Motivation and Mistakes in the Oral Competence of Future Teachers of English

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Abstract

The oral performance of Spanish future teachers of English is an essential linguistic aspect that requires a thorough attention. Emotional stress in the form of anxiety or frustration and mistakes related to their mother tongue influence determine the use of pedagogical strategies. In order to tackle these two issues, a classroom intervention was performed. Before attempting any pedagogical innovation, a semi-structured questionnaire to elicit data about their difficulties and motivation was passed around. Its outcome led to a twofold intervention. Firstly, a set of pedagogical strategies were tailored to improve their attitudes for participation in oral English instruction. Secondly, a battery of participatory activities were designed and put into practice in order to correct their most common oral mistakes.
The successful outcomes indicate that improving the classroom's engagement as well as working on the students' oral competence help fostering a better attitude towards a more confident use of oral skills.

Keywords: motivation, feedback, oral skills, anxiety, ELT.

1. Introduction

As trainers of future teachers of English, we are concerned about our students´ ability to express themselves in English. According to literature, there is evidence of the close relation between anxiety and oral performance among Spanish future teachers of English (Arnaiz and Pérez-Luzardo 2014). Also motivation and anxiety have been reported as existing elements to have opposite effects in foreign language learning. Thus, the implementation of motivation strategies may contribute to lessen the effects of anxiety in the learning of a foreign language. This article explains a one semester intervention with a group of 20 students enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching programme at the University of Burgos. The module "English Language I" was a requisite to achieve an English Professional Skills Diploma that would enable them to become teachers of English. Although the required level was B-2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, not all of them were fluent and confident enough in the second language, as previous teaching experience had shown.

As some studies indicate, motivation may be enhanced by an adequate learning environment which would comprise the instructor's performance as much as the nature of the activities performed. Therefore, the purpose of this intervention was threefold. First, it aimed at enhancing the students´ motivation and attitude towards their oral skills. Second, it sought to improve their level of oral English through feedback and self-correction activities. Finally, the students' independent production was fostered. For an accurate intervention, detection of the students' fears and uncertainties was achieved through a semi-structured questionnaire. Once the intervention was finished, a second questionnaire was passed around in order to evaluate whether the taken measures had contributed to the class improvement both in terms of motivation and oral performance.

2. Data Collection Instruments

The data collection instruments used for this research consisted of an initial semi-structured questionnaire, a motivation enhancement phase, an activities implementation phase and a final semi-structured questionnaire. This circular format allows an assessment of the progress obtained after the implementation of the different phases.

2.1. Initial Semi-structured Questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire was designed in order to tackle the students´ perception about their motivation and performance in oral English. Anxiety levels, motivation and difficulties in speaking were the three selected topics. The students' answers indicated that some of them usually feel nervous because they are afraid that people make fun of them, others express worry about their accent and others are not used to speaking in public. Regarding motivation, their answers showed that they feel more comfortable when they are developing an activity they enjoy, such as role play or debate. Finally, their difficulties in speaking activities were due to their shyness, their lack of vocabulary and their insecurity with English grammar. In order to improve their motivation and oral competence in English, appropriate action was taken in two phases.

2.2. Motivation Enhancement phase

There is evidence of the close relation between anxiety and oral performance among Spanish future teachers of English to the detriment of the students' self-perception (Arnaiz and Pérez-Luzardo 2014). Motivation and anxiety have been reported as existing elements to have opposite effects in foreign language learning (Gardner et al. 1992). Motivation has traditionally been related with desire and favourable attitudes to learn a language (Gardner 1985). In fact, it is a construct that comprises cognitive, affective and behavioural characteristics (Gardner 2007). Although Gardner's associated developed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) to measure motivation, this model has some deficiencies testing foreign language learners' contexts (Dörnyei 1994). Other authors such as Rodríguez and Abreu (2003) have defended the stability of general foreign language

classroom anxiety. However, the implementation of motivation strategies may contribute to lessen the effects of anxiety in the learning of a foreign language. Some studies indicate that motivation may be enhanced by an adequate learning environment which would comprise the instructor's performance (Noels et al. 1999) as much as the nature of the activities performed (Kim 2009; Young 1991).

Due to time restrictions, action focused on external motivation and more specifically, on Gardner's (2007) conception of educational context and classroom motivation. "The educational context refers generally to the educational system in which the student is registered and specifically to the immediate classroom situation" (Gardner 2007, 14). More particularly, "the educational context can play a role […] in the individual's level of integrativeness"(Gardner 2007, 15). Therefore, in order to lessen anxiety and enhance motivation among the students, our intervention focused on increasing group integration to facilitate the students' oral performance, "since speaking in the target language seems to be the most threatening aspect of foreign language learning" (Horwitz et al. 1986, 132). Taking into account that some of the most common sources of anxiety in conversation classes are improvisation of speech, public performance, fear of negative evaluation (Kim 2009) and communication with a native speaker (Çagatay 2015), a set of pedagogical strategies were tailored to improve their attitudes and motivation for participation in oral English instruction. Two aspects were selected. First, the setting was analysed and changed into a more friendly, relaxing and motivating environment. Second, the trainers' attitudes and performances were reviewed and modified. The combination of these two strategies helped to orientate the course towards a more engaging and participatory praxis.

To start with, it must be acknowledged that average classrooms at university still consist of rigid walls, parallel lines of desks and chairs facing a stage at the front where the teacher is expected to give a lecture, and a fixed blackboard and audiovisual devices as teaching tools. Unfortunately, these physical spaces do not favour movement, dialogue or democracy. On the contrary, they align with a banking concept of education (Freire 1970) that has repeatedly been criticised as non-effective, hierarchical, obsolete and above all, not motivating (Graman 1988; Shor 1993). In view of the foregoing considerations, finding a suitable space was a priority to enhance extrinsic interest among the future teachers of English. Management arrangements were needed in order to request a new and more flexible space where frequent distribution changes could take place. A department seminar turned out to be the best option. There, a mobile blackboard and the tablet arm chairs could be easily sorted according to the needs of the different activities. Also the big size of the classroom would allow the development of simultaneous activities, and the absence of a stage was also a plus. Unlike the previous setting, the physical possibilities of this seminar would be more likely to warrant collaborative tasks and communicative interaction. A careful selection of the classroom setting and its atmosphere is relevant to improve the students' external sources of motivation (Dörnyei 2007; Wu 2003).

Secondly, the teacher's attitude and performance during the oral instruction period is also a relevant source of motivation. Friendliness, tone of voice, self-presentation, active participation and attitude are some intangible elements that help to modify the students' degree of anxiety. Motivation is enhanced when the trainer is an accompanying, advisory figure (Jorgensen et al. 2005; Young 1991). For this purpose, the new classroom proved suitable to develop group, pair and individual activities. Also, the very absence of a stage forced to a more democratic and learner-centered array of performances. Unconsciously, the distance between the instructor and the students was shortened, the physical closeness between the teacher and the students was increased and the frequency of spontaneous

interaction on the side of the students grew. The teacher's role focused on encouraging students to communicate thus nullifying any authoritarian attitude. The designed activities were student-oriented and they were based on peer interaction. In sum, less stress in oral performance correlated with the teacher taking the role of facilitator.

2.3. Activities Implementation Phase

To start with, a battery of oral warming up activities was planned in order to obtain the necessary information about the mistakes made by the students. Three of these activities are included here due to their relevance. Debate is an appropriate development activity for improving discussion skills in speech. Using this activity students have the opportunity to practice their ability to express and defend their ideas in the foreign. Thus, debate promotes the expression of personal opinions while anxiety takes a second place. Role play is a successful speaking activity too. The students have the opportunity to put themselves into somebody else's shoes in credible situations. Role play is motivating because it uses real situations. The instructors act as facilitators and their role becomes secondary. Finally, storytelling is also a very useful activity to improve oral skills. Telling stories is important in everyday's communication. Students are asked to create and tell a story so that they have the opportunity to develop their accuracy and fluency in the foreign language.

In a second phase, the most common and frequent mistakes needed to be analysed and some feedback tasks were tailored to monitor and practice the outcomes. To better analyse the students' deficiencies, their performances had been recorded with their consent. At the end of each production, oral feedback was included. This feedback was implemented in two different ways. First, the instructors listened to the recordings and the students were asked to score all the mistakes they noticed. The recordings were heard twice and then they were asked to check their findings. In this sort of activities, changing mate once or twice is very useful. Moreover listening to the recordings helps students to monitor progress and it provides diagnostic information. Once students are aware of their mistakes, they are in a better position to see what they need to improve. In pedagogical theory feedback is important to provide effective support to learners and fosters motivation to continue learning (Ellis 2010). Second, the most significant errors were collected and they were handed out to the students. Then, they were asked to work in pairs to find the errors. These feedback activities helped them identify errors more easily.

After the feedback stage, some reinforcement activities were designed in order to consolidate their progress and foster accurate production. Due to space restrictions, a selection of these activities is included in this article. "Reconstruction of conversation" is a controlled speaking activity to focus the attention on a particular linguistic form. The aim is to invite students to reconstruct a very short dialogue or a sentence. They are asked to formulate hypothesis about what the speaker(s) meant to express and to exchange cognitive and linguistic knowledge. It also helps students to reflect on the structure of the target language. This activity is individual and focuses on particular mistakes. "Listening with quiz" contributes to the development of oral skills and grammar accuracy reducing anxiety by means of game competition. The class is divided into two groups. The students listen to a spontaneous conversation four or five times and then each group formulates questions about the listening. The opposing team is invited to correct the questions before answering. Peer correction takes place through play. "Draw a story" consists of telling the students a story while they are asked to draw an event or a passage related to it. They cannot write any words,

just draw. At the end of the story telling they work in pairs and they have to reconstruct the story following their drawings.

In sum, this production phase combined feedback and reinforcement activities alternating obvious and subliminal correction of oral performances. As a plus, variation of individual, pair and group methodologies enhanced peer interaction and correction in a very natural way.

2.4. Final semi-structured questionnaire

Once the activities implementation phase was completed, a final semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to elicit the results of the interventions. According to the students' answers, the following issues have been selected in order of relevance:
- Personal perception of stress in oral performance: a majority of the students felt more motivated, less anxious and more self-assured. They felt active in their English classroom and they had less fear to make mistakes and correct their peers. Only a few students indicated very little or no improvement at all.
- Methodology for oral skills development: a vast majority preferred working in groups.
- Feedback tasks and feedback on feedback: these tasks were perceived as very effective to improve their oral performances.
- Reinforcement activities: while some indicated that they had not been very interesting, others affirmed that they had made them aware of their mistakes and had helped them predict mistakes.

4. Conclusions

When the instructors step aside and the focus is placed on interaction among peers, students' motivation and interest increase. Facilitating reflection through the use of the students' oral performances contributes to a more meaningful and natural interaction among peers. Anxiety levels decrease and self-assurance is heightened. Also an adequate physical space is relevant as it may stimulate a more dynamic interaction.

A careful analysis of the data extracted from the initial questionnaire illuminated the type of work required. Feedback tasks and reinforcement activities helped students reflect on their language performances. These were useful to understand that oral English is a means of communication that needs to be adapted to each situation. This type of work helped students to increase their autonomy and to correct each other with the tools provided by the teachers.

Results indicate that the use of frequent speaking activities followed by feedback can be of great help to overcome typical obstacles such as the repetition of fossilized mistakes. In fact, the correction of reinforcement activities has shown that previous feedback had already helped the students to improve their spoken English.

In the end, some students showed improvement and developed *problem solving* skills while others showed reluctance to correction. In particular, correction was perceived as a means to help learners on their way to mastering English for communicating purposes, not as a tool for reaching perfection. A fearless attitude towards oral performance is essential and the combination of the previously detailed steps significantly decreased anxiety and enhanced

participation. The more the students engaged in the production, feedback and reinforcement phases, the more positive their perception of their oral skills became.

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