Influence of Oral Homework on Oral Competence in a beginning English class at Technical University of Cotopaxi

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Resumen

Este trabajo presenta resultados cualitativos sobre la aplicación del oral homework a través de la combinación de Enfoque Basado en Tareas y el Enfoque Léxico. El estudio se llevó a cabo con estudiantes del nivel inicial de inglés (nivel A1) en la Universidad Técnica de Cotopaxi durante el período académico abril-agosto 2015. El objetivo principal fue determinar la influencia del oral homework en el desarrollo de la competencia oral. Para lograr este objetivo, la investigadora realizó una implementación pedagógica. Antes de la implementación, la investigadora aplicó una encuesta de diagnóstico. Los resultados muestran que la mayoría de los estudiantes no solían realizar tareas orales; las tareas se enfocaban principalmente a actividades escritas. Después de la implementación se aplicó otra encuesta a fin de conocer la percepción de los estudiantes en cuanto a la aplicación del oral homework en el proceso de aprendizaje. Los resultados indican que los estudiantes están de acuerdo en que experimentaron mejoras significativas en su competencia oral.

Abstract

This paper presents qualitative data about the implementation of Oral Homework via the combination of the Task Based Learning Approach and the Lexical Approach. The study was carried out in a beginning English class (A1 level) at Technical University of Cotopaxi, located in Latacunga, Ecuador during the academic term June – August 2015. The main aim was to determine the influence of Oral Homework in the development of students' oral competence. This is an action research study since the researcher did a pedagogical implementation with thirty students. Before the implementation, the researcher applied a diagnostic survey. Data gathered show that most of students were not used to oral homework; they usually were assigned written homework. After the implementation, another survey was applied in order

to learn students' perceptions regarding the application of Oral Homework in the learning process. Data show that students agree they experienced significant improvements in their oral competence.

Keywords: Ecuador, lexical approach, oral homework, oral competence, task based learning approach.

Introduction

Most English teachers would agree that developing oral competence in students who study English as a foreign Language is quite difficult due to some factors. First, there are few opportunities to be in contact with the language because English is not used for real social interactions. Second, students are not given opportunities for language practice in the classroom due to large classes, limited time, inappropriate resources, extensive curriculum, individual learning styles and different language learning attitudes. Last but not least, homework assigned relies mainly on grammar, reading and vocabulary exercises, which minimizes oral practice. However, in spite of all these problems, there is still awareness about the need to expand opportunities to improve students' oral competence in English since it is one of the major requirements to succeed in any academic or professional field. There are many studies that provide alternatives to promote learners' speaking skill in different settings.

Toapanta (2012) asserts that oral interaction plays an important role in language learning. Therefore teachers should promote students' oral participation. Students must not be passive recipients but active language users; in addition to what they learn, they need to have opportunities to produce language. Sakale and Seffar (2012) identify the significant role of lexis in developing EFL Learners' Speaking Skill. They conclude that learners should be trained in vocabulary learning strategies so as to be able to acquire the vocabulary they need to interact in a specific communicative act. Quintanilla and Ferreira (2010) determine how the methodological principles of the Task Based Learning Approach and the Cooperative Learning can be used together in order to design activities to develop oral competence. Murad (2009) recommends that EFL teachers adopt the TBLT principles and procedures in their classroom practices. Provenzano and Yue (2011) and Méndez (2010) propose oral homework to foster oral practice outside the classroom. They assert that oral English homework assignments increase opportunities for oral communication outside the classroom, especially for students who study English as a foreign language.

Onatra and Peña (2009) agree that one of the factors behind students' inability to speak in English is the teaching approach adopted by teachers. They argue that most of these teaching approaches set aside oral skill and focus mostly on cognitive process (reading and writing). Their findings showed demands of transactional and interactional activities within the framework of the task-based learning approach that focus on meaning and communication. Several studies have showed better results in language learning when students are not focused only on linguistic forms but in communicative tasks (Rodríguez-Bonces and Rodríguez-Bonces 2010, Murad 2009). In this context, Pica (2008) claims "Task-based instruction is characterized by

activities that engage language learners in meaningful, goal-orientated communication to solve problems, complete projects and reach decisions" (p. 71).

A lesson based on the Task learning approach promotes communication and the actual use of the language. Language activities are based on the completion of a final task and the language studied is determined by what happens as students complete it. Unlike the traditional approach, the students are free of language control. Although students are exposed to a whole range of lexical phrases, collocations, patterns and language forms, they select the language they need to complete the task. There are many lesson designs (Lee 2000, Skehan 1996, Willis 1996) using the Task Based Learning Approach; however, they all have in common three principal phases: pre-task, during the task and post-task (Ellis 2003, p.80). In the pre-task, the teacher introduces the topic and task. In the task cycle, students carry out the task. In the report task, students report back to class (Willis, 1996).

Traditionally, classroom instruction in EFL context has been developed by using methods based on grammatical approach. Teachers assumed that after learning some grammar rules, students would be able to speak. However, some research on lexis has demonstrated that vocabulary is more fundamental than grammar in oral production. (Lewis 1993, Moudraia 2001, Lee 2004) Lewis (1993) argues that lexis is the base of language learning and that mastering grammar is not a requirement for effective communication. Furthermore, Sakale and Seffar (2012) carried out a study in which they pinpointed the significant role of lexis in oral production. They found that the lack of vocabulary competence tremendously affects students' oral interaction. Then, they suggested training students in the most effective strategies to learn vocabulary successfully; in other words, they suggest the lexical approach. This approach considers that words carry more meaning than grammar. Under this perspective, Wilkins (1972) claims: "While without grammar little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). In other words, a learner who has spent time learning vocabulary can communicate more effectively than a learner who has learnt grammar rules.

Other researchers propose oral homework to give students opportunities for language practice outside the classroom. The English dictionary (2015) defines homework as "the schoolwork assigned to be done outside the classroom". In the EFL context, homework consists of several learning activities whose main aim is to foster the learner's linguistic competence. One of the most important benefits of homework is that students get practice in the language they learn outside of their classrooms. Some of the most common homework activities are grammar and vocabulary exercises (printed or online), reading comprehension tasks, oral reading tasks, writing tasks (descriptive paragraphs, projects, etc.) and even listening and speaking tasks; in other words, all the classwork activities. Oral homework is the kind of homework students do orally in audio or video files. This work can be done individually or with partners. Almost anything learners are asked to do orally in class can be converted into an oral homework task (Méndez 2010). Oral homework, just like regular homework, has a positive effect on learning. Provenzano and Yue (2011) reported good results on implementing oral homework at a Japanese university. Some of the advantages are increased fluency, motivation and use of target communication strategies. Moreover, Méndez (2010) emphasizes that oral homework is an

excellent option to give students an equal amount of time and opportunity for oral production and feedback. In order to make oral homework more effective, teachers have to plan homework tasks; planning includes assessment and feedback. Apart from that, they should make sure learners have access to recording devices, set up or agree on a format, supervise students the first time they record, set up guidelines for handing in homework, allow students enough time to hand in their work and space out the frequency of recordings (Méndez, 2010).

Methodology

This study was developed by using the Action Research Methodology, a means of improving the teaching/learning process. It allowed qualitative and subjective reflection about the combination of three alternatives to promote students' oral competence: Task Based Learning Approach, Lexical Approach and Oral Homework. The researcher planned a pedagogical proposal and implemented it in a beginning English level (A1) class during the academic term June-August 2015, in the Language Cultural Center at Technical University of Cotopaxi, located in Latacunga, Ecuador. A nonprobability sampling technique was used in this study, which means that the researcher selected participants taking into account the purpose of the study. There were thirty seven students, aged twenty one to thirty, with varying backgrounds in terms of gender, education, and English learning experiences.

Throughout the study, the researcher was involved in planning (lesson plan design), teaching (lexical units), assessing (formative and summative), observing (students' oral performance), and providing language feedback after each oral homework task or activity. The implementation phase was developed during the regular teaching-

learning process. Participants had to do oral homework as regular homework. Thus all of the data collection occurred as a natural part of daily instruction and assessment. At the end of the process, each student had ten recordings in their oral portfolio. These recordings were assessed by using rubrics and observation sheets. Then, the researcher explored students' perceptions about oral homework by means of a survey whose questionnaire was subjected to pilot testing and validated.

Results

The purpose of the study was to identify the influence of setting up oral homework via the combination of Task Based Learning Approach and the Lexical Approach on students' oral competence. The researcher focused on three main elements of oral competence: pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Many researchers (Hoz 1994, Quintanilla and Ferreira 2010, Richards and Renandya 2002, Pavenzano and Yue 2011) emphasize the pedagogical value of two approaches and of oral homework separately. In, this study, the researcher combined two approaches to set up oral homework.
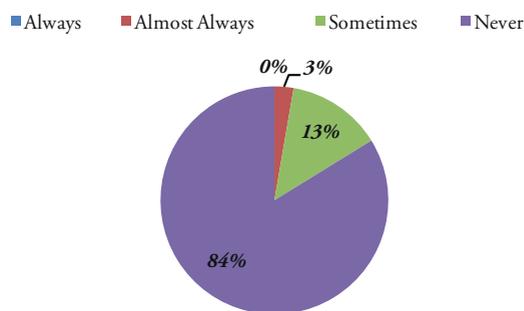

Figure 1: Frequency of oral homework students had before the implementation.

Data gathered by means of a survey reveal that most of the students had never done oral homework before they entered to the language program at Technical University of

Cotopaxi. Graphic 1 shows that 84% of the participants claim that they never did oral homework while 13% of them mention that they sometimes did oral homework and only 3% claim almost always. This means that they were not involved in oral language practice outside the classroom, which minimizes opportunities to develop their oral skill. As Toapanta (2012) says, language interaction is crucial in language learning.
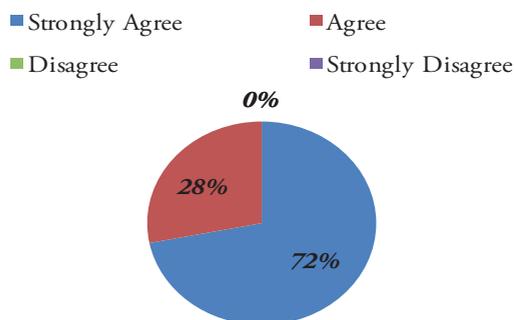

Figure 2: Students' perception of Influence of oral homework in oral competence.

However, after the implementation of oral homework in the learning process, students experienced significant improvements. 72% of them strongly agree that the oral homework they did during the research process influenced positively in their oral competence while 28% agree. No participant disagrees. These results are similar to what Méndez (2010) and Provenzano and Yue (2011) found; learners perceive benefits in doing oral homework.
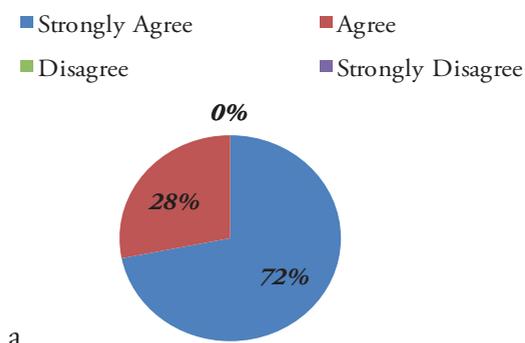

Figure 3: Students' perception of influence of Oral Homework in Pronunciation.

Similarly, 72% of the students strongly agree that they experienced positive improvements after the implementation phase, while 28% agree but no participant disagrees. As oral homework is presented in recordings, and students have the opportunity to self-assess or peer-assess their pronunciation. Teachers' feedback on pronunciation was crucial as well. It helped to increase self-awareness on the importance of proper pronunciation in any communicative situation in the target language. Likewise Correa and Grim (2014) have found many advantages of audio recording in students' pronunciation. Most importantly, students perceive and value this improvement.
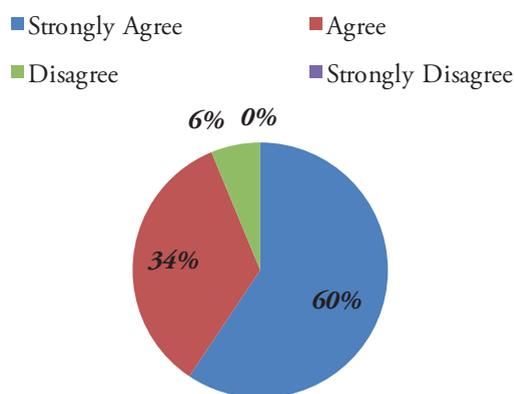

Figure 4: Students' perception of influence of Oral Homework in vocabulary.

60% of the participants strongly agree that oral homework tasks were useful for learning vocabulary. 34% of them agree but 6% of the participants disagree. Before any oral homework task, students were involved in lexical exercises suggested by Lewis (1993, p. 89): identifying, matching, completing, categorizing, sequencing and deleting. Then, they selected the lexical units and were able to use them when doing oral homework. As some researchers (Coady and Huckin 1997, Nation 2001, Sakale and Seffar 2012) agree, lexis has a significant influence in language production.
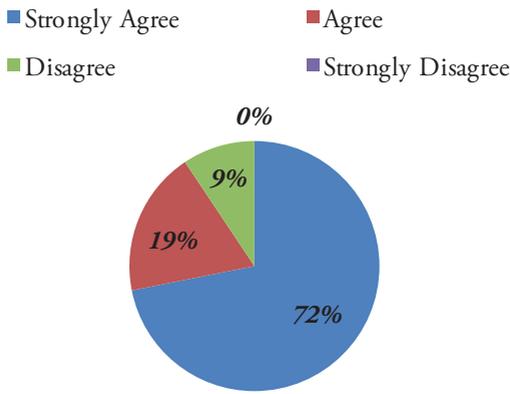
Figure 5: Influence of lexical activities in doing Oral Homework.

Students need vocabulary to produce the language. Lexis presented in the pre-task helped them in the task completion. They consider that the lexical activities they were involved were useful for doing their oral homework. 72% of the students strongly agree while 19% of them agree but 9% disagree.
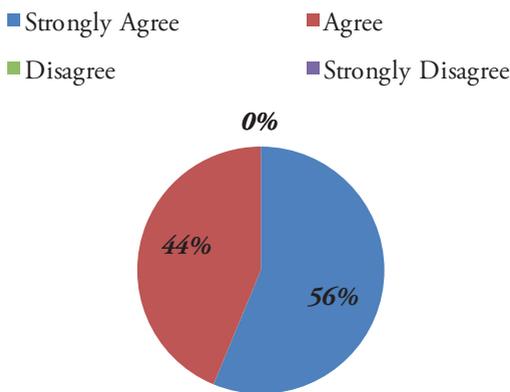

Figure 6: Students' perception of influence of Oral homework in grammar.

Finally, 56% of the participants strongly agree that oral homework helped them to improve their grammar use in oral communication; 44% agree. Even though grammar rules were not taught, participants experienced positive influence of oral homework on their grammatical competence. A possible explanation could be the implementation of the Lexical Approach in the learning process since according to Tovar (2012) grammar is learned from the lexicon. Grammatical sentences can be built from lexicon; therefore teaching vocabulary is more important that teaching grammar (see Lewis, 1993, Lewis, 1997; Richard and Renandya (2002). Graphic 5 shows students' opinions about influence of lexical activities in doing oral homework. Most of the participants thought that the lexical activities they were involved in helped them to complete their oral homework successfully: 72% of the participants strongly agree while 19% agree.

Discussion

Students were asked to complete a task as oral homework. Homework was arranged as a sequence of tasks. The subtasks emerge from the planning to complete the final tasks. Students were provided necessary input and ideas on how to present the final task. As Skehan (1996) and Willis (1996) suggest, students observed others perform a task; videos were useful for this purpose. Ellis (2003, p. 83) suggests that during the nonpreparation activities in the pre-task, teachers focus on vocabulary. Therefore, the Lexical Approach was adopted. Lexical units (chunks, collocations and phrasal verbs) were introduced. Then, students were involved in some lexical activities recommended by Lewis (1993, p. 89): identifying, matching, completing, and categorizing. This helped students to gain vocabulary needed to complete the task.

During the task, students were involved in different language learning activities that include planning and organization of the final task. They selected the language they need to fulfill the oral homework task. As with any type of homework, the oral homework task was completed outside the classroom; however, the teacher monitored

and helped students throughout in order to make homework more successful for learning. As Zacarian (2009, p 9) suggests, oral homework tasks involved step-by-step instructions. 10 minutes assigned in each class were useful to make homework a guided at-home experience.

The oral homework tasks were designed taking into account the standards of Oral Interaction and Oral Production for the level A1 described in the Common European Framework (2001). Deadlines for oral homework presentation were agreed upon depending on the level of task difficulty. Students had one task per week. Oral homework tasks were collected in videos and then were assessed using innovative assessment strategies recommended by O'Malley and Valdez (1996). Teacher's observation and notes were useful to highlight relevant parts of the students' performance and to provide useful feedback, general and personalized. As Méndez (2010) claims, this helps to make informed decisions about next assignments.

The combination of two or more approaches is known as an 'Eclectic Approach' or what Brown (2000, p. 40) calls Your Approach; "this means mixing methods together. Teachers, as creative guides in the teaching-learning process can use the mix of several methods with different learning strategies, techniques and activities." (Cando, 2015, p. 129) The combination of two approaches in this study includes a number of basic principles of learning whose main aim is developing students' oral competence. The results show that this pedagogical proposal is a practical alternative to promote oral practice outside the classroom.

Conclusions

It was feasible to apply Oral Homework by combining the Task Based Learning Approach and the Lexical Approach, similar to how Quintanilla and Ferreira (2010) combined Task Based Learning Approach and Cooperative Learning Approach.

Researches and teachers agree that there are many challenges to make oral activities in the classroom more productive. Therefore Oral Homework is an innovative alternative to promote oral practice outside the classroom. This was supported by the students' perception. However teachers must keep in mind that setting up oral homework involves an active methodological process. Teachers guide and provide students with the input necessary to communicate while students fulfill a task by selecting language from the input provided.

The learning of lexis is the key element that helps students to fulfill the oral task. Teaching lexical phrases is more effective than teaching grammar. Even though grammar was not taught, students agree they experience positive improvements in this component. Students were able to produce comprehensible messages. Just like Lewis (1993), the researcher concludes that comprehension depends more on lexis than on grammar.

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