

A Didactic Strategy to Teach English to Slow Learners

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Abstract

Slow learner is a term that is used to define students with low average Intelligence Quotient level. These students are not disabled but, learn in a different way and most of the time the learning process takes longer than an average student. The purpose of this investigation was to determine the slow learners' main needs of improving the English-speaking ability at Luis Vargas Torres University Esmeraldas. A descriptive, qualitative-quantitative investigation was carried out with the use of the methods of Analysis and Synthesis, Hermeneutics, using the techniques of observation and survey, which were applied to 120 students and 10 teachers of English. The data obtained from the observations were analyzed to determine what strategies students and teachers use to develop the ability of speaking in the English classes at Luis Vargas Torres University. After the observation process, it was identified that students do not consider themselves competent in the ability of speaking. The results also revealed an agreement between students and teachers about the need for pair work for practicing speaking, since students do not like to work by themselves. Both students and teachers stated that working with somebody else the speaking ability gives them confidence and security of a better performance. This coincides with the results of previous studies about the characteristics of slow learners like demotivation, shyness, strong lack of vocabulary and a low self-esteem. It is concluded that teachers need to be more patient with slow learners; they should also keep in mind that slow learners do learn, just in a different fashion. For that reason, a variety of strategies should be used to achieve the goal.

Key words: Slow Learner, Average Student, Speaking Ability, Disabled, Intelligence Quotient Level

Introduction

Students as individuals have a wide variety of differences, which manifest themselves in attitude towards other students, the educators and even towards how one views one's self. All traits could affect the learners' success in their academics; some subjects would be tackled with easy, yet others would be a great obstacle in the students' path that may not be conquered without significant effort. English as a foreign language appears to be one of those subjects that pose significant challenge to most students especially slow learners. Some teaching strategies will be examined to assist the slow learners in the classrooms, not only to overcome a seemingly unsurmountable ESL obstacle but also to encourage them to take up new challenges in academics and in self-improvement.

The author of this investigation, being a teacher of English at Luis Vargas Torres University, has found many different learning problems in the English learning students of this university. There is a gap in the transition of the students with slow learning abilities from high school to university, so there is a necessity to design a didactic strategy to enhance their English-speaking abilities of slow learner. The situation describe permitted to state the following question: Which didactic strategy would be useful to improve the ability of acceptable English speech of slow learners at Luis Vargas Torres University, Esmeraldas?

The impact of this didactic strategy will benefit these learners in the declared issue. Therefore, the general objective for this investigation is to design a didactic strategy to teach speaking to slow learners at Luis Vargas Torres University, Esmeraldas. On the other hand, some specific objectives were also set for this research in order to support the effectiveness of the investigation, first of all the slow learners' main English learning needs in the speaking ability had to be determined. Secondly, had to identify the strategies that slow learners use to develop the speaking ability and finally had to determine the didactic

strategy that English teachers use to develop the speaking ability in slow learners at Luis Vargas Torres University, Esmeraldas.

Definition of Didactic Strategy

Dinuta (2013) notes that “didactic strategies offer solutions for teaching and learning by combining different methods, processes, didactic means and forms of specific organization” (p.299). According to Afflerbach, Pearson and Paris (2008) strategy is “a systematic plan, consciously adapted and monitored, to improve one’s performance in learning” (p. 365). It means that a didactic strategy is a group of well-organized and regular actions to be followed in any teaching-learning context, which are improved and checked by the facilitator, and it is going to enhance the learners’ development.

Madrid, Loera, Peinado and Soto (2018) defined a didactic strategy as an “action plan that comprises methods, techniques, and organization of instructions to achieve an intentional, reflexive, conscious, and self-directed learning in any given teaching-learning environment” (p.325). On the other hand, Vadillo and Klingler (2005) affirm that didactic strategies point to the group of developed activities considering not only students’ understanding of ideas but also a mutual relationship among specific information and a particular activity, as general norm of input. Both definitions have their own merits so they shouldn’t be mutually exclusive from each other. The two definitions complement and round out the meaning of didactic strategy.

Slow Learners:

Definition of Slow Learners

Muppudathi (2014) defines “A student with the ability to acquire all necessary academic skills, at a rate and depth below that of the average student” (p.98). Another definition by Lowenstein (2003) says that “Slow learners are students with below average cognitive abilities who are not disabled, but who struggle to cope with the traditional academic demands of the regular classroom” (p1)It can be inferred that slow learners are the ones that can acquire something which tends to be more difficult for them, and this process takes more time: with the regular students.

Characteristics of Slow Learners

Slow learners tend to take longer time and need a greater effort in help, compared to average students, to acquire the same skill set. This type of students heavily relies on concrete learning in contrast to abstract learning, which poses more difficulties to their understanding. Ramirez (2017) noted some commonalities in different authors’ work regarding the identification of characteristics of slow learners. Some of these characteristics are insufficient vocabulary, bad motor skills and coordination, low self-esteem, being shy or unhappy in school. Borah (2013) notes: “First, slow learners are recurrently immature in their relations with others and do poorly in school. Secondly, they cannot do multifaceted or complex problems and work very slowly.” (p. 140).

Causes of Slow Learning Difficulties

A published document by Gautam (2019) highlights some of the unfavorable conditions that have affected slow learners during their development. Some of those conditions have to do with environment that limits instead of encouraging the learner’s intellectual development. Also, poor home environment can be another limiting factor to incidental learning.

Motivating Slow Learners

Based on a publication by Gautam (2019), low learners have a need for simplified instructions that involves real-life experiences. Therefore, verbal instructions should be restricted. The slow learners’

learning abilities can be improved by out of class experiences such as visiting museums, parks, science fairs and culturally significant places. In-class experiences can be enhanced with audio and visual aids and the learners can be further motivated with the show of personal care to make them feel safe in the classroom environment.

Inclusive Education:

Definition of Inclusive Education

According to UNESCO (2009), inclusive education is seen as “a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education and from within education.” (p.1). Moreover, Bui, Quirk, Almazan, & Valenti, (2010), Alquraini & Gut (2012) define “Inclusive education is when all students, regardless of any challenges they may have, are placed in age-appropriate general education classes that are in their own neighbourhood schools to receive high-quality instruction, interventions, and supports that enable them to meet success in the core curriculum” (p.2).Based on the definitions of the above noted authors “Inclusive Education” is regarded as education that is tailored to all students’ needs in the classroom to ensure their complete success in a given subject.

The Socio-Cultural Approach to Language Teaching

Vygotsky (1920), in his approach of studying child development advocated to draw a line between the natural development of a child and the influence of cultural and social interaction. Cultural and social influences always follow the natural development. In essence a child has a “general, organic growth” and a secondary phase of cultural enhancement in development.

Zone of Proximal Development

The original concept of ZPD by Vygostky (1934) has been expanded to a definition that states that the Zone of Proximal Development is the state of a learner where the acquiring of a set of new skills or new knowledge cannot be achieved without the assistance of a teacher or a mediator who already possesses the skill or knowledge that the learner is trying to acquire. The assistance is provided up to the point where the learner masters the skill or new knowledge, and no further help is needed.

Sreela Datta (2019), in the USA, states that slow learners are not mentally disabled, and provides various teaching ideas for them. One of her suggestions is to implement a regiment of “drilling” to assist the learners to retain new material through repetitive activities. Carroll (2017) states that “slow learners” have not been a controversial topic since (1998): Houk (2012), Borah (2013), Muppudathi, and Ramirez(2014); coincide with the definitions and opinions that slow learners are not non-learners or disabled; they only learn in a different manner at a slower pace than average students.

According to Shaw (2010), in Canada, students “who are slow learners frequently see school as a punishment, but classroom strategies enable teachers to tap into these students’ strengths to enable them to succeed.” (p.1). The author argues that slow learners are failed by the educational system because there is no special category for them, they do not fall into the disabled category but also they cannot keep up with the regular class work due to their diminished abilities to assimilate and apply new knowledge. Slow learners consist of 14% of the student body which is more than all students with recognized disabilities combined. He notes that the majority of that 14% do not receive adequate support to overcome their difficulties, which in many cases send the individuals on a downward spiraling path of life. Often these individuals drop out of school, become unemployed, drug addicted and involved in criminal activities. The author makes a point that teachers can prevent these tragic human events by utilizing special techniques with students that exhibit signs of a slow learner. The slow learners need simple, direct

instructions void of conceptual elements and also need more practical exercises to assimilate new knowledge.

Wettasinghe & Mazla (2007), through a conference the authors shared the experience adopted by the Ministry of Education in Singapore, of implementing information and communication technology (ICT) tools to support the teaching learning process for learners at risk, term according to them to define slow learners. The authors affirm that one of the key components for great achievements in learning is motivation. It has been proved that a class that uses technological tools provides more intrinsic motivation to pupils than one that does not. Technology stretches the learner's range of action because it allows them to build up their own knowledge at their own pace. Wettasinghe & Mazlan conclude their article saying that technology can be an excellent tool for a more effective instruction. For that reason, they also encourage teachers to use them for measurable results and better student-centre approach.

Tayade (2017), in India states that video assistance is a great instrument that helps slow learners in their teaching learning process because it clears concepts that empower the learning development in students. Furthermore, the author expresses that a video can be used to transmit complex data to a student, and it will be easier to comprehend it. One of the advantages then using videos is that the student can repeat them as many times as needed. The author also states that visual aids motivate students to learn and be engaged with the class. Finally, Tayade expresses that technology and pedagogy are intertwining in the learning process. They cannot be separated. Thus, when using videos, he teachers should let students know the educational purpose, the value, and the importance of the video.

Navarro and Piñeiro (2012), in Costa Rica, list thirty-two strategies to help teachers to teach English as a foreign language. Those strategies, according to the authors, were planned around the students' interests. They require no more than twenty minutes to complete and each activity takes into consideration the difficulty levels and linguistic skill needed.

Riera (2016), in Ecuador, agrees with several authors that learning disabilities are not the same as mental retardation and that students who have learning problems are not lazy or stupid. She states that these students' brains just process learning in a different way than an average student. She also shares some advices when working with slow learners:

- a. Help students with visual aids like pictures, graphics, mind maps and real objects. Those will help them to gain a better understanding of the subject and will make them feel comfortable with their learning.
- b. When students express incomplete words or something incorrectly, the advice to the teachers is to correct them immediately by saying it in the right way and repeat it several times.
- c. Use open questions constantly and ask the children what they are thinking, what comes to their minds about the topic in order to help them respond quickly. Also modeling the question through a buildup story can be a good technique that may help students to elaborate the answers.
- d. Children with learning difficulties often need reinforcement on the instructions and tasks to be developed

Method

The investigation was carried out using a mixed approach of qualitative and quantitative one. It took place at the English Centre of Luis Vargas Torres Public University, Esmeraldas in the academic year 2019 – 2020. The centre teaches English as a foreign language pertaining to the general government requirement for all university level courses. The university states that all the students have to take a minimum of four semesters of English to be approved in any of the careers.

According to Gomez (2006), the qualitative approach “it consists of reconstructing a reality as it is seeing by the actors of a previously defined social system” (p.13). The purpose of this investigation is to collect data about slow learners’ main needs in the speaking ability as well as strategies to teach English to slow learners in an effective way. On the other hand, Hernandez, R. (2014), defines the qualitative approach as the use of data collection to prove hypotheses based on numerical measurements and statistical analysis, in order to establish behavioral patterns and prove theories (p.4).

In addition, to diagnose the research, the descriptive method was used. According to Moreno (2004), “The necessary information is obtained through direct contact with the facts that are under study”. The source that was used for this investigation was the students of first and third semester of basic education career at the Luis Vargas Torres University, Esmeraldas.

The population for this study was formed by 120 students from the first and third semester of Basic Education career at the referred university Both semesters of Basic Education are divided into two parallels: A and B. Out of the 120 students, 60 students were identified by the teacher with characteristics of a slow learner and were chosen for the sample. Also, 10 teachers that belong to the English center participated in the survey.

The research hypothesis was: Slow learners are not disabled; they just learn in a different way at their own pace.

The methods of investigation that were used for this research were:

Hermeneutics: It permitted the interpretation of the most relevant information provided in the literature review as well as the interpretation of the results retrieved from the techniques applied.

The techniques of Investigation were:

Observation: they were applied to 7 English teachers with the purpose of knowing and analyzing which strategies are being applied when teaching the ability of speaking to slow learners. The class observations were developed within a 2 months period. A total of 21 classes of speaking were observed. The students observed belonged to the different levels at the English Centre of Luis Vargas Torres University, which were students to the above mention-teachers.

Survey: They were applied to 10 teachers at the English Centre in to know which didactic strategies they apply when teaching the speaking ability to slow learners. The surveys applied to the 120 students of basic education who were part of the sample explained above, with the purpose of knowing their learning requirements in order to meet and satisfy students’ needs.

The instruments created were according to the different techniques that were used:

For the observation technique directed to the teachers, an observation guide with 6 items was applied. The item’s contents were about methodological strategies and application of curricula to slow learners. The English teaching-learning process was observed through the development of speaking activities in class. Also, the students’ learning process, student’s motivation checked through the number of participations speaking activities, and the application of the learning contents were observed and analyzed. An observation guide was provided for both teachers and students.

The data were tabulated manually and then taken to figures and tables using the Microsoft Excel program.

Results

Regarding the students’ opinion about how good they consider themselves in speaking, grading themselves from 1 to 5, being 1 not good, 2 very low, 3 low, 4 good and 5 very good as, it is shown in figure 1, 48% of the students answered that they are not good.

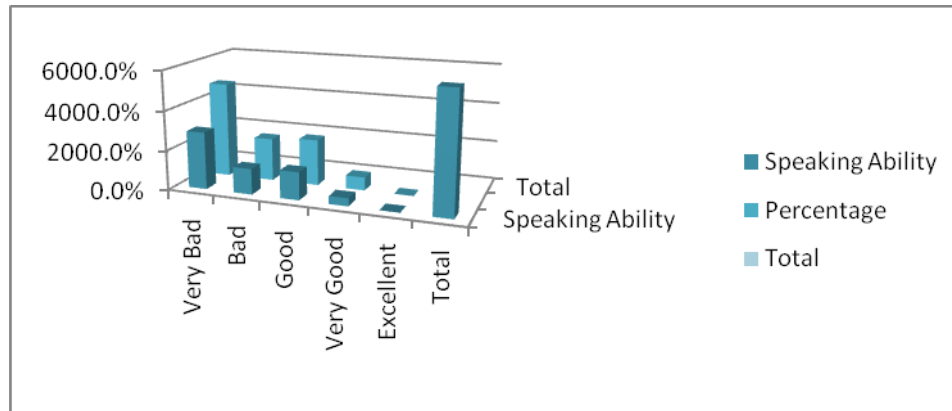


Figure1. Students' opinion about their speaking ability

Source: Survey

Figure 2 provides some of the main learning difficulties that teachers of the English Centre at Luis Vargas Torres University have found. 33% agreed that speaking is the highest problem that students have.

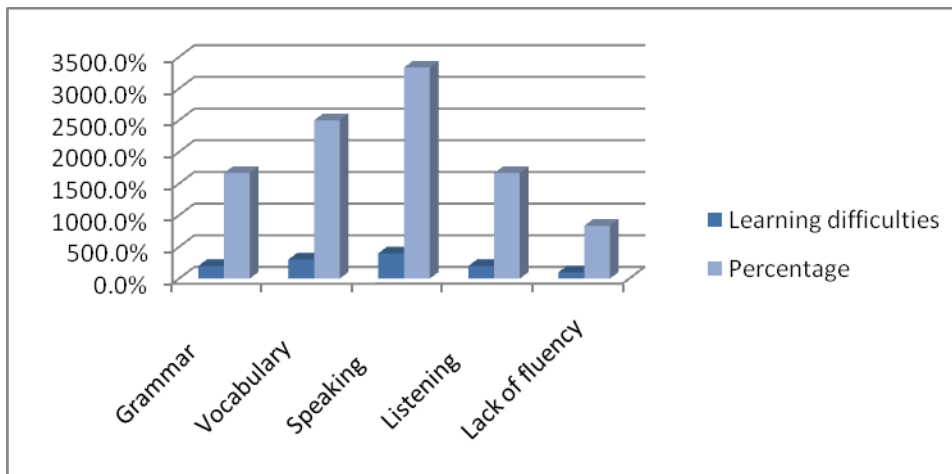


Figure2. Students' main learning difficulties.

Source: Survey

The results in figure 3 displays that 68% of the students prefer to work in pairs, 22% of the sample enjoys working alone and finally, only 10% said that they like to work in groups. As a result, it can be stated that the majority of the students have preferences for working in pairs.

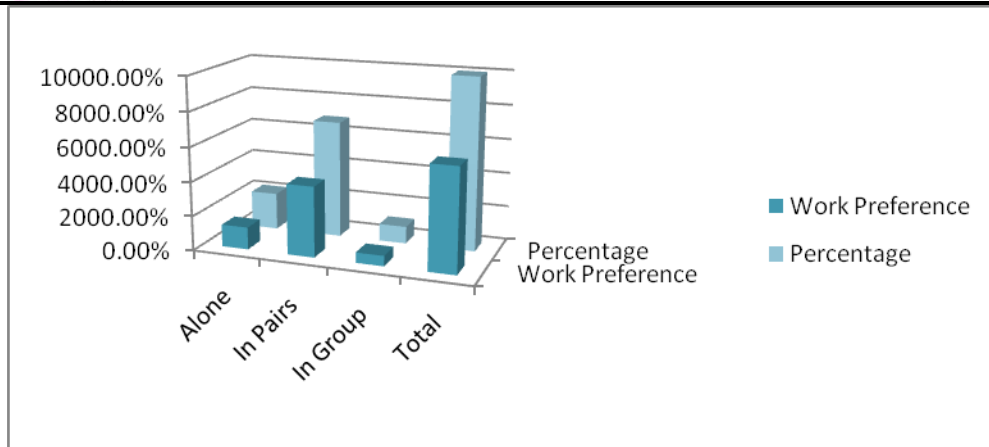


Figure3. Students’ preferences when working in speaking activities

Source: Survey

Regarding some of the strategies that teachers use to help students with difficulties in, figure 3 displays that 25% stated that oral pair work practice and individual oral presentations are the most used.

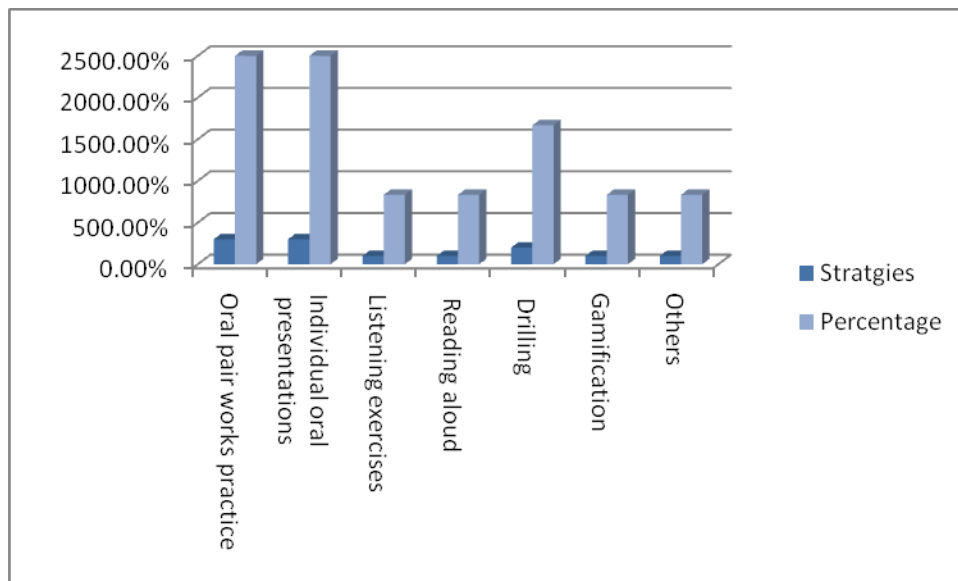


Figure4. Strategies to improve students’ learning difficulties

Source: Survey

Proposal: Didactic Strategy to Develop the Speaking Ability in Slow Learners

Learning a new language can be easier for some and more complex for others. After analyzing the information previously presented in this investigation, it has been determined that slow learners are students who take longer than “average” students in understanding and mastering concepts due to their own characteristics. One of the characteristics, presented in figure 3, is that slow learners do not like to work alone; therefore, it is highly recommended for the teachers to apply the strategies in groups or in pairs. Also, it was mentioned that the use of technology and visual aids motivate these students’ learning process, for this reason, it is strongly suggested to apply such aids to help slow learners to improve their

English-speaking skills. The proposal suggested in this investigation will contribute to improve and speed up slow learners' learning process by motivating students to participate in the activities, keeping them engaged and interested. The strategy covers the needs of learners from beginner to advanced levels. It can be modified to match the needs of any classroom. Also having the audios recorded and saved is an excellent asset to measure speaking progress.

Guess Who?



Objective:

- To help slow learners to improve speaking skills
- To make use of vocabulary covered in class

Skill: Speaking

Level: Beginner

Category: Whole class activity

Materials: Flash cards, a cell phone, a speaker.

Procedure for the Teachers:

1. Teach students prior to this activity a list of vocabulary you want them to use in the activity
2. Check on student's prior knowledge by asking if they know the meaning of the words
3. Teach them the meaning and pronunciation of the words by using physical or electronic flash cards for every word. Example: physical appearance.(tall, short, thin, long, wavy, overweight, curly)
4. Write on the board a description of yourself using the vocabulary as a practical example for the students
5. Read your own description to the students for pronunciation purposes and repeat it as many times as needed
6. Play the students' recordings for the whole class to guess who the described person is
7. Motivate students to participate, they can also connect to the speaker through Bluetooth and play their recordings from their own phone.

Procedure for the Students:

1. Students have to be attentive, active and ready to participate
2. Students have to get familiar with the vocabulary and understand the meaning of the words and have a clear concept of the topic and the activity that is taking place
3. After mastering and comprehending the new vocabulary students have to put it into practice by writing a quick description of themselves as a practice
4. Think of somebody's physical appearance in the class and write a short description, then record the description on your cellphone

5. Connect to the speaker through Bluetooth and play aloud the description in the class, and the rest of the class has to guess the identity of the described person.

Listen and Repeat



Objective:

- To acquire proper pronunciation and intonation through careful listening, then repeating with accurate modeling

Skills: Listening and speaking

Level: Intermediate

Category: Pair Work

Materials:

- Digital file of prerecorded dialog, Cell phone, Bluetooth speaker, WhatsApp

Procedures for Teachers:

1. Find a pre-recorded short dialogue according to the topic that is going to be covered
2. Introduce the new topic and vocabulary to be used in the dialogue by sending the students a list with the vocabulary that you want them to know prior to the class in a WhatsApp message to create higher expectations in the class
3. Ask students to message you back the meanings of the words that they know without looking for the answer
4. When the class time starts, go through the whole vocabulary with the students making sure that they get the correct answers
5. Review the pronunciation with the students several times; remember that drilling can be a very practical technique to be applied on slow learners
6. Explain to the students that an audio will be sent through WhatsApp with a short dialogue for them listen to carefully and to repeat every word as it is heard in the audio. Make it clear to them that they will be working with a partner and they both have to listen and practice as many times as necessary to try to get a similar intonation as used in the dialogue
7. Divide the students into pairs and share with them, the digital media through WhatsApp, the students have to listen to the audio and practice pronunciation in order to get the desired results
8. Students have to listen to the media repeatedly until they feel confident to record them on their cell phone with as accurate modeling as possible
9. Ask the students to send you the final work through a WhatsApp message and play it in the class for everyone to listen
10. Ask the class to decide which couple did the closest imitation of the original dialogue
11. Congratulate everyone for the hard work they put into the activity

12. Since you will have the recorded audios, listen closely for pronunciation difficulties and they can be discussed in the class for making proper pronunciation corrections

Procedure for the Students

1. Students have to be attentive, active and ready to participate
2. Students have to promptly respond back to the teacher the meaning of the words that they know through a WhatsApp message
3. In students have to get familiar with the vocabulary, understand the meaning of the words and have a clear concept of the topic and the activity that is taking place
4. Listen carefully to the audio that was sent, as many times as needed and repeat every word as it is being said
5. Practice the dialogue with the assigned partner several times until both feel confident and ready to record
6. Use a cellphone to record the dialogue
7. Send the dialogue to the teacher to play it on a loudspeaker to the class for assessing the activity
8. Receive the teacher's comments with a positive attitude

The Interview!



Skills: Listening and speaking

Level: Advanced

Category: Pair work/group work

Objective:

- To strengthen the students' confidence in their own ability to pronounce words correctly with the proper intonation and rhythm
- To encourage the students to feel comfortable speaking publicly

Materials:

- Cell phone, Projector, Bluetooth speaker

Procedures for Teachers:

1. Select an interesting topic according to the lesson that is going to be covered so that the students can interview each other. For instance: if the grammar topic is going to be future tense, when the interview questions could be the students' plans in the future
2. Introduce the grammar topic through a video and repeat it as many times as needed and ask students to recognize the tense that is being used in the video
3. Ask the students to write on the board the sentences that they heard in the video

4. Help students to formulate questions and give possible answers about the topic to be used in the interview
5. Divide the students into pairs
6. Students should practice repeatedly until they feel confident to make a short video with their cell phones
7. Film a video of the final interview using a cell phone
8. Playback the video in class with the projector for review and assessment
9. Acknowledge students' participation in the activity

Procedure for Students:

1. Students have to be attentive, active and ready to participate
2. Watch the video and listen carefully to pick up structural sentences about the topic
3. Participate by writing down sentences from the video on the board
4. In class, students have to get familiar with the vocabulary and understand the meaning of the words and have a clear concept of the topic and the activity that is taking place
5. Students have to write down the questions in class and ask for help as needed
6. Practice the pronunciation of the questions several times until the students feel that they have mastered the pronunciation
7. Practice the interview with a partner until they are ready to record
8. Use a cell phone to record the video
9. Send the video to the teacher to play it on a projector to the class for assessing the activity
10. Receive the teacher's comments with a positive attitude

Final Suggestions for the Teachers

Prepare topics, contents, vocabulary ahead as well as the selection of the dialogues or videos to be used in class

Materials used should be up to date to meet modern standards that can help students to use the language in real context

Make sure that all the technological devices are ready to be used

Teachers should respect students' privacy in case that the student do not want their work to be heard by the whole class

Create a risk-free classroom environment to make students feel comfortable and help them to overcome shyness. One way to help students is by telling them that it is to make mistakes when speaking a new language. Another way would be for the teacher to share his/her experiences about learning the target language

Tell students to save their videos and audios to check progress and compare how they started and how they finish the course

Motivate students, empower, and make them see the value that each student has to be successful in life

Discussion

Slow learners are students that learn in a different way than an average student. For this reason, they cannot be considered as disabled, lazy or stupid. They should be seen as students that learn at their own pace. These students need strong support, motivation and help from their teachers, so they can see school as a great opportunity to get ahead in life, achieve new goals and have the chance to be useful members of society. Based on the results of this investigation most of the slow learners consider school as a punishment and they also have very low self-esteem.

As it is shown in the first point of this research as to how slow learners' consider their own ability of speaking English. The results have shown that almost half percent of the students consider themselves not good at speaking the language. These results are likely to be related to the teachers' survey where it was identified that speaking is the ability that is most problematic for students.

There are several authors that coincide with the theories about slow learners; such is the case of Ramirez (2017) who cited some similarities found in different authors concerning the characteristics of a slow learner. These characteristics are lack of vocabulary, low self-esteem and shyness. This outcome is similar to the findings expressed in the survey completed by the students in this investigation, who said that the lack of vocabulary and pronunciation make them increase their fears and create insecurity in them when speaking English.

According to Gautam (2019), slow learners need simple and basic concepts for better understanding. He suggests practical teaching, real experiences, audio and visual assistance should be excellent tools to motivate students and make instruction more attractive and meaningful. This author also highlights that showing interest and care for these students will offer them a risk-free classroom environment.

Lu, Goodale, and Guo (2014) stated: Education in the 21st century is embraced by technology and students in the 21st century are computer savvy with growing access to Web 2.0 technology, it's of great value to explore more interactive tools for EFL learners so that they are able to learn the English language in a more authentic, natural, and meaningful environment (p. 59).

It is remarkable to mention some of the results that the students shared in the surveys about how they like to work. Most of the students in the students' preference survey, see figure 3, mention that they like to work in pairs. This view surfaced mainly in relation to work in class; students do not like to work by themselves. Working with somebody else gives them peace of mind, security, and most of all it brings down their affective filter. They also stated that the practice of dialogues and interviews help them to develop the speaking ability.

One of the most interesting aspects in the teachers' survey stands out that teachers apply pair work oral activities as strategy to promote speaking among students what help them to advance in the language. Also, teachers stated in this research that they measure students' progress in speaking then students are able to answer more than half of the questions in any given topic.

Conclusions

Slow learners are students that even though they have hard time coping with school curriculum, they learn in a different manner than an average student, for this reason they cannot be considered as mentally disabled, lazy or irresponsible. The following postulate will establish the conclusions obtained after the development of this TFM. The general objective referring to the designing of a didactic strategy to teach speaking to slow learners has been achieved through the concepts expressed in the theoretical framework.

Slow learners struggle in the ability of speaking very often due to their own characteristics such as shyness, nervousness, lack of vocabulary; they also take longer time grasping concepts and applying them. The first specific objective was to determine slow learners' learning needs in the speaking ability; it was also reached by analyzing the characteristics of slow learners to find out their needs.

In addition, the second specific objective was to identify the strategies that slow learners use to develop the speaking ability; the objective has been achieved after the analysis prepared, based on the survey and tabulation of surveys and class observations that were applied and presented previously in the article. For instance, as seen in figure 3, slow learners prefer always to work with somebody else so they can feel the supported in their learning process.

The last specific objective was related to the teachers' strategies to develop speaking in slow learners; they have to keep in mind that slow learners consider more pleasurable to work with somebody else as seen in figure 4. It shows that students like to do dialogue or interviews in pairs because it gives them confidence and security. Therefore, that is the reason that the suggested strategy presented in this research does not have individual activities.

Finally, the use of audio-visual aids and technology are strong suggestions for pedagogy now days. These elements can facilitate the instruction for slow learners and teachers. Thus, the strategy created is proposing the use of technology to make the activities more attractive, interesting and challenging for students.

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