



Practice and Development of Oral Skills through Self-recordings in EFL

Ana Guadalupe Torres¹

Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico¹

Abstract

The University of Veracruz considers the educational experiences (EE) of Language 1 and Language 2 as mandatory for all its students. One of these EE is English 1 which is offered in different modalities such as in-person, blended, virtual and autonomous.

The virtual modality has become relevant in recent years due to its flexibility in time and schedules. However, the practice of oral expression in this type of learning environment is often complicated for some students who have difficulties to practice the language synchronously.

Therefore, this research paper aims at describing an intervention project designed to provide asynchronous oral practice opportunities for virtual students. The strategy was carried out through the qualitative action research methodology and consisted of performing self-recordings of different conversations with the basic contents of the course in the target language to improve the pronunciation and fluency of the students.

The strategy resulted in a significant improvement of the participants' oral production as well as a good level of performance in their final exam and a positive opinion about this pedagogical intervention.

Keywords: *Self-recording, oral production, pedagogical strategy.*

1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) in educational programs represent a great support for teachers in the adoption of innovative teaching methods and techniques, achieving some positive effects on the learning process. Authors like Blin, (2004); Guo & Willis, (2006); Bozzo, (2012); Hernández et al., (2012) agree that ICT provides language students with great opportunities to become autonomous learners.

As a consequence of this, the educational model of the University of Veracruz, promotes the constant search for innovative teaching-learning strategies in which the student puts into practice the knowledge acquired within the classroom, either in-person or virtual, in real or simulated contexts.

Therefore, in the teaching of the English language, we have worked with different methodologies such as the communicative approach, which can be understood as a series of principles on the goals in teaching a language, the way in which students learn, the type of activities that facilitate learning and teacher-student roles in the classroom (Richards, 2006, p.2) and the task-based approach, where the student undertakes to carry out an activity to achieve an objective by making use of the target language (Van Den Branden, 2006, p.4). Through the use of these methodologies, students can develop the four skills in acquiring a foreign language: speaking, writing, listening and reading.

For this intervention project, it was decided to focus on the oral ability to support the students of the virtual modality to have a good level of execution in their final oral exam through self-recordings of conversations with the basic contents of the course in the target language.

Hence, the background and objectives that led us to the implementation of this design are presented first. Then, the methodology used to carry out the intervention is described and finally the results obtained that include an analysis of the execution of the students in their final oral exam as well as their opinion about the intervention.

1.2 Background

The educational model of the University of Veracruz is composed of four main areas that are: General Basic Training Area (AFBG for its acronym in Spanish), disciplinary training area, free choice training area and terminal training area

In the AFBG it is intended that students acquire knowledge and skills with multidisciplinary and contextual nature to be able to communicate effectively and lay the foundations for the study of a professional career through the educational experiences (EE) of Language I and Language II, Reading and writing, and Critical and creative thinking skills, which are mandatory for all students



enrolled in the different degree programs offered by the university. (Universidad Veracruzana, "Propósito AFBG", par. 1 and 2).

Learners who study the EE of English 1 and English 2 can do so through different modalities of study such as: in-person, blended, autonomous and virtual.

The virtual courses of English 1 and 2 are carried out through the Eminus institutional platform. Each course is made up of ten units where learners have to study the thematic contents, do practical activities and tasks as well as participate in discussion forums. Although the online learning process may lack oral practice (Hernández, A., et al. 2012), most students are able to develop this skill at a basic level by performing synchronous practices monitored by the counselor.

Oral expression is a productive skill and is defined as an interactive process through which meaning is constructed, and involves producing, receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994, cited by Vez and Bertani, 2018).

It is also one of the most difficult skills to teach (Vez and Bertani, 2018), mainly in the virtual modality where the student has fewer opportunities to practice the language than in the face- modality. Therefore, the implementation of carefully designed activities to support students in the development of oral expression is highly necessary (Ellis and Yuan, 2005).

The intervention project described in this study was carried out with students enrolled in the EE of English 1 in the virtual modality who, since the beginning of the semester, presented communicative difficulties and had problems to perform oral production practices synchronously with the counselor.

1.3 General objective

To describe the implementation of an intervention project for the practice and development of oral skills through self-recordings of conversations with the thematic contents of the English 1 course in virtual mode.

1.4 Specific objectives:

- Provide opportunities for oral practice in the English language asynchronously.
- Improve the pronunciation and fluency of students in the target language.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study was implemented using the action-research methodology; which, according to Latorre (2003), constitutes an inquiry strategy that starts from the detection of a specific problem to which a pedagogical treatment is applied in order to obtain data that must be tested experimentally to modify an educational reality. This method is done by collecting information in daily teaching practice and analyzing it with the objective of making decisions about how it should be in the future (Wallace, 2008, p.4).

We followed the procedure of Bizquerra (2009), which indicates that action-research is carried out through a systematized process that includes the following steps: problem, diagnosis, design of a change proposal, application of the proposal, and evaluation.

2.2 Problem and diagnosis

During the August-December 2018 period, a group of students presented serious difficulties to speak in the target language. As they did not have time to attend in-person sessions to practice this skill, it was decided to support them through an intervention project which is described in the following section.

2.3 Proposal of change

An intervention proposal that consisted of the self-recording of the conversations included in each of the course topics was designed. For this purpose, a free online voice recorder was available on the page: <https://online-voice-recorder.com/es/>. The conversations were written in a Word document for the students to study and were recorded by the course counselor with the objective that the students would listen and imitate the teacher's pronunciation.

2.4 Application of the proposal

To start with the application of the intervention proposal; a set of instructions, a Word file containing 10 conversations which included the main subjects of the course, and an audio of the dialogues was sent to the students through the institutional platform.



The steps to follow consisted of listening to the audio and reading the conversations several times to practice pronunciation. Instructions for the use of the online recorder software were also sent. This directions requested that they record several versions and select the one they considered to have a better pronunciation for submission to review.

2.5 Evaluation

The evaluation of the intervention was carried out through the development and analysis of the self-recordings, the results of the final oral exam, and the students' opinion about the intervention. These three moments are described in the results section.

2.6 Participants

In this pedagogical treatment we worked with 8 students of different faculties enrolled in the virtual educational experience of English 1 during the semester August 2018-January 2019. They presented problems to communicate in English and had serious difficulties to perform their practices in terms of oral skills synchronously with the course counselor.

3. Results

The results obtained at the end of the intervention focused on the development and analysis of the proposal, the final oral exam and the students' opinion about the project.

3.2 Development and analysis of the intervention

At the beginning of the intervention, participants were explained that they would make a series of recordings for the practice and development of oral production with which they would replace in-person work. First, an email was sent with the voice recorder software link and the explanation for using it. Once the students confirmed that they understood how to handle it, they were sent a Word document with all the conversations they would have to practice during the semester. Students should read the dialogues and make sure they understand all the suggested questions and answers contained in the document.

Subsequently, the recording of the conversations was sent with the instruction that they should listen to them and repeat them continuously with their own responses to practice and improve their pronunciation. Once students practiced enough, they should use the software to record the conversations as many times as they considered necessary until they heard their pronunciation similar to the one sent to them as an example.

The analysis of the self-recordings made by the participants is summarized below:

- Students showed enthusiasm for participating in the intervention.
- Some proposed using WhatsApp audio messages instead of the suggested software.
- Conducted and sent all conversations in a timely manner.
- Of the 8 participants, 2 presented good pronunciation, 4 regular pronunciation and two bad pronunciation.
- One of the students who presented poor pronunciation made the recordings again, showing a slight improvement.
- Regarding intonation, it follows that 5 of the participants practiced several times before recording their conversations since they imitated the intonation of the facilitator.
- One of the participants recorded their conversations at a very fast pace, but did not agree to record them again at a slower pace.
- It was found that some students corrected their own pronunciation errors during recording.

3.3 Final oral exam

The final oral exam for the EE of English 1 in the virtual modality consists of two parts. Part 1 is divided into two stages: personal questions and selective questions. In personal questions participants are interviewed individually about their personal information and in selective questions the student responds to a set of questions about a specific topic (daily routine, favorite food, weather, among others). Part 2 corresponds to a "role play" where the students, formed in pairs, make use of a card that raises a situation of daily life to ask and then answer questions each other.

This exam is evaluated by two teachers, the professor of the group that acts as an interlocutor and an examiner who only listens and assigns scores. For both, part 1 and part 2, the examiner evaluates property (use of grammar and vocabulary) and communication (pronunciation and fluency) with a



scale of value from 0 to 4 for each of the parts, giving a total maximum of 16 points, and the interlocutor only assigns an overall score of the student's execution with the same scale (from 0 to 4 points), adding a total of 20 points maximum.

The results obtained by the students in their final oral exam are shown below:

Students:	Part 1		Parte 2		Global mark	Total	Final grade of the course
	Property	Communication	Property	Communication			
1	3	4	3	4	4	18	8
2	4	4	4	4	4	20	9
3	4	4	2	3	4	17	8
4	4	4	2	3	4	17	8
5	4	3	4	4	4	19	8
6	3	2	2	3	3	13	7
7	3	4	3	4	3	17	8
8	4	4	4	4	4	20	10

Table 2. Results of the final oral exam.

Table 2 shows the results obtained by the participants in their final oral exam. It can be seen that the majority of the students obtained high scores that fluctuated between 17 and 20, which was of benefit for their final grade of the course since the group qualification obtained an average of 8.25.

3.4 Students' opinion about the project

Finally, it was considered necessary to know the students' opinion regarding the development of their self-recordings. For this purpose, a questionnaire of 14 questions was designed that included interrogations concerning the software used, practice sessions, the usefulness of the recordings to develop oral skills and improve their pronunciation, as well as questions about the participants' feelings. The answers of the students are summarized below.

- Most participants rehearsed the conversations 6 to 10 times before making the final recording.
- The software used was easy to handle.
- Most students think that the recordings helped them improve their oral production and listening comprehension.
- All students felt that the intervention helped them improve their level of English and provided them with practice opportunities to develop their pronunciation and fluency.

4. Conclusions

This intervention project on self-recordings of conversations in the English language, was designed based on the need for a group of virtual students of the educational experience of English 1 who had difficulties to practice oral skills synchronously.

The results include a description of the way in which the intervention was carried out, as well as an analysis of the students' results in their final oral exam and their opinion regarding the benefits perceived with this pedagogical treatment. It was found that the activity was carried out without major inconveniences; the majority of the students obtained a good grade in their final oral exam and their opinion about the project was positive.

From the above, it is concluded that the intervention strategy was very supportive for the practice and development of oral skill since the participants achieved a good performance in their final oral exam, which helped them obtain a good grade.

The students, knowing that they were weak to communicate orally in the target language, showed a great commitment to listen and practice the conversations several times before making the recordings and delivering them in a timely manner, which resulted in greater confidence at the time of submitting their final exam. For this reason, most of the students agreed that the intervention allowed them to improve their pronunciation and fluency.



It was perhaps unexpected to find that the students who proposed to record their audios through WhatsApp voice messages, had no problem using the suggested software, since they commented that it facilitated the self-recording process.

Finally, the importance of continuing to look for synchronous and asynchronous practice alternatives for students coursing English as a foreign language in the virtual modality is highlighted.

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