STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEIR ORAL SKILLS IN AN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM

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Trabajo de grado presentado como requisito parcial para obtener el título de Licenciado en Enseñanza de la Lengua Inglesa

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Abstract

The globalization of English and a growing demand for good English speaking skills in English teachers place a great emphasis on the teaching of English on a Pre-service EFL program in Colombia. The ‘Professional Development Program for Teachers of English’ (PDPTE) offered by the ‘Otún University’ (OU) focuses during the four firsts semesters on providing instruction that may help pre-service teachers of English to acquire the necessary English skills.

This research project has investigated students’ perceptions about the development of their oral skills during the course, the interactional opportunities offered to the students by the different activities proposed in the class and the factors that students report as influential in their participation in class activities.

Throughout the data collected during the observations and the field diary, questionnaires and interviews applied to students of the *Oral Skills Course, and its subsequent comparative analysis, it was found that students perceived improvement on their oral skills, students perceived the importance of using the target language inside the classroom, but they did not interact spontaneously and the presence of the teacher was needed to encourage the use of English in the class, fears of making mistakes in front of the classmates were perceived as negative influence in the students’ participation in class, while the grade was perceived as a positive influence.

Implications of this study for ELT education include among others that teachers should be aware of the need of helping students to develop their autonomy and a sense of self responsibility own learning which motivate them to participate in class.

1 Pseudonyms were used throughout the document for names of institutions, courses, and participants.
Introduction

The college of Fine Arts and Humanities of the Otún University (OU) offers a Bachelor in Arts Degree in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language. *Oral Skills I* is a course offered to students at the fourth semester of ‘*Professional Development Program for Teachers of English*’ (PDPTE) program. The main goal of this course is to improve students’ oral communication skills and to help them develop oral abilities to communicate fluently in different contexts.

Acquiring and developing oral fluency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context is a difficulty faced by teachers and students at all levels in English teaching institutions in Colombia (Balcárcel, 2003). However, as future teachers of English language it is of the utmost importance that students in the (PDPTE) program develop oral skills at the highest level.

Thus, this research project focuses on observing and analyzing the development of oral skills in 4th semester students from the (PDPTE) Program, specifically those students from the *Oral Skills course I*.

The study also attempts to understand how this course facilitates the acquisition of oral skills throughout the different activities provided by the teacher and the way in which students’ motivation affects their participation and interaction in class.

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2 pseudonyms were used throughout the document for names of institutions, courses, and participants.
Statement of the Problem

The English language has become a major medium for communication across borders globally and is seen nowadays as the medium of communication not only for business but also for academic purposes, Karahan (2007) describes English language as ‘…leading foreign language enjoying a prestigious position in many countries, including Spanish speaking countries, since the end of World War II. It is neither a national nor an official language in Latin America but it is the most widely taught foreign language at all stages of educational system’ (p. 1).

Colombia, due to the importance of its historical relationship with the United States, is living a revival of English since it has become a global language and people need to learn it and use it for different reasons. As it is expressed in the document ‘Formar en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés (2006)’ published by the Colombian Ministry of Education, it explains that the standards in foreign languages point at the development of English as a medium of communication in different fields such as educational since students would be able to learn a new culture and would get more and better information and knowledge. Acquiring a foreign language gives people the opportunity to get better work opportunities since English nowadays is seen as a bridge to improve life quality. People can go beyond country borders and learn about other cultures, thus, people who are able to communicate in a foreign language are helping to the development of their own country.

The Otún University, as an educational institution aiming at impacting the region with professionals that may help in the acquisition of a foreign language (English), offers a program for training teachers of English which includes a variety of courses to help the students to develop the communicative competence in such language.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Learning, Teaching and Evaluation of Languages (CEFR) defines learning a language as the development of
competences on the part of the learner. As it is well known, competence includes not only knowledge but also the ability to use that knowledge.

In order to achieve mastery of a foreign language, learners must develop the four principal language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. However, being able to interact orally with others, using effectively the target language, is nowadays of the utmost importance, up to the point where people who cannot speak a foreign language cannot be considered effective language users, even if they can read it and understand it.

In the context of an English teacher training program, the development of efficient oral skills is especially significant necessity since students need not only to be able to perform accurately, fluently, and spontaneously in any situation, but as future professionals will be in charge of educating others and helping them to develop their own communicative competences.

The teachers’ role in promoting foreign language acquisition is very important, as they are responsible for providing students appropriate contexts to foster communicative situations that allow students to express themselves and interact in the target language.

However, students’ dynamic role, attitude, participation and motivation, are vital in the process. Without their active involvement in class activities, oral skills cannot be properly developed, especially as the classroom is, in many occasions, the only environment in which they have opportunities to use orally the target language.

This study aims at understanding the student’s perceptions and opinions about the development of oral skills in order to get insights about the kind of activities and personal motivating factors that may contribute to strengthen their commitment to the subject.
Research Questions

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How do participants perceive their oral skills development as they participate in the Oral Skills Course I, offered by the PDPT program?

2. What interactional opportunities does the teacher provide in the classroom?

3. What factors do participants report as influencing their participation in oral activities inside the classroom?
Objectives

General Objective

To identify the factors that influence the practice of English oral communication and speaking skills among students from the Oral Skills I offered at ‘Professional Development Program for Teachers of English’ in the Otún University.

Specific Objectives

A) To obtain students’ perspectives on the development of their oral abilities through the Oral Skills Course I.

B) To identify which instructional tasks best promote the oral participation of the participants.

C) To identify the main factors that influence participants’ involvement in oral activities inside the classroom.
Literature Review

Use of English in the Classroom

Many learners of a foreign language usually do not like or are afraid of speaking in the target language, and most of the time they exhibit a passive attitude in class, since they do not have the opportunity to express themselves naturally and spontaneously (Eckard & Kearny, 1981). As Cotter (2007) explains, training in oral skills which let them communicate and interact in a meaningful and fruitful form, (e.g. exchanging information, negotiating meaning, supporting ideas, facing oral defenses) is a way to motivate students to perceive the foreign language as a tool for social interaction. Hence, language should be used widely; we use language to achieve a variety of social purposes, as for example, to entertain, to explain how something works, to provide information, to argue a position, to explore the inner world of the imagination. We also use language to make sense of the world, to express and develop ideas on a range of topics, from everyday experiences to the ideas that are considered across all the areas of the curriculum.

Students need to be able to communicate confidently and appropriately with people from all walks of life: with those who are older or younger, with those in positions of power, with peers and family, with small and large groups. Students will, for example, ‘learn how to interact productively with their peers, to speak confidently in class discussions, to listen strategically, to read with comprehension, and to write well structured and coherent texts’ (Cotter, 2007). Learning English language involves developing both the ability to use language effectively for a range of purposes and the ability to talk about the language being used. White (2004) explains that language is an integral part of learning, and oral language has a key role in classroom teaching and learning. ‘It helps to encourage creativity, understanding, and imagination; it is a means of solving problems, speculating, sharing ideas and making decisions; language builds friendships and enhances motivation through social interaction’.
In order to do that, students need to develop skills and strategies that contribute to the effective use of speaking and listening, as interaction skills, oral presentation, and specific listening skills (Cotter, 2007). Interaction skills are important, for example, in classroom discussions or in group work, where the students need to be aware of how to start a topic, how to include others, how to change topics, how to repair communication breakdowns, how to deal with those who dominate the conversation, how to use language to solve problems, and how to end a discussion.

Oral presentation skills are increasingly important in a world where people are judged on their ability to present their ideas in a coherent and articulate way in a range of situations (school, workplace, and society) this means, be fluent when expressing ideas and thoughts, ‘…fluency is the ability to speak (and understand) English quickly and easily... WITHOUT translation. Fluency means you can talk easily with native speakers-- they easily understand you, and you easily understand them. In fact, you speak and understand instantly’ (Hoge, n.d.).

Students need to be involved in activities which develop specific listening skills, such as the ability to understand completely the main point of a talk, the ability to identify particular details, and the ability to evaluate critically what is being said. Speaking and listening skills are accompanied by nonverbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions, and body movements and positions. Hoge (n. d) describes how to become a good English speaker is: ‘to be a fantastic English speaker, you must learn English with your ears, not with your eyes. In other words, you must listen. Your ears are the key to excellent speaking. So the main mechanism for people to use when trying to communicate any utterance is the ears, they are, joined with the mouth, the senses that should be put into practice in order to be fluent and express ourselves with coherence’.

Cotter (2007) argues that as students learn to use English in the classroom setting, they should also be involved in learning about how language works. They should be asked to reflect on various aspects of language, to develop a common
language for talking about language, and to use this knowledge to evaluate texts critically in terms of effectiveness, meaning and accuracy. ‘Someone who speaks well would similarly understand when to use different grammar points’ (Cotter, 2007).

How can students connect accuracy and fluency in daily life routines in speaking activities inside the classroom? According to Cotter (2007), role-play activities are valuable classroom techniques that encourage students to participate actively in the learning process. This author also mentions that those activities take several different forms and that the teacher should provide students with a variety of learning experiences by arranging different methodologies according to individual needs, interests and learning levels. Cotter also explains that role-play activities enable the teacher to create a supportive, enjoyable classroom environment in which students are engaged and motivated to effectively learn the target language.

Thus, in order to give students a structured class where they can interact with each other, the teacher should organize his/her class with the Presentation, Practice, and Production method (PPP), Cotter (2007) proposed this method in his work and says that there should be three stages in any language classroom and they are:

*Preparation: Allow the students to prepare for the tasks ahead with an effective warm-up. This gives everyone in the class ample opportunity to get their English wheels turning.* Presentation: Next present the topic for discussion, target grammar, or any vocabulary selected for the lesson. Practice: After the presentation, ESL / EFL students need to practice the new material. It's unfair to expect them to make use of the new language without adequate practice. And Free Use: You should always work towards real use of the language.

Cotter (2007) suggests in her work that according to the activities that are been developed in class, they should then move into freer and freer use of the language, which will allow each student to integrate the lesson material with pre-existing language.
Activities at the end of the lesson allow students to select vocabulary and grammar structures, and to tie the day's material with previously studied language. Therefore, ‘for a student to be considered proficient in English, he ultimately needs to speak it well’ (Cotter, 2007).

Language is part of communication, after all, and the only way to get that proficiency in oral English is having conversations as much as possible, with native and non-native speakers, but the main point is that students can interact in the language with other people, since conversation involves using the language, listening to the language, processing the information, and then responding to it.

Cotter (2007) states that when teachers prepare their classes, they should constantly have in mind what the objective is in each of the oral activities they propose to the students in order to achieve certain oral skills ‘the purpose of the conversation affects the process, as does the place and the people involved’. Mastery of English as a foreign language comes down to how well a student speaks. Students may write well, get high marks on tests, or even have an accent nearly identical to a native speaker; but if they cannot express ideas, opinions, or instructions clearly in a conversation, few would call them proficient.

There are studies which explore the integration of other foreign speakers in the classroom in order to order to highlight the relevance of using the foreign language for communicative purposes. In their study, Mita, Shirao, Martin, Hatagaki & Dendo (2006) investigated the effects and implications of inviting foreign Asian students to be present in oral presentations. The researchers found that the fact that these students came from different countries and did not share the same mother tongue helped to create a real need for using English in the class. Mita et all (2006) described in their study that due to their culture, Asian students are sometimes characterized as passive, introverted, unmotivated, inactive and unresponsive in the classrooms.
Teachers should know that students need stimulus in order to communicate actively along with a curriculum that addressed the needs of the students. Mita et al (2006) reported in their results that, by making presentations to Asian students in English, the learners discovered the importance of grammatical competence and strategic competence. It means that, students become aware of their own development as they learn English oral skills.

The researchers also reported that, by making presentations instead of having casual conversations, the learners experienced less anxiety and had more confidence in talking to foreign students. So, having a ‘real audience’ inside the classroom provides a value on students in their own learning process, since the students could notice differences in accent and vocabulary compared with native speakers, talking to native English speakers should make L1 students realize that they themselves need more grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation training to make themselves understood.

It is well known that all the individuals need social interaction to promote communication and express their ideas and feelings, this must be the way in which English as a foreign language would be taught to those people who want to interact in this language, in this way, the major purpose of any teacher is to give the students good strategies for their fluency development, but this process is a hard work that takes long-time to be successful in such skills, mainly oral proficiency, that is what Forero (2005) related in her proposal and research project:

‘...although social conversational skills are important, they are not sufficient for classroom-based academic learning. Yet, it is easy to overlook the fact that academic language can still be challenging and adversely affect the student’s academic performance even though s/he is fluent in everyday conversations. In fact, a young person who is fluent in English on the playground is likely to require four to six years to acquire the level of proficiency needed for successful academic learning. (p. 13)
Students not only need to be well prepared in English skills, they need also use them to build social relationships that allow them to interact with each other. An argument that supports this view is found in Gutierrez (2005) who states: ‘learners often need to be able to speak with confidence in order to carry out many of their most basic transactions. It is the skill by which they are most frequently judged, and through which they make or lose friends.’ (p. 3). This quote addresses the importance of real interaction which gives the learners the opportunity to demonstrate what they can do in the foreign language.

Any user of language must master four principal skills which are: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Students can put into practice most of these language skills on their own but there is one skill that any person cannot practice by him/herself, since it is seen that speaking need interaction (or even an audience) with those people who share the same language. Essberger (2007)

The teacher may develop some activities in the classroom in order to develop oral skills in his/her students, in this way, the teacher should use other students and him/herself in order to foster oral activities in class, the teacher should encourage students to speak no matter the mistakes in grammar and pronunciation they may have.

The teacher also should tell students to join conversation clubs in order to challenge themselves to talk to different people. Role-plays in the class is another kind of activity that the teacher may implement in class, situations such as going shopping and asking about the prices, or just going to a bar and starting a conversation about any topic. The use of songs and videos are other strategies that the teacher may use with students, they may have different likes and dislikes about music and that is another way to start an oral activity with students.
Attitudes towards the Use of a Foreign Language

The attitude is the emotion that a person has towards something or somebody, this emotion predisposes the kind of interaction with a person, or the kind of success when learning let’s say a foreign language. Demir (n.d) illustrates in her work some characteristics about the attitude that a person should have, she explains that:

‘Attitudes are cognitive (i.e. are capable of being thought about) and affective (i.e. have feelings and emotions attached to them). Attitudes are dimensional rather than bipolar. Attitudes predispose a person to act in a certain way, but the relationship between attitudes and actions is not a strong one. Attitudes are learnt, not inherited or genetically endowed. Attitudes tend to persist but they can be modified by experience.’ (Baker, 1988 cited by Demir, n.d.).

According to Karahan (2007) he states that students’ attitudes towards foreign language learning vary depending on their feelings towards the target language, culture, exposure and difficulty of it. He further explains in the next quote:

‘Language attitudes’ are the expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language’. (p. 2)

Given these facts, it is important to create a positive environment in order to encourage the learners’ interaction. As such, they can express their ideas, feelings and opinions without feeling afraid of making mistakes. Students can also carry out communicative tasks in an effective way. Gutiérrez (2005) suggests that creating a low stress atmosphere and using the language for real purposes are ways to get meaningful communication and through interaction learners have the chance to acquire discourse
skills. Gutiérrez (2005) also highlights the essential conditions for effective language learning, such as exposure, use, and motivation. With this view of language, task-based learning offers many advantages in the designing of communicative activities and the development and improvement of oral skills. A supportive environment is built by the teacher on several grounds. These situations provide important social and practical bases for students, especially EFL students.

Students are reluctant to speak inside and outside classroom in the target language, they feel afraid of using English outside class, and in some way, they are unenthusiastic to use English inside classroom, Farooqui (2007) illustrates this situation presented in the English classroom, she investigated how private universities in Bangladesh are helping students to acquire communicative skills and also to improve higher education standards of English, since the government acquired a new methodology in order to teach English in all the private and public universities throughout the country.

Li (1998) cited by Farooqui (2007) showed that students are reluctant to actively participate in class, students still consider the teacher as the authority figure. The findings of Chowdhury (2001) (cited by Farooqui) explain that students are facing themselves to a new world, since they received passive grammar translation method where the teacher is the centre of the class; they encounter themselves with new experiences that in some cases could be frustrating.

Farooqui (2007) also suggests that according to Shumin (2002), Brown (2001) and Green & Nation’s (1989) findings, adults become more engaged in class when they face themselves to short utterances, and activities where they work in pairs together in order to create a short conversation or to build up the ending of a story. Farooqui (2007) proposes in her findings that the communicative approach should be used in all classes in order to provide the students opportunities to interact with each other. She declared that the universities should provide all the necessary equipment and environments for students to constantly interact in English with teachers and students.
The development of students’ participatory and intellectual skills increases when the teacher has the ability to motivate students. First of all, let’s answer the question ‘What is motivation? Motivation could be consider as the emotion that a person could have towards learning a foreign language, and it is determined by his/her predispositions and personality characteristics’ (Karahan, 2007. p. 2). Karahan (2007) also highlights in his study that there are three components that best describes motivation: First, attitudes tend to have a cognitive component. This could involve beliefs or perceptions about the objects or situations related to the attitude. Second, attitudes have an evaluative component. This means that the objects or situations related to the attitude may generate like or dislike. Third, attitudes have a behavioral component, i.e. certain attitudes tend to prompt learners to adopt particular learning behaviors.

The teacher’s ability to motivate is important because it creates a free-stressed atmosphere and establishes a relationship of mutual confidence and cooperation (e.g. rapport). This atmosphere is important for English learning because the classroom is a social setting in which relationships influence character traits that reinforce the skills and virtues of effective and responsible students. When students are exposed to a relaxed and safe place, and as open as possible the space is, they will feel self-confident and will be more able to assume some responsibility for classroom interaction and management (El Karfa, n.d) .

El Karfa (n.d) pointed out in his study that motivated students, who take an active role in their learning, require the teachers to challenge those students who have preconceived ideas about classroom roles; such students might expect the teacher to assume total responsibility for their learning, for their achievement, and for the classroom management. In that case, teachers need to use icebreakers (warm up activities) to involve uninterested sub-groups or unmotivated and shy students in classroom activities. Teachers should also create an atmosphere of familiarity,
friendship, and mutual confidence in the classroom throughout group work, pair work, and collaborative class discussion where students are engaged in purposeful communication that promotes their participatory skills and their sense of responsibility and independence.

...from the perspective of the learner, the factors affecting language learning can be mentioned as diverse needs and goals, peer groups, role models. From the perspective of the learning process, the factors influencing language learning can be outlined as learning styles and strategies, motivation, and classroom interaction (Walqui 2000 Cited by Karahan, 2007 p. 4).

It also becomes appropriate to reflect upon how learners’ attitudes might affect their motivation to learn English since motivation is commonly considered the very key to successful foreign language learning (Larsson & Olsson, 2008). It is important to make the students feel that English language in somehow enriches their identity. Therefore, as Norris-Holt (2001) states, motivation is defined as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language. Motivation is divided into two basic types: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is characterized by the learner’s positive attitudes towards the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community.

This kind of motivation is also called intrinsic motivation which refers to the fact of performing an activity for itself. It occurs when a person’s behavior is stimulated by the inherent value of an action, it means when the person receives pleasure and satisfaction from participation. Instrumental motivation underlies the goal to gain some social or economic reward through L2 achievement, thus referring to a more functional reason for language learning. Another way to describe this kind of motivation is extrinsic motivation which refers to engaging in an activity when a person is stimulated by an external source outside the activity.
…furthermore it is common to make a difference between instrumental and integrative motivation, the instrumental motivation being that motivation which is connected to instrumental goals, such as facilitating a career, being able to understand various technical materials, whereas the integrative side to motivation is connected to a personal wish to integrate into the culture which speaks the target language and to be able to have an interchange with that group (Brown 162 Cited by Larsson & Olsson, 2008. p. 3)

With instrumental motivation the purpose of language acquisition is more useful, such as meeting the requirements for school or university graduation, applying for a job, requesting higher pay based on language ability, reading technical material, translation work or achieving higher social status. Instrumental motivation is often characteristic of second language acquisition, where little or no social integration of the learner into a community using the target language takes place, or in some instances is even desired.

Making Mistakes on Oral Production

Participation usually means students speaking in class in any conversation class: answering and asking questions, making comments, and joining in discussions. Students who do not participate in those ways mentioned above are often considered to be passive and are generally penalized when participation is graded (Lee, 2005).

There are several factors that affect the initiative of students when taking part of oral tasks inside the classroom. Some of them could be inner factors, students’ previous experiences; while some others can be external as for instance the environment created by teachers in the class ‘… non-English speaking adults are already timid about using the English language. The teacher must help students’ self-confidence by being encouraging. Learning environments can have a facilitating effect on oral production.’ (Payne & Whitney, 2002, cited by Farooqui, 2007. p. 5).
The main purpose of having oral activities in class is that students speak and use the target language. They should overcome their fears of speaking and use the target language even if they make mistakes, students cannot learn without making mistakes, the error makes them realize they are having success in their learning process; it is a proof of their development.

It is important to make students conscious of the role that mistakes play in the development of a language. As Jianing (2007) explains in her work, many English students believe that if they make mistakes or fail to find appropriate words to express themselves, they will lose face. ‘To protect themselves from being laughed at, they are reluctant to speak English. So there is the vicious circle: the less they speak, the less they improve their speaking skills, and the more they are afraid of speaking’ (p. 1). Jianing (2007) also states in her study that foreign language learners tend to lose interest in what they learn if they find they make little progress. Additionally, fear of making errors and losing respect are some of the factors that influenced university students’ willingness in participating in classroom oral communication (Lin, 1998).

However, Essberger (2007) highlighted the importance of making mistakes, he stated that students should make mistakes and in that way, they would aware of what is happening in their utterances, Essberger (2007) concluded that ‘The person who never made a mistake never made anything’ (p. 2). So when students know that they have made a mistake, they know that they have made progress. When students are freed of the need to interpret expectations and figure out task organization, they can concentrate on and take risks in learning. In relation with this, Hernandez (2005) states that:

According to Stryker and Leaver (1997) language learning has been compared to learning to ride a bike or learning to play an instrument. Even though it is widely recognized that the best way to learn these skills is by doing them, and not by just studying them or performing exercises and drills, traditional foreign language classes resemble a music class in which
the students spend time practicing scales and theory instead of playing real pieces. (p. 1)

This is what very often happens in any English courses, where students have to deal with grammar rules when writing or reading, but most of the time, they do not face oral communication, so they do not get practice enough in the target language and they become afraid of talking in front of others.

The interactional opportunities offered by the different activities developed in the classroom and the active participation of the students in English classes should help them to improve oral communication skills and develop the oral abilities to communicate fluently in different contexts. As Kozuh (2004) explains ‘communication is a skill much like swimming if you don't get into the water and actually swim, your swimming will not improve’. The importance of speaking skill is also highlighted by Cotter (2007) when he states that humans need language for communication after all, and that primarily means speaking no matter the mistakes students might have when orally interacting with peers or other people.

Importance of the Setting and Context in Oral Activities

Creating good atmospheres and implementing realistic contexts in the classroom should be one of the teacher's top priorities in order to help students overcome their feelings of insecurity and fear when talking and orally interacting with others, thereby the teacher should enable them to build up their confidence and self-esteem, while at the same time making their learning enjoyable.

Nimmannit (1998) commented on this in her work explaining what a typical class in an EFL classroom is; she describes how students are sitting in neat rows listening attentively to the teacher and obediently following each stage of the teacher's instructions. The teacher directs questions to specific students, and occasionally calls
for volunteers, but students generally seem reluctant to respond. Nimmannit (1998) also explains that students will be more motivated if they are exposed to activities to which they can relate, which encourage them to use the target language, and which allow them to choose what they want to say.

Hernandez-Herrero (2005) discusses in his study the importance of using different contexts and settings in the classroom in order to help students from the University of Costa Rica when acquiring English oral production skills. The researcher’s findings showed that many students found oral presentations helpful to improve their oral production skills because they prepared their assignments and topics more carefully; that is, they felt that facing the whole class required more of them than working in small groups. In addition, even though they felt nervous, oral presentations gave them the opportunity to practice public-speaking techniques, skills which they considered very important for students who plan to teach in the future.

*Context of Oral Activities as a Strategy for Developing Students Cultural Knowledge of the Target Language*

A careful selection and organization of educational content allows the teacher to include relevant social and educational topics that may interest students and develop their knowledge of the world at the same time that they build up their oral skills. Some topics that students could work on are good citizenship, human rights, gender and racial discrimination, and sociocultural and linguistic diversity among others. The inclusion of these topics in the class also allows bringing into the class the cultural component of language.

El Karfa (n.d) believes that cultural tips give the students the opportunity to share with other cultures what they think about foreign ones and their own ones, ‘this is likely to encourage the students a tolerant attitude towards the second language, its speakers, and its culture, which will in turn make the students value their own culture
Students’ Perceptions of Their Oral Participation

and identity’. However, according to Melouk (2003) cited by El Karfa (n.d.) if students will reject their own culture when learning a foreign language, it may occur because ‘it is generally a consequence of ignorance (lack of knowledge), misjudgment and hasty value judgments and can be avoided by choosing appropriate content. Content that allows serious discussion and debate about substantive social and global issues will encourage students to consider all sides of an issue and develop critical skills that transfer outside of the classroom’.

Awareness of the Teachers and Students’ Role in the EFL Classroom

In the traditional language classroom, students and teachers often have defined roles. For instance, in highly teacher centered classrooms, the teacher decides who talks when and about what, the teacher-dominated classroom is the one where the teachers spend most of the time talking; these kind of teachers are the ones who control the students’ participation through some classroom activities and students have little chance to participate freely (Fernandez, 2004). This teacher-centered pattern of communication does not encourage students to assume an active participatory role and does not promote the development of interaction and communication skills that are an essential element of English oral skills. ‘…teachers need to create an environment that is conducive to learners’ practice of different participatory and intellectual skills. When teachers relinquish the controlling role and recognize students’ contributions to the learning process, teachers and students become collaborators in the learning process’ (El Karfa, n. d.).

Furthermore, Fernandez (2004) explains that as students become aware of different aspects and problems related to the process of teaching and learning, they will come to better appreciate the teachers’ attempts to engage them in classroom communication, ‘the student-centered classroom is the one where the students can participate more actively’ (p. 3). Fernández also states that where the teacher is a
facilitator of the learning process, students can direct and develop the classroom activities by interacting among themselves. For this researcher, teachers who shift from the dominant role as the source of knowledge empower their students to have more responsibilities, and are themselves able to perform alternative roles as coordinators, managers, organizers, and advisors.

Nevertheless, not all the methodologies, techniques, and activities that teachers use in the classroom promote an active participation of the learners and an interactive process that assures the completion of a successful language learning process. As El Karfa (n.d) states on his work ‘the job of the facilitator is to create a safe space within which people can work and then get out of the way.’ This means that teachers need to create a relaxed and safe atmosphere in the classroom where students share responsibilities for conducting classroom interaction, management and control ‘the prevalence of a rigid distribution of roles and power relationships between teachers who assume the role of sources of knowledge and students who assume the role of passive recipients of this knowledge certainly impedes any effort to put oral English skills into practice’ (El Karfa, n.d.)

Oral Production Activities in the EFL Classroom

Developing oral and communication skills in students, demands classroom activities that will allow them to exchange ideas with each other, express their opinions, and develop learning strategies and communication skills for successful negotiation (El Karfa, n.d). The teacher should then provide his/her students with the necessary input to let them develop their oral and cognitive skills in order to have a successful language class. This means, knowing the students and their interests, having good competence in the foreign language, implementing new methodologies, techniques, and activities along the classes.
Beale (2007) also emphasizes the importance of classroom activities for oral practice. According to this author, students will be motivated to engage in an oral activity if they feel it is cognitively challenging. Beale (2007) explains that activities should move into freer and freer use of the language, which will allow each student to integrate the lesson material with pre-existing language. The researcher also highlights that more than the traditionally taught linguistic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and pronunciation, students require using those linguistic skills in contextually appropriate ways.

When planning a language lesson, teachers should consider what methodology they will use, the technique they should apply as well as the specific activities they will introduce to cover a topic. The teachers must continually assess the strengths and weaknesses of their classes. Cotter (2007) suggests that teachers should take into account the students’ perspectives towards the class and develop effective lessons, always working towards greater communicative ability which maintains a balance between fluency (getting the words out) and accuracy (using grammar and vocabulary correctly). It seems important that teachers plan lessons that give students ample practice time and free use of the language.

El Karfa (n.d) proposes in his work some learner-centered activities that include:

- Problem-solving activities in which learners are presented with a scenario and asked about their opinions, experiences, and what they would do in a particular situation. Role plays and simulations in which learners are assigned to play a role in a certain social situation. Opinion-gap activities, learners share or defend their attitudes or preferences about an idea with their partners.

These student centered activities are more likely to motivate them, and also provide the opportunity for students to engage in the type of negotiation and critical thinking that will help them develop the participatory and intellectual skills necessary for
effective oral skills instruction and learning. Such activities expose students to each other’s opinions with the final purpose of developing their communication strategies and skills; more importantly, these activities help students recognize that there are different ways of looking at things and that communication can be a process that is an essential element for the solution of a conflict.

Therefore, a critical element of language learning that will create interactive patterns of classroom communication is small group work or pair work. El Karfa (n.d) in his study states that group work provides opportunities for students to be involved in cooperative classroom communication and helps to create a comfortable and motivating atmosphere in the classroom. Group work activities have the advantage of engaging students in interactive communication and negotiation of meaning that develops respect of others’ words, ideas, opinions and thoughts.

In addition to small group work and pair work, whole class discussion also allows students to freely engage in interactive communication while they express themselves and exchange ideas and information. El Karfa (n.d) agrees that a circle discussion activity enhances open human communication because ‘in a circle, people can simply be with each other face-to-face,’ in contrast to rows, where they ‘face the source of power and authority, and it is clear who will talk and who must listen’.

There are many useful ways in which students can practice in their target language, the teacher and the students are the ones who are in charged to build settings where they can practice and develop a good oral fluency and accuracy, that is what Eckard and Kearny (1981) illustrates in their work:

*A major goal of EFL education is to teach students how to speak English well enough to converse spontaneously and naturally with native and non-native speakers […] These skills are both linguistic and communicative; one way to combine them and to prepare ESL and EFL students to converse with native and non-native English speakers is to practice conversation.*
Among the conversation activities included are role-plays, question-and-answer activities, class discussions, problem solving, games, and other group activities. (p. 1)

Structuring the classroom around concrete activities rather than paper and pencil tasks is the strategy that is most likely to result in authentic use of language among students. When students are engaged in an activity or task that interests them, they learn language incidentally and naturally. El Karfa (n.d) describes a method in which teachers should center the classroom atmosphere, he explains that ‘the best way to create such an environment in which students learn the target language incidentally and in the context of doing something that is inherently meaningful, is to center instruction around interesting and engaging activities, integrating the use of the target language into that activity’. If the activities turn around an issue or topic that is relevant to students’ daily lives, language learning becomes even more efficient because of the students’ high level of interest in the activity.

El Karfa (n.d) also highlighted that relevant activities can be identified by choosing themes that reflect the students’ backgrounds and past experiences or issues that students and their families are dealing with in their communities.

The importance of such activities is also underlined by Jianing (2007) who affirms ‘The lively atmosphere and real life environment created by activities such as stories encourage the students to talk and discuss with each other. Besides, many stories can be adopted into short plays and learners enjoy performing’.

This researcher also stresses the importance a free and optimistic atmosphere to promote communication and explains that a nervous and stiff atmosphere builds invisible obstacles for oral production.
Methodology

Type of Study

The selected approach for this research project was the qualitative type of study, as I was especially interested in understanding students' feelings and perceptions about their learning experiences. This type of research is used to help the researchers to understand how people feel and why they feel as they do and as Merriam (1998) explains, in qualitative studies 'The key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's.' (p.6)

The researcher, in these cases, seeks to discover and understand an event, a process, the perspectives and point of views of the people involved, or a combination of these. Qualitative studies are concerned with collecting in-depth information about the participants and their contexts. Their aim is to provide an understanding of how or why things are as they are. (Hancock, 2002, p. 1)

The study presents characteristics of the Basic or Generic Qualitative Study and 'seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved' (Merriam, 1998, p.11). My interest in this research project was to inquire into students' perceptions about the development of their oral skills and the factors that may influence their participation in class activities. The study involved not only the students but also the learning context where they acquired English oral skills. As it is stated in Merriam's work, 'Qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there' (2002, p. 5)

The research involved observations, interviews and questionnaires as well as a field diary which are typical instruments for data collection in qualitative studies.
Context of Study

Setting

The setting for this research project was a public university ‘the Otún University’, located on the south-eastern part of Pereira city, Risaralda (Colombia). The educational offer of this university includes a variety of teacher training programs as well as Engineering programs.

The program where this research was carried out is the ‘Professional Development Program for Teachers of English (PDPTPE)’, which seeks to train competent professionals in the area of English language teaching with the purpose of improving the development of English language and promoting the expansion of this language throughout the region.

This study was focused on the Oral Skills Course that this program offers to the 4th semester PDPTPE students. The aim of these speaking classes is to increase the students’ exposure to the English language, to give them an opportunity to share and speak in English in the classroom providing different contexts and environments for the practice of the four principal language skills, mainly oral production.
Participants

With the purpose of getting the necessary information about participation and interaction in class, two groups with a total number of forty-five students were observed.

In order to be able to enroll in the *Oral Skills Course*, students must have attended and successfully passed the previous English courses offered at this program: elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate courses. In fourth semester, students are enrolled in the Advanced English course as well as in other courses taught in English and in Spanish which are mandatory for them, what means that they are receiving oral input in several other academic contexts besides the *Oral Skills Course*.

The students’ ages ranged from 17 to 25 years old, and most of them lived in the city of Pereira. It is important to mention that the level of English of the students was quite heterogeneous due to their different backgrounds, knowledge and use of the target language (e.g. one student came from San Andres Island and another one had lived in London, England, for several years).

Six students (three from each group) were chosen as participants and were asked to answer a questionnaire and an interview. In order to get relevant information about the factors that influenced their participation in the class, it was considered very important that the participants of the study were students with different levels of participation in the class. That is the reason why these six participants were not chosen randomly but carefully selected by the teacher according to their different levels of participation. The students attended to a three-hour class every week.

Out of the six participants, two were described by the teacher as showing high participation and engagement in class, two of them showed a medium level of participation and engagement, and the last two participants showed as the teacher described a low level of participation and engagement in the classroom during the development of the different activities proposed by the teacher.
Data Collection Techniques

The methods used to gather the necessary information for answering the research questions that guide this study were:

1) A questionnaire which was designed to inquire about students’ perceptions on the development of their oral skills throughout the course. The same questionnaire (see appendix 1) was applied at two different stages of the course: one questionnaire at the beginning of the course (week 3) and the other at the end (week 16).

As the questionnaire was applied for the first time three weeks after the beginning of the course, the simple past tense was used in the questions and answers and it was explained to the students that they should refer to how their oral skills were before starting the Oral Skills Course.

Participants were asked to gauge their abilities to understand and to use vocabulary, to assess their pronunciation and intonation. They were also asked to rate their oral participation and interaction in class and their fluency when speaking in English. There was a final question about the students’ ability to think in English without translating their thoughts into the mother tongue.

2) Observation of the Oral Skills classes and field notes.

In order to gather the necessary information, I was focused in five different aspects of the class, (activities, students’ attitudes, interaction patterns, motivation provided by the teacher, and the purpose of each activity) that gave me a better understanding of the situations presented in the class and how students reacted to them. Merriam explains in her work that ‘observational data represent a firsthand encounter with a phenomenon of interest rather than a second hand account obtained in an interview’ (2002, p 1). Taking that into account, special attention was paid to the interaction between the teacher - students, and students - students. During the observations, I took notes and wrote comments about each activity that the teacher and
the students did throughout the class sessions. I collected the information from each activity and then later classified it according to different categories in order to answer the research questions.

3) Semi-structured interview: the interview involved a series of open-ended questions based on the topic areas to cover (Hancock. 1998). The questions were used to inquire about students' opinions and experiences related to their participation in class (see appendix 2). Six participants (three from each group) were interviewed at the end of the semester.

The semi-structured interview took place at the end of the semester in order to give the participants the opportunity to get the perception of the evolution of their skills and the influence of the conversation class on the process; they were asked questions about their perceptions related to the factors that influence their oral participation in class. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

**Researcher’s Role**

Taking into account that I studied the same course in previous semesters, I wanted to inquire on its students’ perceptions about how this course is helping them in the development of language oral skills. My role as a researcher at this particular study was as observer. At no point during the observed sessions did I play any part on the development of the class. I had this role in order to take detailed notes of everything happening in class in my field diary. Key (1997) explains that descriptive research is a continuous process that helps the researcher to explain each detail and fact that could happen in the process of gathering data; descriptive research aims to collect data without any manipulation of the research context.
Data Analysis

In this section I will explain in detail the procedures followed to analyze the data gathered from the instruments applied in the study.

The information provided by the participants through the questionnaire they answered at the beginning of the semester was tallied in a table so I could observe the frequency\(^3\) with which a particular answer was chosen for each of the questions included in the questionnaire and also the particular answer given by each participant. The goal was to observe the prevalent perception among the participants in relation with the particular issue considered. The following image illustrates an example of the procedure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to express ideas</th>
<th>A1</th>
<th>A2</th>
<th>A3</th>
<th>A4</th>
<th>A5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 2</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 4</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 5</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A1: Always
A2: Usually
A3: Sometimes
A4: hardly ever.
A5: Never

I used the Excel\(^\circledR\) program to create a graphic that illustrated the obtained frequencies in order to get a visual impression of the information collected.

As the same questionnaire was applied again at a later stage of the study, this format for processing the information allowed me to introduce in the same table the new answers of the participants and facilitated the observation of the changes in the students’ perceptions. The comparison between each student’s answer to the same

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\(^3\) The frequency was calculated by counting how many participants chose a particular answer and dividing it by the number of total participants of the study.
question at the two different moments in time in which the questionnaire was applied, allowed me to observe the changes in the student's opinion.

For example, Participant number 1 reported in the first stage (week 3) that he considered that he only sometimes was able to express ideas clearly. As it can be seen in the illustration below, the same participant reported in the final stage (week 16) that he considered himself usually able to express his ideas clearly. The change from ‘sometimes’ to ‘usually’ shows that there has been an improvement in the student’s self perception of his ability in this field.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONNAIRE No. 1. (Beginning)</th>
<th>QUESTIONNAIRE No. 2 (End)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to express ideas.</td>
<td>A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 1</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 2</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 3</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 4</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 5</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PARTICIPANT 6</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A1: Always
A2: Usually
A3: Sometimes
A4: hardly ever.
A5: Never

This procedure was repeated with each question of the questionnaire and with each of the six participants of the study.

With the purpose of finding answers to the first and the third research question, I observed eight class sessions in total (four classes in each group). I took notes on my field diary about events belonging to categories previously decided (the different activities that the teacher provided to the students, their purpose and how the students responded to them, and the kind of motivation provided by the teacher, the kind of interaction and participation that students were exposed to, the kind of topics presented to students, interest of the students towards the class and teacher, external factors, etc).

I also paid careful attention to the students’ behavior during the development of the activities as I aimed at discovering which activities increased or decreased students’ motivation in class by paying attention to their reactions, their attitude and the way they
participated in class. The notes were taken in a field diary and then the information was read, analyzed and classified into main categories. As this process was taking place, I digitalized the information directly in the chart.

The interview done to the participants at the end of the process lasted no more than 15 minutes with each participant. The interview was digitally recorded and afterwards transcribed into digital text. I read the information gathered several times trying to detect the common patterns in the participants’ answers. I focused specifically on those items related to the first research question that aimed at finding out what factors influence the students’ participation in class.

Answers to the first research question were analyzed and classified according to whether they provided negative or positive evidence in the influence of the factors in the student’s participation in class.

Questions number 2, 3 and 4 gave participants the opportunity to identify themselves other factors influencing their participation in the Oral Skills class, motivating topics and other valued aspects of the class. I read the information and analyzed it by paying attention to expressions that best fit in the categories and looking at the specific motivating factors mentioned by the students and the frequency in their answers.

Limitations of the study

Although three data collection instruments were used in the study, the shallowness of students’ answers in some questions of the interview, (that was not immediately noticed by the researcher) implied in practical terms that some findings are only based on the information provided by one instrument and could not be supported by evidence coming from any of the others.
This research work would have benefited of a more detailed observational data than the one collected. Lack of detailed description of students reactions during class activities prevented me from getting strong evidence for some of the findings.

Unfortunately, I did not collect information about the objective results obtained by the students in the subject. Those results would have allowed me to correlate my participant’s perceptions about the development of their oral skills with their actual results, what would have been very interesting.

The collection of observational data which was not well written in detail, and was not focused on what I wanted to discover in order to respond my research questions.
Findings

In relation to the research questions of this study, which aimed to find out students’ perceptions of their oral skills development, interactional opportunities provided by the teacher and factors affecting students' participation in oral activities, and after analyzing the information collected through the different instruments, the following findings can be reported:

Improvement of Students’ Perception of Their Oral Skills

The questionnaire done at the beginning and at the end of the course sought to establish how students perceived their class participation in the Oral Skills classes. The students' answers to the questions showed a marked improvement in their perception regarding the different aspects of their oral skills at a final stage.

The percentage of students who reported that they improved in vocabulary, grammar and fluency among other skills was high. Based on the results obtained from comparing participants' answers in week 3 and 16, the majority of the participants perceived an improvement in the different factors related to their oral skills development.

Students Perceived Improvement of Their Ability to Express and Understand Ideas Clearly

In relation to their ability to express and understand ideas clearly, there was a drastic improvement of students' self perception. As graphic 1a and 1b show, there was a decrease in the number of students who considered themselves as hardly ever capable of expressing ideas clearly (50% at the beginning of the semester against 16.6% at the end of the semester). A significant increase can be observed in the number of students who consider themselves as usually able to express ideas clearly.
Considering that the ability to express ideas clearly is a very important feature of fluency, it can be safely assumed that at the end of the course, some students felt their fluency improved.

Improvement of Participant's Perception about Pronunciation and Intonation

The study revealed that students perceived a significant improvement since they reported having advanced in their pronunciation and intonation performance at the end of the course.

As the graphics 2a and 2b below show, there was a significant number of students who assessed themselves as hardly ever capable of good pronunciation at the beginning of the semester (33.4%). At the end of the course, that category had disappeared from the data. There weren't any students who considered themselves as hardly ever capable of good pronunciation.

The same situation can be observed in relation to the students’ self-perception of improvement in intonation. From an initial situation in which the majority of the participants assessed themselves as sometimes capable of good intonation; graphic 3b depicts how that group’s perceptions of sometimes capable of good intonation increased drastically (from 66.8% to 16.6%) and likewise how the majority of students considered themselves as usually or always capable of using good intonation.
The information from the questionnaire shows that at the end of the course, according to their frequency of interaction and participation in class, participants reported that they participated and interacted more often in class. As graphic 4a illustrates, at the beginning of the course 33.4% of the participants declared that they sometimes interacted in class. But at the end of the course, students’ answers showed that there was a decrease in students’ interaction in class, some participants (16.6%)
perceived that they interacted less in class; while there were some students (16.6%) who reported improvement in frequency according to their interaction in class. It can also be observed that the participants (16.6%) who considered that they never interacted in class at the beginning of the course, they perceived improvement in interaction at the end of the class so this category disappeared in graphic 4b.

In relation to students’ participation in class, students initially stated that they hardly ever participated (33.4%) whereas there was an increase in some students that perceived they participated more at the end of the class, so a new category emerged in graphic 5b, some of the participants (33.4%) perceived that they always participated in class at the end of the course.
Improvement of Participants’ Perception about Their Abilities to Recognize and Understand Ideas, and Vocabulary

According to students’ perception in their ability to understand and recognize ideas and words, they reported that there was no progress in their oral skills’ improvement, (although some of them stated to have improved in their understanding of main ideas in a conversation.) In graphic 6a students declared that at the beginning of the course 33.4% of them could understand all of the vocabulary and ideas in a conversation, whilst graphic 6b a decrease in this category at the end of the course (16.6%), since some students reported less understanding of the vocabulary. This data obtained from the participants’ responses could be explained due to the fact that students were exposed, (during the course) to more complex information and they perceived they were not having progress in their understanding of ideas, but still they had improvement in their communicative skills; this situation will be better explained in the discussion part of this study. Another reason that could explain the decrease on this category (understanding of all vocabulary) may be perhaps of a misunderstanding of the question or a contradiction in participants’ responses at the end of the course.

Graphic 6a: Understanding. Week 3

Graphic 6b: Understanding. Week 16
The graphics above show that participants reported a perception to have improved in their ability to recognize and identify main words in a conversation. Participants declared that at the beginning of the course 16.6% of them knew most of the words in a conversation. The graphic 7b shows that at the end of the course, there was an increase on the number of students (33.4%) who knew the main words spoken in a conversation. The ability to know and understand all the vocabulary and words in a conversation is more important that just recognize them but without knowing the meaning of most of the words spoken.

Improvement of the Participants’ Perception of Their Fluency and Ability to Communicate Ideas

Regarding the students’ fluency and their ability to communicate ideas and state opinions, this study demonstrates that there was an important improvement on the students’ self perception about their oral abilities in order to communicate their thoughts and opinions as well as fluency.

According to students’ fluency, it could be observed in graphic 8a that at the beginning of the course 50% of the participants perceived themselves as fluent because
they could speak the target language, despite making mistakes. Graphic 8b shows that at the end of the course there was an important improvement on students who considered that they were fluent (50%), some of the participants perceived that they gained fluency since they can speak with little mistakes in pronunciation and grammar.

Concerning the students’ perception of their ability to easily communicate ideas, at the beginning of the course it can be observed that 16.6% of the participants perceived they always had the ability to communicate their ideas without problems. Graphic 9b shows that at the end of the course, participants perceived they improved according to their ability to communicate ideas, the graphic reports that 50% of the participants always communicate their thoughts and opinions easily.
Participants’ Perception of a Decrease in the Use of Mental Translation When Talking /Communicating Orally

The data collected from the participants’ responses stated that the participants perceived they had a high ability to understand and to recognize vocabulary and ideas from others with little or no use of the mother tongue (no translation to L1). In relation to the students’ feelings towards the use of English in the classroom, there was an important increase on the students’ self perception about the importance of using English and sharing opinions and ideas with others in order to improve their English oral fluency.

The participants reported that at the end of the course some of them had made progress according to their attitudes towards the use of English; graphic 10b shows that some participants (33.4%) at the beginning reported they always felt good using English, while 50% of the participants at the end of the course perceived that they always felt good when speaking in English. It could also be observed that there was an important decrease in students’ perceptions about their feelings when using English in class. 16.6% of the participants reported that they never felt good when using English inside the classroom at the beginning of the course, whilst at the end of the course this category disappeared.

This study revealed that there was a considerable decrease in the use of L1 to translate sentences from Spanish to English. Graphic 11a shows that 50% of the participants declared that at the beginning of the course they hardly ever used the mother tongue when speaking in the target language, meanwhile graphic 11b shows that 66.8% of them felt that at the end of the course they did not see the necessity to use the L1 in order to mentally build sentences in English.
Interactional Opportunities Offered in the Class

The data gathered in the observation sessions through the field diary provided me with the information about the activities that the teacher and students developed in the class. The following findings were observed:
The Teacher as the Main Promoter of Interaction in Class

The eight observations carried out throughout the first semester of 2009 in the two different groups in ‘Oral Skills I’, provided me with information about the different interactional activities that students engaged in during the class. The example below illustrates the tendency in which the teacher was the main promotor of interaction in the classroom since she proposed the different activities or topics to work in. Students just waited for the teacher to organize the interaction in the class. They were responsive to the teacher’s questions but did not take the initiative to engage in spontaneous interaction among themselves or with the teacher. Most of the time the teacher established the interaction among students, and she was the only one who started the interaction in the class. The following excerpt is an example of how interaction took place:

Observation Session 4, Activity 1: ‘(reading) Teacher started the class by asking students some questions about an article related to Public and Private lives. Students had read the article in groups in a previous class. Students had to argue their points of view according to the article. In small groups students had to defend their opinions about private and public lives and their policies. Teacher separated the group in two main groups, the ones who defended public lives and the ones who defended private lives. Teacher started asking questions to the groups.

Field Diary: ‘students interacted very motivated in this activity since they all the time raised their hands and did not wait for the teacher to ask them to talk but interrupted other classmates to express their opinions. They only interacted with the teacher because she was the only one who made the questions about the article. After a while the teacher arranged the class in order for the students to interact among themselves. They asked questions to their partners about their topics, they made a kind of debate.'
In the excerpt, it could be noticed that in session 4 the interaction among students was low since they only interacted with the teacher in the first part of the activity by answering questions that teacher made to them while the rest of the group remained in silence. (In some cases everybody wanted to response to the teacher’s questions). Even though, it was remarkable that students participated more when they were exposed to little groups instead of the whole class or just the teacher.

It could be noticed that the teacher sometimes arranged the class in groups in order to prompt interaction among students debating, arguing, agreeing, giving opinions and ideas, criticizing, analyzing, etc. Teacher - student interaction was based on asking and answering questions individually or in groups. Most of the students participated in the speaking class when the teacher called on them but few students volunteered to participate. As it can be observed in the following excerpt, participant 4 recognizes that the questions asked by the teacher motivate them to talk:


Line 72: ‘… the most important aspects of the conversation class I think the energy of the teacher eh… she [talks] the class more interesting, she asks questions, she is very active with us’.

Presence of the Teacher Needed For Encouraging Students Interaction in English

It was noticed that most times students did not develop the tasks and activities in the target language, in many cases I observed them talking in Spanish rather than in English. Most of the students used Spanish among themselves; they only tried to use English when the teacher was around. When the teacher was not monitoring them, they felt relaxed and free to do something else, something different from the task (joking, whispering, speaking, etc.) The following are some extracts from the field-notes which support this finding.
Observation session 2. Activity 1: ‘Teacher asked students to work in pairs; they had to share their interpretations about their performances in their previous oral presentations in previous classes’.

Field Diary: ‘Some students didn’t talk in English; they developed the assignment most of the time in Spanish but only when the teacher wasn’t around. I could observe that the pairs close to me developed the task in Spanish while the teacher was busy checking the work of other students. The teacher came closer and students switched to English. She didn’t interfere in what was going on, she remained as a quiet listener. After a couple of minutes, she left for the next group and the students immediately switched back to Spanish.

Observation session 7. Activity 1: ‘(Group reading – Famous people) Teacher arranged the class in small groups so that they read an article about famous people. After reading the article the groups had to answer several open questions related to the topic, afterward there was a plenary to share ideas with the whole group.

Field Diary: ‘Students shared ideas among them in their groups; some of them leaded the groups. Although English is prevalent, some students code switched from L1 to L2. When they were aware of the teacher’s presence they kept using English among themselves and addressed the teacher in English.’

In sessions 2 and 7 it seemed that students did not like to interact among themselves in the target language or maybe they did not see the necessity to speak in the target language. The teacher constantly encouraged them to use English inside the classroom. It is remarkable that although students knew the aim of the subject and the usefulness of taking advantage of the activities to develop their oral skills, they seem to need the constant pressure of the teacher to keep in track on the activities and also on the use of the target language.
Interaction Best Promoted through Small Group Activities

I could notice that the interaction among students and the participation in class were higher when the teacher arranged the students in small groups in relation to the amount of students of this course (five people maximum); it seemed that they were more confident when they practiced the target language in small groups where the pressure was lower.

I realized that when students worked in small groups, there was more participation among them since the class was noisier, and students’ facial expressions showed they were motivated. Students participated more in class and there was turn taking, interruptions among themselves, and I could observe that they tended to complete each other ideas.

The patterns of interaction shown below are some excerpts from the information gathered through the observations and note-taking which illustrate that students preferred to work in small groups rather than in big ones or individually.

Observation session 4, Activity 1: ‘(debate) The class started as it was arranged last class, in small groups of five students. Ss were consolidating arguments about public and private lives and policy. Ss had to argue their points of view; they had a debate defending their opinions about the policy about public and private lives. The teacher chose one member from each group in order to argue and defend the group’s ideas about the topic they discussed. The rest of the groups started asking questions to the members of the other groups, some members of the groups defended private lives and the others defended public ones.’

Field Diary: ‘Teacher started the interaction by asking the students some questions. Although students had shown high participation when talking in the small groups, nervousness could be noticed when they were asked to talk in front
of the whole class. Some of them forgot what they wanted to say, some others could not find the words to express themselves… The teacher noticed it and tried to put students at ease by asking other students to help the one talking, by giving prompts, etc’.

As we can notice from the data from session 4, students seemed to feel more confident when the activities involved small group interaction (taking into account that the course had 28 students) and they had to face only a few classmates at once.

Debates and Discussion as the most Engaging Activities for Students’ Participation

During the course, the teacher provided different kind of activities for the students. Some of the activities presented by the teacher were vocabulary contests and quizzes, monologues or group oral presentations, debates, discussions, short prepared dialogues.

I could observe that students tended to participate more in those activities in which there was a previous reading or research about the topic involved; some of the activities that students liked the most were defending and stating opinions (debates). Students were very active during these activities, most of them wanted to establish their position and ideas about the topics. The following is an excerpt from the field-notes and the observations which illustrates students’ preferences of activities for the class.

Observation Session 2, Activity 6: (group discussion) ‘Teacher gave to the students an article to work in small groups.

Field Diary: ‘Teacher started asking questions to the students about public and private life (What do you think about famous people private lives? What would you prefer between a private and a public life? ‘Do you like your normal life or do you want to be a famous person?) Students responded to the teacher’s questions actively. Several of them raised their hands immediately, some of them
started talking without waiting for their turn; most of the students seemed that they liked the topic because time after time they interrupted each other in order to defend or establish their opinions’.

As we can observe from the sample from the data, students seemed to find easier to engage in oral participation when the activities involved debating controversial issues among themselves, in this way they perceive they are giving ideas and sharing opinions in a meaningful way.

Data from the interview also provides information about how the students perceived debates and discussion activities in class. The following is an extract from the interview:


Line 64: ‘…when we are debating and we are all speaking and participating that is important, that’s interesting and that is what the class is for… if there is an issue or a topic that is interesting… they will participate and I will do the same.’

In the extract Participant number 2 confirmed that debating and doing discussion activities were very motivating for him since students were talking and sharing ideas and making oral production naturally. The participant is conscious of developing a higher participation in this kind of activity.

The study also revealed that the use of authentic material in the class was a trigger for students’ participation. Students reported that the teacher provided interesting material that involved them in the learning process; the teacher brought different interactive activities to have her students more engaged so in this way, students interacted more among themselves. Some of the materials that the teacher presented to
students were different games, puzzles, magazines, songs, articles and poems from authentic sources. An example of this can be observed in the following excerpt from the data.


Line 40: ‘I think that, when the teacher starts the class with [the] game, with… crosswords, with newspapers in English, [that] topics are [that] students were more motivated’.

Line 40 shows that this participant stated that the kind of authentic material teacher brought into the class motivated him/her in order to participate in class and be more engaged in the different topics and activities that teacher proposed to the group.

Famous People and Socio-Political Issues Detected As Most Motivating Topics

From the observation sessions, it could be reported that students liked to interact among themselves when the teacher presented topics that were new or fascinating for them. Some topics that were discussed in class were culture tips, music, important and famous places and people, private and public lives, politics and social issues, etc. These kinds of topics gave the students the opportunity to think about their likes and dislikes, and about their previous knowledge they might had about the topic involved.

Data from the observation and field-notes illustrate the effectiveness of the use of these topics inside the classroom.

Observation session 5. Activity 1: ‘(Newspaper reading) Teacher brought to the class some authentic material for students to work in. Students had to share ideas and opinions about the topic of the article (famous people)’.

Field Diary: Some of the students were very engaged in this type of activity, since students responded to the teacher’s questions very actively, it seemed that they
really wanted to participate in this activity since I could notice that most of them were raising their hands, everyone wanted to state their opinions and ideas about the topic they were discussing. Since the interaction in class included talking about famous people I realized that most of the students wanted to share any information they could have about those famous people. It seemed they liked the topic in discussion since they interacted more among themselves, they shared ideas, opinions, photographs, etc. I could notice they were more talkative, they asked the teacher for the new vocabulary, and they were doing some comments about the people they were reading about.

Data from the interview also confirmed how talking about famous people and politic-social issues increased students motivation inside class. The following are some extracts taken from the interview which illustrated students’ perception about this finding:

Line 43: ‘I specially like political issues, political topics, and, mmm.. things that [has] to do with our surrounding, with social issues’.
Participant 3.
Line 49: ‘... when you want to talk about the famous people you feel very interested because you want a… eh… when you talk about the famous people that you like, you feel very good, because is one of the things that you enjoy’.

The information obtained from the observations, field diary and interviews give a clear view of the situation presented in this finding, some students stated they considered more interesting to talk about topics they were more used to, everyday topics, topics in which they could have some background information in order to participate more in class. In this way some of the students seemed to feel more confident and comfortable talking in class about topics they really like and enjoy.
Factors that Might Affect Students’ Participation in Class

At the end of this study, the participants were interviewed in order to know their perceptions related to their interaction and the factors that influenced their participation in class. Students were addressed in order to know how they felt in the Oral Skills course; the external and internal factors that might have influenced their participation and interaction in class activities. The following are the findings that can explain the main factors that influenced students’ participation in class.

Students’ Awareness of the Importance of Participation in Class Activities

The data collected from participants showed that the majority of them were conscious about the importance of improving speaking skills and the problems they had in oral communication. They felt the necessity of developing essential abilities in order to have a better performance in their oral production, thus they saw participation in the conversation classes as the chance for them to practice their English language and at the same time to correct the mistakes they might make.

The following is an extract taken from the interview to participant number 3 in which he stated how he perceived his participation in class:

Question 4. Participant 3.

Line 68: ‘...in the conversation class [...] it doesn’t matter the topic because you have to talk, you need to talk… I like the conversation with everybody… because you can correct the mistakes hearing the partners, the teacher, it doesn’t matter, I just want to participate and learn more’.
In line 68 it is evident that participant 3 was conscious about the importance of speaking and participating in class as a tool for gaining fluency and confidence when they speak in the target language.

It is also important to highlight that some students were motivated in class since they perceived the importance of acquiring fluency in English because they believed it was very important for their lives and profession. Consequently, they saw the necessity to develop good speaking skills if they wanted to become English teachers, they felt the necessity to show a high English proficiency in their future teaching jobs as it is observed in the following excerpt from the interview.

Question 4. Participant 5.

Line 75 ‘I believe all, everything that has to do with conversation is important because we’re going to be teachers and all those things that we are seeing will help us to manage ourselves in order to [attend] a group of children, anyone who we are going to teach.’

When asked about the specific aspects that they value the most in the conversation class, Participant number 5 states that everything is important without mentioning any specific aspect. From his use of the expression ‘everything that has to do with conversation’, it seems that the participant refers to something more than just different aspects of oral skills (fluency, accuracy, vocabulary and grammar that they may acquire). Participant number 5 may also be referring to the organization and management of that type of activities although this is just a hypothesis because I did not ask further questions to the student that could have provided more detailed information.
Grades as a Determining Factor for Class Participation

It could be noticed in the transcription of the interview that half of the participants stated that having a good grade increased their motivation in class, so they were more willing to participate in class. Those participants were motivated when participating in class just to increase their marks in participation instead of increasing or improving their speaking skills.

On the other hand, half of them believed that having a grade is not as important as learning and improving their oral skills. They stated that they participated in the Oral Skills class because they wanted to have better speaking skills.

Data from the interview shows some examples about this situation, these are some opinions that students stated in the interview.

Question 1. Participant 2.

Line 8: ‘...if I know if I can obtain a higher grade for participating, I would do it gladly and I've working hard for my grade, to increase my grade’.

Participant 3.

Line 10: ‘when I'm going to speak I think, I think a lot in my grade because it is a motivation’.

Participant 1.

Line 5: ‘it's most a little, because when I participate in class is because [ I want to learn, for myself ], not for the grade, it's most personal’.
Participant 4.

Line 13: ‘I don’t think the grade is [not] important for me, I participate because I want… eh… the grade is… I don’t know, is a motivation but is not important, that’s because I want to learn’.

Lines 8 and 10 reveal that learners paid a lot of attention to their grades when they were going to participate in class. Participants stated that the grade was very important and influential for them because they perceived the grade as an important factor that tells them they will pass the course, no matter how much they learn or improve. However, lines 5 and 13 reveal the contrary; these participants stated that they did not pay attention to the grades. From the expressions ‘when I participate in class is because I want to learn, not for the grade’ and ‘the grade is a motivation, but is not important, that’s because I want to learn’ I can conclude that Participants 1 and 4 perceived the grade as less important, they just want to learn and improve their oral skills, that was the main reason why they participated and interacted in class.

**Fear of Losing Face in Front of the Classmates as a Negative Influence for Participation**

Some participants, who reported that they did not like to participate in class, also explained that they were afraid of making mistakes when expressing their ideas or making a presentation in front of their classmates.

Although there are different learners’ factors that may influence participation in the class, my participants were very clear when stating that their unwillingness to participate in the class is related both to their fear of making mistakes and to their classmates’ negative behavior and reactions as an audience.

The following are some excerpts from the information gathered from the students’ responses to the interview.
Question 2. Participant 3.

Line 28: ‘when I’m ready to talk in a [participation] I feel very afraid because of the influence of the partners, I feel very [bored], very afraid, I don’t know, for example when the teacher ask me I feel very [bored],, very afraid, because eh.. I think I am going to make a mistake.. it is the problem.’

Participant 4.

Line 32: ‘I don’t like to talk [about], talk a lot in the class because I’m very shy, and I don’t know, the classmates are very [mean] with other persons … they are so bad…’.

Participant 6.

Line 37: ‘I don’t like to participate because eh… the partners laugh a lot of other’s mistakes’.

Lines 28, 32 and 37 illustrates that shyness, fear of making mistakes and lack of confidence influenced students and made them unwilling to participate in class. However, as we can see in their testimonies, participants also stated that they did not participate in class because their classmates laugh at other students’ mistakes.

Group Members’ Diversity in Language Level as a Factor That Influences Participation in Class Activities

The participants stated that the group is clearly divided into small subgroups which influence negatively the way in which students interacted and learned in the class. Students with high academic achievement tended to interact among themselves, and gave few or no opportunities to students with lower academic level to integrate in their groups or interact with them. The following excerpt gathered from participants’ answers in the interview can illustrate this situation.
Question 2. Participant 2.

Line 24: ‘...when the teacher organize us in little groups, there are some students that don’t like to participate with us, ... in my case I’m very shy and I don’t like that other laugh [of] me... some students believe that they are better than others’.

As it can be seen from the participant’s statement, there seemed to be some preferences in group organization since the students with a high level of English preferred to work among themselves rather than mixing with other classmates whose level of English was not as good.

Data from the field diary can also support the participant’s perception; I could observe that when the teacher asked students to freely create groups, they tended to work with the same people, those students who might have better speaking skills than others, tended to work together. Hardly ever could I see those students interacting with low level speaking students. The following extract illustrates this finding:

Observation session 2. Activity 5: (game) ‘Teacher asked students to work in groups; she asked them to create the groups with whomever they wanted. They had to choose a leader. Then the Teacher said a word (noun) to the leaders and they had to describe the word to their teams using synonyms’. Field Diary: Groups are formed very quickly. It seems that students already know who they want to work with. Some students seem to find it difficult to join in any group and finally form a group among themselves. When the competition starts it is clear that the level of English oral skills of this last group is lower than the level of other students. The competition is a little unbalanced, since the high English level students very often win the games proposed by the teacher’.
As it can be observed from this extract, students with high English level tend to work always with the same classmates, and ignore those whose level of English is lower.

Since one of the aims of working in groups is to promote peer cooperation, this tendency to work always with the same students deprives the group from benefitting from peer support and feedback. It also generates an uncomfortable situation for those students who are left out, impacting negatively their participation and self-esteem.
Discussion

The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis for this study:

1. How do participants perceive their oral skills development as they participate in the Oral Skills I Course offered by the PDPTF program?

2. What interactional opportunities does the teacher provide in the classroom?

3. What factors do participants report as influencing their participation in oral activities inside the classroom?

I organized the discussion of the findings to address each one of these questions. In the first section, I describe the participants’ perception about the development of their oral skills whilst attending and participating in the Oral Skills Class. The second section illustrates the activities that students perceived as more motivating in order to encourage participation in class taking into account the interaction with the teacher, their classmates and the development of the activities. In the third section I describe the factors that might influence students’ participation and interaction in class.

The results of the current study revealed the following information:

Improvement of Students’ Perception of Their Oral Skills

The data described the impact of a particular course (Oral Skills I) on the students’ perception about the development of their oral abilities. The data revealed that students perceived that their oral skills improved after attending the Oral Skills Course. Participants reported feeling that the different factors related to oral communicative abilities, like pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary, ability to express and
understand ideas, and a decrease of mental translation, etc. were enhanced by participating in class activities.

Eckard and Keamy (1981) stated that ‘the major goal of EFL education is to teach students how to speak English well enough to converse spontaneously and naturally’ (p. 2). This is especially important in the context of the PDPTE program, since the students who are following its curriculum will need to have excellent levels of English language skills because they will become English teachers.

According to the data from the oral abilities and communicative skills questionnaire, a high percentage of participants thought they improved their speaking since they perceived at the end of the course they had better oral skills; the data revealed that students’ speaking skills had a tendency to get better since the students perceived themselves as being more prepared when establishing a conversation or preparing an oral discussion. Thus, it is important to highlight that students perceived that their needs were fulfilled and their self-image increased positively since they felt they could have a good use of their speaking skills. Venditi and Bahruth (1987) explain better this finding, since they state that students’ difficulties in their speaking skills are a direct result of their beliefs that they cannot think or perform accurately, they also state that ‘students who have difficulty in school have often learned to perceive themselves as incapable of performing or thinking correctly’ (p. 4).

As it was shown in the findings, at the end of the course the majority of the students reported feeling that they interacted and participated more frequently with their classmates in class activities. However, it must be acknowledged that one of the participants affirmed that his interaction in class had decreased. This could be explained by a misunderstanding of the question, a contradiction of the responses, or maybe this Participant’s interaction and participation could have been affected by his perception of little progress or maybe self-exigency. Curiously, this same participant reported in his/her answers to the questionnaire that s/he felt little improvement in his abilities to understand vocabulary and express ideas.
The data from this student supports Jianing (2007) statement that foreign language learners tend to lose interest in what they learn if they find they make little progress, in consequence students tend to participate and interact less in class.

Forero (2005) also explains that it is easy to overlook the fact that academic language can still be challenging and adversely affect the student's academic performance even though s/he is fluent in everyday conversations, so it could be said that although this participant reported they did not feel improved his understanding of vocabulary and expression of ideas, still this student had improvement in their communicative skills since s/he acquired new knowledge everyday.

Oral Interactional Opportunities Presented in Class

It is important to mention that the selection of activities done by the teacher is an important factor that influences students' willingness to participate in class; students would feel motivated or unmotivated depending on the activities and topics that the teacher brings to the class. In this case, the teacher of the Oral Skills Course tried to promote effective communication in the target language by proposing and presenting activities and topics that would catch students’ attention and make them willing to participate in class. This finding supports what El Karfa’s (n.d) study suggests, he said that teachers should be recursive when planning their classes and ‘teachers need to create an environment that is conducive to learners’ practice of different participatory and intellectual skills’.

The data also revealed that the teacher tried to enhance students' interaction and participation by asking them questions that might involve them in the topic or the discussion. It is noticeable, however, that although students are aware of the importance of participating in the class for improving their oral skills, few of them participated or answered teacher’s questions voluntarily. This behavior is consistent with what Nimmannnit’s (1998) describes as a ‘typical’ classroom: one in which the
teacher directs questions to specific students, and occasionally calls for volunteers, but students generally seem reluctant to respond.

Most of the time the teacher assumed total control of the class in terms of choice and presentation of the topics and activities that students should develop in the class. This situation is criticized by El Karfa’s (n.d) study, when he says that students should not been considered as passive participants of their learning process, and the teacher should not been considered as the authority, the centre of the class that provides students with information and no autonomous learning. As he explains, ‘the prevalence of a rigid distribution of roles and power relationships between teachers who assume the role of sources of knowledge and students who assume the role of passive recipients of this knowledge certainly impedes any effort to put oral English skills into practice’ (El Karfa, n.d.)

As it has been previously mentioned, students did not take the initiative in oral interaction; we would expect that students make more oral contributions and take advantage of the opportunities that the Otun University offers to them since it is well known that in our context few people can interact in a foreign language. Although students did not identify this passive role as a factor that influences their participation and interaction in the class, it would be interesting to study if this situation would change by giving them a more active role in the choice of activities and topics.

Another possible factor that influences students’ speaking skills was the impact of the teacher’s presence on students’ use of the target language. Although a high use of the target language would be expected in such a particular group of students, aware of the importance of interacting in the target language as well as of the lack of opportunities out of class environment to improve their oral skills, the findings show that the presence of the teacher was needed in order for the students to interact in English.
This lack of use of English could be explained by the type of activities used in the class. Nimmanit’s (1998) argues that students will be more motivated if they are exposed to activities to which they can relate, which encourage them to use the target language, and which allow them to choose what they want to say with no pressure of teacher’s control (Activities-Relating activities to the students' experience, para. 1). Also Gutiérrez (2005) emphasizes the importance of class activities and of using language for real communicative purposes when she states that the teacher should create a low stress atmosphere where students can use the language for real purposes in order to be involved in meaningful communication and interaction that allow them to acquire speaking skills.

Other findings of this study support these ideas. In my research I could notice that the activities that seemed to motivate students participation was debates and discussion activities about different topics. To facilitate oral skills development, students were motivated by the teacher to talk about topics such as famous people or places, likes and dislikes according to their free-time activities, politics and social issues, private and public lives, poems and readings, music and movies, history, etc. in this way, the teacher encouraged and allowed the students to talk about themselves to promote conversation and confidence when talking about a content that was interesting and entertaining for them in front of the class or small groups.

This finding supports what Hernandez-Herrero (2005) wanted to establish in the University of Costa Rica. She proposed a program in which tasks were organized according to Content-Based instruction (CBI), she said that based on CBI, teachers organized their classes around a content or information rather than around forms and functions, in this way, students acquired the necessary speaking skills without paying attention to the accuracy of their speech.

This study revealed that another factor that affects directly students' participation is the arrangement for class activities. My observation’s data showed that class
interaction was better when students were organized in small groups to develop the activities. The finding concerning the class organization used by the teacher showed that students tended to participate more when they were exposed to small groups. It seemed that they felt more relaxed and more motivated to use the target language and interact among themselves. This finding aligns to what El Karfa’s (n.d) study states, he describes that group-work provides opportunities for students to be involved in cooperative classroom communication and helps to create a comfortable and motivating atmosphere in the classroom.

Along these lines, it is remarkable students’ behavior during solo presentations. I noticed that one of the activities that seemed to negatively influence students’ motivation was solo oral presentations maybe because students had to deal with pronunciation and grammar mistakes as well as memorizing the information. Jianing (2007) and Balcárcel (2003) strongly recommend that students use the language in real life situations similar to the ones they will have to deal with instead of preparing speeches or oral reports that most times are memorized.

Seeing as monologue is infrequent in real life situations, the usefulness of this kind of activities is arguable. It does not really show what the students are able to do with the language since they have to prepare, memorize and practice an oral speech and that does not help to communicate spontaneously.

This kind of classroom activities do not simulate what students will have to do with the language in real life contexts, even in lectures or teachers’ explanations in class. In the first case there is an interest on the part of the person who listens (usually you freely decide to attend a lecture), in the second case, a teacher’s explanations is aimed at achieving something and it’s frequently followed by activities or interaction with the audience.
Since solo presentations are focused on the presenter and usually no questions from the audience follow the speech, most students are disengaged and paying little attention to what is happening, focusing instead on mentally rehearsing their own discourse.

However, even if students dislike giving presentations, it must be agreed that this type of activities has its usefulness in relation both with fluency and accuracy. Having the opportunity of preparing in advance what they will say, students can focus in the accuracy of their discourse. The actual presentation in front of the class will give them the chance to practice pronunciation, intonation and public oral skills. The Colombian Ministry of Education acknowledges the role of monologues as a communicative skill to develop among students of English and includes it in the Standards of English that must guide teaching practice in the country. Hernandez- Herrero (2005) explains that students feel that facing the whole class requires more from them than working in small groups. In addition, even though they feel nervous, oral presentations give them the opportunity to practice public-speaking skills techniques, which will be very important for their future professions.

This finding is supported by Mita et al’s (2006) findings; they stated that ‘It was found that by making discussion activities inside the classroom, the learners discovered the importance of grammatical competence and strategic competence. It means that, students became aware of their own development as they learn English oral skills’.

It must be agreed that creating a real communicative environment in the foreign language when all students share the same mother tongue is not an easy task. Students need to convince themselves of the necessity of speaking the foreign language even when they know in their inner self that it would be easier for them to express and understand each other in Spanish. That is why the teachers’ role is of the utmost importance in order to strengthen motivation and use of the target language in
the classroom, not only through their presence but also by the choice of activities that are presented to the students.

Factors Affecting Students’ Participation in Class

The data from the interviews showed that the majority of the participants were highly aware of the importance of active participation in class activities as a way of improving their oral performance. This fact was consistent with the students’ reports about participation in class activities. At the end of the course students reported a higher level of participation in class activities than at the beginning of the course. Thus, it can be argued that the Oral Skills I course was helpful to raise students’ awareness on the importance of active involvement in the class and affected positively their attitudes and motivation.

Attitudes and motivation play an important role when students are learning a foreign language as they will strongly affect their success or lack of it in their learning process. They need to be conscious of the necessity of using the target language to communicate, since as Fernandez (2004) explains in her work, when learners have a clear communicative need in the target language, they are most likely to learn language spontaneously by participating in class activities.

The interview results showed that instrumental motivation dominated half of the participants since they reported that they participated in class in order to have a good grade in participation. According to them, the grade is one of the most important factors to participate in class. These opinions expressed by the students contrasted with Nimmanit’s (1998) findings which show that students are more motivated if they are exposed to activities to which they can relate, which encourage them to use the target language, and which allow them to choose what they want to say, instead of having something external or just receiving a reward for participation in class in this case a grade.
However, there were also some streaks of integrative motivation. Some of the participants stated that they liked to go to the Oral Skills class in order to improve their communicative skills regardless of getting a grade. They explained that they considered that acquiring the necessary tools for having fluency skills would help them in the future. This can be interpreted as partly an integrative motivation since it comes from their inner conviction of the value of having better oral skills in the target language in order to achieve the goals they want for themselves.

Furthermore, Brown (2000) quoted by Larsson & Olsson (2008) to state that ‘students’ needs play a significant role when it comes to motivation, in the sense that when they see that there is a possibility for their needs to be fulfilled, they become motivated’. Students’ perception of their need of improving their oral skills, and also of the usefulness of the class for achieving that goal may have had a strong influence in their levels of participation in class activities.

On the other hand, aligning with Lin’s (1998) study about students’ fears of making errors and losing respect in front of their classmates as factors that might influence students willingness to participate in class oral activities, my research shows some findings in which participants perceived fears about making mistakes or maybe being laughed at by others due to inaccurate pronunciation or grammar as possible negative influence in their motivation in participation.

Also Farooqui (2007) supports this finding when she claimed in her study that non-English speaking students are timid about using the language; that is why the teacher must help students to develop self-confidence.

The importance of errors in the class has been widely discussed. Essberger (2007) highlights the importance of making mistakes as a way to develop the interlanguage and Jianing (2007) explains that many students of English believe that if they make mistakes or fail to find appropriate words to express themselves, they will lose face. So it becomes a vicious circle in which these students are reluctant to speak
due to their fears of making mistakes and ‘the less they speak, the less they improve their speaking skills, and the more they are afraid of speaking’ (p. 1)

My finding highlights the importance of strengthening students’ confidence when speaking or doing oral presentations in front of others. Teachers play an important role since it is their responsibility to create a supportive environment in the class and encourage respect among students.

As Gutiérrez (2005) and El Karfa (n.d) emphasize, if teachers want to help their students to become fluent speakers, they need to turn the class into a safe place in which learners have opportunities to speak and where their attention be more focused on communicating content than in the accuracy of their speech.

My research also revealed that students consider diversity of mastery of English among the members of a group as a factor that decreases their participation. Some of my participants seemed to feel uncomfortable when forced to join students with a higher speaking skill for class activities and reported that their motivation to participate in discussions was lowered. Probably that is the reason why when given the possibility to choose partners, they tended to work always with the same people.

This situation might be explained by Karahan (2007) study about the different components of students’ attitudes towards their classmates in which he describes that attitudes tend to have cognitive and behavioral components. The cognitive component determines student’s behavior; this means that the beliefs or perceptions about the persons or situations related to the class in general may generate like or dislike and thus prompt learners to adopt particular learning behaviors. For instance, low-English proficiency learners or low-self esteem learners may feel anxious, nervous and embarrassed because they assume that they are being judged for those with a better oral proficiency. As a result, students may create a fear for communication and tend to avoid the situations in which they have to confront those more capable classmates.
Thus in order to avoid these situations in class and to create a comfortable atmosphere in which learners turn their fears to speak with others into positive attitudes, El Karfa (n.d) and Fernandez (2004) describe that teachers must foster and maintain a high self-esteem of the students. Besides, they state that students with high self-esteem tend to show positive traits such as expectation of achievement, confidence in attempting to communicate and an ego strong enough to minimize the effect of failure.
Instructional and Research Implications

Teaching Implications

The results of my research bring interesting issues that should be considered by foreign language teachers, in this case English teachers.

Students consider that participating in the Oral Skills Course I has a positive influence on the development of their oral skills. It must be explained that the main purpose of my research was to explore students’ feelings and opinions about the impact of Oral Skills class on the achievement of the oral and communicative skills they will need.

My research shows that students consider that participating in the class helps them to improve their oral skills. This is of great importance for us as teachers because regardless of the objective achievements of students (which I did not pretend to assess in my study), the class has a positive influence on their self-image as English speakers. This implies that including in our programming conversation stages may help students to develop a positive self-image that might increase their participation in class and in this way their oral skills will probably improve.

Although students acknowledge the impact that active participation in class activities has in the development of their oral skills, my research also showed that their spontaneous participation in the class was scarce. Even though they readily answered the teacher’s questions, they did not take control of the discussions and debates and left on the teacher’s hands the task of starting and directing the interaction in the class.

This finding points out at the necessity of developing students’ autonomy and self-responsibility for their own learning. Teachers must help their students to become empowered in the classroom so they feel confident to participate spontaneously and
start oral interactions on their own so they maximize the practice of oral language in the class instead of being reduced to wait for the teacher to include them in the activities.

In relation with the spontaneous participation of students in the class, my research revealed that there are topics and types of activities that seem more attractive to students than others and consequently are more likely to engage their participation. This implies that the teacher should make a previous assessment of their students’ interests and needs when planning for the class. Giving the students the choice of topics and types of activities would probably make them feel more involved and empowered in the class. Teachers, however, must orient students in their selection so although they have freedom enough to satisfy their individual interests, the variety of themes allows them to acquire a wide range of vocabulary.

In relation with this need of developing self responsibility in the students, it is also interesting to mention that my research shows that the teacher’s presence was needed to maintain the use of English when students were interacting in small groups. Teachers should gradually adjust their style of teaching, avoiding their traditional role of instructor in which they only transmit and assess knowledge, and gradually adopt a facilitator role that may help students to take control of their learning process.

This research study also showed that the grouping of students for class activities influenced students’ participation in oral activities. Since low English proficiency students feel more capable of participating in class when they are exposed to small groups in which they feel confident to speak, this kind of arrangement should be maximized for conversation classes.

Besides, students reported that having to interact with classmates whose level of English was too different from their own, impacts negatively their participation. It seems important, then, that teachers assess the conversation group’s language proficiency level at the beginning of the semester so they can take into account individual oral skills and decide the most fruitful arrangement for group activities.
Since ‘fear of losing face’ was identified by students as one of the most influential factors that reduced their participation, teachers should increase their efforts to make of the classroom a safe and comfortable environment where students are tolerant of other classmates’ mistakes and where the error is seen as a proof of ongoing development, so the participants feel encouraged to try their hypothesis about language and take risks to communicate.

**Research Implications**

This study carried out in the *Oral Skills Course I* offers information that can contribute to the enrichment of the teaching and learning process in communication skills. The following aspects should continue to be analyzed, studied and explored:

EFL teachers can conduct this research in speaking classes and offer the teaching community interesting insights about students’ attitudes and motivation that may allow creating more participative and safer environments for English oral practice.

Researchers must identify the most suitable activities, instructional materials and practices for the development of oral skills in the Colombian context. A study that compares the effectiveness of the use of different oral activities for the development of oral skills would be helpful for teachers.

The use of computer mediated communication activities may offer meaningful contexts where students can use the target language in real situations. The implementation and study of the impact of such activities could be an interesting field of research.
It could also be interesting to research the use of oral English outside the classroom by PDPTE students and the impact that this use may have in their oral skills development.

In order to obtain enough and necessary data for this type of study, researchers should design carefully the methodology and data collection techniques they will use when carrying this study.
Conclusions

In this study, students’ perspectives about their English oral performance and motivation to participate in oral activities in the class were studied.

The findings of this research show that students perceived improvement of their oral skills after attending and participating the Oral Skills course.

The findings also revealed that although students are aware of the importance of participating in class activities they leave the responsibility of interaction to the teacher whose presence is necessary to maintain the use of the target language in the activities.

Factors as the grade are found to positively impact students’ motivation whilst fear of losing face and the composition of the groups for class activities may have a negative influence on participation.

From the findings above mentioned, the following educational implications follow: - teachers should include in their programming conversation stages that may help students to develop a positive self-image as well as developing students’ autonomy and self-responsibility for their own learning which motivate them to participate in class; in order to maximize students participation in class activities it seems advisable that that teachers make a previous assessment of the students’ interests and needs, that allows them to include in their classes the topics and activities more engaging for the particular group of students they have in charge; it is of the utmost importance to create a safe and comfortable environment where students are tolerant of other classmates’ mistakes and where the teacher avoid the traditional role of instructor, and gradually adopt a facilitator role.

This study leads to further research in the field that may focus in aspects such as: the design of a comparative research study about different types of activities and topics and their impact on students’ participation, the design, implementation and assessment of practical interventions to turn around negative attitudes in the classroom,
the implementation and study of the impact on students’ participation and motivation of computer mediated communication activities, investigate the use of oral English outside the classroom and its impact on the students’ oral skills development.
References


Essberger, J. (n-d) Speaking to yourself can be dangerous! (the importance of speaking practice for ESL learners) Retrieved November 12th, 2007 from: http://eslplayground.com/home/the-importance-of-speaking-practice/


Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE No. 1

Note: the same questionnaire was applied to the participants at the end of the course. It was changed the use of the verbs to simple present.

(Self Assessment of oral performance at the beginning in the Oral Skills Course I)

This questionnaire is done as an instrument to collect data for the current project called ‘The students’ perception of their oral participation in the Oral Skills course I’. This instrument will collect your opinion towards your English oral performance. Please, answer the following questions, giving any information that you consider important for you. The data you provide us will be used confidentially.

Instructions for completing the questionnaire:

After each question you are offered five different options. Choose the option that applies better to your oral performance in the Oral Skills classes.

1. **Taking into account that VOCABULARY is an essential part when talking and interacting orally with others,**

   - How often were you able to express your ideas clearly?
     
     a. I always had vocabulary enough to express myself clearly.
     b. I usually had vocabulary enough to express myself clearly.
     c. I sometimes had vocabulary enough to express myself clearly.
     d. I hardly ever had vocabulary enough to express myself clearly.
     e. I never had vocabulary enough to express myself clearly.

   - How often did you understand other people’s ideas clearly?
     
     a. I understood all the vocabulary that I encountered.
     b. I understood most of the vocabulary that I encountered.
     c. I understood some of the vocabulary that I encountered.
     d. I understood very little vocabulary that I encountered.
     e. I understood none of the vocabulary that I encountered.
2. When expressing ideas and thoughts, having a good PRONUNCIATION and INTONATION will give us a better understanding of what we want to communicate. Based on this,

- How was your pronunciation before starting conversation classes?
  a. I always had good pronunciation when talking.
  b. I usually had good pronunciation when talking.
  c. I sometimes had good pronunciation but with little mistakes.
  d. I hardly ever had good pronunciation but with mistakes.
  e. I never had good pronunciation when talking.

- How was your intonation before starting conversation classes?
  a. I always had good intonation when talking.
  b. I usually had good intonation when talking.
  c. I sometimes had good intonation but with little mistakes.
  d. I hardly ever had good intonation but with mistakes.
  e. I never had good pronunciation when talking.

3. INTERACTING and PARTICIPATING in class are two important elements that help the development of oral performance. Based on this

- How often did you interact with other classmates?
  a. I always interacted in class easily with others.
  b. I usually interacted in class with others.
  c. I sometimes interacted in class but with some problems.
  d. I hardly interacted in class but with some difficulty.
  e. I never interacted in class with others.

- How was your participation in class before starting the conversation class?
  a. I always participated in class easily with others.
  b. I usually participated in class with others.
  c. I sometimes participated in class but with some problems.
  d. I hardly participated in class but with some difficulty.
  e. I never participated in class with others.
4. A FLUENT person has the ability to converse about fairly abstract ideas, state opinions, understand the language when spoken normally (on TV, radio, film, etc.), can reorganize sentences in order to communicate and figure out the majority of new vocabulary within the context. In other words, fluency refers to the smoothness with which sounds, syllables, words and phrases are joined together during speech. Based on this,

- Were you fluent when speaking in English before starting conversation classes?
  3. I was fluent but with little mistakes.
  2. I was fluent but with some mistakes.
  1. I was fluent but with mistakes.

- Did you feel comfortable speaking the language (English)?
  3. I always felt good and comfortable when speaking in English.
  2. I sometimes felt good when speaking in English.
  1. I never felt good when speaking in English.

- Could you communicate easily your ideas with your partners and friends?
  3. I always communicated my ideas and opinions with ease to others.
  2. I sometimes communicated my ideas and opinions to others.
  1. I never communicated my ideas and opinions with ease to others.

- Were you able to understand the general idea of the language as it is spoken, even if you didn't know every single word?
  3. I knew most of the words
  2. I recognized most of the words.
  1. I was not sure about the words

5. Thinking in English is an important sign of fluency. Thinking in the language means that a person understands the words without actually translating them into the native language. According to this:

To what extent did you use the L1 in order to (mentally) build sentences when you interacted in English?

5. I have never used the L1 to (mentally) build sentences when speaking in English
4. I hardly ever have used the L1 to (mentally) build sentences when speaking in English
3. I sometimes have used the L1 to (mentally) build sentences when speaking in English
2. I usually have used the L1 to (mentally) build sentences when speaking in English
1. I always have used the L1 to (mentally) build sentences when speaking in English.
Appendix 2

**INTERVIEW**: This interview is done as an instrument to collect data for the current project called ‘The students’ oral participation in the Oral Skills class I’.

The following questions were asked to the participants.

1. How does the grade influence your participation in an oral activity?
2. What other factors influence your participation in an oral activity?
3. Which topics do you consider more motivating for conversation classes?
4. What aspects of the conversation class do you value the most?
## OBSERVATION SHEET SAMPLE

**RESEARCH PROJECT: THE ORAL PERFORMANCE OF CONVERSATION CLASS STUDENTS INSIDE CLASSROOM**

**DATE:** March 11th / 2009  
**SCHEDULE:** Wednesdays 9:00 to 12:00

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITIES &amp; TOPICS PROPOSED BY THE TEACHER</th>
<th>STUDENTS' BEHAVIOUR.</th>
<th>INTERACTION PATTERNS</th>
<th>MOTIVATION (TEACHER – STUDENTS)</th>
<th>PURPOSE OF THE ACTIVITY</th>
<th>TIME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of famous people, culture. (Bill Gates), (religion – Freemasonry), (Jennifer Paige), (Michael Jackson), Pablo Picasso), (Ronaldo)</td>
<td>Ss remained quiet while listening, some weren’t paying attention. Some of the Ss were not interested in some topics. In some presentations, Ss were more engaged and they answered to some questions that the presenter made. Some presenters felt nervous when doing their presentations. Most of them didn’t feel confident since they made to many mistakes in pronunciation, grammar, and accuracy. Some students forgot their presentations and they started reading them.</td>
<td>Individually. Ss didn’t have to ask questions, just pay attention. In some presentations, Ss had to work in pairs in order to listen to a song and answer some questions about the song.</td>
<td>Ss got a grade according to their presentations. Some presenters appeared disguised according to the famous person they were talking about. This encouraged some students to pay attention to their presentations.</td>
<td>To develop and improve oral presentations in front of the students, to increase students’ confidence when speaking in public.</td>
<td>10 min. maximum per student.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>