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LEARNING

TO LEARN ENGLISH TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPEAKING SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CUBA

APRENDER A APRENDER INGLÉS DIRIGIDO AL DESARROLLO DE LA EXPRESIÓN ORAL EN LA EDUCACIÓN SUPERIOR CUBANA

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the role of teaching Language Learning Strategies (LLS) to non-philological university students in the context of the new language Policy in Cuban universities. Students at graduation must prove to be Independent Users of English, which is equivalent to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). From the application of achievement tests, surveys, observation and document analysis, it was possible to determine that students at this level used a very limited repertoire of language learning strategies that did not favor the development of speaking skills. Therefore, the aim of this work is to promote the use of language learning strategies in order to develop speaking skills in A1 level students of English. The results obtained demonstrated the effectiveness of the applied system of tasks. The repertoire of LLS used by the students increased; in addition, there was an improvement of the students' speaking skills in English.

Keywords:

Language Learning Strategies, tasks, speaking skill, proficiency language level, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo aborda el papel que juega la enseñanza de estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas (EAI) para estudiantes universitarios no filólogos en el contexto del perfeccionamiento del inglés en las universidades cubanas. Los estudiantes al graduarse deben demostrar ser usuarios independientes del idioma inglés, lo que equivale al nivel B1 del Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCER). A partir de la aplicación de exámenes, encuestas, la observación y el análisis de documentos se pudo determinar que los estudiantes de este nivel empleaban un repertorio muy limitado de estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas que no favorecía el desarrollo de la expresión oral. Por consiguiente, el objetivo de este trabajo se orienta promover el empleo de EAI para desarrollar la expresión oral en inglés en los estudiantes del nivel A1. Los resultados obtenidos demuestran la efectividad del sistema aplicado, en tanto se amplió el repertorio de EAI que empleaban los estudiantes y se observó una mejoría en la expresión oral de los estudiantes en inglés.

Palabras clave:

Estrategias de aprendizaje de idiomas, tareas, expresión oral, nivel de competencia lingüística, Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas.

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays as a consequence of the global changes that have going on, English has become a Lingua Franca, therefore learning this language for a competent professional is almost an indispensable condition. The most updated bibliography and scientific publications are written in this language.

Participation in international events, the exchange with foreign experts within multidisciplinary teams integrated by specialists from diverse parts of the world and the constant communication that all this implies, requires an adequate command of English language. It is for this reason that learning this language is an essential element for those who hope to reach high positions on the labor market. In this sense, English proficiency for future university graduates represents an instrument of work and culture in social and professional activities.

In order to develop English language skills in Cuban Higher Education a new policy is being currently applied. This policy states that all students at graduation must be Independent Users of English language, which is equivalent to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Council of Europe (2002).

The application of the new language policy in Cuban Higher Education implies the formation of groups by language levels; depending on the students' proficiency. As consequence, students are compelled to do greater effort, and show more commitment with their learning process, so that they could become more active participants in their own professional training.

In this new context, pedagogical practice should be directed towards training students in learning to learn skills, allowing them to develop greater interest and retention of content, as well as establishing their own guidelines for learning the foreign language. In this sense, language learning strategies (LLS) are an element of particular importance, because they help to the gradual development of the student's thought and cognitive independence.

From the educational practice, interviews, surveys and observation to classes, it was determined that A1 level students at the University of Cienfuegos show:

- Lack of knowledge about the learning strategies they can use to learn English and to develop speaking skills.

- Insufficient repertoire of language learning strategies.

- Inadequate organization and planning of the ideas they express orally during the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language.

- Poor language skills development mainly speaking.

- The above expresses the need to promote the use of language learning strategies in A1 level students of English in order to contribute to the development of language skills, mainly speaking. In this sense, the authors set themselves the following **objective**: to promote the use of language learning strategies in order to develop speaking skills in A1 level students of English.

DEVELOPMENT

As it is well known, speaking is one of the four linguistic skills involved in the development of communicative competence, and one in which the greatest difficulties are presented by university students. In order to address its study, it is necessary to define it first.

Howarth (2001), provides a definition in which what is expressed is the product of cooperation between two or more individuals: *"speaking is a bilateral process involving real communication of ideas, information or feelings".* (p. 41)

Luoma (2004), defines it as "*an interactive process of meaning construction that involves the production, reception and processing of information. Its meaning and form depend on the context in which it takes place, including the participants, the place, and the purspose to speak".* (p. 2)

On the other hand, Abd EL Fattah Torky (2006), understands it as *"the student's ability to express themselves orally in a coherent, fluent and appropriate manner in a meaningful context".* (p. 34)

In one way or another these definitions take into account speaking as a process in which two or more individuals communicate ideas orally, information, moods (negotiate meanings), in a given context and in a fluent, appropriate and coherent way.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Language (2002), considers activities in which speaking skills are involved in as: *expression activities* and *interaction activities*. In expression activities the language user produces an oral text that is received by one or more listeners. For example, make public announcements (information, instructions, university lectures), speaking based on note-taking, written text or visual elements (outlines, images, graphics,), speak spontaneously, etc.

These activities play a significant role in the academic and professional fields. In order to be able to express themselves, the students must know how to: plan and organize a message (cognitive and metacognitive strategies), formulate a linguistic statement and articulate the statement in

a coherent way. That is, the student needs to use LLS to help them develop successful speaking skills.

At the international level, authors such as Monereo (1994); Pozo (1996); Bernard (1999), have carried out research on the training of students in the acquisition of learning strategies in general education. The results obtained by these authors have demonstrated the need of teaching LLS and to deepen on the differentiation between some of their conceptions.

In Cuba, authors such as Solís (2004); Wong (2005); and García (2010), have carried out research on the subject of learning strategies at different levels of education and from different perspectives and areas of knowledge. Their studies have been aimed at two main areas: expressing how teachers can teach strategies to their students and verifying those LLS students use.

In languages specifically, Oxford (1990), established principles for teaching LLS that are of paramount importance, recognizing that deeper studies should be conducted in that regard. Murcia (1993); and Richards & Lockhart (1995), have also investigated the subject in the teaching of foreign languages. Similarly, Cohen (1996), refers to methods for investigating language learning, language use strategies and language learning strategies. He also proposes a classification of learning strategies related to language skills that is significant for the purposes of this research. The criteria expressed by O'Malley and Chamot (1996), who propose metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies in their research, recognized the necessity of the study on how strategies can be taught to students. The evaluations of Macaro (2014), were also taken into account, since he establishes the close relationship between tasks, strategic behavior and linguistic knowledge.

There are also several Cuban authors who have studied language learning strategies. Among them, Moreno (2000); Casar (2001); Concepción (2004); Bermúdez (2010); and Veitía (2013), have recognized the need to take into account LLS for the development of language skills in the apprentices. In most of their conceptions they refer to three large groups of strategies that include metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies. However, none of the previous authors proposed an integrated conception of the three groups of strategies. For Bernal (2008), on the other hand, the interdependence between cognitive, metacognitive and socio-effective strategies is evident, assuming cognitive strategies as the central axis. His studies focus mainly on the development of oral communication in English language in students of medicine. However, he does not take into account the levels of the CEFR and his proposal is not based on TBLT (Task Based Language Teaching).

Several authors state their definitions of strategies. For Rubin and Thompson (1994 quoted by Lessard-Clouston (1997), strategies "contribute to the development of the language system that the learner constructs and directly affects learning" (p.1). For Bernard (1999) "a learning strategy is equivalent to a conscious, organized and controlled set of processes carried out by apprentices in order to reach a goal involved in solving a complex and new task" (p. 20). For Oxford (2003), are "specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing their skills in the foreign language" (p. 8). For O'Malley and Chamot (1996), language learning strategies are: "special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help themselves to understand, learn, or retain new information". (p. 1)

Out of all the previous definitions, the authors of this paper assume the definition formulated by Cohen (2012), for this author, the language learning strategies of the learner are "thoughts and actions, consciously chosen and operationalized by language learners, to assist them in carrying out a multiplicity of tasks from the very onset of learning to the most advanced levels of target-language performance.

There are also several classifications of learning strategies a number of authors have provided their taxonomy of LLS. In general, according to Cohen (2012), most of the classifications are subscribed to one of the following: strategies for learning and using the language, strategies according to their functions and finally according to the language skills. For example: Cohen (1996), differentiates between LLS and language use strategies (LUS). The former is referred to as: those that are used with the explicit aim of helping learners to improve their knowledge and understanding of the foreign language. It also states that they are used by students to facilitate the resolution of learning tasks and to personalize the learning process, a criterion that is shared by the authors of this paper.

This work assumes the classification established by Cohen (2012), in which he associates the LLS with the linguistic skills, in this way it will be easier to assimilate and use by the students of level A1. This classification is stated below:

1. Strategies related to listening.

2. Strategies related to speaking.

- Strategies for exercising speaking.

- Strategies for starting conversations.

- Strategies for when the appropriate word or phrase cannot be found.
3. Strategies related to reading comprehension.

When applying empirical methods (documentary analysis, participant observation, survey and interview) and performing triangulation, the authors arrived at the following regularities:

- The official documents ruling the teaching-learning process address the need to teach LLS to students, but do not say how to do it.

- Most of the A1 level students do not know what the LLS are and how to use them to develop their skills in English.

- Although the students do not know what LLS are, they use some of them in speaking, though the majority with very low frequency.

- The teachers of the A1 level of English do not have theoretical knowledge on the LLS; nevertheless, in an empirical and incidental way they orient the use of some strategies to their students. Professors also indicated that speaking is the language skills with greater difficulties in the students' performance.

After the literature review and the application of the research methods and techniques, the authors determined that a possible solution to this situation was to develop a system of communicative tasks to enhance the use of LLS in a way that would contribute to the development of speaking skills.

A system of communicative tasks was elaborated associated with the subjects of the 10 units of the series **face-2face** level **Starter (A1**) created in 2009 by the publishing house Cambridge University Press; this book constitutes the basic bibliography used in level A1 at the university. The objectives, topics, vocabulary, grammar and communicative functions it addresses are according to those of the A1 level of the CEFR.

The system of tasks created is comprised of eight communicative tasks; those are either of interaction or of expression, and have been associated with the LLS. The tasks in its structure are composed of: theme, objective, LLS to be fostered, actions, operations and evaluation (Iglesias, 1998). The phases of the task are those set forth by Benítez (2011): preparation for the task, execution of the task and phase of control and evaluation. Each task has an objective (depending on the general objective stated in the system of tasks) which, in turn, is derived from the objectives stated in the course syllabus and that correspond to the descriptors of the CEFR for level A1. Each stage specifies the actions and operations carried out by both the teacher and the students. In the tasks, the

LLS are introduced gradually and taking into account the students' needs. As we move through the system, the LLS that are necessary to use from the already presented and practiced are taken up again. At the end of each task, a self-assessment activity is proposed on the contents and skills of each unit. This activity (Progress Portfolio) is similar to the one that appears at the end of each unit of the book only that has been enriched with the strategies that have been learned and / or employed in the tasks. At this moment, a metacognitive reflection is carried out by the students, under the guidance of the teacher, about the strategies they are already able to apply and at the same time how they have helped them to develop speaking skills. The final task of the system leads students to evaluate the LLS they are already able to use on their own and how useful they have been. Details of each phase of the proposed tasks are given below:

Task preparation phase:

- Motivate and familiarize students with the topic of the lesson and the LLS.

- Prepare the students in the necessary linguistic contents, establishing the links between the known, which must be activated for the execution of the task and the new knowledge.

- The Activity Orientation Basis (AOB) allows students to prepare themselves adequately to achieve the goal of the communicative task. The strategies that can be used are carefully oriented. The teacher models the LLS and offers levels of help depending on the needs and the individual characteristics of his/her students.

Task execution phase:

- Interaction or oral expression is carried out by putting into practice the LLS that can be used.

- The use of the foreign language is encouraged in order to cover information gaps and solve real problems.

- In this phase the teacher's intervention will be brief, and the participation of the students will be more spontaneous and independent, until they become closer to the conditions of actual use of the language. During this phase the prevailing interaction must be student-student.

- This stage varies depending on the type of task being performed (interaction or expression) and the level of assimilation achieved by students.

Control and evaluation phase:

- Must be determined the degree to which the goal proposed by the performance of the task has been

achieved, whether from the point of view of the development of the skill or the usefulness or not of the LLS used.

- Evaluate to what extent there was progress in carrying out the activities.

- The students should be encouraged to determine in which areas they should work more, which should be further developed, and thus lead to new post-task activities that promote independent study and cognitive independence.

From the application of the system of tasks it was possible to verify that the students incorporated into their learning process strategies that they had not been aware, so that their repertoire was expanded. Also, the internalization of the concepts of learning strategies was a novel element in influencing the transformation of their ways of learning the language. We found a favorable psychological state in the development of learning strategies. Students were given an intrinsic motivation and a desire to continue studying both English language and strategies for learning.

It was also verified the need to continue to deepen the work with the LLS and its extension to students of higher levels. Likewise, a superior performance in the speaking skill was evidenced, shown in the lessons as well as in the evaluations and exams done. The applied system resulted in greater efficiency for English language teaching at the A1 level, because it achieved qualitatively superior results both for the work of the student and for the work of the English language teacher. In addition, the results of the different instruments applied showed that the system of communicative tasks implemented fulfilled its objective. The system is perfectible and flexible, so that teachers can adapt it to apply it to other educational contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The research methods applied showed that: students arrive at the university with difficulties in speaking in English and without having the most effective learning strategies they can use to develop it.

Students need to familiarize themselves with CEFR descriptors so that they can self-assess as they move forward in their English learning process.

Students express satisfaction with the linkage of LLS to their teaching activities.

There is an increase in students' performance levels in speaking skills.

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