Plans of Improvement: A Resource to Enhance Performance and Autonomy in EFL Courses

Eduardo Zamora Salazar
Olga Chaves Carballo
Universidad Nacional, Costa Rica

Abstract

Educators in the major *Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés de I y II Ciclo* at *Universidad Nacional* have been concerned about students' proficiency at all levels. To address this situation, the researchers conducted a study with sixteen students enrolled in the *Oral Communication III* course of the IV level of the major during the I cycle of 2011. This investigation analyzes the effectiveness of strategies aimed at improving the participants' oral communication skills. The main objective is to make them aware of the need to achieve continuous growth in their proficiency. In order to accomplish this, the learners are requested to elaborate and carry out an individual *plan of improvement* in which they select their own tasks and assignments, mainly focusing on the skills that need further advancement. This strategy helps them not only enhance their performance but also develop skills to foster autonomous learning. The pedagogical implications on linguistic awareness analyzed in this study will provide insightful suggestions for effective learning that can be implemented in the major and other EFL programs.

Key words: ongoing improvement, linguistic awareness, novel strategy, autonomous learning, oral communication

Resumen

Los y las docentes del *Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés de I y II Ciclo* de la *Universidad Nacional* han mostrado su preocupación sobre el nivel lingüístico de los y las estudiantes en todos los niveles. Con el propósito de solucionar esta situación, se realizó una investigación con dieciséis estudiantes del curso *Comunicación Oral III* del IV nivel de la

carrera durante el I ciclo del 2011. Este estudio analiza la efectividad de las estrategias diseñadas para mejorar la habilidad comunicativa oral de los participantes. El principal objetivo consiste en que comprendan la necesidad de experimentar un crecimiento continuo en su desempeño lingüístico. Para alcanzar tal objetivo, se les asignó elaborar y desarrollar un *plan de mejoramiento* en el que cada alumno/a selecciona sus prácticas y tareas, enfocándose principalmente en los aspectos que necesitan superarse. Esta estrategia les ayudó tanto a mejorar su desempeño como a desarrollar destrezas para promover el aprendizaje autónomo. Las implicaciones pedagógicas en habilidad lingüística abordadas en esta investigación brindarán valiosas sugerencias para fomentar un aprendizaje efectivo no solo en dicha carrera, sino en otros programas de inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras claves: mejoramiento continuo, conocimiento lingüístico, estrategia novedosa, aprendizaje autónomo, comunicación oral

Introduction

Professors of the *Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés de I y II Ciclo* at *Universidad Nacional* have posed concerns about students' target language proficiency at all levels of the major. Unfortunately, such deficiencies are noticeable in every language skill. Although most students usually meet the required standards to pass the courses, they do not achieve the optimal competence to become English teachers. In other words, it is unlikely that students whose grade point average is below an eight (in a scale from one to ten) have the proper command of English to become teachers, despite the fact that they can graduate with such average.

The study analyzes factors that contribute to the improvement of learners' oral communicative skills such as motivation, attitude, and strategies, among others. The main objective is to make them aware of the need to achieve continuous proficiency development. In order to accomplish this goal, the participants were requested to design and carry out an individual weekly plan of improvement in which they established their own tasks and assignments, mainly focusing on the skills and sub-skills that deserved further progress (such as fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and others). Then, each learner recorded his/her progress through weekly formative assessments, and questionnaires.

The plans of improvement are an innovative model that focuses on the learner's use of metacognitive strategies in order to achieve improvement. Thus, learners are provided with tools that allow them to monitor and assess their proficiency level as well as to design and carry out pedagogical activities intended to enhance their target language proficiency. Emphasis is placed on observation, analysis and reflection upon the students' behaviors that positively affect their learning process. Nevertheless, it is not the teacher who is entirely responsible

for monitoring this course of action; in fact, it is the student him/herself who has a predominant role in this task while the teacher mainly provides constant guidance and encouragement.

This study contributes to the field of language acquisition since it reports on students' own initiative to develop their linguistic proficiency, creativity, and comprehensible discourse in both planned and unplanned interactions. Consequently, if the proposed model proves to be effective, it will certainly serve as data to suggest changes in the paradigm currently put into practice in this institution and others. Considering the critical need to provide a model to enhance learners' linguistic awareness, the present study suggests a systematic plan to accomplish such transcendental goal. Lastly, the pedagogical implications drawn by this research provide insightful suggestions for effective learning that can be implemented not only in this major but also in other EFL programs.

Literature review

One of the earliest contributions in SLA that focused on the imperative need that learners develop personalized strategies to enhance their language proficiency was suggested by Naiman et al. (1978). These authors claimed that students' with an active role in the learning process would considerably improve their performance. They suggested five steps that they named *Good Language Learning Strategies*. Thus, Naiman et al recommend to:

1. Find a learning style that suits you
2. Involve an awareness of language both as system and as communication
3. Pay constant attention to expanding your language
4. Develop the L2 as a separate system
5. Take into account the demands that L2 learning imposes. (30)

Cohen (1998) agrees with such a view by stating that "an underlying premise is that language learning will be facilitated if students become more aware of the range of possible strategies that they can consciously select during language learning and language use" (65). Nevertheless, these valuable principles can be further refined when the students are the ones who actively participate in the design and implementation of such strategies. In other words, helping students develop self-teaching skills (i.e. autonomous learning) will provide greater results.

Unfortunately, achieving autonomy is not a simple task. Fukuda, Sakata and Takeuchi (2011) argue that:

> … after years of teacher-centered lessons, students do not need a sudden jump into autonomous learning, but a gradual shift in responsibility. This shift in their learning requires acquiring an understanding of SLA, becoming objective of themselves as language learners, and allowing a chance for setting goals through trial and error. (81)

Evidently, it is going to be an arduous work that requires constant guidance and patience, for having the students practice trial and error, as they establish their own learning experiences, will lead them to informed decisions in the process. The same authors claim that "[t]his can be done by providing opportunities to become effective autonomous learners by allowing them to choose their own goals and guiding them towards effective autonomous learning" (81).

Hess (2006) analyzes an intriguing new factor in the view of autonomy development. He argues that "the capacity to set one's own goals hinges crucially on... a non-trivial insight into the extent and complexity of the subject matter… [T]his insight is developed and fostered through instruction and communicative action in formalized settings" (103). This poses a question to language educators, for it has to be determined if implementing autonomous-learning skills can be similarly done in courses whose nature, contents and objectives are quite different (e.g. pronunciation, composition, linguistics). The present research will focus only on the area of oral communication.

Consequently, since oral communication courses are interactive in nature, it is pertinent to bear in mind what Ruiz (2005) concluded in her doctoral dissertation. She claims that "the improvement of reflection and analysis abilities is central to the development of learner autonomy, since both may help learners to fully and critically participate in social interaction as well as their own learning process" (567). Once again, the benefits of autonomous learning are highlighted as an integral model that fosters both the cognitive and the affective domains. In fact, the affective factors play a very important role, for they can determine the magnitude of the goals that a learner sets for him/herself, and the complexity of the tasks to accomplish them. Ruiz also adds that "we can conclude that the learners' behaviors related to autonomous skills are derived from an integration of the medium in the learning tasks" (570).

This view of learner autonomy is part of the contemporary pedagogical paradigm which regards students as creators of their own education. In a student-centered classroom, as active participants of the learning process, students are indeed responsible for their endeavors in language acquisition. Accordingly, Nunan (1989) states that:

a. Learners must take responsibility for their own learning, developing autonomy and skills in learning –how-to-learn.
b. The social and interpersonal roles of the learner cannot be divorced from psychological learning processes.
c. The learner is involved in a process of personal growth. (80)

Another factor that students need to achieve is self-confidence to overcome anxiety, which is one of the main obstacles of communication, as indicated by Tok's study (2009). He comments that a major constraint that hinders communication in EFL classrooms is anxiety resulting from the students' concern about making mistakes. According to him, "as a result of anxiety, learners often choose to remain silent and are unwilling or less willing than other students to

participate in speech communication in class; then, because of their silence and unwillingness to speak the language in class, they become more anxious" (85).

When students develop a higher commitment to increase language awareness and autonomy, they enhance their capacity, motivation, creativity, and metacognitive strategies to practice the language for long-term results. In the light of this concern, educators feel responsible to ensure students' academic success as their role must be "to accommodate individual learners in the classroom by attempting to meet their various linguistic, communicative, and sociocultural goals" (Cohen, 66). Likewise, Huang (2009) points out that "teachers should, in addition to designing communication tasks for learners to use the language, inform students explicitly of the language-related goals of classroom language tasks" (77).

All in all, the study, as explained, proposes to increase students' motivation and self-directed goals that will make them accountable for their own learning and achievement. This will lead to student awareness to improve the ability to master phonological features, stress, rhythm, intonation patterns, an acceptable degree of fluency, appropriate conversational formulae and fillers, conversational skills and turn-taking, interaction, and negotiation of meaning, as suggested by Nunan (1989: 80). Students need to be guided to explore their own self-monitoring strategies and constantly analyze their communicative performance in optimal levels.

Participants

The participants in this study are sixteen Costa Rican senior students currently taking the course Oral Communication III in the Bachillerato de la Enseñanza del Inglés de I y II Ciclo at Universidad Nacional. Three of the males are in mid twenties, and one is thirty-two while the females' ages range from twenty-one to twenty-seven. Furthermore, all of the students come from the Central Valley. They started learning English in high school, and all of them want to become English teachers; six participants are already teaching while six are customer service agents; one is a guide at a museum and three students do not have a job at the moment.

Instruments

Four instruments were specifically designed by the researchers for this project. The first instrument was a recording. Then, the use of plans of improvement was implemented recurrently as the central strategy of this investigation. Later, a written questionnaire was administered. Finally, the participants wrote a reflection on the process.

To diagnose the participants' proficiency at the beginning of the study, their oral production was assessed. They were given five minutes to think of ideas about the topic *the benefits of study English abroad*. After that, a seven-minute

speech was recorded in a multimedia lab. This task had two objectives: that the researchers identified and analyzed linguistic mistakes and that the learners became aware of the improvement needed to meet the standards of their career level. At the end, not only did each learner receive personalized (written and oral) feedback on her/his performance, but also the whole class was given a summary of the major, most salient errors.

The students were instructed to take the feedback to create a plan of improvement called *Self Assessment for Better Language Proficiency*, the second instrument. It was composed of a description of linguistic problems (e.g. pronunciation and grammar), semantic use of the language, analysis of mistakes, proposed activities for practice and the sources used. The students developed six plans of improvement during the course; they also had to self-assess the accomplishment of their plans every two weeks and handed in their digital or written plans to be checked. (See appendix 1)

The questionnaire had two parts: statements of agreement and open questions. First, with a Likert scale of agreement, the participants rated a set of nine statements about linguistic awareness and the effectiveness of the plans of improvement. Secondly, they answered eight information questions about cognitive and affective factors that contribute to the enhancement of language proficiency. An hour was given to complete this task. (See appendix 2)

The last instrument elicited perceptions about the plans of improvement. Students wrote a four-to-eight-sentence paragraph reflecting on their progress achieved after having done the assignments of the *Self Assessment for Better Language Proficiency*. This reflection was submitted by e-mail.

Procedure

This research project followed a qualitative approach to accomplish its objectives. At the beginning, the recording took place, and the students received the detailed feedback a week later. After this, the students were asked to present their first plan of improvement which was checked by the professors and revised by the learners. The variety of activities carried out in class (e.g. prepared and impromptu speeches, interviews, debates, book reports, role plays, colloquiums, video/movie analyses and a group project) served two purposes: to use the language to identify mistakes and to orient the design of the plans of improvements. Students worked on six of these plans during a period of fifteen weeks. The questionnaire was administered in the tenth week. Lastly, on week eighteen, the students submitted the reflection.

Results and analysis

The study met its expectations since the learners reported significant improvement in their linguistic proficiency. The results obtained from the

instruments show that the implementation of the strategy (i.e. the *Self Assessment for Better Language Proficiency*) was successful. In fact, the students' motivation and independence was fostered in order to enhance learning automaticity.

The first recording assessed the students' proficiency level and was used as the starting point to determine the desirable improvement. The data exposed issues such as grammar deviations, wrong use of vocabulary, lack of fluency (persistent pauses or hesitation), and pronunciation and intonation weaknesses. Furthermore, it evidenced other language-related areas that called for further development. Some of them are the use of basic vocabulary, short and simple ideas, unnecessary fillers, repetition of words, and lack of confidence. In general, most students seemed to have very basic communication deviations which did not necessarily interfere with meaning but had to be corrected at this advanced level to enhance their communicative performance. As a matter of fact, most students commented that they had never done any deep analysis of mistakes in previous courses; in fact, this was one of the first times that they realized how much they needed to work on their language use to advance in their proficiency level.

The whole process of the implementation of the central strategy helped students accomplish their linguistic objectives since their assertive and enthusiastic attitude contributed to the achievement of higher levels of communicative competence, as expressed by participant 10, "thank you very much for all the comments and recommendations. I will work really hard to achieve a high level of English language proficiency during this semester." This kind of student is the one who benefits the most since his/her motivation drives him/her to enhancement of their linguistic performance. As stated by Masgoret and Gardner (2003), "the interactively motivated student is the one who is motivated to learn the language, has an openness to the identification with the other language community, and favorable attitudes toward the learning situation" (169). This is demonstrated in the following comment:

> I preferred to highlight first my confidence when talking in front of my oral communication class. Honestly, I feel uncomfortable; perhaps the main reason is that I need to practice a little bit before presenting as well as applying everything above [her plan to develop confidence]; I am pretty sure that this area of improvement will become a strength. (Participant 9)

Moreover, students developed self-esteem and language awareness after positive and encouraging feedback in assignments. This was possible since learning occurred in a non-threatening environment that reduced anxiety and improved motivation and confidence. In fact, Sato (2003) reports that reducing learning anxiety and using meaningful communication in class through appropriate error correction and group work improve speaking skill. These techniques were successfully implemented in this investigation to help students explore learning strategies to use them effectively and consciously. Therefore, the participants were able to analyze and reflect on their performance in order to

develop self-teaching skills or autonomous learning. This awareness on personal development contributed to effective learning and raised self-esteem as pointed out by Participant 2, "with these practices I will learn a lot, I will learn for life!"

As learners were assigned to correct and elaborate their plan of improvement after every major classroom task, they did not show any resistance or apathy to the procedure. On the contrary, they manifested concern, yet enthusiasm, upon receiving corrective feedback. As a result, they were constantly eager to work on their plans of improvement by analyzing their feedback and researching on potential practices, in order to carry out actions for measuring their progress while performing in class. In brief, motivation and positive attitudes contributed to enhance their language command.

Figure 1
Participants' responses to the agreement
statements in the questionnaie
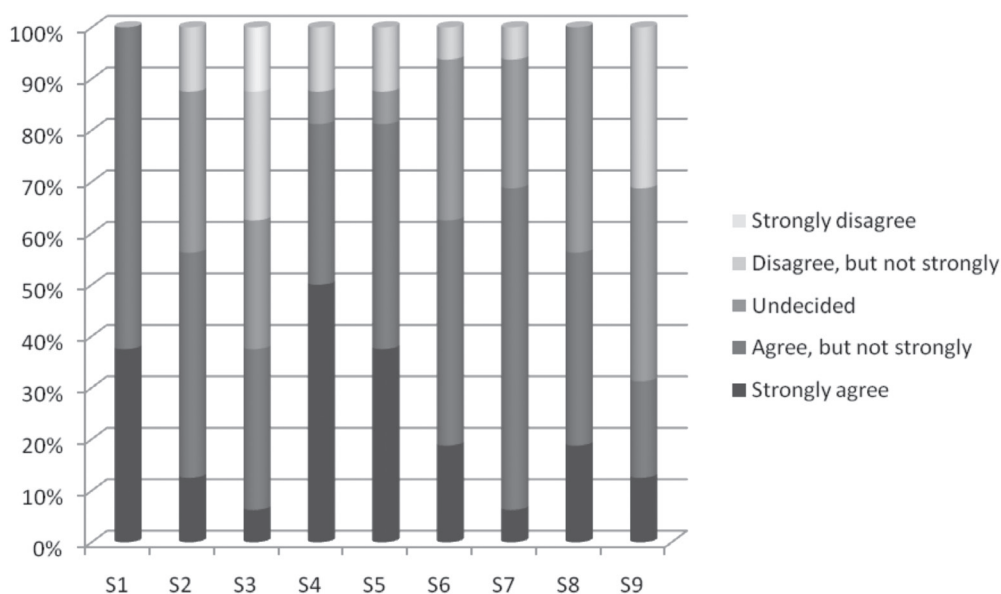
The questionnaire also drew encouraging results since the participants expressed the positive outcome generated by the plans of improvement. All of them agreed (either strongly or not strongly) with the statement *I have experienced considerable improvement in my oral skills in this course*. Furthermore, 81% (13 out of 16 people) also showed agreement with the ideas *This course has provided me with novel ways to raise my awareness regarding weaknesses in my performance*, and *This course has provided me with novel strategies to enhance my oral production* while 88% did it with *The plans for improvement have fostered my autonomy (independence) as a language learner*.

Even though five respondents claimed to be undecided when asked *The plans for improvement have had a strong positive impact in my learning process*, only one person disagreed with such idea whereas the rest (63%) agreed with it. The last datum may be deceiving for two reasons: they may have been undecided since they had only carried out three plans of improvement by the time the questionnaire was administered, and the use of the word "strong" in the statement might have been misleading since they probably considered having experienced a positive impact, but not a *strong* positive impact (since the process was halfway through). Consequently, this answer called for further information, which was in turn provided in the final reflections.

The previous analysis also applies to answers elicited with statements *The plans for improvement have helped me refine my decision-making ability to orient my target language learning*, and *It is likely that I will continue developing plans for improvement when this course finishes*. In both cases, nearly 40% of the respondents claimed to be undecided. Lastly, the statements that inquired about prior use of strategies to raise linguistic awareness (i.e. *Before starting this course, I was fully aware of my mistakes in oral production*, and *Before starting this course, I successfully put into practice strategies to overcome my oral production weaknesses*) did show any definite tendency, for participants provided very different responses. (See Figure 1)

The open inquiries of the questionnaire revealed that the students realized that they needed to improve their linguistic competence and that the plans of improvement contributed to their language acquisition. They listed some techniques such as listening to music, watching videos, talking with native speakers, practicing online, and the like to reinforce the target language. They stressed the significance of the plans of improvement to help them to continue with more practice, correct their mistakes, and evaluate their progress.

In general terms, the learners indicated in their reflection the importance of the plans of improvements as they expressed that it was an effective strategy that contributed to their success in achieving a higher oral proficiency level. This assertion is expressed by Participant 10 as she states "I personally believe that the developing of a well organized plan of improvement through our learning process is the key to success." Likewise, students also valued them for self-evaluation to language mistakes. "These plans of improvement were a wonderful tool because they help[ed] me to evaluate myself. Thinking of ways to improve help[ed] me to reflect about the repetitive mistakes I was making and to consciously apply the solutions I thought about" (Participant 16). Similarly, Participant 5 agreed on the benefit for language awareness by indicating that "in the plan of improvement, the students can think of strategies to diminish those errors, and it works positively because the student is aware of what must be improved."

At the end of the process, participants manifested their great satisfaction in being exposed to a innovate tool to assess themselves and measure their advancement. Participant 3 commented "In general, I consider I left the class with a great sense of satisfaction for the work done. The plans of improvement are surely a great tool for improvement when we are committed to follow them".

These opinions show that students took advantage of the new strategy since they became aware of their language needs to successfully achieve the objectives of the course. In this respect, Participant 8 mentioned that "plans of improvement were practical for me …because they let me know the areas in which I was failing and it offered me practices and exercises for improving my flaws and try to be a great speaker." In short, this reflection showed that the learners valued the plans of improvement as a very dynamic and innovative strategy since:

> The plans of improvement are an important tool for recognizing and improving mistakes. It was great that my classmates and I had the chance to do this. On the other hand, it is a shame that it's the first time in four years that I did a plan of improvement. Now I now what are the aspects that I must work with in order to gain fluency. (Participant 15)

Conclusions

This study has addressed a very important concern for educators of the major *Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés de I y II Ciclo* at *Universidad Nacional*, which is to improve the proficiency level of these future teachers. The innovative attempt to focus on the student as an active participant of the learning and teaching process who can identify his/her metacognitive strategies for improvement provided a satisfactory outcome: positive attitude, motivation and willingness to do extra work to enhance language skills. In fact, students developed appreciation for the plans of improvements, teacher guidance, self-evaluation and self-directed learning.

Students claim that they have reached learning autonomy by exploring different strategies that motivate them to develop their proficiency level for academic success. The results suggest that students improved their communication competence due to the plans of improvement. Participant 10 provides an illustration of this comment by claiming that "Student autonomy should be a goal both teachers and students aspire to; yet, it can best be reached when we create the opportunity for us to self-assess, for only then will we have succeeded in our mission to be successful language learners."

This study also contributes to the field of language acquisition since it reports on students' own initiatives to improve proficiency in the target language through self-evaluation, analysis of performance, planning of ongoing activities, records of progress, and effective peer and group work. As a result, the researchers recommend adapting it as a required pedagogical technique in every course of the major and assigning a percentage of the course evaluation to encourage the work.

To conclude, this research suggests that the proposed strategy of using plans of improvement could be implemented in other courses in order to record its effectiveness before implementation in any program. If the results correlate with the success of the ones found in this study, this innovation will foster students' academic performance in order to achieve higher proficiency level.

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Annex

Annex 1: Plan of Improvement

Universidad Nacional
Facultad de Filosofía y Ciencias del Lenguaje
Centro de Investigación y Docencia en Educación: División de Educación Básica
Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés para I y II Ciclos
Curso: LLR406 Comunicación Oral III

Self Assessment for Better Language Proficiency

Instructions: Analyze your feedback according to each of the headings below in order to elaborate on the areas of your oral production that need further

improvement. Explain the strategies you plan to put into practice to enhance your proficiency. Finally, carry out your plan.

1. Provide a description of the linguistic problems:

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2. Investigate the correct language use:

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3. Analyze the factors/conditions that lead you to make such mistakes:

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4. Propose a solution to the situation. Come up with (1) activities to practice the TL and (2) strategies to overcome the problem, and (3) sources available.

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5. List the used sources.

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Annex 2: Questionnaire

Universidad Nacional
Facultad de Filosofía y Ciencias del Lenguaje
Centro de Investigación y Docencia en Educación: División de Educación Básica
Bachillerato en la Enseñanza del Inglés para I y II Ciclos
Curso: LLR406 Comunicación Oral III

The present questionnaire intends to collect information regarding the development of communicative skills in a target language. Please respond each question to the best of your knowledge. The questionnaire is anonymous.

A. Personal information

1. Age: ___ & Gender: Female ___   Male ___
2. City where you were born: _____. City where you currently live: _____.
3. Year when you started learning English: ___
4. Do you currently work? No ___ Yes ___ Job position: _____
5. What kind of job would you like to have after graduation? _____

B. Use the following criteria to rate the statements in the box.

5. strongly agree	4. agree, but not strongly	3. undecided	2. disagree, but not strongly	1. strongly disagree				
1. I have experienced considerable improvement in my oral skills in this course.				5	4	3	2	1
2. Before starting this course, I was fully aware of my mistakes in oral production.				5	4	3	2	1
3. Before starting this course, I successfully put into practice strategies to overcome my oral production weaknesses.				5	4	3	2	1
4. This course has provided me with novel ways to raise my awareness regarding weaknesses in my performance.				5	4	3	2	1
5. This course has provided me with novel strategies to enhance my oral production.				5	4	3	2	1
6. The *plans for improvement* have had a strong positive impact in my learning process.				5	4	3	2	1
7. The *plans for improvement* have fostered my autonomy (independence) as a language learner.				5	4	3	2	1
8. The *plans for improvement* have helped me refine my decision-making ability to orient my target language learning.				5	4	3	2	1
9. It is likely that I will continue developing *plans for improvement* when this course finishes.				5	4	3	2	1

C. General questions

1. What are the main three initiatives you have devised to improve your linguistic ability?
2. What are three motivational aspects that encourage you to improve your oral skills?
3. How do you feel about being corrected in English? (by your teacher, peers, other speakers)

4. How do you think you would be able to achieve a higher proficiency level? (three aspects)
5. What kind of language learner are you? Describe yourself in depth.
6. What is your main goal by the end of this term? Are there any other significant goals?
7. How have your plans of improvement helped you develop language awareness? (three aspects)
8. Which three recommendations would you suggest to your classmates to achieve higher levels of proficiency?