

INFLUENCE OF EPISODES AND METHODOLOGIES ON YOUNG LEARNERS' FL OUTPUT

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Abstract

Since the last part of the XX century to nowadays there has been an emphasis on foreign language learning. Globalization has prompted researchers to investigate new and more effective ways to learn. New theories were developed and practitioners applied them to classes. Action research has increased in the last two decades (Burns, 2010) and the benefits of research has help to more effective ways of teaching.

Although big efforts have been made on making lessons more meaningful to students (Long & Doughty, 2009) and helping them to think in a foreign language (Puchta & Williams, 2012), we believe the best way to understand classes is investigating the teaching-learning process. Not only observing and recording but also, transcribing them (Harfitt, 2008) as well as analyzing classroom discourse.

Like three decades ago (Chaudron, 1988), research on classes development is still focus on teacher's verbal behavior. This research pretends to investigate the teaching learning context itself, considering all participants in class, especially learner's participation. Taking discourse analysis as an essential tool we have adapted the Sinclair & Coulthard's Discourse Analysis model (1975) adding Conversation Analysis' elements (Tsui, 1994) and the tripartite conception of language (Poyatos, 1994) we study English classes for Spanish young learners in different contexts to find out how methodology implemented affects student's output.

We focus on ESL classroom structure, paying especial attention to one type of pedagogical episode searching students' oral skills development. Two different methodologies, Cooperative Learning and Traditional method, have been investigated to check which one helps students better to promote FL output.

Keywords: classroom research, young learners FL learning, peers interaction, cooperative learning, episodes.

1 INTRODUCTION

Although learning a foreign language was something not very common four decades ago, it has become essential nowadays. Only in Europe, there are more than twenty countries where studying a foreign language (FL) is compulsory at school. According to the Eurostat 2012 report, in most European countries, students begin studying their first foreign language as a compulsory school subject between the ages of six and nine.

English is by far the most taught foreign language in nearly all countries, starting at primary level. In 2009/10, on average, 73 % of students enrolled in primary education in the EU were learning English. That percentage has greatly increased in the last five years and although other languages as French (23%); Spain (19%), German (19%); Italian (3%) or Russian (3%) are also studied, the most studied foreign language today in Europe is English (94%).

We ask to ourselves why Spanish students do not get a better FL acquisition level in spite of starting learning it earlier than in other European countries. In most schools, students start getting in contact with English at the age of three.

We believe it is not sufficiently studied how oral language production in L2 is promoted on Spanish young FL learners. This research is focus on describing actual teaching-learning contexts to investigate the best way to promote FL output in class.

Tsay and Brady (2010) are certainly right when stating that one of the greatest challenges educators face is determining the most effective teaching strategies for their students. Cooperative learning has increasingly become a popular form of active pedagogy in U.S.A. as well as in many parts of the world.

Relevant studies on cooperative, competitive and individualistic learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2013) show how students learn more working together than alone. Practitioners and researchers agree on the benefits of implementing cooperative learning at different educative levels although different methods or techniques lie under the Cooperative Learning approach (Slavin, 1978; Kagan, 2009). Special programs show its effectiveness for disadvantaged children (Chambers et al, 2013).

In this research, we have compared students' FL output in a school context with a very well structured CL method Kagan (2009) versus an oral episode in a traditional FL class.

2 AIMS

The main aim in this study is to investigate how teachers' decisions can affect students' FL acquisition.

In our opinion, two of the main decisions a FL teacher has to make when planning any class period are: (1) episodes selection and (2) methodology.

Our hypothesis is that the use of Cooperative Learning approach in an oral episode offers more opportunities and prompt students to speak more in the target language than the traditional method.

After many hours observing and studying classes in previous investigations, we have checked that it is not possible to analyse the class period as a whole. Contrary to that, any class is compound by a sequence of fragments or *episodes* and each one plays an important role to build the class session.

For us, an *episode* is a fragment of class period destined to develop a specific pedagogical goal. Therefore, the sum of episodes compound the class. Episodes and activities should not be confused because at least one, although more than one activity can take place within the same episode whenever searching the development of the same pedagogical goal.

From the seven types of episodes detected after many hours observing and analyzing young learners' classes in previous studies, we consider the oral episode is the one destined specifically to promote learners' FL output.

3 PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

Participants are one FL teacher and 38 Spanish students aged (10-11) studying English as a foreign language in a Primary public school located in the outskirts of a medium size city in the south of Spain.

The English teacher's mother tongue is the same as her students' but, she has a great experience in FL teaching (28 years) and her proficiency level is C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

Both classes share many similarities:

- 1 Same number of students: 19
- 2 Most students have spent eight years at the same school;
- 3 Students have learnt English with the same English teacher for the last five years;
- 4 They are all similar age (10-11)
- 5 They study at the same educative level (Year 5)
- 6 Both are mixed ability groups with a similar percentage of high, medium and low achievers learners in each class
- 7 All students live near the school
- 8 They mostly come to school by bus (98%) because houses are all spread.

3.2 Methodology

After the selection of an oral episode in two sixth level Primary classes with the same FL teacher from the same school, the first step was observing and audio recording the same amount of time (5') as well as taking notes of any paralinguistic or kinesics elements relevant for communication.

In spite of not being a very long episode, this microanalysis can greatly help to describe how students' FL oral output occurs. Taking into account that, unfortunately, oral episodes are not usually the most frequent type of episodes in many FL classes, results obtained from this research can have a general idea of class results in terms of learners' FL oral output if that episode could last the total period of class (45').

Secondly, classes' transcriptions process took place. Thirdly, data analysis was both quantitative and qualitative and from results, we draw conclusions.

We started to use Sinclair and Coulthard's model of Discourse Analysis (D.A.) and, as (Cockayne, 2010), we found difficulty on applying it to a student- centered EFL classroom, which is not surprising because in 1975, when the Birmingham Discourse Analysis model was developed, classes were not pupil centered. Therefore, we found necessary to make some adaptations incorporating Conversation Analysis findings (Tsui, 1994) and the notion of the tripartite conception of language (Poyatos, 1994). For example, being classes much more communicative nowadays, some types of *acts* that originally were supposed to be part of the teacher's discourse take place also on students' discourse (author, 2012).

Our focus in this microanalysis is set on an episode which is devoted to promote students FL output. We have selected an Oral Practice episode with exactly the same objectives in both settings: learners should be able to describe people from different given pictures. They have to use clothes vocabulary and physical descriptions that they had been practicing.

In spite of doing the same activity in both classes, methodology implemented differed: Cooperative learning approach (group A) versus a teacher-fronted class (group B).

Classroom distribution was very different. Students from group A worked in five teams, four teams of four members and one of three. On the other hand, students in class B sat in rows facing the blackboard and the person who stood in front of it.

In the traditional method followed in group B, with a Teacher-Fronted pattern, a student stood in front of the blackboard holding a picture while described it to his/her classmates.

On the other hand, in class A, in order to implement the activity, the teacher chose one of Kagan's Cooperative Learning structure (2009) named *a stray*. One of the learners in each team had to move to another team with a picture and describe it to the new team. As learners were numbered from 1 to 4, they knew perfectly well who had to change place to another team when the bell rang and teacher said the number. First, student number 2 changed, then, number 3 and finally, number 4. Without hesitation, student requested in each team jumped and run to a different team, avoiding sitting again with one of his/her original teammates.

On the contrary, in class B, all students sat opposite to the blackboard and the teacher. One volunteer student at a time, stood next to the teacher, facing the students when describing one of the given pictures. When she/he finished, another student came to describe another picture.

We have analyzed the following issues:

Quantitative analysis:

- a) Participation level
- b) Participation level in L2

Qualitative analysis:

- c) Type of participation. Why do they participate in class? Do students respond? Do they only respond or do they also initiate and/or give follow ups?
- d) Type of Responses, Initiations and Follow up made by students.

4 RESULTS

First, we present results obtained from the quantitative analysis.

4.1 Quantitative analysis

4.1.1 Participation level in the foreign language

To investigate students' participation level, we have search for the quantity of verbal acts made by students in each context.

In class B, students produced 29 Verbal Acts (VA) while in class A, in the same amount of time (five minutes) students produced 240 VA.

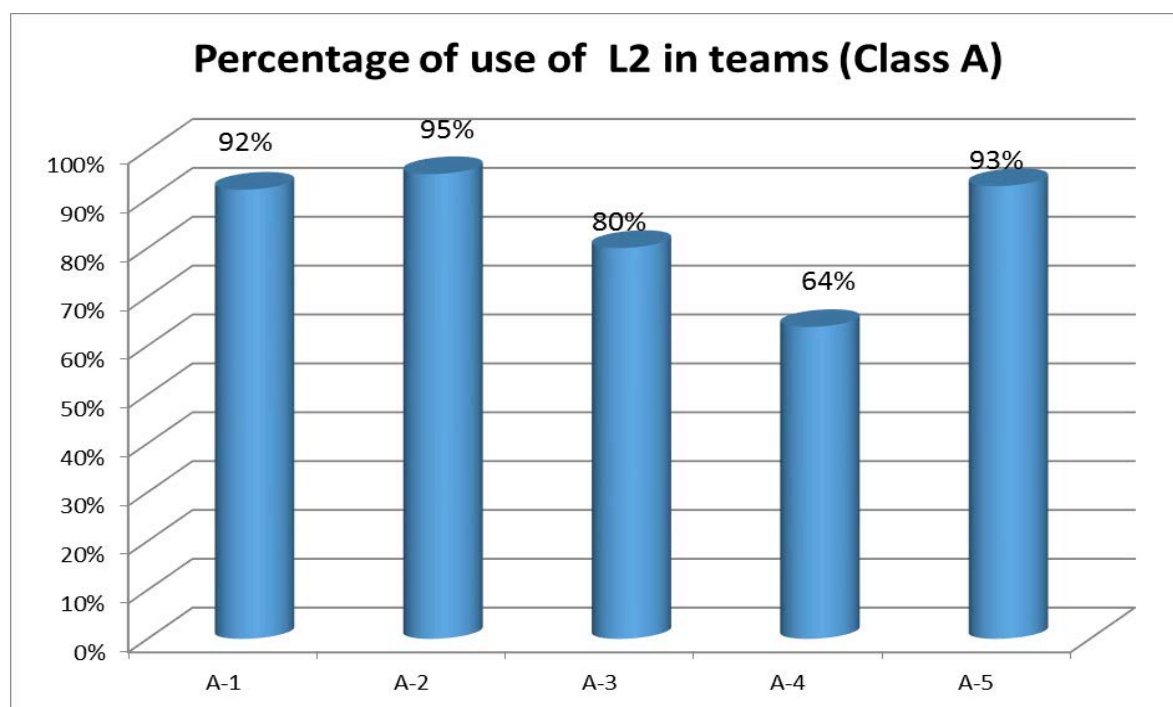
Being interested in knowing if learners used the target language (English) or their mother tongue (Spanish) in both classes, we paid attention to the quantity of VA produced in each language.

Data shows that all students who participated in this oral episode in class B used the target language. On the other hand, 85% of students output in class A was in English.

We are not surprised by class B results because only five out of the 19 students in class B had the opportunity to speak because, following a traditional method, volunteers described a photo to the rest of their classmates in front of the class while the remaining 14 sat passively. Furthermore, only the brightest students had the opportunity to speak, as low achievers do not usually feel confident enough to offer themselves to speak in front of the whole class.

On the contrary, in class A, the 240 VA observed came from the sum of all students' oral production. Table 1 shows the percentage of English used per teams. Results show how all teams spoke more in English than in students' mother tongue. The lowest team obtains 64% but four of them are very close to a hundred per cent (A1, A2 and A5).

Table 1. L2 output in class A.



4.1.2 Learners' oral output distribution

A very important question that arises in our mind is the following one:

Is there an equal distribution of students' verbal participation?

First thing we have noticed is that class A results eight times higher than students' results in class B as they have produced 240 VA versus 29 VA.

We observed oral production per student, detecting that average quantity of VA in class B is 5.8 VA versus 12.6 V.A in class A. The reason for obtaining such results are directly related to the fact that only five students participated in the oral episode which represents 26.3% of students in class B. On

the contrary, 100% of students in class A participated simultaneously in this oral episode. Although many teachers are reluctant to students working without constant teacher supervision, our microanalysis shows that all team members worked well, participating in the activity proposed and speaking in English, reaching a participation level between 41 and 62 VA as shown on table 2.

Table 2. Verbal Acts produced in A and B classes.

Teams	Activity 3 (S1-S7)					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
Verbal Acts in A	62	41	48	47	42	240
Verbal Acts in B	29					29

Working in teams implementing the cooperative learning structure named by Kagan (2009) *a stray* seems to give students great opportunities to speak in class. The average is 15.5 VA in team 1 (T-1); 10.3 (T-2); 16 (T-3); 11.7 (T-4) and 10.5 (T-5).

In spite of being very difficult to implement long episodes with young students due to their lack of attention, if the analyzed oral episodes would have last the whole class period, the total amount of students' FL output could have reached 2160 VA in class A and 261 in class B. In that case, the average of VA made per student would have been 113.7 in class A versus 13.7 in B, which makes an amazing difference.

To investigate if there is an equal output distribution among students, we have searched all VA made by learners. We have to take into account that all teams changed their composition, having different team members whenever the bell rang.

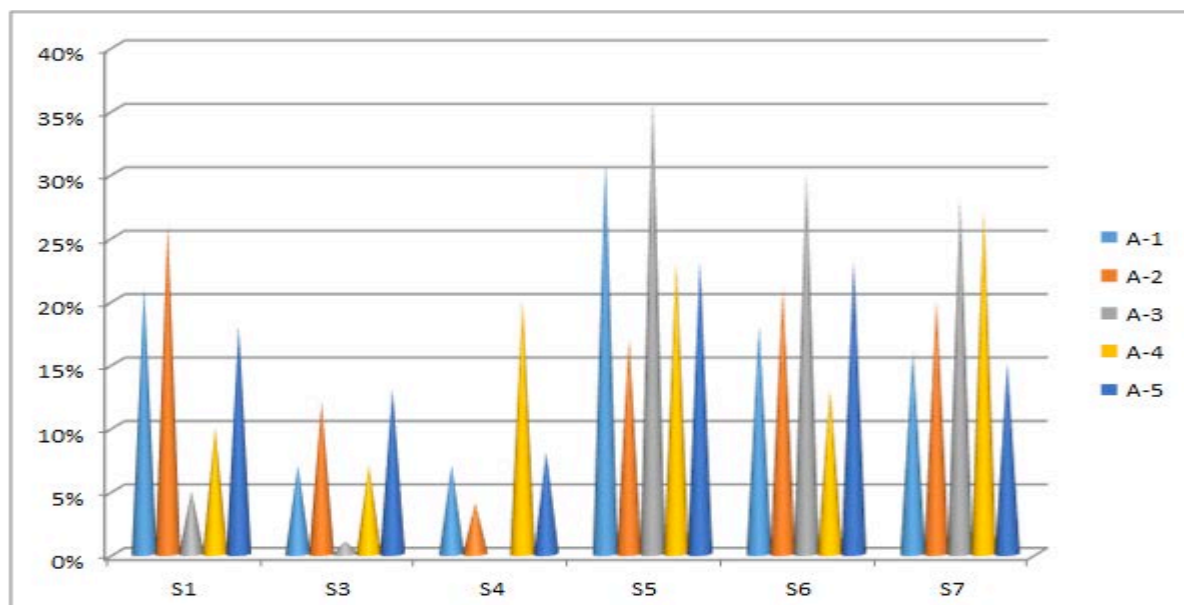
First time, S2 had to leave the original team to insert in a different one holding a picture of a person. As soon as S2 joined the new team, she or he had to describe the picture. It was at that moment when S2 become S5.

Second time the bell rang, teacher called S3 and all students number three had to leave their team and joined a new one but avoiding finding a member from their previous team. It was then when S3 became S6.

The bell rang again and S4 did exactly the same becoming S7 in the new team. Unfortunately, there was no time for S1 to change team but, as the rest of members changed, all teams were completely different at the end of the process.

On table 3 it is shown the percentage of L2 production made by each student within each team.

Table 3. Learners' L2 contribution.



It was evident during the classroom observation and it is shown on table 3 how all students in class A participated actively, taking turns to speak in English.

It is important to mention that students had a number from one to four. The highest achiever is number one, and the lowest achiever is number four in each team. Number two and three are medium achievers. Probably, that was the reason why teacher selected students with number 2, 3 and 4 to be the main characters in this episode, trying to make them speak or, giving them the chance to speak more in L2. When each student arrived to the new team, s/he was responsible for describing the person in the picture. It does not surprise then, to observe that these three students are the ones who speak more in this activity. Three relevant observations are important to notice here. In first place, all students have been able to make descriptions in the target language, even the lowest learning achievers (S4=S7). Secondly, there are not big differences between the person who spoke more and the person who spoke less in each team and thirdly, in spite of not considering them the main characters, students numbered one interacted, taking part in the description.

Now we move on to results obtained from the qualitative analysis:

4.2 Qualitative analysis

At this point, we focus the analysis on what learners do when they speak in class. We would like to understand if students have used the target language only to answer or also to make Initiations and/or Follow up.

On the other side, we are very concerned about two important issues:

- a) Is communication among individuals in class similar to real communication?
- b) Are students engaged to FL learning?

4.2.1 Type of participation

Data obtained clearly shows important differences between classes A and B are according to the types of Verbal Acts produced.

Students in class B have only made 1 type of act (R(give info)) because their contribution to classroom discourse has been to give information about the person in the picture, appearance, clothes..., answering back teacher's soliciting information.

In contrast, each team member in class A has participated producing up to six types of Verbal act in L2. It is important to point out that as not all members have produced the same types of VA, all learners have had the opportunity to listen and learn how and when use them.

Table 4 shows the quantity of different types of VA made by each student in each team context.

Table 4. Types of VA used by learners in class A.

	S1	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7
A-1	5	3	5	3	3	2
A-2	5	3	1	5	5	2
A-3	3	4		5	4	3
A-4	5	4	6	4	2	1
A-5	5	5	2	1	2	1

It is also remarkable that learners' VA do not only belong to the Response Move, which means that students not only respond to teacher's elicitation but also are able to initiate and give Follow up.

Following a traditional methodology, in a Teacher- Fronted classroom, learners' role is always to answer, to respond teacher's initiations as it happens in the oral episode we have analyzed in class B.

In Cooperative Learning teams, we have checked that learners spoke freely, giving answers, of course, but at the same time using V acts that in traditional classes only the teacher would be allowed to use like eliciting information, repetition or confirmation. Also the use of directive instructions or informative report.

Table 5 Most frequent types of VA in A.

	A-1	A-2	A-3	A-4	A-5	B
Is(nom)				1	1	
Is(elic:info)	6					
Is(elic:repeat)		2	4			
Is(dir:inst)	4	7	2	2	2	
Is(inf:report)	3	2	1			
Is(elic:confirm)		3			2	
R(give info)	36	17	26	25	29	21
R(repetition)	3	2	2	1		
Fs(ack)	4	1			2	
Fs(no ack)			3		1	

On the other hand, students have felt confident enough to give feedback to their teammates acknowledging, or not, other partners' contributions.

In the cooperative learning teams, we have checked that learners spoke freely, giving answers, of course, but also using verbal acts that, in traditional classes, only the teacher would be allowed to use as eliciting information, eliciting repetition or eliciting confirmation. Besides, they have been able to give instructions (directive instruction) or initiate to inform (informative report).

The importance of all that relies on the similarity with real communication. Learners are able to build communication in a foreign language.

We turn now into another relevant pillar for learning

4.2.2 FL engagement

Through classrooms observation and classroom discourse analysis, it is possible to measure to what extent students are engaged to learning.

We have noticed students' lack of engagement in class B. Since the first volunteer described a picture, students' attention started to decrease and they started to speak to each other using their mother tongue. Up to six times, teacher had to stop audience talking in L1 with expressions like:

Listen!; Stop!; Pay attention, please!

Here is an example of lack of engagement in class B.

I	T.- Ok. Take one picture, please		I(marker) I(dir:inst)
NVR5		(S5 takes one picture)	NVR5(+ action)
Iss		(Students are talking in L1)	Iss(xxx)
I	T.- Stop,please!. Stop!. Listen to S5!		I(dir:inst) I(dir:inst) I(dir:inst)
NVRss		(silence)	NVRss(+ action)

(own resource)

Nothing similar happened in class A. Probably, because not only the student who arrived to the team did most of the job of describing the person in the picture but also, because the whole team was involved in the task.

In the following fragment, taken from team 2 in class A, we can observe the relationship among team members.

turn	Move	Teacher discourse	Students' discourse	V. Acts
1	I	T: person number 3 describes the picture.		I(lecturing 1)
2	R6		S6. He is... Her name is Manuela. She has got...no! She is 27 years old. She has got long hair, and brown hair. She is wearing a red T shirt and mm	R6(give inf) R6(give inf) R6(give inf) R6(give inf) R6(give inf)
3	R1		S1.-red jumper, no?	R1(give inf) I(elic:agree)
4	R6		S6.-and red jumper. She is wearing shorts. And she has got blonde eyes uy Blond hair	R6(agreement) R6(give inf) R6(give inf)
5	I3		S3.-blonde?	I3(elic: confirm)
6	R6		S6.- No, brown!	R6(no confirm) R6(give inf)
7	I4		S4.-Finished, finished!	I4(Inf:report)
8	NVI	(The bell rings)		NVI(dir:inst)

(Own resource, team 2, class A)

The excellent learning atmosphere within the team is perceptible even reading the classroom transcription. Team members do not quarrel to answer in first place or more than the rest. They simply realize that although it is S6 turn they feel free to participate, adding information, giving feedback or coaching like in turn 3 when S1 helps S6 to finish her sentence when she hesitates in her fourth response or in turn 5, when S3 adverts a mistake in S6 response and repeats the wrong part of it eliciting confirmation. By his tone, S6 understand it is not correct, think it twice and gives the correct answer then. The last member of the team also participated to inform the teacher that they had finished with the activity proposed.

Observer informed about the smooth climate created in class. Despite 19 students talking altogether, there was no high noise perception as they respected turn taking rules and were engaged in the task.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions drawn from this research highlight the importance of giving young learners the opportunity to speak in the FL class to increase their FL output. There is clear evidence that cooperative learning method has offered students more opportunities to speak than the oral episode in a teacher-fronted class. In addition, the highest use of English as well as the balanced participation lead us to think that when students cooperate, learn more and better.

Besides, traditional methodology prompts students to give responses while cooperative learning makes them produce not only responses, but also initiations and follow up acts in a more communicative way.

Finally, but not least important, it is important to notice the engagement level detected in both settings. The good learning atmosphere observed when working cooperatively in teams and coaching peers in need greatly contrasts with disruption events when learners do not listen to their mates and disconnect speaking in their mother tongue in the traditional context.

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