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EFL Students' Perceptions of Speaking

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To God who knows how to move the pieces of everyone's life and makes it look so simple. He knows the correct time to provide us with the strengths we need to survive in this tremendous adventure called life.

To my beloved and caring mother who has accompanied me along my way and has witnessed my failures and achievements, for she supports every crazy decision I make and she stands by me no matter how. I owe you my life and I will always dedicate all my achievements to you, I love you!

ABSTRACT

The present research took place in a middle school located in a rural community to the north of the State of Veracruz. The inhabitants of this community were bilingual and used both Spanish and Náhuatl for communication purposes. The problem to be studied was the lack of students' oral production in the third-grade English class.

This work sought to discover the **sociological** and **psychological** factors affecting negatively students' perceptions of **speaking** in English. The aim of this research was to determine what made students feel afraid of or indifferent to the use of English as the classroom language. This topic is highly important in the language teaching field due to the fact that it concerns one of the four major skills of a language: Speaking. In order to accomplish this goal, the data-collection instruments were a journal, interviews and questionnaires.

The data obtained from these instruments showed that all students, in spite of their personalities, felt uncomfortable using English in the classroom and they preferred to remain quiet while in other subjects they were very participative and enthusiastic. Furthermore, students felt demotivated to learn English because they regarded as useless and difficult. The study also showed that the manner in which students produced orally in English was influenced by the amount of exposure to the language they received, which was minimal; therefore they felt insecure to speak a language they did not feel familiar with. Moreover, teachers' attitude towards mistakes when pronouncing made them feel anxious and reluctant to communicate in English. On the other hand, the study showed that bilingualism worked as a positive influence due to the fact that students felt that English could work as a bridge to communicate among them when they did not know any word whereas in Spanish or Nahuatl.

This study can be used by researches interested in understanding some of the features involved when promoting oral production in English.

INTRODUCTION

In my short experience as a middle-school English teacher, I have faced the same problem every school year and that is the lack of participative students. At first, I thought this was due to the lack of vocabulary and English instruction. I assumed that my students would become more participative after further instruction and more vocabulary were provided. Nonetheless, as time passed by, I found out that my students still remained quiet and afraid of using English to communicate in the classroom. Even when they spoke, they doubted after pronouncing few words and did not use the language naturally. I found out that they had learnt English because they answered the written tasks correctly but when they were expected to participate orally they preferred not to.

The problem is not precisely the fact of being participative or not, but not being able to use the language for communication purposes as it is intended in the school programme. Speaking is one of the four major skills in the language teaching field and it is defined as the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts (Chaney, 1998, p. 13). So that, middle-school students are expected to be able to participate in conversation using suitable language at an appropriate level. Nonetheless, this purpose is never accomplished in this school.

The purpose of this research is to study the different factors that interfere in the way these students perceive English and, as a result, make them act reluctantly towards using the foreign language within the classroom. It seeks to analyse the different factors, both sociological and psychological, that affect students' perception of the second language in a specific geographic area. It also seeks to understand how these factors produce, as a result, a negative reaction towards using English as the classroom language despite having the sufficient amount of vocabulary and grammar instruction.

This study will help identify the reasons students have to feel anxious about speaking in English as well as to determine the environmental factors that might contribute to this phenomenon. By means of this research, there will be a better understanding of students' perceptions of the language. Thus, by means of this research, future generations of teachers within this same geographic area will have a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding their work and how these circumstances interfere in the way students perceive the language. Furthermore, it will help understand students' personal motives not to use the language as they are expected to.

This research will also contribute as a first-hand source to take viable alternative to solve these problems and improve students' learning by finding better approaches to reduce anxiety and facilitate oral communication in English. The findings of this work will be valuable to make a second research where each aspect can be treated in a specific manner, so that students lose their fear of using the language and, as a result, their levels of anxiety decrease.

CONTEXT AND FOCUS

The community

The present study takes place in a very small bilingual community located to the North of the State of Veracruz. The inhabitants of this community live isolated from other cities and communities due to the distance and the difficulties to get there. This phenomenon, as for language teaching, has become a constraint because they do not have access to any external source to acquire or even practise the language (movies, songs, readings online, foreign tourists, etc.) as the majority of the people who live in cities or even bigger communities.

Apart from what has been mentioned above, there are not many services available. The lack of water due to the prolongation of draughts is one of the main problems they face every year. As a result, the priorities of these people change and education is **reluctant** to the second place. Both children and their parents invest most of their time on carrying water from the remaining streams which are located outside the community to their homes. So that, children stop attending school for several days and for those who come to the class, they feel unwilling to participate or even perform the tasks they are required to.

The lack of Electricity is another issue that interferes negatively in the manner in which students learn. On the one hand, the majority of the families cannot afford electricity so that they rely on the sunlight and candles to carry out their activities. As a result, students have not enough time to study or do homework. On the other hand, when teaching a language at school, they do not have access to tape recorders or videos to train their ears and be exposed to real language. This situation affects the way in which students learn, leaving them in disadvantage to fulfil the curriculum established by the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP).

Furthermore, the majority of the students are bilingual; they speak both Spanish and Náhuatl for communication purposes. There are some others, the minority, who do not speak Spanish at all. Some teachers, after many years of experience, have learnt some basic Náhuatl so that they can interact with their students while some others rely on their bilingual students to translate what has been taught. As for the English subject, the teaching-learning process becomes slower and more difficult to happen because there are three languages involved and neither the teacher, nor the students have the sufficient knowledge to balance the situation.

The School

The secondary school where the study took place has four first grade groups, four second grade groups and only three groups of third grade, 11 groups in total. There are currently 350 students who attend classes there from 7:30 a.m. to 1:40 p.m. The classrooms have only the basic elements such as blackboards, chairs, a desk and, as mentioned previously, there is no electricity in the facilities which make extremely difficult to work when there is not enough illumination. As for course books, they are not enough to satisfy the need of all the students and they have to work in big groups which makes learning difficult to acquire. The school have twenty-one teachers with different areas of expertise to satisfy the students' learning requirements.

The English class is taught by three different teachers, each teacher works with a specific grade, so that the groups are never switched. The purpose of this was that, by the time the students get into third grade, they could have the experience of working with different types of teachers and get used to different accents. Unfortunately, the first-grade classes are given entirely in Spanish and the students work only with the vocabulary they have to learn, but they never get to use or pronounce. Second grade students, on the other hand, are expected to use the basic classroom vocabulary to communicate and ask for permission but there is not further practice and they

continue to the next level without having the basic understanding of commands in English or being able to maintain a short conversation in the foreign language.

In third grade, students are expected to express themselves in English and the class is partly given using the English which makes students feel anxious and react indifferent to the class; the teacher expects that his students understand and use English to carry out certain activities or participate in short debates whenever it is necessary. It is at this point that the lack of oral production becomes explicitly obvious and there is the need of correcting this problem.

The Problem

This issue has become a serious problem in the school and nowadays it is regarded as something normal to have graduate students without learning to communicate in English. The supervisor, also, has become familiar with idea that a small community, as this is, will not have the same success in English as the other urban secondary schools he also works with. Therefore, during his visits he never interrogates students in English or asks the teachers for a real demonstration of their work, he only goes through some of the written works they have handed in during the school-year and make some comments regarding grammar structure or the purpose of the task itself. All this together has neglected speaking to a second place where it seems not to be necessary.

The problem was evident and despite the lack of attention paid to this situation, it was necessary to start working on solutions that contributed to a better teaching-learning experience and encouraged students to use English for communication purposes. Speaking, being the weakest skill developed by students, needed to be taken seriously and students needed to practise, hence they could feel like using the language orally. It was clear that students understood the language, but what was missing that made them reluctant to speak? What were the impressions that they had of the language

that made them remain quiet? In other words, what were the students' perceptions of speaking the foreign language?

To this point it is clear that the main problem was the lack of oral production in this rural community as well as finding out efficient strategies to make students speak the foreign language. Therefore, as a means for improving this situation in the school, I decided to work on an Action Research Project which aimed at improving students' oral performances and, at the same time, helping students to feel comfortable with using English to communicate their ideas, thoughts, etc. This project was divided into different steps and each of them had a specific purpose to be accomplished.

The Objectives

The focus of this first study was precisely to understand the different perceptions that students had regarding performing orally in English; and according to what had been exposed above, several aspects were taken into consideration to have a better understanding of what had happened within the area, the school and with the students. To accomplish this objective, there was the need of discovering the previous experiences that students had had with language as well as to know what strategies had been carried out in order to make students speak in English.

Furthermore, it was important to find out the role that personality traits had when developing the ability to speak a third language. This investigation also aimed at discovering the role of the social context where they interact and the fact that most of the people are bilingual had when it came to studying a third language. That is to say, how much negative or positive influence bilingualism had when it came to study a third language.

Discovering students' perceptions of speaking will help understand what happens inside the mind of these individuals that preferred to remain quiet despite having the sufficient tools to produce a competent conversation in English. This, without any doubt, will represent the first step to improve students' capacity to speak any foreign language, not only English.

The next step will be carried out based on the suggestions made by the students regarding how they would like to be taught and what dynamics they would like to make during the English class in order to practise oral English. The suggestions will also help to modify teachers' behaviours, in case it is necessary, and the way they address to their students so that they could feel comfortable and receptive.

By means of this first study, future researchers within this geographic area or other regions that share similar social and linguistic conditions will be able to have a better understanding of the way students perceive the language and they will also be able to elaborate and carry out efficient strategies that benefit students' oral performances, enhance their self-esteem and make them feel confident whenever they use the language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An Overview of the Language-Teaching Field

The field of teaching is surrounded by an enormous number of constraints that teachers have to tackle with in our daily-work. In the field of language teaching specifically, the constraints seem to be wider due to the fact that a language itself includes many other variables to be studied in order to be acquired successfully. According to Brown (1994) "Whenever you teach a language, you also teach a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting". This statement expresses the inevitable work that comes along when teaching a language, so that, teachers become explorers and promoters of other cultures and have to be very skilful so that their work is considered as efficient and meaningful.

Language teaching also requires the employment of a collaborative method where there is the willingness to learn from the part of the students and the disposition and commitment from the teachers in charge. At first, it sounds easy to achieve this goal; unfortunately, there are some other aspects involved in the process that affect the degree of effectiveness in the results obtained in a language course. Some of the constraints found on the way are related to the poor infrastructure of the institutions which are not adequately equipped to fulfil the needs of the learners and the lack of material and resources available to complement the study of the foreign language. As a result of that, the work of a teacher consists not only of sharing knowledge and guiding students, but he also need to be capable of coping with the missing materials and adapt himself to the context where he teaches.

Apart from what has been mentioned above, there is a main constraint which is the most difficult to overcome in the language classroom and that is the unwillingness or predisposition of students to learn. This aspect has to do with the fact that English is a compulsory subject in the curricula and in some cases as not worth learning. This lack of interest comes from different sources but it affects equally in all contexts. Hence,

new strategies have to be employed to catch students' attention and make them aware of the importance of learning a second language.

Language Teaching in Mexico

In Mexico, for example, English language learning has become a matter of necessity rather than a hobby, as it was primarily regarded a few years back. Nowadays, the Mexican government in collaboration with the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) has implemented compulsory English courses in public institutions from kindergarten to secondary level, so that students can be prepared to face the real world when they finish the basic education; in addition, they will have better opportunities to succeed in their future careers, obtain a good job and compete with students from other countries in equal conditions.

In order to achieve this goal, the SEP has sorted out a National English Programme for Basic Education (NEPBE) which covers four cycles along the basic instruction of every child in the country. The first cycle includes two years of kindergarten in which students will have their first encounter with the second language; the second and the third cycles, three years each, are covered during the six years of the elementary school in which they are expected to learn some basic grammar structures and lose their fear to use the language to communicate ideas. The last cycle, regarded as the last step of the basic instruction, takes place during secondary school and at this point, students are expected to communicate ideas in English as well as to be competent in the other three major skills (Reading, writing and listening).

In 2011, the NEPBE was remarkably modified to satisfy the current needs of the national population due to that the previous methodology employed seemed old-fashioned and it did not produce positive results anymore. **So that**, the NEPBE shifted its attention from structures and translations, which was the focus of the previous programme, to concentrate more heavily on communication. All this was based on the

belief that a language classroom should be focused on oral production rather than grammar structures so that students can produce the language and use it purposefully in their lives. This way, they will see the language as a tool to have more opportunities to obtain better jobs.

The Problem with Speaking

Oral production, however, has become an enormous challenge for English teachers in basic education due to different aspects and the lack of the appropriate resources to elicit students to speak. In addition, the level of English proposed in this programme overcome the real situation in Mexico and for those who work in the secondary level, they are expected to accomplish a very difficult task without being given the appropriate tools or resources to succeed.

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Thus, it is important to pay attention to the development of this major skill during the process of acquiring a new language. Learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules (Shumin, 2008) and it is precisely this aspect that makes speaking the most challenging skill to teach because it requires having previous knowledge of other sub-skills plus the capacity of use them adequately to produce meaningful utterances.

The ability to speak a second language requires that the learner is receptive and committed to the purpose; otherwise, all attempts to help him will be useless. So that, the learners' motivation influences very much in the way a language is acquired, especially when spoken. This motivation has to be nourished every class by the teacher who needs to find the appropriate tools and strategies to keep catching students' attention. Sometimes, however, it does not matter how much effort is made, there are other factors that make students reluctant to learn, and in this case, to speak a second language.

Students' perceptions

It is precisely the necessity of knowing what factors interfere with students' willingness to learn that makes important to investigate the perceptions that students have of the language they are studying. Lindsay and Norman (1997) stated that a perception describes the process whereby sensory stimulation is translated into organised experience. That is to say how students, stimulated by different factors, formed their notions of the language they are learning.

In the language field, these perceptions can be influenced by different factors and one of them is the social context of each individual. The social context, as for this investigation, can be described as the geographic and cultural territory where a number of people with similar characteristics interact every day and whose behaviours are determined by what is considered normal for them. Vygotsky (1978) suggested that knowledge is constructed in the midst of our interactions with others and is shaped by the skills and abilities valued in a particular culture. Based on this, it is not strange to think that the context where they interact influences the way in which they see the acquisition of a foreign language. The social context can also determine the possibilities that the individual have to succeed in a quest because it shapes our understanding of the world (Darling-Hammond, 2003). In other words, it teaches us how to interpret the world and to decide what is useful from what it is not.

Another factor equally important regarding perceptions is that related to psychology. As for the lack of oral production in English, it is important to study what happens with the learners that make them reluctant to produce orally. **Therefore**, the psychological factors are vital at the time of knowing the students' perceptions regarding English.

The psychological factors affecting student's perceptions involve personality traits. A personality conveys a sense of consistency internal causality, and personal distinctiveness (Carver & Scheier, 2000). That is to say, the particular way of being of a person. Another definition of personality establishes that it is the complex characteristics that distinguish an individual from one another. Sometimes also

referred to as the totality of an individual's behavioural and emotional characteristics (Personality, 2012). This second definition makes reference to the fact that the individuals behaviour is shaped by the personality and based on this, it is not difficult to understand that the traits of personality can both help or affect the way in which the learner acquires or uses the foreign language.

Motivation is without any doubt a crucial factor that determines the way in which a learner sees the language. According to Dornyei (1998) motivation energizes human behaviour and gives it direction. **So that** if it is well directed, the results will be positive, but when motivation never happens or it is not adequate in the given context, the perception of the language could be negative and even tedious. Dornyei also states that language learners are motivated differently according to their achievements and self-confidence. That is why teachers need to be careful and pay attention to all their students' needs.

Language perception can be also defined by the number of language an individual speaks. Bilingual speakers, for example, are more receptive to learn languages and become skilful in many other aspects of their daily-lives. The New York Times states that it can have a profound effect on the brain, improving cognitive skills not related to language and even shielding against dementia in old age. In other words, being bilingual or knowing more than one language works as a positive catalyser when it refers to language learning. Furthermore, these people are better adapted to speak new words, get used to different accents and even feel motivated to keep learning other languages.

METHODOLOGY

The Study

This research is entirely qualitative because its aim is to explore social phenomena, human behaviour and reasons for such behaviour (Mora & Goodwin, 2012: p.9). That is to say, this study helped find out the reasons that made students reluctant to speak in English despite having the sufficient amount of knowledge according to their scholar grade. Furthermore, qualitative research seeks to discover the meanings that participants attach to their behaviour, how they interpret situations, and what their perspectives are on particular issues (Woods, 2006). It sought to find out and categorize the factors that influence in the way students perceived the foreign language.

In this type of investigation data is gathered in open-ended questions that provide direct quotations (Key, 1997). The quotations help as a first-hand source of information for the researcher that interprets the words, and the quotations also make the research more humanistic because, as it was previously mentioned, it focuses on discovering the meaning behind the words. Qualitative research is concerned with developing explanation of social phenomena ... It help us to understand the world in which we live (Hancock 2002).

For the purpose of this research, the information obtained was first classified into two major categories which contain subcategories that emerged from the data obtained. In other words the method used in this investigation was Grounded Theory (GT). Its main thrust is to generate theories regarding social phenomena: that is, to develop higher level understanding that is "grounded" in, or derived from, a systematic analysis of data. GT is appropriate when the study of social interactions or experiences aims to explain a process, not to test or verify an existing theory (Lingard, 2008). That is to say that the data obtained from the implementation of the different instruments contributed to the integration of the different categories and subcategories.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that the aim of GT is to generate or discover a theory from data systematically obtained from social research. In this particular investigation, a social phenomenon was studied which aimed at understanding what made students reluctant to produce orally in English and GT fitted perfectly so that we could generate a theory that explained the nature of this phenomenon.

The first big category referred to the sociological factors that had to do with the geographic area where they lived in and the people they dealt with in their daily-lives. These two aspects were very interesting because the place we live in and the conditions in which we live help shape our way of being; furthermore, the people we talk to and we get along with influence to a big extent the way we behave and speak, which is the main objective of this investigation.

The sociological factors also had to do with the social perception of English as a third language, considering that most of the people in this region were already bilingual because they spoke both Spanish and Nahuatl for communication purposes. This last aspect is very interesting because the community where the study took place is one of the few that preserves its language and continues teaching it from generation to generation. **So that** students become bilingual or, in some cases, they only learn Náhuatl.

The second category studied the psychological factors (PF). These factors had to do with the way in which each student regarded the language and the personal reasons they had not to use it in the classroom. This aspect refers to what the students think of the language and whether they see it as relevant. As for these aspects, I studied the different personalities my students had and how these personalities affected the way they behaved regarding speaking in English. Another aspect included in this category was the study of the causes producing anxiety towards using English as the classroom language.

In other words, the PF studied in this research were students' personality traits, motivation and anxiety, all of them addressed to understand what make students reluctant to use the English orally.

The Data-Collection Instruments

In order to carry out this research, I worked with a group of middle-school third graders of a small community. This was a bilingual community where people used both Spanish and Náhuatl for communication purposes in their daily-lives, there were even some of them that only used Náhuatl and they were in the process of learning some Spanish at the same time they were learning English.

I decided to work with third-graders because they had already had two years of English instructions and, even though they did understand written English and had a good grasp of the language, they did not use English in the classroom as they should have. This was a very interesting phenomenon because it appeared not to have relationship with the lack of knowledge because they had shown progress in the other major skills, but the resistance to use the English language as a means for communication.

As for the data-collection instruments, I used three different types: a journal described by Lengeling (2012, p.14) as an instrument to probe more deeply into the lives and emotions of participants in a research study. This instrument helped keep a record of the students who participated and the times they did, as well as to make some notes regarding how they felt about participating and whether I perceived nervousness, lack of confidence, among others. Keeping a journal provided me with the opportunity to manage information in a more personal way, so that I could decide what was truly relevant to my purpose and what was not.

The second instrument was a questionnaire to find out information regarding how much English they had received and from what sources, in case they had. This questionnaire also helped me describe how the social environment affected the way

they felt about the language. In other words, by means of this survey I sought to find out what place English took in their daily-lives. This specific instrument helped gather first-hand and concise information regarding how much English they had received how they had used it, in case they had had access to any and what their impressions of the language had been.

The third instruments were two semi-instructed interviews which were all recorded in order to facilitate the transcription and preserve the exact word the interviewees said. Interviews are the art of asking questions and listening (Denzin and Lincoln: 2005, p 643). They can generate useful information about lived experience and its meaning, and they are also influenced by the personal characteristics of the interviewer (Mora: 2012, 42).

An audio-recorded interview was employed with a selected number of students. The selection includes the least and the most participative students of each group. The interview provided first-hand information regarding their personal experiences with the language and it helped determine how they felt about speaking in English, as well as to find out why it was that most of the students did not use the language.

Another interview was employed with the teachers who had taught these students in the previous school-years. This second interview had the purpose of knowing if the students had behaved in the same manner the last two-years. That is to say, if they had shown the same reluctance to participate actively in the English class or whether they used English to communicate in the classroom or not.

This interview was also intended to know the way in which the teachers taught their classes, as well as whether they took any alternatives to promote oral participation in the classroom, and if so, what results they had gotten. This interview provided me with the opportunity to look at the problem from a different perspective and contributed to a better understanding of my students' attitude towards speaking through the eyes of other language teachers.

Another questionnaire was employed with the students to know their opinions about the approaches in which they would like to be taught and what suggestions they would make in order to become more participative and produce orally in English in the classroom. This last instrument was very helpful as a link to continue with the second part of this action research project because it provided first-hand information on students' preferred ways of learning.

The Implementation

Teacher's Journal

The implementation of the different methods was intended to take place in two months' time. This length of time would have been sufficient to collect the necessary data in order to understand the internal and external reason that the students had so that they did not produce orally. Unfortunately, due to different circumstances that had to do with the school and different festival and meetings that were carried out during the aforementioned length of time, the implementation took more time and it was difficult to collect the information because the participants were not available when they were needed.

In spite of the different constraints faced and after having extended the length of time planned to carry out the activities, the instruments were successfully implemented with some difficulties on the way as it is described below:

The first instrument employed was the journal. This instrument was employed for a month, which represented four weeks with three hours of English each, 12 hours in total. The implementation of the journal took place during the English classes. At first, there was continuity in the registration of the information collected, but then there were many suspensions at school that delayed the collection of the data and broke the continuity established (3 hours of English per week), as a result, the journal went along for a month and a half.

During this time, I registered my students' participations with a letter that represented the attitude they showed at the time of participating as we can see in appendix 2. The attitudes or emotions they showed were expressed in the following manner: N (Nervous) that is to say, the student hesitated at the moment of speaking and they spoke with broken voice.

The letter S was for "shy", this letter was used with students who needed to be pushed up to participate, different from the N, S students knew the answer and they did not hesitate when talking but their tone of voice was very low and they always needed to be given the chance to participate, they never did it by themselves. I (Insecure) this letter was used when students hesitated and aborted the mission of participating or when they'd rather continue talking in Spanish so that they could not be pointed out in case they were wrong.

The letters SC were for "Self-confident". These letters helped described the few participations that were voluntary. SC students spoke with confidence and these types of participations only happened when the questions did not require any long answer. RS code (Reluctant to Speak) was used to classify the type of students that despite being asked to participate, they simply did not.

The journal included twelve participations for each student in the classroom, one participation per class. Nonetheless, some classes it was difficult to come up with the time to make all students participate, as a result, there were classes in which some students were asked to or given the opportunity to participate twice so that they could all have the same opportunities to participate in the aforementioned length of time.

The Questionnaire (1)

The first questionnaire was intended to obtain information regarding the relationship between the social context and the manner in which the students perceived English language. This instrument included two types of questions: Open-ended questions

(OEQ) in which students were free to answer with their own words and express their thoughts in as many or few words as they think it was necessary; and close-ended questions (CEQ) in which students had to select from a fixed list of replies that the research chose because they were considered relevant for the study.

The questionnaire was first piloted after classes. The students were asked to stay a bit longer so that they could answer some questions. The instrument was entirely in Spanish and the questions were explained when necessary so that students could answer as clearly as they could possibly do. Unfortunately, the data obtained from this first version of the questionnaire was too vague and did not satisfy the needs of the study.

The same questionnaire was modified to correct the flaws that appeared when it was employed the first time. The second version of this instrument delimited questions and utilized simpler vocabulary that students could not misunderstand, as for the CEQ the lists of the possible answers were reduced and they were focused on the aspects that were considered more important for the research after seeing the information obtained from the first version.

The questionnaire was employed one more time a week after it was first pilot, the circumstances were similar. Students were asked to stay after classes so they could answer some questions. This time, each question was explained in detail and students seemed to take it more seriously than before. The questionnaire was answered anonymously so that students did not feel threatened and they could answer without feeling that they were being judged.

The Students' interviews

After the first questionnaire was employed, a group of fifteen students was selected randomly so that they could be interviewed regarding their personal experiences with the language. The decision of this random-selection was due to the fact that it would

have been difficult to find a specific characteristic that made one student different from the other at the time of interviewing them.

The interview was semi-structured so that new questions could be asked depending on the answers obtained from the ones that were planned in the first place. This type of interview is very convenient because it does not limit the work of the interviewer and more information can be obtained during the employment. Furthermore, for the purpose of not losing any important piece of information, all interviews were recorded and transcribed so that the data could be used afterwards using the same words the interviewees used.

The number of the students interviewed was chosen considering that the original group was formed by thirty students and fifteen of them represented the average needed so that we could have enough information to continue the research. It is important to mention that the first plan was to interview all students in the class, but due to time conditions, the lack of organisation in the school, and some students' personal issues (some students took extra classes in other subjects and they could not stay more time, some others preferred not to be interviewed, etc.), it was impossible to have access to all of them.

The interviews were scheduled to take place after classes. Each interview lasted around 20 minutes so that only two students were interrogated per day, three days per week only. The interviews took place in the classroom when the rest of the students had gone or had moved to their extra-class. Each student was explained the purpose of the interrogations and asked to be completely honest with the answers they provided. Furthermore, they were informed that the whole process would be recorded and they all agreed.

The interviews were carried out without inconveniences and the information provided for the students was significant for the study. Three weeks were necessary to complete this purpose and based on the analysis made to the data obtained I could think of better questions to ask the teachers in their interviews.

Teachers' Interview

The next instrument employed was another semi-structured interview in which the participants were the previous English teachers who had taught these same students. The questions included in this second interview were aimed at finding out whether the students behaved the same manner and whether they presented the same reluctance to participate in English. This instrument also aimed at discovering what actions these teachers took to solve the problems they had regarding speaking.

The data obtained from the students' interview helped formulate interesting questions for this second interview employed with their teachers. It is important to take into consideration that despite talking about students' perceptions, knowing what happened before they got into third grade and what actions had been already taken without any positive result helped understanding the current viewpoint of these students regarding speaking in English.

The teachers' interviews were carried out outside the workplace because they both preferred to answer the questions in a friendlier environment. In consequence, they were interviewed at their places once the classes were finished. They were both explained the purpose of the interviewed and they agreed to cooperate and be completely honest. However, due to time constraints, these interviews were made in two different days and, similar to the students' interview, the data obtained from this new instrument contributed enormously to the study.

The Questionnaire (2)

After all the other instruments were implemented and the teacher's journal was concluded, the second questionnaire was employed. The purpose of this last questionnaire was precisely to obtain information regarding students' opinions on how they would like to be taught and some strategies to practise and improve their speaking skills.

This questionnaire was employed with all students in the classroom and different from the previous instruments, it took place during the English class. This time, students answered only open-ended questions and they were all told that the suggestions they gave would be put into practice with the future generations so that they could feel more confident at the time of speaking in English, furthermore, their suggestions would contribute to enhance the teaching-learning process regarding Speaking.

It is important to keep in mind that the main purpose of this second questionnaire is precisely to help continue with the next step of the research project in which the most attractive and plausible activities recommended by the students will be implemented and monitored during the whole process so that I will be able to determine their efficiency and correct the possible flaws they might have.

All in all, the instruments were **carried out** successfully despite the time issues and some school factors that were previously explained. Thus, these instruments provided valuable data that was carefully analysed so that it could help the purpose of the study which was to understand students' perceptions of Speaking the foreign language, act upon the negative aspects that can be corrected and improve those who have been working efficiently.

FINDINGS

According to the nature of this investigation and as it was established previously, the method employed to analyse the data was Grounded Theory. That is to say, after the data was completed and there was a saturation of information, all this was categorised and supported by the direct quotations retrieved from the different participants who helped enrich and support the findings of the investigation.

After an exhaustive analysis was made, different categories emerged. These categories were classified into two major groups considering its nature. The first major group involves the psychological factors (PF), which, as it was mentioned previously, has to do

with the internal reasons the students had **so that** they preferred not to use English as the classroom language. The other major group refers to the sociological factors (SF) that influenced students' motivation to produce orally in English. These SF, as for this study, had to do with the relationship they had with the social environment and the people they lived with.

Psychological Factors

The first major group included different categories which emerged after analysing the data from the different instruments. The PF has to do with **personality traits** and how these different traits in personality affected, to some extent, the students' willingness to produce orally in English. **Intrinsic motivation** which deals with the internal desire of each individual to succeed in doing something and the **anxiety** produced by their fear of speaking.

1. Personality Traits

As for the purpose of this study and based on the data analysed only two types of personalities were taken into account because of its relevance. The first trait of personality was extraversion/introversion while the second one had to do with openness/not-opened personality.

The analysis showed that Extrovert (ES) and Introvert (IS) students despite having completely opposite personalities and acting according to them during the other classes, they both presented the same reluctance to use English in the classroom or participate in this specific class as the mentioned during the interview "... Yo veo que así nos pasa a todos, porque no somos normalmente así de callados, hay unos que hablan mucho y pues en esta clase siempre es lo mismo, nadie habla... (S3)" Another student added with references to the same aspect "... Personalmente yo siempre soy un "relajo" y usted me ha visto fuera de clases, pero ya dentro del salón como que todo es distinto... (S14)". Both students expressed that their personalities

(Extraversion/Introversion) did not affect or influence in their willingness to speak, however, both type of students preferred not to.

The second personality trait had to do with the openness/not open, in this case, one student stated “A mí me gusta participar, de hecho siempre estoy participando pero aquí (Referring to the English class) como que no existe esa confianza... No me siento a gusto (S1)”. This student also mentioned “Es como si de repente nos volviéramos otras personas y todos tuviéramos miedo de hablar (S1)”. In this second trait of personality, it is observed that students changed their behaviours so that they could adapt themselves to the situation in order to avoid feeling exposed or looking vulnerable. Unfortunately, this change in the behaviour reflected a negative effect on students’ oral production.

2. Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation represented another subcategory within the PF. This type of motivation was considered important for the study because students commented that they did not feel any interest in the language despite the motivation they received from their teachers or even from some close relatives who helped them prepare for the test. “A mí todo el tiempo me están apurando para hacer la tarea y mi tío que estuvo en Estados Unidos siempre está insistiendo en que practiquemos pero no sé, a mí no me llama la atención”. Some expressed that they did not understand the purpose of studying a language they will never use “Tal vez no le echamos ganas porque sabemos que no lo vamos a ocupar... Yo voy a trabajar en el campo y pues ahí no voy a hablar inglés... (S2)”

Furthermore, some students expressed that they did not have the means to continue studying and even showed some impotence when they referred to those who have the economic possibilities to do it and waste their time at school “Aquí sólo los hijos de maestros o los que tienen mucho dinero son los que se podrían interesar en aprender porque van a seguir estudiando... Y ni ellos lo hacen (S8)”

Intrinsic motivation did affect negatively in the willingness that students showed at the time of learning English. This is reflected specially at the time of promoting oral production because the other aspects of the language (grammar, writing, reading, vocabulary, etc.) were accomplished so that they could obtain a grade, but speaking seemed to be different and unfortunately, it is the most important aspect according to the SEV programme which emphasises a more communicative approach.

3. Anxiety

This last aspect was included in the PF because it involved students' emotions and expressed the way in which they felt at the time of being asked to demonstrate what they could say in English or even address to the teacher in the foreign language. Anxiety emerged as the result of the lack of English instruction regarding speaking as this student stated "Yo por ejemplo me estreso cada vez que pienso que me puede tocar participar... Si me dijeran que pronunciara como yo puedo pues sí, pero nos piden que sepamos pronunciar lo que nunca hemos escuchado (S13)". This is a very valid point due to many English teachers force students tread small paragraphs when they have not had any previous input. Another student made reference to the permissions they have to ask in English and how she felt everytime she needed to go to the restroom, "Yo me escribo la pronunciación en la mano y ya cuando llego al escritorio para pedir permiso voy hasta con las manos sudadas y todo se me borra... Eso me frustra y más si realmente necesito salir (S15)".

Anxiety, as well as intrinsic motivation, was regarded as negative influence that made students feel less interested or demotivated to produce oral English.

SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS

This major group included three subcategories which were addressed to understand how the social and scholar environment influenced the willingness that students showed when they were asked to practise oral English. The first subcategory had to do with the **lack of exposure to oral English** which obviously diminished the students' ability to produce orally. Another aspect regarding these SF is the **teachers' negative attitude towards mistakes** which instead of motivating them to enhance, prevent them from speaking at all; and **students' bilingualism** which, in the end, turned out to be the most positive aspect to encourage students to speak.

1. The lack of exposure to oral English.

This lack of exposure had a logical but not justified explanation. During the teachers' interview one of them admitted the following "Yo no estudié inglés, lo que sé lo he aprendido sobre la marcha y cada ciclo escolar pues voy dando lo mejor de mí" He also spoke about the importance of practising pronunciation but argued that he felt overwhelmed and preferred to focus on vocabulary. As for the other teacher, he explained that he had a technical career in Tourism where he studied several languages but he never had opportunity to go deeper into practising the oral aspect of the language, so that he only taught what he knew. "Yo sé inglés, pero la pronunciación yo creo que a todos nos cuesta y es la habilidad más difícil de desarrollar... Ahora imagínate a los alumnos".

As a result of this, students suffered the lack of exposure to the language and also commented with reference to this topic. In fact, the majority of them agreed that this factor caused their negative attitude towards speaking. One student stated "A mí me molesta que nos hagan pedir permisos y todo eso en inglés cuando el maestro sólo nos habla en español, de hecho le decimos 'May I go to the toilet?' y nos responde 'Sí, ve'... (S13)" for the students, this only showed that the teacher was not congruent with what he taught. Another student added "¿Cómo me piden que pronuncie o hable bien si nunca me dicen cuál es la pronunciación correcta? Yo por eso mejor me quedo callado

y así me evito problemas (S12)”. This quotation indicated that students were perfectly aware of the lack of capacity that teachers showed regarding speaking the foreign language and as a result they took the same attitude.

2. Teachers’ negative attitude towards mistakes.

Another interesting aspect mentioned both by the teacher and the students is the negative attitude which these same teachers showed the students every time they made any mistake when pronouncing. As for the teachers, one of them stated “Yo los pongo a repetir frases y siempre cometen los mismo errores y aunque los castigos, siempre lo hacen”. So that, instead of motivating students, they only made them feel afraid of the teacher and, over all, of speaking. The other teacher commented “Por ejemplo a los que pronuncian mal los pongo a hacer planas de la escritura y la pronunciación, sólo así aprenden”. This teacher use negative reinforcement as a means to obtain better results but it never worked and instead provoked that students feel less willing to speak.

According to the students, teachers’ attitude influenced very much their behaviour in the English class “Cuando iba en primero participaba pero siempre que me equivocaba el maestro me miraba feo o me regañaba en frente de mis compañeros... Ya después mejor me callaba (S11)”. Another student added “se supone que estamos aprendiendo pero pues nomás nos ponen a hacer planas y repetir, y si nos equivocamos de nuevo nos ven feo o nos gritan (S9)”. It was clear that the attitude they perceived from the teacher influenced negatively in their willingness to speak the foreign language.

3. Bilingualism

Bilingualism turned out to be an efficient tool to promote the third language and, according to the students, made the language real and gave it a purpose, furthermore,

the fact of being bilingual motivated them to keep learning more languages “Yo ya sé dos idiomas y ahorita que estoy estudiando inglés pues como que me siento más importante (S4)” Another student mentioned “Luego nos ponemos a jugar fuera de clases y nos saludamos en inglés y respondemos en náhuatl o español, y es divertido, como que tenemos más de dónde elegir (S1)” this student expressed that knowing two language and being learning a third one, made her feel more capable of expressing herself and that is a very positive aspect to promote.

The most interesting fact that appeared when considering bilingualism was that students regarded English as a bridge to solve the communication problem they have among the students that only speak either Spanish or Náhuatl. They expressed that having a language in common made communication possible, even though they mispronounced, they realised that there was understanding by the listeners and that made them feel interested in keep on learning. “Yo no hablo náhuatl y pues ahora ya mínimo con palabras claves como que me voy comunicando con mis compañeros, y eso me hace sentir bien (S5)” They admitted that this “conversations” usually happened outside the classroom or when the English teacher is not around because they did not want to feel judged or received any punishment for their pronunciation, “Luego nos ponemos a hablar inglés, así todo mocho en el salón o los pasillos pero en la clase del teacher no, como que nos da corte”.

As we could see, students’ perceptions of speaking were classified into two major categories which involved psychological and sociological factors. These two categories had subcategories that explained in detail the different perceptions that students had regarding speaking the foreign language. As for the psychological factors, there were three subcategories related to personality traits, intrinsic motivation and students’ anxiety. The sociological factors were also divided into three subcategories including: lack of exposure to oral English, the teachers’ negative attitude toward mistakes and the fact that students are bilingual.

DISCUSSION

The study was grounded on the believe that knowing the students' perceptions of speaking the foreign language, several actions could be taken to improve the current situation in which, despite showing an appropriate level of the language when writing or understanding written English, students still refuse to speak or even ask permissions using English. Thus, by using the information obtained during the research, these perceptions could be categorised and analysed in detail in order to make arrangement in the way the classes were taught.

The data concluded that there were two major factors that influence these perceptions. The first factor had to do with some psychological aspects which, as we could see, instead of promoting the use of oral English, diminished their disposition to produce orally, and in some other cases, as what happened with the different personality traits, it did not affect nor contribute to the encouragement of the practice.

The second category which referred to the sociological factors resulted even more interesting because while some aspects such as the lack of exposure to the language and the negative attitude that the teachers had affected negatively and even arose fear and anxiety in the students; the fact that they were bilingual motivated them to continue practising the little language they could pronounce because it became meaningful and they used it with a real purpose: Communicating among them.

Once established what students think of speaking, it is time to discuss now how this beliefs or conceptions could be transformed into efficient strategies to reduce the negative conception that they seem to have. Furthermore, knowing the real thinking of the students, teachers can also change their behaviour and understand more about the lives of their students. This will benefit not only the English class and the amount of English they produce, but also the teacher-students relationship which has been also neglected and, to some extent left aside.

Psychological Factors

As for the psychological factors and based on the suggestions made by the students, we could start by reducing their anxiety towards speaking. Students suggested that they should speak when they feel they are ready “Me gustaría que los maestros fueran más pacientes y nos dejaran hablar cuando quisieramos y no cuando ellos digan. Así yo sí me animaría a participar”. This could be both good and bad. On the one hand, students will be less anxious about talking; on the other hand, students with introverted personalities will never speak voluntarily. And even if the speaking problem is reduced, some other students will be left behind because of their shyness. Another student also suggested “Yo creo que en la forma del pedir está el dar y a veces no es que tengamos miedo de hablar, sino miedo a la manera en la que se nos pida hablar, yo sugiero que lo maestro tengan más tacto para con nosotros”. This second suggestion is better and gives the possibility to all students to develop the speaking ability at their own speed. In this case, what we need to change is the attitude of the teachers.

As for the intrinsic motivation, there is not much teachers can do, but we can work from the outside and find ways to motive them to speak. Perhaps we do not have the power to make the world change and guarantee a successful future for them, but we can teach them that there are other options that they could have if they continue study and make efforts. As for speaking, one student commented “Me gustaría que el maestro fuera más entusiasta, que nos sorprendiera cada día y que cuando nos haga hablar, que lo haga con una sonrisa”. It sounds very easy, but sometimes, we forget to smile. It is incredible how a simple gesture can make everything simpler, easier, and magical; that is how students should be motivated.

Sociological Factors

Within this category, we talked about the importance and the effect that the lack of exposure to oral English has on the students' perceptions of the language. It is evident that if the students do not receive the appropriate input, they will not be ready to produce the corresponding output. In other words, they cannot speak what they have never listened to. "A mí me gustaría que el maestro nos hablara más seguido en inglés pero despacio para que nosotros vayamos poniendo atención a cómo pronuncia" another student added "Yo no hablo porque no sé cómo se pronuncia, si supiera pues hasta diez me sacaría en la materia, yo quisiera que el maestro nos hablara más seguido en inglés y que nos tuviera paciencia". These two students affirmed that receiving a considerable input, they will feel more comfortable using the language and they will participate in the class. It is a teacher's duty to know when to use English and the appropriate speed to provide student with the tools they need.

As for bilingualism, several suggestions were made and all of them were focused on the idea that Nahuatl should be allowed in the classroom. "Yo creo que para mejorar en inglés deberían de dejar que fuéramos nosotros mismos, hablar como hablamos nosotros, así ya ni nos daríamos cuenta cuando hablamos un idioma u otro", another student commented "Yo creo que si nosotros vamos a hablar inglés, el maestro debería aprender nahuatl, así nos sentiríamos más en confianza" This is also part of the motivation they need, they want to have a common ground, they want the teacher to learn from them. Furthermore, the use of Nahuatl could work as an efficient tool in the English class. And teachers should also try to learn the language to be more competent at the time of teaching in a bilingual classroom.

All this suggestions will be taken into account and carried out during the next step of the project in which the role of Nahuatl language will be paramount. All strategies will be grounded on the idea that Nahuatl could work as a positive catalyser that make students more confident to speak and that if the teacher uses both languages, he could

contribute to promote a better classroom environment where learning takes places more easily and speaking appears spontaneously.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Speaking is a very important aspect of any language. In this specific study, we investigated the lack of oral production which appeared to be unjustified due to the students already had the sufficient knowledge of the language to maintain a substantial conversation without any problem, but they did not do it. So that, in order to mend this situation, there was the need of studying and analysing students' opinions, ideas, and suggestions about the way they felt when using English orally.

Students' perceptions were studied and after analysing the data from the different instruments employed along the research several categories emerged. These categories emphasized the importance of two aspects, one related to psychological factors and the other which referred to sociological factors. Within these two, there were some other categories used to describe the different perceptions that these students had regarding speaking a foreign language.

The psychological factors (PF) indicated that students felt demotivated because they did not see the language as a productive tool for the future and they did not have the means to continue studying, instead, they have a pessimistic attitude. Within the PF, it was also suggested that students' personalities affected nor positively neither negatively the way they behaved during the English class; that is to say, both introverted and extroverted students presented the same reluctance to participate or use the language for communication purpose.

The sociological factors (SF) showed that due to the social context where they lived, it was very difficult to have students exposed to real language and this affected them negatively as well, because they were in disadvantage in comparison to other students who live in the city. Furthermore, there was the pressure they had due to their

teachers' attitude during their classes. Students felt discouraged and unwilling to participate because they were under the impression that participating and making mistakes was always equal to punishment or disqualification from the teacher.

The only positive aspect within the SF was the fact that the majority of the students were bilingual. They affirmed that learning a third language had helped them as a bridge to fill in the blanks they had between the two languages they already speak. So that, students that only speak Nahuatl could finally communicate with the students who only speak Spanish. This gave them the opportunity to see English with a meaningful purpose.

Implications

Based on this study and the findings obtained, future researches will have the opportunity to act upon similar situations regarding speaking. This first attempt grounded the theory that the social context affects directly on the impressions that students have of language learning, specially speaking. In addition, the research showed that studying the psychological factors involved in the process of acquiring a language can help improve the way we teach and, evidently, the way they learn.

Furthermore, researchers will be able to go deeper into studying the advantages that bilingual students have regarding language learning. Thus, different strategies could be implemented by using the two languages they already know as means to acquire a third language. This could open new alternatives of language teaching in remote communities that share the same characteristics and make the learning experience more contextualised and meaningful.

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