



## Voice Recording as a Resource to Increase Oral Production

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### Abstract

*This research paper describes an educational intervention strategy that was conducted at the Language Center of Universidad Veracruzana in Poza Rica, Mexico, to increase the oral production of English university students.*

*This strategy involves the development of 10 small tasks or projects (mini projects) over the course of Basic English level 1, in which students are asked to research certain information that is used to write a short paragraph in the target language subsequently recorded with a voice recorder software.*

*The main purpose of this project is to show the progress achieved by students who reported a very low ability to produce spoken English in a pre-test evaluation and who elaborated and recorded most of the mini-projects. So, we present a brief analysis of the audios produced by these students regarding pronunciation skills, and we also compare the official results of their final oral assessment with those students who showed the same characteristics in the pre-test evaluation but did not carry out any of the mini project recordings.*

*Findings from this analysis suggest a significant improvement in the oral production of students who recorded most of their mini projects as well as a better result in their final oral assessment. For this reason, we emphasize the importance of including this type of tasks or projects in language courses in order to promote opportunities for oral practice which help our university students strengthen their confidence to communicate and use the target language in all possible contexts that their future professional life might provide them.*

### 1. Introduction

Innovating in the educational field is a very important fact that all teachers at all levels should always take into account. Within our work in education, we have to search and research different types of innovative ways to present and transmit knowledge to our students, as well as different strategies that might help them get the tools they need for a permanent self-education.

The educational model adopted by the Universidad Veracruzana promotes the constant search of teaching-learning strategies where students are able to practice what they learned in class in real or simulated situations. Therefore, a number of language teachers have worked really hard using task-based methodologies in order to help students develop the four necessary skills in language learning: speaking, listening, writing and reading.

However, some of our university students who only study the mandatory basic levels of English (level 1 and level 2), have observed low levels of performance in their oral examinations. For this reason, this research work is mainly devoted to describe the implementation of a task-based instructional design that involves the elaboration of ten small projects or mini-projects.

So, we have divided this research report in 4 sections:

1. The background that describes the relevant recent work carried out for some teachers whose results conducted us to design a new task based methodology.
2. The methodology chosen for the implementation and evaluation of the new task-based design.
3. The results obtained which include a brief analysis on students' oral production progress derived from the voice recordings.
4. The conclusions reached at the end of the whole process.

### 2. Background

In 2009, the Universidad Veracruzana implemented a teaching strategy called "Proyecto Aula" (Classroom Project) to promote an institutional culture of continuous innovation in the teaching-learning process in order to consolidate its educational model and the skills or competences approach. The academic work produced by "Proyecto Aula" participants involved a big number of instructional task or project based designs with the aim at promoting students learning in real contexts.

Teachers from the different Language Centers of the University, including the Language Center located in Poza Rica, elaborated instructional designs mainly based in three tasks: the first two called



“complex tasks” and a final task called “integrative task” (Torres, 2011), one for each language syllabus.

Most of these designs were applied in different language courses and their results have been published in different forums and conferences (Torres, 2011, Madrigal, 2012, Arciga 2012), and all of them suggest positive conclusions regarding students acquisition of the four language skills, and some highlight positive results in students’ oral production when the task included oral presentations in front of the class. But the need for more oral practice opportunities within the tasks has also been regarded, which is why we decided to elaborate the new instructional design based in ten mini-projects.

### **3. Methodology**

For the evaluation of the new task-based instructional design, we considered the action-research methodology, which is an investigation strategy that begins from the very detection of a concrete educational problem that needs to be solved with a pedagogical treatment as a way to collect data that must be proved through an experimental form and consequently conduct to the transformation of an educational reality. (Latorre, 2003)

This methodology is used as a guide for teachers to reflect on the results they obtained after using the educational intervention strategy designed for the course. This analysis exercise supposes the continuous improvement of the teaching-learning process because it implies the documentation and testimony of all the work that has been carried out in class (ACET, 2010).

Action-Research is given through a systematic process that includes the next steps: Problem detection, diagnose, design of the intervention proposal, application of the intervention and evaluation. (Bizquerra, 2009).

In our study, after detecting the low oral production in our university students, we started the design of the mini-projects methodology. The written and voice recording evidence is briefly described below:

Project 1: An “introducing yourself” activity using personal information (Name, last name, phone number, e-mail).

Project 2: A “messy room” description using place prepositions.

Project 3: The introduction of a friend.

Project 4: The physical description and clothes worn by three friends in a picture.

Project 5: The time, place and activities some famous people are doing at the moment of speaking.

Project 6: The daily routine of three outstanding classmates using the simple present tense.

Project 7: Their house description with there is, there are and have.

Project 8: Their career description using Wh-questions with do/does.

Project 9: Their eating habits using adverbs of frequency.

Project 10: Their home abilities using can and can't.

After finishing the mini-projects design, we selected a group of university students enrolled in level 1 of the English as a foreign language course during the February-August 2013 semester, attending a face to face class that started at 12:00 pm and finished at 13:30 pm, from Monday to Thursday. The students presented a pre-test evaluation consisting on an oral interview in order to detect those with a low oral production and dismiss the ones who showed a high level of performance in this skill.

Then, we proceeded with the implementation of the mini-projects methodology having students solving and recording their projects right after the end of each course unit.

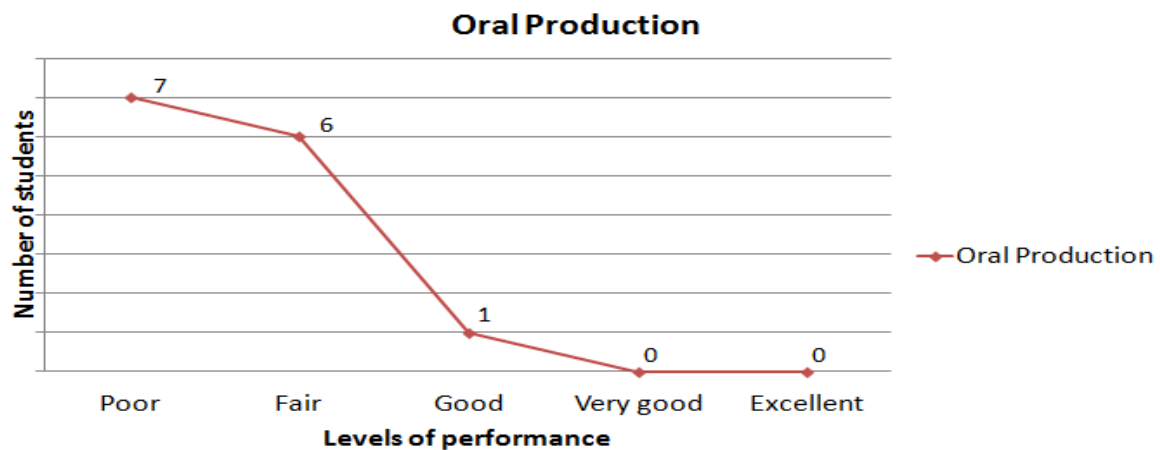
Finally, a post-test oral evaluation was carried out at the end of the course and students attended a single focus group session to share their opinions on the experience of task-based learning.

### **4. Results**

The results obtained with the mini-projects implementation are presented as follows:

#### **4.1 Pre-test**

The group of university students who participated in the pedagogical intervention was formed by 9 women and 5 men (a total of 14) enrolled in the English as a foreign language course level 1. All of them were students of different careers offered by the University in the campus of Poza Rica. Students were enthusiastic about participating in the study and showed curiosity when they knew about the intervention mechanics and the voice recordings. So, they all agreed to take the oral pre-test evaluation whose results can be observed in graphic 1.



Graphic 1. Pre-test results.

On graphic 1 it is possible to observe that most students obtained very low levels in their oral production. It was an expected fact because in most of the cases, the university students enroll for the English level 1 course because they have not acquired enough language knowledge during their basic education. Students who were able to learn the English language before starting their university studies tend to present a certification test or competency examination in order to avoid coursing the mandatory subjects of English levels 1 and 2.

#### 4.2 Intervention development and analysis

From the very first day of class, students were told about this research project and the importance of their participation elaborating and recording the ten mini-projects to develop the speaking skill. In each project, students have to make use of information about themselves or other people according to the subjects they have learned in class to write a short paragraph (60-80 words) or a short interview describing real life situations. Once the paragraph or interview is written, they have to voice record them using an iPod, a cell phone or any voice recording software they can get, as long as it is kept in an mp3 format. Then, they have to listen to their own performance several times before handing it to the teacher for revision.

The following table resumes the voice recording deliveries for each student and a brief analysis on their progress in pronunciation accuracy:

Voice recording deliveries /														
Pronunciation accuracy: ● Poor ● Fair ● Good ● Very good														
Voice Recordings	Students													
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Project 1			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 2	/	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 3			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 4			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 5			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 6			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 7			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 8			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 9			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Project 10			/	●	/	/	●	/	/	●	/	/	/	●
Total	1	1	8	4	3	10	4	2	9	9	1	6	10	7
Post-test level	—	—	VG	F	P	E	G	VG	VG	E	G	G	E	G

Table 1. Total of voice recordings made by students and pronunciation progress.

Even though students were enthusiastic in participating in this research project at the beginning of the course, only 2 of the 14 students delivered all the voice recordings. 2 of them delivered 9 recordings, 1

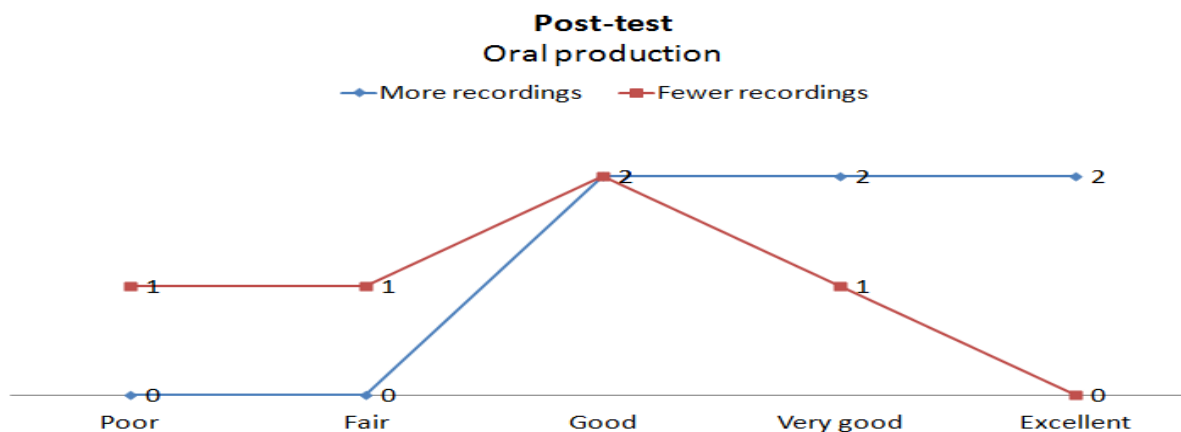
student delivered 8, 1 student delivered 7, and 1 delivered 6. The rest of them handed less than 5 voice recordings.

So, we present a very brief analysis on the pronunciation progress of those students who delivered most of their voice recordings (students 3, 6, 6, 19 13, and 14). Most of these students started with a poor pronunciation (red circles). Then, they turned to a fair pronunciation (yellow), and finally, they got levels good (blue) and very good (red). Student 13 got high levels of oral production in the pre-test, which is why he has presented high levels from the first project.

On table 1, it is also possible to observe the oral production post-test final results for each student at the bottom of the table.

#### 4.3 Post-test

The graphic below shows a comparative analysis between the results obtained by students with more than 5 recordings who are labeled "more recordings", and the students with less than five recordings who are labeled "fewer recordings". Three students were dismissed from this analysis: students 1 and 2 who didn't took the post-test, and student 13 who got a high oral production level in the pre-test (see table 1).



Graphic 2. Post-test oral production results.

The blue line represents the 6 students with more than 5 recordings and the red line represents the 5 students with less than five voice recordings. Students with more than 5 voice recordings obtained performance levels fluctuating between good, very good and excellent. Students with less than five recordings obtained performance levels fluctuating between very good and poor.

The analysis described above suggests that students who made more than 5 voice recordings obtained better results than students who carried out less than 5.

#### 4.4 Students' opinion

Finally, during an interview in a focus group session, students gave their opinions about their experience on working with a task or project-based methodology. Their opinions were all positive and they concluded that the voice recording strategy was a great support in the development of the speaking skill, because it provided them more practice opportunities.

### 5. Conclusions

In any field of education, the implementation of a new teaching-learning methodology implies a huge investment of time, money and efforts. It also implies breaking own paradigms, getting out of own comfort zones and innumerable successes and failures. Nevertheless, when real vocation exists, it is possible to do all of it, not just for adopting educational trends, but for the continuous search of strategies that help our students to get a significant, permanent, and autonomous learning, by teaching them in class and providing them with tools that can support them to seek the knowledge by themselves, going beyond the school syllabuses.

In language learning, it is necessary to keep experimenting with different strategies or methodologies, according to our students' necessities. Because the pedagogical treatment that seemed to be a good





strategy to increase the oral production in the students who participated in this research, might not be good enough for other students.

It is also important the analysis of the development in the rest of the language skills: writing, listening and reading. So, we recommend continuing the redesign and implementation of the task-based methodologies and we always welcome new ideas and suggestions.

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