

## Developing Oral Proficiency with Break-through College Learners

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**Resumen:** Esta propuesta es el resultado de un estudio etnográfico realizado con un grupo de enseñanza del inglés de la Universidad Nacional, Campus Coto que cursa actualmente el segundo año. Durante dos semestres, se monitoreó el nivel competencia oral de los estudiantes por medio de observaciones participativas y entrevistas para detectar los factores lingüísticos y metodológicos que pudieron afectar el incremento de la fluidez de los discentes, considerando que éstos tenían comprensión de material auditivo y de lectura pero no eran capaces de expresarse con fluidez en inglés. El enseñar a hablar a discentes novatos es una labor difícil debido a la influencia de factores no lingüísticos y pedagógicos que influyen en el manejo del lenguaje meta. Arroyo aduce que “Algunos estudiantes aseguran que la timidez y la falta de práctica son factores que afectan el aprendizaje del idioma en forma fluida” (Al Día). Lamentablemente, el problema cuando los discentes principiantes no mejoran su competencia comunicativa para así poder mostrar mucha más fluidez en la segunda lengua. Por tanto, es necesario llevar a cabo la implementación de una metodología comunicativa que contemple un repertorio de estrategias pedagógicas de enseñanza-aprendizaje las cuales puedan lograr un incremento de la competencia comunicativa y lingüística de los estudiantes que les permita un mayor crecimiento en el lenguaje meta. Al final del segundo semestre, los estudiantes progresaron y alcanzaron el nivel requerido. Este enfoque pedagógico propuesto no es una fórmula mágica. Empero, el mismo ha demostrado ser un recurso lento pero efectivo que logra incrementar el desarrollo de la habilidad oral de los estudiantes.

**Palabras claves:** Competencia comunicativa, conocimiento deductivo e inductivo, estrategias metodológicas, enfoque metodológico, fluidez.

**Abstract:** This proposal is the result of an ethnographic study done with a first-year English group from Universidad Nacional, Campus Coto that is now in second year. During two semesters, students' oral proficiency level was tracked down through participant observations and interviews to detect the linguistic and methodological factors that affected the increase of the students' fluency, considering the fact that they were able to show comprehension of listening and reading material yet were unable to express themselves fluently in the target

language. Teaching novice learners to speak is hard to do due to the influence of various non-linguistic and pedagogical factors that affect the students' mastery of the target language. Arroyo stated that some students express that shyness as well as lack of practice are factors that affect target language learning fluency' (Al Dia). Unfortunately, the problem arises when these breakthrough learners do not seem to make progress in terms of developing communicative competence to be able to express much more fluently in the target language. As a result, the implementation of a communicative methodology, containing a repertoire of learning and teaching strategies is proposed for the purpose of augmenting the learners' communicative competence as well as the linguistic knowledge of their L2 in order to make them grow. At the end of the second semester, the students made progress and were where they needed to be. The proposed pedagogical approach is not a magic formula. However, it has proven to be an effective slow going resource that increases the students' development of the oral skill.

**Key words:** Communicative competence, procedural and declarative knowledge, pedagogical strategies, teaching approach, fluency.

## I Introduction

Second language learning is an ongoing process since knowledge of a target language is always emerging. Nevertheless, target language learners have the capacity to reach a level of proficiency as well as show linguistic competence when they communicate in L2.

Traditionally, the teaching of English in Costa Rica in public middle and high schools has probably been limited to the mastery of the reading skills due to the country-mandated test (National test). For this reason, perhaps many students do not develop skills to learn to speak the target language. Indeed, when new learners enroll in the English major at Universidad Nacional, either the bachelor's program in English teaching or the Associate's degree in English, they might be able to communicate in the target language at a very novice low level or not to utter a single phrase at all.

The teaching of a foreign language is a complex long-term process that requires teachers to use a variety of pedagogical strategies to teach the target language to their pupils. As a result, most students are able to learn to listen, read, and write in the target language with a great deal of accuracy. However, when it comes to the speaking skill, it is hard for the teacher to make students communicate among themselves. This is contradictory since learners' main goal and interest is oral communication in L2. With regard to this point, Arroyo quoting Gibson states that "A Costa Rican's main weakness continues to be oral expression, which is mandatory to apply for job" (Al Dia).

Teaching novice learners to speak is hard to do due to the influence of various non-linguistic and pedagogical factors that affect the students' mastery of the target language. Arroyo states that "Some students express that shyness as well as lack of practice are factors that affect target language learning fluency" (Al Dia). In addition, Arroyo quoting Gibson manifests that lack of language fluency 'is probably due to the education system which has promoted reading comprehension" (Al Dia).

Unfortunately, the problem arises when these breakthrough learners do not seem to make progress in terms of developing communicative competence to be able to express much more fluently in the target language.

In general, this investigation aims to accomplish the following objectives:

General:

-To analyze the non-linguistic and pedagogical factors that affect the communicative competence of break-through English students at UNA, Sede Regional Brunca.

Specific:

- To identify the most influential non-linguistic and pedagogical factors that deprive the students from interacting in L2.
- To determine the communicative proficiency level of new students, taking the course Integrated English I, at the beginning of the school year by administering a speaking test.
- To identify the teaching methodology used in the classroom.

## II Framework of Reference

### 2.1 Oral Expression

Teaching speaking or oral expression to novice learners is one of the most difficult tasks to carry out for the language teacher. This is probably because speaking is a productive skill that is time consuming, procedural and slow going. This means that a learner does not learn to communicate in the target language overnight. Students learn to speak by interacting with others. If they are not provided with enough opportunities to do so, they will not make it through the mastery of this important ability. Speaking as well as listening, reading and writing must be integrated through a holistic approach that guarantees learners the global mastery of the target language, mainly for communicative purposes.

A highly challenging aspect that a teacher must face before planning a lesson is the gathering of the materials to be used. When it comes to oral expression, the teacher needs to design activities that comply with the three stages of speaking (pre-communicative, communicative and post-communicative activities) that promote student-student interaction more than student-teacher interaction. Moreover, it is necessary to develop a communicative approach such as the *Task-Based* or the *Communicative Language Teaching* that are oriented towards oral elicitation through the use of communicatively effective strategies such as role-plays, skits, simulations, interviews, story-telling, and so on.

Following this line of thought, CEF (Common European Framework) recommends implementing “an approach that is action-oriented in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as social agents, i.e members of a society who have tasks . . .” (p. 9). In addition, Larsen (2000, p. 129) quoting Morrow holds, “truly communicative activities have three features: *information gap*, *choice*, and *feedback*.” This means that an information gap exists when one speaker has information that the other lacks. In addition, choice accounts for what a person wants to say and the manner it

is said. Namely, the speaker must not be controlled or limited to express a particular answer. True communication must have a purpose, and a speaker needs to assess his/her achievement based on the information provided by the listener. It is pertinent to point out that in order for an individual to become a proficient speaker, it is necessary to be a good listener and show understanding of what others say. For that reason, research shows that listening and speaking are overlapped. Furthermore, listening is no longer considered a passive skill. According to Bachman and others, “listening is not a passive or receptive skill, as it is commonly assumed. Listening is an interactive, dynamic, interpretive process in which the listener engages in the active construction of meaning (qtd. in O’Malley & Valdez, p. 58). For this reason, it would not be commendable to teach speaking in isolation since the increase of communicative competence depends on the internalization of input through listening comprehension in order to build the required knowledge for developing oral communication.

## 2.2 Communicative Competence

Communicative competence accounts for the level of cognition that a learner needs to have for the purpose of expressing himself or herself with others by means of socialization with the aid of an appropriate context that promotes learning. Chang (2011) defines communicative competence by quoting Hymes who states that “the study of human language should place humans in a social world. The definition of ‘communicative competence’ is what a speaker needs to know in order to communicate in a speech community” (p. 3). This means that interaction takes precedence over form through meaningful context. In that way, a speaker will have the opportunity to express his or herself much more for the purpose of developing his or her oral proficiency level of the target language. As to this point, Chang states that “in the real world, not only is a speaker expected to produce a grammatical sentence, but he/she should also consider the situation or context in which the sentences are used” (p. 3). According to Hymes, competence should be viewed as “the overall underlying knowledge and ability for language which the speaker-listener possesses” (Qtd. in Chang, p. 3). He also recommends using four main areas or “sectors” for communicate competence:

First, “whether or not something is formally *possible*” refers to the notion of grammatical competence. It is concerned with whether an utterance is grammatically correct. Second, “whether something is *feasible*” deals with its acceptability, in addition to being grammatically possible. For example, some grammatical sentences cannot be part of competence because of the restricted ability of human information processing. Third, “whether something is *appropriate*” means that a sentence should be appropriate to the context in which it is used. Finally, “whether something is in fact *done*” implies that a sentence may be grammatically correct, feasible, and appropriate in context, but have no probability of actually occurring. It may be concluded that communicative competence consists of knowledge of linguistic rules, appropriate language usage in different situations, connection of utterances in a discourse, and language strategies. (p. 4)

This may mean that a sentence like “*Elephants can fly*” is a grammatically correct sentence that is not likely to happen because of its erroneous semantic nature, and it may probably happen at a very fictional context on T.V, particularly cartoons.

### 2.3 Interactive Approaches

For many years, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language has been based on form and vocabulary, taking into account principles and techniques of the Audio-lingual Method and the Grammar-Translation Method such as *memorization, repetition, emphasis on written language rather on spoken language, and deductive application of grammar rules*. Indeed, the syllabus for this kind of instruction was very structure-oriented. For some language theories, “grammar is the most important element of learning a language” (Lindsay & Knight, 2006, p. 1). As a result, most learners might have made progress in literacy but not in oral communication. Grammar can be taught through inductive and deductive reasoning. Brown (2000) defines both aspects as follows:

In the case of inductive reasoning, one stores a number of specific instances and induces a general law or rule or conclusion that governs or subsumes the specific instances. Deductive reasoning is a movement from a generalization to specific instances: specific subsumed facts are inferred or deduced from a general principle. Second language learning in the “field” (natural, untutored language learning... involves a largely inductive process, in which learners must infer certain rules and meanings from all the data around them. (p. 92)

Even though Nunan (2003) “recommends combining both approaches (inductive and deductive) when teaching grammar, he believes that “inductive techniques appear to result in learners retaining more of the language in the long term” (p. 158). This means that it is pertinent for teachers to focus teaching more on procedural knowledge (usage of gained insights for elicitation) than on declarative knowledge (grammar rules).

Nowadays, the trend in foreign language teaching and learning is to have the students learn the target language in an integrated way by implementing a communicative methodology inside or outside the classroom through meaningful learning in order to enhance the students’ communicative language proficiency. According to Lindsay and Knight, “learning can take place both inside and outside the classroom. It can be an informal process; picking up words from the T.V, magazines, books, or friends; or it can be a formal process-attending lessons and taking part in classroom activities where language and skills are introduced and practiced” (p. 1). Brown (2000) considers meaningful learning an important cognitive-learning principle and refers to it as follows:

Meaningful learning “subsumes” new information into existing structures and memory systems, and the resulting associative links create retention. Rote learning- taking in isolated bits and pieces of information that are not connected with one’s existing cognitive structures- has little chance of creating long-term retention. (p. 57)

The process of developing communicative language proficiency in the target language through an inductive approach and social interaction is possibly slow-going and time-consuming. According to Nunan (2003), “a disadvantage of an inductive approach is that it takes more time for learners to come to an understanding of the grammatical point in question than with a deductive approach. However, inductive techniques appear

to result in learners retaining more of the language in the long term” (p. 158). In addition, “research has confirmed that students may be able to communicate fluently in English after only two to three years of all-English schooling but may take longer, between five and ten years...” (O’ Malley & Valdez, p. 60).

Social interaction is another important factor that contributes to increasing language proficiency. In order to promote interaction, it is necessary to develop communicative activities and meaning negotiation which is an important characteristic of interaction. As to this point, Hwang quotes Long by stating:

One particular kind of interaction, known as *negotiation for meaning* has been proposed in relation to focus on form. Long (1996) characterized this term as follows: "negotiation for meaning by definition involves denser than usual frequencies of semantically contingent speech of various kinds (i.e., utterance by a competent speaker, such as repetitions, extensions, reformulations, rephrasing, expansions, and recasts), which immediately follow learner utterances and maintain reference to their meaning. (p. 48)

Notwithstanding, no single method has proven to be a hundred percent effective enough to guarantee a successful development and mastery of oral communication. It is possible to implement some new approaches to language teaching for communicative purposes like the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Task-based Approach (TBA).

#### **2.4 Communicative Language Teaching**

CLT is an improved version of the Communicative Approach which is both communication and interaction-oriented. Larsen-Freeman (2000) states that “Communicative Language Teaching aims broadly to apply the theoretical perspective of the Communicative Approach by making communicative competence the goal of language teaching and by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication” (p. 121). The effective results of its applicability will be reflected based on the interpretation that teachers make of its main components such as tenets and strategies.

The role of the teacher who uses CLT in developing speaking proficiency among the students is that of a facilitator since his or her major goal is to promote interaction. In addition, the teacher can advise learners by answering their questions and monitoring their work.

CLT focuses on functions rather than forms albeit a functional syllabus is not always used. Various language forms are inductively introduced for each linguistic function to be developed. At the beginning, simple patterns are presented, yet as soon as the learners become more proficient in the target language, the previous functions are introduced again in order to learn more challenging forms. For instance, in learning to ask for directions, breakthrough students might practice *‘Where is the post office?’*, but independent users might learn *‘Do you know where the post office is?’* or *‘Can you tell me where the post office is?’*

Some of the techniques implemented by CLT are the use of *authentic materials*, *language games*, *role-play*, *picture strip story* and other activities that promote social interaction in the target language.

## 2.5 The Task-Based Approach

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is focused on language use for communicative purposes. Larsen-Freeman (2000) refers to TBLT as follows:

A task-based approach aims to provide learners with a natural context for language use. As learners work to complete a task, they have abundant opportunity to interact. Such interaction is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning. By doing so, they have to check to see if they have comprehended correctly and, at times, they have to seek clarification. By interacting with others, they get to listen to language which may be beyond their present ability, but which may be assimilated into their knowledge of the target language for use at a later time. (p. 144)

Since task-based instruction is based upon experiential learning, the teaching of declarative knowledge is not emphasized at all since the teacher, as a facilitator and guide of the teaching-learning process, makes students learn by doing meaningful activities and by providing them with the appropriate context that is task-oriented. With regard to this, Nunan (2003) states the following:

In TBLT, language lessons are based on learning experiences that have non-linguistic outcomes, and in which there is a clear connection between the things learners do in class and the things they will ultimately need to do outside of the classroom. Such tasks might include listening to a weather forecast and deciding what to wear, ordering a meal, planning a party, finding one's way around town and so on. In these tasks, language is used to achieve non-language outcomes. For example, the ultimate aim of ordering a meal is not to use correctly formed wh-questions, but to get food and drink on the table. (p. 7)

Lee quoting Willis says that there are “five principles for the implementation of a task-based approach: (a) exposure to worthwhile and authentic language, (b) active use of language, (c) tasks that motivate learners to engage in language use, (d) a focus on language at some points in a task cycle, and (e) a focus on language that is more and less prominent at different times” (p. 107).

In sum, TBLT is probably one of the most effective approaches to oral language proficiency if the instructors carefully design the tasks that their pupils need to perform in and out of the classroom. Of course, there are tasks for different language proficiency levels. For that reason, it is necessary to determine the level(s) that the student(s) may have.

## 2.6 Factors that Affect the Development of Oral Proficiency

Developing oral proficiency is probably the most difficult communicative goal to reach when learning a second language. This is because every learner is different, and

every person learns at different rates. Lindsay and Knight mention that some of the most common factors that might influence the learning of a foreign language, particularly in terms of oral communication, are “innate ability, aptitude, attitude, motivation, age, embarrassment and anxiety, self-confidence, learner types, relationship with other learners, [teaching strategies], and relationship to the teacher” (p. 7-10).

Learning is a never ending process that can take place inside or outside the classroom. Such a process can be both *informal* (getting pieces of knowledge from a variety of sources: magazines, T.V, friends, life, experience) and *formal* (instruction conducted in a classroom). As a result, learners gain insights through different everyday situations. Of course, the knowledge obtained (learning outcomes) is the result of the strategies (techniques), individual differences, and socio-cultural factors.

Sousa states that “teachers can facilitate a lifetime of successful learning by equipping students with a repertoire of strategies and tools for learning” (p. 24). This means that the market offers a variety of tools to be used to guarantee learning. Many experts have established different taxonomies to group them according to their philosophy. However, no single learning strategy can guarantee the effective mastery of a language. This is similar to the assumption that there is no single method or “teaching recipe” to teach a language the best way. Nonetheless, teachers can and have the obligation of selecting the most outstanding techniques or tools that in their opinion are learning oriented to quench their students’ learning thirst.

Learning strategies play an important role in the process of second language acquisition and are highly linked to individual differences that learners might have. This means that educators are responsible, to a great extent, for what happens in the classroom in terms of *the topic or content taught, the materials used, the kind and sequential order of activities, classroom management, and corrective feedback*. Also, teachers need to identify their pupils’ needs as well as the learner types they have and design lessons which satisfy their students’ learning needs and promote their cognitive development. This is very difficult to do, considering the fact that all groups are not homogeneous and present different characteristics. Moreover, learners must be told not to worry about making mistakes since it is part of the learning process and errors are evidence that learning is taking place. As a matter of fact, learners are also responsible for learning a great deal, and they must use techniques according to his learning idiosyncrasy and take advantage of every single opportunity they have to use the target language, self-monitor and correct. Learning strategies are to be effective or ineffective based on some individual learning differences such as *age, motivation, aptitude, personality, and intelligence*. Although it is highly believed that little kids can master a second language more readily than adolescents or adults, old learners have the capacity as well. They only need to be exposed to a variety of activities that activate their senses (touching, tasting, smelling, visual, and hearing). Moreover, the degree to which learners are motivated and show enthusiasm is important to guarantee success in language learning since the students will have a reason or goal to assimilate L2. This is called intrinsic motivation. Although there are different kinds of motivation, the intrinsic one seems to be much more effective because of the direction it takes to empower learners. Some good ways to



motivate learners intrinsically are preparing lessons that contain colorful materials, developing student-centered activities that promote social interaction, creating a positive environment in the classroom, supporting the students at all times, and making them feel confident of the work they do. If a learner does not have a talent to develop L2 interest, s/he will not probably make it since their aptitude shows that this is something they do not want to do. Nonetheless, other pupils can be more talkative, extrovert, assertive and dynamic. For both cases, teachers need to use learning strategies that lead to control anxiety and be able to succeed. This means that shy learners might have a hard time when doing public speaking. As a result, motivation and encouragement are two techniques used to lower the students' affective filter. On the other hand, extrovert students, particularly AD/HD learners (attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder) can suffer from anxiety for doing tasks. Seldom are they quiet or passive. For this reason, it is necessary to design challenging activities that really keep them interested and lead them to grow as well. Students have intelligence. This concept should not be defined from a psychometric perspective, that is, knowledge is measured in terms of the results by means of traditional tests. Intelligence, according to Gardner, is more than that. Actually, he defines intelligence as a group of multiple abilities or talents that every human being has, and an individual can have all of them or some, but they are developed according to the learner's aptitude. As a result, teachers need to design activities that promote the development of such multiple intelligences.

Socio-cultural factors and learning strategies are highly interrelated in the process of second language acquisition since there is an assumption that states if you are bilingual, you are bicultural. This does not mean that learners will be strictly attached to the target culture, but they will learn it and respect it, but they do not have to be forced to follow all of its components. When living in a foreign country, students face a phenomenon called acculturation which is the adaptation to the target culture patterns. Some experts point out that this is a step by step process that might have the following phases: *honeymoon stage, not like home, period of adjustment, and not so bad*. The honeymoon phase is optimistic to learners since they receive support from the community, friends, and school. This means that the new situation looks promising. With the pass of time, learners realize that living abroad is not like living at home, thus frustration sets in because in many cases there are no tools for understanding new language though they may try. Besides, they feel isolated because oral communication is hard and group support begins to fade. Then, learners experience a period of adjustment, that is, they can recognize cues, facial expressions, gestures, and behaviors. In this stage, they may have very little understanding of language, but they feel comfortable. As soon as they get more into it, they realize that L2 is not bad at all, and there is general acceptance for life in the foreign country. Subconsciously, they like the new place of residence.

### III Methodology

This is a type of descriptive study based on quantitative research which uses the case study as a main strategy, eight non-participant observations done with a group of first-

year students (the sources of information) during the first two months of the first semester, key-informant interviews done to both course professors, and the administration of a survey to the learners as a verifying instrument. The results will help academic authorities of UNA, Sede Regional Brunca, to make decisions when selecting or designing a communicative methodology for teaching the course Integrated English I. Gay (1992) states that “descriptive research involves collecting data in order to test hypotheses or to answer questions concerning the current status of the subject of study. A descriptive study determines and reports the way things are” (p. 217).

Moreover, this descriptive research implies the development of indirect work with the sources of information (the learners and course professors) during eight weeks to determine the both the non-linguistic and pedagogical factors that deprive the students’ from increasing their communicative competence in the target language.

### 3.1 Population, Subjects, and Setting

The population sample is composed of one first-year career group of approximately twelve students which ages range from 17 to 20 years. This class is from Universidad Nacional, Campus Coto, located in Paso Canoas, Corredores. The selection of the institution will be done through convenience sampling because the researcher of this study works at UNA, Campus Coto and has the feasibility to carry out the investigation there due to the fact he does not count on much time or have many funds to conduct the study at other school campuses. Gay (1992) defines convenience sampling as “accidental sampling and haphazard sampling [that] basically involves using as the sample whoever happens to be available” (p. 138). This means that the researcher chooses a sample that is advantageous and convenient to the purposes of the investigation.

## IV Conclusion

In conclusion, learning is an ongoing process that demands the use of many different strategies in order to succeed. This process is hard and can be both formal and informal; thus, learners can be either active or passive. There must be commitment on the part of both learners and teachers to select appropriate techniques, considering individual learning differences, socio cultural factors and learning results. Namely, teachers and students must do team work and be willing to accept challenges in order to grow day after day following the wise principle: “Practice makes it perfect.”

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He has been working at UNA for 14 years in the Associate, Bachelor and Licentiate's degree programs. He has also been a thesis director in the licentiate program. Besides, he worked for 2 years in the CONARE-MEP training program. He has done research in applied linguistics and linguistics to be presented in different congresses and seminars.

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Manuel Navarro Godínez has been an EFL teacher for over fifteen years. He is a graduate of Universidad Nacional with a licentiate's degree in Applied Linguistics and another one in School Administration. He has taught EFL in elementary, middle, and high school. He has also worked as a career teacher at Universidad Nacional for eight years. Manuel has three years of international expertise, having taught ESL at KES (Knightdale Elementary) in North Carolina, USA. He has also worked as both high school principal and assistant principal for two years. He is the chair of the EFL team and currently teaches English to second –year career students at Universidad Nacional, Campus Coto as well as some service courses to students of other majors. Manuel is also studying for his Master's degree in Second Languages and Cultures at Universidad Nacional.