Communicative Tasks to Develop the Oral Comprehension in English

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Abstract

One of the bases of the acquisition of a foreign language is the oral comprehension, a skill that is the fundament of the oral expression and a skill that should be developed in preschool using approaches like the Natural Approach, the Communicative Approach and the Task-based Language Teaching.

Keywords: Natural Approach, Communicative Approach, Task, Preschool, Language Learning, EFL

1. Previous Analysis

In this text we are going to talk about "tasks" and "Task-Based Language Teaching" or "TBLT". But before making a pedagogical analysis, we think that is important to clarify these two terms.

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), a task is an activity which is developed by learners, in which they have to solve a problem, like buying something, searching a street, writing a letter or making a telephone call using real world communication.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a method which uses tasks as central unit of the teaching-learning process. This method has three main principles:

- *"Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning."*
- *"Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning."*
- *"Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning."*

(Richards and Rodgers, 2001: 223)

Using English is more difficult when it is a foreign language and this is the reason why TBLT put its attention in conversations because through it, learners, can practise English with vocabulary and grammar they know in a real communicative situation because all the learners have to understand the others using English.

As Richards and Rodgers (2001) point out, using real world communication is a way to motivate learners because they can practise what they know and they can do including physical activity, exploring with the language, practicing partnership and collaboration and tolerating and encouraging different styles of communication.

In TBLT there are different types of tasks. Based on Nunan (2004), there are two different types of tasks according to their purpose: Real World Task (RWT) and Pedagogical Task (PT). RWT it is non-technical and non-linguistic. It is the situations that the learner can face in the street. In contrast, PT includes the tasks we can find in an English classroom and they demand to the learners to interact in the target language using the vocabulary and the grammar they know.

Tasks have also different components. First of all are the elements we have to take into account when we design a task. Before designing a task we have to decide the content, which is the subject or topic to be taught. Then there is the material and the different activities we are going to develop through the task. But all of that must be done with the leaners in mind, being aware of their abilities, their needs and their interests.

An important component of the tasks is the goal. A goal is the general intention behind a task which links the task with the curriculum. In other words, is what the teacher might say to someone who asks why the learners are doing a particular task.

If we based on Nunan's (2004) theory, we find four different types of goal:

- Communicative goal: through this goal the aim is to obtain exchange of information, ideas, attitudes, feelings, etc., between the learners which means the establishment of interpersonal relations.
- Socio cultural goal: the aim is that learners can comprehend the patterns of their contemporary lives through the target language speech community.
- Learning how-to-learn goal: this goal gives to the learners the tools to plan their work and how to set themselves realistic objectives.
- Language and cultural awareness: to be able to comprehend how a language works and its systematic nature.

1.1. Communicative Language Teaching

"Communicative language teaching can be understood as a set of principles about the goals of language teaching, how learners learn a language, the kinds of classroom activities that facilitate learning and the roles of teachers and learners in classroom" (Richards, 2006, p.2).

Any communicative language teaching method sets at its goal the development of the communicative competence, being less important the grammatical competence. But, what does each competence imply?

According to what Richards (2004) says the communicative competence gives the learners some knowledge of how to use the language according to different situations and how to vary the use of the language according to the participants of the communicative activity.

On the other hand, the grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of the building blocks of sentences and how sentences are formed.

Taking these two definitions developed by Richards (2004), we can see that the grammatical competence by itself doesn't give the learner the tools and the abilities they need to communicate with the others. The teacher has to work with the communicative competence on mind because is that competence which capacitates the learners to communicate in the target language.

Another question to be solved is how learners learn a language. Richards (2004) stands out two different views of that. The most classical methods, or the earlier methods, focus the effort of the learner on the grammatical competence. Language learning is view as a process of mechanical habit formation. These habits may work when the learner produce sentences correctly, without making any mistake. Learners memorize dialogs which give them the opportunity to speak but without mistakes because they are reproducing what they have learnt by heart.
We want to point out two different theories about how learners learn a foreign language. One is the natural order hypothesis. In this theory, Krashen suggest that a language is acquired in a determined order which will be the same in the learning process the mother tongue.

The other hypothesis is the input hypothesis. In this statement, Krashen says that we acquire languages when we understand messages (input) in the target language. This is a little controversial because, *"in order for learners to progress from one stage of acquisition to the next, they need to comprehend language that includes a structure at the stage beyond that of their current level"* (Nunan, 2004, p.79).

What the input theory suggests is that reception precedes production so that the teacher should give the learners listening and reading opportunities before they speak and write, particularly in the early stages of acquisition.
The other view is what modern methods say. They work the communicative competence over the grammar and let the learners to have interaction among them using the language. The collaborative creation of meaning is another important point and also the negotiation of meaning as the learner and his or her interlocutor gets comprehension. The importance is focused on the production but also on the comprehension because these new methods encourage learners to pay attention to what they are listening to and try to incorporate new words or new structures to his/her language (input). Here is where we can name the Communicative Language Teaching Approaches.

Now, we know something more about Communicative Language Teaching but, how should a Communicative Language Teaching Approach be? Richards (2004) proposes a "ten core assumption of current communicative language teaching".

1. Second Language Learning is easier for learners when they are engaged in interaction and communication.
2. A task designed to be effective provides opportunities for leaners to learn more about the target language, to know how language works in use and to take part in meaningful interpersonal exchange.
3. Meaningful communication arises when learners process the content that is relevant, purposeful, interesting and engaging.
4. Most of the time the communication requires several language skills.
5. Inductive activities that underline the rules of language, language use, organization, analysis and reflection facilitate language learning.
6. Creative use of language and trial and error is involved in the gradual process of language learning. Mistakes are normal but the goal is that learners can speak as accurately and fluently as possible.
7. Each learner is different because each one has his/her own way to learn as well as each one has different needs and motivations for language learning.
8. A effective learning and effective communication strategies are involved in successful language learning
9. Teacher is a facilitator in the language classroom who create a good climate in which learners are motivated to learn the target language, giving them the opportunities to have real communication with what they have.
10. Collaboration and sharing are the main ingredients in a classroom what, at the end, is a community.

1.2 Designing, Sequencing and Grading Tasks

First of all, we have to have a clear view of what we want to achieve with the task. So the first step is to create input for learners because, as we have explained, input is the main characteristic of Task-Based Language Teaching.

Then it is necessary to think about the objectives, the competences and the goals you want to develop with the task. The objectives could be made as a list of grammatical items (Nunan, 2004). Finally, we put all these elements under a topic which will help us to give sense to a group of tasks so that they will be a unit of tasks instead of a group of individual and unconnected tasks.

As Nunan (2004) says, a common goal of all tasks is to create a real communicative situation so that most of the tasks have to be pedagogical tasks, because they have a pedagogical intention, but at the same time they have to prepare the learners to the real world tasks which are those they can do outside the classroom and they haven't got a pedagogical intention

Another important point is the material. To do some of the tasks we will need pedagogical material which is all the material which has been created with a pedagogical purpose. But, at the end, learners will face a real world, with real communication and with material without a pedagogical purpose. So that, as Richards and Rodgers (2001) point out, it is also important to use realia. In this way, we will create tasks more realistic because learners will use materials they will find outside the classroom. Some examples of realia could be resources from newspapers, television, radio programs or Internet.

When we have designed the task, the next step comes: sequencing the task. The most common way of grading any activity in any approach is doing first the easiest activities or tasks and with the time do the most difficult activities or tasks. But here, in the Task-Based Language Teaching we will chain all tasks according to their complexity, from easiest to most difficult, and also according to the input, the learners and activity factors and the topic, following a logical learning pathway (Nunan, 2001).

But at the time of grading tasks we don't have to take into account just the difficulty of the task because an important element of the teaching process is the learner. So that we will take into account different learners' factors (Nunan, 2004):

- Their confidence.
- Their motivation.
- Prior learning experience.
- Learning pace.
- Observed ability in language skills.

- Cultural knowledge/awareness.
- Linguistic knowledge.

After grading, we will sequence all the tasks which we have previously packed in tasks units. This sequence is along a week, a month, a term or a scholar year, depending on the amount of the task units, their duration etc.

But it is necessary to sequence all tasks in a normal day. As we have seen in Ellis (2006), Nunan (2001), Nunan (2004) and Richards and Rodgers (2001), the normal way is to follow three phases:

1. Pre-task activities.
2. During task activities.
3. Post-task activities.

Now, we are going to explain each phase.

In the pre-task activities our intention is *"to prepare students to perform the task in ways that will promote acquisition"* (Ellis, 2006, pp. 20-21). With that, students will be introduced on the topic of the task and the teacher can give them an overview of the task, the grammar which is involved on the task, etc. The teacher can also give them some strategies to face the task. But at the end, what the teacher tries to get is to motivate learners before doing the task.

Here, in the pre-task activities we can do what Skehan (1996) says. We can follow the four alternatives he gives us which are:

- Supporting learners in performing a task similar to the task they will do in the "during tasks activities".
- Ask students to observe a model of how to perform the task.
- Engaging learners in –non-tasks activities designed to prepare them to perform the task.
- Strategic planning of the main task performance.

Then, in the during task activities, the teacher and the learners perform the task doing all the things that the teacher has designed previously. In the different activities, the teacher could set a time limit to do the task and he/she could introduce some surprising elements. (Ellis, 2006).

Finally and according to Ellis (2006) in the post-task activities there are some options. One option is to repeat the task under the same conditions of under different conditions than the first time. This is a way to improve production of learners because their speeches complexity increases and they become more fluent.

Another thing to do is to ask them how they did the task so that they comment their mistakes, how they feel speaking in another language, listening to other people with different level on that foreign language, etc. After that, the teacher could make a mistake review.

2. Proposal of Educative Intervention

Now, we are going to explain our personal proposal of educative intervention, but before, we present a brief theoretical information about what we had taken into account to make our personal proposal of educative intervention more appropriate for preschool.

2.1 The Pedagogic Principles

- Globalization: from an operative core of work the task has to present different links with other aspects of the education program so that children can work different facets at the same time.
- Autonomy: through tasks the teacher has to create situations which have to be solved by a child in an independent way, helping to develop the self-confident at the same time the child learns.
- Game: this is the essential pillar over preschool teaching is based on. Through games, children develop different facets, like the development of the different motor abilities, a mental development, socialization and the affective aspects. In addition, through games, children learn enjoying.
- Socialization: teacher has to give children the different tools to integrate in so that a child can notice his/her group membership adapting his/her behaviour to the group. All these will help in the learning process as a child learns from another child.
- Individualization: each task has to take into account the differences among children so that it can cover all the motivation and can be adapted to the entire learning pace.

As the tasks we propose try to develop the oral comprehension, we have taken into account what the Spanish preschool program says:

"To comprehend and to respond, in a verbal and a non-verbal way, to oral productions in foreign language which are related to daily tasks and with abundant visual support".

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The aims we want that children get to acquire the oral comprehension are:

- To listening to and to understand verbal messages in various interactions, using the information provided to perform specific tasks related to their experience.
- To recognize and to use basic strategies of communication (verbal and nonverbal) and social rules governing participation in tasks requiring information exchanges.
- To identify phonetic aspects of rhythm, stress and intonation, and linguistic structures and lexical aspects of the target language and use them as building blocks of communication
- To understand and to respond to, in a verbal or a non-verbal way, oral production in a foreign language, common tasks associated with classroom and with plenty of visual support.

2.2 Aims

- Identification of lexical and worked previously own foreign language elementary structures.
- Identification and assessment of the foreign language as a tool of communication.
- Importance of language as a tool of communication.
- Foreign language as a way to know other cultures and other people.

2.3 Competences

- Ability to listen to and understand spoken messages in an appropriate range of communicative situations (topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life).
- Ability to answer to a spoken message using verbal or non-verbal communication.
- Awareness of various types of verbal interaction (e.g. face-to-face, phone conversations, etc.).
- Sensitivity to cultural differences and resistance to stereotyping.

2.4 Methodology at Class

All the tasks we are going to develop will be done under a globalization process through which children acquire all as a unit, as a whole and not as a different aspects unconnected among them so that, despite our main purpose is to develop the oral comprehension in a foreign language, we are going to work that through tasks that imply the development of other skills and contents own educational program contents.

Another important aspect in our methodology is the meaningful learning. Applying this type of learning, children learn taking into account what they know, all they had acquire previously and taking it as a basis, they build new knowledge. Using this learning, we ensure that children build their knowledge in a non-arbitrary way.

As we want to develop the oral comprehension in a foreign language, we have to work taking into account the different ways of learning that each child has as well as the interests and motivations that they have. This is made in an individualization process through which we want that children enjoy learning.

But, as we live in a society, they need to work in groups, learning different social rules that they have to apply when they are at class, so that the cooperative work will be present at our teaching process. We also want to incorporate the peer learning so that they can notice that the teacher is not the only person they can learn from, but they can learn from their mates in any situation.

All these methodology will be applied with a principal aim which is to develop the oral comprehension in a foreign language. So that we will use the Communicative Approach in a way that we will have an interaction with children using the target language as the normal language at class in a way they can notice how useful is the target language and in a way they can see the communicative aspects of a language as well as the different ways of communicate, using the oral communication and/or nonverbal communication.

Another approach we will use is the Natural Approach, using the input as the principal way that children acquire new words, structures, phonetic sounds, etc., in the target language. We will use this approach in order to respect the natural acquisition of a language, trying that children acquire the foreign language as the acquired their mother tongue.

Finally, we use the Task-based Language Teaching as we will work in class through tasks, motivating the interaction between children and putting attention on the process rather than the result.

2.5 Educational Resources

- Storytelling: maybe this is one of the most useful activities in preschool. It allows us to create communication because the teacher tells the story but, at the same time, he/she can interact with children. We have to be very clear telling the story because in this moment, children create and image of the story in their mind. To help them, we can use drawings of the story or of the main characters of the story or puppets, but it is also good just tell the story so that if they make a comprehensive listening, they will be able to create the image of the story in their mind.

During the storytelling, we have to be sure that children understand the story. To check that, we will make some questions to children that requires their active participation. Finally, when we have finished the story, we will make more questions, or we ask to some children to tell they the story or to make a dramatization of it.

We will take other things into account when we tell a story. We will make a circle with al children sitting down on a carpet or on the floor. We will control de light too, adjusting the amount of light that get into the class so that children will be comfortable and they will put all their attention on the story.

- Dramatizations: we can create different types of situations where use the target language. We can make a dramatization about a story that the teacher has told or about a story that children know or a dramatization about a story created by all children. We can also make a role playing, where once children have their role, they can create a situation in which they are free to create the story they want.

As we want to develop de oral comprehension on children, they won't learn what they have to say after reading it, but they will learn or reproduce the oral message after listening to the teacher.

The dramatization could be done in class, with some children making it and the other children listening to them and later changing the role and those who was listening, then make the dramatization and those who made the dramatization are who now listen to their mates. The dramatization could also be done by the oldest children of preschool while the spectators are the youngest children on preschool, so that we promote the peer learning.

- Songs and rhymes: through songs and rhymes children can improve their oral skills. The oral comprehension is improved listening to the teacher when he/she sing a song o say a rhyme and children can also improve their oral expression when they repeat the song or the rhyme.

Songs and rhymes are a good tool to teach and to learn a foreign language because they have a lot of repetitions so that children can understand new words, new grammatical structures and new phonetics easier. The rhythm of the song is other things that help children to acquire new aspects of the foreign language.

- Games: most of the games imply communication and interaction among the teacher and children and among children. Games will be explained in a way that the rules will be clear to children in order they respect them.

Games are important in the foreign language learning because they learn in a funny way so that the acquisition of new aspects of the foreign language should be acquired easier.

3. Conclusion

We want to conclude that the acquisition of the oral comprehension is the first step in the process of acquisition of a foreign language because, as the Natural Approach says, after the oral comprehension goes the oral expression, which have to be the main goal of the process.

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