Developing the speaking skill through cooperative learning techniques

El desarrollo de la habilidad del habla a través del uso de técnicas de aprendizaje cooperativo

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Abstract: The speaking skill has been giving emphasis in teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Thus, in this article, the authors have assumed Slavin's teaching techniques of cooperative learning to adapt and apply them to develop speaking in the teaching learning process of English as a foreign language at University of Granma. Cuba. First, some theoretical foundation about the process of communication and cooperative learning is offered. Second, some cooperative learning techniques are described. Finally, the teacher's role and the descriptors to assess speaking are described.

Keywords − speaking, cooperative learning, communication, descriptors, techniques.

Resumen: La habilidad del habla ha sido priorizada en la enseñanza aprendizaje del idioma inglés como lengua extranjera. Por lo que en este artículo los autores han asumido las técnicas de enseñanza del aprendizaje cooperativo de Slavin para adaptarlas y aplicarlas y contribuir a su desarrollo en el proceso de aprendizaje de la enseñanza del inglés como idioma extranjero en la Universidad de Granma, Cuba. Inicialmente, se ofrecen algunos fundamentos teóricos sobre el proceso de comunicación y aprendizaje cooperativo. Luego, se ofrecen algunas técnicas de aprendizaje cooperativo. Finalmente, se describen el rol del profesor y los descriptores para evaluar el habla.

Palabras clave − expresión oral, aprendizaje cooperativo, comunicación, descriptores, técnicas.

INTRODUCTION

Learning the English language in Cuba is getting a great level of importance due to globalization, the opening up of its economy to the world and the scientific and technological development of the country. Nowadays, it is a necessity to improve university students' skills to face a proficiency test to be graduated from college. They need to be prepared as future trained workers to face their forthcoming labor challenges regarding oral communication in English either in their country or abroad. Fernández Lavín, M. (2017)

According to the Cuban policy established in 2015 regarding the English language learning, students must get the B1 level once they are graduated from college. For this reason, it is necessary to find teaching and learning strategies to help them practice and improve their oral production, and achieve

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the desired oral level. Many approaches have been put into practice to accomplish this goal, but taking into consideration the characteristics of cooperative learning, strategies provided by this approach are considered the most appropriate ones to be applied in the teaching learning process of English as a foreign language at University of Granma.

At this University, most of the English classes are made up of at least 18-25 students. In each class, one third of the students are less efficient students. They are sometimes shy and unwilling to use the English language to communicate efficiently. Others feel uncomfortable if they make mistakes when speaking in front of the rests of the students. Therefore, teachers must find some ways to enhance students' self-confidence to motivate and encourage them to improve their oral production. Students´ interaction in class should provide equal opportunities to participate actively and learners need to learn how they are expected to interact in the classroom.

Meng, J. (2010) considers that group and pair works have become increasingly popular in language teaching and learning since they can provide many advantages. Group work is a cooperative activity; that is, some students are assigned a topic, a role-play or a problem-solving activity. In this way, they will tend to participate more equally, and they will also be able to experiment and use the language more independently than they are supposed to use it in a whole-class arrangement. The moment students get into pairs and start working, they will be doing the activity more freely than in a whole-class arrangement. Both, pair and group works give students chances for greater independence because they are working together without the teacher controlling every move. They take some of their own learning decisions, they decide what language to use to complete a certain task, and they can work without the pressure of the whole class, listening to what they are doing.

This article is the result of an investigation to get a Master Degree, aimed at providing some theoretical foundations related to the use of cooperative learning to develop the speaking skill in the teaching learning process of English as a foreign language at University of Granma. Examples of cooperative learning techniques are also suggested.

Trends in foreign language teaching
The structural linguistics that, together with one or another psychological theory, mainly the behavioralist, has mastered the teaching of languages for decades, it considers language in terms of its grammatical structure, without much attention to its meaning and use. Consequently, students develop the ability to produce sentences grammatically correct, but do not perform communicative functions such as encouragement, approve something, invite, accept or refuse an invitation, ask for and offer personal information.

Erroneously, the goal in many mother tongue and foreign language classes is not communication, but the knowledge of an isolated grammatical structure and its use in communicative practice. In this regard, Hymes, D. (1970) noted that there are rules for the use without which the grammatical rules would be useless and inoperative.

Since the end of the 60s, many authors have insisted on this problem. Leontiev, A. N. (1982) points out that emphasis has been placed on the formation of linguistic habits and not on the development of skills and that there has been formal education with little attention to the psychological factors of communication.

In this regard, Wilkins, D. A. (1976) expresses that inefficiency in the teaching of languages because the courses developed in the world have had a structural organization, where the parts of the language are taught separately to be integrated little by little into a process of gradual accumulation. As a result, students work with the linguistic material in class, but are unable to communicate because the ability of this is not equal to the sum of its elements. You cannot reduce the knowledge of the whole to the knowledge of its parts. It is, then, to recompose the whole.

In the 70s, Hymes, D. (1970) developed the concept of communicative competence that results broader than the concept of linguistic competence of Chomsky, N. (1968). In this way appears the Functional-notional program with a list of topics, notions and communicative functions selected from the needs of communication. The language components, (phonology, grammar and semantics) are taken into account in it and are incorporated into teaching as a communication system. The program is organized around functions and notions and not linguistic structures as it was done before.

Hymes' theory of communicative competence (1970) is a definition of what the speaker needs to know to be competent from the communicative point of view; is the ability that the individual requires to use language as a means of communication in a certain community. According to this author, a person who acquires communicative competence achieves both: knowledge and the ability to use language regarding:

- If something is and to what extent formally possible.
- If something is and to what extent possible by virtue of means and existing implements
- If something is and to what extent appropriate (adequate) in relation to a context.
- If something is and to what extent actually executed and what its realization means.

In the teaching of the English language as a means of communication, it is necessary to achieve the development of the four English language basic skills. However, an emphasis should be on speaking."In foreign language learning, oral language is given priority to achieve the establishment of the mechanisms of listening and speech. This priority means that the oral language is presented first and the written one is taught from what the learner has learned orally" (Antich de León, R., 1986: p. 40).

Therefore, a reflection on this assertion is made, and the authors of this article wonder if a cooperative learning approach, with its emphasis on the active involvement of all students, could solve the problem of the speaking skill as students could have more opportunities to speak in small groups.

Cooperative learning in foreign language teaching
Wang, P. T. (2009) citing Slavin, R. E. (1986) said that this author emphasized the applicability of cooperative learning to planning instruction on school subjects and formation of heterogeneous groups. His definition on cooperative learning is that cooperative learning methods are structured, systematic, and instructional strategies, which are used at any grade level and in most school subjects. All of the methods consist of having the teacher assign the students two-to six-member learning composed of high, average, and low achievers; boys and girls; black, Anglo, and Hispanic students, and mainstreamed academically handicapped students as well as non-handicapped classmates. Slavin, R. E. (1986)

Slavin, R. E. (1986) states that cooperative learning has three important features. First, cooperative learning is a kind of group work. Learners have to work together in small groups between two and six members. Second, learning is structured to ensure that everyone in the group is able to fulfill the learning task. Third, students have to be dependent on each other to achieve their learning goals.

Slavin, R. E. (1995) identified cooperative learning as students work together in four member teams to master material initially presented by the teacher. Slavin's Student Team Learning methods emphasize team goals and success and he suggests if all members of the team learn the goals being taught, the success of a team can be achieved.

According to this author, three elements are central to all Student Team Learning methods – team rewards, individual accountability, and equal opportunities Slavin, R. E. (1991a). Team rewards on cooperative learning research indicates that if students are rewarded for doing better than they have in the past, they will be more motivated to reach than if they are rewarded for doing better than others. Because students will work together towards a common goal and their learning efforts will help their teams succeed. Individual accountability means that the success of a team relies on the learning of every individual in all team members. Accountability focuses the team member's activity on helping others learn and making sure that team members are ready for a quiz without teammate's help.

Equal opportunities for success mean that students can contribute to their teams by improving over their past performance. This ensures that all the students, including high, average, and low students are equally to do their best to value individual contributions. Why should students working in cooperative groups learn more than those in traditionally organized classes?

Researchers investigating this question have suggested a wide range of theoretical models to explain the superiority of cooperative learning. Slavin, R. E. (1991a). In doing so, the study is to acquaint the teachers with aspects of theory that may be helpful in understanding the historical development of Slavin's cooperative learning approach and its significance to the teaching of a second language. The theories include three major categories: motivational, cognitive, and social independence theories.

Motivational Theories on cooperative learning focus primarily on the reward or goal structures under which students operate Slavin, R. E. (1992). Deutsch, M. (1949) identified three goal structures: cooperative, in which each individual's goal-oriented efforts contribute to other goal attainment; competitive, in which each individual's goal-oriented efforts prevent others from reaching their goal; and individual, in which individuals' goal-oriented efforts have no connection with others goal attainment. From a motivational aspect (such as those of Johnson, D. W. (1998) and Slavin, R. E. (1993), cooperative goal structures create a situation in which the only way group members can reach their own personal goals if the group is successful.

Cognitive theories are mainly based on the theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, L. (1962) and cognitive science (Johnson, D. W. (1999). Piaget's ideas have been widely interpreted as supporting the creation of classroom environments where students play active roles as they engage in real or at least realistic tasks. Slavin, R. E. (1995)

Many Piagetians (Damon, W. 1984; Murray, F.B. 1982; Wadsworth, B. J. 1984) have called for an increased use of cooperative activities in schools. They argue that interaction among students on learning tasks will lead in itself to improve student achievement. Students will learn from one another

because in their discussions of the content, cognitive conflicts will arise. Slavin, R. E. (1978). Piaget believed that conflicts occur when individuals cooperate. Cognitive disequilibrium is created by such conflicts and in turn stimulates cognitive development. Eisner, E. W. (2002)

According to Vigotsky, L. (1962) cited in Slavin, R. E. (1995), they claim that knowledge is social, constructed from cooperative efforts to learn, to understand, and the process of solving problems. Vigotsky viewed learning and development as dynamic processes that are situated in social and cultural contexts. He believed that "learners are interactive agents in communicative, socially situated relationships and that the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the socialized but from the social to the individual" (Vygotsky, L. 1962, p.20). He stated that students must interact with a person who is more expert than themselves to go beyond their current development. From this statement, teachers should give students guidance and provide opportunities to work with more capable peers. Without cooperative activities to provide such learning environment, students will not grow intellectually.

The central notion of Social Interdependence Theories is that social interdependence exists when individuals share common goals and each individual's outcomes are affected by the actions of others. Johnson, D. W. (1998). Social interdependence can be differentiated from social dependence and social independence. Social interdependence occurs when each person's gains and losses influence the gains or losses of other individuals. From this viewpoint, learning takes place through social interaction and communication. Group members who have positive interactions will bring about good results. When both social interdependence and social dependence are absent, there are only individual efforts. Chien, Y. (2004). Without integration, learning cannot increase.

The role of communication in English language teaching
According to Acosta Padrón, R. (2008) communication exists for the language, and from the methodological point of view, it is the main objective in either teaching the mother tongue, or teaching foreign languages.

The authors of this article assume that communication is a bilateral relationship (subject-subject, subject-subjects) in which a certain system of signs is used that allows interpretation by both parts, where certain influence is exerted on the psyche of the participants in this process, mutually influencing their ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

This is materialized in the proper use of language (formal and informal), depending on the communicative situation in which they interact. A message or information can determine a change in the subject that receives it. This can be done, consciously, for a specific purpose or involuntarily.

Debs Rosales, A. (2008) argues that this concept is a bilateral relationship where **A** causes changes in **B** and vice versa, and that both use the same system of signs to establish a mutual influence. He considers that communication is the primordial factor of the formation of the human psyche, that is to say, communication is the means of manifestation in the psychic particularities of each individual.

Communication is the result and indispensable condition of the production process and as the main and most complex expression of human relations in the process of activity, where there is an exchange of ideas, thoughts, attitudes, representations and affective experiences through language.

González Maura, V. (2001) considers it is the activity, specifically human communication, through the language. Language can express not only the knowledge concerning the surrounding world, but also the relations between men and the phenomena of the external world and each individual in his relationship with other people.

In this article, it is assumed the definition of language assumed by Debs Rosales, A. (2008) who considers it as the use of the language by the people, involved in the process of the activity, to develop the act of communication. The same idea, the same discovery can be transmitted through language, relying on the resources of one language or another.

Language (as a linguistic category) is, therefore, a system of verbal signs that encompasses certain vocabulary (socially elaborated), grammatical and phonetic laws, is national by character, and is governed by certain laws and rules. The speech or the language forms a unit. Language is a process; in contrast, speech or language is a set of resources used by the individual who speaks. Communication is not only based on verbal communication, but there are other non-idiomatic or pragmatic means, such as gestures, mime, intonation, among others, but the fundamental form used by man for communication is verbal.

This type of communication is carried out, through the language, using the sounds and spelling or written symbols as means of communication; it adopts two basic forms of expression: oral expression and written expression which are two of the basic skills to be developed in teaching a language.

Skills are psychological formations through which man expresses in a concrete way, the dynamic of the activity with the aim of elaborating, transforming, creating objects, solving situations and problems, acting on oneself, and self-regulating. They are characterized by being useful in different contexts, either by applying knowledge and actions already known or by experimenting, extrapolating and elaborating new combinations based on old stereotypes and experiences.

Elliot, J. (1999) states that skills are not independent, isolated elements, but are linked to a structure; this implies that the development of a particular skill is not disconnected from the parallel processes through which the development of other skills occurs, although some experiences are propitiated with the intentionality of contributing to the development of a particular skill. This also implies that for the achievement of a particular competence, more than a specific skill, a skill structure is involved.

The formation of skills constitutes, therefore, the mastery of a whole system of operations aimed at the elaboration of the information contained in the knowledge and information obtained from the object and the operations tending to reveal this information and its confrontation and correlation with the activities.

In this article, it is considered that skills constitute the logical and organized use of the knowledge that allow the student to transform their way of acting and face situations and problems in their objective reality in an effective way by means of the use of cooperative learning strategies.

Proposal of Cooperative Learning Techniques

Wang, T. P (2009) provides Slavin´s techniques of cooperative learning, which are assumed in this article and adapted to be applied in the teaching learning process of the English language at University of Granma. Cuba.

Students-Teams-Achievement Division (STAD)

STAD is a prevailing and simple technique in cooperative learning. It consists of five major components: class presentations, teams, quizzes, individual improvement scores, and team recognition. Slavin, R. E. (1986)

a. Class Presentations. In STAD linguistic material is introduced in direct instruction or discussion way, but involves audio-visual presentations. Students must pay attention carefully during the class presentation, and then they can do quizzes to gain good scores for their teams.

b. Teams. Teams consist of four or five students working in heterogeneous groups according to their academic performance. Each team meets to study worksheets, discuss problems, compare answers, and correct misconceptions. The main function of the team is to promote its members to do the best on their work.

c. Quizzes. Students take individual quizzes during the quizzes that are not allowed to help each other. This makes sure that every student is responsible for knowing the linguistic material.

d. Individual. Improvement scores. Students quiz scores are compared to their past average. The students get points for their teams based on how much their scores can exceed their previous quizzes. When students make progress on their quizzes, the whole group's performance will improve.

e. Team Recognition. If students' average scores exceed a certain criterion, teams can be given certificates or other rewards.

Jigsaw II

Group members share information with each other in this technique. (a) Six or seven students begin to work in a first team created (original team). Each original team is given a topic to write about. (b) Students form the expert team, which is made up of one person from each of the original teams; look for the major points to develop the topic, which is the same for all the teams. (c) The students from different groups study and discuss their major points attentively. (d) Students form the expert team return to their original group to teach and share what they have discussed to their teammates. (e) Students take a quiz or work together developing the supporting details for each major point, including the oral presentation of the topic.

Think-Pair-Share

These can be viewed as a family of three-step technique. (a) Students work individually. (b) Students take turns to tell or describe with their partners. (c) Students discuss and report to the class. They share what they have learned with group members. Lyman, F. T. (1992)

Number Heads Together

Students work together and check whether they can explain what their group has done. (a) Students work alone to do a task assigned by the teacher. (b) Students share their answers and put their heads to try to give an answer. (d) Students with the number chosen report their answers. If a student does not complete the answer, the teacher will call on a teammate to complete the answer. Kagan, S. (1992)

The Rearrangement for the Heterogeneous Classroom
Students are divided into heterogeneous groups in class. The teacher selects two advanced students, two average and two low ones to form one group. The other groups follow the same grouping procedure. Group members rearrange their chairs and desks to face each other. Such a seating arrangement will help team members to work and strengthen group positive interdependence. Positive interdependence is encouraged by creating opportunities for resource, identity, environmental, and role interdependence in the team to have students complete the task. Ghaith, G. M. (1995)

Different roles in the team promote role interdependence (e.g., REC, EL, COF, EN, PR, REP, and TI). During the discussion, each member takes on his or her roles. The recorder (REC) writes down what members discuss. The elaborator (EL) explains and elaborates important viewpoints. Checkers of understanding (COF) make sure each member understands what is discussed. The encourager (EN) encourages group member's participation and contribution to the group. The praiser (PR) cheers members feel better about their contributions to the group. The reporter (REP) summarizes the discussion and reports to the class. The timer (TI) takes charge of group process and reminds member to complete the discussion within the time limit.

Teaching conversation
Three main exercises can be done to practice students' listening and speaking skills. There are three-level practices as follows:

In the first level, the teacher introduces the dialogue "A visit to Margaret apartment" for example, and encourages students to brainstorm words to describe the apartment. Students read the dialogue and describe Margaret's apartment by using Grammar Note. The students read the dialogue again and work in pairs to describe Margaret's apartment giving more details by using Vocabulary Note. Then the teacher chooses the role of a group to make the description and has students write a short sentence individually to describe the place and share descriptions to see which contains the most quantity of information. From this stage, each member should listen carefully in all teams, and then they can share descriptions and report it orally to the class.

In the second stage, the teacher plays a listening material, reminds the students to listen for gist and sequence, and guesses what is happening. Students listen to a woman describing her house and select the expressions used to denote existence. Playing the recording again, the teacher has students try to add more details writing two or four sentences describing the woman's house. After that, each student checks and shares the answer; the teacher has students describe the house and apartment by adopting Useful Language:

Does the house have a porch? What color are the walls? What is there in the living room? Does the apartment have a garden? Are there roses in the garden? Students need to read and repeat the useful examples in order to be familiar with doing Number Heads Together technique. The teacher asks the students questions and chooses the role which best suits the answer to the questions. Roles should exchange so that each student has opportunities to develop in a well-rounded way to help the group achieve their goal. In doing so, the students can benefit from the effects of mutual learning of equal opportunities. Slavin, R. E. (1986).

In class, the teacher brainstorms other questions for students to guess parts of the house or the apartment by means of Think-Pair-Share technique. Students can work individually, and then take turns

in the group to talk with a partner. Finally, they report to the class. In this activity, combining Think-Pair-Share and Number Heads Together techniques, individual accountability and positive interdependence are encouraged effectively. Individual students need to concentrate in the small group so that they can get points for their groups.

The third stage, in order to increase the opportunities of oral practice, the teacher plays the material, that is, the woman describing her house and has students listen carefully. The teacher has students write the sentences students have heard. Meanwhile, students can work in groups to share what they have heard in the dialogue. After discussion, group members cooperate and are ready to answer the teacher's questions and get points for the team.

Students work together in the group and make up a dialogue by using useful patterns or creating sentences to describe their own homes or apartments. The teacher draws up the team to present its dialogue as a role-play to the class. Before the presentation, each group should try their best to praise, cheer and encourage their members and use their imagination and creativity in conversation. Occasionally, the teacher can employ "Jigsaw II" to present the dialogue. The procedure of Jigsaw II promotes reading and a lot of active listening and speaking because the experts report what they have learned to their original teammates and solve the problems. However, the management of the classroom may lead to noise and a little confusing.

During each stage, the teacher can administer individual quizzes to encourage individual accountability and make sure that students understand what they have learned. After the quiz, the teacher requests students to check their own work using answer keys prepared. This provides them one more reinforcement opportunity. Finally, the students determine the teams who have had a good work together.

Teachers' role
According to Villarroel Beltrán, L. (2014), after giving the task, when the teacher makes sure students are doing the activity, solving doubts, or checking their performance into team quietly is the monitoring task. Larsen Freeman, D. (2013) states that the teacher moves from group to group, offering advice and answering questions. Cooperative learning and monitoring task are the two basic strategies to follow in order to reach the speaking skill.

For assessing speaking and see if students have reached the B1+ level, the following descriptors can be used:
Regarding spoken interaction, students can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in an area where the language is spoken. They can enter unprepared into a conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).

Regarding vocabulary, they use a wide range of simple vocabulary appropriately when talking about familiar topics.

Regarding phonological control, they can convey their message in an intelligible way in spite of a strong influence on stress, intonation and / or rhythm from other language.

Regarding grammatical accuracy, they show control of grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a learnt repertoire.

CONCLUSIONS

Learning the English language in Cuba is important to prepare students for their future professional interactions either in the country or abroad. Although the structural linguistics that, together with one or another psychological theory, has mastered the teaching of languages for decades, there have appeared others like the communicative approach and cooperative learning that permit a better development of the speaking skill in the teaching and learning process at University of Granma.

Using cooperative learning, equal opportunities for success are given to students in order to enhance students' self-confidence to motivate and encourage them to improve their oral production.

The cooperative learning techniques stated in this article may be very useful not only to develop speaking, but also to improve the rest language skills.

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