CLASSROOM RESEARCH PROJECT:

“What effects do pair work-based speaking activities have on levels of student engagement in oral production in a seventh grade EFL classroom?”

By

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**Abstract**

The following classroom research aimed at understanding the effects of speaking activities performed in pairs on students’ engagement in oral production. This study was conducted on a seventh grade classroom, where 15 girls and 14 boys participated in the study. The data was obtained through anecdotal notes from the researcher and a teaching assistant, two semi-structured interviews with the host teacher and surveys administered to students after each of the five interventions. The results suggested that the most important outcomes were related to an increase in students talking time in English as well as their confidence to speak English. Nevertheless, further research on the issue is needed so as to gain more knowledge as to the intricacies of pair work in EFL contexts.
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Introduction

School Context

This research project was conducted in a seventh grade classroom from “Capitan Jose Luis Araneda” School. This public institution, that hosts students from kindergarten to 8th grade, has a total amount of 350 students, with an average of 30 students per classroom.

The School, located in Renca, receives students especially from difficult socio-economic backgrounds. A diagnostic study conducted by the school between 2014 and 2017 suggested that a significant number of parents were disinterested in relation to the school activities of the students, and almost half of parents had not completed high school education.

In terms of the existing resources for students, the school provides materials such as books, pencils, copybooks and a computer lab that teachers can also use. Although every classroom is equipped with a whiteboard, there are only two projectors available for all the teacher staff.

As expected by the Proyecto Educativo Institucional (2014), the school promotes several values aligned with a Catholic viewpoint. Moreover, the school has a special approach do discipline as reinforcement for shaping students’ behaviors; teachers are fostered to be strict and firm with students when necessary.

A final element to take into account is that school authorities strive for obtaining good results in SIMCE evaluations; as a matter of fact, the institution was awarded with “academic excellence” during the years 2006-2007 and 2008-2009, receiving as result
Pair work-based speaking activities to engage oral production financial resources. Therefore, every year this evaluation takes place, students are trained to obtain such results.

**Classroom Context**

This classroom research was based on a seventh grade class with 29 students (14 girls and 15 boys). Considering that most of them came together from second grade, they are a generally cohesive group; according to observations undertaken and, after consulting with both the head teacher and the English teacher, there are not significant misbehavior issues among students.

In regard to English, it is relevant to highlight two points: firstly, students have two sessions per week (90 minutes on Tuesdays and 45 minutes on Wednesdays). Secondly, a single teacher of English covers all the different levels in the School.

An observation period of almost a month was undertaken before start conducting this research, with journal notes were taken to characterize how the lessons developed on a regular basis: The instructions started with a greeting, then the teacher (sometimes by using the Ministry textbook) explained the concepts and grammatical rules on the whiteboard, followed by some time devoted for students to copy on their notebooks. Then, the teacher invested time in writing exercises to allow students to practice from the concepts previously given. Occasionally, there were listening exercises involved as well. Finally, the feedback of the exercises was done mainly in two ways: the answers were asked as a whole-class response, or some students were asked to give the answers. As an observation, the teacher infrequently used English, mainly for greetings and giving some examples.
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The class configuration was closed to follow a grammar-oriented approach, in which the teacher provides the knowledge and presents it deductively. Students, on the other hand, practice the language as a set of grammatical rules. (Brown, 2007)

**Research Problem**

From the context described, the following question arose: are speaking skills being considered in class?

An interview was conducted with the English teacher to deepen understanding of the issue. From the answers obtained, the teacher stated that there were no opportunities for students to practice oral skills as part of a pedagogical decision, since she considered that it is better to have a quiet classroom; “Hay mas disciplina cuando los estudiantes no están hablando, sino que en silencio durante la clase”. In addition, she expected that speaking activities in the classroom might not work, as the class can become uncontrolled if students are allowed to speak. Lastly, she addressed that, being the only English teacher in the school, she has to deal with considerable work. Having too many responsibilities and duties, it would be difficult to do more work than she can handle.

However, as established by the Ministry of Education (2013) curriculum, speaking is a relevant aspect that needs to be considered. In fact, seventh graders are expected to participate in brief and controlled exchanges such as conversations, discussions and expositions in which they make use of basic language structures to express preferences and interests about several subjects (p. 74).

If the problem is, therefore, the lack of opportunities for speaking, it is appropriate to search for different responses to that issue. Some scholars (e.g. Scrivener, 2011; Brown, 2007) argue that trying out different interactions would be beneficial for creating such an opportunities. In fact, considering the observation of the lessons, the most frequent
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interaction that happened was Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF). Introduced by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975), this interaction pattern is characterized by a teacher-student interaction in which the teacher initiates by asking a question, then a student respond, followed by the feedback of the teacher. Besides IRF, it is possible to find other forms of interaction. In this regard, Ur (1996) identified several types of interaction: group work, pair work, small group work, and choral or whole-class responses, among others.

Given this, a challenge was to try out other forms of interaction was addressed. Among the existent forms of interaction within a classroom, pair work resulted interesting in that it allows every student to have a chance to speak with a partner, in a more private way.

Therefore, the following research question was formulated as follows:

“What effects does pair work-based speaking activities have on students’ engagement in oral production in a seventh grade EFL classroom?”
Research Methodology

Data collection tools

First and foremost, the research aimed as understanding the effects of pair work activities on students engagement in oral production. In doing so, it was necessary first to review relevant literature so as to establish what the expected outcomes are in terms of oral production on an EFL setting. With the literature consulted, four main topics aroused in order to organize the analysis. The essence of this research is to unveil if the same effects derived from the theory can be seen in this particular context, or if some new unexpected outcomes are revealed, thus, it is important to have an open and flexible stance for any unpredictable outcomes to occur. With all the previously said, the research methodology is of a qualitative nature.

In first place, it is important to understand how students react to the implementation of activities which aim is to practice the speaking skills in pair work. As the researcher is an active participator of the lessons, a structured observation, in the form of observation sheets, was conducted. Accordingly, Tomal (2003) expresses that this form of observation is especially effective when information needs to be quickly recorded. Likewise, a classroom assistant—who was previously taught to effectively register observations—was also responsible for taking observational notes for the same purpose.

The host teacher’s voice is a relevant component on how this issue can be understood. Therefore, two semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the English teacher; this instrument is effective since it is flexible enough for obtaining more in depth answers, meaning more rich information (Burns, 2010; Cohen, 2007). The first interview aimed at obtaining, from the English teacher’s perspective, what factors are to
consider regarding the existent lack of engagement in speaking production. The last interview, done at the end of the interventions, sought to understand the effects of the interventions on student production. Furthermore, an observation sheet was provided to the teacher so that she could make observational notes about the classroom in order to have a more informed and detailed observations of each intervention.

Lastly, student’s reactions towards the interventions were also important to obtain. In order to do so, a survey seemed to be the most suitable instrument. Burns (2010) points out that surveys are the best option to get quick responses from several people. Considering that there is a need to obtain students responses right after the intervention are over, students answered a survey each time an intervention was finished.

**Pedagogical design**

In order to support the intervention, five lessons were planned in which pair work-based speaking activities were applied. The topic of the lessons, in alignment with the National Curriculum for seventh grade, was “Free Time Activities”. In each lesson, a particular pair work-based speaking activity was proposed to be done during the post-stage of the lesson; the part in which students have to produce the language. This way of proceed was planned considering a communicative language teaching approach, in which using the language for interaction is of utmost importance. The activities selected were jigsaw (or information gap), interview (questions/answers) and a dialogue.
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**Data analysis and interpretation approach**

The data obtained was organized and analyzed through a concept driven approach. Given the nature of the research, this method is particularly appropriate since it is possible to build preconceived ideas about what possible effects pair work might generate in students.

By using pre-determined categories to analyze data, “retrieval and analysis are facilitated” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 206). If the same categories drive the data obtained from every data collection method, then comparisons and triangulation could become easier and straightforward.

Pair work is regarded as one of the most effective methods in making students interact. A number of authors support that several benefits of pair work inside the classroom can be acknowledged:

Brown (2007) explains that pair work addresses especially the promotion of a good affective learning climate, in which students can actually feel that they can practice and take risks. As a matter of fact, Ur (2007) goes beyond and asserts that an appropriate affective climate within the classroom is one of the key aspects that need to be covered for the teacher to allow a meaningful learning.

Similarly, one of the most noticeable outcomes of pair work activities is the fact that the time for students to actually engage in spoken production increases greatly from a class with a teacher-centered classroom (Scrivener, 2011; Brown, 2007; Ur, 2007). If it is considered that, for a 90 minutes lesson, the time that the teacher invests in speaking is considerably more than students, when students engage in pair work, each student has the real chance to use the language.
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Additionally, Harmer (2016) highlights that pair work activities are suitable specially for students that are shy or do not want to engage in speaking activities that involve speaking in front of the whole class. In this regard, Scrivener (2011) also stresses that, when students work in pairs, inhibition levels decreased, since “it is less anxious to talk with a partner than talking in front of the entire classroom” (p. 60).

When engaging in effective pair work activities, students can really have a sense on what they are capable of doing with the language. Regardless of the level, if pair work is tailored for students, having a clear idea of the language involved and what they are capable of doing, students can bust their confidence in speaking. In other words, students can have a sense of accomplishment (Thornbury, 2013).

From the previous literature review, it is possible to condense the concepts into four main areas:

- Student talking time (STT by using the target language)
- An affective climate is promoted (commit mistakes or risk taking)
- Anxiety and inhibition are decreased (fear to talk in front of others)
- Confidence to speak is increased (sensation of accomplishment)

Finally, the data analysis can be resumed as presented in the figure 1.
Findings

From the data obtained, the findings were organized and analyzed based mainly on a concept-driven approach. The following lines are devoted to synthesize the most relevant findings by the four categories previously established.

1. Student talking time:

Although this research is of a qualitative nature, the amount of time that students used English for task completion was measured. The observation notes written by both the classroom assistant and the researcher demonstrated that there was a gradually increase in the use of English during the speaking activities. Although during the first two interventions students used a mixture between English and Spanish, during the third and fourth lessons more than half of students performed the activities by using the target language.

Similarly, the observations carried out by the English teacher revealed the same phenomenon; in the first intervention she pointed out that “(...) los la mayoría de los estudiantes intentan hacer la actividad, pero muchos hacen muchas preguntas al profesor para saber si esta bien lo que estan haciendo y como lo estan diciendo. Los veo con duda, pocos de ellos se atreven a hablar en Ingles…” In the other hand, an extract from the fourth intervention adresses the improvement in this aspect: “Hay seis pares que hacen la actividad usando el Inglés en buena medida. Hay 3 grupos que aun necesitan mucha ayuda, pero los demás piden ayuda y se atreven a hacer la actividad sin recurrir demasiado al Español”.

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From the surveys answered by the students right after the interventions, the statement “Trabajando en parejas puedo practicar más el Inglés” show that they choose “totally agree” in most of cases during the fourth interventions. However, during the fifth intervention, when they had to complete a dialogue and practice it with a partner, the same statement obtained 14 “medianamente de acuerdo” and 3 “Medianamente en desacuerdo”, proving that students might have had some troubles trying to use English during the activity.

2. Affective learning climate:

In terms of the learning climate generated, that is to say the class atmosphere in which students develop the activity, there were mixed responses. The data obtained from students’ surveys showed that more than half of students were not able to take risks when trying to use the target language regardless of the mistakes committed. From the surveys responses such as “Trabajando en parejas tengo menos miedo de cometer errores al hablar Inglés” and “Trabajando en parejas me motiva a intentar hablar más Ingles”, it was demonstrated that during the activities in which the language involved was more basic and simple (such as in jigsaw activities), students responded in a more positive way. On the other hand, in the activities that oral production was more complex (such as in asking/answering questions from an interview), students responses were more mixed. Regardless of this data, the anecdotal notes of the researcher and the classroom assistant showed that there was not a significant inclination towards a positive or negative response.

3. Anxiety and inhibition:
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According observation notes from both the researcher and the English teacher, it was pointed out that some students started to mock to other classmates that had more problems to complete the activities, especially during the second and third interventions. An observation made by the English teacher describes the situation in question: “El estudiante A y B, al terminar rápidamente la actividad, comienzan a burlarse de como pronuncia un estudiante de otro grupo. Esto hizo que otros grupos se desconectaran de la actividad por un momento, y se rieran también. El par que recibió las burlas no termino la actividad por culpa de aquellos estudiantes, ya que no querían seguir practicando”. Moreover, the results from the surveys in this aspect (“Me sentí relajado al trabajar en parejas”) proved to be mixed; while almost one half of students were able to engage with their peers in the speaking activity, the other half did not feel relaxed and talking in front of another partner was an issue.

4. Confidence to speak:

It is important to mention that during the lessons, some pairs were able to perform the activities proposed beyond what was expected. Moreover, from the statement in the survey referred to this aspect (“Trabajando con un compañero me da mas confianza para hablar en Ingles”), the responses suggested that almost every student had positive reaction to the statement, especially during the three first interventions. In fact, the English teacher stated her impressions about the third intervention in the following way: “Los alumnos son capaces de hacer una actividad de speaking sobre completar y decir un dialogo. 6 pares de 10 fueron observados trabajando y ensayando un dialogo que ellos mismos completaron con sus actividades favoritas.” The observation notes from the researcher points that although students had problems in communicating specially during the first intervention, once they started to ask more questions to the
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teacher and receive positive feedback after they complete the activities, they felt more confident to produce orally.

As a conclusion, the evidence from the data, proposed that the two aspects on what students got a positive effect was the amount of student talking time and the confidence to speak in English. In the other hand, the affective climate, anxiety and inhibition proved to have mixed effects on students. In the next section of this research, some possible factors around these results are addressed.

**Implications**

Taking into account what was found through the findings, the results present a complex reality that needs to be addressed and compared with the existent EFL context.

First and foremost, it is important referring to some limitations and issues that emerged as this classroom research was on progress. In terms of the data collection methods to be used, it was planned to video record the five interventions. In this regard, the data would have been more natural and closer to an ethnographic approach, which would have been more beneficial to observe more in depth the students during the events happening in the class, without losing the focus of the teaching (Burns, 2010). However, since 10 students did not wanted to be recorded, this data collection method was ruled out.

Referring to the implications of the research, it is essential to assert that the class in which the research focused on corresponds to a particular setting of EFL. Therefore, oversimplifying a reality by assuming that some results will be obtained is dangerous
Pair work-based speaking activities to engage oral production (Burns, 2010). Nevertheless, a comparison and contrast with the current literature, studies and research in the same field can help to better understand and interpret this classroom research. The results obtained in this study reflect a complex scenario where the effects of pair work-based speaking activities were not as much as the expected, proving that interaction strategies are a field under development.

As Scrivener (2011) points out, student talking time varies greatly depending on the interaction pattern and the teaching approach used. In this particular scenario, students were accustomed to interact most of the time in teacher-students exchanges. This repetitive pattern has proved to be resilient, since data results showed that, although students were able to increase the oral production, it was a progression of five lessons. Moreover, it was difficult for students to change from IRF to pair work. In this matter, several studies in EFL contexts, for instance Hardman (2003), Abd Kadir & Hardman (2007) and Vaish (2008), as well as the work of Walsh (2006) have explored and problematized the use of IRF as the main interaction occurred in ESL/EFL contexts, proving that what happens in the “Capitan Jose Luis Araneda” School is not an isolated concern.

Urrutia and Vega (2010) studied students encouragement to speak English by using games. This research, conducted in Colombia on a seventh grade classroom, revealed that oral production and an appropriate climate in which students feel comfortable to commit mistakes have a deep connection, especially on EFL contexts. In this regard, the research has revealed that a class atmosphere might be a prerequisite for allowing students to use the language without fear. This idea is reinforced by Ur (2007) who claims that the teacher needs to balance feedback and praising. In this work, the teacher has been a central factor to develop appropriate and balanced activities that were aligned to the communicative language teaching approach.
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The work of Maher (2011) on exploring pair work in a communicative classroom illustrates that interaction in pairs is essential to artificially reproduce interaction in EFL context. He stresses also that the planning and setting of the lessons are quite important in order to create a systematic way of introducing students to oral production, from more controlled and simple tasks to gradually more independent work from students. In this research, it was observed that the implementation of a progressive planning helped to create a better development of the interventions, which implies that pair work works better when the teacher knows exactly what and how to deliver in a class, meaning that students will have more chances to engage on oral production.

In her study, Achmad (2014) reflected about pair work tasks in the Indonesian context. The results proved that pair work could be quite successful in a multilingual class setting, that is, a class where learners do not have a common language besides English. In Chilean context, however, the nature of English Learning is enclosed to an artificial scenario in which English is taught and orally practiced, if so, only within a classroom.

Along the same line, Thapa & Lin (2013) in their research on interactions to improve language learning of students on a Nepalese EFL setting asserted that there are different interactions that can achieve the same objective. Moreover, it highlights that the knowledge of the teacher about his or her own context is crucial in order to make decisions about what forms of interactions are better to implement. In this regard, this research showed that although students struggled at the beginning of this new way of proceed in the class, one of the possible factors might be related to the fact that they faced a new form of learning, which needs to occur gradually in order to succeed.
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With all the previous ideas, it is of utmost importance to go deeper on pair work in order for EFL students to start using the language to communicate, which is the aim of CLT (Brown, 2007). It has been demonstrated that pair work and other interactions in ESL/EFL are relevant topics to study. Interactions that are aligned with the communicative language teaching approach, seek for enhancing communicative competence as the core of their teaching. Therefore, through this study it is reaffirmed the fact that pair work needs to be implemented, although gradually.

Conclusions

The presented classroom-based research constituted an effort in understanding the effects of pair work over the engagement of students in oral production through the implementation of speaking activities on a seventh grade EFL class. Full of challenges, the research conducted has unveiled some aspects that, without a doubt, need more attention.

The evidence from the data, suggested that the two aspects on what students got a positive effect were the amount of student talking time and the confidence to speak in English. In the other hand, the affective climate, anxiety and inhibition proved to have non-conclusive positive effects on students. The implementation of pair work speaking activities within a context that had a different interaction pattern, and the subsequent problems emerged, indicate that there is much work to do in terms of promoting other forms of interaction besides IRF. The lack of opportunities for speaking could be detrimental in fostering oral production in the EFL Chilean context.
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Lastly, it is necessary to acknowledge all the limitations for conducting this research. Nonetheless, it is expected that this enquiry still continues as part of a bigger process or better founded research project. The importance of shifting the model of IRF to a more communicative design of classroom interactions is crucial to engage students in oral production and, therefore, improve their learning.
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References


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Warayet, A. (2011) Participation *as a complex phenomenon in the EFL classroom*. Newcastle University
Appendices

Entrevista con Profesora de Inglés (pre-interventions)

1. A su juicio, ¿Cuáles podrían ser las causas de por qué los alumnos no han tenido oportunidad de practicar la producción oral en Inglés?

2. ¿A qué cree que se debe esta situación?

3. ¿Qué es lo que está limitando las oportunidades de practicar comunicación oral en los estudiantes?

4. Cree que el no practicar las habilidades de comunicación oral ha tenido efectos en los estudiantes? ¿Cuáles?
Entrevista con la profesora de Inglés (post-interventions)

1. ¿Cuál es su impresión general sobre las actividades de pair work?

2. Según su impresión, ¿De qué manera ha afectado a los estudiantes el trabajar en pares?

3. ¿Cuáles han sido los efectos de pair work sobre los estudiantes en cuanto su producción oral?

4. ¿Qué otros aspectos considera que son necesarios de comentar sobre las actividades de pair work?
Encuesta estudiantes

Estimado estudiante: Esta encuesta está diseñada para saber tu percepción acerca de una actividad realizada durante la clase de hoy. La encuesta es de carácter anónimo, por lo que no debes preocuparte por poner tu nombre.

**Instrucciones:** Lee cada afirmación y marca el recuadro que más te represente

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<td>Trabajando en parejas me sentí mejor que al trabajar normalmente en clases</td>
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<td>Trabajando con un compañero me ayuda a mejorar mi Inglés</td>
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<td>Trabajando en parejas tengo menos miedo de cometer errores al hablar en Inglés</td>
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**Observación**

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<th>Número del par</th>
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<th>Observaciones (estudiantes son capaces de usar el Inglés; se esfuerzan por lograr la actividad, toman riesgos y/o preguntan; no tienen miedo de hablar frente a un compañero)</th>
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Pauta de observación

Profesora Titular

A partir de la actividad en parejas realizada por los estudiantes en clases, y luego de haber a los estudiantes, le ruego contestar lo siguiente:

1. ¿Cuántos estudiantes trabajaron durante la actividad en parejas?
   a. La mayoría de las parejas
   b. Más de la mitad de la clase
   c. Menos de la mitad de la clase
   d. Muy pocas parejas

2. En términos generales, durante la actividad en parejas la mayoría de los estudiantes se mostraron:
   a. Estresados
   b. Relajados
   c. Normales
   d. Otro (______________)

Observaciones y notas sobre el desarrollo de los estudiantes en la actividad en parejas:

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