INPUT AND INTERLANGUAGE IN THE EFL[1] CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY WITH PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we present classroom-based research in which we study the interlanguage and the different ways teachers manage to make their oral input comprehensible to children in their first or second year of learning English as a foreign language.

We studied, by means of audio-video recordings, field notes and interviews, five primary school teachers. Our main purpose was to spot the strategies used by the teachers to make their input comprehensible and compare the results (Foreign Language Acquisition) with those obtained in previous research carried out in a context of English as a second language.

RESUMEN

Se presenta en este artículo una investigación llevada a cabo en el aula, que tuvo como principal objetivo, analizar cómo cinco profesores de Primaria conseguían que sus alumnos entendiesen lo que se les decía en la lengua extranjera y desarrollaban su interlengua.

Los profesores seleccionados fueron observados a través de grabaciones en audio y vídeo, notas de campo y entrevistas. Se pretendía detectar las estrategias usadas por estos profesores para hacer su *input* comprensible y comparar los datos obtenidos (adquisición de una lengua extranjera) con los de

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[1] In this study we make a distinction between the acquisition of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because most of the previous research has been carried out in the field of second language. This conveys the need of studies like this, where we try to find out if the results of previous research also applies to the teaching of English as a foreign language.

investigaciones previas llevadas a cabo mayoritariamente en el campo de la adquisición de una segunda lengua.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article on présente une recherche en situation d'apprentissage dans la salle de classe qui se proposait d'analyser comment cinq professeurs de l'enseignement Primaire arrivaient à se faire comprendre par leurs élèves au moment où ils leur parlaient en langue étrangère et comment ces apprenants développaient leur *interlangue*.

Les professeurs choisis ont été observés au moyen d'enregistrements d'audio et de vidéo, d'annotations prises sur le vif, et d'entretiens personnels. Tout cela pour détecter les stratégies employées par ces professeurs en essayant de faire son *input* compréhensible et pour comparer ces résultats à ceux des recherches précédentes qui ont été menées pour la plupart dans le champ d'acquisition d'une langue seconde.

1. INTRODUCTION

Spain started to implement foreign language teaching, from the age of eight, in 1993. This change took place within the context of a new curriculum for compulsory education. Since then, teachers of English have been faced with a double problem: they have had to start teaching a completely new age group, as well as adapt their teaching to the requirements of the new curriculum (based on the constructivist theory of language learning).

During the implementation of the new curriculum, the Local Education Department (Canary Islands) has organized several Refreshment Courses for Primary School teachers. It was established, as one of the conclusions reached in these courses, that the main worry of the teachers was one of the roles they had to play in the classroom: the teacher becomes the source of oral input in listening activities where the children have to be able to follow the thread of a story. Moreover, it was argued that that was the main instrument for the development of the pupils' interlanguage. Interlanguage was defined following Selinker's model (1972, 1992). If we consider interlanguage within a continuum between the first language system (the learner's initial knowledge) and the second language system (the learner's target) at any given point the learner is said to speak an interlanguage. This approximate system

grows and develops and teacher input reveals to be an important factor in its development.

Taking into account what has been said before, and also trying to avoid the criticism often stated by teachers when they fail to see any connection between what they have to do in the classroom and what researchers report, we designed classroom-based research in which we studied the different ways teachers manage to make their oral input comprehensible to children in their first or second year of learning English as a foreign language. We also analyzed children's speech to look for interlanguage growth.

2. SUBJECTS AND METHOD

The subjects for this case study were five primary school teachers. One of them was a native speaker and the rest of them had a very good level of English. Each teacher was observed teaching his/her group of pupils (between seven and nine years of age). Though some groups were older than others, they had something in common: they were all in their first year of English.

Our main purpose was to spot the strategies used by some EFL teachers to make themselves understood (obviously when they were speaking English), and compare the results with those obtained in previous research. We were also interested in spotting interlanguage development.

Previous studies, most of them in the field of ESL, have shown that there are some characteristics related to teacher talk. So we followed the tradition of case studies investigating the role of linguistic and interaction adjustments in some EFL primary school classrooms.

We held at least two meetings with each teacher with the main purpose of choosing the group of children and also the lesson to be recorded. For the five groups one lesson was recorded and subjected to a quantitative analysis. Since the focus of this study is on characteristics of the teacher talk, the lesson chosen for analysis was one in which the teacher was either telling a story or speaking to the classroom most of the time (by giving instructions, orders, explanations, etc.).

To allow for the teacher's and children's adjustment to the presence of a video camera and an observer in the classroom, one lesson was recorded one week before. Though the data obtained with this recording was not to be transcribed.

The data were recorded on both audio and videotapes. Then the tapes were transcribed verbatim, with only a very small portion of the recording lost as a result of incomprehensibility. The transcriptions also included the field notes taken by the observer. At this stage we also felt the need to hold another meeting with each teacher to clarify some of the notes taken by the observer.

Then the transcriptions were divided into utterances. To do it we used the definition of utterance given by Crookes (1990, p. 188):

> A complete thought, usually expressed in a connected groupingof words, which is separated from other utterances on the basis of content, intonation contour, and/or pausing. (i) *Content*. A change in content is used as one criterion for segmenting utterances... (ii) *Intonation Contour*. A falling intonation contour signals the end of an utterance. A rising intonation signals the end of an utterance if it is a question... (iii) *Pauses*. Pauses are used in conjunction with the above two criteria to segment utterances.

Once the transcripts were divided into utterances, we began to analyze each utterance searching first for the presence or absence of each of the characteristics which previous ESL research had identified related to the two following factors: simplified input and interactional modifications. Then we analyzed the children's utterances to study their interlanguage.

3. SIMPLIFIED INPUT

3.1. Syntax

Like other investigators, we found that the speech used by the teachers when talking to the pupils appears at first sight "simple". For one thing, it is short. The results reported in the ESL research reveal that utterances are normally short. So Kleifgen (1985, p. 61) found that the teacher's utterances varied in length going from 3.18 to 5.27 according to the linguistic ability of the pupils[2]. The sample of our study ranged from 95 to 234 utterances in the lesson recorded in each classroom. The mean length of utterances (MLU) was measured and the results are given in the following table:

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[2] Other researchers who have come up with similar results are: Henzl, 1979, p. 162; Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1982, p. 416; Hakansson, 1986, p. 88.

Table 1. Mean length of the utterances in each group.

Groups	Mean length of utterance
1	2.97
2	3.55 (4.63)*
3	3.25
4	3.56 (3.88)*
5	2.61

* = when the teacher was telling a story.

As can be seen in the above table, the five subjects of our study also used short utterances. But there are two more outstanding features in the above table: 1) Group 5 heard the shortest utterances and it happens that that was the group with the youngest children. 2) When teachers were telling a story, the utterances became longer as can be seen in groups two and four.

Regarding other aspects related to the syntax, our data confirms the observation of many researches in ESL (Hakansson, 1986, p. 94; Wesche and Ready, 1985, p. 102; Henzl, 1973, p. 211):

- The teachers tended to speak in short and well-formed sentences, avoiding unfinished sentences.
- They also favoured the use of simple syntactic structures instead of more difficult ones.
- Subordinate clauses were rarely used. There are only two examples in the first three groups. But if we study the examples, we find that each teacher always uses the same kind of subordinate clause.

Teacher of group 1:

- Who wants to come to the blackboard to write the word snake?
- Who wants to come to the blackboard to do another difficult one?

Teacher of group 2:

- When I say ready, you begin.
- When I call out an animal, you hold up your picture.

Teacher of group 3:

– Your animal can have, if you want, two heads.
– They can have, if you want, a tail.

So these subordinate clauses had become "routines" of the teacher talk, as the teachers did not intend the pupils to learn these subordinate clauses.

3.2. Lexicon

There are two main characteristics in this field. First, teachers tend to use a very simple and basic vocabulary and, second, these words are quite frequently used. Previous research in ESL (Kleifgen, 1985, p. 61; Scarcella and Higa, 1981, p. 420) shows that teachers have a kind of detailed inventory of the words the children have previously understood and tend to use a high frequency vocabulary.

Our findings support these two characteristics. Teachers used a very simple and frequent vocabulary, with the following amounts in percentage terms of different words:
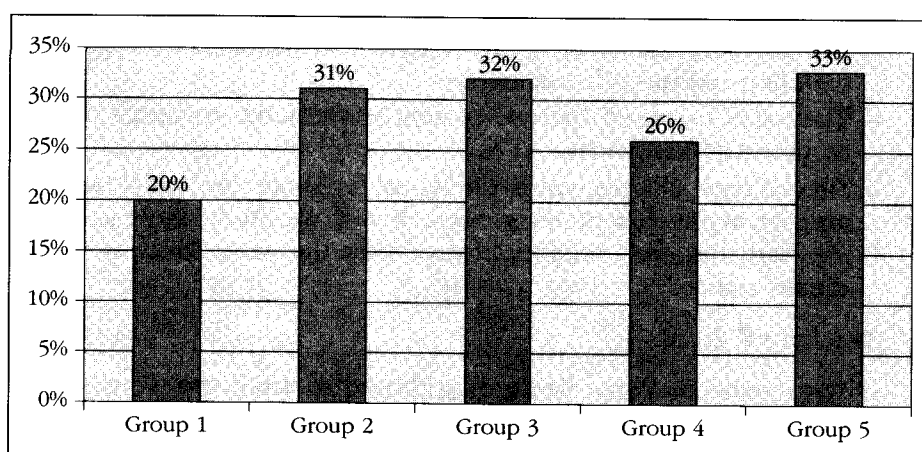

Figure 1. Different words in percentage terms.

The token ratio was calculated for the first 300 words in the transcriptions.

3.3. Phonology

The phonological characteristics of the teacher talk in our corpus were similar to the ones reported in ESL research (Scarcella and Higa, 1982, p. 181; Enright, 1986, p. 133; Chaudron, 1988, p. 69): exaggerated intonation, a standard pronunciation and a slow rate of speech (caused basically by the enormous amount of pauses due to the short utterances). As for contractions, we found that the teachers used some contractions (I'm, It's, I've got, Isn't, Can't, Don't), and at the same time they always avoided the following ones: We are, You are, You will.

4. INTERACTIONAL MODIFICATIONS

Among the discourse features isolated by ESL research, as being more common in teacher talk, we found the following ones in our corpus:

4.1. Repetitions

An outstanding feature found in our corpus, was the use of repetitions. But before presenting the results found in our study, we think it necessary to define what we understand by repetition. Casby (1986, p. 130) establishes that an utterance is a repetition if it repeats all or part of the model utterance and appears within no more than five succeeding utterances from the model. Nevertheless, we decided to restrict this definition, as in the research carried out by Fernald and Morikawa (1993, p. 642) and we only considered an utterance to be a repetition if it occurred within no more than three ensuing utterances from the model.

A database was created for each teacher where we specified if each utterance was a repetition or not. And we also established the type of repetition: RT (the teacher repeats something he has said), RP (the teacher repeats something a pupil has said), and P (the teacher paraphrases something he has said)[3]. Examples of the different types of repetitions are:

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[3] Pica and Doughty (1985, p. 120) also consider paraphrasing as a type of repetition when they talk about the speaker's semantic repetition of the content of own preceding utterance. They also provide the following example: "Do you share his feelings?, Does anyone else agree with Gustavo".

Teacher 5 repeats something he has said (RT):

> Teacher: Quiet please! Quiet please! Quiet please!

Teacher 3 repeats something the pupils have said (RP):

> Teacher: It's a cat. Very good. And... what's this?
> Class: Bird (the pronunciation is not very good)
> Teacher: It's a bird. Bird. Repeat, please. Bird.
> Class: Bird

Teacher 1 paraphrases (P):

> Teacher:... now I want you to cut out this page. Take your scissors and cut out this part here. Follow the black line and cut it in two. Yes. Follow the black line.

The total number of repetitions found in the transcriptions of each group, as well as the type of repetition, are the ones presented in the following table:

Table 2.   Types of repetitions used by each teacher.

Group	Type of repetition	Total
1	RT: 119 RP: 32 P: 4	155
2	RT: 44 RP: 29 P: 4	77
3	RT: 25 RP: 12 P: 0	37
4	RT: 41 RP: 13 P: 0	54
5	RT: 25 RP: 18 P: 0	43

The next graph shows the percentages of the total number of utterances that were considered to be repetitions.
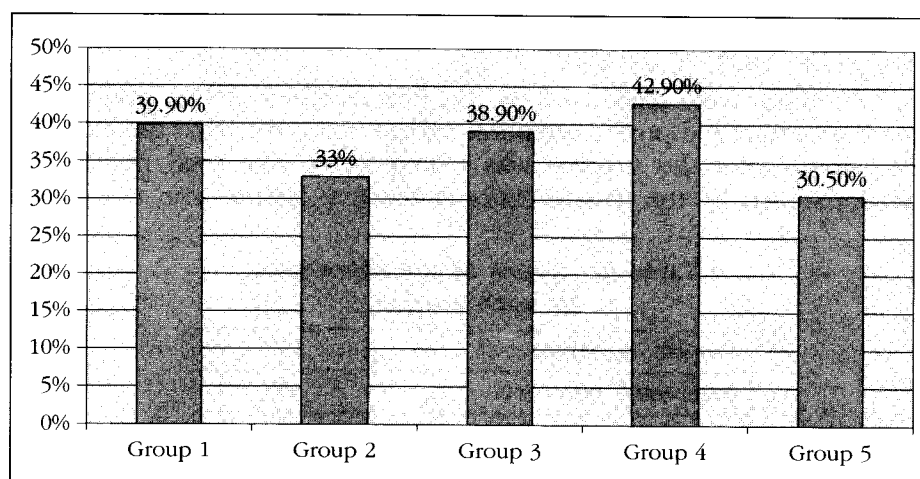
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Figure 2.   Percentage of repetitions.

Our results show that repetitions are an important feature of the teachers' talk when they try to make their input comprehensible, as was pointed out by other previous studies carried out in second language acquisition (Scarcella and Higa, 1981, p. 413; Kleifgen, 1985, p. 62; Wesche and Ready, 1985, p. 105; Lightbown and Spada, 1993, p. 30) and in an EFL situation (Peñate and Bazo, 2001, p. 281). However, our research doesn't seem to prove that paraphrasing plays an important role in the discourse of primary school teachers when they are speaking the foreign language. It may be that this feature is more frequently used with older students as some previous studies seem to suggest, as, for example, the one designed by Chiang and Dunhel (1992).

4.2.   Questions

Questions are considered to be one of the most important interactional modifications used by teachers when they want to attract the students' attention and make sure the children understand what the teacher is saying.

Previous research in ESL has found that teachers ask more questions when they speak to non-native speakers (Long, 1981, p. 150) and tend to ask questions that oblige students to display knowledge rather than provide unknown information (Long and Sato, 1983, p. 268). Other studies have also spotted a frequent use of rhetorical questions by the

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teachers (Wesche and Ready, 1985, p. 104) and comprehension checks (Pica *et al.*, 1987, p. 753).

Questions were also used by the five teachers of our study, as a means to attract the pupils' attention and to make sure that the children understood what the teacher was telling them. The total number of questions used by the five teachers in the five lessons are:

Table 3. Types of questions used
by each teacher.

Display questions	139
Referential questions	55
Comprehension checks	28
Rhetorical questions	0

From the above results, the important role played by the display questions to make the input comprehensible can be seen, that is to communicate with the pupils. These questions have been criticized by authors like Nunan (1988, p. 139), though more recently other writers have stated that these questions are important tools in the classroom to communicate with the pupils (Seedhouse, 1994, p. 318) as can be seen in our study.

One of the things which distinguished referential questions from display questions is that they were always asked to the whole group of children and never to one child in particular. Most of the referential questions had as their main purpose to ask for a volunteer as, for example, "Who wants to write parrot on the blackboard?". In other cases the referential questions were rather greetings as in "How are you today?" The comprehension questions were made by means of words like, OK?, Understood?, Yes?, Right? And finally, it's quite obvious that the rhetorical questions were not favoured by our five teachers.

4.3. Gestures

ESL research literature has paid little attention to the use of gestures by the teacher while talking to the classroom. In some cases, some researchers have just mentioned that teachers use visual aids like reallia, flashcards, etc. And in very few cases, the researcher just mentions that the teacher uses gestures while speaking. It seems that studies of teacher

talk seem to assume that the only part of the teacher that is moving is his or her mouth. So obviously we had to make our own taxonomy or classification table for coding the functions of gestures in teacher talk. This taxonomy was made taking into account the one pointed out by Kellerman (1992, p. 243) and the gestures dictionary of Coll *et al.* (1990). Gestures were identified from the videotapes and classified according to the communicative function being expressed.

Table 4. Types of gestures used
by the five teachers.

Types of gestures	Total
Personal identification	76
Place	93
Time	1
Affirmation / Negation	31
Amount	23
Appearance	7
Actions	35
Orders	44
Feelings	14
Greetings	0
Others	5
TOTAL	**329**

There are several observations worth making about these results:

- There's only one gesture for Time because the teachers didn't utter any more sentences about this topic. On the other hand, the teachers did utter sentences which were greetings, but they didn't accompany these greetings with gestures. The reason for this is because all these sentences were well known by the pupils.
- The personal identification gestures and the place gestures intended only to control the interaction in the classroom, as itwas quite obvious from the fact that the children understood what the teacher was saying (names of children, very easy words, etc.).

The next figure shows the amount, in percentage terms, of gestures in each classroom.
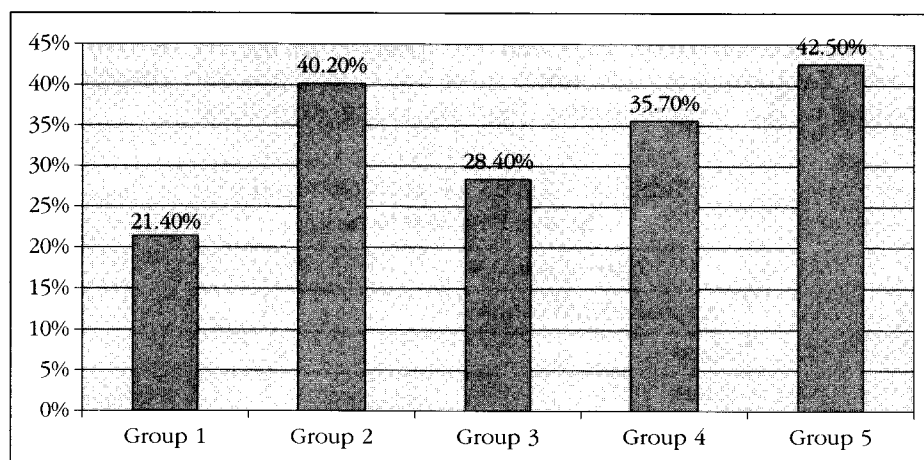

Figure 3.   Percentage of utterances accompanied by gestures.

It's important to notice here that group 5 gets the highest percentage, which doesn't come as a surprise because it was the group with the youngest children. But on the other hand it is surprising because the teacher of this group was the native speaker, from Great Britain, and this fact contradicts the opinion given by Kellerman (1992, pp. 251-252): "Kinesic behaviour is undoubtedly a universal mode of expression... What does vary from one culture or group to anotheris the extent to which kinesic behaviour is used". What Kellerman says may be right when the speaker is not teaching a foreign language to a group of children, since the teachers have to make use of the body language to help the children understand what is being said, even if they know little of the language being spoken (Krashen and Terrell, 1988, p. 55; Wong-Fillmore, 1982, p. 283; Al-shabbi, 1993, p. 17).

5.   INTERLANGUAGE

No one would deny that language learning involves the acquisition of new habits but the processes underlying that acquisition are now

seen to be more complex than the process that any simple habit formation theory would suggest. Learners produce utterances to which they have never been exposed, and, given that they do not yet *know* the native-speaker rules, those utterances seem to follow a plausible rule system.

As we have said before, if we consider interlanguage within a continuum between the first language system (in our case Spanish) and the second language system (English) at any given point the learner is said to speak an interlanguage. Selinker (1992) argues that this interlanguage is permeable (because the rules that constitute the learner's knowledge is open to evolution); dynamic (because it is changing constantly) and systematic (because it is based on coherent rules which learners construct and select in predictable ways).

The main findings in the interlanguage produced by our pupils came from cross-linguistic influence. We consider transfer not only as the influence of the mother tongue on the learner's performance in the development of a given target language. But with Primary pupils that was its main effect.

We found positive transfer mainly associated to different lexical sets: especially words that in Spanish end in *-ción* or *-oso* and its correspondence in English *-tion* and *-ous.*

We could also find negative transfer in relation to certain syntactic uses:

a) The omission of the indefinite article:

> Teacher 4: What's this?
> Class: Dog
> Teacher 4: No. A dog. It's a dog What's this? *(shows a flashcard and points a pupil)*
> Pupil: Fox.
> Teacher 4: A fox. It's a fox.

b) Overgeralization of the use of the indefinite article:

> Teacher 3: What's your animal?
> Pupil. My animal cans a jump. It can't a fly. It's a rabbit.

c) Postposition of the adjective:

> Teacher 1: Can you see animals? What animals can you see?
> ¡Venga! Elephant.
> Pupil: Yes, an elephant blue.

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d) Pronunciation according to spelling:

> Teacher 3: This animal is black and white. It's got eight legs. It's a...
> Pupil: Spider (pronouncing the word according to Spanish phonetic rules).

It is important to state that the use of English by the teachers in the class was constant and it created a setting for communicating in the foreign language.

6. FINAL REMARKS

In summary, therefore, the results of the present study suggest that the EFL teacher speech which is addressed to young children, consists of a number of features similar to those found in previous studies in ESL. The interlanguage is as expected in young learners when they are addressed in English. Nevertheless, further investigation concerning these and other questions related to the teaching of the listening skill in EFL and interlanguage is needed.

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