Speak Up! Fostering Oral Communication in the English Classroom Through Dialogic Musical Meetings

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This study, carried out in Spain in 2016, proposes new dialogical pedagogy techniques based on deeply rooted in constructivism to improve the level of English education in Spanish high schools. Spain is the second worst country in the European Union when it comes to English command, especially with regards to oral output, as a consequence of several factors, such as the deficient preparation of teachers, cuts in the education budget or dubbed films. This paper will present the outcomes of a Second Language Acquisition innovation project carried out in the North of Spain. After analyzing data collected to study their low command of the language, the participants, more than 20 students from the Spanish equivalent for US high school 10th grade, performed tasks that prepared them with insight and training to then participate in a musical meeting, where they, without the intervention of the teacher, listened to English music and discussed in the targeted language about some songs and their lyrics. These meetings were recorded to posteriori analysis with the students.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, oral competence, English instruction, dialogic learning

This innovation proposal was designed out of my experience as a student-teacher, part of an internship, teaching English in the bilingual track (Spanish-English) at a high school in Asturias, North of Spain. It was a 10th grade class with 18 Spanish students that had English five hours a week. Taking into account that compulsory English education in Spain starts in 1st grade—six years old, by the time students reach 10th grade they should have a pretty strong command of the language. However, this is not the case, as a vast amount of literature as shown.

One of the most important studies regarding the proficiency of English in Europe was carried out by the European Commission in 2012 in their study “Europeans and Their Languages” (2012), which was carried out between February and March 2012 in 27 different countries of the European Union. It had almost 27,000 participants, of different ages, professions, and origin. The first section of the study deals with multilingualism in Europe, trying to calculate how many Europeans can speak one or more languages apart from their mother tongue. The second section focuses on the most widely spoken foreign languages in the European Union and the domain level. The results are quite interesting. According to the study, more than half of Europeans (54%) are comfortable in a conversation in a foreign language, being Luxembourg (98%), Latvia (95%), Holland (94%), and Malta (93%) the countries with the higher number of citizens that are able to speak another language. However, there are some countries where the majority of citizens are unable to speak a foreign language.
including Spain, with more than half of the population (54%) being unable to speak a foreign language.

In addition to this, the results of the study show that English is the most spoken foreign language in Europe, with 38% of Europeans considering it their second language. According to the study, English is the best understood foreign language, with 25% of Europeans saying that, although they do not speak it with ease, they can understand and follow television or radio programs or read in English. However, Spain is the last (along with Hungary) in this aspect, with only 12% of Spaniards being able to understand English in a passive situation, such as understanding radio.

Another section of the study explores the use of foreign languages in Europe. It points out the evident relationship between the level of language proficiency and the frequency of its use. English is the most frequently spoken language, with 47% of Europeans speaking it regularly. But, again, Spain stands at the tail, having said 41% of its citizens have never learned a foreign language (only behind Portugal, with 48%). By contrast, in Luxembourg only 2% of its inhabitants said they had not learned a foreign language.

In order to grasp a better understanding of why the students were not fluent when speaking in English, I took a look into the department of English’s guidelines for evaluation and class contents. To my surprise, the oral production competence—speaking—was not even part of the final grade, which consisted of reading 20%, writing 20%, grammar 20%, vocabulary 20%, and listening 20%.

Segalowitz (2010) proposes that, in order to measure aspects of fluency in a foreign language, we should collect data on fluency in both the second language (L2) and the first language (L1). It proposes to calculate fluency through a comparison between the fluidity in L2 and L1. In this way we can consider factors regarding the fluency of L1 in L2.

In the investigation of L1, the standard measure of fluency is the average duration of speech MLU (mean length of utterance), measured in words syllables or phonemes per minute. In L2, on the other hand, the frequency of pauses (greater than 0.2 seconds), its duration, and average speaking time are considered the most significant indicators of fluency (Towell, Hawkins, & Bazergui, 1996; Trofimovich & Baker, 2006).

For this reason, I collected random samples in the classroom to measure in some way the fluency of the students. From three students (hereafter A, B, and C) I analyzed his fluency in his L1 (Spanish) and in L2 (English). These analyses show the fluency of these children in their oral production in English is insufficient for all the years they have spent studying the language.

Table 1
Fluency of Students

| Samples | MLU | L2 Number of pauses per minute | MLU |
|---------|-----|-------------------------------|-----|
| 1       | 98  | 13                            | 149 |
| 2       | 116 | 12                            | 153 |
| 3       | 104 | 17                            | 145 |

Justification and Objectives of Innovation

Although there is a large number of studies and statistics that study the low level of English in Spain compared to the rest of European countries, there are very few articles and/or investigations that indicate the reasons and diagnosis; and the number is almost zero when we try to look for innovation proposals to solve it. After having observed and analyzed these data and checked their consequent effects in the language classroom...
during my experience in the high school, I decided to design a project of educational innovation, with the purpose of proposing solutions to the problem. For this reason, the objectives that I set are the following: (a) final objective or expected results: (1) increasing the fluency of the students in the oral production competence in English, (2) updating the language instruction methodology, (3) updating the evaluation methods of the English teaching program of high school; and its consequent application by all the department’s teaching staff; (b) specific objectives: (1) increase in oral production of words in English per minute, (2) decreasing pauses and silences when students speak in English, (3) reviewing and changing the didactic programming document of English in the high school; more specifically the evaluation methodology section, (4) implementation in the classroom of “dialogical” meetings with students.

Theoretical Frame of Reference for Innovation

The methodology is based on authors of theories on Second Language Acquisition, pedagogy, and psychology, notably Vygotsky, Freire, or Ramón Flecha. The ideas of these authors are developed and combined with present-day research to help our students to develop the key competences of the Compulsory Secondary Education (C.S.E) through an active and participative methodology. Summing up, this course planning relies on principles of constructivism, dialogic learning, and communicative approach, with the objective of having participation, collaboration, and cooperation inside of the classroom, keeping our students active.

We should point out to the importance that several concepts from Stephen Krashen have in this innovation proposal, namely his Input Hypothesis (1982), with the five hypotheses on the distinction between learning and acquisition, the natural order, the monitor, the input, and the affective filter.

Using a communicative approach based on the theory of Canale and Swain (1980) and Dell Hymes—who defines communicative competence as the ability to use a language in a proper way, adapted to the communicative register. Focusing on the grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic and strategic competences, students will work on tasks and different theoretical questions, with help and scaffolding from the teacher—concept developed by Vygotsky. One of the main contributions of this Russian psychologist was the concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the distance between what a person can do on their own, without help, and what they can do with the help of a teacher or someone who has more knowledge than them (the figure of the More Knowledgeable Other). To work on the ZPD, we need to provide our students with feedback and scaffolding, giving them cognitive tools to help them in their learning process.

According to Vygotsky, we need social interaction to learn, so we need our students to be active in the classroom and to talk between them; that way, they can work on the process of creation and understanding of the sociocultural and sociolinguistic identities of the native speakers of the target language.

Another theoretical foundation is Dialogic Learning, which is based on education from a communicative approach and goes beyond previous educational models. It is based on the concepts of the information society and dialogical rotation (Flecha, Gómez, & Puigvert, 2001) and on theories of various authors—Habermas and Freire more specifically. All these theories have something in common: They point to social interaction and communication as the fundamental basis of dialogical learning.
Following Ramón Flecha, today’s society is the information society, which is based on dialogism: Due to the innumerable tools and sources from which we can obtain information nowadays, dialogue and negotiations through it have gained crucial importance. Progressively, we help each other through dialogue and information tools to propose solutions when solving a conflict. Therefore, communication takes on maximum importance in all areas: daily, professional, academic, etc.

This has an obvious impact in the field of education: Our students need interaction to build their own knowledge through dialogue and intersubjectivity. In addition, they do not learn only from dialogue with the teacher, but with any person: classmates, family members, friends... Since we all have different knowledge and understand things from different perspectives, there is no “absolute” truth—as they explain Beck, Giddens, and Lash (n.d.) with their concept of the de-monopolization of expert knowledge. Thus, teachers dialogue and negotiate with students so that they learn, since here also this de-monopolization and dialogical turn has taken place.

According to dialogism, we need first of social interactions for later, through cognitive processes, to learn (Llamas, 2010). We could say that education is not only given in the classroom, but students learn by relating what happens inside and outside the educational institution (Elboj, Puigdellivol, Soler, & Valls, 2002).

Already in the 1970s, Chomsky (1968) established that we all have the faculty of language—universal grammar—regardless of the socio-economic situation, culture, cognitive processes, etc. We can all participate in social communicative exchanges. Therefore, it will depend on the educational institutions that the students get the best results they can through the dialogue. This idea is also ratified by Habermas, with his theory of Communicative Action (1985), where it states that we all have the ability of language and action, so we can all communicate.

There are infinite cases of boys who change schools and get better grades. The abilities of these students are the same; the difference is in how the teachers stimulate them. Thus, Chomsky (2001) emphasizes that the work of teachers is crucial and that the greater or lesser level of student learning depends on them.

On the other hand, Vygotsky (1962) points out the importance of relating to the social environment in order to learn. We learn through interaction, with language being the main cognitive tool. Thus, after communicating with someone, we internalize what we have talked about, therefore knowledge comes from socializing. Vygotsky proposes that learning begins interpersonally, and then is internalized. He also postulated (1996) that our development and learning occur in two planes: first inter-psychologically and then intra-psychologically. This means that we learn first by relating to people and then assimilate, internalizing.

Habermas supports this idea of Vygotsky in his theory of Communicative Action (2001), according to the which, subjectivity is the result of intersubjectivity. Thus, someone’s way of thinking is the result of having internalized what they have learned in social interactions with other people. In addition, he points out that we create meanings through dialogue with other people

Another very important contribution of Vygotsky in the Zone of Near Development, which refers to the distance between what a student can do for himself and what he can do with the help of an adult or partner. Traditionally, when we do exams, the only thing that we evaluate is the autonomous, independent work of a child. The developments of these constructivist theories propose to avoid this, and try to evaluate the difference between what we can do alone and what we can do with the help of another person, which will show us what we are capable of doing for ourselves (Valkenburg, 2010, p. 36; Herrera, 2008).
In addition, it postulates that: “learning awakens a series of internal evolutionary processes capable of operating only when the child is interacting with the people in their environment and in cooperation with someone similar” (p. 138). Thus, it reaffirms the idea that students learn, not only through communication with a teacher, but with all the people in their context.

Vygotsky (1962) emphasizes that language plays a crucial role in social interaction; since when we talk and negotiate the meaning and meaning of things with other people, we use language interpersonally. Thus, if students work in heterogeneous groups, they will resort to language to express their different points of view, to help each other, and to explain themselves. By needing interpersonal language and social interaction in these situations, students are internalizing what they already know and new knowledge they internalize.

Following Vygotskyan theory, students learn when they work in heterogeneous dialogical groups, since they are learning first intersubjectively, through language, to then internalize it. All the while, in addition, they will be working in their zone of next development, being guided by their peers and/or teachers.

Wells (n.d.) studies the dialogues and points out the need to redistribute the classrooms to facilitate communication in the classroom. The author, like Bruner (1985), postulates that teachers should reconsider their role, to overcome the behavioral tradition in the classroom and to introduce dialogue as the main tool.

The research group CREA (Community of Research on Excellence for All) of the University of Barcelona focuses most of its studies on dialogical learning. They postulate (Aubert, Flecha, García, Flecha, & Racionero, 2008) that within this current there are dialogical and power interactions. The first is based on principles of equality, so that all dialogue participants understand and evaluate them depending on what they contribute to interaction, instead of evaluating them by the interlocutor’s position of power. CREA’s educational projects have shown that students learn better through logical interactions. Therefore, educational institutions should gradually introduce education through dialogical interactions instead of power (as they have prevailed so far).

In addition to this classification of interactions in the classroom, we find another that establishes transformative interactions and adapter interactions (Aubert et al., 2008). In the latter, the negative results persist, while in the former, success results are produced. These transformative interactions develop much more the learning and knowledge of the students, helping students to transform the different situations of inequality in which they can be found. Moreover, as their own name indicates, they transform students, promoting and stimulating their development, confidence, and self-concept. Dialogic learning is one of the best methods to end adaptive interactions and turn them into transformative

**Development of Innovation**

**Activity Plan**

Since the rest of the competences to work for the subject of English are already in the curriculum, being implemented and worked in class by the different professors of the department, the innovation consists in introducing in the curriculum a proposal of innovation for the work in class of oral production competence, which, as we have seen, does not work. This proposal is called “dialogical meetings”, where students will work and learn from each other in a communicative, dialogical, and collective way.

This activity is based on dialogical learning, which is based on current international research and educational innovations with guarantees of success. Thus, the dialogical meetings comply with the seven principles of dialogical learning (Aubert et al., 2008, pp. 168-235), which do not have a strictly linguistic focus, but are a proposal that has demonstrated effectiveness in all areas, improvement of results, and greater
involvement in the educational community. They require that the proposed works be of the highest quality (preferably classical) to raise both the expectations of the student body and the academic and intellectual level.

The principles are the following:

- Equal dialogue: communication to negotiate and reach agreements, instead of imposing our beliefs due to the social hierarchical position that we occupy. The egalitarian dialogue is what stimulates student learning, formed by pretensions of validity (Habermas, 1985), egalitarian, and respectful, where the contributions are taken into account based on the logic of the arguments, not who makes them.

- Cultural intelligence: Apart from academic knowledge, we must take into account the cultural intelligence of people; thus, we will increase the learning of our students. If we motivate our students to have cultural as well as academic intelligence, they will be improving their ability to select information and how to use it in the information society. In other words, following Cattell’s (1971) theory, we will foster fluid intelligence and crystallized intelligence.

- Cultural intelligence is composed of practical and communicative intelligence; and it is crucial to develop it to live in the information society. Thus, students will develop the ability to select information, use it, and process it.

- Transformation: Currently, the methodology and teaching of the high school are based on adaptive interactions, when they should be transformative, since, as Freire (2003) points out “we are beings of transformation, not of adaptation”. Dialogical learning postulates that we need to transform our educational environment so that it is a place where students and teachers can interact with each other.

- Instrumental dimension: When learning collectively, higher level students help children. With this, the cognitive processes of our students develop much more, since they have to explain what they know to other students, re-establishing what they already know and fostering their meta-cognitive capacity. In addition, they will have to adapt their explanation to the level of the other and their cognitive processes. Consequently, their communication skills will develop much more than in traditional education. So, through dialogue, we develop instrumental learning.

- Creation of meaning: In today’s society, the activities in which it is felt are crucial. What do we mean by this? We create a sense of our reality through dialogue with others, where intersubjectivity is created and we share experiences and perspectives. So, by communicating we understand the world and current society.

- Solidarity: By working in heterogeneous groups, we develop solidarity, since we see different points of view of people with different backgrounds, socio-cultural environments, race, culture, age, etc.

- Equality of differences: We need to work and learn in heterogeneous environments because we learn much more. First, we develop much more knowledge about our own cultural baggage, and secondly, we learn from different perspectives. This is something quite positive of the North American education, where the classroom is sought to be heterogeneous; but, on the contrary, in Spain the opposite has been sought.

- In Spain, traditionally, an equal opportunity has been sought, adapting the differences of our students. However, we need to achieve equality of results, transforming the educational context in a place where we can all achieve the same results but considering our differences.

How does this innovation proposal work?

At the beginning of each didactic unit, the teachers will have chosen two or three songs for the students to listen and analyze. After about two weeks, when the unit is finished, the day of the meeting will take place. The students will all sit together in a circle, seeing each other, and will talk in English about these songs. Each one
will have to choose the part they like the most and explain to the rest why, and what their understanding of the song itself is. There will be a facilitator, who will moderate the meeting and offer scaffolding (concept of Bruner and Vygotsky as we have seen) so that the students will analyze the songs little by little and comment on their impressions, understandings, ideas, etc., all from their own perspective and cognitive processes. The facilitator will be a different person in each meeting, in favor of creating an equal participation.

The correct use of English is not the main function of the meeting; but to “let go” and start practicing the real oral production competition. Through an egalitarian dialogue, they will delve into the songs, analyzing different concepts suggested by the facilitator (lyrics, background culture, linguistics, history, etc.). The songs can be of any time and gender, but, obviously, they cannot be explicit or represent values such as machismo, racism, intolerance, etc.

The songs will be put in the background in the meeting, to be able to listen to some relevant parts if necessary. So, little by little, analyzing the songs all together and providing valid arguments, we will be creating meaning collectively, learning from each other intersubjectively.

At the end of each meeting, the students will have two days to write a text with the ideas they have developed in the meeting; impressions, what they have learned, what comments they have liked, etc. The role of the teacher is that of facilitator, observer, and, above all, one more participant in the meeting. In the next session, the students would be given linguistic feedback of the session and the errors would be analyzed.

**Agents Involved**

As we have seen, dialogical learning is based on equal dialogue, equal opportunities, and solidarity. Participation, coordination, and decision making will be equal. That is, all participate in all existing roles (moderator and participants). The songs to work in each didactic unit will be agreed between all the students, starting from a list proposed and previously agreed by the teaching team of the department, which will be established in the didactic program of the department.

**Support Materials and Necessary Resources**

- **Material resources.** Classroom, chairs, blackboard, computer, stereo, speakers, projector (optional).
- **Human resources.** Students, teachers, teacher training in dialogical learning and communicative approach for the subject.

**Phases (Calendar/Chronogram)**

In a first phase, to put into practice this update and adaptation of the didactic programming with reality and the latest educational and sociological research, teachers should receive training in dialogical learning, constructivism, cooperativism, etc. For this, and as part of the schedule, I consider it essential that they are training and attend, at least, 50 hours of training in this field.

Next, we would review and update the department’s teaching program. In this stage, in addition, the teachers would agree on how the meetings, objectives, procedures, monitoring, evaluation, etc., will be developed.

In accordance with the established in the didactic programming of the center, each academic course is divided in 15 didactic units, which translate into a unit for every two weeks, approximately. For each unit we would have a final session of social meeting, leaving the schedule for each unit:

- **First day:** introduction to the songs that will be worked on in this unit.
- **At the end of the unit:** dialogic musical meeting with its consequent document of reflection.
Last day of the unit: Finally, the final session of each unit will be dedicated to analyze linguistic errors and students will receive feedback from the teacher. As the meeting will be recorded—in order to be an objective evaluation instrument, the students and the teacher will see some minutes of the video, focusing on the linguistic errors.

It will be the task of each teacher to relate the songs with the contents of each didactic unit. Thus, during the two weeks, different aspects and competences will be worked on what will provide knowledge to the students and ideas to take to the meetings.

**Phases and Activities of Each of Them**

The activities will depend on each teacher and their methodology, but will be based on a communicative approach and with principles of dialogical learning, as it will be established in the didactic program of the center after its revision and update.

**Evaluation and Monitoring of Innovation**

The role of the teacher in each meeting will be to supervise it, trying to intervene as little as possible (that’s what the facilitator is for). Then, the teacher will have the essays that each student writes at home about the meetings to supervise that everything is going correctly and that the students are learning.

The progress and improvement of the student will be evaluated in each meeting, observing their interventions. In addition, with the updating of the didactic programming, the competence of oral production will be included within the evaluation criteria; in each quarter, exams will be conducted to evaluate this competence in a specific way. This, added with the evaluation of the meeting, will serve as supervisory instruments.

**Table 2**

| Analysis of the Objectives |
|----------------------------|
| General objectives | Indicator of impact | Measurements |
| Increase of the fluency of the students in the oral production competence in English | Oral production competence | MLU Specific tests of oral production |
| Updating of the language instruction methodology in the high school | Teacher’s work in the classroom | Possible visits to the classroom among the different professors to verify that a methodology more focused on communication has been implemented |
| Update of the evaluation methods of the English teaching program of the high school and its consequent application by all the department’s teaching staff | Didactic programming of the English department | Review, update and adaptation of the didactic program for the next academic year |

| Specific objectives of the project | Indicators of achievement of objectives | Measurements |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------|
| Increase of oral production of words in English by minute | Student fluency | Oral production tests (words per minute) |
| Decreased pauses and silences when students speak in English | Student fluency | Oral production tests (pauses of more than 0.2 seconds per minute) |
| Review and change of the didactic programming document of English in the high school; more specifically the evaluation methodology section | Didactic programming for the next academic year | More communication exercises in the classroom |
| Implementation in the classroom of dialogical meeting with the students | Methodology and didactics | Reports of the teachers of planning of activities and didactics followed in their classes |
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