Think Aloud to Promote Oral Fluency

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Resumen

El proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del idioma inglés en Ecuador se está convirtiendo en un desafío para los actores de esta área debido a los estándares establecidos por las autoridades de Educación. Por este motivo, las instituciones educativas están buscando nuevos diseños curriculares que ayuden a los docentes a mejorar en sus prácticas así como también beneficiar a los estudiantes en este proceso. La presente innovación se implementó para incrementar el tiempo que los alumnos hablan a través del uso de protocolos de pensar en voz alta. Estudios previos realizados en la misma institución educativa tenían como objetivo el desarrollo y aplicación de cinco sub-destrezas de lectura. Se esperaba con este estudio también consolidar las sub-destrezas. Esta investigación-acción incluyó el análisis de datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los resultados indican que hubo poco mejoramiento en el tiempo de habla y precisión en el discurso de los estudiantes. Esto pudo deberse al poco tiempo en clase y espacios para practicar oralmente. Un hallazgo importante fue que el trabajo escrito del uso de las sub-destrezas de lectura fue más extenso en comparación con los primeros y los alumnos incluyeron palabras técnicas en sus composiciones.

Palabras claves: Inglés como lengua extranjera, sub-destrezas de lectura, protocolos de pensar en voz alta, destreza de hablar

Abstract

EFL learning-teaching process in Ecuador is becoming challenging due to the standards established by the Education authorities. Thus, schools look for new instructional designs that help teachers improve their practices and benefit students. This innovation was implemented to enhance students' speaking lengths by using think-aloud protocols. Previous studies conducted in the same institution aimed at the development and application of five reading subkills. These subskills were meant to be consolidated with the implementation of this innovation. This action research involves analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Results indicated that there was little improvement in students' speaking length and accurateness. This might be due insufficient time and spaces to practice in class. An important finding was that students' written use of reading subskills was longer and students applied technical discourse.

Key words: English as a foreign language, reading subskills, think aloud protocol, speaking

Introduction

As 2012, the government in Ecuador made changes in the curriculum of the educational system. One of those improvements was to reinforce the EFL teaching-learning process through the setting of standards and pre-requisites in order to advance to higher levels of studies (Ministerio de Educacion, 2012). Students finishing high school by 2017 needed to have reached a B1 level according to the Common European Framework and by the end of their university studies they should get a B2. Those requirements also applied for teachers who must have a proficiency level higher than the one of their students.

English became mandatory in middle and high school. Institutions had to include five hours of this subject. Private schools had to adhere to that number of hours and if they were bilingual they could add more hours for English classes. Regarding speaking skills among some of the exit profile for high school described by the Ministry of Education (2012) included the description of students' reactions to the plot of a book or film, and to narrate a story, which is one of the reason that supports the implementation of this study.

Since 2008, the school, where this study was developed, signed a contract with a well-known English language school to intervene the English area and promote changes to enhance the proficiency of students. In order to meet the requirements of the agreement, a consultant visited the school two days a week. Within those days, the consultant had to carry out class observations that were followed by interviews to provide feedback. This person also had to attend weekly meetings where workshops were carried out to improve teachers' weaknesses.

Other activities included oral interviews to students in order to assess the consultancy program and promote effective techniques. In the same year, two master's candidates conducted a research study to implement instructional coaching in order to change teachers' current reading practices which were traditional as described in the study. Results of this innovation indicated that there was a little change in the practices but not in teachers' beliefs about reading. Data indicated that teachers applied a new discourse which integrated specific terminology regarding reading subskills. (Briones & Ramírez, 2011)

In order to monitor the effectiveness of the consultancy, interviews were carried on to students. Preliminary interviews done to assess students' fluency revealed that:

- some students did not understand the question.
- some students understood but could not answer accordingly.
- they could not describe the topics of readings or dialogues they had already been introduced and practiced in previous classes.

Having this situation and knowing that teachers as well as students had been under training to apply reading subskills. This innovation tried to consolidate the application of reading subskills as well as to enhance students develop speaking fluency through the implementation of Think-aloud protocols when the lesson involved reading practices.

Regarding the use of Think aloud in other studies, one conducted by Shahrokh, Morteza, Gohar, & Reza (2012) indicated that "verbal reports and think-aloud protocols have been widely used in both L1 and L2 reading research with the aim of studying the mental processes of readers in different situations." They also mentioned that the focus of those studies was mainly in reading comprehension, they listed the following examples: a taxonomy of reading strategies, report evidence of strategy transfer from L1 to L2, identify reading strategies of readers, study the effect of previous knowledge when comprehending a text, and describe strategies that students used when taking reading comprehension tests.

On the other hand, Charters (2003) conducted a research which focused on the qualitative data obtained from teacher-researchers applying this protocol. She investigated the thought process involved using this method. All in all, she concluded that studies have tried to investigate this method and its effect on reading comprehension as well as the process of thinking. Charters also reported some studies where researchers tried to "improve their data by suggesting explicit

strategies for students to talk about or asking specific probing questions that may distort thought processes."

Hence, being the context of this study EFL and that students struggle to utter simple sentences. The focus of this study is to consolidate reading subskills that had been applied since 2008 and help students verbalize their responses when they had a reading class. Teachers will help students by practicing reading subskills and having students respond orally to activities either individually or in pairs. As Charters (2003) indicated Think-aloud utterances may also vary in quantity and quality, for the purpose of this study the emphasis will be on the quantity of time and accurateness observe when students speak during interviews.

Doing so students will fulfill the Education authorities' indicators of B1 exit profile which indicates, among other skills: give brief reasons and explanations for opinions and plans, describe their reactions to the plot of a book or film, and narrate a story. These skills are directly connected to reading and they can be developed after having reviewed and practiced the content of a passage.

The context of this study is English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Thus, some concepts that support it come from Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, Speaking in EFL, and Think aloud.

Starting with SLA, High (1993) assured that in an EFL setting the four skills are developmental and they are mastered in sequence. This is first students understand what they are exposed to through listening and this exposure helps them later structure students' speaking. Regarding reading, there is more comprehension of texts than what they can write. Thus, these skills are better learnt through exposure, practice and feedback. As this population had been under the intervention of a consultancy program which has monitored teachers as well as students, it is expected that they had mastered at least listening and reading, and now it was time to pay more attention to the productive skills: speaking and writing.

On the other hand, Thornbury (2006) explained that SLA researchers investigate data regarding the input (what students are exposed to) versus the output (what they actually do either in writing or speaking including their errors). In this innovation, students will respond to the passages. That means both input and output are involved. Teachers will scaffold the subskills and students will go over that content to produce language orally.

Additionally, Cheng (2013) suggested that assessment of learning regards the instruments to determine whether classes promoted learning or not. Therefore, interviews were applied as a tool to asses speaking skills. The same activities is recommended by the Ministerio de Educación (2012) in the National Curriculum guidelines for English teachers.

Talking about fluency and oral competences, Thornbury (2006) assured that speaking is the most important of the four skills. He added that it is usually referred to as the proficiency of a student in the language. Nonetheless, it is also challenging since it happens spontaneously in real time. Students struggle because planning and production overlap. Then, he differentiates between fluency and accuracy. The first refers to the production of the language in a normal way and the second to the planning in terms of speaking grammatically correct. In this regard, Harmer (2007) implied that speaking activities developed in class scaffold students to become autonomous language users, since the more students are exposed to use the language the more opportunities they will have to activate vocabulary and grammar that might be stored in their brains. Thornbury indicated that automaticity is suggested to combine planning and production. Harmer treated it as the uncouncious fluency of students when using the language.

Another view is provided by Harmer (2007) who sustained that speaking in the classroom gives learners a sense of safety to start practicing and rehearsing. Besides, speaking tasks provide feedback for both learners and teachers. For the purpose of this study, feedback can be considered for fluency and application of reading skills. Harmer also included a reading principle that suggests teachers to exploit passages to the full. He meant to use the topic for discussion and additional activities, to use the language for study and connect students' context to the content they were reading. The subskills that students had been exposed to are: previewing, skimming, scanning, contextual guessing, and summarizing.

Moreover, Jacobson (1998) indicated that think-aloud protocols could be a venue to observe the reading strategies that students are applying and help them include new ones. He also assured that by implementing this protocol, students utter through interviews the process they follow when they are exposed to passages. This is shared by Oster (as cited in Cohen, 1987), he referred to this protocol as a technique in which students share their thoughts in speaking when they are reading and thus letting others know the strategies they use in order to understand a passage. Furthermore, Ozek and Civelek (as cited in Block, 1986) introduced the think-aloud method as a diagnostic tool to identify students' strengths and weaknesses when exposed to reading passages. Tinzmann et al. (as cited in Shahroks, Morteza, Gohar, & Reza, 2012)

considered that getting students into the habit of thinking out loud enriches classroom discourse. As reported in Shahrokh, et al., many studies have been conducted to investigate the thinking process students undergo when they read as well as to enhance reading comprension practices and none has focused on how think-aloud protocol help students in their speaking skills.

It is important to mention that to master a skill students need to be scaffolded. Nuttall (2005) suggests oral interaction in the classroom to model the tasks. Then, as students get used to and can use the skills by themselves they can help other students. This is the process that this action research implemented.

Materials and method

The purpose of the innovation was to enhance students' oral fluency. The research questions were:

- To what extend will students speak longer after implementing the Think-aloud method?
- Will students apply reading subskills in their oral responses when being interviewed?

This was an experimental study that included the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. The independent variable corresponded to the technique that was implemented "Think alouds" and the dependent variables were:

- The level of comprehension of passages determined by the length of students' responses and understanding of questions.
- The classification of students' responses into the five reading subskills that they were expected to use in their speech.

Six teachers were part of this innovation. Three of them had worked in the institution for more than five years. Two had been working for two years and another just started in the school. According to the SLEP test, their level of English was B1. Four of them hold their bachelor's degree as English teachers. There is one that has a degree in Finance. Four of them were female and two male. Each teacher was in charge of five groups. For this study, it was considered one group from five teachers and two of another in order to have one sample group from each grade.

The students that participated in this study belong to elementary, middle, and high school graders. Teachers were in charge of five groups/classes. For the purpose of this study, sections of classes were chosen randomly. They had different levels of English. In each classroom there

were about 30 - 35 students. Following the government guidelines, the institution had grouped classes made up of 50% women and 50% boys. Ages for this study ranged from 11 to 18.

Teacher	Sex	Grade	Students' Age
1	Female	7th	10-12
2	Female	8th	11-13
2	Female	9th	12-14
3	Female	10th	13-15
4	Male	1st	14-16
5	Male	2nd	15-17
6	Female	3rd	16-18

Table 1. Description of population

Students' age depended on the time they started their studies. Some parents registered their children before they are expected to begin their formal required education. This situation has also been regularized since the government also has become strict with ages students can be registered in the different grades.

Because the institution had been under a consultancy program since 2008, students were given the SLEP test in that year and they were classified into levels 1 and 2 of a total of 10 levels. As years passed, in 2015 they were again assigned a number according to the textbooks that they were using. That is grade 7th was the bridge from elementary to middle school, thus, it was assigned a book that connected both sections for two purposes: to prepare students for high school mechanics, and to help them be acquainted with content of the following level. Eighth and ninth grades had been assigned the same book (number 2 of the series) because the previous transition had started the year before. Tenth and first were assigned number 3 and 4 of the series. Grades 2nd and 3rd used a business textbook which was a review of basic tenses in a higher degree.

In order to answer the innovation questions, the following instruments were applied:

Observations

They were unannounced and non-participatory, that means the observer did not interact, participate or speak in the development of the class. Two kinds of class observations were carried out:

- Short visits: They lasted about 5' or 10' in order to monitor what was going on in the classroom, to check if teachers had planned their lessons, and if they were behind or according to their syllabus.

- Long visits: These visits lasted one or two periods of classes (from 40' to 80'). Their main purpose was to see the teaching-learning process in order to work on weaknesses and praise or share good practices.

A form was filled up. It has a checklist of practices as well as spaces to include additional information relevant that needed to be addressed later between the consultant and the teacher. After the observations, there was an interview with the teacher to go over the methodology observed and provide feedback. An action plan was filled out. The action plan included weaknesses to be overcame, suggestions to work on them, and dates teachers indicated changes might have been implemented in order to improve their practices. This process was included in a report that was given to the authorities of the school in order to inform the advances of the program.

Workshops

Observation's analysis helped to develop workshops to target problems that were common to the group. They were held during 40 minutes of the meeting. They could be planned every two weeks or once a month according to the availability of teachers and if there was time to include workshops in the meetings.

Coursebooks

Material used to prepare workshops and test students was taken from students' course books to develop/plan the lessons. They were EFL textbooks. Because this innovation was aimed at implementing the think-aloud method, passages of these books from each grade were considered. During workshops, teachers experienced different activities to introduce, practice and assess the reading subskills. Most importantly, content from their material was applied. Thus, they observed and went over the tasks they could transfer in their lessons with ease.

Interviews

Students were interviewed in June, at the beginning, and in November, at the end of the school year. Those months were strategic since students and teachers were more acquainted with the

new cycle of studies. November was better than December because of the festivities celebrated in the later month. Due to teachers needing to have everything ready for the end of the period and students trying to catch up in their studies, January was not a good month to apply a post interview.

Because of the reduced numbers of visits that were done and because interviews were held individually, not all students of each class participated. Nevertheless, the same students were considered in the pre and post-test to compare results and effectiveness of the intervention.

Each interview was made up of four or five questions. They were related to passages that students had already practiced in class. Information questions were considered to know the level of comprehension of students when responding. Regarding length of interview, it was considered five minutes with each individual pupil. They were conducted outside the classroom, not to interfere with the lesson. Teachers could continue with their classes. The interviewer had a list of students and called one by one. Responses were registered in writing.

Innovation

To start the innovation, there was a review of reading subskills in a meeting with the teachers followed by class observations and interviews to students individually. In the first workshop, senior teachers helped the relative new teachers to the program. In that interchange, the researcher realized that everyone needed to review: definition of skills, and mechanics of each subskill.

The review of subskills indicated that teachers were better acquainted with previewing, skimming, and scanning than with contextual guessing, and summarizing. Thus, the focus of coming workshops was to reinforce those subskills.

During the visits to the classes, the researcher filled out a form to record the learning-teaching process. These observations indicated that teachers planned a coherent reading sequence but when students were tested orally one by one, results indicated that some of them could not start or hold a conversation. When students were asked to respond to a reading, some did not know what to say. Thus the intervention continued with workshops to the teachers that aimed at the improvement of specific subskills. They were followed by class observation. The same procedure was detected. Therefore, teachers were instructed to define the reading subskills when they applied the subskills in class. Students had to label, read and know the mechanics of

each subskill. If it was necessary, demonstration classes were developed. That is, the consultant worked with the class and model what was expected from teachers.

Results

There were 64 visits done by the researcher to the institution during the school year 2015 - 2016. Within that time, the following observations were done:

Teacher	Short	Long
1	37	6
2	34	2
3	39	7
4	31	3
5	30	3
6	16	2
Total	187	23

Table 2. Observations

Short visits lasted from 2 to 5 minutes. Long visits were done for two periods of classes, each period was 40'. Table 2 summarizes the number of times teachers were observed during the school year of the intervention.

Teacher	Short /subskill observed	Long / subskill observed
1	10 Previewing, scanning.	1 Previewing, scanning.
2	3 Previewing, scanning.	2 All subskills.
3	4 Previewing, scanning, oral lesson reading skills individual, review of reading strategies.	2 All subskills.
4	8 Previewing, skimming, scanning.	3 All subskills
5	1 Previewing.	1 Scanning, previewing.
6	3 Scanning.	1 Previewing, skimming, scanning.
Total	29/187	10/23
Percentage	28.87%	43.47%

Table 3. Observations where the process of Think-aloud was observed.

Table 3 indicates that from the total of short observations only a 28.87% was dedicated to reading skills and Think aloud protocols (from the total of observations done during the school year). The percentage is higher in long observations which percentage is 43.47%. Nonetheless,

subskills present in all classes were previewing and scanning. Teachers were supposed to apply five reading subskills: previewing, skimming, scanning, contextual guessing and summarizing. Fifty percent of teachers applied all subskills and Think-aloud protocol as reported in long observations.

Class	Number of students	Pre-test		Post-interview	
		Accurate answers/ total of questions.	%	Accurate answers / total of questions	%
7th	9	11/36	30.55%	32/36	**88.88%**
8th	11	19/55	34.54%	26/55	42.27%
9th	9	8/45	17.77%	18/45	40%
10th	12	12/48	25%	29/48	60.42%
1	14	37/56	66.07%	37/56	66.07%
2	18	27/72	37.50%	50/72	**69.44%**
3	20	38/100	38%	52/100	52%
Total	**93**	**152/412**	**36.89%**	**244/412**	**59.22%**

Table 4. Interview to students

Results from interviews indicated that there was an increase of 22.33% (calculated from the difference in percentages from the pre and post-test) in the whole group. Teachers from 8th, 9th, 10th, and 1st were observed during the application of the complete process. Percentages indicated that from those teachers, students of the first two and the third grades had better results than the four which percentage remained equal (66.07%). Even though, the first teacher was not observed during reading practices, her students got the highest percentage of improvement with 88.88%. This indicates that teachers applied reading lessons including the think-aloud protocol. A similar result was observed in the group of the 2nd baccalaureate teacher. A total of 50 answers were correct from 72 questions.

Discussion

This innovation wanted to improve students' fluency and accuracy when speaking by implementing think aloud protocols. Results indicated that there was improvement in students' correct answers after the program. These results may be consequence of constant observation of teachers, reminders of applying the innovation in classes, teachers really wanting their students to succeed in English, the ongoing application of reading subskills in the whole institution that started seven years ago, or students being motivated because an expert was assessing their oral performance.

Interviews indicated that in students' answers, they could find specific information, they understood the questions, they could speak a little bit longer than before but could not use

contextual guessing or summarizing. This might also respond to the second question of the innovation.

Student's lack of application of contextual guessing and summarizing may be the effect of teachers not applying these subskills as reported in table 2. All teachers applied previewing, skimming and scanning but they were rarely observed practicing contextual guessing or summarizing. Regarding this issue, Charters (2003) shared that working memory has a limited capacity and that heeded information, sometimes called noticed, goes into that memory but it is held briefly and can disappear when new information is added. This means students needed more practice with those skills.

Considering the concepts of automaticity given by Thornbury (2006) and Harmer (2007), the former considered it as combining planning and production at the same time when speaking whereas for the later it involves using the language unconsciously, students might not have got to that level being that they had not been exposed to those skills in class as they had been to previewing and scanning, for example. Lastly, Charters (2003) contributed on this issue by stating that many processes that include thinking are not verbalized for two reasons: the first because they are automatic, for example recognition of repetitive words or pictures; and second because the thinking process is too quick that there is no time for utterances. This may indicate that even though students understand the question and knew what to say in L1 they could not transfer their thoughts into L2 and thus their responses were short.

Thinking aloud has been widely implemented for reading comprehension, the purpose of this protocol in this study was to reinforce the five reading subskills that had been implemented in 2008, to consider how it helped students speak accurately and fluently. Charters (2003) highlights that think aloud, requires demanding language from higher levels of thinking, according to the Bloom's taxonomy. This study did not pretend students to verbalize their thoughts but to apply reading subskills orally guided by the teacher in class and later replicate the same in the interview. Akyel and Kamisli (1996) recommended splitting the tasks into small units that can be worked one at a time. This way, students will not feel overwhelmed and instead of helping them, an obstacle and resistance might be built by requiring them to complete a task with a level of difficulty that could not be appropriate for this context. This was the process that teachers were asked to include in their lessons to start by previewing the passage (connecting what students know with what they were going to be exposed to through picture description or eliciting ideas using the title of the passage), skimming (reading quickly to get the main idea),

scanning (finding specific information through questions or definitions), contextual guessing (for language study), and summarizing (rewriting passages in students' words using graphic organizers). All of these activities had been practiced since 2008. Beginning 2015, with this innovation, they were requested to report the usage of those subskills orally to promote fluency and accuracy when students speak.

Conclusions

It is important to mention that even if teachers were not practicing a reading class, they applied the subskills with other type of tasks like: introduction of vocabulary, dialogues or grammar sections. The subskills present in most classes were: previewing and scanning. They were followed by skimming and in lower frequency by contextual guessing and summarizing.

Moreover, short and long observations showed that there was a traditional activity observed: students wrote down in their draft notebooks and later they passed that information to their English notebook at home as an assignment, because teachers graded notebooks at the end of each midterm. Thus, after participating orally either individually or in groups, students had to pass what was on the board to their notebooks and once they got home they had to rewrite that information on their English notebooks. It was observe in written tests, that students' compositions were longer when they were asked to include reading subskills after a passage. It was also observed that students gained technical discourse. This was also reflected in students written tests, students indicated the subskill they were applying and developed the activity. The process of writing the class in students' draft notebooks and later rewriting content in their English notebooks might have contributed to the increase of students' compositions as well as the retention of the names of the subskills. This was not reflected in the interviews. Students did not indicated which subskills they were applying but they described pictures that were connected to the reading and this was an example of previewing, for example.

There are some limitations of the study. First of all, the number of students in each classroom made impossible to the researcher to conduct interviews to all of them in a pre and post-test basis. In the best case, when classes had two hours in a row (80 minutes), only 13 students could be interviewed, considering that the researcher let the teacher start the class the first five minutes and left five minutes before class is over for any announcement that the teachers might give the class.

Other studies might include students interviewing one another to save time and get to include everyone in the study. This is also a procedure suggested by the Education authorities to asses or promote speaking in the classroom.

Further research should be done in order to include the reading subskills that students are applying in their speech. They can also focus on other speaking skills like intonation, and pronunciation. Researchers might also want to see students' attitudes when delivering their speech and connect that to their emotions and message transmission. It is recommended to continue with the implementation of reading subskills to consolidate students' accuracy and to enhance their fluency.

Teachers are an essential factor in any research innovation. The population of teachers that were involved in this study had a B1 level. This might explained the results in the last three grades. The higher the level, the more challenging the language and tasks. Even though the teacher of 1st baccalaureate applied the reading subskills, the results of his class remained the same. It is important to mention that in this grade, students were using the highest level of the coursebooks. Next grades will make a review with a business English textbook. Therefore, students in 2nd baccalaureate were exposed to a review of content at a basic level, they could easily respond to the inquiries.

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