

MESTRADO EM ENSINO DE INGLÊS NO 1º CICLO DO ENSINO BÁSICO

***Developing Spoken Interaction through
Information Gap Activities in the Primary
EFL Classroom***

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Relatório realizado no âmbito do Mestrado em Ensino de Inglês no 1º Ciclo do Ensino Básico,
orientada pela Professora Doutora Maria Ellison de Matos
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Dedicated to all those who gave me support.

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Resumo

Embora seja conhecido que a interação oral é uma estratégia importante para desenvolver a língua estrangeira das crianças, continuar a ser um desafio para os professoras implementá-la no 1º ciclo. O interesse pelo estudo deste tópico surgiu pela falta de atividades em pares observadas na sala de aula do 1º ciclo durante a minha prática de estágio. Este projeto de pesquisa tem como objetivo encontrar evidências da influência das atividades de lacuna de informação no desenvolvimento da interação oral dos alunos e demonstrar que as limitações para implementar esta estratégia podem ser superadas. O método escolhido foi um projeto de ação-investigação em pequena escala. Este estudo foi realizado em uma escola pública em Portugal e envolveu um grupo de vinte alunos da turma do quarto ano, que tiveram aula de inglês duas vezes por semana com duração de uma hora cada. Foram coletados dados de diários reflexivos registrados por mim durante as aulas, questionários, gravações de áudios dos alunos e grades de observação, o que possibilitou demonstrar que as crianças são capazes de se comunicar entre si na língua estrangeira por meio de atividades de lacuna de informação. Durante a interação oral dos alunos, ficou evidente a partir das gravações de áudio e das grades de observação que os alunos utilizaram mais o idioma estrangeiro do que sua língua materna para trocar informações e conseguiram utilizar a língua alvo de forma mais autônoma para realizar a tarefa. Além disso, os resultados obtidos nos questionários demonstraram que os estudantes preferiam atividades em pares em comparação com a interação com o grupo todo. De acordo com este estudo, colocar alunos em pares para realizar este tipo de tarefa oferece aos aprendizes oportunidades para aprimorar sua produção oral. Logo, os professores devem considerar aplicá-la na sala de aula do 1º ciclo de inglês como língua estrangeira.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de inglês a crianças, atividades de lacuna de informação, interação oral, língua materna

Abstract

Although it is known that oral interaction is important to develop young learners' foreign language, it continues to be an issue for teachers to implement in the primary classroom. This topic of interest arose due to the lack of pair work activities observed in the young learners' classroom during my teaching practicum. The present research project attempts to find evidence of the influence of information gap activities in developing learners' spoken interaction and show that the limitations for implementing this strategy can be overcome. The method chosen was a small-scale action research project. This study was conducted at a public school in Portugal and involved a group of twenty students in the fourth-year class who had two-weekly one hour of English lessons. Data were gathered from reflective journals registered by me during lessons, questionnaires, students' audio recordings and observation grids which made it possible to demonstrate that young learners are capable of communicating with each other in the foreign language through information gap activities. During learners' spoken interaction, it was evident from the audio-recordings and observation grids that students used the foreign language more than their mother tongue to exchange information and were able to use the target language more autonomously to accomplish the task. In addition, results obtained from the questionnaires demonstrated that students had a preference for pair work activities compared to whole group interaction. Regarding this study, pairing students to perform this type of task provides learners with opportunities to enhance their spoken interaction. Therefore, teachers should consider applying this in the English foreign language primary classroom.

Key-words: Teaching English to children, information gap activities, oral interaction, mother-tongue.

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

IPP I- Iniciação à Prática Profissional I

IPP II- Iniciação à Prática Profissional II

EFL- English as a Foreign Language

L1- First Language

L2- Foreign Language

CERF- Common European Reference Framework

CLT – Communicative Language Teaching

Introduction

Over the years, we have been experiencing a more globalized world in which the English language continues to be a crucial choice for learners, especially in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education. The teaching of the foreign language has undergone several transformations throughout the years due to the advent of new methodologies having a great influence on how teaching is being developed in the classroom. From the old traditional way of learning and teaching to a more active approach, more student-centred, able to meet learners' needs. Although the main objective of foreign language teachers in the primary classroom is to develop the four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), communicative tasks have gained more importance among young learners. As Harmer mentioned (2001), the communicative approach improves students' ability to communicate in realistic situations. When students are faced with meaningful tasks, they tend to become more interested and motivated. Therefore, they are more encouraged to speak using the target language. According to official Portuguese documents for teaching English as a foreign language, such as *Aprendizagens Essenciais*, the emphasis is on spoken production and interaction (Direção Geral da Educação, 2018). Despite having these documents as guides, traditional methods are still being used in the primary classrooms, having learners produce language through drills or memorized presentations as speaking activities.

The teaching methodology chosen by teachers in the primary classrooms has a great influence on the development of the learning process. If the focus of the lesson is mainly on grammar rules, vocabulary memorization and repetitions, there is a chance of having demotivated young learners. On the other hand, if the objective of the learning is to understand and to be understood without worrying about the structure or form while speaking, learners will be more engaged and confident to participate.

An effective way to engage students and make them participate more actively is to provide opportunities for them to show what they know in authentic social contexts. Peer interaction is a way to promote oral practise. When learners interact with each other, they become the centre and have active roles, "allowing them to experiment with language" (Moon, 2000, p.58). For this reason, pair work is considered beneficial for young learners' oral practise in the classroom, since it gives students a chance to learn with each other through mutual support. While teachers act as guides by monitoring learners' interaction by correcting,

motivating and praising, students have the opportunity to practise the target language more freely without worrying about making mistakes. That means that, the teacher no longer controls the actions in the classroom, or asks lots of questions for pupils to answer. This student-centred approach may be challenging as teachers are accustomed to being the centre of the learning process similar to the way they were taught themselves (Oleson & Hora, 2014). This does not mean that the whole lesson should be teacher centred. “Teachers may try to balance these more teaching-centred activities with ones which are more learning-centred or interactional” (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2002, p. 41). For this reason, I chose to develop learners’ oral interaction through information gap activities, since learners are only exposed a teacher centred approach in their lessons and adopt a more passive role. As stated by Ur (1996), activities which are based on the information gap principles make learners participate actively in the learning process.

In this study, my intention was to increase learners’ spoken interaction through information-gap activities. In other words, make students produce longer utterances when speaking with their peers in the foreign language instead of using only individual words and, also make them use more L2 than L1 during their English lessons.

This Action Research Project is divided into three chapters. The first chapter starts with the school context, the students’ profile and the observation process which explains how the issue was identified. Chapter 2 addresses the theoretical framework including significant literature on oral interaction in the English as a foreign language classroom, highlighting its strengths and constraints. The following section includes the definition of information-gap activities, what factors influence their success regarding learners’ oral skills and the benefits provided by using this technique for students in the primary English as a foreign language classroom. In chapter 3, the research design is presented which includes the methodologies adopted and the data-gathering tools. This is followed by the description of the first cycle of the Action Research and the presentation, analysis, interpretation, and a final discussion of the results. The conclusion mentions limitations in relation to this study and suggestions for future research.

Chapter I – Justification for action

The present study took place during the second semester of the Master's in Teaching English in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education within Iniciação à Prática Profissional I (IPP1) of the school year 2022/2023, and in the 1st semester of Iniciação à Prática Profissional II (IPP2) of the school year 2023/2024 within the scope of the English Teaching in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education in a public school located in the metropolitan area of Porto. Although the observation and teaching practises occurred in the 3rd and 4th year groups, the investigation focused on the 4th year. The following chapter begins by making reference to the school context in which this investigation was carried out, including information about the School Cluster, as well as its facilities, the curriculum and the learners' profile. This information is followed by the identification of the problem, the intervention area and action research questions.

1. School Context

1.1 – Carolina Michaelis School Cluster

Bom Pastor Primary School became part of the Carolina Michaelis School Cluster in the year 2013/2014 in Ermesinde, Porto. Besides this school, there are other schools which are also part of this cluster. These are: Constituição Primary School, Bom Pastor Primary School, Irene Lisboa Primary School and Carolina Michaelis Secondary School. This school cluster covers the areas of Paranhos and Cedofeita.

When Carolina Michaelis School Cluster was founded, it was exclusively for girls. After the Portuguese Revolution, in 1974, it became a mixed school. In 2013, Carolina Michaelis became part of a group of schools called Carolina Michaelis School Cluster. It is situated in an urban area quite near the city centre.

According to the School Cluster's Educational Project (2022-2025), the school's mission is to promote students' development in all areas of education and their awareness towards the importance of being part of the community. Furthermore, it values the inclusion of students with special needs and respect for the cultural diversity. The Project also encourages the involvement of families in the children's educational process and promotes training courses for teachers which secures the efficiency and quality of the teaching. There

are additional complementary projects and activities to promote humanistic, cultural and environmental values. The Educational Project (2022-2025) is a document which serves as a reference to guide and support the activities to be developed. It is considered everyone's responsibility, especially teachers to understand the intentions of this Project, implement and monitor its implementation systematically. This justifies the motto of the school which is "Onde todos contam".

1.2 – Bom Pastor Primary School: Facilities

Bom Pastor is the school where the observation of classes occurred and where my teaching practices took place. It was inaugurated in 1973 and completely renovated in 2012. The school is located in a calm and quiet neighbourhood. It has 125 students who are distributed across the following year groups: two pre-school classes; two first years; two second years; two third years and 1 fourth year. It is a two-story-building with a large area outside with a playground and a garden. On the first floor there is a cafeteria, pre-school classrooms and a library. The other classes and the teachers' room are situated on the second floor. All the classrooms are spacious with their desks organized in rows of four with students seated in pairs, allowing plenty of room for teachers and students to move freely around the classroom. Sometimes the desks are rearranged by some teachers in a horseshoe layout. Although there is plenty of storage space in the classroom, students' books from other subjects are kept piled up on their desks. There are always some English materials displayed on the walls, such as the annual calendar in English and posters or drawing done by students. All the classrooms have a computer with wi-fi connection, a blackboard, a projector, a box of chalks and speakers.

1.3 - Curriculum

In Bom Pastor Primary School, the curriculum is based on the official documents provided by the Ministry of Education across all subjects, such as Mathematics, Portuguese, Social Studies, Physical, Artistic and Motor Expression, Citizenship Education and Physical Education. English became obligatory in Years 3 and 4, through the Decree-Law n°176/2004. These lessons are one hour in duration and take place twice a week. They are taught by a teacher who is specialized in English language teaching from the Group 120. These teachers

have the responsibility of elaborating their plan of work and updating their teaching materials to better suit students' needs.

Bom Pastor Primary School offers extracurricular activities for students who are interested in attending them and take place after the regular school hour. These include: *Atividade Lúdica; Apoio ao Estudo; Atividade Física e Desportiva*. Furthermore, Portuguese lessons for speakers of other languages are offered as well.

1.4 - Learners' Profile

The 4th year class consisted of 20 students, 8 boys and 12 girls, and their ages varied between nine and ten. The majority of the students were Portuguese and one was Brazilian. One of the students from this group is visually impaired. For this reason, there is specialized equipment situated on his desk which amplifies the pages of his book, but he refuses to use it. Teachers believe he feels different from his colleagues. This was the students second year having curricular English lessons. The English language coursebook used is Easy Peasy 4, which follows Easy Peasy 3 used in the previous year.

The action research was designed for this class when they were in Year 3, during the second semester of 2022/2023 and its development occurred when learners were in Year 4, the first semester of 2023/2024. For this reason, my presence in the classroom was not a surprise for learners since they had seen me observing some lessons. However, students went through an important change in the beginning of the year, which was their English teacher being allocated to another school and they were faced with a different person in the classroom. Although, these changes took place, students reacted well to their new English language teacher, since her approach to language teaching was similar to the previous teacher.

Since IPP I, it was possible to observe that students in this class revealed considerable interest in learning English and had a good relationship with their peers, teachers and school staff. There were no serious behaviour issues, only a few distractions and, sometimes, students were not able to control their enthusiasm in relation to respecting each other's turn, affecting the flow of the lesson. However, when asked, they were able to adjust their behaviour and posture. With regards to the English language, students' average marks were between Good and Very Good. They are an homogeneous group which showed engagement towards the content presented in the English lessons. The topics developed in the lessons were part of the

Aprendizagens Essenciais de Inglês do 4º ano (Direção-Geral da Educação, 2018), which is the official document that establishes aims for each language skill (listening, reading, writing, and speaking). The English classes observed were reliant on the English coursebook with the repetition of vocabulary and written activities. The exercises which required interaction between students were not done.

2. Observation Process and intervention area

During the first months of IPP1 (2022/2023), students from the Master's in Teaching English in the 1st Cycle of Basic Education were asked to observe the 3rd and 4th year groups. Notes were taken regarding learners' behaviour, classroom management, teacher roles, routines, strategies adopted, use of L2 and possible areas which needed intervention. This observation process was essential to identify an area in need of improvement which would be the focus of this action research project. Opportunities for practising the language orally through peer interaction was evident during my observation of the young learners' classroom.

2.1. Analysis and conclusion of lessons observed

Choosing an area of intervention was not an easy task since various aspects of the teaching practice are considered important. However, during IPP1, there was one in particular that caught my attention and which I consider fundamental to be part of any teaching environment and could be developed by teachers from other subjects as well.

After having observed the 3rd and the 4th year classes, I noticed that the teacher demonstrated a good rapport with students, making the learning environment more enjoyable and less stressful. As stated by Willis (1996), communication can be effective if learners are provided with a non-threatening environment. Learners were also interested and motivated about learning the foreign language. Regarding the teaching of English, a more teacher centred approach was adopted and most of the oral interactive activities observed during the lessons occurred between students and the teacher. Activities which involved speaking in class were usually done by repetition of the structure or the target vocabulary taught of a specific unit. Learners did not have much space to use the language meaningfully. According to Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002) listening and repeating new vocabulary is not enough to engage learners in using the target language. This may be the reason why some students only participated when

they were called to do so. As they do not have enough oral practice, they may feel insecure or afraid of making mistakes in front of other peers. Besides not having enough interactive oral practice, they were also not exposed to different patterns of interaction, such as pair work or group work. For this reason, during the teaching practice, when doing the pair work activities, it was necessary to explain the basic instructions, giving models since learners had not been exposed to this type of learning strategy. In addition, it was also perceived that there was unnecessary use of the L1 by the teacher in some instances, leading some learners to have difficulties to understand basic classroom instruction and some listening activities.

During the observation process, information was collected through notes taken in the teacher's diary. Learners' performances were written down while participating in different activities. It was noticeable how learners demonstrated a positive attitude towards the English language and how the teacher tried to create a comfortable and relaxing atmosphere. I was also able to perceive that students were participative and engaged in the lessons, but there were a few of them who only participated when called on, so if they were not requested to participate, they would not speak at all or they would only use their mother tongue with their colleagues.

The observed lessons, mainly, followed the sequence of the coursebook in which my mentor would ask learners questions about specific vocabulary from a unit and students would usually reply using individual words instead of complete utterances. Another opportunity for oral practice arose at the end of a unit when learners memorized specific content to be presented in front of the whole class. This was another situation which caught my attention. During the note taking of the lesson in which students had to give a presentation in front of the entire group, it was noticeable how nervous and anxious pupils felt. This feeling is common among young learners as they fear making mistakes in front of their peers. Pupils become more relaxed when they are not being heard by the entire class and even the "reticent students become vocal participants" (Brown, 2001, p. 178). Hence, this situation could be avoided by developing activities which promoted spoken interaction among smaller groups or pairs. These oral activities mentioned previously were mainly the strategies adopted during my observations. There were no varied patterns of interactions. It was mainly between teacher-student.

Another point to consider, which I noticed during the lessons I observed, is in relation to the textbook adopted. All units of the book lack diverse tasks that promote interaction. The exercises which were usually found in some units were role-plays and show and tell. However,

these oral practises were done as a form of assessment of students' oral production. The focus of the lessons I observed was mainly on activities which provided learners with listening and repeating tasks, prompting grammatical structures and memorizing content. This is an issue to be considered since teachers tend to follow the sequence of activities found in the book. Unfortunately, this approach restricts learners from using the language previously learnt within a meaningful context.

During the note taking of the lessons, another aspect which caught my attention was learner's attitudes while the teacher requested responses from specific students. While this activity took place, a group of students would get bored and distracted since they had to wait a long time for their turn. They would, eventually, start using L1 with their peers, causing the noise level in the room to rise. Consequently, there would be a break in the flow of the lesson as the teacher had to call learners' attention. This situation could be avoided if this oral activity was done with all the students at the same time through pair work. As pair work is considered in this study, activities done in such a way allow students to speak for more time in the foreign language (Nunan, 2003).

According to the analysis done, it is clear that there were some issues regarding the teaching methodology adopted, since different strategies and techniques were not used with learners. There were no opportunities for students to have an active role in their learning process, which could be fostered by promoting pair work activities. Moreover, pupils should also have more opportunities to practise the foreign language in a more meaningful way, rather than through repetition or memorization. As stated by Harmer (2001), communicative activities should aim for content rather than language form. When the focus is on meaning learners are able to use language effectively in real-life situations rather than being concerned about memorizing vocabulary lists or grammar rules. The focus on meaningful interaction can lead students into having more enjoyable experiences when learning a foreign language.

2.2. Research question

Considering that students spoke English in the classroom mainly to repeat a structure taught or reply to the teacher when requested, they did not have enough opportunities to speak more freely or interact with each other. Therefore, they would benefit more from these oral activities if they were exposed to different types of interactions. The main objective of this

research project was to help learners develop their spoken interaction through information gap activities. Consequently, they would be able to produce longer utterances when speaking to each other, decreasing the amount of L1 use and using the language in a more natural manner. For these reasons, I considered the following question:

-What is the potential of information gap activities as a means to develop learners' oral skills?

I also thought it would be essential to make learners aware of the benefits of doing pair work activities, since they were not accustomed to this strategy. As stated by Hawkey (2006), learners are more motivated to use L2 when doing pair work tasks. It is fundamental to have students reflect about the use of L1 and L2 during the interaction in order to make them more engaged and involved in their learning process. The use of a questionnaire after doing information gap activities was intended to make students realise whether their peers can help them speak better English or not while interacting with each other. As highlighted by Richards and Lockhart (2007), questionnaires are a means of gathering information about students' beliefs, motivation, preferences, and attitudes, which can result in a more effective and efficient language learning and teaching. For this reason, I added another question:

-What are students' perceptions of their spoken interaction regarding information gap activities?

Chapter II – Theoretical Framework

Literature review

The literature review of this research project has the objective of highlighting the importance of oral interactions (pair work) to facilitate learners' English language learning and develop their oral skills, especially through information gap activities. The first section of this chapter clarifies the concept of spoken interaction in foreign language learning and illustrates the relevance of exposing learners to oral interaction activities to promote the development of their speaking skills. The second section focuses on communicative tasks as a means to develop spoken interaction among students and explores the use of information gap activities in the English language class highlighting their strengths and constraints.

2.1. Spoken interaction in the primary classroom

Developing speaking skills is an essential factor when learning a language, but it is not an easy task to achieve. Nunan (2001) comments that learners find speaking a critical skill when learning a foreign language and their success is measured in relation to their accomplishment in oral communication. A variety of different teaching strategies and techniques are required for its success in the classroom. Learners' main goal is to have the ability to understand the spoken language and to reply in the target language in a meaningful way. In other words, verbal interaction is not only a matter of using meaningful utterances, but also interpreting others' oral utterances. For these reasons, nowadays, it is necessary to practise oral skills using interaction activities between students as it is considered to play an essential role in the learning process. There have been some changes in the paradigm of foreign language learning which are important to mention in this study, such as learner autonomy, collaborative learning, focus on meaning and alternative assessment. Through oral interaction students can gain confidence by participating in meaningful conversations more freely with their pairs. Moreover, the assessment is more authentic since teacher can observe students' production in a more authentic context. Therefore, pair work activities can be considered as a way to develop students' language learning (Philip, Adams & Iwashita, 2014).

The term oral interaction in foreign language classroom settings applies to communicative exchanges, varying from teacher/student discussions to student/student activities. All these exchanges are important in any language learning environment. When learners interact with each other, there is transfer of views, emotions, and concepts. According to Ellis (2005), proficiency development and successful learning of the foreign language depends on the existence of opportunities for students to produce the language. For this to happen, teachers need to provide learners with various types of tasks such as information gap activities in which one student has information and the other lacks. Another important aspect of oral interaction is the need to focus on meaning. Cameron (2005) asserts that one of the principles of oral interaction is that the meaning must come first. Pupils are able to learn much more when they experiment with the language by using it repeatedly and meaningfully than by memorizing rules which do not have any meaning to them and that they will certainly forget about in the future. Cameron also argues that for pupils to be able to develop speaking skills and engage in oral interaction, they need to “participate in discourse and build up knowledge and skill of participation” (2005, p. 36). The official document in the Portuguese national context, *Perfil dos Alunos à Saída da Escolaridade Obrigatória* (Direção-Geral da Educação, 2017), emphasizes the importance of prioritizing oral interaction and developing oral skills in this teaching cycle. Accordingly, another important document is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2018) which highlights how “spoken interaction is considered to be the origin of language” (p. 81).

The Portuguese Ministry of Education considers communication as being an important tool in learning a foreign language. The CEFR for young learners (2018) expects that learners with a pre-A1/A1 level of English produce short utterances about themselves, giving basic personal information. The CEFR adapted descriptor for young learners (2018) expect them to ask and answer questions using short expressions and gestures to reinforce meaning. Therefore, peer interaction provides learners with the opportunity to engage with the language in a meaningful manner. Among the four skills, speaking is considered to be the most important to be developed with young learners in the young learners’ classroom, according to official documents. When speaking, children have the opportunity to experience real-life communication, engage in peer interaction, develop their fluency and express themselves with more confidence.

2.1.1. Developing speaking skills in young learners

In the beginning of the learning process, young learners' utterances in the foreign language is constituted of individual words to answer the teachers' questions or useful classroom language expressions. After the introduction of a topic, various strategies are adopted to consolidate the content so learners can feel confident to use them adequately. When the teacher notices that students have acquired the language needed, the learning advances and students' participation changes from controlled practise to freer and more spontaneous use of the L2. This way, pupils' speaking skills will gradually increase. According to Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002), it takes more than listening and repeating new vocabulary to be able to communicate in the target language. For this reason, it is fundamental to use a diverse range of activities, different patterns of interaction and promote opportunities for learners to speak in the classroom. By being exposed to a diverse range of tasks, learners will feel more motivated to participate since each child has a different learning style. When teachers know whether students are auditory, visual, tactile or kinaesthetic, they can adapt a learning content according to learners' preferences. Firstly, it is necessary to repeat vocabulary and structures, then the language use becomes less controlled, and learners are capable of using it more effectively. It is not a simple process but if it is practised frequently it can facilitate the development of the foreign language learning.

Student's fluency is another important component which can arise from language use and practice (Oliver & Philip, 2014). As learning progresses, the language used by students become more internalised and requires less effort. As stated by Segalowitz, cited in Oliver and Philip (2014), "the benefit of practice is that as learners gain more skill, they require less effort to produce language and become more fluent" (p. 33). These authors also mention that as learners try to speak and make themselves understood, eventually they will use the language adequately, developing all aspects of oral skills. In the beginning, the learner needs to make an effort when using the target language. However, with meaningful interaction, students develop new skills, greater fluency, and automaticity in the foreign language.

The teaching approach that continues to influence language teachers is the Communicative Language Teaching, which focuses on meaning. When learners interact with each other it can help make the new language meaningful. However, there are also other elements that are necessary for second language acquisition, such as producing the target language. When learners produce output, they become aware of their own production as well

as what is required in the target language. Therefore, students become aware of the language use when they speak and interact with others (Oliver & Philip, 2014). Language acquisition is supported when students notice the connection between form and meaning.

2.2. Communicative tasks

The Communicative Language Teaching approach has become popular in language classrooms with the focus on speaking and listening. Its main aim is to have learners understand what is being transmitted and provide a meaningful reply in the target language. In this approach, young learners are engaged in activities such as drawing, acting out, listening, talking, reading, or writing based on contextualized and meaningful tasks using the language previously presented. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), in communicative language teaching, students are encouraged to communicate using the taught language. There has been a paradigm shift in learning, from memorizing vocabulary and drilling grammatical structures to encouraging interaction through pair work activities. In CLT, less attention is given to the presentation and discussion of grammatical rules as was done in the past decades (Brown, 2001). The traditional teaching method was replaced by a more learner centred approach, where teachers are encouraged to develop students' critical, creative, collaborative and communicative skills. More spontaneity is present in communicative classrooms, in other words, students are encouraged to deal with more authentic situations under the guidance of the teacher. There is a concern with how to facilitate lifelong language learning among young learners, and not just with a particular task done in the classroom.

Tasks which require learners to communicate orally are essential in learning a language, so the communicative approach should be taken into account as its aim is to communicate and interact through the language. These tasks should be meaningful in order to provide learners' with a real need for interaction. According to Cameron (2005), a task needs to focus on meaning and it must have a purpose of being done. Tasks also "encourage children to personalize language, pursue their interests and use language in an independent and hopefully creative way" (Brewster, Ellis, Girard, 2002, p. 50). Among some definitions of task, one of them is described by Ellis:

A task is a workplan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the

correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and to make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of a task may predispose them to choose particular forms.

(Ellis, 2003, p.16)

When students are put together to interact with one another, in pairs, which is the focus of this research project, they are given the chance to build on their speaking skills. Brown (2001) states that when learners work in pairs, they improve their communicative abilities. In information gap tasks, students have a reason to communicate with each other, and they can be used to practise more or less specific aspects of language. Harmer (1991, p.95) states that information gap activities “are drills, but because they have a slightly communicative element built into them they are more involving and motivating than a lot of question and answer practise”.

The document which is currently used to guide English language teachers in the Portuguese context is called *Aprendizagens Essenciais de Inglês para o 4º ano* (Direção Geral da Educação, 2018), which draws on other documents, such as *Metas Curriculares* (Bravo, et al., 2015) and the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (2001). They all mention the importance of speaking in the foreign language classroom. With regards to the interactions, students should be able to communicate with their teacher or colleagues in pairs or groups, ask simple questions and reply using content learnt in the lessons.

In order to develop effective speaking activities, especially in pairs, it is fundamental that the aim of the task is clear and engaging for young learners. So, for this reason, teachers should take risks and try doing more pair work activities in which pupils can have more chances of practising their oral skills, instead of only applying this type of strategy at the end of each semester with an oral presentation which is, basically, to present memorized structures or read to the whole group of students and be assessed. Unfortunately, many coursebooks continue to follow the same model, with exercises which involve practising a specific structure or a set of lexis, lacking activities which promote oral interaction. This leads some teachers, who use the coursebook as their guide, to leave out the activities that promote interaction among learners. These lessons become teacher-centred, with learners having a passive role. This is true of the coursebook used by the students where I did my research project. Usually, freer oral activities were done at the end of each unit in which students had to present content related to a specific

topic. There were no pair or group work activities. It is worth mentioning that teachers should be aware of the existence of different patterns of communication since this affects the dynamics of the classroom. Some of them are teacher-centred while others are student-centred. There should be a balance between these patterns when planning lessons, and it is the teachers' attitudes that will set the context for successful learning to take place.

When choosing to use a student-centred approach, teachers must give learners clear instructions in relation to their attitudes and behaviour during the interaction, otherwise the classroom may become disorganized and noisy. Allowing learners to work more autonomously can result in lack of control if there is no appropriate monitoring of learners' interaction. This approach can be challenging, especially for young learners as they require clear instructions and guidance in order to perform the selected task. In addition, pupils may not be mature enough to guide their own learning when interacting with each other. Harmer (1991) states that the organization of the activities and the instructions given by the teachers are fundamental to help students perform the task in a satisfactory manner. He also notes that the language teacher is a facilitator, a resource and a promoter for pupils when they are involved in communicative tasks (2001). When participating in the tasks, Harmer (2005, p. 94) states that "there is nothing wrong with teachers getting involved, of course, provided they don't start to dominate".

From what was mentioned above, teachers have an essential role to play in assisting language learners. Therefore, when they provide students with activities which promote interaction between pairs, learning is facilitated. When engaging in peer interaction, there is a real need to communicate by conveying and requesting information, which can be seen in activities provided through information gap activities.

2.2.1. Information-Gap Activities

The Information Gap activity is one of the various techniques from the communicative approach and is considered to be a beneficial strategy when teachers want to engage their learners in interaction in their classrooms. Some researchers argue that information gap tasks are challenging and unpredictable. They encourage learners to take risks and give them a sense of autonomy, boosting their feeling of enjoyment (Dewaele et al., 2018). According to Leaver & Kaplan (2004), as the focus of the information gap tasks is to achieve a goal, students are likely to be cognitively challenged and take risks when using new language. Moreover,

information gap tasks can give learners a chance to solve problems that can arise during the task performance (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 2009).

In this type of activity learners are required to use the language learnt to exchange information and transmit an idea. Prabhu (1987) states that “information gap activities involve transfer of given information from one person to another, or from one form to another, or from one place to another generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language” (p.46). Harmer (1998) points out that the gap is the incomplete information two speakers have about a certain topic. Therefore, when pupils are faced with the need to communicate and to solve a problem, that is the moment in which the speaking activity becomes “unpredictable and therefore interesting” (Lindsay, 2000, p. 157). Students’ attention is taken away from the grammatical form and focused on meaning. According to some researchers, students’ willingness to speak in class increases when there is a reason for communication, for instance, giving their classmate information they need or solving a problem together (Spratt, Pulverness, Williams, 2005, p. 35). The students who are provided with information give clues to the ones who do not have the information. Half of the learners need to transmit information appropriately, so the other half is able to understand and accomplish the task. An information gap can only exist when one person knows something that the other lacks and the task is completed by exchanging information and finding a solution to the problem (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). For Swan (1985, p.94), an information gap activity is “a basic concept in contemporary methodology”. He also notes that “when one student talks to another, we feel that it is important that new information should be transmitted across the ‘gap’ between them”. Scrivener (2011) believes that communication through information gap activities is only possible if there is a purpose for doing it. According to Harmer:

Information-gap activities include a tremendous variety of techniques in which the objective is to convey or to request information. The two focal characteristics of information-gap techniques are their primary attention to information and not to language forms and the necessity of communicative interaction in order to reach the objective. The information that students must seek can range from very simple to complex.

(Harmer, 2001, p.198)

There are different aspects to consider when implementing information gap activities in the young learner classroom, such as the type of task that will be developed based on students' needs. These tasks need to be level appropriate in order to maintain students interested and motivated. Teachers also need to monitor learners' performance and try not to intervene. Learners should not be told they are making mistakes as this would diminish the communicative purpose of the activity. Before the interaction, the teacher introduces the language that will be necessary to complete the task. While students are engaged with the task, the teacher monitors their performance and mediates when needed. This mediation is given through scaffolding, which is employed to give learners temporary support during their language development process. Hammond and Gibbons (2001) state that this type of strategy is known as "the temporary assistance that teachers provide for their students in order to assist them to complete a task or develop new understandings, so that they will later be able to complete similar tasks alone" (p.3). This support should be given in the beginning of the learning process and then, gradually, learners start performing the task on their own. This can only happen when learners have gained sufficient knowledge and do not need the teacher's assistance any longer (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001).

Another important consideration to have in mind is when choosing an exercise to be done about a specific topic. It is essential to consider age appropriateness as this will interfere in their learning and interest. In other words, the more appealing the activities, the better students' attitudes towards the English language and the task itself. Unfortunately, the coursebooks adopted provide mainly repetitive tasks and listening exercises. The only authentic communication occasions given is through role-play or a whole group presentation of a topic at the end of each unit. Nunan (1992) argues that "the coursebooks consist largely of manipulative, form focused exercises" (p. 51-52). Therefore, it is the teacher's role to plan the lessons beforehand so learners are offered as many possibilities of spoken interaction as possible. Moreover, as coursebooks do not provide varied types of interactional activities, the teacher plays an important role in the creation of their own materials. Students need to be provided with various patterns of oral interaction, so they are able to demonstrate their communicative competences. Before starting the task, students need to be provided with examples in order to carry out the task successfully as Harmer (1991) states, "if students have not done an exercise of this type before the teacher would be well advised to demonstrate the technique before putting the students in pairs" (p. 100). When the activity is done, the teacher can conduct feedback by having different pairs to ask and answer questions in front of the

whole class. This will be useful to check learners' language production and whether they performed the task appropriately.

2.2.1.1. Strengths

According to research carried out by Defrioka (2017), implementing information gap activities improves intermediate English level learners' spoken interaction in the classroom, since they have to exchange information and collaborate with their peers to reach their aims. His findings also showed that information gap activities enhance participation and interest of learners in class activities. Students are forced to negotiate meaning as their oral production must be comprehensible to others in order to accomplish the task. When learners negotiate during their oral interaction, they develop their communication skills and enhance their ability to express themselves effectively. According to Ur (1996), a successful speaking activity occurs when learners: talk as much as possible; participate equally and their contributions are evenly distributed; are highly motivated and eager to speak; and show an acceptable level of language use (relevant utterances). Lightbown and Spada (1999) highlight that when pupils interact with each other, they advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance than if they were working independently. In addition, when learning through student-centred tasks, students are gradually seen as less dependent upon teachers' assistance (Watamni & Gholami, 2012). They perform the task without the teacher's interference and are given more opportunities to speak in the target language for an extended period of time. As Moon (2000, p. 54) points out, pair work activities are "valuable in providing more opportunities for children to get more language exposure". Nunan (2003) argues that "these activities can be used to increase the amount of time students get to speak in the target language during lessons" (p. 55). It is the teacher's role to be a facilitator who explains and reviews the vocabulary needed to accomplish the task. Therefore, the aims and procedures of the information gap activities must be clear, otherwise, valuable class time for oral practice can be wasted. Giving the right instructions is the key element when developing this type of task.

Another study conducted by Karimi (2010) for intermediate level students showed that implementing different information activity tasks in the language classroom can provide foreign language learners with near-authentic language use. According to the results of this study, learners' fluency enhanced through exposure to task-based inputs.

In a study done by Ejzenberg (1994), it was shown that when young adults developed guided tasks interacting with other people, there was an increase in their oral fluency, when compared to working alone. A collaborative environment can help learners develop their language competence and achieve a better performance than if they worked independently. (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). During information gap activities, students become focused on giving the correct information and try to express themselves as fluently as possible, without giving so much attention to the structure. Harmer (2001) affirms that these activities are a means to reinforce language fluency instead of accuracy. Similarly, Willis (1996) points out that this technique is applied to focus on meaning in order to “gain fluency at the expense of accuracy” (p. 40). Although the focus is on meaning, attention towards accuracy should not be forgotten. According to Watkins (2005), there needs to be a balance between these two elements for the speaking activity to be carried out efficiently.

Information gap activities are motivational since there are a wide variety of tasks that can be developed in the classroom which may be beneficial to different learning styles. Lightbown and Spada (1999) suggest that “positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning” (p. 56). Some of the information gap activities which can be effective are: describe and draw, spot the difference, jigsaw readings and listening dictations. When selecting a task to be developed with students, teachers need to analyse the level of difficulty of the task before assigning them for young learners, in order to check whether they are adequate or not. If students know the purpose of the activity, they will be capable of using linguistic forms and functions in a communicative way.

Another benefit, mentioned by Moon (2000) is that working in pairs is ideal for the enhancement of social skills such as promoting respect towards others and turn taking. In order to accomplish the task, students need to be attentive to their peers in order to find the hidden information. While pupils are involved in the task, the teacher is freer to monitor and observe the interactions between the children. Another advantage of pair work is that it can increase learners’ confidence as they do not have to be afraid of being wrong or being corrected in front of the entire class.

2.2.1.2. Constraints

Although there are various benefits when promoting pair work activities, some difficulties may arise when choosing this type of strategy in the classroom. One of the

disadvantages as Harmer (2001) suggests is that “students in pairs can often veer away from the point of an exercise, talking about something else completely” (p.116). Moreover, Hill (1995) mentions the need for managing learners’ behaviour, especially noise levels, excessive use of the mother tongue and off-task talks. For this reason, it is crucial to choose activities which are of students’ interest and have an appropriate level of difficulty. What’s more, prepare pupils beforehand with regards to their voice level which should be low enough not to disturb the pairs who are seated nearby, revise the language needed for the task and remind learners to use as much English as possible while interacting with each other. Besides, the teacher can also give examples and model the activity with a pupil in front of the whole group to facilitate their understanding of the task procedure. These aspects should be taken into consideration as students are not used to working in pair with their mainstream teacher. For this reason, the lessons should be carefully planned and plenty of practice should be provided to children. As mentioned by Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002), students need to be mature enough and prepared to be able to work in pairs.

In addition, Harmer (2001) also notes that working in pairs can be an issue when one person from the pair is linguistically weaker than the other one. In many classrooms, there are weak and strong learners. Therefore, when planning pair work activities, the teacher should consider the different ability levels and organize the pairs in accordance with the type of task provided. This way, both students can benefit from the activity.

The use of L1 and indiscipline can also be a barrier to doing pair work activities. For this reason, rules should be established before doing the activity. After practising this kind of task several times, students will become accustomed to performing it appropriately and using English most of the time. Lasito & Storch (2013) argue that the use of the mother tongue is inevitable, and it is mainly used for task management and when dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary. If teachers promote pair work activities, learners use of L2 will be higher (Hawkey, 2006). Moreover, when students are motivated to work together, and one of them is using more L2, the other will automatically do the same (Cao & Philip, 2006). Cao & Philip (2006), also mention that students’ performance can be influenced by familiarization with their peers, size of group and self-confidence when speaking. Some years ago, students’ use of L1 was considered to reduce the amount of L2 input and hinder their chances of acquiring the foreign language. However, overtime this belief has changed as Oliver & Philip (2014) state, “first language can and does have a positive role to play in second language classrooms and this is as true for primary school learners as it is for those who are older” (p. 90).

As mentioned previously, pair work activities have limitations. However, these constraints can be overcome by providing learners with consistent practice of this type of interaction. If these aspects are taken into consideration, the benefits may be far greater than the disadvantages.

Chapter III – Research design

This chapter aims to present the action research methodology adopted during the teaching practice, including its developmental process. In addition, it shows the tools used to collect the data, how it was developed and the intervention plan. The results are then analysed and discussed. Three information gap activities were given to students in order to promote their oral interactions.

3.1. Methodology

The method adopted was small-scale action research. As cited by Burns (2010), this is an appropriate methodology for classroom research since it is a combination of critical reflection and practical action to acquire a response to an issue found in the school context. In other words, the teacher observes, questions, collects data and reflects on a problem which needs to be improved. As Burns (2010, p.2) states, a research project consists of “taking an area you feel could be done better, subjecting it to questioning, and then developing new ideas and alternatives”. Throughout IPP I, notes were taken regarding the approach, methodology and techniques adopted in the school context in order to identify an area that needed intervention. The data collection tools were also considered at this time.

In IPP II, the Year 4 students from Bom Pastor Primary School were engaged in three information gap activities in which they were observed performing the tasks. Students answered questionnaires related to their perceptions on their spoken interaction regarding the use of L1/L2 and whether their peers helped them speak English better. Moreover, an observation grid was used by the teacher to record some aspects of pupils’ spoken interaction, such as their ability to accomplish the task, use the taught vocabulary and whether they communicate effectively when interacting with each other. To make data more reliable,

learners were also audio recorded during their interaction. The last stage of this entire process was the reflection phase, in which data were analysed and interpreted.

According to Bell (2010, p. 115), “methods are selected because they will provide the data you require to produce a complete piece of research”. This project involved both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The quantitative method involved collection of numerical data through questionnaires, analysis and interpretation of data. While the qualitative one involved collecting more details about a specific group of learners’ experiences. The data collected is then analysed. This method is helpful to obtain insights into students’ responses which may not be easily captured with the quantitative method alone. When they are both used in conjunction the outcomes become more reliable. The data collected from the three questionnaires given to students at different moments of this study were analysed quantitatively in order to analyse how many students changed their opinions regarding pair work activities. The qualitative research method applied was via observation grids supported by audio recordings, which were created to analyse students’ speaking performance during the pair work. The teacher reflecting notes were also used in the qualitative analysis with the aim of gathering information for a better understanding of learning and teaching processes. As stated by Creswell (2012, p. 535), these two methods combined can “provide a better understanding of the research problem and question than either method by itself”.

3.2. Data-gathering tools

In order to collect data for this study, various instruments which are used by several researchers were selected. For the qualitative data, audio recordings and observation grids were used with a sample of six 4th year students selected according to their English language levels. While three questionnaires were selected to collect quantitative data.

3.2.1. Reflective journal

A record of my research experience was registered through notes taken during the observed and taught lessons. These less structured observations were undertaken in order to make learners more comfortable when performing the task without feeling the pressure of being observed. As stated by Mackey (2005, p. 175), “In less structured observations, the researcher may rely on field notes for detailed descriptions of the phenomena being observed or transcripts

of tapes of those events”. After having observed and taken notes, some important data were gathered with regards to learners’ attitudes, behaviours, as well as the strategies and techniques adopted by the English language teacher. According to Moon, the ideas and reactions of the teacher and students can be captured in a learning journal, accordingly, contributing to a better understanding of the learning and teaching processes (Moon, 2006). In addition, it is also helpful with regards to how to better understand, analyse and compare results when implementing the information gap activities. As Mackey (2005, p. 175) states, “Over time and repeated observations, the researcher can gain a deeper and more multi-layered understanding of the participants and their context.”

These notes were also useful for writing the reflective journal which was about our assessed lessons during IPP II. The entries in the journal were based on brief notes taken during classes for reflection of the teaching practice. The qualitative analysis of data collected from the notes was helpful to reflect on the application of the information gap activities in pairs. Some entries from the journal will be mentioned in the following sections. Richards affirms that:

Reflective teaching is an approach to teaching which is based on a belief that teachers can improve their understanding of teaching and the quality of their own teaching by reflecting critically on their teaching experiences. In teacher education, activities which seek to develop a reflective approach to teaching aim to develop the skills of considering the teaching process thoughtfully, analytically, and objectively as a way of improving classroom practises. This is brought about through using procedures which require teachers to collect data on their own teaching practises (e.g., through audio or video recordings), to reflect on their own decision making (e.g., through journal writing), and to examine their own values and assumptions about teaching (e.g., through peer or group discussion or observation of videos).

(Richards, 2002, p.23)

3.2.2. Observation grid

Throughout classroom observations, an adapted model of grid (Appendix 1) of speaking task assessment provided by Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou (2003) was employed. In addition, the same grid was used at three different moments for the three pair work tasks to compare learners’ speaking progress throughout the implementation of the action research project.

The objective of using the grid was to gather information on students' fluency, appropriacy of vocabulary use, task achievement and use of the mother tongue. Each category was divided into three levels of performance. In relation to fluency, the lowest level (1) referred to frequent, long pauses which affected the spoken interaction. The following level (2) meant the existence of some long pauses which did not prevent the learners from communicating with one another. The highest level (3) was effective communication without long pauses. In relation to vocabulary use, the lowest level (1) demonstrated insufficient or inappropriate vocabulary that hindered communication and use of L1 most of the time. The next level (2) of achievement represented a sufficient range of vocabulary to complete the task and a few words or expressions in L1. As for the highest level (3), this referred to the use of sufficient and appropriate range of vocabulary to adequately complete the task with no use of L1. Finally, with regards to task achievement, this varied from students having difficulties in carrying out the task for the lowest level (1); for the following level (2), learners carried out the task but with some difficulty; lastly, pupils carried out the task successfully with relative ease for the highest level (3).

The data were collected from six students while they performed the three different pair work tasks. They were four girls and two boys. In the first task, due to classroom management issues, such as noise level and doubts about the activity itself, it was only possible to take notes of two pairs. After talking to learners about the rules when doing pair work activities, it was possible to take notes of all the three pairs in the following two other tasks. Among the 20 children, aged between 9 and 10 years old, three pairs were selected according to their level of speaking in the classroom and seating arrangements. This sample represented the entire class: two low level students (1, 2), two average (3, 4) and two high level ones (5, 6). Students worked in the same pairs while performing these pre-selected activities and the information recorded in the observation grid was supported by the audio recording.

3.2.3. Questionnaires given to students

The questionnaire was applied to the whole class after participating in three pre-selected pair work activities. The reason for having all the students participating was to avoid causing anxiety or any type of pressure upon the selected learners. Brown (2001, p. 6) affirms that "questionnaires allow researchers to gather information that learners are able to report about themselves, such as their beliefs and motivations about learning or their reactions to learning

and classroom instructions and activities”. The statements in the questionnaire (Appendix 2) were in Portuguese, designed to assess students’ awareness about their whole class participation, their level of confidence during oral activities both individually and in pairs and their perception regarding the use of L1/L2 when working with peers. Before completing the questionnaire, students were told that there were no right or wrong answers (Coombe & Davidson, 2015). These results were compared to check whether there were any significant changes in students’ opinions with regards to doing pair work activities. The data collected are presented in tables which represent students’ opinions in the form of percentage and number of answers.

3.2.4. Audio- recording

According to Dörnyei (2007), to capture some insights when students are interacting with each other, it is necessary to combine structured observation with other forms of data collection by using mixed methods. Since the use of observation grids alone may be more objective although the observer can miss essential aspects (Dörnyei, 2007), I considered recording the six students’ speech during their interaction. By choosing to do this, it was possible to obtain more details than when using only the observation grid. By way of example, it is not possible to know the exact moment the speaker hesitates when using the grid, or what the difficulties encountered were when trying to transmit information to their partner. Richards (2003) states that audio recording is an alternative approach for researchers who have a particular interest in observing participants while they interact with one another. Burns (2010) also affirms that transcribing oral exchanges precisely through notetaking only can be a difficult task. Thus, the audio-recording provided extra support when analysing data from the observation grid.

3.3. *Intervention plan*

For this study to be conducted, it was necessary to implement a plan of action indicating the steps that needed to be followed. The planning started in IPP I and the first task was to observe and investigate an area which needed intervention. This stage is the Zero Cycle of the action research project. As mentioned in Chapter I, through the reflective notes, it was possible to notice that learners needed more opportunities for speaking, since their lessons were teacher

centred. Notes of students' attitudes and behaviour were written down in order to collect evidence for the plan of action to be designed. After collecting enough evidence that would justify the need for action and the viability of the study, the next stage was the development and execution of the strategy which would be used to conduct the study.

The development and implementation of the strategy was divided into three phases. In the first cycle of the action research, the project was presented to the children by myself and my mentor. They were told that they would participate in a study conducted by a student teacher along with their current English language teacher, in which they would participate in different types of oral activities. Permission to conduct this study was given by the coordinator of the school where the research was being executed. The following stage was to apply the chosen strategy and the tools for collecting the necessary data. The strategy adopted was for learners to complete two information gap activities in pairs. The first task was implemented in October and the second, in November. After the activities, students would complete a questionnaire about the task they had done. It was in Portuguese so they could reflect better about the activity. The results of each questionnaire were helpful for the teacher to reflect on which aspects of the task worked well or not, so adjustments to the strategy could be made. As stated by Burns (2010), action research "involves taking a self-reflective, critical, and systematic approach to exploring your own teaching contexts" (p.2).

The second cycle began after some changes with regards to the strategy adopted. An additional collecting tool, audio recording, was selected to support the observation grid and the questionnaire implemented in the first cycle. The last phases of the intervention plan were the analysis and interpretation of the data collected.

3.4. First cycle of the action research

The two activities of this cycle took place between the beginning of October until mid-November of 2023. This cycle of the action research was based on two tasks and one questionnaire for each task. The first cycle analysis begins with the description of the intervention undertaken in the 4th year class, followed by the analysis and interpretation of the data collected. Of the twenty students in this study, one of them only participated in the second cycle because he began attending the class at the beginning of December, when the second cycle was carried out.

3.4.1. Description of the first activity implemented

The two tasks selected for this cycle were part of other pair work activities the students carried out during my practicum. Since learners had not been exposed to this type of strategy, the pair work activities done with students contributed considerably to increasing the amount of talking time for each student. Modelling the pair work activity was essential to have students prepared for this type of task. This allowed them to get acquainted with the rules of behaviour when doing pair work, such as the voice level.

The first task (Appendix I), which was a picture description information gap activity, took place on 25th October. The picture was selected in accordance with the language students had been learning and were familiar with, which was numbers and parts of the body. Learners were expected to read the sentences which were related to the image, whilst their partner had to draw the picture based on this description.

While learners performed the activity, the teacher registered the interaction of four selected students in the observation grid. The aim was to collect data from three pairs, but due to classroom management issues and lack of clear instructions, it was only possible to gather information from two pairs. Students were identified by a code, represented by a number. Students were paired as follows: students 1/2; students 3/4 and students 5/6. The first pair was formed by a weak level learner with an average learner, the second pair was composed of average level student with a high level one and the third pair, high level students. These students were chosen in accordance with their seating arrangements in order to save time.

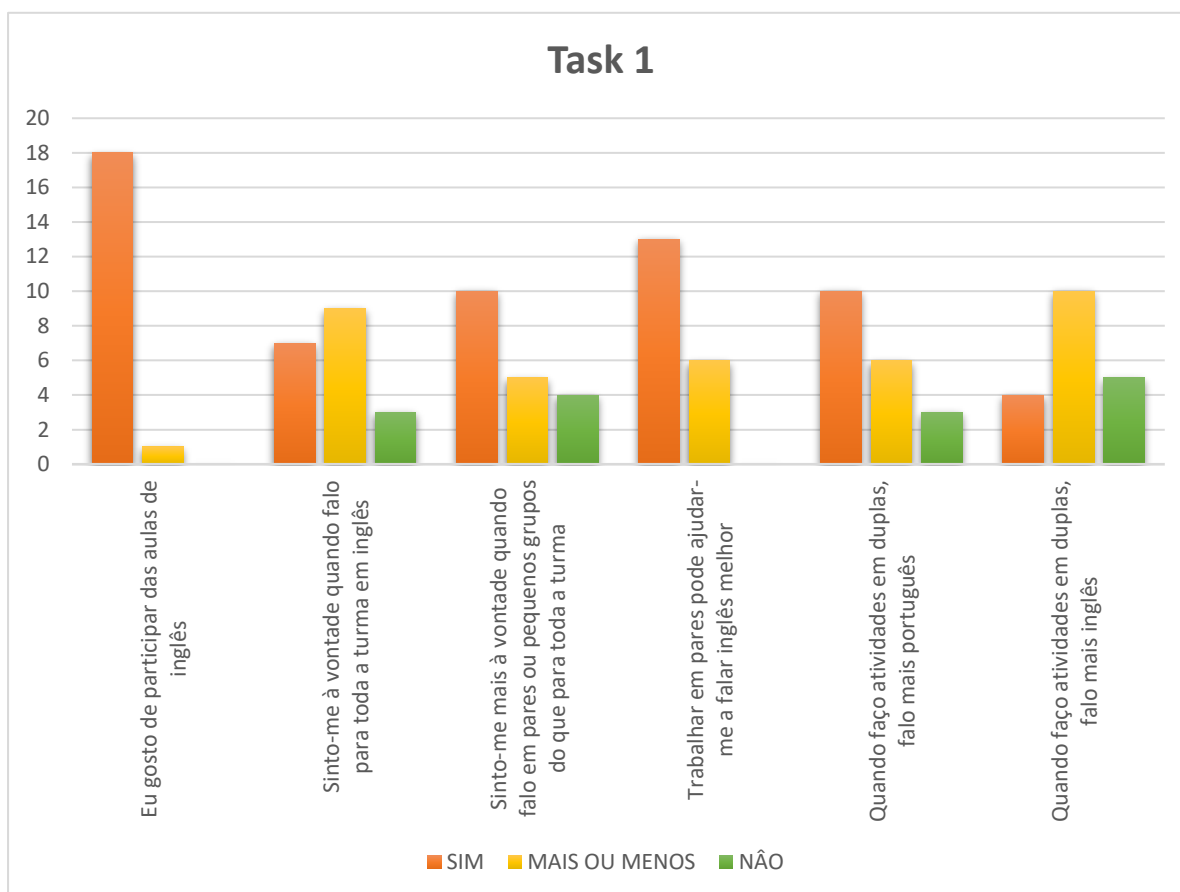
The results obtained in the first task were registered in an observation grid which is shown in the following table.

Observation Grid – 4th Year

		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
Focus	Level						
Task Achievement	Had difficulties in carrying out the task	X					
	Carried out the task but with some difficulties		X				
	Carried out the task successfully and with relative ease			X	X		
Vocabulary	Insufficient or inappropriate vocabulary that hindered communication. Resorted to L1 most of the time	X					
	Range of vocabulary sufficient to complete the task. Use of a few words or expression in L1		X				
	Sufficient and appropriate range of vocabulary to adequately complete the task. No use of L1			X	X		
Fluency	Frequent and long pauses cause difficulties in communicating	X					
	Communicates even though there are some long pauses		X				
	Communicates effectively without long pauses				X		

Table 1: Observation grid of the first information gap activity

Following the first task, a questionnaire was given to students (Appendix 6). It was composed of six statements with the options of answers:” yes”, “more or less” or “no”. A graph was created in order to represent the results of the options chosen by all the students.



Graph 1: First questionnaire about the 1st information gap activity

On 29th November, the second information gap activity was carried out and 18 students took part in this task. The lesson was related to numbers in which students had to talk about people's age, so to take advantage of this topic another pair work task was created for students to work with the same partners. In this task (Appendix 2), pupils were given a handout with each containing different information. In this activity, student A had information about some people's ages, which student B did not. Similarly, student B had information about other people which student A did not possess. They had to fill in the gaps to discover what the missing information was by asking and answering questions.

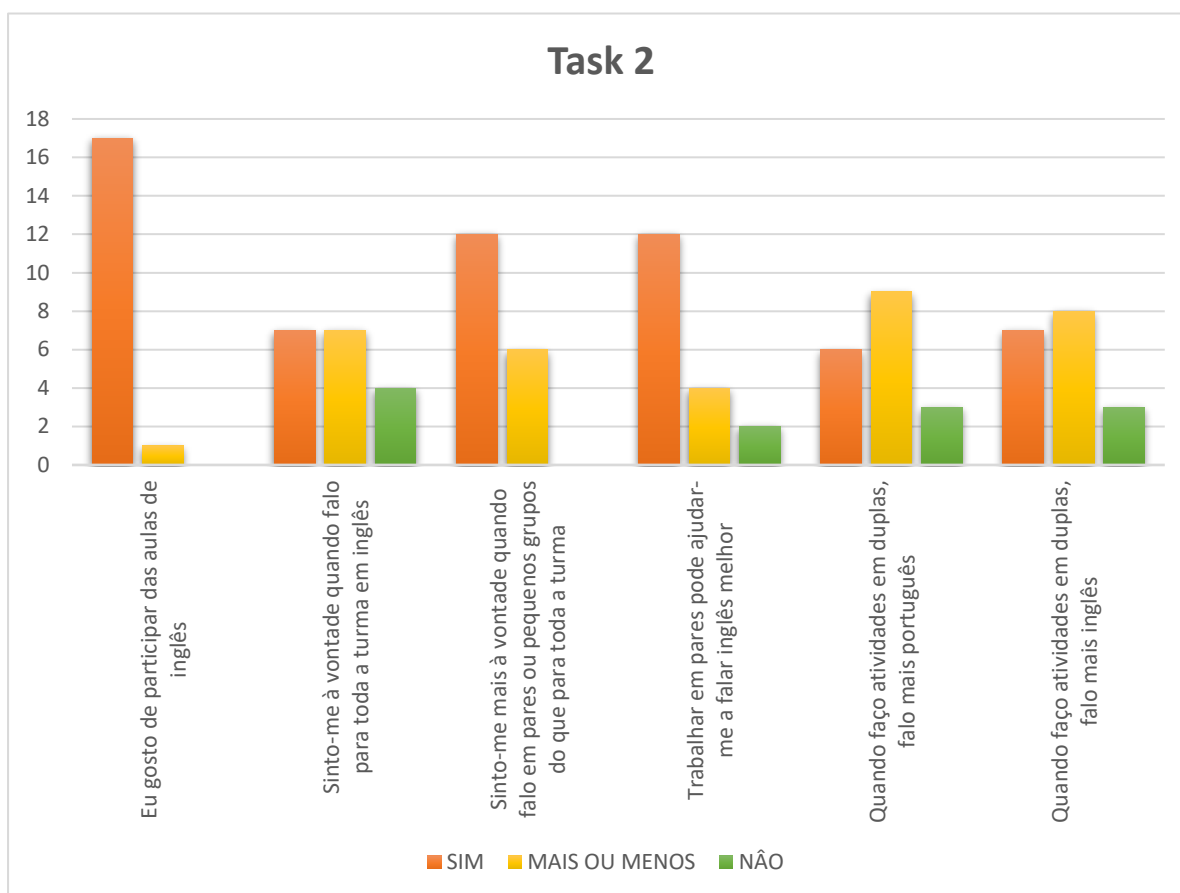
For this second information gap activity, the observation grid (Appendix 5) was the same as the one used in the first task, but this time it was possible to record information of the three pairs. It was possible to collect information of the six students from the sample, because some instructional procedures were adopted by the teacher in relation to the noise level, since during the first task, this was a problematic factor. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Observation Grid – 4th Year

		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
Focus	Level						
Task Achievement	Had difficulties in carrying out the task	X					
	Carried out the task but with some difficulties		X				
	Carried out the task successfully and with relative ease			X	X	X	X
Vocabulary	Insufficient or inappropriate vocabulary that hindered communication. Resorted to L1 most of the time						
	Range of vocabulary sufficient to complete the task. Use of a few words or expression in L1	X		X		X	
	Sufficient and appropriate range of vocabulary to adequately complete the task. No use of L1		X		X		X
Fluency	Frequent and long pauses cause difficulties in communicating						
	Communicates even though there are some long pauses	X					
	Communicates effectively without long pauses		X	X	X	X	X

Table 2: Observation grid of the second information gap activity

The first cycle ended with the same questionnaire distributed to students. It was the same structure as the previous one (Appendix 6). The following graph shows the result of students' answers.



Graph 2: Second questionnaire about the 2nd information gap activity

3.4.2. Analysis and interpretation of the results of the 1st cycle of the action research

Since other activities related to asking and answering questions were carried out between students after the first observed information gap activity, some differences with regards to learners' oral performance were noticeable when comparing the first and the second pair work activity. The six students selected to be closely monitored showed a positive progression in vocabulary use, fluency, and the use of the target language.

As can be seen in the observation grid of the first pair (1-weak student; 2-average student) there were no considerable changes. Student 1 was one of the weakest students in class and showed difficulties in concentrating. By analysing the results, it was clear that she did not show improvement in task achievement. Student 2 was an average student, who was usually attentive and motivated. His results revealed that his fluency improved, and his range of vocabulary was sufficient and adequate. However, he carried out the task with some difficulties because during the instruction and modelling of the task, he was not attentive since

he wanted to do the pair work with another person. Therefore, he did not help his pair with the vocabulary acquired to carry out the task, so the weak student needed my help with the vocabulary. The noise level of the other pairs was another issue for them. For this reason, I mentioned this situation in the journal, “I should have helped pupils by establishing rules such as noise level, because during the interaction some pupils could not hear their pairs due to the noise level of other pairs” (Reflective journal, 25th October 2023)

Regarding the results for the second pair (3- average student; 4 – high level student), there were some changes. Student 3 was motivated, but distracted at times, frequently making use of L1. Her results showed progress in task achievement, perhaps due to her interest in that specific activity. The use of L2 by students was mentioned in the journal “I notice that if they are encouraged to speak English, they will definitely try their best to do it, as I see learners motivated and interested to participate in the activities” (Reflective journal, 15th November). With regards to student 4, who had a very high level of English, the task was motivating and challenging. It made her think about the content learnt while interacting with her pair, and also give her friend support when required. She revealed a high level of achievement in all items assessed.

The results of the third pair (5 and 6- high level students) were similar. Before the intervention took place, these students demonstrated interest and were motivated towards the English language learning. These learners showed very good results in their written assessment. Although student 5 had positive results in tests, he did not improve as much as student 6 in relation to vocabulary use, due to his lack of attention during oral practice in class. Student 6, meanwhile, showed positive results in all items assessed. Perhaps due to his active participation in oral activities.

From the questionnaires, when comparing the results from tasks 1 and 2, it was possible to notice that students were motivated to learn the foreign language. Regarding the pair work activities, most students prefer speaking with a partner to talking in front of the whole group. Another important aspect perceived was that from the first to the second task, learners believed their use of L1 decreased when doing the activity in pairs, which means they were aware of their L2 use during the task. Oral interaction between peers can promote L2 learning by providing opportunities for experimenting with language, practising forms they know and consolidating their knowledge” (Oliver & Philip, 2014, p. 111).

3.5. Second cycle of the action research

The second cycle was conducted from mid-November to mid-December of 2023. Based on the results collected from the first cycle, some changes to the strategy adopted were made. The 2nd cycle of the action research consisted of one information gap activity, an observation grid, a questionnaire, and an audio recording of students' interaction. The new collecting tool, audio recording, was adopted to gather more reliable data about students' spoken interaction to support the observation grid. Moreover, the classroom arrangement was modified, and students were organized in two big groups. One group did the pair work activity while the other did another activity quietly. When the interaction was over, the groups would exchange tasks. This strategy was adopted in order to collect clearer evidence of learners' oral performance as the noise level decreased. The 2nd cycle is presented as follows: description of the intervention in the 4th year class, presentation of the data collected and interpretation of the results.

3.5.1. Description of the second activity implemented

The second cycle began with an information gap activity called 'interview exchange' (Appendix 4), which occurred on 13th December. For this task students had to pretend to be the person described in their worksheet. Each person from the pair had a different version of the information. Before starting the task, they were told not to look at each other's paper and it was necessary to recall the structure needed to ask and answer questions. The language required for this task was learnt in the previous lessons, such as asking and answering questions regarding one's name, age and birthday. Therefore, to confirm they remembered it, modelling of the activity was demonstrated. Information about a person was presented on the board with gaps. Students then had to elaborate questions to ask and fill in the gaps. This pair work activity was created following the content from students' English coursebook which presented information about cardinal and ordinal numbers, and months of the year. To support the results obtained from the observation grid and the questionnaire, an audio recording of the three pairs was made. The transcriptions can be better analysed by looking at some codes (Appendix 5). Learners' interactions are described below.

Classroom Snapshot 1

This exchange happened between students 1 (weak-level learner) and 2 (average-level learner). They were given different worksheets which contained information about a person's name, age and birthday. Student 1 asked the three questions and student 2 replied. Using the information given, student 1 completed the gaps on her worksheet. After that, student 2 asked the same questions.

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| a) Student 1: What's your name? | g) Student 2: What's your name? |
| b) Student 2: My name is Bob. | h) Student 1: My name is Sofia. |
| c) Student 1: (...) Years old are you? | i) Student 2: Year old are you? |
| d) Student 2: I'm nine years old. | J) Student 1: *Eleven |
| e) Student 1: (...) Is your birthday? | k) Student 2: Is your birthday? |
| f) Student 2: Fourth ten | l) Student 1: Two (...) twelve. |

Table 3 - Transcription of 1st pair speech

Classroom Snapshot 2

This interaction was between students 3 (average-level learner) and 4 (high-level learner).

Student 3: What's your name?	Student 4: What it's your name?
Student 4: My name is Harry.	Student 3: My name is Susan.
Student 3: (...) How old are you?	Student 4: Susan (...) How old are you?
Student 4: I'm ten years old.	Student 3: I'm eight years old.
Student 3: When's your birthday?	Student 4: (...) When is your birthday?
Student 4: It's on four of August	Student 3: When's your (...)
	Student 4: NÃO! ISSO FUI EU QUE DISSE.
	Student 3: It's on (...) two of (...) Feb*
	February NÃO SEI DIZER MUITO BEM
	Student 4: February [Silence] ok

Table 4 - Transcription of 2nd pair speech

Classroom Snapshot 3

This exchange was between student 5 (high-level learner) and 6 (high-level learner)

Student 5: What is (...) what is your name?	Student 6: What's your name?
Student 6: My name is Duarte.	Student 5: My name is Sofia.
Student 5: How {hmmm} old are you?	Student 6: How old are you?
Student 6: I'm nine years old.	Student 5: I'm {hmm} twelve years old.
Student 5: When's your birthday?	Student 6: When's your birthday?
Student 6: It's four of October.	Student 5: It's (...) it's on two and of November.

Table 5 - Transcription of 3rd pair speech

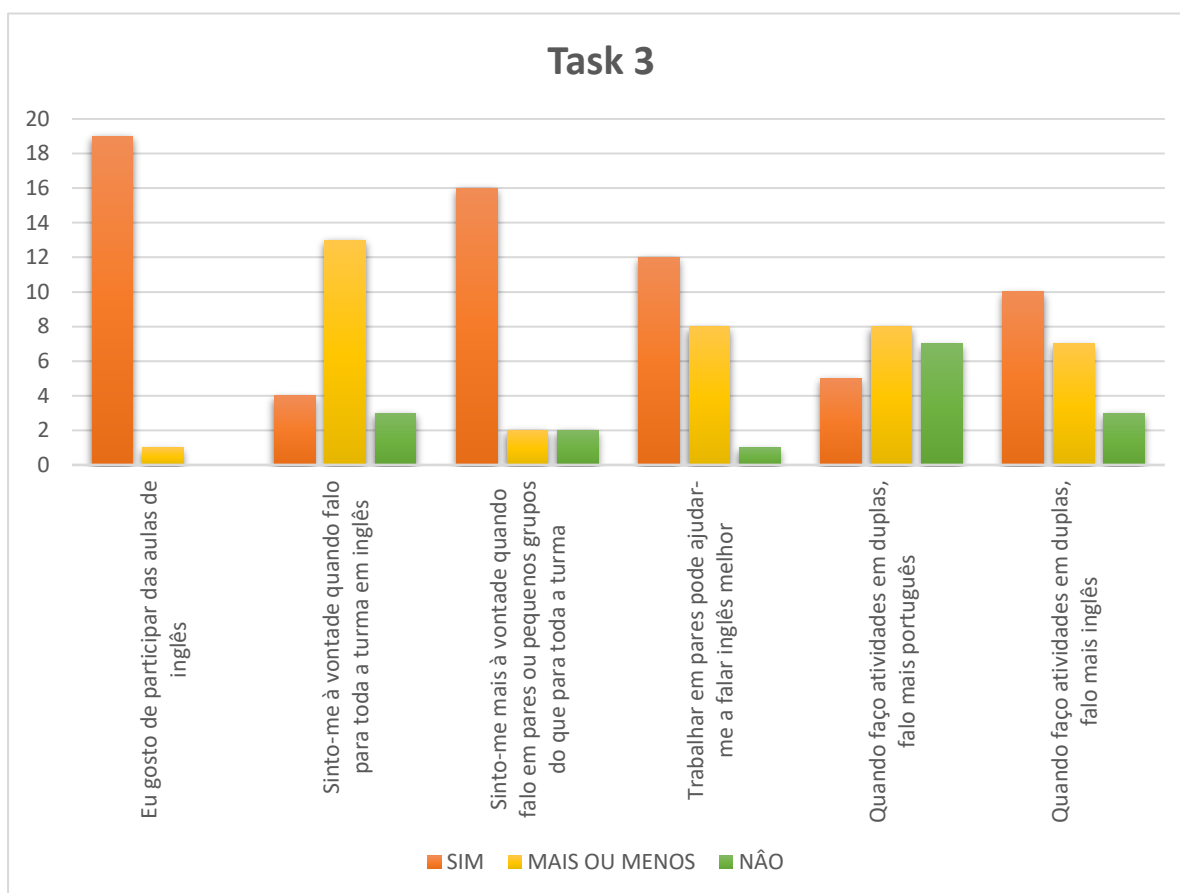
For each oral interaction of the pairs, besides the audio recordings, an observation grid was completed in accordance with the recorded interaction. Once more, pupils were referred to as a code represented by a number. The results are presented below.

Observation Grid – 4th Year

		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
Focus	Level						
Task Achievement	Had difficulties in carrying out the task						
	Carried out the task but with some difficulties	X					
	Carried out the task successfully and with relative ease		X	X	X	X	X
Vocabulary	Insufficient or inappropriate vocabulary that hindered communication. Resorted to L1 most of the time						
	Range of vocabulary sufficient to complete the task. Use of a few words or expression in L1						
	Sufficient and appropriate range of vocabulary to adequately complete the task. No use of L1	X	X	X	X	X	X
Fluency	Frequent and long pauses cause difficulties in communicating						
	Communicates even though there are some long pauses	X					
	Communicates effectively without long pauses		X	X	X	X	X

Table 6: Observation grid of the third interaction

To conclude the second cycle of the action research, the questionnaire (Appendix 6), which was the same used in the previous tasks of the first cycle of this study, was distributed to students. There are twenty students' answers, because a pupil from Argentina began attending classes one week before this third pair work activity was implemented. The answers can be observed in the graph below.



Graph 3 – Third questionnaire about the project

3.5.2. Analysis and interpretation of the results

Regarding the use of the audio recordings of students while interacting with each other, it was possible to perceive that students were able to use more L2 than L1 during the activity as they had to communicate in the L2 to accomplish the task. Moreover, learners' effort was noticeable when trying to reply to their peers using complete utterances, and not only individual words. In relation to the use of students' first language during the activity, it was noticed that it was mainly to confirm a reply given by their pairs or to deal with clarification. As stated by Lasito & Storch (2013), L1 is superior to L2 mainly for task management, unfamiliar vocabulary, and clarification.

In addition, the teacher was able to observe and record students without being interrupted with pupils' doubts about what to do in the activity. This is the result of having practised other pair work tasks before, and due to the examples performed with students before starting the interaction task itself. "I had some challenges, because they had never practised this type of

activity, so it took me some time to model it before the freer situation” (Learning journal, 25th October 2023). Another aspect observed in the transcription was that even though a few learners paused or hesitated while speaking, this did not affect their spoken interaction with their peers. These results appear to be connected with Curtain & Dahlberg’s (2010), who conclude that pair work activities stimulate cooperation, provide opportunities for language use, natural language practise and two-way communication. These benefits can be noticed in more detail through the observation of the transcripts on the pair working together. In other words, pupils worked collaboratively to complete the missing information and used the taught vocabulary and grammar to ask and answer questions in a meaningful way.

In relation to the results of the observation grids, it was noticed that giving opportunities for students to use the language in pairs benefited learners with regards to the development of fluency, vocabulary, and the use of the target language. Despite some inaccuracies regarding the grammar, this was not the focus of the study, and this did not disrupt learners’ spoken interaction.

According to the questionnaire it was possible to verify that between the end of the 1st cycle and the end of the 2nd cycle of the action research students changed their opinions regarding pair work activities. There was an increase in the number of students who felt more comfortable to participate in pairs rather than in front of the whole class. Moreover, they felt they spoke more English than Portuguese when interacting with each other. On the other hand, there were no significant changes when they had to give their opinion about whether their peers helped them speak English better. Perhaps, a class discussion should have taken place about the benefits of doing pair work activities.

3.6. Global discussion of the results

Throughout this action research project, it was possible to notice how students’ perceptions of pair work activities changed and how their noise level decreased when interacting with one another. Since they had never worked in pairs during the English classes or with the mainstream teachers, in the beginning it was confusing in relation to task explanation and classroom management. However, afterwards they became used to negotiating with colleagues and, consequently, required less assistance from the teacher. As for students, they were also faced with challenges such as having to produce language they had recently

learnt and apply it to a context of interaction with another. However, after exposing them to various types of information gap activities, pupils became accustomed to interacting with each other through pair work tasks. For this reason, the more activities of interaction are developed, the less children will revert to the use of their L1 (Oliver and Philip, 2014).

The results show that learners showed interest and motivation to participate in the lessons throughout the action research project. From the 1st cycle to the 2nd cycle, students were exposed to different types of information gap activities, so it was possible to notice that some changes in students' opinions took place with regards to their oral performances during pair work activities.

These results also demonstrate that interaction through information gap activities can be a way of creating a non-threatening environment to get students to use the language freely without worrying about making mistakes in front of the entire class. Their enthusiasm and interest were evident in both cycles of the action research, mostly due to the fact that their task was to discover the missing information.

With regards to the research question "What are students' perception of their oral production regarding information gap activities?", the results obtained in this study shows that students were aware that they used more L2 than L1 when interacting with their peers. Nevertheless, after the first information gap activity, only 21% of pupils believed they spoke more L2 than L1. This figure changed to 39% after the second activity. Increasing significantly after the last pair work activity, rising to 50%. This perception is essential to show what the children think they are capable of doing, which can motivate them even more. One aspect which needed to be discussed with pupils was "working in pairs helps me speak better". 68% viewed it as positively impacting on their oral production in the first information gap activity. However, this percentage for the following two tasks decreased to 55%. Perhaps this occurred due to the fact that the statement was abstract, and they were not able to recognise exactly what it meant or, the time between the two other questionnaires was too short for pupils to be able to recognise improvements in their speaking skills. The willingness to communicate in L2 can relate to their confidence after doing various pair work activities, since results revealed that the percentage of pupils who preferred pair work activities to talking to the whole class, increased from 53% to 80%.

In relation to the second research question "What is the potential of information gap activities as a way to develop learners' oral skills?", it was possible to conclude that these types

of activities are beneficial to develop learners' vocabulary, fluency, and the use of the target language. However, students' development was not consistent during the whole process and this might have been influenced by the person they were paired with. Pupil's oral abilities were mainly positive, but there were specific students who did not show any improvement. This result is in line with Storch's study (2002) that mentions that collaborative and expert/novice patterns are essential to have better learning outcomes. Similarly, Cao and Philip (2006) argue that students wish to communicate in the target language is influenced by the desire to communicate with a specific person. Accordingly, if pupils are not doing the pair work with someone they do not have a good relationship with, it will affect their performance. This was observed with the first pair of this study, who did not improve as much as the other pairs.

In conclusion, results collected demonstrated an attempt to show the effectiveness of information gap activities to develop students' spoken interaction in English in the 1st cycle of basic education. Moreover, it was through different pair work tasks that students were able to practise and improve their communicative skills. Information gap activities can set the environment for motivating spoken interactions among students (Scrivener, 2011). Learners showed interest and became more involved in the activity due to their urge to find out what information they lacked, and their partners possessed. In relation to language development, when learners interacted with each other, if a person from the pair forgot what question they needed to ask or which vocabulary to use, the other would provide that support.

Conclusions

This action research project aimed at finding out whether information gap activities were a useful tool to develop students' spoken interaction. Results of learners' attitudes and performances demonstrated that it is a valid strategy since they showed excitement and engagement while performing the tasks. This positive attitude towards the foreign language can enhance students' motivation and develop their language learning. Unfortunately, not all English coursebooks include these types of tasks or only contain the same kind of pair work such as role-plays. Therefore, teachers need to include this extra strategy in their lessons in order to create more learning opportunities and make the classroom more student-centred by encouraging them to participate more actively. Undoubtedly, it is essential for teachers to know about and try to implement this strategy in their lessons, since it is known to bring various benefits to young learners. These include: increases in learner talking time; promotion of cooperation and mutual help; development of social competences; and students' autonomy and confidence.

In this study, students became familiarized with information gap activities, which was not a common strategy adopted by the English language teacher nor the mainstream teacher. In addition, pupils were able to realize that pair work activities can help them speak more English than Portuguese during their interaction and that their colleagues can help them into improve their oral skills.

Besides bringing benefits to students, this study was also relevant to my growth as a teacher since I was able to reflect on the teaching approaches I have been adopting during my teaching career and realise that students' can also benefit from a more learner- centred classroom. In addition, it provided me with tools for assessment of students' performances. Needless to say, when one reflects on one's own practises this can certainly help develop the appropriate strategies that best suit learners' needs.

4.1. Limitations of the study

One of the most problematic issues with regards to this study was its duration. It started in September and ended in mid-December of the same year, but there were not enough classes from the 3rd and 4th years to be observed in only one school of Carolina Michaelis Cluster, so I had to wait for permission from the coordinator of the other school, from the same Cluster, to

attend the other classes as well. This took almost a month to happen, so it was a very tight schedule to meet the number of hours required for my observation and teaching practice. Another aspect in terms of time, was the implementation of the action research. If I had started the observation earlier, more detailed and specific data would have been collected.

Another limitation regarded data gathering. Having to collect information in observation grids during students' interaction was not an easy task. Therefore, it was only possible to collect data from a small sample, even though I had my mentor help me in some of the tasks. The struggle was that while learners interacted with each other, the teacher needed to observe pairs, but sometimes when moving to another pair to be observed, they had already finished their interaction. For this reason, it is essential to think of various strategies when collecting data from the same pairs during different tasks. This was done with the last task from this study. Two bigger groups were formed so the teacher was able to observe students' performance and record pairs at different times. While pairs from one group did the information gap activity, the other group of students did another task quietly. After accomplishing the activity, they would change roles. Nevertheless, teachers need to think carefully when arranging the activity to be able to collect data from as many pairs as possible.

Finding information related to this area of research was another limitation. It was more common to find research on pair work activities done with secondary school students than with young learners. The latter were usually assessed through a pre-test in the beginning of the intervention and a post-test at the end of the study.

Despite the limitations mentioned previously, based on the results obtained in this study, this strategy proved to be effective for the purpose of this project. It also helped me acknowledge that there can be some factors which will limit or make the teaching difficult, but if teachers are flexible and reflect on their teaching, these obstacles can be overcome.

4.2. Future investigation

In relation to pair work activities, there are a few suggestions which should be taken into consideration when adopting this strategy. Firstly, teachers from EFL contexts, especially in Portugal, should adopt this strategy since it promotes not only social interaction and communication between students, but also develops their social skills such as turn-taking, politeness, and respect towards each other during their interaction. Therefore, if more teachers

adopted this strategy more frequently, perhaps further studies could be done and, as a result, help prove its efficiency beyond boundaries found in the current study.

It would also be interesting if a larger sample group could be studied and perhaps compare the different pair formations in relation to their level of English and find out how to best pair students. Along with this, the duration of the study could be extended, thus enabling further observation and recording of students' attitudes and use of language in more types of information gap activities and analyse students' responses with regards to their interests and preferences among the tasks provided.

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Appendices

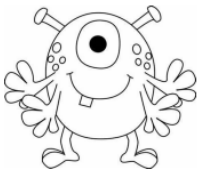
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Appendix 1 – Task 1

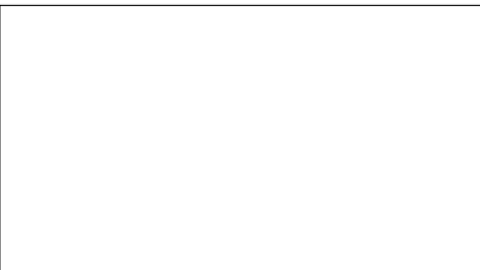
STUDENT A

Student: _____ Date: ____/____/2023

MY MONSTER

	My monster is _____.
	It has got four arms, two legs, two
	ears, one eye, one mouth and one tooth.

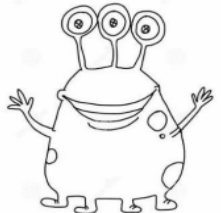
MY FRIEND'S MONSTER


--

STUDENT B

Student: _____ Date: ____/____/2023

MY MONSTER

	My monster is _____.
	It has got three eyes, two arms,
	four legs and one mouth.

MY FRIEND'S MONSTER



Appendix 2 – Task 2

Student A

 Susie	
 Bob	
 Pat	
 Tim	
 Harry	
 Kate	

Student B

 Susie	
 Bob	
 Pat	
 Tim	
 Harry	
 Kate	

Appendix 3 – Task 3

Student A

Name	Bob
Age	9
Birthday	04/10

Name	_____
Age	_____
Birthday	_____

Student B

Name	_____
Age	_____
Birthday	_____

Name	Sofia
Age	12
Birthday	02/11

Appendix 4 – Observation Grid

Observation Grid – Interview (4th grade)

		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6
Focus	Level						
Task Achievement	Had difficulties in carrying out the task						
	Carried out the task but with some difficulties						
	Carried out the task successfully and with relative ease						
Vocabulary	Insufficient or inappropriate vocabulary that hindered communication. Resorted to L1 most of the time						
	Range of vocabulary sufficient to complete the task. Use of a few words or expression in L1						
	Sufficient and appropriate range of vocabulary to adequately complete the task. No use of L1						
Fluency	Frequent and long pauses cause difficulties in communicating						
	Communicates even though there are some long pauses						
	Communicates effectively without long pauses						

Appendix 5 – Transcription codes

Transcription codes	Meaning
CAPITALS	L1 used
(...)	Pause
*	Hesitation
{nuance}	Sigh (hmm, han?)
[Silence]	Waits for peers' prompt

Appendix 6 - Questionnaire

Desenhe a carinha de acordo com aquilo que pensas em relação a cada afirmação.

SIM= 

MAIS OU MENOS= 

NÃO= 

Eu gosto de participar das aulas de inglês	
Sinto-me à vontade quando falo para toda a turma em inglês.	
Sinto-me mais à vontade quando falo em pares ou grupos pequenos do que para toda a turma.	
Trabalhar em pares pode ajudar-me a falar inglês melhor.	
Quando faço atividades em duplas, falo mais português.	
Quando faço atividades em duplas, falo mais inglês.	

Date: ____/____/2023

Student: _____