

BUILDING BRIDGES TO ORAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a research study carried out with a group of first-year students of English at the School of Modern Languages at the University of Costa Rica. The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects on the students' oral production skills of using a combination of reading and listening to texts, and to determine whether or not the proficiency level of the students affects the effectiveness of the technique.

Key words: combination of skills, reading, listening, oral production skills, proficiency level.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este artículo es reportar los resultados de un estudio que se llevó a cabo con un grupo de estudiantes de inglés de primer ingreso en la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Se investigó si la combinación de la lectura y la escucha de textos tiene efectos positivos en la producción oral de los estudiantes. Además se investigó si el nivel académico de los estudiantes afecta el éxito de la técnica.

Palabras clave: combinación de destrezas, lectura, escucha, producción oral, nivel académico.

1. Introduction

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching a language in a foreign setting is to both provide the students with enough exposure to the real spoken language native speakers use and to give them opportunities to use that language in real communication situations. The first aspect is difficult because the classroom might be the only source of input. Students are not always motivated enough to look for learning opportunities outside the classroom. The second aspect is affected by the size of the groups and the type of tasks students have to perform. Very often teachers have to work with very large groups which limits the students' opportunities to communicate. Pair and group work activities within the classroom could somewhat remedy this problem, but our students share the same native language; therefo-

re, there is no real need to communicate in the target language. Teachers are very discouraged because they spend time looking for the right activities to achieve the objectives, but the results are not as hoped for because the students use Spanish while performing the tasks.

After many years as professor and trainer of teachers of English as a Foreign Language, I have noticed that we teachers often expect our students to speak English, but we do not provide them with the necessary language to perform the task. I believe this is why the students use their native language. As a non-native teacher and writer of English and a student of other languages, I have also experienced this lack of language when trying to talk or write in the target language, and thus share my students' desire to return to my native language. The dictionary is a good tool, but sometimes I am not able to choose the right

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word; or maybe my choice is fine, but it is not exactly the one that native speakers will generally use in that particular context or situation. One strategy that has worked very well for me is looking for the vocabulary I need in readings related to the topic. In addition, I can find the words they collocate with; that is, the verbs, adjectives or adverbs that usually accompany those words, as well as notice the grammatical context in which they appear.

However, we all know that a good reader is not necessarily a good speaker. Even though reading can give excellent exposure to the language native speakers use, we lack the opportunity to communicate directly and to learn better word pronunciation. Therefore, there are two additional problems we have to solve: how to create opportunities to use the new or unknown words found in the readings in communication situations, and how to learn their pronunciation. Although nowadays most textbooks and teachers claim to use a communicative approach to language learning, the tasks used in classrooms do not always promote the creative use of language. According to Nunan (1999:77) "Creative language use involves the recombination of familiar elements (words, structures, and prefabricated patterns) in new ways to produce utterances that have never been produced before by that particular individual (for that individual, they are therefore unique.)" He adds that "In classrooms and textbooks in which the creativity principle is activated, learners are given structured opportunities to use the language that they have been practicing in new and unexpected ways. They are provided with the language that they will need to take part in genuine communicative tasks, and they are given opportunities to respond appropriately in new situations outside the classroom (...). In this way, classrooms themselves act as a bridge to the outside world rather than as a linguistic quarantine station where learners are protected from the risks involved in having to engage in genuine communication (Nunan 1999:76-77). To promote this creative use of language, I have tried to use a combination of reading and speaking activities with my students, and it seems to work well for them. I have used spea-

king tasks such as jigsaw readings, debates and discussion groups. I usually work on pronunciation with each group while other groups are doing the reading comprehension exercises. This has helped but has not completely solved the problem. Listening to the pronunciation of the words once in class is not always enough to internalize it. Therefore, I added another element: listening to texts before using the information in communicative situations.

This article presents the results of an investigation carried out with a group of first-year English students at the University of Costa Rica. The technique consists of using a combination of reading and listening to texts before performance of topic-related speaking tasks.

2. Theoretical Framework

Language teachers claim that there is a difference between teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and teaching English as a second language (ESL). One of these differences is that in the EFL situation, students lack opportunities for using the language outside the classroom because native speakers are not available. Krashen (1997:39) partly disagrees with this statement. He claims that at the beginning level, EFL and ESL speakers are in exactly the same situation: they are dependent on the classroom for comprehensible input. For EFL students, there is no comprehensible input outside the classroom, and for ESL learners, the input they receive is not comprehensible. Therefore, language classes are invaluable for both. At the intermediate level, however, ESL learners have an advantage over EFL learners: their conversational language competence continues to develop outside the classroom as soon as they are able to understand some of the language they hear. Although EFL learners will never have the same advantages as ESL learners in acquiring advanced conversational proficiency, teachers can find ways to address this limitation.

2.1. Crossing the Bridge through Listening and Reading Activities

Research findings have shown that reading has a profound effect on second language acquisition. It provides rich exposure to language in use. It is an excellent way of expanding vocabulary, learning new phrases and consolidating grammar. It is also an important bridge to the acquisition of more complex language and an excellent way to maintain contact with the target language. The following examples illustrate these findings. Elley (1991 in Krashen 1993:5) conducted three studies with elementary-age children in Singapore. The children who followed the “Reading and English Acquisition Program,” a combination of shared book experience (books of interest are read to the class from “big books” and discussed with the students), language experience, and free reading (“book flood”) did far better on tests of reading comprehension, vocabulary, oral language, grammar, listening comprehension, and writing than the students who were taught traditionally. Cho conducted a study with ESL female adult acquirers who had studied English in Korea and had lived for a short time in the United States, but who had made little progress in English. These students read extensively from the Sweet Valley High Series. Cho reported significant vocabulary growth in her readers, and the subjects reported that everyday language was much more comprehensible to them after reading the “Sweet Valley” series (Cho and Krashen, 1994, 1995a, 1996b in Krashen 1997:32).

It is well known, however, that some people manage to gain an excellent reading knowledge of a language but never learn to speak it. This is usually because they either have no need or opportunity to speak, or do not hear the language used. Conversely, other people never learn to read at all but speak quite fluently (Willis, 1996:8). Research studies have shown that a good solution to this problem is the use of audio and videotapes, including films, TV and radio programs together with free reading. This will help the students to continue to improve in spite of the absence of native speakers. A very good combination would be to both read and listen to a text. For instance, students who have read a novel will have an easier understanding of an

audiotape of that novel and vice versa. Dr. Kato Lomb, the most accomplished polyglot in the world, has acquired 17 languages by means of keeping in touch with the languages through reading. She says that novels are quite appropriate since they contain a substantial amount of conversational language. When possible, she also utilizes oral input from conversations, radio, and her work as an interpreter (in Krashen, 1997:41).

Michael Lewis (1997:57) also supports the idea that a combination of listening and reading has positive effects on language acquisition. He says that “even a prose text is more likely to become intake if it is heard.” He gives great importance to chunking—the way you put words together when you talk or read. He claims that unless you speak in appropriate chunks, you place a serious barrier to understanding between yourself and your listeners. Likewise, unless you chunk a text correctly, it is impossible to read it with understanding. Therefore, chunking is not only the basis of spoken fluency, but also a determining factor in the way you “hear” a text in your heads as you read and in the way you decode meaning. Do learners see chunks when they read, or do they see only a sequence of individual words? If the latter is true, that is, if learners do not “hear” input correctly chunked, the text will be difficult to understand and correspondingly of limited value—it is input which is unlikely to become intake. According to Brazil (in Lewis 1997:58), when we teach pronunciation we often focus on individual words, and it is the chunking of the text which is the main problem in delivering any spoken text, even supposedly unprepared spontaneous speech. Then we can conclude that chunking is the key to comprehensibility. It is central to effective communication and efficient acquisition. From a language teaching point of view, helping the students to understand chunks and chunking should have a central place in the classroom.

Michael Lewis (1997: 56) suggests a series of reading and listening activities to help students chunk words correctly:

- Have students listen to course book dialogues at least once, better twice, once for

content and once when attention is directed to some feature of how it is said, i.e., chunked. Read at least a part of it aloud, asking learners to notice some feature of the chunking.

- Ask learners in small groups to chunk a printed version of something they are going to hear. Compare their versions with the one you have done on a transparency and finally with what they actually hear.
- Have the students listen to a tape while paying attention to the meaning of what they hear, rather than the pronunciation of words. Then listen again and attend to the short pieces into which it is divided, and trying to mark the breaks. Next, check by listening again. Finally, have them read it and pause wherever they have marked a break. Be sure not to pause anywhere else (Brazil in Lewis 1997:57).

Pawley and Syder (1983 in Nation 2001: 323) also agree with Lewis on the importance of chunking. They see chunking as the key to nativelike selection and fluency. They wrote the following:

The best explanation of how language users can choose the most appropriate ways to say things from a large range of possible options (nativelike selection), and can produce language fluently (nativelike fluency) is that units of language of clause length or longer are stored as chunks in the memory." This explanation means that most words are stored many times, once as an individual word and numerous times in larger stored chunks.

The puzzle of nativelike selection is that by applying grammar rules, it is possible to create many grammatically correct ways of saying the same thing. However, only a small number of these would sound nativelike. (...)

The puzzle of nativelike fluency is that we can only encode one clause at a time when speaking and we usually need to do so without hesitation in the middle of the clause. Most of the language we use consists of familiar combinations. Only a minority is entirely new. (Nation 2001:323)

Pawley and Syder argue "that memorized

clauses and clause sequences make up a large percentage of the fluent stretches of speech heard in everyday conversation (1983: 208 in Nation 2001: 323-324)." They distinguish 'memorized sequences' from 'lexicalised sentence stems.' They add, however, that to develop fluency, all collocational sequences are important. Students need to encounter these sequences several times in meaning-focused use, and they should be encouraged to do so at a faster rate than that which learners usually perform at. Research studies on receptive and productive language processing indicate that learners may need to experience the language chunks in the medium in which they need to use them. That is, students are unlikely to become fluent speakers by becoming fluent listeners. In order to become fluent speakers, students have to practice speaking (Pawley and Syder in Nation 2001: 324).

2.2. Crossing the Bridge through Reading and Speaking activities

According to Nation (2001: 127), developing fluency is important at all stages of learning. Students should become fluent with what they learn from the beginning levels. Tasks such as retelling, role plays, ranking and other speaking activities which make use of written input are a very useful means of vocabulary learning.

Retelling activities can take many forms, but what is common to all of them is that learners read a text and retell it. Nation notes that "From a vocabulary learning point of view, the text provides new vocabulary and a context to help understand it, and the retelling gives learners the chance to productively retrieve the vocabulary and ideally make generative use of it." Students may or may not look at the text while retelling the story. Research studies (Joe, 1998 in Nation, 2001) have shown that having the text while retelling ensures that more target vocabulary is used, but retrieval conditions are poor because students have the words in front of them. Therefore, until further research is done, it is not advisable to have the text present during retelling in order to

promote recalling of the target vocabulary during the performance of the task.

Another form of retelling is the “4/3/2” activity (Maurice, 1983 in Nation, 2001: 136). It consists of giving the same talk to three different listeners one after the other, but with four minutes to give the first delivery of the talk, three minutes to deliver the same talk to a second listener, and two minutes for the third. The talk can be a retelling of a previously studied text. According to Nation (2001: 136), the repetition would not be expected to increase the range of generative use, but would provide opportunity for more fluent retrieval. Eller, Pappas and Brown (1998, in Nation 2001: 136) observed native-speaking kindergarten children as they listened and then retold the same picture story on three separate occasions one day apart. The researchers were able to show that the children’s control of particular words increased from one listening and retelling to another. The results of their study support the idea that knowledge of a word gradually increases with repeated encounters.

The **Read and retell** activity (Simcock, 1993 in Nation, 2001: 136) involves retelling a written text, but the listener has a set of questions to ask the reteller so that it resembles an interview. The types of question can encourage the use of the target vocabulary and ensure that all the important parts of the text are retold. Both learners study the text and the questions before the retelling, and they can rehearse the retelling before performance of the task in front of others.

Drama techniques, such as **improvisations, role plays, and simulations**, can be very effective in developing oral language skills. According to Forrest (1992, in O’Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996: 85) “(T)hey provide a format for using elements of real-life conversations, such as repetitions, interruptions, hesitations, distractions, changes of topic, facial expressions, gestures, and idiolects (individual variations of dialect).” Dramatic techniques can reduce anxiety, increase motivation, and enhance language acquisition (Richard-Amato 1998 in O’Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996: 85)

Improvisations require students to generate language based on an oral or written cue called a *prompt*. These cue card prompts provide

the instructions students have to follow when acting out the situation. Students usually do not get time to prepare what they are going to say. In a **role play**, students are assigned roles and speak through these roles. Role plays tend to be more structured than improvisations because the students prepare a dialogue before their presentation. **Simulations** provide a context or situation in which students need to interact in order to solve a problem or make a decision together. As with role plays, students are allowed time to prepare their simulation before presentation to the class (O’Malley & Valdez Pierce, 1996: 85).

Nation (2001:140 – Table 4.3) gives the following recommendations for increasing the vocabulary learning potential of a speaking task.

1. Make sure that the target vocabulary is in the written input for the task, and that it occurs in the optimum places in the text:
 - Have plenty of written input.
 - Make sure about 12 target words occur in the written input.
 - Try to predict which parts of the written input are most likely to be used in the task, and put wanted vocabulary in those parts.
2. Design the task so that the written input needs to be used:
 - Avoid the use of numbering in lists of items or choices.
 - Use retelling, role play, and problem solving discussions based on the written input.
3. Get each learner in the group actively involved:
 - Split the information.
 - Assign roles.
 - Keep the group size reasonably small.
4. Ensure that the vocabulary is used in ways that encourage learning.
 - Use tasks such as role plays that require changing the context of the vocabulary.
 - Use a procedure such as the pyramid procedure or reporting back to get the vocabulary reused. In the pyramid proce-

dure the learner prepares a talk individually, rehearses it with a partner, practice it in a small group and then presents it to the whole class.

- Remove the input so that recall is required, or after looking at the detailed sheet, use a reduced one for the task.
- After the task is completed, get the learners to reflect on the vocabulary they learned.

3. The Study

3.1. General Objectives

- a) To determine if a combination of reading and listening to texts¹ has a positive effect on students' oral production skills².
- b) To determine if the students' proficiency level affects the effectiveness of this technique.

3.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study were:

- a) To determine if using readings expands the students' active vocabulary.
- b) To determine if the students use the word(s) appropriately based on the context.
- c) To determine if reading and listening to texts simultaneously improves the stu-

dents' pronunciation of words and word groups.

- d) To determine if the students' fluency is affected positively or negatively when incorporating the information in the readings.

3.3. Participants

A total of 24 LM-1001 – Basic English students, 12 men and 12 women studying English at the University of Costa Rica during the first semester of 2003, participated in the study. From this group of students, three sub-samples were selected based on the students' proficiency level in order to compare the number of words the students used in the conversations. Table 1 gives a general profile of these learners. The students were all native speakers of Spanish whose age range was from 17 to 35. They met two hours per day from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. Monday through Friday. In addition, they attended lab sessions three days a week from 10:00 a.m. to 10:50 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

3.4. The Data

The following instruments were used to gather information:

1. Students' evaluations of the reading and activities carried out in class,
2. Recordings of three oral exams,
3. Student Self-evaluation

TABLE 1
Background Information on the Sub-sample Learners

Students	Gender		Level		
	M	F	High Beginner	Intermediate	False Beginner
1		✓	✓		
2	✓		✓		
3	✓		✓		
4	✓			✓	
5	✓			✓	
6		✓		✓	
7	✓				✓
8		✓			✓
9		✓			✓

Checklist (See Appendix A), 4. Student Questionnaire (See Appendix B), and 5. Teachers' Evaluations of the students' performance in the oral exams (See Appendix C). When the comments of teachers and students were in English, I transcribed them verbatim. When they were in Spanish, I translated them.

3.4.1. Students' Evaluations of Texts and Activities

The researcher and the students had previously piloted and evaluated the texts and the oral activities specifically designed for this project through questionnaires and interviews during the second semester of 2002. Some texts were eliminated and others added based on the results of this evaluation.

3.4.2. Recordings of three oral exams

After every four textbook units, the students had an oral exam. The last three exams were recorded to collect the data. Pairs of students had to act out two or three situations based on the topics studied in class. Only one of these conversations required the use of information from the readings, although the students could also use it in the other(s) (See Appendix D for sample situations). The classroom instructor and another LM-1001 professor graded these exams. Prior to the exam, I told the students that they had to use the information in the readings to support their points of view when talking about the different topics assigned for the test. I also gave them a list of key words to be used in the conversations for each textbook and supplementary reading.

Something important I kept in mind when choosing the vocabulary was to distinguish between active and passive vocabulary. Since not all new words in a text are necessarily used in every day conversation, I chose those which I thought could increase the students' active vocabulary.

All of the LM-1001 groups were graded using the same scale. Therefore, the students' grade did not necessarily depend on their use of the information from readings or the vocabulary provided by the instructor.

The conversations were transcribed in order to analyze the content and to count the number of words used by the students in their conversations.

3.4.3. Student Self-evaluation Checklist and Questionnaire

After the students took the second and third oral exams, I asked them to fill out a Self-Evaluation Checklist, and after the fourth exam, they filled out a student questionnaire (See Appendix A and B).

The twenty-four students completed the Self-Evaluation checklists after the oral exams. However, for practical reasons only the data from the sub-samples were analyzed. Table 2 shows the answers to Part I of these checklists.

TABLE 3

Yes %	
	Did listening to and reading the texts help you improve your
	oral production skills?
22	
95.65	

TABLE 2
Strategies used by the sub-sample students to practice for the oral exam

Student	1		2		3		4		5		6		7		8		9	
	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3	2	3
I practiced the situations with my partner	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
I listened to and read the texts at home		x					x	x			x	x			x	x	x	x
I practiced using the words included in my vocabulary log	x	x			x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
I practiced retelling the information in the texts					x			x		x	x	x		x			x	x
I practiced by using the information in the readings in the situations studied in class		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x

Twenty-three students answered the questionnaire. Table 3 shows the results:

More or less	%	
	1	4.35
How did it help you?	No. of students	% of students
a) It improved my pronunciation of words	18	78.26
b) It helped expand the vocabulary	10	43.48
c) It helped me understand words in context	6	26.09
d) It helped me learn grammatical structures	3	13.04

3.4.4. Teachers' Evaluations

After the exams, the teachers who evaluated the students completed a questionnaire (See Appendix C).

3.5. Methodology

The tasks developed for this study were in accordance with the objectives, topics, and language of the LM-1001 course program. The difference was the treatment given to the texts included in the coursebook, as well as those provided by the instructor. I selected texts to complement the topics of some of the textbook units. Native speakers recorded the supplementary readings, and the professor recorded the textbook readings. The students had a chance to read and listen to them in the lab and at home before the oral activities took place. The students had to carry out a combination of listening, reading, and speaking tasks based on the information provided in the passages. Lewis' suggested exercises for correct chunking of words were taken into consideration when dialogues and readings were practiced in class and in the lab sessions (1957:56). Nation's recommendations for increasing the vocabulary learning potential of a speaking task were also taken into account when designing such tasks (2001:140).

3.6. Materials

The following fluency-development activities were carried out during the semester. All of them combined reading input and spoken output. Whenever possible, the listening component was also added.

3.6.1. *Read-and-look-up technique*

The read-and-look-up technique was used to practice most of the dialogues included in the coursebook after the listening comprehension and pronunciation activities had taken place. This practice activity was followed by communicative tasks in which students had to use the language learned in the dialogues in less controlled ways.

This read-and-look-up technique was devised by Michael West (1960b in Nation 2001:340) as a way of helping students to learn from written dialogues and to put expression into their speak-

ing. It also deliberately draws attention to correct chunking of language. The learners sit in pairs/groups facing each other. The size of the groups depends on the number of characters. The students take turns reading a role in the dialogue and listening to their partners as they read theirs. The learner holds the paper or book containing the dialogue at about chest level and slightly to the left. This enables the learners to look at their books while reading and at their partners while talking without having to move their heads at all. These are the rules of the technique. The reader looks at the dialogue and tries to remember as long a phrase as possible. While the reader is looking at the paper, s/he does not speak; while s/he is speaking, s/he does not look at the paper. At first it is difficult, but once the students get used to the procedure, it becomes a very useful way to fluently use the new language learned in the units. West considers this technique very valuable because the learner has to hold the phrase in his/her memory, and the brain is actively involved. Since the language is stored in chunks, it becomes easier to retrieve later on in communicative tasks.

3.6.2. *Rate Buildup Reading*

Anderson (1999:62) designed this activity to increase the students' reading rate and at the same time to encourage reading with comprehension. This activity can be done with almost any textbook reading as long as it is both prose and long enough for the students to read for more than one minute. I selected a reading and asked the students to read for one minute at a comfortable speed, making sure they were understanding what they read. After a minute went by, I said "stop" and the students placed a check mark where they had finished reading. Then in pairs, they shared whatever information was learned from the passage. Next, they started reading again from the beginning of the text, and they were given an additional sixty seconds to try to read more material than the first time. Once again they shared whatever additional information was read. The drill was repeated a third time. The purpose of this technique, as suggested by the title, is for the students to increase their rea-

ding rate but at the same time to read with comprehension. The students reread the old material quickly and try to add more material each time the process is repeated. One good thing about this technique is that there is no competition among classmates, and once the students learn the procedure, they can continue to use it to improve at home, too.

3.6.3. *Read and Retell Activity*

I gave the students a reading about a famous artist. After completion of the reading exercises, the students listened to and recorded the passage and the follow-up questions in the lab. They were asked to listen to and practice the story at home for retelling. The following day the students worked in pairs. The listeners used the questions to help their partners retell the story. They were encouraged to add more questions of their own. Then they switched roles.

3.6.4. *Read and Run*

This activity practices the strategy of scanning for information. It also exercises the learners' memories. By looking at questions before reading, students are able to understand the text and locate the necessary information.

I prepared a set of 12 questions based on a reading which compared weekend activities in the early 20th century to those carried out nowadays. I divided the class into groups of 4 and gave each team a handout with the questions. Copies of the reading were posted on the walls of the classroom, one per group. Teammates assigned themselves numbers. Student 1 had to read a question, run to the text, scan the reading to look for the answer, run back to the group and dictate the answer to Student 2. Student 2 repeated the procedure with question No. 2. The procedure continued until all twelve questions were answered. The first group to finish and get the right answers received a prize. Then the students reread the passage, did some reading exercises and discussed the following question in groups: "Do you think weekend activities have changed a lot in Costa Rica from the early 20th century to now

? Explain."

(Adapted from Day, Richard R, Ed. 1993. *New Ways in Teaching Reading*. Alexandria: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc.

3.6.5. *Folk Tales*

I gave the students two versions of a folk tale. In class, half of the students read version A and the other half version B. The students worked in expert groups –groups of students with the same story– to highlight or underline the important points of their readings and to work on vocabulary. The students recorded the stories in the lab. In pairs, they rehearsed telling the story. As homework, they practiced again, which they were encouraged to do with the tape, and prepared visual aids to help them convey meaning. The following day, A's paired up with B's, and they took turns telling their stories. While A was telling the story, B had to take notes on similarities and differences. Then they switched roles. Once they finished their oral presentations, they shared their lists of similarities and differences and reported their findings to the class.

(Adapted from Brown, Steve, *The Tesol Newsletter*, 1987, XXII(1) 17).

3.6.6. *Debate*

In class the students read an interview taken from the Internet of opinions from British students about designer brands. They also listened to and recorded the interview during the lab session. Then they were asked to reread and listen to the information at home in order to write some opinions, both pro and con about designer brands to get ready for the oral activity. The following day I organized a debate in groups of 4. First the students worked in pairs, one pair for and the other against designer brands. Pair mates shared the information they had and added ideas of their own. When they were ready, they got in groups and the debate started. I wrote useful expressions on the board such as: "I agree/disagree with you because..." "In my opinion..." "I think/believe..." "That's a good point, but..."

(Adapted from Jones, Leo and Victoria Kimbrough. 1987. *Great Idea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

3.6.7. *The Fluency Workshop*

This is a variation of the 4/3/2 activity mentioned in the theoretical framework. The focus of the activity is speaking fluency and note-taking. It is common for any reader, whether native or non-native, to pause, repeat, start and stop, and/or use hesitation devices, e.g., “uh,” “you know,” and so on in a conversation, especially when discussing a topic for the first time. As the speaker gets warmed up, the pauses tend to decrease. In this activity, the speaker has a chance to speak about the same topic with three different partners, but each time, the speaking time is reduced. The idea is to give the students more time at the beginning because they are struggling with the language and the ideas. By the third round, they should communicate their ideas as fluently and naturally as they can.

In preparation, I asked the students to look for information in English and write a summary about a country or city (location, weather, tourist attractions, etc.). I suggested the Internet, brochures, or textbooks as good sources of information. I checked the paragraphs before the activity took place. The students learned the information and brought notes with main ideas, cue words, flash cards or pictures to help them convey meaning. Then they worked in pairs. I used an adaptation of the Inside-Outside circle (Hernandez, 1994:E-112), a more suitable seating arrangement with a large number of students. A's talked first for a few minutes while B's took notes and asked clarification questions. Then they switched roles. The procedure was repeated two times with different partners. The students used the gathered information later on with model dialogues practiced in class.

(Adapted from Phapphal K., Wonebiasas, and Maurice, K. 1986. '86 Convention Papers: *Methods and Techniques that Work*. Bangkok: Thailand – Tesol in Hernández, 1994).

One student said this about the activity: “In my opinion, this activity has many advantages for the students and for the teachers as well because:

- The teachers can evaluate the responsibility of the students in relation to the materials assigned for homework.
- The students have the possibility to choose the materials they want to work with in class.
- They can learn new vocabulary.
- They can improve their fluency due to the repetition of information.
- They have the opportunity to work with classmates they have not worked with before.
- The class is more dynamic and creative. This type of exercise avoids boredom and reduces inhibition when communicating in another language.” (my translation)

Another student wrote: “I think the activity, which consisted of looking for information about a place and then sharing it with some of our classmates, was very important because I learned new vocabulary and expressions. We worked very actively on the speaking and listening skills. We also worked in pairs, a very useful technique to learn English. In addition, the professor gave us feedback on pronunciation during the performance of the task.” (my translation)

3.6.8. *Jigsaw Reading*

The term *jigsaw* refers to activities in which students in small groups are dependent on the others in the group for the information they need in order to learn a topic or complete a task. The reading material is divided into meaningful, self-contained units, and these units are often graded according to proficiency level. First, the students work in expert groups; that is, each group member reads, does reading exercises and rehearses his/her part of the story with students who have the same piece of information. Then the students regroup to share their piece of information with the rest of the jigsaw group members in order to get a more complete idea of the story. Students are evaluated on how well they learned

all the information.

For this jigsaw task, I duplicated sets of the "Heart Victim Can't Stay" reading (A, B, C, D), the accompanying exercise sheets, and copies of the quiz for each student. Students were assigned readings based on proficiency level, A's being the low achievers, B's the high achievers, C's and D's the intermediate achievers. I also asked two native speakers, a man and a woman, to record the readings.

In class, I divided the students into expert groups. As a pre-reading exercise, I wrote the title on the board and told the students that the story was about a man who had two big problems. I asked them what the two problems might be. After the students made their predictions, I distributed the readings to each expert group and asked them to skim their readings to see if their predictions were correct. Then they reread the passage to look for answers to the following questions: "What's wrong with his heart?" and "Why can't he stay?" The students then went through the reading skills exercises and checked their answers with a key. They also prepared a mini-quiz to be administered after their oral presentations in the Jigsaw groups. In the lab they listened to and recorded their readings and worked on pronunciation.

For homework, I asked them to go over the readings one more time and prepare their oral presentations. They could bring cue words, flash cards, and/or pictures to help them convey meaning, but they were not allowed to use the readings during their oral presentations.

Two days later, they formed jigsaw groups. The students were allowed to form their own teams, but there had to be males and females and one A, B, C and D in each group. Thus, the groups were mixed by gender and proficiency level. The students made their oral presentations and checked comprehension by means of the mini-quizzes to make sure everyone in the team had mastered the information shared. On the board I wrote a list of key words and idioms found in the readings and encouraged the students to use and share what they knew about the vocabulary during and after the presentations. After completion of the task, the students had a

quiz, which included information from the four readings, ten true and false items, and a discussion question. I gave the students an evaluation sheet for grading their teammates on their oral presentations. Then I averaged both the students' written and oral performance to give them a task grade.

The readings, the exercises, the quiz and suggested procedure were taken from: Cohelo, Elizabeth, Lise Winer, and Judy Winn.-Bell Olsen. 1989. *All Sides of the Issue*. Hayward: Alemany Press.

Oral Evaluation criteria:

Speaker: _____ Listener: _____

- _____ 1. Was the talk well prepared?
- _____ 2. Did the speaker use eye contact?
- _____ 3. Did the speaker speak clearly?
- _____ 4. Did the speaker give enough information?
- _____ 5. Did the speaker check comprehension after his/her oral presentation?

_____ Were you a good listener?

Grading Scale

4 pts.: Excellent 3 pts.: Very Good 2 pts.: Good 1pt.: Needs improvement.

The Oral Evaluation Criteria was adapted from: Hernández (1994:107).

One student wrote the following comment: "The first part of the activity was very helpful to clarify doubts, mainly vocabulary, and to understand the text. The reading comprehension exercises were excellent to aid comprehension. The second activity was very effective to practice oral communication. In my group it was very good, and I can even say that we had fun. The use of the cassette with the recording of the text was very useful because many times we forget the pronunciation when we only listen to the text in class, but with the recording, we can listen to it several times, and it is easy to remember. In my opinion, the activity was very productive." (my translation).

Another student wrote this: "The use of the text and the recording was very useful to become familiar with the pronunciation of the

words. We first read the story and then checked the pronunciation with the help of the cassette. The sound of the tape was very clear. In my opinion, the teacher should continue to include this type of activities because it gives us a chance to listen to the way other people talk. In this way we can get used to understanding people other than the teacher. In addition, having to tell our classmates the story in a way they can understand us forces us to speak fluently and pronounce clearly. It is a way to learn and have fun at the same time. We improve with enthusiasm and dedication.” (my translation).

3.6.9. Role Play

In the lab, the students listened to and read a folk tale called “Ming Lo Moves the Mountain.” I asked the students who wanted to get extra points to form groups of four or five students and dramatize the story. These students recorded the story and took it home to get ready for the role play. They were free to dramatize it any way they wanted. One group used puppets and added an extra character: the mountain. The other two acted out the story, but used their creativity to make the activity more interesting and fun for their classmates. Out of the 15 students who participated in the activity, nine used the cassette to practice the pronunciation and six only listened to the story in the lab.

This is what a student wrote about the role play: “I believe that this activity was very helpful because for me one of the biggest problems that we foreign language students have is to lose the fear of talking in public, and this type of activities helps us get rid of it. I also think that it was of great help to take the tape home because we often ask for the pronunciation of a word in class, but when we get home, we have already forgotten it. In addition, practicing the text several times helps us learn the words and the pronunciation. For me, this should continue to be done throughout the course because we not only learn, but we also have a lot of fun.” (my translation)

4. Analysis of Results

Objective a – To determine if using readings expands the students’ active vocabulary.

43,48% of the students explicitly mentioned that listening and reading to texts simultaneously helped them increase their vocabulary and knowledge of new words.

Table 4 shows the approximate number of words and word groups from the lists

used by the students in the conversations. Even though an effort was made to count the exact number of words the students used in the conversations, it was somewhat difficult because they recycled some of the words in different exams and combined the information from texts to support their points of view.

TABLE 4
Word Count

Student	Exam 2	Exam 3	Exam 4
1	-	11	10
2	2	*	1
3	1	5	-
4	6	11	2
5	3	7	5
6	2	2	12
7	13	11	8
8	2	2	8
9	1	3	2

* No data available because of technical reasons

The results show that only two high-level students did not use any of the words included in the lists: Student 1 in exam 2 and Student 3 in exam 4. However, the first incorporated quite a few words in the following two exams. Students 2 and 3 did not seem to make an effort to incorporate new vocabulary in any of the exams. It seems that these two high-level students did not find it necessary to learn new words because they already had an adequate vocabulary and were fluent enough to pass the exams with good grades without making an extra effort. Student 1, on the other hand, showed an increasing desire and enthusiasm to go beyond what she already knew as the course advanced. This view is reinforced if

we go over the techniques these three students used to prepare for the oral exams (See Table 2). Student 2 did not listen to the texts at home; however, in the questionnaire he mentioned that he reread some. Student 3 neither listened to nor reread any of them at home. However, both of them practiced situations with their partners before the oral exam took place. Student 1 mentioned that for exam 3, she read and listened to the texts at home, and although she did not rehearse the situation with her partner, she did it by herself, and it was in this exam that she used the highest number of words. In spite of this, the lack of peer practice was reflected in her grade, which was somewhat lower than in the other three.

All the middle achievers and two of the low achievers were able to incorporate a considerable number of words from the lists in their conversations. Most of them reported listening to and rereading the texts at home. Student 5 did not read or listen to the texts at home, and student 7 only reread them. However, both rehearsed the situations with a partner and practiced incorporating the information in the conversations. Surprisingly enough Student 7, a low achiever, was the one who seemed to benefit the most from reading texts in regards to vocabulary expansion. Only Student 9 found it very difficult to incorporate these words and the information from the readings in the conversations. In her evaluations she mentioned that even if she studied a lot and tried hard, it was difficult for her to do a good job.

Based on these results, we can conclude that the majority of the students were able to expand their vocabulary from reading the passages. A thorough analysis of the transcripts indicates that most of the students used at least some of the words and word groups included in the texts, although not necessarily the ones chosen by the instructor. The students kept a vocabulary log with the words and expressions of their choice, and one of the strategies used to study for the exam was practicing the words included in the vocabulary log. In Table 2, it can be observed that most of the students, except Student 2, and Students 3 and 5 in Exam 2 used this technique to study for the exam. In addition, most of them, except Student 1 in exam 2, and

Student 9 in exams 2 and 3, used the information from the readings — the second technique most widely used to prepare for the exam — and even combined information from different texts to enrich their conversations.

Objective b – To determine if the students use the words appropriately based on the context.

26.09% mentioned that the readings helped them understand the words in context, use the words correctly based on context, or deduce meaning from context.

An analysis of the conversations of the sub-samples shows that the students used all of the words and expressions in the lists in meaningful contexts; that is, they used them successfully to communicate ideas. The few errors found were form errors such as omission of the past tense and articles (i.e., *That movies last only one minute, Coffee is stimulant*), addition of an *-s* to a noun modifying another noun and to irregular plural forms (i.e. *products from animals sources, take care of childrens*), agreement (i.e. *You strengthens the parts of the brain and There are pollution*), and substitution of the verb for a noun (i.e. *It strength important parts of your brain*). However, most of these types of errors seem to be common in first-year students and are probably due to the developmental learning stage they are in.

This is what one student wrote: “When we read and listen to texts simultaneously, one can compare the way a word is written with its pronunciation. It helps me learn to pronounce and use a word according to the context. In this way, I can use it again on different occasions.”

We can conclude that presenting language in context promotes meaningful use of words, although these words are not always encoded in grammatically correct contexts. This finding coincides with Lewis’ claim that words are more effectively learned when they are presented as part of a text rather than randomly, because this contextualization has the advantage of showing the co-text with which the words and expressions can occur. He says that “if context is seen as situation + co-text, it is the latter – co-occurring language – which is more important in language

learning (Lewis, 1993:104-5).”

Objective c - To determine if reading and listening to texts simultaneously improves the students’ pronunciation of words and word groups.

78.26% of the students explicitly mentioned that reading and listening to texts simultaneously helped them improve their pronunciation in different ways; for example, it helped them improve their diction, learn the pronunciation and stress of new words and word groups, use correct intonation of some phrases and affirmative, negative and exclamatory expressions, and pause correctly when reading out loud or silently.

This is what some students wrote about the technique:

It helped me because there were many words that I knew, but I did not pronounce them correctly. In addition, the texts were very important because you can pay attention to the pauses that you have to make when you read out loud or silently. Furthermore, all these types of listening and reading exercises train our ears to get used to the new language. (my translation).

It helped me because listening to the correct pronunciation helps a lot, specially to non-native speakers like us. That gave me the chance not only to pronounce correctly but also to try to leave the accent behind.

As a student of English, I think that the use of the recordings is extremely important since in order to improve the oral skill, pronunciation plays an important role. Even if we have good memory and pay attention in class, there are things that slip our minds. The cassette is useful because with it, we can correct our pronunciation and improve our listening comprehension. Recording the readings and conversations increases our vocabulary, and we can remember the pronunciation. It is an excellent tool to check things fast. (my translation).

...recording the readings and the vocabulary is very important because we can practice at home. There are many words that we don’t have an idea how to pronounce. Recording our voices together with the tape helps us correct our mistakes. In addition, listening to the readings in class is important not only for pronunciation but also to learn the intonation and rhythm. Personally, all the work done in class and in the lab has helped me a lot. When the course began, I thought that I was going to get poor grades in the

oral evaluations, but I have done very well. This is very important to lose the fear to communicate in English. (my translation)

Objective d – To determine if the students’ fluency is affected positively or negatively when incorporating the information in the readings

The use of readings may sometimes affect the students’ fluency in a negative way. However, their conversations are richer in content. When the students use the textbook dialogues learned in class to develop the situations, much of the language used has been previously memorized; therefore, it is retrieved faster and fewer hesitations and repetition of words occur. On the other hand, when the students incorporate information from texts (not retelling stories), it takes them more time to recall the right information based on the situation and use it in correct English. This finding is consistent with Pawley and Syder’s explanation of nativelike fluency and selection (1983 in Nation, 2001:323). For example, compare the first part of the conversation when students are using the dialogues learned in class with the second part when they are adding information from the readings:

A: Intermediate

B: False beginner

A: Hi, R.....! How are you?

B: Hi, E.....! How are you? (laugh) Fine, thank you, and how are you, E....?

A: Oh, O.K. I’m fine, too. Hey, you’re in good shape!

B: Ah, thank you!

A: What are you doing to keep fit?

B: Well, I... I do exercise twice a week!

A: Twice a week? What do you do?

B: Well, I ...I do weight lifting.

A: Weight lifting?

B: Yes!

A: And do you do anything else?

B: No, only, I only do weight lifting.

A: Ah, but, but do you think it’s good to be a fitness freak?

B: Well, I think the, the exercise makes your bones, muscles, health ...eh ...heart and your lungs stronger and also strengthens important parts of your brain, and I think that exercise is, is very, is very comfortable for people.

A: I didn’t know. Why, why do you, do you say it strengthens parts of the brain?

B: Because if you, if you ...for example, if you play

basketball you have, you have to know the, the move ...movements and, and you, you can remember all the moves and that I... and that I..., and you strengthens the parts of the brain for be only, for be one body with the brain and the body!

A: Do you think you can remember all the things and learn ...

B: It's advantage because, because the exercise help you to learn new things, and remember all the information.

A: Yeah, but, well, do you know I'm a couch potato and I, I think you can learn more being a coach potato because if you are a coach potato, you're sitting on your coach, you know, and with your feet up, and you watch a lot of documentals so, you...

B: High quality programs ...

A: Of course, like Discovery Channel and the History Channel, and all of those programs that can increase you knowledge and, or, for example, if you want to learn about sports, you can watch sports, if you want to learn about how can people draw cartoons, you can see cartoons, so I think it's very good to be a coach potato because you learn a lot.

B: But, I think if you're a coach potato you can, you can, you can learn new things because you're watching high quality programs, but one disadvantage is that you don't, don't do exercise and also you, you only watch TV, and it's bad for your eyes and for your health.

A: I agree with you.....

Even though the students hesitate and repeat words more often, their conversation is richer in content and goes beyond the question and answer situation more commonly found in textbook dialogues.

The following comment by a teacher supports the researcher's opinion:

"The use of readings increases the students' vocabulary, although it does not necessarily improve their fluency. They have more to talk about, and they even use grammatical structures which are in the readings but have not been studied in class. They have more ideas to include in their conversations."

5. Conclusions

Twenty-two students (95.65%) felt that reading and listening to texts improved their oral

production skills, and one student (4.35%) said "more or less." Their opinions agree with the comments of the teachers who collaborated on grading the exams. This is what they said about the students' performance:

"The conversations are more interesting, motivational, in depth. The students can express opinions and thoughts. The language used is more complex than what is in the book, talking at a different level, more authentic. They want to learn more words."

"All the students were able to benefit from the information from the readings, some more than others. Each student was able to use the information at his/her own proficiency level." (my translation)

"After assessing students' oral proficiency in a tribunal, I could see the difference in the performance of students who had worked with additional recorded readings and students who had not received additional readings, or received them but did not have access to a recording of the texts. (...)The group that worked with the recorded readings was using more new vocabulary to express their ideas and used it with the appropriate pronunciation. They had more ideas to communicate, given that they had covered different perspectives and views of the topic while working with the readings. They could expand on the issues with confidence because they had done so in class through the texts. Their overall performance was superior to the students' performance from other groups."

As mentioned in the discussion of Objective a, not all the students used the words and word groups included in the lists; however, most of them were able to enrich and use language creatively in their conversations. Only Student 9 was unable to do this. She limited her performance to the language in the dialogues from the textbook. This could have been due to the fact that the majority of the students had very recently concluded their high school studies. Therefore, most of them, except Student 9, had had fresh contact with the English language. In contrast, she had stopped studying for a period of time before she enrolled in this course. Therefore, it is possible that the input provided by the texts was not appropriate for her developmental stage. In addition, her resulting lack of confidence made this situation worse.

The level of difficulty of the texts was also

mentioned by another student as a factor which affected her performance in the oral exams. This is what she wrote: "I think that readings increased my vocabulary and the knowledge of new words. However, because of the level of difficulty of some readings, some were hard to understand. It was difficult for me to retell them or use the information." (my translation) Another one said: "It was difficult for me to follow the text because of the speed of the reader."

The majority of the students (some more than others) were able to expand their vocabulary and improve their pronunciation. We must remember that all of the in-class activities combined both reading and spoken output and whenever possible, a listening component was also added. The use of this technique together with other out-of-class strategies (i.e. listening and rereading the texts at home, practicing with partners) gave the students a chance to encounter and use the new words and expressions several times in meaningful situations, which helped input become intake. Surprisingly, the intermediate and low-level students seemed to benefit more from the technique since most of them reported listening to and rereading the texts at home, while the high achievers were satisfied with the work done in class. This finding is consistent with the conclusions of Eller, Pappas and Brown that knowledge of a word increases with repeated encounters, and with Salling (1959), Kachroo (1962), Saragi (1978) in Nation, 1999, that there is a relationship between repetition and learning, but that this repetition has to go hand in hand with an effort to recall its meaning.

We can conclude that a combination of reading and listening to texts has a positive effect on the students' oral production skills. Rereading the text at home provides the students with an opportunity to recycle/reinforce the material studied in class. If the students not only read but also listen to the texts simultaneously, their pronunciation also improves, but more importantly, they are able to use and recombine the language learned in new, creative ways.

We can also say that the proficiency level of the students does not seem to affect the effec-

tiveness of the technique. However, choosing texts which match the students' proficiency level and repeated opportunities to practice the information might make the difference.

6. Pedagogical Implications

6.1. Encourage students to look for out-of-class learning opportunities

The students should be encouraged to find opportunities to activate the target language outside the classroom. It is this recycling of material which helps them internalize what was learned in class. In this research project the students were involved in role plays and simulations which helped them use the language learned in class in creative and imaginative ways. Moreover, they were asked to use that information and the new words in their vocabulary logs in conversations with partners. They also reread and listened to texts at home and practiced retelling the information. This is what a student wrote about the latter technique: "It helped me with pronunciation and also helped me understand the word in context. I think [sic] is very important because sometimes you just see the word and you don't memorize it. But, if you listen [sic] it again [sic] at home you will learn it, and that will improve your vocabulary."

The following very useful out-of-class tasks are also worth trying:

- Dialogue journals with the teacher via the Internet
- Taking part in conversation exchanges with international students learning Spanish. Partners can spend half of the time speaking in English and the other half using Spanish. In this way both can benefit from the experience
- Chatting in English with friends on the Internet
- Watching TV programs on cable TV. Closed-caption programs can reinforce the technique of listening and reading simultaneously

- Finding native speakers to practice English

6.2. Develop different strategies to help students become better and more autonomous language learners

Teachers should provide explicit strategy development to help the student

become better and more autonomous language learners. In addition to the out-of-class strategies mentioned in Table 2, students were trained to use the following strategies in class:

Metacognitive

- Self-monitoring
- Self and peer-evaluating
- Classifying/grouping

Memory

- Memorizing dialogues and formulaic expressions
- Placing new words and expressions into new contexts
- Using keywords to recall information

Cognitive

- Making predictions
- Guessing meaning from context
- Note-taking
- Brainstorming
- Inducing rules from examples
- Summarizing
- Highlighting
- Practicing (repeating, using formulas and patterns in new contexts, recombining)

Socio/Affective

- Cooperating with others
- Asking for clarification, repetition
- Keeping the conversation going

- Having fun

6.3. Choose reading materials which are appropriate for the age, interests, proficiency level, topics and objectives of the course

The more the readings match the proficiency level of the students and the topics of the situations, the easier it will be for them to use the information in the conversations. If, in addition, the topics are appropriate for their age and interests, motivation will be higher and students will be able to do a better job when communicating orally.

Notes

1. By text I mean authentic or adapted discourse of any type (narrative, expository, conversational) and any source (television, newspapers, stories, reports of various types, and texts for children as well as adults). (Adapted from Bardovi-Harlig, Kathleen. 1996. "Tense & Aspect in Context." In Miller, T. (Ed.), *Functional approaches to written text: Classroom applications*. Washington, D.C.: United States Information Agency.
2. By oral production skills I mean the ability to produce language quite fluently, using appropriate vocabulary, grammatical structures, and correct pronunciation of words and word groups (chunks).

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Appendix A

Student Self-Evaluation Checklist

N a m e :

E x a m :

I. Check the strategies you used to prepare for the oral exam:

- _____ I practiced the situations with my partner.
_____ I listened to and read the reading passages at home.
_____ I practiced using the words included in my vocabulary log.
_____ I practiced retelling the information in the reading passages.
_____ I practiced by using the information in the readings in the situations studied in class.
-

II. Complete the following statements:

I was (not) happy with the results of the exam because _____

It was easy to _____

It was difficult to _____

Next time I can do the following things to improve my performance:

Appendix B

Name: _____

Please answer the following questions:

Did you read and listen to the reading passages at home? _____ Yes _____ No

Did listening to and reading the text simultaneously help you improve your oral production skills?
_____ Yes _____ No

If it helped you, how did it help you? If not, mention the problems you had.

Appendix C

1. In your opinion, does using additional readings to complement topics increase the students' oral production skills?
2. Was there a topic in which the students showed less proficiency or lack of language?
3. In your opinion, were the low-level students unable to use the information in the readings? Explain.

Appendix D

Sample Situations

Student A

Your partner is a fitness freak. S/he is in great shape. Ask him/her what s/he does to keep in shape. You are a couch potato. Try to convince your partner that watching TV has many advantages. Support your points of view with information from the readings.

Student B

You are a fitness freak. Answer your classmate's questions. Convince him/her that exercise is good for his/her health. Mention the disadvantages of watching TV. Support your point of view with information from the readings.

Student A

Ask your partner about his/her family (number of members, names, age, occupation, hobbies). Discuss how families have changed, and the advantages and disadvantages of this change. Ask his/her opinion about house husbands. Support your point of view with information from the readings.

Student B

Ask your partner about his/her family (number of members, names, age, occupation, hobbies).

Discuss how families have changed and the advantages and disadvantages of this change. Ask his/her opinion about working mothers. Support your point of view with information from the readings.