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USING COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE ORAL SKILLS OF A BASIC LEVEL GROUP OF STUDENTS FROM THE LANGUAGE CENTER ORIZABA AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VERACRUZ

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Gracias...

Al Padre Eterno, por permitirme llegar hasta este punto de mi vida y por sus incontables bendiciones. Bendito seas, Señor.

A mis padres, Graciela y Miguel, muy en especial a mi madre por darme y enseñarme tanto de la vida.

A mi tía Elo, por su apoyo y cariño en todo momento.

A mis amig@s, por su apoyo e invaluable amistad.

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A mis alumnos y compañeros maestros, por todo el conocimiento compartido con ustedes.
Communicating in a foreign language implies the development of certain skills, among which fluency plays an important role when communicating orally. The following action research project was aimed at improving fluency by training students in the use of communication strategies. The participants were basic level learners at the Language Center in Orizaba from the University of Veracruz. The communication strategies used in this project were paraphrasing/circumlocution, coining words, using facial expressions/gestures, literal translation, switching to L1, asking for help, clarification/confirmation and using fillers. The implementation was done in a five-week period as part of our language course. A learning styles test, two exams, a journal, a questionnaire and an interview were the instruments used to collect data. As a result from the training, most students used communication strategies and improved their fluency, but also those factors (such as time, attitudinal and motivational aspects) need to be taken into account in this process and involve not only the students but also the teacher. In addition to this, results from the questionnaire and the interview regarding students’ perceptions on the use of strategies suggest that the strategies are accepted as part of their training and that they find them useful as part of their language learning process. The results also suggest that communication strategies training should be included during the whole course and more time should be spent during the term/course on this type of training.
In today’s world, communication happens every day and in many different ways. And this process certainly implies having a good command of certain communicative skills and strategies, such as speaking, reading, writing, evaluating, questioning and analyzing, among others. All of these allow us to communicate in person or throughout different means, such as electronic ones, in many different scenarios and situations. The speaking skill could be regarded as one of the most valuable among the others in teaching English as a second language, as this one contributes to interact in different places and situations, being those ones that we face to fulfill our needs and the issues we usually focus on more as the primary ways to communicate and get our messages across. For this reason, it is vital for teachers of English to pay attention to these important factors, being one of them fluency in the performance of an individual. In order to foster fluency in the learner, teachers need to focus on this aspect of oral communication and implement the necessary resources and changes in the class so as to improve this aspect in the learner, when necessary.

The aim of this research project was to focus on the necessary changes in my daily practice in order to foster fluency in the learners and the compelling elements to be considered for such objective. As communication in English is more and more common among speakers in the world, we have to consider this aspect as relevant as it implies a better communication among the actors in a conversation and supply the learner with the necessary components and strategies to use in order to fulfill his/her needs and goals as a speaker of English. It was also the aim of this project to examine the type of activities and communication strategies that can foster such improvement in oral fluency; consequently, this information could provide myself and our fellow teachers with some possible answers and options to raise their awareness on the issue and implement the possible and necessary changes in our classrooms and daily practice.
One important aspect that both, teachers and students, do not usually pay attention to is how fluency can interfere in the communication process if a person lacks of it, and how important it is when the learner has serious problems in order to communicate his/her ideas. We sometimes misunderstand the idea behind a fluent speaker and we think that it is enough to have somehow clear ideas and some accuracy in the utterances used during a transaction. The problem becomes harder when a person has to deal with a more fluent interlocutor, and negative feelings such as confusion, frustration and despair appear in the first one as he/she is unable to communicate as the other person does, especially if the student is already in an lower-intermediate or intermediate level.

In the last couple of semesters, while giving feedback to my students at the end of the evaluation process, I noticed that in my notes I had written that most of them had some lack of fluency at a certain level, and when I mentioned this to them, they simply did not consider that to be important as the other aspects that were evaluated or they considered that they were fluently enough. Since this aspect is as important as the other ones related to a good command of the language in the four skills, the oral one more specifically, I decided to focus this research project on this important issue and try to detect the necessary elements that are necessary to take into consideration in order to foster and improve fluency in the learners in my late beginner groups at the Language Center in Orizaba. In these groups, I usually have a homogeneous mixture of men and women in an average age raging from 18 to 40 or 50 years old, including students (from Universidad Veracruzana (UV) and other institutions), professionals, and housewives, among others; these students usually come to learn English for different reasons: students from UV who would like to continue studying the language after having completed their two language compulsory courses (English I and II) and take the following course Basic English Three Hundred (also known as IBAS 300 - Inglés Básico 300, which would be an equivalent to ‘English III’ and for the ‘A2’ level from the Common European Framework) as an optional subject from their curricula; housewives who take the course for different reasons, among which helping their children with
school homework or as a spare time activity can be included; and those professionals (engineers, architects, dentists, doctors, nurses, etc.) who, as part of their practice, need to read and/or interact in this language. I consider fluency can be as important as the other ones mentioned before, and I expect to obtain some answers which can help my students and myself raise our awareness in the learning process so as to be better users of and more fluent speakers of the language as long as to share some information with my fellow teachers and contribute to their professional practice. In my own experience, I have noticed that this aspect of oral communication can truly affect the learner’s performance, either in the class or in the oral examinations we have as part of the evaluation process. The main goals and objectives of the course state that the speaker at a late beginner level needs to have a certain level of fluency in the oral skill and command of the linguistic aspects of the language at the time he/she takes a final examination. I have noticed that some learners are not able to conclude this stage of their learning and go on to the next level of their instruction and show one or more than one of the following problems: lack of linguistic knowledge, problems to express their ideas clearly, lack of fluency in their pace when speaking, and extreme nervousness, which impede them from having good performance during the evaluation stage.

As I stated before, my main interest in this action research project was to implement some communication strategies and changes in my class in order to help my learners improve their fluency and get them to acquire a good command of it at their level. Basing my assumptions of their lack of fluency on their performance in the final examinations during the oral exam, I consider that it is important to foster this improvement in their accomplishment and provide them with the necessary strategies to raise their awareness on this important issue and use them when appropriate. There were certainly several aspects to take into consideration to be more fluent in the language, and I tried to cover them during the project. Even though I have experienced teaching several levels at the Language Center and I was familiar with some possible
activities to use during the implementation in my class so as to help my students improve their fluency, it was necessary to consult the necessary literature.

The research questions related to these issues previously mentioned were:

- To what extent can communication strategies improve my IBAS 300 students’ performance and fluency during their oral production?
- To what extent can my students use/handle communication strategies?
- What are my learners’ perceptions and opinions towards their fluency and communication strategies after experiencing them?

Taking into consideration that I had to select some strategies and the corresponding activities to use with my IBAS 300 students in order to foster and improve their fluency, the main objective of these was to make students have more oral fluency in their performance in class and their oral examinations from the evaluation process and make them aware of the importance of such aspects in both stages of their course. Since I was in charge of the design and implementation of this project, I searched in available literature and on the web for the necessary and useful strategies and activities to fulfill the objectives previously mentioned. Also, I asked my peers and project assessor for help based on their expertise and for some activities and strategies they had implemented in order to reach the same goal. I had already considered some activities to implement in order to foster and improve fluency in my IBAS 300 learners: they had to practice with some drilling exercises intended to foster communication and fluency; also, I tried not to interrupt them when they were participating orally in class and tried to detect what other factors could interfere in the learners’ fluency during class time. For the purpose of analyzing what happened in the class, I kept a journal and some records of such events and the results obtained from them. As for measuring my students’ performance, I took the mid-term and final oral exams as the main indicator to observe how much their fluency and performance had improved since their first participations in class.
As I have worked at the Language Center in Orizaba from the University of Veracruz for about eighteen years, I had noticed that a lack of fluency had been a constant issue in most of students at this beginner level. As they moved up to higher levels in their language education, most of them seem to either improve or still have difficulties when communicating orally at a considerable pace and get their messages across properly with their classmates and professors. These aspects have not been regarded properly in the joint scholar work known as “academias”, and most of times teachers focus their attention to other aspects (i.e. grammar structures, length of expansion of ideas) to be considered during the course, leaving aside this important aspect and consequently affecting the learners’ oral performance at that stage and the consecutive ones, resulting in negative feelings of anxiety and frustration and provoking to obtain poor grades and dissatisfaction from their studies. For these reasons, I considered that it would have been valuable to set into practice a series of activities and strategies in order to help the learners cope with their needs and lack of fluency and to provide with some tools to use for improving this aspect.

This action research was aimed to help improve the learners’ fluency by doing the following:

- Reviewing updated literature and experts’ opinions related to the aspect of fluency in English Language Teaching (ELT).
- Spotting common mistakes during class time which may interfere in the learners’ fluency.
- Implementing some activities and strategies in my daily practice in order to help the learners improve their fluency.
- Share the results and information obtained from this action research project with my peers so as to raise their awareness on the issue, and/or share the benefits of such implementation and its possible application to other levels.

This project was aimed to focus on learners who are studying the IBAS 300 level at the Language Center in Orizaba from the University of Veracruz. The complete four-skills series of courses of English is made up by nine levels and each one of these includes
working with a specific textbook which is intended to cover the main goals and objectives from the curriculum; learners can take the course in different modalities and have to cover a compulsory amount of five hours per week, lasting each course an average of four months in an six-month basis formerly considered as a semester. For the purpose of achieving the aims of this project and collecting data derived from the administration of certain strategies and activities, questionnaires, audiotaping, interviews, a journal, and other resources and devices were used.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*What is fluency? Why is it important?*

Fluency plays a very important role in the communication process and includes significant aspects in order to contribute to it. Fillmore (1979, cited in McCarthy 2002) described fluency as “the ability to talk at length without abnormal pauses, the ability to talk coherently, employing ‘semantically dense’ sentences, the ability to have appropriate things to say in a broad range of contexts, and the ability to be imaginative in language use”. Brumfit (1984, cited in McCarthy 2002) argued that “fluency involved ‘natural’ use of language”, and that “continuity and speed were involved”. He also states that it is necessary to include an element of automaticity in the characterization of fluency. Hedge (1993, cited in Lanzaraton 2001) states that fluency has two meanings. The first, defined as “the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness or undue hesitation”... and a second, more holistic sense, that of “natural language use,” which is likely to take place when speaking activities focus on meaning and its negotiation, when speaking strategies are used, and when overcorrection is minimized. Another significant factor in the perception of fluency is the length of the utterances, i.e. the number of syllables between pauses. The longer the utterances, the more fluent the speaker sounds. (Thornbury, 2008)
McCarthy (2010) includes an example of a conversation in one of his articles and he points out the use of formulaic chunks (e.g., and then, I mean, you know, I would say, I don’t know, etc.), as “one of the key elements contributing to speech rate and conversational flow”. He also argues that Chunks are retrieved whole; they are not created anew each time. They operate either as sentence frames (e.g. you’re gonna...) or as pragmatically specialized units (e.g. or whatever). They are typically spoken quickly and as a one tone unit; they are thus part of phonological fluency as well as lexico-grammatical fluency. The rest of the utterance [...] can be spoken more slowly without damaging fluency.

(McCarthy, 2010)

Another aspect to take into consideration is the perception we can have as listeners on pausing: “… if- the- speaker- produces- one- word- at- a- time- like- this, no matter how accurate the results are, the speaker will not normally be judged a fluent speaker.” (Thornbury, 2008:6)

Lowes and Target (1998) state that, along with fluency, accuracy plays a core role in the oral skill; that is why it is important for students to know the difference between them and develop both. There is also the misconception that accuracy is the main aspect learners have to pay attention to, but that is wrong. What is more usual is that anxious students worry about accuracy and more confident students concentrate on fluency. (Lowes and Target, 1998). Brown (2007) argues that, when the learner is trained in the speaking skill, the following series of principles should be taken into consideration:

- Focus on both fluency and accuracy, depending on the objective.
- Provide intrinsically motivating techniques.
- Encourage the use of authentic language in meaningful contexts.
- Provide appropriate feedback and correction.
- Capitalize on the natural link between speaking and listening.
- Give students opportunities to initiate oral communication.
- Encourage the development of speaking strategies.
Brown (2003) also states that fluency requires automatization: "Fluent speech is automatic, not requiring much attention, and is characterized by the fact that the psycholinguistic processes of speech planning and speech production are functioning easily and efficiently." This automaticity happens when the student actually uses the language he owns, so it is necessary to create the opportunities to practice communication (Gatbonton and Segalowitz, cited in Brown, 2003). According to Brumfit (1984a, cited in Bygate, 2008), learners should be allowed to improvise their own expressions when working with fluency activities. Ur (1996) suggests considering the following scale when actually evaluating fluency:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features present in the learner’s production</th>
<th>Score</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easy and effective communication, and the learner uses long turns</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective communication in short terms</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learner gets ideas across, but hesitantly and briefly</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learner is very hesitant and brief utterances, sometimes difficult to understand</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little or no communication</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**What are learning styles?**

Learning styles are the ways we prefer to learn, and they are usually put into action using specific learning strategies (Ehrman, 1996, cited in Cohen and Weaver, 2005). Lowes & Target (1998) state that “individuals learn in very different ways, and what works for one person may not work for another”. They also argue that learners need to know what kind of learner they are already and we need to give them strategies to develop further in and out of class. There are different classifications of learning styles; one of the classifications relies on perceptual style dimensions, which include three specific styles: visual (relying more on the sense of sight, and learning best through visual means); auditory (preferring listening and speaking activities); and hands-on (benefiting from doing projects, working with objects, and moving around) (Cohen and Weaver, 2005).
When we lesson plan, it is important to take learning styles into consideration in order to provide activities related to different styles. Including a good balance of activities, all styles can be catered (Lowes & Target, 1998). Research suggests that the greater number of styles students can use, the more successful they will be at learning a language. Research also shows that we all have learning styles preferences and thus may tend to favor our preferred approaches when learning (Cohen and Weaver, 2005).

**What are language learning strategies?**

Language Learning strategies are those actions taken by second language (L2) and foreign learners to control and improve their own learning (Oxford, 1990). O’Malley and Chamot (1995) define them as “the thoughts and actions we engage in, consciously or not, to learn new information. The goal of teaching learning strategies is to help students to consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated, and independent language learners.” While research shows that most learners can learn the same content, each of them needs to learn in their own way in order to get more successful results (Lowes & Target, 1998). Research efforts concentrating on the “good language learner” have identified strategies reported by students or observed in language learning situations that appear to contribute to learning; these efforts demonstrated that students do apply learning strategies while learning a second language and that these strategies can be described and classified (O’Malley and Chamot, 1995). Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) state that “an added benefit of learning strategy training is that it can help learners to continue to learn after they have completed their formal study of the target language.

**What is communicative competence?**

Communicative competence refers to a language learners ability to communicate in the target language. Learners are considered communicatively competent if they can participate in a spontaneous interchange with a target language speaker (Horwitz, 2007). Canale and Swain (1980, cited in O’Malley and Chamot, 1995) proposed a
theoretical framework in which communicative competence has three major components. The first is grammatical competence, which includes vocabulary and pronunciation as well as grammatical structures and word forms. The second is sociolinguistic competence, which is made up of sociocultural rules for using language appropriately and discourse rules for linking parts of language texts coherently and cohesively. The third component of this model is strategic competence, which consists of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence; Lanzaraton (2001) defines strategic competence as “a repertoire of compensatory strategies that help with a variety of communication difficulties”. In this model, the strategic component refers to communication strategies, which can be differentiated from learning strategies by the intent of the strategy use. That is, learning strategies have learning as a goal, and communication strategies are directed toward maintaining communication (Tarone, 1981, cited in O’Malley and Chamot, 1995).

Brown (2007) suggests that “the concept of strategic competence ... is one of the few that beginning language students are aware of. They simply have not thought about developing their own personal strategies for accomplishing oral communication purposes.” The classroom can be one in which students become aware of, and have a chance to practice, such strategies as

- asking for clarification (What?)
- asking someone to repeat something (Huh? Excuse me?)
- using fillers in order to gain time to process (Uh, I mean, Well)
- using conversation maintenance cues (Uh-huh, Right, Yeah, Okay, Hmm)
- getting someone’s attention (Hey, Say, So)
- using paraphrases for structures one can’t produce
- appealing for assistance from the interlocutor
- using formulaic expressions (at the survival stage) (How much ___ cost? How do you get to the ___)
What are communication strategies?

Communication strategies can be defined as the conscious processes used by the learners to convey a message that is both meaningful and informative for the listener or reader when they don’t have all the language they need (Cohen and Weaver, 2005). Brown (2003) states that …

communicative language strategies are abilities that students need in order to maximize communication when they are less than 100 percent accurate in their use of language. Fluency is probably not an absolute characteristic that students either have or do not have. If, in fact, fluency is a matter of degrees, students at any level of proficiency can probably achieve some degree of fluency.

According to Cohen’s taxonomy (2011), communication strategies include the following:

• paraphrasing/circumlocution
• coining words
• using facial expressions / gestures
• literal translation
• switching to L1
• asking for help
• clarification / confirmation
• using fillers

How can communication strategies contribute to fluency?

Using communication strategies in the class can actually help learner when trying to improve their fluency. Brown (2003) suggests that communicative language strategies can help students communicate fluently with whatever proficiency they happen to have at any given time. There are at least six such strategies, including the abilities: (a) to use speed to their advantage, (b) to use pauses and hesitations efficiently, (c) to give
appropriate feedback, (d) to repair competently, (e) to clarify effectively, and (f) to negotiate for meaning when necessary (Brown, 2003).

As fluency is closely related to communication, it would be important to mention how useful and relevant can communication strategies be regarded in the language class and as an important factor that can contribute to getting fluency. Saiz (1990) states that these strategies “relate to a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be clear”.

Also, according to Saiz, the most commonly communication strategies used are: topic avoidance (the learner avoids certain topics for which he/she lacks vocabulary), message abandonment (the learner starts talking about a topic but abandons it because he/she is unable to continue), paraphrase (the learner rewords his/her message to make him/herself understood), circumlocution (the learner describes an action or vocabulary item because he/she does not know the appropriate word), transfer (the learner borrows from any language he knows), appeal for assistance (the learner seeks help from the person he is speaking to), and mime (the learner uses nonverbal signs to convey the desired meaning), among others. As these strategies can be used in order to promote communication and fluency in the speaker, I considered using most of them as a useful tool during the class, as long as they can be used, in order to foster fluency improvement in the learners’ oral performance.

Also, it is vital for learners to be aware of the existence of certain communicative devices which can be used in a transaction, such as back-channeling (uh-huh, right) or by predicting and completing each other turns in a conversation (B: ...but let’s [...] just+ A: Let’s check it out.) in order to scaffold each other performances (Saiz: 1990).

Nguyen (2010) suggests the following series of techniques based on the cognitive, affective, and situational framework:

- Reduce the level of task difficulty
- Give students more time to do tasks
- Bring the tasks within students’ experience
- Allow students to collaboratively solve communicative tasks (Nation, 2000)
• Provide students with task guidance
• Attend to individual students’ needs and ability
• Promote positive attitudes among students
• Change students’ negative beliefs and attitudes towards mistakes
• Boost students’ self-confidence
• Lower students’ anxiety in the classroom
• Build a supportive learning environment
• Encourage peer support in the classroom
• Be sensitive when assigning students into groups
• Tolerate L1 use when appropriate
• Make the classroom environment a non-threatening place (Oxford, 1999)
• Introduce opportunities for students to speak English outside the class

How relevant is to teach communication strategies?
How important is it to focus our attention on teaching communication strategies in speaking in the ESL classroom? According to Richards (1990) “oral skills have hardly been neglected in EFL/ESL courses (witness the huge number of conversation and other speaking course books in the market) though how best to approach the teaching of oral skills has long been the focus of methodological debate. Teachers and textbooks make use of a variety of approaches, ranging from direct approaches focusing on specific features of oral interaction (e.g. turn-taking, topic management, questioning strategies) to indirect approaches which create conditions for oral interaction through group work, task work and other strategies” (Richards, 1990).

In order for learning strategy instruction to become an integral part of second language teaching, classroom teachers need not only to see the value of such instruction but also develop the skills for its implementation (O’Malley and Chamot, 1995). Regarding this issue, Cohen (2011) states that “…it is essential that language educators have adequate knowledge to pass on to teachers and to learners directly as to just what these strategies consist of and how to use them more efficiently.” However, not all teachers
are willing to receive proper training on this area. O’Malley and Chamot (1995) argue that “not all teachers have the necessary motivation or skills to add learning strategy instruction to their classes, and that substantial training may be necessary both to convince teachers of the utility of learning strategy training and to develop the instructional techniques that will help students become more autonomous language learners.” In order to be proficient so as to train learners, Lanzaraton (2001) states that “… it is clear that language learners must become competent at using strategies, such as circumlocution, hesitation devices, and appeals for help, and that the oral skills teacher should at least advocate and model their use.”

According to Harmer (2006), the roles of the teacher intended to get students to speak fluently are the following:

- **Prompter** (the teacher should be able to help the learners and the activity to progress by offering discrete suggestions)

- **Participant** (teachers should be good animators when asking students to produce language… they can prompt covertly, introduce new information to help the activity along, ensure continuing student engagement, and generally maintain a creative atmosphere)

- **Feedback provider** (when students are in the middle of a speaking activity, over-correction may inhibit them and take communication out of the activity… Helpful and gentle correction may get students out of difficult misunderstandings and hesitations)

According to Lowes & Target (1998), it is the teacher’s obligation to provide students with significant and abundant learning opportunities; also, it is mandatory for the teacher to fight negative beliefs in the learners by providing positive learning experiences, and to increase the students’ awareness towards diverse learning approaches. It is also necessary to point out that, even though the teacher is in control of the class, it does not necessarily have to be the center of attention: “If we accept
that it is the students’ job to learn and the teachers’ job to help them do this, then the focus in the classroom shifts from the teacher to the students.” (Lowes & Target, 1998)

**How can motivation influence fluency development?**

There can be different levels of confidence and abilities in the learners when they speak. Some may be shy, some may be nervous about making mistakes; others can get embarrassed if they say something wrong or they can give up very easily if they do not know the necessary words. On the other hand, some learners are more willing to take risks and try to communicate and they do not worry about mistakes that much. (Lowes and Target, 1998). Motivation is a key factor in language learning. Norris-Holt (2001) states that “motivation is the motor of learning; without it learning is unlikely to take place. When students choose to learn, they are motivated.” You can motivate your students, not only by providing them with meaningful learning experiences, but also with an encouraging, positive attitude. When designing your lessons, it is vital to take extrinsic (produced by the promise of an external reward of some kind) and intrinsic (personal enjoyment; sense of achievement and fulfillment the learner gets from the learning process) motivation into account (Lowes and Target, 1998). The atmosphere you create in your classroom is vital for learning experiences to be successful; regarding this issue, Scrivener (2011) argues that

> “generally speaking, you are likely to want to create experiences in which learners feel less worried about speaking, less under pressure, less nervous about trying things out. It’s a fine balance though, as you also want learners to feel under some pressure to take a risk and use language that they may have been avoiding using until now.”

One common mistake teachers make is that they immediately correct students at the very moment they are producing oral utterances, which is wrong as learners can experience loss of concentration and develop reluctance to participate in class; Scrivener (2011) suggests that teachers avoid interrupting the flow in the class, and try to avoid those management techniques that can cut the natural conversation flow.
The following are a series of techniques suggested to improve fluency on speaking:

- Don’t allow students to speak their native language in class.
- Minimize your teacher talking time (TTT) and maximize students’ talking time (STT) scheduling plenty of time for fluency activities.
- Make materials meaningful; students are more likely to chat if the topic is relevant and interesting to them.
- Fluency isn’t only about conversation; also use skills and task-based activities, such as problem solving.
- Teach language which allows students to scaffold their conversation (discourse markers, sequencers, etc.)
- Help students build their confidence: praise their participation, (especially when it is correct and relevant to the class) and don’t interrupt them with needless correction and cold error correct at the end of the exercise.
- Set up fluency activities for success: nothing will undermine a student’s confidence more than being asked to use language they’re not confident with or complete an activity they don’t understand how to do.

_Techniques to improve fluency in speaking_ (2010)

Is learner autonomy related to communication strategies?

An autonomous learner is someone who is able to learn on their own (Lowes and Target, 1998) and autonomous learning, also called student-centered learning or flexible learning, relates to the change in focus in the classroom from the teacher to the student (or from the teaching to the learning) (Taylor, 2000, cited in O’Neill and McMahon (n/d)) This switch of roles implies centering our planning and inclusion of communication strategies in the learner’s needs and potential possibilities, so the well-informed student can make intelligent choices regarding his/her use of learning and communication strategies when required in order to improve fluency. Accuracy and fluency are important for effective language learning so we need to help learners understand the difference between the two and develop both. They need to know
what kind of learner they are already and need to be given strategies to develop further in and out of class (Lowes and Target, 1998).

Lowes and Target (1998) also state that “learning a language is a bit like learning to ride a bike, because, in the end, students must be able to do it on their own and have their own experience. The same happens in language learning”. Students who take some responsibility for their own learning are usually more successful. This can be promoted in the class by encouraging and fostering students’ ability to remember, learn, extrapolate outside the classroom and achieve on their own (Lowes & Target, 1998).

Learning also happens outside the classroom, and the teacher is not always indispensable for the learners to learn. Learners also need to become more autonomous for both educational and practical reasons, and they need to be competent in the four skills of the language when you are not there to help them, so you need to encourage them to become independent of you. Teachers also need to develop motivation which comes from a sense of pleasure in learning, their intrinsic motivation; giving students more autonomy can have a positive effect on motivation. Students feel more motivated to learn if they are involved in decision making, if their views are considered, and if they are free to choose how they work (Lowes & Target, 1998). Well-informed students on strategy use, and communication strategies specifically, can help the learner in making the correct choices when trying to overcome difficulties at the time of speaking.

**METHODOLOGY**

*Action Research*

The format used for this project was an action research project. According to Burns (1999), action research (AR) is “… a self-reflective, systematic and critical approach to enquiry by participants who are at the same time members of the research community.” (Burns, in Cornwell, 1999, p. 5) The purpose of using AR was to cope with the objectives of the master’s degree program I am currently enrolled and AR offered
me an opportunity to do this type of research which “... aim is to identify problematic situations or issues considered by the participants to be worthy of investigation in order to bring about critically informed changes in practice” (Burns, 2010).

I consider AR was an invaluable tool to implement this project as us as teachers and providers are the ones who can take control of the research from a more personal and local perspective and make the necessary changes that we consider are suitable to our academic scenario.

**Data Collection**

In order to collect data from this project, it was necessary to use different research instruments and the corresponding electronic resources: a learning to learn (L2L) test, a journal, two exams, a questionnaire and an interview in Spanish.

*The L2L test*

An adaptation in Spanish of the first part of the Learning Style Survey (Cohen, Oxford, and Chi, 1997) – the perceptual style dimension test, was used in the very first session (see Appendix 1). The test was used in order to make the students aware on their learning styles and also for me to know the type of learners I had in the class. The results were as follow: five visuals, three auditory and six kinesthetic/hands-on, so I had to include activities and means of interaction in the implementation sessions which could cope with the three different styles.

*The journal*

I kept a journal of each lesson in order to collect any relevant information on the use of the communicative strategies and activities and the learners’ reaction to both of them; this one was very useful and provided me with very interesting information on those specific features for each one of the lessons (see Appendix 4).

*The two exams*

Two oral exams were used, which also acted as the mid-term and the final oral exams, in order to examine the level of language command the learners had and how fluent
they were at that moment, in the first one, and the second was used in order to discover how much the learners had improved in their fluency and if they were able to use the communication strategies (see Appendix 5). Both of them were divided into three sections (personal information, activities from recent past, and their plans for a near future) and were somehow similar in order to use the same structures and functions corresponding to this course and see how fluently they could perform when talking about those topics on both occasions.

The questionnaire
A questionnaire in Spanish was used at the end of the implementation in order to collect some opinions from the learners and analyze what their perspective was on the use of communication strategies perceived from this implementation (see Appendix 6).

The interview
An interview in Spanish was used intended also to collect some opinions from the students on the final results they had obtained and how fluent they felt had become using communication strategies (see Appendix 7).

Note taking
Some note taking was also used along the project, specially when I approached students and monitored their performance during the activities.

A discussion group on Facebook
It was intended to use a Facebook group as a means of discussion and interaction among the students, but it was not possible to do it due to time constrains.

Description of the implementation
The group that I worked with was Basic English Three Hundred and Eight (IBAS 308), which level is an equivalent to A2 from the Common European Framework. The population was made up by fourteen people, eight women and six men, whose ages ranged from nineteen to twenty six years old.
This project was intended to be implemented at the beginning of the course in a two month basis/period, but it was not possible due to two specific aspects: first, the lack of uniformity of language knowledge on behalf of the general population of students, and, secondly, the very low command of language that some students presented at the time of the first sessions I had with them. Regarding this last situation, it was necessary to reinforce their structures and have several sessions of remedial work during the first two months of the course and of language revision with them before implementing the project and give them an opportunity to balance their knowledge and contribute efficiently to the class and be able to work with the strategies that were necessary to use in order to effectively improve their fluency.

As a general trend or pattern, the students showed disposition to work collaboratively in the sessions to, either improve their command of language and/or revise and re-learn the structures that they were supposed to have learned in the previous two courses. Some of them sometimes showed a negative, non-endeavoring attitude towards the activities done during the sessions as they had to take the class compulsorily as part of their curriculum in their professional schools from the University of Veracruz. Some of them even missed several classes and did not participate much in the communicative activities I gave them in each of the sessions. This could be possible to different factors which may include their lack of language knowledge, or the fear to talk in front of their peers and be inaccurate and/or too slow.

The project was finally implemented in a five-week basis period with approximately four sessions per week; this was also a time constrain as it was almost at the end of the term when the implementation was set in progress.

The communication strategies used during the project implementation, according to Cohen’s (2005) taxonomy, were the following eight ones:

• Paraphrasing/circumlocution
• Coining words
• Using facial expressions / gestures
• Literal translation
• Switching to L1
• Asking for help
• Clarification / confirmation
• Using fillers

The implementation sessions

Session 1
In the very first session of the project, it was necessary to implement the learning styles test, which was an adaptation of the first part of the Learning Style Survey by Cohen Oxford and Chi (2001) (see Appendix 1), and refers to the sensory aspects of the learning styles classification. As a result, five learners presented a visual style as predominant, while six of them were auditory and the other six resulted to be kinesthetic. Once they had completed the test and seen the classification according to the scores obtained in the test, they were surprised to discover that they actually used the actions and strategies the test described for each learning style; some of the strategies described and discussed after the test had been finished included a variety of the strategies intended to be used during the project implementation (paraphrasing, coining words, using facial expressions / gestures, literal translation, switching to mother tongue (L1), asking for help, clarification / confirmation, and using fillers). I did not verbalize this to the class as it was intended to do it in a posteriori different session (see Appendix 2).

Session 2
In the second session, a sensibilization activity was used in order to make students aware of their responsibility shared by both, the teacher and the learners. It was interesting to observe during their discussions the many things they discovered about the obligations they and I had as entities in the learning process and how important they considered these factors to be. Sometimes it was difficult for them to express some ideas, but it was the occasion when I as a teacher acted also as a vocabulary
provider for either, help them recall the words they were not able to use or to tell them the new vocabulary.

Session 3
The third session was intended to introduce the concept of strategies and explore which strategies the learners knew or had used before, either in a conscious or unconscious way. As an introduction, I asked them to talk in trios about the resources they used when they could not find a certain word or expression in order to get their message across. Next, I also asked the learners to tell me their choices in Spanish so it was much easier for them to express their opinions and thoughts. Fortunately, and I must admit that it was very surprising, they explained, among other resources and ideas, all of the different strategies we were going to use during the implementation. They knew they could do “that” in order to keep on the communication and the consequent fluency, but they were not aware they were using strategies per se, but just a series of ideas which had helped them in the previous two courses and that they had developed as part of their needs and lacks when trying to communicate. I selected the most relevant ideas for the aim of the class and made a list on the board. Afterwards, I explained to them the different strategies I had listed on the board and sampled each one of them, sometimes eliciting and other expanding the examples they gave during their participations.

Session 4
It was time to talk about special presents and describe them in the fourth session. As part of the lesson included in the textbook, the learners were requested to talk about a present they considered special and describe the necessary features. It is necessary to point out that, from this session and on, we were going to begin using the strategies and every time it was necessary, I explicitly referred to the strategies and elicited and gave examples related to the topic, so the students were able to use them the most appropriately they could; I even created a chart on a big piece of paper that I placed on the board to point out at the strategies included in this project, so the learners had them at sight and utilized the ones that could suit the activity better. Such was the
occasion they used using facial expressions or gestures, literal translation, switching to L1, and asking for help, either from me or their peers.

Session 5
For session five, they were asked to talk about activities from a past vacation or a party they had attended. This time the intention was that they reviewed their structures and pronunciation for the past tenses, either regular and irregulars, and also for giving descriptions and asking for help when they considered it was necessary. I consider necessary to mention that I tried not to focus completely on only one strategy in each session, but I gave them freedom of choice to use any of the strategies in the chart and even ask for help if they wanted to corroborate if the sample piece of language or vocabulary being used was appropriate; if the topic or activity needed a special strategy to focus on, I usually promoted it and exemplified it so the students had a much clearer scope of it and the necessary language and/or devices to use during the activity.

Session 6
In session six, the objective was to tell anecdotes on bad experiences the learners had had in the street as they had to listen to a similar story in the recording intended for that class related to the past tense. They also had to use sequence connectors (first, then, next, etc.) and try to focus on strategies that could help continue talking, doing some emphasis on coining words or switching to L1.

Session 7
Session seven was somehow similar to the previous one, but this time they had to tell and describe good experiences they had had in the street, too. In this session there was a recall for strategies (I did not place the chart on the board but asked the learners to help each other and write them on the board) and we reinforced the ideas behind each one of them before they used them. They also showed a bit more confidence to ask for unknown vocabulary and showed willingness to work with different peers during the activity.
Session 8
A new L2L activity was done in session eight (see Appendix 3A). It was a “Find someone who” activity related to their learning styles and the options they had when using communication strategies. There was a post-activity group discussion on their choices and I encouraged them to try to explain their own ideas using strategies. It was a bit difficult but they managed to use them, especially when switching to L1 and using gestures.

Session 9
The ninth session was used to talk about food and drinks and quantifiers and containers, as part of the activities suggested in the textbook. The atmosphere was a bit more relaxed and I did not mention/emphasize the use of strategies but set the chart on the board and allowed students to look at them indirectly. At the end of the activity, I asked them if they had used any of the strategies and they mentioned the ones they had tried to use. One of them even emphasized the fact that I had not encouraged them to use the strategies at the beginning of the session, but they had used them unconsciously as they needed.

Sessions 10 and 11
Sessions ten and eleven focused almost completely on circumlocution as the unit from the textbook was intended for this specific strategy using who, that, where and which in relative clauses and other useful expressions that can be used as part of a circumlocution (e.g. It is similar to “worried”; For example, you can do this with the TV; It’s a kind of machine; It’s somebody who cleans the street; etc.). The topic was using “The Devil’s Dictionary” for giving sarcastic definitions to daily life concepts, and it certainly brought entertainment and matter to talk about during the activities.

Session 12
In session twelve, we worked on the written form for the circumlocution structures so as to reinforce the oral practice they had had during the previous two lessons; in this session, however, there was a slight change of attitude and several students tried to remain silent during the activities.
Session 13
To solve a crossword using circumlocution was the main goal in session thirteen. The students were somehow surprised because of the format they had to use in order to complete the activity, but they also showed enthusiasm and involvement in it. It was sort of difficult for them at the beginning, but they managed to use diverse structures and this specific strategy in order to complete the task.

Session 14
Borrowing items was the topic to work on in session fourteen. As I presented different realia items with unusual names, they did not know the word in English, so the emphasis was also on the phrases they had learned previously from the textbook in order to use the circumlocution strategy.

Session 15
Talking about nice people and a nice vacation and using fillers were the objectives for session fifteen. They liked the activity a lot, especially because they became more aware of how fillers are used in English and when to use them in order to fill in gaps in communication and express different feelings (e.g. surprise, confusion, excitement, among others).

Sessions 16 and 17
For sessions sixteen and seventeen, the lesson focused on how to react to difficult questions and use strategies in order to try to answer those questions. The topic was the ‘Miss Universe’ pageant interview phase, and it was a fun experience to listen to the questions they created and how they responded to them, trying to assume the role of a contestant.

Session 18
Finally, in session eighteen, there was a review of structures and strategies used during the project and there was an opportunity for clarification of doubts and any problems the learners could have faced during the previous sessions (see Appendix 3B).
Data Analysis

Data collected through the previous instruments were analyzed and contrasted in order to find out the categories and themes resulting from the diverse actions taken during the implementation regarding the different strategies used during the sessions and to what extent they permitted the learners to improve their fluency, either in an explicit or implicit way. The results from the L2L test were classified according to the categories already existing from the authors (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles); some of the audio files were transcribed in order to sample some of the strategies the learners were able to manage during the second oral examination. Categories were also used to classify the answers given in the written questionnaire (i.e. usefulness and likeliness of strategies) and the opinions from the interview in Spanish (were also put in order to analyze the learner’s perceptions and how they felt after the implementation had ended).

FINDINGS

Results from the Learning Styles Test

The results obtained from giving this test to the students were quite revealing as they commented had never taken this type of test in order to discover the learning style they had: five were visual, three more were auditory and the last six resulted kinesthetic/hands-on (see Table 1); it is necessary to mention that, at first, it was kind of challenging for me to design activities for each one of the sessions that could support the three different learning styles, but I asked and consulted my peers and reviewed several textbooks in order to get the most appropriate ones for these learners. When the students had finished answering the test, they commented and agreed with their resulting learning style and the different procedures the test suggested for each style, which they had sometimes unconsciously experienced before, either in Spanish or in English, without noticing they were actually using a learning strategy.
Learning style | Number of learners identified with each learning style:
---|---
Visual | 5
Auditory | 3
Kinesthetic/hands-on | 6

Table 1: Learning styles detected in the learners

Results provided by the journal

The entries in the journal suggest that the atmosphere was very tense at the beginning of the implementation, so it was necessary to make some changes in my attitude: I realized that the more easy-going and friendly I was towards students, the more they would cooperate in the activities and the less frightened by me and stressed they would feel. I also began smiling more and even joked with some of them while the activities were in progress or during whole class discussions, and that was very relieving for me and for them, too.

For some students, it was more difficult to understand and follow the strategy training, so I observed and paid attention carefully and approached to them and offered my help trying to be kind and supportive; fortunately, they would accept the help and would even ask me other questions related to what they were doing at that time. It was interesting to see that after a few explanations, all of the students were able to follow the activity and complete it; in the whole journal there is no entry indicating that the learners would have complained that the activities were extremely difficult or boring. It was also interesting to realize how most learners’ attitude towards me and the class began to change little by little, and by the fifth session of the implementation I could notice they would feel much more relaxed and willing to cooperate in the sessions. Almost by the end of the implementation, the situation had considerably changed and the learners were much more participative than they were in the end; also, most of them had improved their fluency and were able to use most of the strategies.
Results Provided by the Examinations Regarding Fluency and Strategy Training

The examinations used at the beginning and at the end of the implementation provided relevant information to this project. In the first one, the students’ responses to each of the tasks given during the test showed how fluent they were and if they could use any of the strategies to be included in the implementation.

Based on the results from the first examination, students can be classified into three main categories: the ones that were sufficiently fluent for the level they were in (five out of fourteen students); the ones that were fluent so as to communicate properly in the language; and there were the ones that were at a threshold stage or below and made many mistakes and lacked heavily on proper vocabulary, which usually interfered with their fluency, were slow when speaking, and presented accentuated hesitation and loss of coherence when trying to communicate orally.

The results indicate that from the first to the second examination, some improvement can be detected in most of the learners: during the first examination, none of the strategies were detected to have been used by the learners and only a few of them seemed to be fluent as I explained previously; on the second exam, however, most students used the strategies and seemed to have increased their fluency at some extent.

Strategies Used (Results from the Second Examination)

Certain strategies were found to be used more frequently in the second exam and some other were barely used or not at all by the learners during the examination. Here, some examples:

- **Coining words**
  
  T: Why do you like to play basketball?
  St: Because it’s saludeibol...
- **Using facial expressions / gestures**

  St A: What are you going to do next weekend?
  St B: What?...
  St A: What are you going to do next weekend? (moving a finger in circles forward, indicating next day)

  St A: It was very... very...
  St B: Very big?
  St A: Yeah, it was huge! A huge tree! (holding her arms wide open upwards indicating big volume)

- **Literal translation**

  T: What do you want to do in the future?
  St: I want to... dedicate me... to sources human...

  T: Tell us about a nice place you have visited.
  St: My went in the city of Puebla... the cathedral of Puebla and different smalls...

  T: Apart from going to the soccer match, what else did you do?
  S: I .. my went to the walk with the family...

- **Switching to L1**

  T: Tell us about the last time you ate in a restaurant, please.
  St: The last time I went to a restaurant, I ate ... mariscos... and drank... manzanita

  St A: In your last Christmas, what did you eat?
  St B: I ... mmmh... ate... pavo and drank... sidra, yes.

  St A: What were you studying?
  St B: I was studying for my exam of... Estados Financieros.

- **Asking for help**

  T: Tell us about the last time you went to a party. The last time, not the next time...
  St: An experience?... Yes?
  T: Exactly, a past experience.
- **Clarification / confirmation**

  T: How old are you?
  St: I am... 12 years old – 20! years old

  T: What does your mother do?
  St: My mother is a wifehouse... sorry! housewife.

  T: What do you like doing in your free time?
  St: I’m like play soccer – I like! playing soccer.

  T: Where are you from?
  St: I’m from to Puebla – no! I’m from Puebla

  T: What are you going to do in the future?
  St: I go to work – I’m going! to work in a big company... in the USA...

  T: What are you going to do next vacation?
  St: We are going to go at... at... Cancun... No! We are going to go to! Cancun...

The strategies that were used more frequently during the final examination were using facial expressions/ gestures, literal translation, switching to L1, and clarification/ confirmation; coining words and asking for help were used in fewer occasions. Even though the strategies paraphrasing/circumlocution and using fillers strategies had a more direct focus and were directly emphasized in their use in more than four of the sessions during the implementation, there is no evidence that the students had used them during the examination.

**Students’ Perceptions Regarding the Use of Strategies (Results from the Written Questionnaire)**

The written questionnaire was answered by eleven students, and it included eight questions which were intended to find out the learners’ opinions on their experience working with communication strategies.
a) In question one, all students agreed that it had been useful to know and practice the communication strategies seen in class. Here are a few opinions on their agreement:

- “They were useful because I increased my vocabulary and improved my fluency”
- “I had never been taught before [on CS], and it was interesting, it was fun and they did convince me”
- “They ease communication and provide us with ideas to answer”
- “As you put them into practice, you do not remain silent and makes your mind [think] quicker”

b) In the second question, the students were inquired which strategies they had liked the most and why. As can be seen, the strategies that most students liked were paraphrasing/circumlocution and coining words (see Table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy:</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Paraphrasing/circumlocution</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Coining words</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Using facial expressions / gestures</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Literal translation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Switching to L1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Asking for help</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Clarification / confirmation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Using fillers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Strategies the learners liked the most

The reasons they expressed for their choices were also diverse: sense of security, attainment to usual behaviors, fun, and helpfulness, among others.

- “I felt more secure using these strategies when speaking, as I did not interrupt my message” (strategies liked by this student: A, B, D, F, G, H)

- “I guess that one of the strategies that I used the most was using facial expressions and gestures, I liked it a lot as I tend to move my hands a lot and make faces when speaking!” (strategies liked by this student: A, C, F, H)
• “It was fun to use these ones, and we could use them quite well!” (strategies liked by this student: A, C, F, H)

• “I asked when I did not know a word and that made understand better how to use certain structures in English” (strategies liked by this student: A, B, C, D, F, H)

• “They helped me to communicate more easily” (strategies liked by this student: A, F, H)

c) In question three they were inquired about which strategies had been more useful for them. As Table 3 shows, the strategies that most students considered useful were asking for help, using fillers, coining words, and using facial expressions/gestures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy:</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Paraphrasing/circumlocution</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Coining words</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Using facial expressions / gestures</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Literal translation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Switching to L1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Asking for help</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Clarification / confirmation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Using fillers</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Strategies the learners considered the most useful

The reasons why students found the strategies useful were: providing time to think, providing faster ways to give an answer, and giving ability to describe unknown words, among others. Here, some of their opinions:

• “These helped me think while I was giving my answer, and I learned from my peers and the teacher, and I also widen my vocabulary.” (strategies considered useful by this student: B, F, H)
• “It provided me with more time to think what I could answer.” (strategies considered useful by this student: H)

• “I feel these are the quickest ways to answer in English or make some time answering adequately.” (strategies considered useful by this student: B, F, H,)

• “Really, all the strategies used were useful, however, being able to describe unknown words helped a lot as well as to use facial expression.” (strategies considered useful by this student: A, C)

d) When they were asked in question four whether they had had or not enough practice with the strategies in class, eight people agreed that they had had enough practice:

• “There was actually some practice for each; unfortunately, not always in the correct way as sometimes in a dialogue it was not done for an “X” reason among peers.”

• “The teachers tried to make us practice most of the time with such strategies.”

• “Because I use them in several classes and I was able to learn more.”

But two did not:

• “Because they were not used in every class”.

• “There was not enough time to practice them in class”

e) In question five they were asked to mention in what other ways they would have liked to practice the strategies; these are some of their answers:

• “With written descriptions”

• “In a more dynamic way”

• “With more exercises or activities”

• “In most of the sessions during the term”

f) They were asked if they wanted to work with other learning strategies in question six, most of them agreed that they would like to continue working with them:

• “Yes, it would be good to know and use them”
• “Yes, I would like to know the other types and, if necessary, use them”
• “Yes, because they would help me learn more in English”

g) “What did you like the least of working with strategies?” was question seven; most learners mentioned it had been good to work with them, although a few disagreed:
• “Probably, we did not use them correctly, as coining words was used excessively by some peers”
• “Sometimes I did not have the necessary vocabulary or I did not know the correct pronunciation”
• “Sometimes I could not figure out which to use to get my message across”

h) Finally, in question eight the learners were asked for some suggestions for the teacher to work with strategies in the following courses, and they suggested the following:
• “They should be practiced more in class”
• “They may be more dynamic”
• “They should be practiced since the beginning of the course”

**Students’ Perceptions regarding their Fluency (Results from the Interview in Spanish)**

A semi-structured interview in Spanish was conducted to collect open-ended opinions in detail from the learners and complement the questionnaire previously described. Five people were chosen at random to be interviewed, and were asked three questions: 1, if they had liked to work with strategies in class; 2, If they considered they had improved their fluency with this work; and 3, if they wanted to continue working with these learning strategies. They all answered affirmatively to the three questions, having similar positive perceptions in their use of the strategies mentioning that this type of work had certainly increased their fluency. Here some opinions:

• “I consider they were a very important tool which made comprehension easier as well as a means to speak”
• “They helped me increase my vocabulary, and also a source to remember and recall new vocabulary”
• “I still have some problems with pronunciation, but the fact that I now have more ways to continue talking, and give an opportunity to improve and increase a bit more my fluency”
• “They allow us to keep on talking, not cutting communication.”
• “They are something new, and I would like to continue using them in class as they help learn from other people and I acquire more vocabulary.”
• “To tell you the truth, I did not know those many strategies; I only knew that I could ask the teacher or my peers for help or that I could change my information or invent it.”
• “They helped me in two ways: recall certain ideas to help me continue talking and they definitely helped me improve my fluency.”
• “Some of them are easy, some are difficult, but I guess it is just a matter of using the ones that can help me and they helped me in the oral skill being very useful when learning a language.”
• “The names were new for me, but I certainly have used them before.”
• “I realized they had helped me during the exam, as I did not got stocked during the oral exam and being able to know how to answer and think faster.”

During the interview, most students seemed relaxed and willing to cooperate to answer the questions. The general atmosphere was friendly and they did not hurry to give an answer. As it was not a very long interview, all of the students seemed surprised when they were told the interview had ended.

**DISCUSSION**

A major objective of this action research project was to implement communication strategies in the classroom in order to show students that there were other possible
ways to improve their fluency at their own level. A second objective was to see how the project’s intention could evolve, as it was to train students on strategy use and see how well they could cope with and manage their use of these strategies and increase their fluency. The major results obtained from this training, implementation and use of strategies in the classroom can be considered positive as the strongest students seemed to have improved their fluency and were able to use most strategies; the mid-level ones could show some improvement and were able to use some strategies; and the weak ones did not seem to manage using the strategies and their fluency did not increase, except one of the students whom I would refer to in detail later. When the second exam was given to the learners, most of them presented some improvement as they had gained confidence and control of their language structures and could use communication strategies and be more fluent when trying to communicate in an oral format.

Reviewing the answers for the research questions, results suggest that...

- **To what extent can communication strategies improve my IBAS 300 students’ performance and fluency during their oral production?**
  Most of the learners seemed to have improved their fluency as a result of using the communication strategies used during the implementation.

- **To what extent can my students use/handle communication strategies?**
  The learners can use some strategies in three different levels: some can use most of them, some can use only a few of them, and a few learners are not able to use them.

- **What are my learners’ perceptions and opinions towards their fluency and communication strategies after experiencing them?**
  The learners seem to like and find useful the strategies seen during the implementation.

Also, the findings suggest that the short period of time spent during the term using and practicing with the strategies may have not contributed to all of the learner’s success and good command of the strategies, as some of the learners stated in their answers.
for the questionnaire. According to the experts, strategy training usually takes time for learners to feel confident with and begin using them and it is also the trainer’s obligation to be well-informed and trained in their use so as to be able to provide effective results for his/her trainees (Cohen, 2010).

The results from the journal suggest that circumlocution, coining words, and switching to L1 seemed to be the most appealed strategies by the students at the time of use and practice during the activities in each of the sessions, and it was surprising that sometimes they would adventure to use one or more from the other strategies previously mentioned. Asking for clarification was another strategy used by the learners, either referring to me or their peers, depending on how confident they would feel to ask me as being the “authority figure” in the classroom; despite their lack of confidence to ask for help, I would usually try to pay attention and try to listen carefully to them during the practice stage and approach the students in need in order to offer my help in a softer tone of voice and usually smiling at him/her. However, during the final examination, circumlocution was not used at all by the learners and it seemed to have been avoided in order not to make mistakes.

The issue of motivation during the instruction, practice and use of the strategies may have been a key point for success in the process. I had not realized the importance of smiling at the time of talking to students, which could lead me to discover that they would feel less threatened by me when I would address or approach to them to either elicit or provide a sample of language using a strategy and/or when they could use it in a more real conversational act.

**The Attitudinal Factor during the Class**

Using the journal during the sessions period provided me with the opportunity to write down important features from each session and also allowed me to record several factors which I had noticed during the sessions but I had never paid attention to in previous courses: how the teacher’s and the learners’ attitudes can affect motivation in the learner and how this can also lead the class objectives towards success or towards
failure; a nicer, more encouraging, warmer attitude towards and/or from the learner can allow the class to flow smoothly and improve the interaction teacher-student and also encourages the learner-learner interaction to develop adequately in order to fulfill activities and interiorize the knowledge which is being tried to learn.

Regarding the attitudinal factor, it was interesting to see how one of the learners evolved during the course regarding fluency and attitude. At the beginning, she seemed to be very shy and not to be very interested in the class: she was getting late to class, she was not doing the pieces of homework assigned to the whole group, she even seemed to try to remain silent during the oral exercises, and her attitude gave the impression of not being very friendly towards the other learners and the teacher; consequently, a rejecting, uncomfortable attitude in general seemed to have been generated towards her. Along with this, her oral skills and her grammar and vocabulary seemed very limited. I even believed she was not exactly interested in the class and I must confess I was about to develop a negative attitude towards her. But I decided to try to help her and try to change that atmosphere. As the course progressed, I tried to encourage her to be more participative by pairing her up with stronger learners in order to give her some support during the oral practice and I subtly paid more attention to her and her learning. Fortunately, little by little she began to modify her behavior and attitude and, even though her oral skills, grammar and vocabulary could not get as strong as it was necessary to pass to the next course (according to the final examination), she began taking risks in class and dared to interact more orally. During the final oral exam, she definitely seemed to have gained a little bit more confidence and fluency and to be able to break the barrier of shyness that probably was refraining her from being more active and participative in class.

Regarding the limitations of the project, the most important was the short amount of time that was available for its implementation; unfortunately, I did not take into account the weaknesses that some students could have presented at the time when the course started, so I had to expend several weeks (six, to be exact) doing remedial work and could not implement the project at the start as it was originally planned.
Another important factor that I considered did not contribute was the attitude and motivation of some students who have to take the class compulsorily; I consider that it would be very interesting to see the results in a class in which all students are willing to work and experience new things as part of their learning process.

My suggestions for further research would be, among others, to be aware of the possible limitations and constraints that can be faced when trying to implement this kind of project, specially the fact that, sometimes, in a group we can have a very mixed type of learning styles, attitudes, degrees of motivation, and commands of language. There is also the possibility to use other resources that current practice and media offer, such as discussion and work groups on web platforms in order to provide autonomous work that can be necessary and/or suitable for many learners and to exchange points of view among participants and give suggestions on how to cope with the tasks assigned in class and online; there are also web sites that are specially designed for these specific purposes in strategy training and practice and there is also the possibility to use social networks for a more casual interaction among students in order to exchange opinions and suggestions regarding these issues.

**CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

According to the results obtained from this study, using communication strategies in the classroom seems to provide a positive effect during the language learning process in order to improve fluency in the learners. In order to achieve success in the use of communication strategies in class, several factors can be considered, and a very relevant one is the previous training and knowledge on the part of the teacher; he/she would have to be in charge of providing those strategies that he/she would consider to be necessary to work with and implement in the class given certain characteristics in the learners and their performance.
It is also necessary to remind ourselves that this area is still developing slowly and very few students (and teachers) can distinguish a strategy from an activity and how each of them can affect their learning in an either positive or negative way; also, it is necessary to rehearse and perform cognitive work in order to achieve success when taking up this type of tasks, not to mention, also, the importance of language command that learners may have achieved at a certain stage of their language learning process, being this the case when remedial work is necessary and vital to be done in class in order to improve the conditions for the project to be implemented.

Raising students’ awareness towards taking responsibility of their choices and allowing them to experience several possibilities on working in order to improve their capacities are other important factors to consider during the process. The first one should be shared along with the teacher in order to achieve success using the resources at hand, and the second would imply providing opportunities to experience significant knowledge which can change the learner’s perspective towards the language and how these can fulfill their needs and expectations in real life.

Along with these issues, there are motivational and attitudinal features to be taken into account when designing and implementing the strategies during class time, and also, be aware of the characteristics that certain learners may have in our own scenario and setting, as they can lead to success or total failure. We as teachers sometimes forget that those characteristics in the learner makes him/her human, that are of vital importance even if they are minimal or wrongly considered unimportant; there is also the fact that a kind manner or a smile and a nice tone of voice can make a total difference in the learner’s perception.

The issue of time was a very important one to take into consideration during the whole process. If it is not the most vital aspect, it is certainly the amount of time that we spend in each class and during the term focusing on practicing and using the strategies that can make a difference in the learning/acquisition process and determine how much success and how much mastery a learner can achieve from those strategies worked on in class and the consequent increase in their fluency. During this project’s
implementation, it would have been very interesting to see the resulting experience of having more time available for this type of work done during the term with the strategies and see how much the learners could have improved from having a longer-lasting training and practice on them.

Finally, I would like to say that trying out these new perspectives in my class and giving my students the opportunity to experience new ways of learning and improving their language knowledge was very rewarding and satisfactory. This type of experiences can certainly trigger new ideas, new projects, new ways of motivating students, but most of all, they can certainly give you a whole new scope on your professional practice to help your students become better learners.
REFERENCES


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APENDIX 1 A. LEARNING STYLES TEST (FRONT)
(SPANISH ADAPTATION FROM THE LEARNING STYLE SURVEY BY COHEN, OXFORD AND CHI, 2005)
Suma la puntuación asignada de acuerdo a cada pregunta indicada para cada estilo de aprendizaje:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estilo visual:</th>
<th>3 + 6 + 9 + 10 + 14 + 16 + 20 + 24 = 60</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estilo auditivo:</td>
<td>2 + 5 + 8 + 12 + 15 + 17 + 21 + 23 = 99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estilo cinestésico:</td>
<td>1 + 4 + 7 + 11 + 13 + 18 + 19 + 22 = 78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

El estilo en el que obtengas la mayor puntuación es tu estilo de aprendizaje predominante.

**Descripción de los estilos de aprendizaje:**

**Alumnos Visuales**: aprenden a través del contacto visual con el material. Algunas de sus características son:

- Aprenden al ver materiales.
- Los videos, películas o programas de cómputo mejoran su aprendizaje.
- Las representaciones visuales en materiales como gráficas, cuadros, carteleras, y diagramas mejoran su aprendizaje.
- Su manera más eficiente de almacenar información es visual.
- Este estilo incluye del 40 al 50 por ciento de la población.

**Alumnos Auditivos**: aprenden escuchando. Debido a que la enseñanza tradicional tiene como base en general el uso de este canal, los estudiantes auditivos se adaptan con facilidad al formato de cátedra. Algunas de sus características son las siguientes:

- Aprenden mejor al escuchar el material.
- Las cintas de audio, los CD’s, etc., mejoran su aprendizaje.
- Recuerda mejor lo que escucha que lo que lee.
- El almacenamiento del material meramente auditivo es menos eficiente que el visual. Por lo general los educandos auditivos efectúan algún tipo de transferencia de información a un sistema de almacenamiento visual.

**Alumnos Corporal-cinestésicos**: aprenden al interactuar físicamente con el material en cuestión. Para aprender requieren del movimiento. A continuación sus características:

- Aprenden al interactuar físicamente con el material.
- Están en movimiento continuo moviendo las manos, los pies, etc. La mayor parte del tiempo se la pasan haciendo garabatos.
- El tiempo asignado para una tarea debe ser limitado y requiere descansos frecuentes.
- Puede recordar mejor lo que hace en lugar de lo que ve o escucha.
- Es la forma menos eficiente para almacenar información académica y la mejor para almacenar datos que tengan que ver con lo atlético y lo artístico.
- Incluye del 30 al 50 por ciento de la población en general.
Important note:
The following activities are intended to be done as part of a class and not as a whole session.

Universidad Veracruzana
Centro de Idiomas - Orizaba

Teacher’s name: Adrian M. Soler Rojas
Group: IBAS 308    Time: 8:15 am    Number of students: 14    Age: 17 - 35    Gender: 6 men, 8 women
General Objective: To raise students’ awareness on the importance of doing homework.

LESSON PLAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIME</th>
<th>METHODOLOGY</th>
<th>MATERIALS</th>
<th>OBSERVATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 min.</td>
<td>Ss are asked if they know what a learning style is and what it is used for. He elicits some possible answers and takes notes on the board.</td>
<td>Markers, board.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 min.</td>
<td>The T asks Ss to get in trios and collect some possible ideas on activities that they use to learn a language. The T allows some time for discussion and collects ideas from the trios.</td>
<td>Ss’ notebooks and pens.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 7 min.</td>
<td>Once the T has collected some possible answers, he asks the Ss to take the quiz and gives some instructions on how to use it.</td>
<td>Photocopies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 min.</td>
<td>After the allocated time, the T asks Ss if they discovered anything new regarding their learning style and the activities suggested in the quiz. T and Ss listen to Ss opinions.</td>
<td>None.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 min.</td>
<td>T asks Ss to discuss on the importance of knowing and using their learning style, and asks Ss to give specific examples of how they would like to use these activities for the pieces of language they are struggling with.</td>
<td>Ss’ notebooks and pens.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 min.</td>
<td>Once time is allotted, the T asks Ss to share at random as a whole class on their examples. If necessary, the T makes some correction on using the learning style and the activities.</td>
<td>None.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 min.</td>
<td>Finally, the T makes some final statements on the issue and gives instructions on the homework intended to be done after that class.</td>
<td>None.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Complete the questionnaire. Compare your answers with a partner. Explain your answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I want to learn English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed my English classes last year.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a good student of English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I sometimes use English out of school.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think English is easy.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like trying to speak English.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I liked my English teacher last year.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think English is useful.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to do well in my English class this year.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think learning English can be fun.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APENDIX 3 B MATERIAL FOR SESSION 18
April 1st, 2013

- Find store who
- unit 8 2 superlatives
- learning style test

Today the session began kind of slow as it was the 1st day after a week vacation. SS seemed kind of rocky during the 1st act and didn’t want to talk that much. As class developed, they felt a little more secure and confident to talk and interact. Also, they talked freely when they read their learning style description. Most agreed with them and expressed it was good to know this info as language learners.

I also told them they will have the written mid-term exam on week 3rd.

- Visuals
- 3 auditory
- 6 kinesthetic
- Learning style test after test.
UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA
Centro de Idiomas Orizaba
IBAS 300 Mid-term oral exam:

1. **PART 1:** Tell me some information about you

2. **PART 2:** Tell me some information about your activities from yesterday/last week/last weekend.

3. **PART 3:** In pairs, have a conversation about your activities next weekend/tomorrow/next summer vacation.

---

UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA
Centro de Idiomas Orizaba
IBAS 300 Final oral exam

1. **PART 1:** Personal information questions

2. **PART 2:** Speak for about one minute about the following topic:
   The last time you
   - went to the movies
   - went on vacation
   - had dinner in a restaurant.

3. **PART 3:** Look at the cards and have a conversation about:
   - your next birthday
   - your next Christmas vacation
   - your next trip to Puebla/Mexico City

APENDIX 5 . ORAL EXAMS QUESTIONS
UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA
MAESTRIA EN ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA
PROYECTO DE INTERVENCIÓN DIDÁCTICA

NOMBRE (opcional): _____________________________ FECHA: __________

INSTRUCCIONES: A continuación encontrarás una serie de preguntas relacionadas con tu uso y aprendizaje de estrategias de comunicación vistas en tu curso de Inglés Básico 300. Por favor, contesta en español las preguntas con toda la honestidad que sea posible; las respuestas a este cuestionario no serán usadas para otorgarte una calificación en tu curso.

1. ¿Fue útil para ti conocer y practicar las estrategias de comunicación vistas en clase? Sí  No
   ¡Por qué? Explica: _____________________________

2. En tu opinión, ¿cuál(es) fue(ron) la(s) estrategia(s) que te agradó(aron) más? Márcalas con una v: paraphrasing __________ coining words __________ using facial expressions / gestures __________ translation __________ switching to L1 __________ asking for help __________ clarification / confirmation __________ using fillers
   ¡Por qué? Explica: _____________________________

3. ¿Cuál(es) de ellas te fue(ron) más útil(es)?
   ¡Por qué? Explica: _____________________________

4. ¿Consideras que tuviste la suficiente práctica en clase de las estrategias? Sí  No
   ¡Por qué? Explica: _____________________________

5. ¿De qué otra manera te hubiera gustado practicar las estrategias? Explica: _____________________________

6. ¿Te gustaría trabajar en clase con otros tipos de estrategias de aprendizaje? Sí  No
   ¡Por qué? Explica: _____________________________

7. ¿Qué fue lo que menos te gusto de trabajar con las estrategias? Explica: _____________________________

8. ¿Qué sugerencia(s) le harías a tu profesor para trabajar con estrategias de comunicación en el siguiente curso?
   _____________________________

¡Mil gracias por tu valiosa colaboración!

APÉNDICE 6A. QUESTIONNAIRE IN SPANISH (BLANK)
UNIVERSIDAD VERACRUZANA
MAESTRÍA EN ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA
PROYECTO DE INTERVENCIÓN DIDÁCTICA

NOMBRE (opcional): 
FECHA: 11-JUNIO-2015

INSTRUCCIONES: A continuación encontrarás una serie de preguntas relacionadas con tu uso y aprendizaje de estrategias de comunicación vistas en tu curso de Inglés Básico 300. Por favor, contesta en español las preguntas con toda la honestidad que sea posible; las respuestas a este cuestionario no serán usadas para otorgarte una calificación en tu curso.

1. ¿Fue útil para ti conocer y practicar las estrategias de comunicación vistas en clase?  
   Sí  No
   ¿Por qué? Explica: ________________________________________________________________________
   Mejorar en paráfrasis y fluidez.

2. En tu opinión, ¿cuál(es) fue(ron) la(s) estrategia(s) que te agrado(aron) más? Marcala(s) con una X:
   X paraphrasing  X coinage words  X using facial expressions / gestures  X translation
   X switching to L1  X asking for help  X clarification / confirmation  X using fillers
   ¿Por qué? Explica: ________________________________________________________________________
   Con estas estrategias, me siento más seguro al hablar el idioma, porque no contabilizo la comunicación.

3. ¿Cuál(es) de ellas te fue(ron) más útil(es)?
   ¿Por qué? Explica: ____________________________
   Creo que me ayudaron a pensar mientras daba mi respuesta, aprendí más vocabulario y podría hablar más.

4. ¿Consideras que tuviste la suficiente práctica en clase de las estrategias?  
   Sí  No
   ¿Por qué? Explica: ____________________________
   Creo que no, porque no las practicamos en el aula.

5. ¿De qué otra manera te hubiera gustado practicar las estrategias? Explica:
   ____________________________
   Con descripciones escritas o en forma visual

6. ¿Te gustaría trabajar en clase con otros tipos de estrategias de aprendizaje?  
   Sí  No
   ¿Por qué? Explica: ____________________________
   Creo que no, porque no he estudiado otros tipos de estrategias.

7. ¿Qué fue lo que menos te gusto de trabajar con las estrategias? Explica:
   ____________________________
   Creo que no me gustaron mucho, pero no deben ser utilizadas en exceso como por ejemplo inventar palabras.

8. ¿Qué sugerencia(s) le harías a tu profesor para trabajar con estrategias de comunicación en el siguiente curso?
   ____________________________
   Que las utilice en más clases, ¡Felicitaciones!

¡Mil gracias por tu valiosa colaboración!

APENDIX 6 B. QUESTIONNAIRE IN SPANISH (FILLED BY ONE STUDENT)
Interview to Find Out Students’ Perceptions on Strategies and Fluency

QUESTIONS:
1. ¿Te gustó trabajar con las estrategias de comunicación?
2. ¿Te gustaría continuar trabajando con las estrategias de comunicación y con otro tipo de estrategias?
3. ¿Consideras que el trabajo que se hizo con las estrategias mejoró tu fluidez?

APENDIX 7. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (IN SPANISH)