

This action research project had its genesis in a common problematic situation observed in the Secondary School in Ermesinde and in the EB1 Santa Cruz, in two distinct classes, the 10th J and 3rd B. This problematic situation is reflected in the reluctance shown by some students to express themselves orally or to avoid spontaneous oral participation. Even if the environment created in the classroom was friendly and relaxed (even playful, in the 3rd year class), some students showed embarrassment when asked directly by the teacher. However, despite their resistance to oral participation, it was found during an initial observation phase that the students felt that talking was the most important skill in learning a foreign language. It was also found to be a convergent opinion in both groups that it was easier to talk to a colleague or within their peer group than with the teacher and that an oral presentation before the entire class was perceived as intimidating. Students surveyed about the strategies that have positive effects in developing their speaking skills said they liked to work with songs and communicative games.

The research results show that information gap exercises were an effective tool in the development of oral skills of students in 10th and 3rd year. The strategies used in both groups were similar, suggesting that these exercises cut across different age groups, becoming an advantageous working tool from which students benefit in foreign language classes.

The communicative approach in the classroom

The main aim of the communicative approach to teaching and learning is to achieve competence in communicating in a foreign language in all its components. Thus, to communicate is to use a whole range of knowledge, know-how and attitudes. The

communicative competence of a speaker is constrained by a wide knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and several paralinguistic aspects of the target language.

Within the framework of communicative competence in a foreign language, the Common European Framework of Reference states that in order to accomplish their communicative intentions, learners mobilize overall skills and combine them with a communicative competence specifically related to language. In a narrower sense, the communicative competence comprises linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects. Communicative competence should include knowledge and performance because, in practice, these terms do not exist separately.

In an article on communicative tasks, Nunan pointed to key characteristics of the communicative approach, namely the emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the foreign language, the introduction of authentic materials in the context of learning, creating opportunities for students to focus not only on the language but also on the learning process itself, the use of student's personal experiences as important contributions in the classroom and the attempt to link language learning in the classroom with its activation beyond the classroom (Nunan 279).

Although these are guidelines for the communicative approach, when developing my project I wasn't trying to meet the potential or actual communicative needs of the students who are learning a foreign language. Quite the contrary, the tasks given to students were not chosen according to a real situation outside the context of the classroom. Following the curriculum of the 10th year (German) and the Guidelines for English in the Primary School (3rd year), I chose the grammatical and lexical items to work with and I selected the materials and activities that I considered to be more effective to achieve my goals.

Long defines information gap exercises as those tasks that require the exchange of information among participants (qtd. in Pica and Doughty 307); each one has information that is unknown to the other, but both need it to accomplish a given task. It emphasizes the mandatory nature of the information sharing that occurs in a reciprocal manner, thus creating conditions for students to adjust their speech and to maintain consistency of content.

So, what I intended with my research project was to develop students' awareness of what they already know about the linguistic system of a foreign language, demonstrating that it can

be applied in communicative contexts in real life. In possession of basic language skills, including some vocabulary and structures, I wanted students to feel confident and able to establish dialogues / conversations in the target language. To achieve this objective, I created activities to develop students' self-confidence in the context of the classroom, developing their comfort with the foreign language and the possibility to overcome difficulties of inhibition or shame.

The anxiety and reluctance in speaking

A study by MacIntyre & Gardner shows that anxiety negatively affects learning and performance, indicating a close relationship between anxiety levels and their students' proficiency in acquiring a foreign language. According to Tobias (1986), anxiety can work as a mental block to cognitive performance in its three phases: input, processing and output (qtd. by MacIntyre and Gardner 255). An increase in anxiety, which is typically associated with feelings of low self-esteem and fear of failure, can hinder the performance in the foreign language.

The anxiety in language, a kind of anxiety associated with specific contexts of language learning, can arise from several factors, according to the frames of reference specific to each learner. The context of the classroom itself may represent an environment likely to cause anxiety in some students, since it involves frequent assessments.

As pointed out by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, "performance in any foreign language can challenge the self-evaluation of the student as a competent communicator and can cause reticence, self-awareness, fear or even panic" (Horwitz *et al.* 128).

As far as performance anxiety is concerned, other authors offer a list of potential sources of language anxiety, which can be personal and interpersonal anxieties, the opinion of the learner about learning foreign languages, the teacher's opinion about the foreign language teaching; the actions of teacher and student, the procedures of the classroom, and the assessment in the foreign language.

The process of teaching and learning a new language often challenges the personal identity, the social and cultural development of the learner, in which cognitive and affective factors, directly linked to their personality, often play an important role. The tolerance of

differences, the willingness to take risks and to be exposed to the other, the anxiety, inhibition, motivation and self-esteem are some of the inherent factors of the learning process.

With no intention of disregarding the personal traits of each student, forcing those students who do not like to speak, even in their native language, to do so, I consider the strengthening of the oral fluency to be extremely important. By developing oral skills, even inhibited students observe and develop grammar, pronunciation, fluency, facial and body posture.

The relevance of the use of information gap exercises

Information gap exercises, developed predominantly in pairs, involve the exchange of information from one element to another, that is, each student will have information to share with a colleague, so that the task they have been proposed is successfully accomplished. This was the strategy I chose to develop the ease of students in the production of oral speech, for numerous reasons. Besides allowing a broad exchange of information, it makes students concentrate on the information they are encouraged to share, making them both producers and receivers of discourse.

It also encourages the development of socialization skills, which are very important in the 1st cycle of basic education, promoting a spirit of mutual help and solidarity. The motivation for carrying out this type of exercise is high, since the students have a reason to talk to each other, encouraging the use of structures and vocabulary they already know and offering the same speech opportunities to all students.

Another reason is that these exercises are conducted in pairs, which means they are less intimidating to shy or embarrassed students, who do not expose themselves to the whole class. It facilitates the creation of a comfortable and uninhibited classroom environment, thereby increasing the students' self-confidence and well-being towards the target language.

According to the Guidelines for English Teaching in the 1st cycle, the teaching and learning of foreign language aims at the progressive appropriation of language specific skills, respecting and promoting the development of generic and developmental skills and fostering the integration of language in other curriculum areas (*Orientações 9-10*). Again, information gap exercises

show their relevance, since they are easily adaptable to a variety of activities which include vocabulary, reading, drawing or maths.

As far as the role of the teacher is concerned, the idea is to become just a facilitator of communication, providing the necessary material for the activity to take place. After that, she is the organizer of the activity, giving instructions to students, correcting any errors and ensuring that the activity is progressing as planned. In terms of effective communication, it is the students who are conducting the activity and performing the main interaction; the teacher assumes the role of moderator for more insecure or less autonomous students.

Information gap exercises in the classroom context

Information gap exercises were introduced into the research framework of the acquisition of foreign languages by Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991), in an attempt to clarify issues related to input and interaction. Since that date they have been reliable tools for gathering information. The origins of information gap exercises may be referred to by teaching, by taking root in the classroom, in activities that ask students, for example, to find differences in images, to order sentences or stories, to complete maps and tables (Brumfit and Johnson 1979; Ur 1981, 1988, qtd. in Pica, Kang, and Sauro 302). As performers of these activities, students engage in the foreign language in a functional manner, focusing on the meaning and use of the target language, cultivating an appetite for learning. In an approach that favors the use of form, the information gap exercises can be developed to encourage students to devote greater attention to specific linguistic structures.

Too often in the classroom, while performing certain tasks, students who are listening are not actually participating, sharing or exchanging information among themselves and practicing their language skills. Quite the contrary, they tend to disperse their attention, especially if the interaction that is taking place is beyond their ability to process language. However, if all students, without exception, feel a practical need to know information that others hold, their attention will not wander and their language practice time will be extended.

According to Nakahama, Tyler, and van Lier, a number of studies on interaction in foreign language teaching demands that, in the case of non-native speakers, unstructured interaction

provides few opportunities for language development when compared to a more controlled interaction, which converges to a specific and well defined target (Nakahama *et al.* 378). In fact, studies have found that controlled, task-based interactions, particularly those with a single result, promote more opportunities for language development than less structured activities, whose purpose is more open. In contrast, in poorly structured exercises students can experience difficulties in communication because they lack the lexical knowledge of form, which inhibits and restricts them, causing frustration and resistance to the use of the target language.

Verbal interaction is an important aspect in the process of acquiring a foreign language. For example Long (1985) and Ellis (1994), quoted by Nakahama, Tyler and van Lier, concluded that this interaction becomes relevant when the linguistic information becomes more obvious to the learner (Nakahama *et al.* 379). More recently, Izumi and Bigelow (2000), also quoted by the authors mentioned above, added two additional factors involved in verbal interaction and language acquisition, the student's attention and production (Nakahama *et al.* 379). Information gap exercises focus primarily on the informational level. There is information that will be exchanged through the use of primary aspects such as lexical items or a certain grammar structure. The end result of this type of exercise is unique, common and convergent, allowing less space for doubts and uncertainties.

The intention of this work, focused on information gap exercises with non-native speakers of English and German, was to move the students' attention to the form and meaning, with exercises that presupposed oral interaction and the development of five distinct aspects:

- a) vocabulary: groups of words, vocabulary related to a defined topic.
- b) form: framing questions and answers.
- c) pronunciation
- d) the overall competence, referring to a speech content and ability
- e) reduction of anxiety and increase of self-confidence.

Since the purpose of the exercises I proposed was, in most cases, to complete charts, students concentrated on understanding the words spoken by their classmates and on producing their statements correctly, to make themselves understood. Since the interventions of each element of the pair are short and are characterized by the repetition of lexical items and

structures, both had the opportunity to interact several times during the performance of the activity.

The information gap exercises were developed in the classroom, in a controlled environment in which tasks were carefully explained and the expected results were uniform and easily verifiable.

The research process

After an initial phase of contact with both schools and classes, of informal and simple observation, and a second stage of drafting a plan for data collection, which used questionnaires and observation grids as research tools that allowed me to draw some conclusions, it became easier to define a theme to work and to choose a method to do it.

I had the opportunity to apply in one English class (3rd Year students at EB1 de Santa Cruz) and one German class (10th Year Students at ES de Ermesinde) information gap exercises, in an attempt to get answers to the research question I set out to investigate: *what is the contribution of the information gap exercises in the development of oral skills in students of foreign languages?*

The first cycle of my action research project started with the presentation of a theme, which included vocabulary and grammatical structures. I will begin by describing the activity implemented in the class of German.

The activity object of study, performed at the end of class, consisted of a communicative game, known for being one of the students' favorites to play in their leisure time outside school. It intended to activate the interest and motivation of students and simultaneously maximize the students' speaking time. To implement this activity in class, cards with different clothing items were used, coloured with four different colours. The aim of the game, played in pairs, was that each player got a set of the same garment in four colours. For this, each student had to ask his colleague, e.g. *Hast du einen roten Rock?* (Have you got a blue skirt?). If the player had the item of clothing requested, it would be delivered, otherwise it would give the deck to try their luck. Each student would form one question at a time.

The interventions of the students were noted down on an observation grid, in real time. The categories used for observation grid were chosen in order to record specific behaviors of students, relevant to the subject of study of this project, including their interest and ease when facing an eminently communicative activity, which sought to determine whether they could apply the vocabulary related to clothing and the structure presented in class.

After analyzing the observation grids related to the activity it was necessary to re-evaluate the strategy applied and the level of difficulty presented to the students. The class showed great interest in this activity, demonstrating understanding of the game's instructions and respecting the rules set in advance by the teacher. The students participated and were interventional, never trying to miss their turn to speak or delaying the normal flow of the game; they reacted positively, showing no inhibition. However, as far as grammatical accuracy is concerned, the results show that only one student managed to do it mostly correctly, while three students missed 4 out of 10 questions and two students missed 3 of the 10 questions they have asked. Analyzing the students' pronunciation during the game, four of them had 50% or more interventions with good pronunciation and made only two pronunciation errors in 6 out of 10 questions. It is also important to emphasize the use of mother tongue, which wasn't used by three students, which was little used by two students and used four times out of ten by another student.

Regarding the activity conducted by the English class students, it was an information gap exercise in which students, interacting in pairs, had to complete a table with the number of fruits that the colleague said / possessed. The aim of this task was to promote the practice of the structure "... How many have you got?" / "I've got ...", plurals and to consolidate vocabulary related to numbers and fruits. Based on data collected through observation grids at the beginning of the school year I concluded that only six students in this class felt inhibited and anxious when they needed to express themselves orally in English. Thus, although the whole class did the information gap activity, I was observing these six students in particular, because they needed a more focused intervention. From the six students who constituted the total sample, two showed some concern with the fact of asking the question and giving the answer in English, showing insecurity and reluctance in speaking. Interestingly, only one of these students

demonstrated not to recognize the name of the fruits listed in the table, which made it impossible to understand the question and, consequently, led to failure in working out the answer. To overcome this difficulty, he used his mother tongue.

In the second cycle of my action research project I worked with the class the topic *Wetter* (Weather), which represented a positive factor; the topic was easy for students to understand which increased their self-confidence. Insisting on a student – student interaction, I proposed two distinct activities. In the first one, students in possession of small cards with pictures depicting the weather, asked a classmate "*Wie ist das Wetter heute?*" (What's the weather like today?), hoping to find a card with a similar picture, to make a pair.

In the second activity, three students received grid A and the other three students received grid B, both incomplete, with the months of the year and three world cities, with different weather conditions in different seasons. The task was to ask their classmate "*Wie ist das Wetter im Januar in Berlin?*" (What's the weather like in January in Berlin?), drawing the symbol the classmate said, for example, "*Es regnet*" (It's raining). In this activity, students were expected to formulate the question correctly, distinguishing the preposition used with the months of the year and with the names of towns, recognizing weather vocabulary and drawing the symbol in order to complete the table. Again, the implementation of the activity was noted down in an observation grid. The class reacted favorably to the German communicative games, showing interest, at ease and participating in the activities with a posture that showed motivation. Five of the six students were secure in using the lexical items and structures involved, only one student showed some uncertainty in the identification of weather icons. The six students were able to formulate the question and give the answer without making grammatical errors, seeming fully aware of the difference in the preposition. Half the class performed the activities with proper pronunciation and none of the students used the mother tongue during the tasks, which shows some growth and maturity in terms of foreign language and perception of the communicative purpose of the activity.

At the end of the second cycle of action research, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire in which they had the opportunity to express their opinions about the communicative activities that had been proposed, keeping the principle of confidentiality and

anonymity. Together with the observation grids, this questionnaire was an important assessment tool for understanding the effect of information gap exercises in the development of students' oral skills.

The activities performed by the 3rd Year English students in the second cycle of the action research project included handing out worksheets, with Grid A and B. I decided to keep the exercise typology because, especially with younger students, establishing routines and habits is extremely important. In this particular aspect, I do not mean social routines or socializing, but the routines with cognitive function, which according to Vygotsky work as organizers of cognition in the dual point of view of the representation of the task and its mode of resolution.

The activities were more ambitious in terms of language knowledge, as students were supposed to know vocabulary related to games, hobbies and sports, should recognize that through pictures, the days of the week and should be able to express preferences using the structure "Do you like ...?" Thus, taking turns, students asked their classmates, for example, "Do you like playing computer games on Monday?" and drew the correct symbol ("I love / I like / I don't like"). Keeping the methodological options selected at the beginning of this project, the implementation of the activity was noted down on an observation grid.

The data analysis demonstrated that activity maintained the students' interest and motivation. The two students who in the first cycle of this action research had shown disinterest and uncertainty showed as very receptive to the task. Only one student failed to use the structure accurately, the same student who could not verbalize the structure in the first cycle of this action research, asking the question incorrectly and keeping the error, despite hearing the partner using the correct structure. Only one student used the mother tongue, which represents a significant decrease compared to the first cycle of this action research, in which five students persistently used Portuguese during the activity.

The German class

The less encouraging results obtained in the first cycle of the action-research with the German class are explained by the fact that the activity was too ambitious for these students' level. In

fact, to ask the question correctly, students had to recognize the garment, the colour, they had to identify the gender of the word, which could be feminine, masculine or neutral, and finally had to form the question using the accusative case. There was actually too much to take into account for these students, who despite having already felt at this stage some peculiarities of the German language, still lack an opportunity for further practice.

As a global assessment of the activity, I consider that the grammatical and pronunciation errors made by students didn't hinder their communicative activity. All, without exception, were able to interact with the classmates in a motivated way. However, those students who didn't feel confident about the pronunciation or the grammatical structure revealed an evident unwillingness to ask the question, so I felt that this first cycle of action research had not fully accomplished the previously established objectives.

Thus, the option taken in the second cycle of action research was to simplify the information gap activity, based on two reasons. Firstly, the results obtained in the first cycle of action research, had not been entirely positive. Secondly, the decrease in students' motivation and the consequent need to prevent the spread of the belief that German is a "difficult" language.

The interpretation I make of the second cycle of this action - research allows me to make very satisfactory comment as it was possible to register an increase in security with the language and a very substantial reduction of the use of mother tongue as a strategy to support learning and performing tasks.

Also the results of the questionnaire corroborate the interpretation that was made from data collected by observation grids, confirming the positive results of activities with a gap of information as potential development tool of oral skills in foreign language students, particularly by increasing levels of confidence and ease, fluency and predisposition to oral communication.

The English class

The data obtained in the first cycle of the action-research allowed a positive assessment of the activity, which was warmly welcomed by the entire class and the majority of the six target students in this study, who achieved an uninhibited and conscious interaction with their peers.

The encouraging result obtained in the first cycle of this project led me to increase the degree of difficulty of the exercises offered in the second cycle of action research, both in terms of linguistic exponents and in the scope of the exercise.

The performance of students in this study during the second cycle of action research was even more positive than that recorded in the first cycle. The disinhibition with language that all students developed over the school year was evident in the implementation of the information gap exercises proposed, whose mode of operation was very well accepted and assimilated by the students. The natural willingness for oral communication expressed by students in this age group allied itself with the internalization of English as their own language of communication in the classroom.

The increased levels of trust in using the language, the attempt to improve the correct use of structures and the decrease in the use of L1 allow me to conclude that this second round of action research also constituted a positive contribution in developing the oral skills of this English class.

The initial fear that students might not interact was not confirmed. The information gap exercises proved to be an activity that reached all learners, helping them to develop their communication skills and thus making them more confident to assert their knowledge in foreign languages.

The initially set aims to develop vocabulary, structures, pronunciation, global competence, to decrease anxiety and to increase self-confidence were achieved in general. In further lessons, students repeated questions and answers worked previously, using a different interaction, usually led by the teacher, which resulted in a significant activation of their linguistic memory, inviting them to participate and interact orally. This procedure also confirmed the efficiency of the information gap activities in promoting the learners' oral fluency.

The relevance of using closed response exercises was also confirmed as a way to increase safety and awareness that the knowledge you have, even if it seems to be insufficient, is already enough to hold a conversation in a foreign language.

I have also confirmed the possibility of using information gap exercises in different lesson stages, either in the lead-in to review the previous class, in the phase of consolidation of

topics or in the final production stage. Its eclectic nature is also revealed in the ease with which it allows cross-curricular activities, allowing the exchange of different areas of learning and knowledge, an important characteristic when working with students in the 1st cycle of basic education.

Conclusion

Students were given the opportunity to develop their ability to communicate and interact in the target language, using their personal interests as a form of motivation, trying to link the language learning in the classroom with its activation beyond it. With the tasks I proposed, I did not bring real life into the classroom. However, a real complexity of vocabulary and structures was constructed that students will use in real communicative situations. Thus, provided that the interaction is not true, it seems to me that the pragmatic aspect cannot be measured in this action research project. However, little episodes occurring outside the context of the classroom demonstrate disinhibition with the target language and willingness to communicate.

I can refer a student of German, that said "*Es is kaltheute*" (It's cold today), demonstrating that she has learned to apply the knowledge acquired in the classroom to the real context as indeed it was a very cold day, and to have overcome the anxiety the oral statements caused her at the beginning of the school year. Also, the students of English showed, in real life settings such as study visits, motivation and willingness to display their knowledge of English, not hesitating to keep a dialogue with a couple of English native speakers, showing spontaneity and knowing how to use the foreign language in real life.

As teacher-researcher I felt encouraged by this action research project, which I think has been quite engaging. I found myself constantly reflecting on my practices, taking into account the difficulties the students felt and the specific contexts of each class and these thoughts have been reflected in the attempt to achieve a better practice. I believe that the type of activities proposed effectively contributed to the development of oral skills in students ■

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