



Exploring the Students' and Teachers' Perceptions about Classroom Activities

Explorando las percepciones de alumnos y profesores sobre las actividades en el aula

Gabriela Geovanna Guevara Enríquez*

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Abstract

For many years, the use of activities inside and outside the classroom in order to promote an activate learning has been very common. A challenging area in the field of education is the acquisition of languages so there no doubt that learning a second or foreign language is not easy for all learners. In fact, some have to face different barriers in the process such as lack of learning support and motivation. Nevertheless, some authors have advocated that using the appropriate activities in classes can make a big difference in the results of those students who are interested in learning a second or foreign language. The present paper has chosen English as the foreign language since it is considered one of the most requested language in Ecuador where this study has been carried out. Besides, it would be also important to mention that the aim of this paper is to help teachers realize if they are choosing their classroom activities considering their students' learning styles and interests.

Key words: effectiveness, activities, learning styles, interests, motivation.

* Master in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.
Universidad Estatal de Guayaquil, Guayaquil,
Ecuador.
E-mail: gabriela.guevarag@ug.edu.ec
ORCID: 0000-0003-0375-0758.
Google Scholar

Resumen

Durante muchos años, el uso de actividades dentro y fuera del aula para promover un aprendizaje activo ha sido muy común. Un área desafiante en el campo de la educación es la adquisición de idiomas. No hay duda de que aprender un segundo idioma o una lengua extranjera no es fácil para todos los estudiantes. De hecho, hay algunos que tienen que enfrentar diferentes barreras en el proceso. El presente trabajo ha elegido el inglés como lengua extranjera, ya que se considera uno de los idiomas más solicitados en el Ecuador donde esta investigación ha sido desarrollada. Además, el objetivo de este trabajo es ayudar a los profesores a darse cuenta de si están eligiendo las actividades utilizadas para impartir sus clases a través de los estilos de aprendizaje de sus estudiantes y sus intereses.

Palabras clave: eficacia, actividades, estilos de aprendizaje, intereses, motivación.

Introduction

The use of classroom activities in the learning process, especially in the acquisition of a foreign language (FL), has been receiving widespread attention since they are considered as active learning strategies. The use of them will depend on the teachers' main objective in order to pursue students' achievements.

There is no doubt that exists a variety of different activities that can be implemented in the classrooms when teaching a foreign language such as pair/group work tasks, listening to tape recordings in order to fill in some gap-exercises, and the use of flashcards to learn new words, among others. These activities have been used over the years and have given good results when acquiring a second language at any level such as school, high school, or university.

However, it is necessary to explore what the teachers' and students' perceptions of those activities are. Both should converge in one direction which is the benefits for students as well as teachers. As a consequence, this study is crucial because it is the way to know how appropriate the classroom activities are and what improvements teachers can make from the results obtained.

Undoubtedly, learning a foreign language, English for example, is a challenge for some students. That is why, it is important to bear in mind different factors that might be affecting the acquisition of the FL. One of those factors is the insights that students may have related to the types of activities which are being implemented during their lessons. Anderman & Miggly (1997) claim that teaching methodology and details in the school system evoke effects in the learners' academic performance because the self-regulated learning requires orientation to be successful. Joy, environment, challenges, selection of topics, students' interest and participation in the selection of items to be studied are some of the details that are required.

Some studies have shown the advantages of classroom activities. For example: Moore (2011) thinks that classroom activities can (i) engage students in learning activities, facilitate learning by doing, and practice communication skills; (ii) provide many benefits, give immediate feedback to students, arouse a high degree of students' interest and enthusiasm, meanwhile allow teachers to work with a wide range of student capabilities, and allow experimentation with a model of the real environment (Huang, & Hu, 2015).

There is a light of evidence that taking into account the students' learning styles makes learning less difficult or frustrating. Of course, it is essential to know what students' weaknesses and strengths are, but it is also important to know what their interests are as well. In fact, Reid & Dixon (1999) mentions some of the benefits of increasing learners' awareness of their own learning styles: "higher interest and motivation in the learning process, increased student responsibility for their own learning, and greater classroom community. These are effective changes, and the changes have resulted in more effective learning" (p. 300).

"Learning style is the biologically and developmentally imposed set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others" (Dunn, & Griggs, 1988, p. 3). In other words, "they are considered as general approaches that students use in acquiring a new language or in learning any other subject" (Oxford, 2003, p. 2).

An outstanding fact to mention is that about 98 % of all new learning enters the brain through the senses (Jensen, 1997). As it was previously mentioned, every person has each own way or preference to learn. It can be through visual, tactile, or auditory experiences.

On the other hand, it would also be essential to consider the importance of the theory multiple intelligences (MI) at the moment of selecting the activities to be done in our lessons. According to Gardner (1985), there are at least nine types of intelligence and every person has all of them. However, not all those bits of intelligences have been developed by each individual. In other words, there are some intelligence in which we are weak as well as strong.

Some authors such as Arnold & Fonseca (2014), advocates that there is a relationship between the MI and the foreign language learning. In their study, they claim that teachers must use

different types of tasks to engage learners and help them feel more involved in their lessons. As a matter of fact, at the end, students' profiles will be more outstanding.

It is worth noting that the learning styles and the MI go hand in hand. That is why it is necessary to emphasize that every human being is capable to do many valuable things regarding his weaknesses which may affect his development in some ways during the learning process (Armstrong, 2009).

As the last point, it would be vital to mention a special key when acquiring a foreign language, it is 'motivation.' It is an essential component since it controls students' attitudes towards the activities they are asked to do in their lessons. Motivation refers to "the reasons underlying behavior" (Guay et al., 2010, p. 712). In other words, "it involves a constellation of beliefs, perceptions, values, interests, and actions that are all closely related" (Lai, 2011, p. 5).

Materials and Method

The aim of this study is to establish the level of relation between students' and teachers' perceptions of a group of classroom activities which are used in the acquisition of the second language. In order to carry out this study, the following question needs to be answered: What teaching and learning activities do teachers and students consider most useful and efficient in learning the second language?

Identification of variables in the objectives or research question that have been formulated: The following independent variables have been considered in this study: language competence; pragmatic competence; and types of activities.

The population used for data collection: The participants in the study are a group of 30 students from seventh grade as well as their teachers from English, Science, and Social Studies subjects, who agreed to take part in the investigation. Students received 18 weekly hours of classes distributed in 14 for Language Arts, 2 for Science, and 2 for Social Studies.

School context: Participants belong to Unidad Educativa Bilingüe Nueva Semilla which is a bilingual institution located in Guayaquil. At this school, even though students are close to second language since they are little kids, formal instruction starts when they are in third grade where they are induced by a Cambridge programme which is called Starters; Movers (A1) for fourth and fifth graders; and Flyers (A2) for sixth and seventh graders. At the end of the year, learners are assessed through those Cambridge exams, and they got the certificate if they prove they have reached the correspondent level.

Procedures for data collection: A questionnaire was conducted to students as well as their English teacher to make a comparison between the perceptions that both have on classroom activities.

Data analysis: A quasi-experimental design has been adopted in this study since the groups have been pre-established and the subjects have not been randomly chosen (Nunan, 1992). Besides, a Likert-like scale was used in the questionnaires; thus, quantitative data was provided. With regard to this, the SPSS programme has been used to get the mean and the standard deviation from the results. This analysis could be done using the Descriptive Statistics option from the programme. In this option, two commands were employed: The Frequency and the Descriptive Commands.

On the other hand, despite the obvious advantages of the questionnaires in identifying the students' and teachers' perceptions on classroom activities, there is also a disadvantage that appears regarding validity and reliability. Indeed, the problem starts when the participant is not sincere enough and tries to modify his or her answers to please the enquirer, to cause a good impression, or to obtain a greater degree of Social sanction (Madrid, & Pérez Cañado, 2001). Thus, in order to counter this issue, students were asked to explain their reasons and support their ratings in each item of the questionnaire.

Results

Once collecting all the data from the 22 activities included in the questionnaire, with it has been awarded considerably high scores, the most widely accepted are the following:

Table 1. Results of the questionnaire about the perceptions of effectiveness from some English activities

From Students' viewpoint	From teachers' viewpoint
1. Internet (4,90)	1. Project (5)
2. Vocabulary (4,87)	2. Visual Aids (5)
3. Pronunciation exercises (4,50)	3. Oral exercises (5)
4. Playing games (4,47)	4. Internet (5)
5. Visual aids (4,43)	5. Vocabulary (5)
6. Watching videos (4,30)	6. Watching videos (4,67)
7. Listening to songs (4,23)	7. Pronunciation (4,67)
8. Oral (interaction-teacher-students) (4,20)	8. Activities on the Sociolinguistics (4,67)

From Students' viewpoint	From teachers' viewpoint
9. Projects (4,17)	9. Culture (4,67)
10. Spelling activities (4,10)	10. Spelling activities (4,33)
11. Culture (4,07)	11. Strategies (4,33)

Source: author own elaboration.

The results can be interpreted considering the following rates:

Table 2. Rates used in the questionnaire

1	Of no importance
2	Of very little importance
3	Somewhat important
4	Very important
5	Important

Source: author own elaboration.

A group of 30 students, as well as their teachers, were asked to rate classroom activities. The average score obtained was the following:

Table 3. Students' perceptions about classroom activities

	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pair-work exercises	30	3,57	1,251
Group-work exercises	30	3,50	1,408
Data-gathering/interviewing foreigners on the street	30	2,37	0,890
Projects	30	4,17	1,117
Watching videos	30	4,30	0,794
Listening to tape recordings	30	1,97	0,765
Listening to songs	30	4,23	0,679

	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Playing games	30	4,47	0,507
Visual aids	30	4,43	0,679
Oral exercises (interaction)	30	4,20	0,847
Internet	30	4,90	0,305
Dramatizing	30	2,80	1,031
Oral comprehension exercises	30	1,90	0,960
Strategies	30	2,43	0,728
Reading	30	3,00	0,910
Written activities	30	3,83	0,791
Pronunciation exercises	30	4,50	0,682
Vocabulary	30	4,87	0,346
Grammatical exercises	30	3,13	1,042
Spelling activities	30	4,10	0,995
Activities on the sociolinguistics	30	3,13	0,629
Culture	30	4,07	1,015

Source: author own elaboration.

Table 4. Teachers' perceptions about classroom activities

	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pair-work exercises	3	4,00	1,000
Group-work exercises	3	3,00	0,000
Data-gathering/interviewing foreigners on the street	3	1,67	0,577
Projects	3	5,00	0,000
Watching videos	3	4,67	0,577
Listening to tape recordings	3	3,67	0,577
Listening to songs	3	4,00	1,000

	No.	Mean	Standard Deviation
Playing games	3	3,67	1,155
Visual aids	3	5,00	0,000
Oral exercises (interaction)	3	5,00	0,000
Internet	3	5,00	0,000
Dramatizing	3	2,67	0,577
Oral comprehension exercises	3	2,67	1,528
Strategies	3	4,33	0,577
Reading	3	4,33	0,577
Written activities	3	4,33	0,577
Pronunciation exercises	3	4,67	0,577
Vocabulary	3	5,00	0,000
Grammatical exercises	3	3,33	0,577
Spelling activities	3	4,33	0,577
Activities on the sociolinguistics	3	4,67	0,577

Source: author own elaboration.

From the evidence presented in this study, it would appear that in this English classroom, both students and teachers have a close relation considering their perceptions from the 22 activities which were part of the questionnaire.

According to the results, the 90 % of the students consider the Internet as a very important activity in the classroom, whereas the other 10 % think it is important only. In the same way, the 86,7 % of the class believe that vocabulary exercises are also very important. Finally, the 60 % of the students think that pronunciation is very important, whereas the 30 % believes it is important.

The percentages presented above have a very close relationship with what the teachers from this classroom think about. Regarding the use of the Internet, 100 % of the teachers agreed that it is very important in the classroom. Besides, the same amount underline the importance of increasing students' vocabulary. In fact, one of the reasons from one of the teacher was that in his opinion without an extensive amount of words in our vocabulary, even though students may know a lot of structures, they will not be able to communicate.

Something positive from these results is the great connection that exists between the teachers from these three different subjects and their students. It is evident the influence that the teachers have particularly in this classroom. Some of the reasons that the students gave for the questions were close to what the teachers think. One of them was vocabulary activities, for example, where both participants (teachers and students) coincide in its importance at the moment of expressing ideas or just simply communicate.

Despite all the positive conclusions, it is important to highlight a special fact that was observed with two of the variables from the questionnaire: strategies and sociolinguistics. It is worth noting that students were in some way not really sure about these two variables. Of course, before doing the questionnaire, students receive a brief induction about what they were supposed to do, and they were allowed to ask questions from the items they were not sure about. However, I still believe some of them just choose an option randomly. Indeed, most of them chose option 3 (somewhat important), perhaps as they were not totally sure, they just choose a score not too high but not too low.

Discussion

From what it has been shown in the results, there is a significant connection between both sides (students and teachers). It can be an advantage since it will help with the development of learners' skills as well as the increase of their language knowledge due to the implementation of these activities which from both viewpoints are the most appropriate when learning a foreign language.

Motivation plays an important role considering that students will feel engaged with the activities and their performance will be better. Thus, fruitful results will be obtained. In fact, motivation "energizes" human behavior and "gives it direction" (Dörnyei, 1990) and is a significant dimension in language learning (Gardner, 1985; Lightbown, & Spada, 1993).

Regarding the variable that was rated as one of the lowest in the questionnaire (Data gathering/ interviewing foreigners on the street), it would be beneficial for education systems to consider this kind of activity more relevant since students will have the opportunity to get in contact with a more "real language."

On the one hand it is understandable that educational institutions avoid these kind of activities because they are in charge of taking care of students; thus, it is a huge responsibility to let students go outside from school since there are many dangerous people or situations surrounding them. However, a possible solution could be to create that environment inside the institution. They can invite some foreigners who want to collaborate with the bilingual program and make a performance such as if they were on the street.

On the other hand, some learning centers do not pay attention to the previous activity since they think students can get in contact with foreign people by themselves. Sometimes it is because there are students who have the possibility to travel with their families to an English speaking country so that they are able not only to practice but improve the language. However, what they must bear in mind is that not all students have the same opportunities.

In further research, it would be strongly recommended that the items from the questionnaires must be according to the students' ages to avoid misunderstanding such as the one that happens with "strategies" and "sociolinguistics." In that way, the reliability of the study will not be affected, and we will be able to get objective results as possible.

It would be also a good option to do the study separately. That is to say to compare and analyze students' perceptions, but not with the whole teachers' viewpoints, but one at a time. So in that way, we can have a profound insight of what the perceptions are according to each subject.

Conclusions

It is undeniable that learning a foreign language, English, for example, can be a challenge for some students since there are some barriers that they have to learn to overcome during the process. However, it has been proved that when using the appropriate activities, outstanding results can be obtained.

The aim of this work has been to prove that it is not only important to choose activities that "as teachers" we tend to think they are fruitful for our students in one way or another, but rather to consider the students' learning styles as well as the use of the MI since learners may have different preferences when learning the language.

In the same vein, it is necessary not to forget the importance of motivation in the learning process, especially when acquiring a foreign language. There is a light of evidence that when students do not feel motivated, they will have more difficulties when achieving their personal goals in life. Regarding education, undeniably, motivation will help to make this learning process easier since it makes learners feel confident about what they are able to do.

It is universally acknowledged that every human being is a different world. Thus, it is quite simple to come up with the idea that every person learns differently, too. There is no doubt that sounds easy, but it is very demanding to prepare lessons with different kinds of activities in order to support the different styles that a teacher is supposed to have in the classroom. However, once more, it is our commitment which moves us to do the best in the profession that we decided to embark.

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