

# ROLE PLAY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AS STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE SPEAKING SKILL IN TOURISM AND LANGUAGES STUDENTS AT INSTITUCIÓN TECNOLÓGICA COLEGIO MAYOR DE BOLÍVAR

## EL JUEGO DE ROLES Y LOS DEBATES COMO ESTRATEGIAS PARA MEJORAR LA HABILIDAD COMUNICATIVA EN ESTUDIANTES DE TURISMO E IDIOMAS EN LA INSTITUCIÓN TECNOLÓGICA COLEGIO MAYOR DE BOLÍVAR

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**Abstract:** This research was developed at Institución Tecnológica Colegio Mayor de Bolívar, with third semester students from the tourism and languages program. The main objective of this project is to improve the speaking skill of the students through the implementation of role plays and discussion questions. To develop this research, we started with the identification of the problem, used observations and took field notes, used surveys to confirm our observations, performed pedagogical interventions and observed again, and, finally, used student focus groups to determine the outcomes of our intervention. We found out that both role plays and discussion questions can serve as vehicles to enhance the student's speaking skill, especially if, when implemented, those strategies are applied in accordance to the findings of this paper.

**Keywords:** speaking, role plays, discussion questions, improvement, class participation, English for Professional Purposes, tourism.

**Resumen:** Esta investigación fue desarrollada en la Institución Tecnológica Colegio Mayor de Bolívar con los estudiantes de tercer semestre del programa de Turismo e Idiomas. El objetivo principal de este proyecto es mejorar la habilidad comunicativa de los estudiantes a través de la aplicación de juego de roles y preguntas de discusión. Para desarrollar esta investigación, comenzamos con la identificación del problema, realizamos observaciones y tomamos notas de campo, aplicamos encuestas para confirmar nuestras observaciones, realizamos intervenciones pedagógicas e hicimos nuevas observaciones, y por último, utilizamos los estudiantes del grupo de debate para determinar los resultados de nuestra intervención. Se comprobó que, tanto el juego de roles como los debates, pueden servir como vehículos para mejorar la habilidad comunicativa del estudiante, sobre todo si, cuando se implementen, se apliquen estas estrategias de conformidad con las conclusiones de este trabajo.

**Palabras claves:** comunicación, juego de roles, participación, debates, inglés con fines profesionales

\*This article results from the research project "Role Play and Discussion Questions as Strategies to Improve the Speaking Skill in Tourism and Languages Students at Institución Tecnológica Colegio Mayor De Bolívar" to obtain the Graduate Certificate in English Language Teaching at Unicolombo.

## Introduction

Institución Tecnológica Colegio Mayor de Bolívar is a higher education institution which offers technical and technological programs. This public university located downtown in Cartagena de Indias aims to provide education to people who get to the institution with the purpose of learning languages in order to have good performance in the touristic labor context. One of its programs is Tourism and Languages, developed through six semesters. This research will be focused on the third semester. The group is integrated by twenty five students, four male and 21 female. Students are between sixteen and twenty years old. Most of them are from Bolívar; hence they share a very similar cultural identity. The English subject is mandatory, it is developed in four months; classes take place three days a week, two hours per day. This adds up to a total of 96 hours per semester.

In this community, there is a need for learning communicative English focusing on the speaking skill. The institution has strong ties to the tourism industry, as it was the first university to offer a major in Tourism and Languages. Therefore, Colegio Mayor de Bolívar has the responsibility of training students with the necessary abilities demanded by the market.

In order to identify students' needs, a survey was applied to the group about their preferences and interests related to language skills with a special emphasis on speaking. This survey was answered by twenty five third semester students of Tourism and Languages at Colegio Mayor de Bolívar. The results of this survey show that students do not work much on the speaking skill, even though they think that is the skill they must improve. Most of them just practice speaking during the class, and they do not feel comfortable when they have to speak.

Although Tourism and Languages students will interact with people from different places, based on the needs analysis, it is clear that students are usually afraid to speak in English. Therefore, it is of great importance to implement different strategies in order to help them acquire the oral skills to communicate effectively in the context. Kayi (2006) states that through several strategies, i.e. role play, discussion questions, brainstorming, storytelling, interviews, among others, the speaking skill can be improved. According to this theory and based on the needs analysis, this research will be focused on the improvement of the speaking skill through Role plays and Discussion questions as classroom activities.

Since there is a special necessity about the improvement of the speaking skill, we wonder: How can role play and discussion questions be implemented to improve the speaking skills in third semester tourism and languages students at Colegio Mayor de Bolívar?

Developing the speaking skills, demands activities that promote oral language, and interaction. Teachers have made use of many strategies and activities to achieve that goal. Among others, role plays and discussion questions are well known tool and are widely used nowadays. Kayi (2006, p.1) states that, "Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. In brief, ESL teachers should create a classroom environment where students have real life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language". The use of role plays in classrooms serves the purpose of promoting speaking according to Kusmana (2011): "A Role play is a highly flexible learning activity which has a wide scope for variation and imagination. It uses different communicative techniques and develops fluency in the language, promotes interaction in the classroom and increase motivation" (p. 4). Spontaneous role plays are a good way to ensure certain degree of non-rehearsed responses in the students. Students have to receive the input they need to complete the task. Once they have the information, clear instructions have to be given. Roles have to be assigned and a topic defined.

Discussion activities also serve the purpose of improving students speaking skills. According to Segura (2012), "The Discussion activities give learners the opportunity to speak more freely and express themselves. It is helpful to structure a discussion activity by giving learners enough information about what they will be talking about and giving them enough time to think about what they want to say" (p. 53). Both discussion questions and role plays are excellent strategies to create an environment in which speaking happens in a more efficient manner. Getting the students to talk can be achieved not only by using these two strategies, but they are certainly quite useful to achieve that goal, provided they are properly and consciously applied.

Our main objective is to improve the speaking skill in third semester tourism and languages students at Colegio Mayor de Bolívar through the implementation of role play and discussion questions.

## Methodology

First we identified a group of third semester students from the Institución Tecnológica Colegio Mayor de Bolívar. The group is integrated by twenty five students, four of them male and twenty one female. This population was chosen since they already have some basic English knowledge and by taking into consideration that the following semester they must start their hotel internships and have oral interaction with foreign people, the third semester is a crucial moment to enhance the speaking skill. To achieve the objective, qualitative research was conducted.

The data has been collected through a four-stage investigation. The first stage consisted of class observations before the planned interventions, in order to analyze students and teacher's behavior during the English class, and identify the strategies and activities implemented to improve the language skills. Four classes were observed and we used field notes to collect and organize information. As a second stage a survey was applied to the twenty five students, the objective was to identify the students' preferences and interests related to the language skills with a special emphasis on the speaking one. We used a structured questionnaire as an instrument to collect information, formed by one open question and seven closed questions which deal with students perceptions about their needs related to language skills. The third stage comprised the Pedagogical Interventions. Five classes were taught to 25 students from third semester, developed from April 1<sup>st</sup> to May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Even though classes had a special focus on speaking, the other skills were also practiced. The topics introduced were related to the touristic labor context: hotel services, the check in and check out process in a hotel, touristic places, dealing with customers' complaints, and food.

Finally, the last stage was based on students' interviews, in which we used a focus group to identify students' perceptions about the pedagogical interventions and improvement of their communicative skills, especially the speaking one. Ten students participated in focus group, and seven open-ended questions were asked to them in a written and oral way.

## Results

### Field Notes Before the Pedagogical Interventions

We used field notes as an instrument to report the observations made before and during the pedagogical interventions. They are presented as evidence from the first and third stage of the research process.

The first stage was the observation process. The objective was to analyze students and teacher's behavior during the English class, and also the kind of activities and strategies used in the class. We observed four classes, and the following aspects were identified:

- Students did not participate much in class.
- They looked afraid to speak in English.
- The activities were mostly based in reading and writing.
- Oral communication was not emphasized.
- The book was strictly followed and there was no room for extra material.
- Speaking activities were highly controlled.

- Students seemed to feel at ease during the class.
- Students worked in groups and there was order and closeness among them.

It is important to mention that classes took place from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. The students start their classes at 7:00 am. Therefore, when they had the English class they seemed tired and even hungry. It was normal to see them asking for permission to buy something in the cafeteria or to go to the bathroom. Some students even stayed outside the classroom for long periods of time.

## Surveys

Taking into consideration the data collected from the observation, the second stage of the study was focused on students' surveys; we used this technique in order to know students perceptions about their needs and interests related to the English learning process. This was useful to confirm the aspects observed. The results are showed in Figures 1-8.

Figure 1  
*Reason to study English*

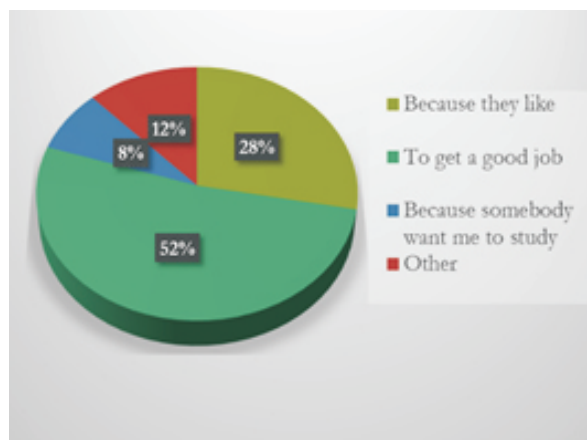


Figure 2  
*Preferences about group or individual work*

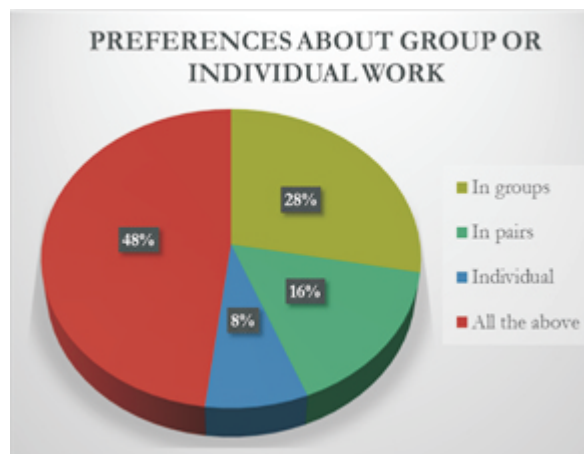


Figure 3

*Activities students would like to have in the English class*

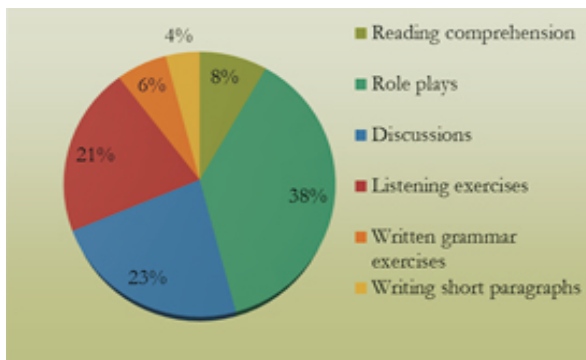


Figure 6

*Speaking practice*

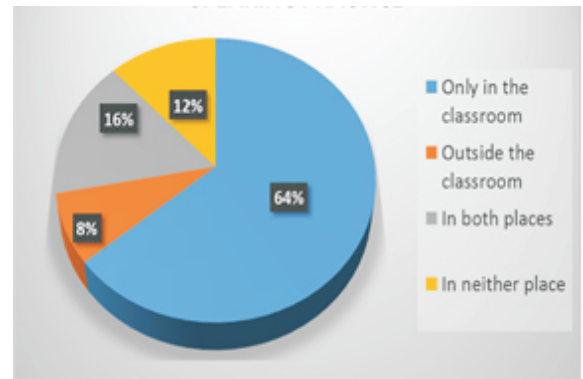


Figure 4

*Activities to practice*

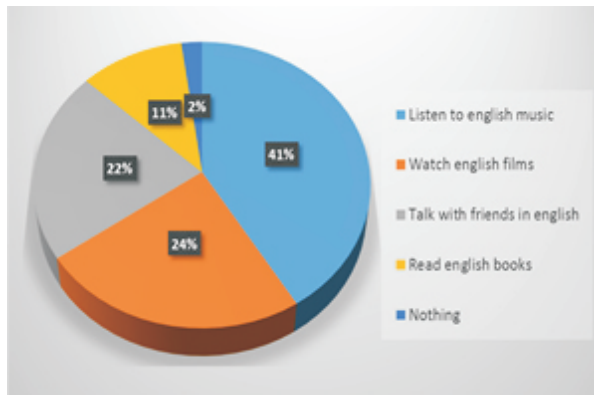


Figure 7

*Do you feel comfortable speaking in English during the class?*

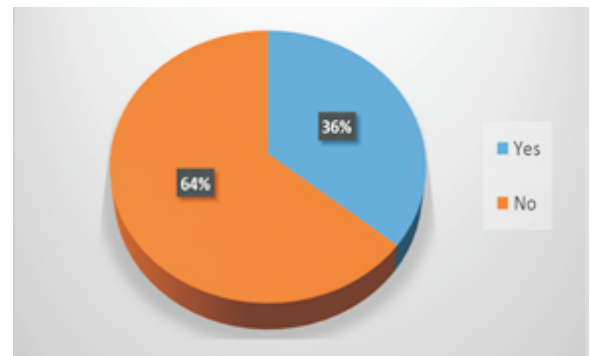


Figure 5

*Language Skill to improve*

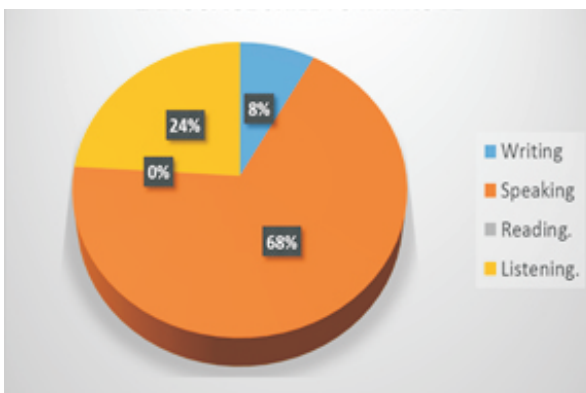
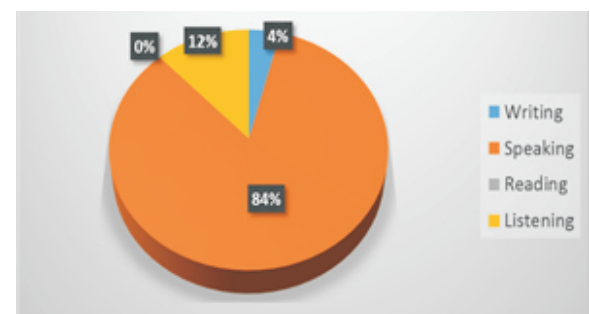


Figure 8

*What do you think is the skill you will use the most when you finish your major?*





As the survey was analyzed, some conclusions arose:

A large part of the students decided to study English to get a good job, which is an important motivation to learn. Most of them do not have any preference about working in groups, individual or in pairs. They would like to have more speaking and listening activities in class instead of grammar and written exercises. As an extra practice outside the classroom they prefer listening activities, and they do not work much on the speaking skill, even though they think that is the skill they must improve. Most of them just practice speaking during the class, and they do not feel comfortable when they have to speak. Finally, they think the skill they will use the most when they finish their major is speaking.

### Field Notes During the Pedagogical Interventions

We used this instrument to collect the information observed during the development of the pedagogical intervention. Lessons were designed with a similar structure: class must start with a discussion question as a warm up about the topic to present. Then, teacher introduced the topic while maintaining the interaction with students. They had listening or reading exercises as activities to practice; for example, sometimes the teacher played a video and students had to answer questions orally or discuss about the situation presented. At the end of each class, students had to present a role play related to the lesson in order to show they really learned and also to practice oral communication in simulated real life situations. The role plays were spontaneous. Students chose a paper from a bag, which described a specific situation, and they had to play that role immediately, in front of the class. These activities were assigned in pairs and the situations required were based on tourist labor context, such as hotels and agencies, among others. We have some video clips as evidence of those activities and some scripts are presented in this document. Homework was assigned in all classes, focused on writing activities and free production about a given question or situation. To evaluate the process an oral test was applied before and after the pedagogical interventions, based on a rubric and the grading standards established by the institution.

The following are the main aspects extracted from it:

- Student's participation in terms of speaking improved as they were asked to express themselves orally about a particular topic.
- Student-student and student-teacher interaction increased.
- Though all four skills were addressed, the speaking skill was emphasized during the class.

- Discussion questions allowed the students to freely participate, without being asked to, therefore their confidence improved.
- Role plays performed during the class not only showed that students had understood the topic, but also created an atmosphere of joy.
- Even the students who were not actively participating in role plays paid attention to their classmate's performances.

The pedagogical intervention made a positive impact in the classes. This can be evidenced when we compare the field notes taken before and during the interventions. For both teacher and students, the class seemed to be more productive and enjoyable. As an example, before the pedagogical interventions students did not participate, and they seemed to feel at ease during the class; but, after the interventions student's participation improved, taking into consideration that discussion questions allowed the students to freely talk, and role plays not only showed that students had understood the topic, but also created an atmosphere of joy.

### Video Clips

We made use of role plays and discussion questions to foster oral communication among students. During the pedagogical intervention, we recorded their performances and the following scripts are examples of what they did in class.

#### Script 1. Discussion Question Sample

What kind of food you should and should not eat to stay healthy?

Student 1: You should eat less sauces and fast food because they have high calories and is not healthy.

Student 2: You should eat more salads and grains. You shouldn't eat fast food they have high calories.

After a few more interventions, the students were asked to make recommendations to one of their classmates.

Students 3 to student 4: I think you should eat more healthy food. You shouldn't eat hot dog, pizza, fried chicken, and etcetera. These food is unhealthy and it had high calories, and also you should drink soda, avoid soda...

Student 4 to student 5: If you want to lose weight, you should drink green tea accompanied with fruits in the morning and milk is a good option also. In the lunch, try to reduce to portions and

please avoid the empanadas.

- Several other participations occurred during this exercise, to the point that it took longer than anticipated. Students felt confident while expressing themselves. Involving the students and having them direct the advice to a particular person, seemed to work as a motivator.

Discussion questions about a new topic activated previous knowledge. It was easier to introduce new vocabulary and even grammar after students answered a question related to the topic, due, in part, to the fact that students with a higher level of English made use of some the vocabulary that was going to be taught in the class.

#### Script 2. Role Play Sample

This strategy was a key to achieve our goal. We implemented spontaneous role plays instead of controlled role plays. Students were given a situation in which they had to represent a character. Before getting to the task, students received all the necessary input. How they used it, and to what extent, depended entirely on the students and on how the situation evolved. Had the students had time to prepare the role play, as it happens in controlled role plays, their performance would have probably been much better. Since they were told to engage in a conversation right after knowing what the situation was, the amount of language produced was not abundant; however, it clearly resembled a real life conversation, in which prior preparation is not possible.

The following script is a role play sample which was set in a touristic information office, between a clerk and a visitor, who wanted to know about the main touristic attractions in the city.

Clerk: Good morning miss, what can I help you?  
Visitor: Good morning. I need to know about the places to visit in the city.  
Clerk: Yes. There are many places in Cartagena. You can go to the Torre del Reloj or the walls. Also, you can visit the San Felipe Castle.  
Visitor: What is the San Felipe Castle?  
Clerk: Is a military building very old, like 400 years.  
Visitor: Is it near here.  
Clerk: Yes. But you should take a taxi.  
Visitor: And how much it is the tickets?  
Clerk: 20.000 pesos.  
Visitor: Thank you, sir.  
Clerk: You're welcome.

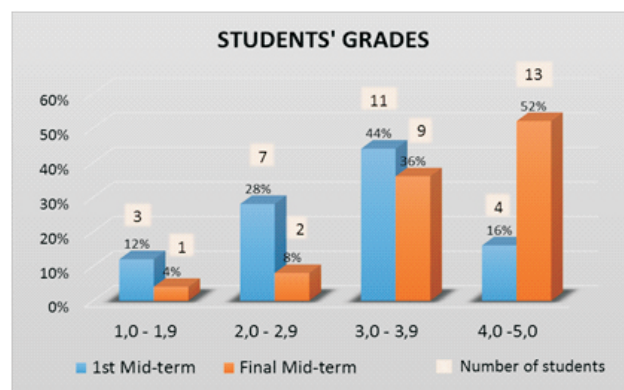
Role-plays encouraged students to talk. Even when mistakes were made, communication was still possible. There was also something that called our attention that can't be seen in the transcripts. That is the

interest the whole class showed when their peers were performing. In some audios it is possible to hear them correcting their partners as they speak. All in all, role plays served their purpose.

#### Oral Tests:

During the semester students have to take three oral exams, which are graded from one to five, depending on how well students perform and whether or not they achieve the competences set for each exam. These competences are mostly based on fluency, accuracy, vocabulary and grammar. This study was conducted right before the second midterm oral exams. We decided to compare the results obtained in the first and the final exams because at the time the second midterm had not yet taken place. The following graph shows the results of the twenty five students' oral tests before and after the pedagogical interventions.

Figure 9  
*Students' Grades*



The results shown in the Graphic 9 before the intervention evidence that many students did not achieve the competences, while just a few were above the average. Three students (12 %) had scores between 1 and 2; seven students (28 %) between 2 and 3; and only four students (16%) had scores in the 4-5 range. Nearly half of the students (44 %) got scores that placed them in the middle of the scale.

On the other hand, the exams made after the intervention show that most of the students (13) achieved the top of the scale. While before the intervention only four students had this level of competence, the number increased in nine students after the intervention was applied. Moreover, the number of students at the bottom of the scale was reduced, from three to one, and from seven to two in the 1-2 and 2-3 grade range, respectively. The number of students in the middle of the scale showed less variation passing from 11 to 9.

The final exam was conducted by the researchers, who followed the rubric and the grading standards established by the institution.

### Interviews

Once the pedagogical interventions finished, a written interview was applied to a focus group of ten students, aiming to identify the students' perceptions about the pedagogical interventions through a set of seven open questions.

The first and second question referred to whether or not they liked the activities in the four classes and how they felt during the intervention. All of the students said they liked the activities. Some mentioned that classes became less boring and more dynamic. "I like the classes, they were really fun..." To most of them the class was "easy to understand," which, in turn, made them feel more confident. The third question dealt with the improvement they experienced during the intervention. Mostly, the students said they were able to speak and communicate more, as one student put it "I lost shy." Questions four and five specifically referred to the students' opinion about the implementation of role plays and discussion questions during the classes. Students said both strategies helped them "participate more" and "understand the topic even better." In the sixth question, the students were asked whether they would like to have more classes like the ones that were implemented and why. All of them answered positively. Several reasons were provided. "Classes are more interesting and exciting," said one student; "we use a different methodology and classes are less monotonous," said another.

Finally, students were told to give any suggestions about other strategies that could be used to improve their speaking skills. The use of videos, music and more role plays prevailed in their answers. "Videos and more role plays" and "activities with songs..." were some of the answers.

### Discussion

We as teachers are familiar with the problems students face when they are learning English. First they complain about how little, if at all, they can understand the target language. Once they receive enough input and understanding becomes easier, producing language orally turns into the next big challenge. This is one challenge they do not overcome easily. Since oral communication is so important and, unfortunately, equally difficult, based on the problem identified at Institución Tecnológica Colegio Mayor de Bolívar, this study aims to improve the speaking skill in Tourism and Languages students of third semester through the implementation of role play and discussion questions.

After observing some classes, it was evident that

students lacked the skills to communicate their ideas orally and confidently. It was common to hear them complaining "I know what to say, but I do not know how to say it in English." This was, of course, said in Spanish. In part, this was so because students were not used to speaking in English and also because they felt somehow afraid of making mistakes. Our first impression was confirmed later on, when a survey applied to the group showed that they did not feel comfortable when they had to speak in English. However, that same survey showed that students were well aware of how important it was for them to develop the speaking skill, which they considered was the one they had to use the most in future real life situations, especially in their jobs.

This study took place in third semester students, who already had some knowledge of English. Moreover, some of them were above the average. That is why we decided to start the intervention using discussion questions. Through this strategy, previous knowledge is activated and students are encouraged to participate. Another strategy fundamental to our study was the implementation of role plays. By simulating real life situations, motivation and interaction are encouraged.

Taking into account the benefits that both strategies may bring into the classroom, we wondered about how can role plays and discussion questions be implemented to improve the speaking skills in third semester tourism and languages students at Colegio Mayor de Bolívar?

Implementing the discussion questions at the beginning of every class was decided by the researchers, as said before, to activate previous knowledge and to engage the students into participating. Throughout the investigation, several discussion questions were asked, and we observed that students participated more and gave more accurate answers when the discussion questions covered certain features, such as:

- The question must be directly related to the topic being taught.
- It must be an open question.
- Both previous and new vocabulary must be included in the question.
- Paraphrasing the discussion question is advisable to make it understandable.
- The discussion questions should generate controversy in order to foster student-student interaction.

When we formulated the questions complying with the features given above, the students participated even more, and at one point the answers were directed toward another student or the class in general, and it was



the teacher's job only to keep certain order in the student's interventions and provide scaffolding, but the motivation came from the question and the class itself.

During the observations of the classes prior to the intervention, we identified that, even though speaking activities took place, they were also highly controlled, that is, the teacher intervened in all of them, correcting at every stage and making sure his directions were followed to the letter. There was a lot of imitation, but not real communication.

We decided to give a different focus to the activities, especially to the role plays. There were directions, as to make sure students understood what they were expected to do. Other than that, students had the freedom to make mistakes and to choose what the best way to approach the task was. Putting them in charge also created a sense of responsibility and cooperation.

After seeing how the role plays best served their purpose of improving the students' speaking skills, we now can say that role plays should be implemented in accordance to the following guidelines:

- They must be implemented at the end of the class, after students have the necessary input.
- Situations and the roles must be assigned by the teacher, but the speech must be constructed entirely by the students.
- More attention must be paid to the communication goal, rather than grammatical or lexical aspects.
- Whenever some mistakes are detected, if these do not impair communication, they must be corrected at the end of the exercise.
- If during the role play communication reaches a stalemate, the teacher should and must scaffold the process.

The video clips are evidence that students actively participated and they were interested in the activities, even when they were not performing in front of the class. We observed that some students orally corrected their peers when they were making mistakes, without this being considered rude or causing lack of confidence. Since all of them were involved in the process, peer correction seemed more natural.

To sum up, these speaking enhancing strategies proved their value when oral exams were applied at the end of the semester. The students showed more knowledge and confidence when speaking. There was more negotiation of meaning between the teacher and the students, who managed to make themselves

understood. This improvement was also observed during the subsequent interventions, which got better and better as the strategies were regularly applied

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