

Encouraging the Development of Children's Oral Communicative Competences through Play

Estimulación del desarrollo de las competencias comunicativas orales de los niños a través del juego

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When children start to learn a foreign language they already have some communicative competence in their mother tongue. Thus a classroom research project was carried out in order to study the development of children's competence in communicating in other languages. The main theme explored was if it was possible to help kids acquire and develop their competence in the new code through the use of play activities. The concepts related to competences, play and some children's characteristics when learning a second language will be presented in this article. Also, the results of the implementation of play activities in the classroom as well as some pedagogical implications will be analyzed as a means to promote improvement in the foreign language teaching-learning process.

Key words: English-Primary School, Children Second Language Acquisition, Learning Ability in Children-Research, Educational Games-Teaching-Research

Cuando los niños empiezan el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera ya poseen alguna competencia comunicativa en su lengua materna. De lo que se trata, por tanto en este proyecto de investigación en el aula es de promover esta competencia para comunicarse en otras lenguas. El propósito fundamental de esta investigación fue explorar si era posible ayudar a los estudiantes a adquirir y desarrollar su competencia en este nuevo código, mediante la implementación de actividades lúdicas. En este artículo se presentarán los conceptos de competencias, lúdica y algunas de las características de los niños en el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. También se presentarán los resultados que surgieron a partir de la implementación de las actividades lúdicas y se mencionarán algunas implicaciones pedagógicas que promueven el mejoramiento del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera.

Palabras claves: Inglés-Escuela Primaria, Adquisición de Segundo Lenguaje en Niños, Aptitud de Aprendizaje en Niños-Investigación, Juegos Educativos-Enseñanza-Investigación

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INTRODUCTION

Children need activities which are exciting and stimulate their curiosity; they need to be involved in meaningful situations that emphasize interaction through the use of English as a foreign language, so that play activities are considered pedagogical alternatives to encourage children's development of communicative competences in this language.

The purpose of the investigation was to provide teachers with didactic tools that promote changes in the classroom and the building of meaningful learning. I have attempted to find a way to encourage the teaching activities in the English area, considering the possibility of including the play element in the teaching – learning process of this foreign language in order to promote the development of oral communicative competences.

This research was carried out in fifth grade at a public primary school in Bogotá from February to November 2002 with the cooperation of the homeroom teacher. I did initial observations inside the classroom in order to explore what was happening at this school. From this process, I detected a lack of teacher's preparation in the English area, which led her to focus the lessons on repetitive exercises that mainly had to do with writing. I also detected some weaknesses in the students' oral communicative competence. Then I talked to the students about the class' limitations and they expressed their desire to learn English differently. The children said that they learnt better when playing and that they enjoyed being involved in activities which allowed them to be more active and creative. In this process the classroom teacher also expressed her limitations in the English teaching area and her willingness to collaborate in this research.

From this diagnosis, the following questions were chosen as the main focus of the study:

- How can we encourage the development of oral communicative competences through play in fifth grade students in a public primary school?
- What play strategies can be used to promote the development of oral communicative competences?
- What is the effect of games on the development of these competences?
- What constitutes a meaningful situation for children's interaction in English as a foreign language?

1. RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Based on the theoretical framework and the problematic situation observed inside the public primary school, I opted for collaborative research which belongs to qualitative approaches. Buendia (1998) points out some relevant aspects of this type of research. The objective of the study is decided from a problematic situation which is observed within a group. Its purpose is to change that situation by researcher intervention and participants' contributions.

Thirty-five students from fifth grade at a public primary school participated in the investigation. Data was collected through interviews, observations and field notes. The interview was applied to find out students' perceptions, interests and expectations of the English class. Then I carried out a field study. A structured observation was conducted in order to determine the strategies used by the teacher and to determine learners' performance in relation to the development of the English communicative competence.

Based on the identification of the students' lack of oral production in English, this research was directed towards the development of oral

communicative competences. The theoretical review led me to opt for the play component as a support strategy. In the final stage I participated as a teacher in the process of preparing and carrying out the play activities with the students inside the classroom. Meanwhile, the classroom teacher continued collaborating by taking an active role in the development of these activities.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the purpose of this research was to encourage the development of oral communicative competences through the use of play activities, it was relevant to explore elements such as competences and children's characteristics in the second language learning process as well as the concept and the importance of play activities.

Bogoya (1999) defines competence as an individual ability to do something in a specific context. It occurs only through performance. Communicative competence means an ability to communicate; it concerns either spoken or written language. Hence, communication is seen as a dynamic process which depends on the negotiation of meaning between two or more persons who share some knowledge of the language being used.

According to Hymes (1972) and Bachman (1990), communicative competence has to do with the functional use of language. They emphasize that communicative competence requires realistic interaction among learners using meaningful and contextualised language. These are decisive aspects when thinking about activities which will encourage the development of oral communicative competence among learners.

Regarding children's characteristics in the second language learning process, several psychologists such as Piaget and Bruner have pointed out some important aspects. For Piaget (1981) children construct their own knowledge in an active and creative way. According to Vygotsky (1978) and Shorrocks (1991), interaction is defined as a force that encourages language learning. Bruner (1990) points out that children need a supportive environment which facilitates the learning process in order for the child himself to promote his language development. González (2000) recommends learning through play. It creates suitable conditions for children to learn a foreign language. The play element is a dimension of human development. It is an essential part of life. For this reason, Jiménez (1996) argues in favor of the importance of this component in the educational field. In play situations children make the foreign language their own.

The play component is a key factor in the development of oral communicative competences because it contributes to the preparation and the promotion of the development of human processes.

Figure 1 presents some key aspects in the development of oral communicative competences in English taking into account that varied games are interesting for children and motivate them to communicate in the new code.

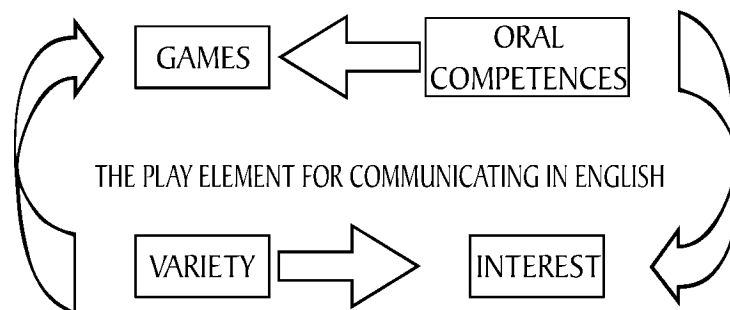


Figure 1. Key aspects in the development of oral competences

Playing is an activity connected with daily life that facilitates teaching and contributes to improving the relationship between children and school. This component can be used in different environments as a cultural and learning experience. Piaget points out that play operates as a revealing element of the mental cognitive processes. Play activities are recreational exercises that give children pleasure and enjoyment as they are learning a language. Playing is a way to make learning interesting and to satisfy children's needs because this activity is within the bounds of their daily life. Therefore play should be considered a strategy to encourage the use of the foreign language and the development of oral communicative competences in learners.

On the other hand, it should be considered that the pedagogical conception of this research was constructivism, in which knowledge and language are seen as human construction. Therefore, the basis for learning is the interaction between people and their environment through the use of language.

3. RESULTS

To analyze the information obtained from my field notes and the interviews, I followed the principles of triangulation. According to Arhar et al. (2001), this process includes analysis, synthesis and making assertions. The data collected was examined and two main categories regarding the implementation of play activities in the classroom were derived during the process. These relevant aspects were contrasted with what was recorded in the field notes.

3.1 Games as Activators of Communication

In this category games are considered pedagogical tools for effective foreign language

teaching. These include a set of play exercises that takes into account children's interests and has great relevance in their school life, as was expressed by a student: "*We learn more when playing, we like it so much, it is more enjoyable than writing*" (Geraldine).

The play element allows children to develop autonomy by using vocabulary and structures that they learned in a controlled way but more freely and spontaneously. Hence, learners have the opportunity to be involved in a more authentic communicative situation: "*I understand better with play activities, I don't like when teacher gives a traditional class*" (Yessica).

Games motivate children to take an active part in language learning by getting involved in the construction of their own knowledge. For instance, in my field notes I could see that children acted out scenes of a sketch in class. They showed interest and started to imitate the voices of the characters and practice pronunciation several times.

This first category, games as activators of communication, includes two important issues: overcoming fears and action. They are explained in the following paragraphs.

3.1.1 Overcoming Fears

This aspect is defined as students' initiative to take the risk of interacting in a foreign language in spite of making mistakes. Children construct hypotheses about the foreign language based on the knowledge they already have of their mother tongue. Therefore they use the language thinking their hypotheses are right. For students who are not familiar with English oral practice, it is difficult to acquire self-confidence to do it. In this study children continually expressed their fears and difficulties in pronunciation. Very often

I could see that most of them hummed the song's rhythm without saying a word. They were confused with the pronunciation and sang as if they were reading in Spanish.

Learners also included Spanish words when they spoke in English to get the message across. This helped them develop self-confidence. For instance, when I asked for the description of a book's cover, some of the children said, "*hay una pink lamp y un yellow elephant*".

Likewise, they tended to replace phrases by others when these were similar to something they had heard before. A sample of this could be seen when some of them sang the second stanza of a song called Merry Christmas. They said, "*and a happy to you*" instead of "*and a happy new year*".

Children demonstrated their willingness to overcome their fears by participating in the development of the activities carried out in class. Although they felt nervous when making presentations (sketches, worksheets, little projects, etc), most of them tried to say things in English in spite of their difficulties with pronunciation. This shows us the benefit of the play component for facing learning situations that at the beginning made them feel insecure.

3.1.2 Action

This component is like a force that motivates children to express and use language for communication through body movements. This has to do with the total physical response method, in which students act as a response to teacher's requirements. Their learning process is more effective and their participation more active. For example, when I started with the song *Head and Shoulders*, children sang it and touched the parts of their bodies as they were being mentioned. They also sang a song called *Yellow Submarine*

and, after repeating it several times, they sang 'karaoke'. Most of them moved their bodies according to the music and they enjoyed what they were doing. Another example of such a response could be this: "*Today students did several actions using their hands according to the song. For example, they raised their right hands and shook their left hands*" (Field notes).

Activities that imply actions can be considered useful tools for working with children because they develop self-confidence in using the English language orally. This is enhanced through the implementation of musical and linguistic games as well as drama.

3.2 Children's Commitment towards Learning Opportunities

Language in real context contributes to the development of expressive abilities and to foster children's involvement in linguistic interactions. This category includes three important aspects that affect learners' commitment to engage in learning opportunities: interest, daily life and variety.

3.2.1 Interest

This factor is defined as the children's desire to take an active part in the activities carried out inside the classroom, especially the ones which take into account the play component. Learners are free to involve themselves voluntarily and creatively. They have the satisfaction of participating in enjoyable activities and expressing their ideas. "*It is great when we participate in all the activities carried out in the classroom; for instance, talking about the family and the parts of the house*" (Edwin). More evidence of this could be seen when they enjoyed showing the cards with their favorite animals and saying their names in English.

3.2.2 Dally Life

This element connects school life to the children's experiences and environment. For instance, when we talked about professions and jobs, the children were asked about their parents' occupations, and all of them wanted to say them in English. In another lesson, when I asked the class to work in pairs doing the exercise related to the family, all of them did it introducing to his/her partner the members of their families. These examples show that play activities provide them with a familiar context to engage in new learning experiences. Hence, it is important to include children's life aspects in this process because these increase their interest and desire to participate.

3.2.2 Variety

This element has to do with the selection of activities to be carried out inside the classroom so that children can experience different approaches to English learning. This also implies a break in the routine of the classroom. This led me, as a teacher, to include innovations in the lessons for, as one student said: *"I like different activities for learning and enjoying"* (Nury).

Throughout this study, it could be noticed that it is necessary to take into account that children show lack of interest towards repetitive exercises based mainly on writing. They do not like activities that require looking up words in a dictionary and building sentences according to given models.

Children enjoy fun activities; they need to be exposed to a large variety of activities which have meaning and purpose because these provide them with opportunities to interact in the language. Furthermore, varied activities help kids to increase their desire of being involved in the development of the classes. Therefore, these kinds of exercises facilitate the learning process

and encourage the development of children's oral communicative competences. In relation to this, *Vanessa* expressed, *"I liked taking part in different activities that allow me to work and learn but also enjoy what I am doing"*.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the results obtained in this investigation, I can conclude that in order to encourage the development of oral communicative competences through play, it is fundamental to take into account children's traits in the teaching-learning process. This can help the foreign language teacher to get a better view of them in such a way that he or she can choose the most effective strategies.

In relation to the play strategies that can be used to promote the development of oral competences, I concluded that the implementation of strategies such as musical activities, linguistic games, and activities related to drama in the classroom encourage the development of oral communicative competences. Through all of them children can perceive the foreign language as a useful instrument of expression and play.

Musical games include songs and rhymes that promote children's freedom and self-confidence allowing them to express themselves using the English language. Linguistic games allow students to participate actively and become more interested in the learning process. Likewise, the activities related to drama encourage children to interact in English spontaneously.

In the development of oral communicative competences, games have a great impact because they are ways to make learning attractive. Besides, games are an important part of children's lives and they satisfy their needs.

Therefore games should be considered play strategies to encourage the use of the foreign language and the development of oral communicative competences.

Lastly, we concluded that meaningful situations for children's interaction in English should include their experiences. Authentic situations create suitable conditions to develop oral communicative competence as children understand better things that are relevant to their lives. In general terms, games are pedagogical tools that help learners to express themselves in communicative situations.

5. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In the implementation of play activities as a supporting strategy for oral communication in the foreign language classroom, it is important to take into account the following aspects:

- Teachers should include games as part of their teaching strategies because these provide students with situations that help them learn easily. At the same time, games encourage the development of oral and written communicative competences.
- It is important that the tasks suggested by the teacher have a purpose and a strategy to involve students in games and enjoyable activities.
- It is fundamental to take into account learners' characteristics, needs, and cultural contexts in which the teaching-learning process takes place.
- Finally, the teacher should contextualize the language through the use of concrete activities related to the children's lives.

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