

Getting students to talk: elicitation of student oral production through pictorial stimuli

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The study I report analyzes the speech generated through pictorial stimuli by eight first-year Spanish students of English at university level. It explores the possible relationship between self-correction, introspective techniques and teacher intervention and improvement in speaking. Students were split up into pairs and given two types of treatments. Treatment A consisted of retrospection and self-correction. Treatment B consisted of retrospection and direct teacher intervention.

The research to date (Long et al. 1976, Doughty & Pica 1985, 1986, Varonis and Gass 1985) suggests that small-group and especially pair work seems to provide more opportunities for negotiation of meaning leading to making input more comprehensible than in teacher-led discussions. In several studies, Pica and Doughty (1985, 1986) concluded that group work appears to encourage a linguistic environment suitable for SLA, as long as learner groups work on a task which involves a two-way exchange of information, thereby requiring all members to participate. They also pointed out how pair work might even be more conducive to increased interaction than small-group work.

For the purpose of this research, the task chosen was picture description and questions about it, done in pairs. Except for a minimal picture identification, students were free to conduct their conversations as they wanted. Because of the strong emotional connotations of the pictures—they were pictures brought by the students—it was thought that the activity would encourage real communication, and a lot of interaction and negotiation of meaning.

On the other hand, some studies in error correction in second language classrooms (Brock et al. 1986, Fanselow 1977, and Bruton & Samuda 1980) as well as on caretaker speech, indicate that immediate error correction on the part of the teacher does not always have an effect on students' production. Teachers often correct students more for errors in meaning than errors in grammar. They tend to treat as errors student answers that do not correspond to what they expect. Brock et al (1986) concluded in their study that learners being corrected by their partners during certain communication games quickly incorporated the corrections in their interlanguage. Bruton and Samuda (1986) investigated the issue of learners' incorporating other learners' errors into their own production when doing group work. In their results, they concluded that picking up other students' errors was very rare. However, learners' adjustments toward more correct production were observed.

Finally, studies such as those by Cohen & Robbins (1976), White (1980), Hayes & Flower (1983) have pointed out the importance of learners giving verbal or written reports on how they learn and paying conscious attention to the processes they go through when using language. According to Cohen (1987), verbal report data may provide important insights for enhancing learners' attention to language input, facilitating their efforts to speak fluently.

Taking into consideration the research done on NNSs/NNSs interaction and error analysis, as well as the criteria for the classification of introspective methods in SL research (Faerch & Kasper 1987, Poulisse et al 1987), I decided to compare to see if there was any difference between students given treatment A (retrospection and self-correction) and those given treatment B (retrospection and direct teacher intervention).

The specific research questions addressed were:

- 1) Are there any appreciable differences in the language students produce between those in treatments A and B?
- 2) Are there any differences within the pairs in each treatment in the kind of language they produce after each treatment?
- 3) Can introspection techniques and especially self-correction through retrospection make students more aware of a) how they learn and what communicative strategies they use and b) the errors they make?

4) Are self-repairs and other-repairs more common after having gone through the treatments?

Although this research should be considered exploratory, my intuition was that the more aware students became of their learning processes and the errors they make, the more they would internalize their specific problems through self-correction rather than teacher correction (but not one to the exclusion of the other), and the more they would improve their productions in the long run.

My hypotheses were that:

1) Those students given treatment A would be more aware of the language they produced in the second picture description and as a consequence would monitor their input/output more.

2) Those students under treatment A would have more repairs (especially self-correction and other correction) and more negotiation of meaning in the second picture description.

3) Those students who were given treatment B would improve slightly, if at all, in their second description but would not show so many signs of monitoring their production as students under treatment A.

4) Those students who were given treatment B would have fewer repairs (especially self-correction and other correction) than students under treatment A.

Method

Subjects: Eight 1st year Spanish students of English at University level (E.U. de Formación del Profesorado de E.G.B. «Pablo Montesino,» Madrid) took part in the research. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24. There were 3 men and 5 women. Even though their level of English is varied (as is normal in an EFL class), all students enrolled in 1st year have at least reached a COU level (pre-university course) in English and so have some previous years of formal study of the language. For the purpose of this research, they were paired off on a random basis.

Materials and procedures: Eight pictures showing people (sometimes 1 person, sometimes several people) were used to elicit students' oral production on two occasions. Four pictures were described each time, one per pair. The conversations were recorded.

Prior to the 1st session, students willing to take part in the research were asked to bring at least two pictures of relatives or persons they like or admire, dead or alive. The idea was to have some pictures the students felt strongly about.

They were also asked, if possible, to give a short description of each picture for the purpose of aiding the T to decide which were most appropriate. Once the pictures had been brought, the T went over them to select the ones she considered more suitable to stimulate conversation. Some students were also asked individually about which they preferred to talk about. One picture per pair was selected for the 1st picture description. Students were then selected randomly in pairs. Four pairs were formed: 1) male-male 2) female-male 3) female-female and 4) female-female. They were asked not to tell either their partners or the group about their pictures.

The pictures described by the pairs were the following:

1) A photo that seems to be of someone's parents in their kitchen. The man is looking into the camera and the woman is looking for something in the cupboard.

2) A man standing in front of a football field in an empty stadium.

3) A man dressed in a karate outfit posing behind his trophies with some karate posters in the background.

4) A photo of what seems to be a birthday party, with some presents visible. A coffee cup, a piece of cake and an empty wine bottle can be seen. The hilarity visible also suggests a state of inebriation.

The 1st session took place on the 25th of April. Instructions concerning the activity were given by the teacher. Student A in each pair was to identify briefly the person/people in his picture (eg this is my father/cousin/boyfriend) and the situation. Student B was to ask his partner questions about his/her picture. Immediately after the instructions were given orally, the teacher handed out the pictures to each pair at the last minute so that students did not know until then whose pictures had been selected for the activity. A fifteen-minute time limit was established and the conversations were recorded. In order to ensure that the recordings were audible, 2 pairs stayed in class and 2 others went to another room. The teacher was not present during most of the recording.

Immediately after recording the conversations each pair of students and the teacher met individually to discuss and elicit specific aspects of the task performance. The interviews were conducted in the students' first language, Spanish, and were not previously announced to the informants. They were recorded. Some of the guidelines pointed out by Faerch and Kasper (1987) were taken into consideration in the interviews. The objectives of the retrospective interviews were two-fold. Their first purpose was to provide information about the affective factors involved: How did students feel while performing the task? Did they like it? The second objective was to elicit information and reflect on the processes and communication strategies going on during the activity. This technique of immediate retrospection was thought appropriate because traces of the original cognition were still present in the students' short-term memories and aspects of speech production during task completion could be studied and recalled easily.

During these first interviews, a combination of self and other-initiated retrospection was used. Because students had never done this type of thing, it was felt that they would need some general guidelines. In order to identify students' production problems, the teacher asked them to think about things they wanted to say or ask but weren't sure how; what vocabulary and structures they had used and how they had managed when they didn't know a word or structure; how much translation, if any, they had used; or what questions they had refrained from asking because they didn't know how to pose them. Students were also asked to report freely about anything they liked concerning the activity. Open interaction between each pair was allowed and encouraged by the teacher. Except for these general guidelines, the teacher took the initiative only when the informants remained passive.

A second interview with the two pairs of students in treatment A was scheduled two days later. Retrospective techniques for the purpose of error analysis were used. The audio recordings of the conversations were presented to each pair. They were asked what in their opinion was or was not grammatically and lexically acceptable. This second interview had two objectives: a) to elicit students' intuitions about what is «correct» or not and check if they knew the rules but did not apply them; and b) to provide students with time for reflection on their own performances to see if this could affect subsequent oral productions. For the purpose of error analysis, the students were left to identify production problems in their audiotape performances and to reconstruct their cognitive processes. They were asked to listen to the tapes and stop them when they heard things that didn't sound right. Moreover, they were asked to correct what they heard. The teacher took the initiative (eg by stopping the tape) only when informants remained passive. However, she did not give any information about what was right or wrong.

The second interviews were recorded and took place in Spanish.

About 2 weeks later, correction procedure was implemented with the other two pairs in treatment B that had not had the second interview. The treatment consisted of the teacher giving students a model. During 15 minutes, the T described a photo and students asked questions. Some general guidelines about picture description and features of discourse were given. The conversations were recorded. The teacher's model showed a man cutting something with a machete while a couple in the background eats fruit. At the right in the picture, a man also holding a piece of fruit can be observed. In the background, banana trees and a thatched hut can be seen.

A week later, each of the 4 pairs was asked to record a second conversation dealing with a different picture. This time, pictures submitted by students in the B group were chosen to give the same opportunities to talk about his/her picture to each member of the pair. The same procedures as in session 1 were followed. The photos described this time were the following:

- 1) A black and white photo of a little boy about 5 or 6 years old, smiling and dressed for the summer in short pants, sandals, and a short-sleeved shirt.
- 2) A photo of two girls leaning against a railing, looking at a view.
- 3) Six little girls dressed in leotards, tights, and ballet slippers showing off what they have learnt in dance class.
- 4) Five girls, casually dressed, standing in front of a public building of some sort.

Results

Once all the data had been collected, transcripts of the conversations dealing with the pictures were made with the purpose of analyzing the differences between the first picture descriptions and the second ones. This analysis was three-fold. First, errors made by each pair during its first picture description were examined by the teacher in order to classify them in a general way. Second, the former information was contrasted with what students in treatment A had identified as errors when they listened to their conversations. Finally, using Van Lier's (1988) guidelines on the organization of repairs in second-language classrooms, the number of self-repairs and other-repairs were examined in both the first picture descriptions and the second ones in order to see if a higher number of repairs could be an indication of students' greater awareness of their errors. Also, and as a starting point, information on the first retrospective interview, dealing with students' reports on affective factors and communication strategies used during the first taping, were examined and general conclusions were drawn. Very briefly, I will report on these first. Concerning students' feeling toward the activity itself and their feelings while performing the task, they all reported having liked it because of its novelty. Two subjects, at least, thought it was a good exercise because it obliged them to make an effort in their pronunciation and the fact that it was taped impelled them to talk. However, some students found it embarrassing to talk to a tape recorder, perhaps because they had never done it previously, and this was reflected in nervous laughter or awkward silences. The time factor also put some pressure on students.

With respect to the strategies students used during the activity, one of the most common problems was trying to find the right words. They overcame this by either: a) saying the word in Spanish or asking their partners b) looking for another word that was similar c) restructuring the phrase to make it simpler and to avoid the word d) using a paraphrase. Secondly, dealing with structures, word order, and tenses caused most students a lot of problems. Some students used direct translation from Spanish into English. Others did not translate and showed some degree of awareness with respect to the mistakes they made,

identifying some during the interview. Some reported having liked the opportunity to structure the questions and perhaps write them down before speaking.

Errors made by students were of all kinds. For the purposes of this research, we will not enter into consideration of what caused them. We will limit ourselves to giving a general picture of the most frequent morphosyntactic errors and whether some changes were noticeable in the second picture descriptions.

Each pair of students showed different interlanguage stages and consequently, different errors. However, all of them had difficulty dealing with tenses, especially keeping to the correct tense according to the discourse. Asking questions and structuring the phrases with the correct word order were two other commonly-observed errors. Moreover, some students skipped morphemes such as third person singular «-s» or «-s» plural. Others did not use any preposition when needed or when they did, chose incorrect ones. Furthermore, some students used inappropriate vocabulary, sometimes transferring phrases from Spanish into English. The following are some examples of the errors mentioned above:

Tenses: «I think we had meat and potatoes, potatoes and after I buy two . . .»; «After dinner we go to the discoteque . . . and after we go to bed.» Lack of auxiliaries: «What sort of sport he practice?»; «What course he studied with you?»

Word order: «He works usually in Far East»; «I like very much a big dog.»

Vocabulary: «I was very happy when I passed my summer in their farm»; «parents» instead of «relatives»; «to get a goal» (to score); «It's one of my prefer sisters» (favorite)

Morphemes: «He live in Saragossa»; «yes, a lot of my girlfriend»; «childrens»; «All the animals are happy; you can see it in their face.»

Prepositions: «The woman who is looking the, in the board is his wife.»

With respect to the insights and quality of discussion of the two pairs in the self-correction stage—treatment A—one pair of students focused almost exclusively on vocabulary problems. Even though after having listened to the tape and having been asked about what they thought to be their problems, they reported lack of precision in tenses and word order problems, they seemed to be unable to spot the errors while listening to the tape. They did not show any awareness of pronunciation mistakes, wrong prepositions, double negatives, countable and uncountable names and relative pronouns, some of their weak points. They focused on meaning, understood only as vocabulary. However, they were able to explain the nature of their vocabulary errors and the processes they had gone through while searching for appropriate words (eg using «parents» instead of «relatives,» meaning «parientes» in Spanish; get a goal, «meter un gol» in Spanish). On the other hand, the other pair made a more diversified analysis. Even though their insights were not always right, they were able to spot a variety of errors. Their discussion centered on different items:

a) on tenses: eg I S1: (referring to the picture) «has been taken»; S2: «fue tomada»; S1: «was taken»

II «To have» or «to be» (for ages). They decided that «to be» was the correct verb.

b) how to ask questions: eg S1: «This picture is taken in the farm»; S2: «is a question, is this picture taken in the farm?»

c) possessives: eg I S1: «her wife, Teresa»; S2: «her is `su de ella'»

II The daughters of David vs. David's daughters

d) prepositions: eg S1: «in the weekend»; S2: «in the weekend»; S1: «at weekends» («I have seen that»)

The students were not always able to find solutions to their problems but their discussion was pretty lively, taking into account that this was the first time they had done an exercise of this sort. They failed, though, to spot word order problems, some wrong prepositions, morphemes and some vocabulary items. A comparison of the errors in the first picture description and the second one showed some changes in the errors of this particular pair of students. Even though some problems with prepositions, morphemes and vocabulary remained, lots of self-correction could be observed in the use of tenses and pronouns, two features that the students had spotted as problematic. There were, for example, three instances of alternancy between the verbs «to be» and «to have» to express age versus no alternancy in the first picture descriptions. There was also lots of self-correction in the use of pronouns (eg «my uncle is her, is his boss, is his boss»). The number of self-corrections and other-corrections between the 1st picture description and the 2nd seems to indicate, as we will see later on, a slight improvement in this particular pair.

With respect to the other pair of students in treatment A, comparisons between the 1st and 2nd pictures showed that there was no appreciable change in students' errors. Except for some self-correction in pronouns, the students continued having problems with tenses, prepositions, relative pronouns and vocabulary. However, it should be taken into account that the amount of conversation taped was less than in the first picture, due to some mechanical problems in taping. The students had to tape the conversation again and change their picture.

Students given treatment B, the teacher's model, did not show appreciable changes in their error production in the second picture descriptions. One pair continued making the same kind of mistakes observed in the first picture description: wrong tenses, difficulties in asking questions, using the right pronoun and prepositions and choosing the right words. Self and other-repairs were for comprehension, not for self-correction. The second pair showed a couple of examples of self-repairs in tenses and morphemes but on the whole continued making mistakes in tenses and questions and did not seem to monitor its speech much.

Finally, the amount of corrections in both the 1st and 2nd picture descriptions were examined. The corrections were divided into two categories: self-corrections and other-corrections. Within each category and following Van Lier's (1988) criteria on the organization of repair in second-language classrooms, self-corrections were classified into a) same-turn self-repairs and b) other-initiation/self-repair. The category other corrections, on the other hand, was divided into: a) other-repair and b) self-initiation/other-repair. The following excerpts from the data collected illustrate these categories and subcategories:

Self-correction: a) same-turn self repairs:

Excerpt 1: S2: he punched you when you are a children, when you was a children, you, were, you were

Excerpt 2: S1: she, she is my, my friend. She, I met, I met him, she, digo, her, when I (pause) . . .

b) other-initiation/self-repair: Excerpt 1: S2: have they, your brother and his wife (pause) any babies? S1: no, we, we (pause), we were married, we were married at November; S2: (unintelligible, in Spanish); S1: (laughs), they, they, they were married at November (pause), November, no October of the last year and no babies (long pause).

Excerpt 2: S1: he was very; S2: he?; S1: Ay! Perdón, she was very elastic and, er (pause), she like dancing . . .

Excerpt 3: S1: yes, and well, he, she study EGB (pause). He, and she, is in four; S2: fourth?; S1: Yes, fourth year.

Excerpt 4: S1: uh. And which parts do you know like Aranjuez, Toledo . . .; S2: which part?; S1: er, which places do you know around Madrid?; S2: Ah! I know El Escorial . . .

Excerpt 5: S1: Yes (long pause). And which of these girls live closest to you?; S2: I don't understand; S1: Which of these girls, er, live near of you?

Other-correction: a) other-repair: Excerpt 1: S1: Sí, yes. It's, he seemed, well, er, the place (pause) no seems my house (pause), the place is a, a laboratory photograph, a photograph . . .; S2: studio; S1: a photograph studio

Excerpt 2: S1: er (laughs). I have (pause) otro (laughs); S2: another; S1: another brother . . .

b) Self-initiation/other repair. Excerpt 1: S1: and after I think we had meat and potatoes, potatoes, and after I buy two (pause) ¿Cómo se dice pasteles?; S2: cakes; S1: two cakes . . .

Excerpt 2: S1: yes, I think it was my best birthday because it was the first time I got with my, all my friends to dinner and it was, it was very, very nice. I enjoyed very much and is a (pause) ¿Cómo se dice recuerdo?; S2: remember; S1: and it's very nice to remember

The number of corrections in each treatment was as follows:

Treatment A pairs

1st picture

pair 1—a) 9 self corrections (8 same-turn self repairs and 1 other-initiation self-repair); b) 0 other corrections

pair 2—a) 4 self-corrections (3 same turn self-repairs and 1 other-initiation self-repair); b) 1 other-correction (other-repair)

2nd picture

pair 1—a) 4 self-corrections (3 same turn self-repairs and 1 other-initiation self-repair); b) 1 other-correction (other repair)

pair 2—a) 14 self-corrections (10 same-turn self-repairs and 4 other-initiation self-repairs); b) 6 other-corrections (other-repairs)

Treatment B pairs

1st picture

pair 1—a) 1 self-correction (other-initiation/self-repair); b) 3 other-corrections (2 other-repair and 1 self-initiation/other repair)

pair 2—a) 4 self-corrections (1 other-initiation/self-repair and 3 same-turn self-repairs); b) 4 other corrections (2 self-initiation/other repairs and 2 other repairs)

2nd picture

pair 1—a) 6 self-corrections (4 same-turn self-repairs and 2 other-initiation/self-repair); b) 6 other-corrections (other-repairs)

pair 2—a) 9 self-corrections (6 same-turn self-repairs and three other-initiation self-repair); b) 2 other-corrections (other-repairs)

We can see in the second picture descriptions an increase in the number of self-repairs and other-repairs in all students, independently of their treatment. The increase, however, varied according to the pairs. While pairs in treatment B showed a slight increase between the first picture descriptions and the second, pairs in treatment A showed contradictory tendencies. Pair 1 in treatment A had more self-corrections in the first picture description than in the second, and just one other-correction in the second picture description. This could be due to the fact that pair 1 had some mechanical problems while recording the second picture description as I have pointed out previously. They did not use all the 15-minute talking period and probably were tired of the activity. On the other hand, pair 2 showed a considerable increase in the number of self-corrections which seems to indicate a higher degree of awareness and monitoring of the language being produced.

Conclusion

Because only one pair under treatment A showed a considerable increase in self- and other-correction, we cannot really conclude that students in this treatment were more aware of the language they produced and had more self-monitoring during their oral productions. However, the quantity and quality of the students' corrections in pair 2, treatment A, make us think that the students' self-correction stage during the retrospective interview might have had some effect on their second picture production. What seems clearer is that the first interview for everyone on affective factors and communicative strategies could have had a slight effect on some students because that verbalization made some of them aware of particular mistakes.

In order to determine up to what point self-correction can aid oral production more than direct teacher intervention can, a longitudinal study would seem appropriate to really compare groups under different treatments. My impression is, however, that a combination of both student self-correction and a more formal, teacher-oriented error analysis (eg going through the transcripts with the students) could be more effective in aiding students to overcome their errors and monitor their speech. Self-correction only on the part of the students is not enough. Checking their mistakes gives students an active role in learning, but on the other hand they need to be sure that their insights about what's right or not are correct.

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