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The Impact of Information Gap Activities on Young EFL Learners' Oral Fluency

El impacto de las actividades con vacío de información en la fluidez oral de estudiantes jóvenes de inglés como lengua extranjera

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This study adopted a mixed method approach with an action research design. The aim was to determine the impact of information gap activities on young English as a foreign language learners' oral fluency. Information gap activities were based on the communicative approach as well as on task-based learning. Twenty-three eighth graders participated in this action research. The students were immersed in a multicultural and at-risk context in a public high school in southern Chile. Their English-speaking level fluctuated between A1 and A2. The technique was applied over the course of a semester (ten weeks). Data were collected by applying a pre-test, post-test, and focus group questionnaire. Results suggest an improvement in oral fluency and a positive perception of the technique used during the intervention.

Key words: Attitudes in English as a foreign language, English as a foreign language, information gap activities, young learners, oral fluency.

Este estudio adoptó un método mixto con un diseño de investigación-acción. El objetivo fue determinar el impacto de las actividades con vacío de información en la fluidez oral de estudiantes jóvenes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Las actividades vacío de información fueron basadas en el enfoque comunicativo y en el aprendizaje basado en tareas. En esta investigación-acción participaron veintitrés estudiantes de octavo grado. Ellos estaban inmersos en un contexto multicultural y de riesgo social en un liceo público en el sur de Chile. Su nivel de inglés fluctuaba entre A1 y A2. La técnica se aplicó durante diez semanas en el curso de un semestre. Para la recolección de datos se aplicó una prueba previa, una posterior y un grupo focal a los estudiantes. Los resultados sugieren una mejora en la fluidez oral y una percepción positiva de la técnica usada durante la intervención.

Palabras clave: actitudes, actividades con vacío de información, estudiantes jóvenes, fluidez oral, inglés como lengua extranjera.

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Introduction

Within the South American context, in Chile the use of English as a foreign language (EFL) has been gaining prominence because of globalization and the job opportunities that people can have to improve their economic conditions by knowing the language (British Council, 2015). The *English Open Doors Program*, created in Chile in 2003 and supported by public policies, responds to such conditions and aims to improve the English level of students from the fifth to the twelfth grades (Ministerio de Educación, 2017). The latest evolution of mass media and social networks' emergence have complemented and boosted the use of English in everyday contexts. Increase in migration and multiculturalism have arisen as strong reasons for EFL learning. These factors make EFL learning, for either educational or recreational purposes, a necessity in our region.

Meanwhile, EFL learning through information gap activities belongs to *task-based learning*, which is part of the *communicative approach*. It should be noted that ideas for this technique came from prominent researchers from the 80's such as Doughty and Pica (1986) and Prabhu (1987) as well as from more recent studies by authors such as Ellis (2003) and Larsen-Freeman (2008), who aimed for oral EFL/ESL acquisition with the enrichment and practice of information gap activities and their procedures. Although Chilean teachers have mentioned the use of information gap activities in the EFL classroom (Díaz, Martínez, Roa, & Sanhueza 2010), there is still no evidence of literature about an action research based on the technique and its results having been carried out previously in Chile. Therefore, this action research was meant to break new ground in terms of speaking activities that belong to this approach.

The present research followed precedents from recent studies, with similar participants, conducted by Jondeya (2011), Putri (2014), Defrioka (2016), Ratnasari (2016), and Rini (2017) to improve speaking skills by

using information gap activities. These studies showed positive results in most of their participants. In consideration of such outcomes, information gap activities were effective in the experimental groups over the course of the interventions with quantitative and mixed method approaches. These researchers also carried out data collection by using pre-tests and post-tests. These studies contained tasks that promoted meaningful language learning in terms of content, because such studies needed "to be related to learners' communicative needs" (McCarthy, 2013, p. 54). Information gap activities are intrinsically based on tasks and, therefore, this supports the idea that while students are on task, they can have the opportunity to express feelings and perceptions over certain topics of their interest according to their grade level. Furthermore, communication between learners needs to be meaningful with tasks that provide new knowledge and practice to foster language acquisition in real-world situations (McCarthy, 2013).

The Chilean curricular framework for English aims to help students manage the four language skills in daily-life situations and to reach level A2 (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR) by the eighth grade (Ministerio de Educación, 2009). To evaluate the progress of this subject within the context of public education and to determine courses of action, the Chilean Ministry of Education has implemented the national SIMCE English test (British Council, 2015). Results from 2012 imply that the English level is still insufficient by the eleventh grade with only 18% of the students obtaining level B1 and, furthermore, the learners' English level seems to be poor in all the rest of the grade levels as well (British Council, 2015). Chilean EFL students lack the proper abilities to start producing fluent L2 in an autonomous way, somehow because of the low-quality that Chilean public education has shown in the last decades (British Council, 2015). The studies replicated in this research had a similar situation and context, in which students from public schools seemed to require more spoken

English input. Because of the apparent lack of proper speaking performance and the positive results from the studies previously mentioned, the intervention was considered pertinent.

The aim of the study was to determine the impact of information gap activities on young EFL learners' oral fluency. Students practiced this technique within a period of 10 lessons in 10 weeks. This technique can encourage, lead, and impact the students' oral fluency production. To implement this technique, the students were given pieces of paper with two different kinds of exercises: "information exchange" and "spot/find the difference". These activities usually include pictures or visual clues. The implementation of these information gap activities in most studies alternates between these two.

Literature Review

Information Gap Activities

Prabhu (1987) points out that "information gap activities involve a transfer of given information from one person to another—or from one form to another, or from one place to another—generally calling for the decoding or encoding of information from or into language" (p. 46). This type of activity is labeled as a meaning-focused activity as well as "reasoning gap" and "opinion gap". The "gap" is the incomplete information two speakers have about a conversation topic (Harmer, 1998), that is, the moment when the learners' need to communicate and to solve the problem emerges to make the speaking activity "unpredictable and therefore interesting" (Lindsay, 2000, p. 157). To promote negotiation of meaning, learners need to solve a task or problem by locating and exchanging the missing information (Larsen-Freeman, 2008). This type of technique is also implemented to focus on meaning to "gain fluency at the expense of accuracy" (Willis, 1996, p. 40).

Interaction is essential in information gap activities as they provide the opportunity to exchange ideas,

perceptions, opinions, and observations about a daily-life topic that causes interest to talk (Lindsay, 2000). A wide variety of activities for developing oral fluency can be found but, regarding information gap, learners can perceive this type of technique as practical and effective whenever a teacher aims to make students speak the L2 in the classroom providing real-world situations in a motivating way (Lindsay, 2000). Similarities exist that foster understanding of information gap activities in the same way. Scrivener (2011) sees communication with "information gap" possible when there is a purpose for speakers to do so. In this way, experts agree on what "information gap activities" are and how they work.

Teachers can find established ways of working with the information gap activities in EFL classrooms. Teachers can help monitor the students' progress of classwork and their role can be clearly defined by only guiding the information-gap tasks preferably to be carried out in dyads (Richards, 2002). Brown (2002) points out assorted language teaching techniques classification, in which they can be "ranging from controlled (drills, dialogues, reading aloud, display questions/answers, etc.) to semi-controlled (referential questions/answers, cued narratives, information gap activities, etc.) to free (role-plays, problem solving, interviews, discussions, etc.)" (p. 15). It can be concluded that information gap activities can be used in any level to promote speaking tasks; they provide optimization of time for learners to speak in class, with the teacher as a mere facilitator and monitor of the activities provided that the use of information gap activities is clear in terms of aims and procedures.

Oral Fluency in EFL

Fluency is not an easy aspect to define but "the narrowest definitions only include a few features, typically pausing, hesitations and speech rate, whereas the broadest uses are virtually synonymous with 'speaking proficiency'" (Luoma, 2009, p. 88). Ellis (2003) asserts

that “tasks that (1) provide contextual support; (2) have familiar or involving topics; (3) pose a single demand; (4) are closed; and (5) have a clear inherent structure are likely to promote fluency” (p. 127).

Regarding implications of fluency in speaking production, information gap activities are classified as a mixture of tasks that are open and closed but also more closely related to closed tasks (Brown, 2002). Therefore, learners can take advantage of the fewer possible ways to solve a closed task in which learners can take advantage of this, and eventually, they can achieve more fluency than with open tasks. (Long, 2015). Consequently, by designing the activities this way, learners can be responsible for developing their oral fluency more effectively as they can be guided to analyze the information. After that process, they would be able to find the gap and eventually to express the required information to “breach” such gap. These can be the actual steps for the students to have their oral fluency impacted because they focus on giving the proper information and once they have it, they focus on expressing the information as fluently as possible. Regarding assessment, the students should know the way they would be assessed beforehand.

As stated above, information gap activities are part of the communicative approach and, as such, they are useful to promote fluency and to motivate students to interact (Lindsay, 2000). They specifically foster “communicative” activities that are a means to bolster language fluency instead of accuracy (Harmer, 2001). Teachers should instruct their students to know the procedures of a speaking activity in order to acquire the natural pace of the procedure and, after doing this; the learners’ fluency can be promoted (Harmer, 2001).

Ejzenberg (1994) found an increase in oral fluency when learners developed guided tasks interacting with other people. Therefore, in information gap activities, as well as in cued dialogues, learners would find a gap in which interaction is necessary to solve a task, and this may bolster oral fluency.

Attitudes of EFL Learners Towards Information Gap Activities

It is of paramount importance to establish that there is no unified convention as to what *attitudes* are. According to a psychological definition, attitudes are related to the verbal expression of a person eventually turned into behavior (Harris, 2011). There is also the sociological definition where attitudes are a “mental position with regard to a fact or state” and also “a feeling or emotion toward a fact or state” (Attitude, n.d.). These definitions aim to understand learners’ reactions and behaviors during the implementation of information gap activities. In order to learn a foreign language, it is advisable to consider the students’ attitudes to determine and reflect if the tasks would be successful or not. Elder and Iwashita (2005) state that “attitudes towards a task and the conditions under which it is performed might itself have some impact on test performance” (p. 223). The students’ attitudes can be determined through the researcher’s ability to provide a suitable environment and the environment provided by the nature of the information gap activities themselves. Motivations are part of attitudes as they are part of people’s behaviors. Information gap activities can set the environment for motivating spoken interactions (Scrivener, 2011). Oxford (2001) states that “negative attitudes and beliefs can reduce learners’ motivation and harm language learning, while positive attitudes can do the reverse” (p. 168).

In order to set the mood for positive attitudes towards information gap activities, it is also appropriate to consider the students’ opinions, views, and interests, to take advantage of real-life settings, as real people do (Klippel, 1985). Kormos and Trebits (2011) found that learners with a positive attitude learned and achieved comprehension. In this action research study, through information gap activities, students were gradually able to build up meaningful communication and eventually that gave way to better student attitudes. Furthermore, information gap activities are a means to interact with

learners who have negative and positive attitudes in a bilingual context and, as such, teachers can gain the students' sympathy by using their mother tongue every once in a while to foster the students' positive attitudes towards the technique and to minimize negative ones (Lam, 2013). Therefore, through all the interactions and opportunities provided by information gap activities, students were able to have better attitudes towards the activities and even about English itself. In short, the more appealing the activities, the better the attitudes.

Method

This study was carried out in southern Chile. It adopted a mixed method approach with an action research design, and involved three instruments: a pre-test, post-test, and a focus group questionnaire. Each test was assessed with a holistic rubric (see Appendix A) adapted from "The Test of English for Educational Purposes Fluency Scale" (Weir, 1993, p. 44). The focus group was adapted from Krueger (2002). The rubric and focus group were validated by three PhD professors and five MA students. The pre-test, post-test, and the material used during the intervention had the format of information gap activities from a *Cambridge English: Young Learners* test at the A2 level, according to the CEFR (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2017a, b). The material was adapted according to the contents of the Chilean curricular framework. The main objective of this research was to determine the impact of information gap activities on young EFL learners' oral fluency. Three specific objectives were proposed: (1) to identify the young EFL learners' fluency level; (2) to examine the young EFL learners' fluency level through information gap activities; and (3) to uncover and analyze the young EFL learners' attitudes towards information gap activities. This study replicates the learning technique from research of Jondéya (2011), Putri (2014), Defrioka (2016), Ratnasari (2016), and Rini (2017) in which they used information gap activities to improve eighth graders' speaking skills. However, adaptations were made

in this action research project because of the learners' educational context.

Participants

The participants of this study were 23 eighth graders from a public high school in southern Chile. There were 15 female and 8 male learners of the ages of 13 and 14. Their English speaking level was between A1 and A2. Learners were observed and chosen because of their low performance in speaking activities. Furthermore, the authors previously mentioned also conducted a study with young learners of a similar grade level. Learners and their parents were informed about the study and they agreed to participate voluntarily by signing a consent letter.

Procedure

First, the principal, parents, and students received and signed the consent letter previously mentioned. After that, another EFL teacher was asked to be the examiner and applied the "Cambridge Young Learners English: Flyers Speaking" (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2017a) for the pre-test at the beginning of the intervention. The intervention consisted of 10 lessons within 10 weeks using the information gap activities. The examiner used the holistic rubric for fluency to assess the pre-test. Every lesson started with a brief vocabulary instruction of seven concepts with a "mind map" and then the task was modeled for the students. Furthermore, modifications had to be made after the second class. These changes had a friendlier design to make the activities less monotonous and less time-consuming. For every class, information gap activities consisted of two task types: Part 1: "Spot/find the difference"; in this task, learners worked in pairs, each one had a similar picture and talked about five of the differences they saw. Part 2: "Information exchange"; in this task, learners had an incomplete grid, then, they had to exchange information orally by posing questions and giving answers to complete the gaps. Both tasks were assessed with the same holistic rubric as in the pre-test. By the end of the semester, another EFL teacher carried

out a different version of the “Cambridge Young Learners English: Flyers Speaking” for the post-test (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2017b). Finally, a focus group questionnaire was applied to six students from the class. They were selected considering their interests in common and their similar personality characteristics.

Data Analysis

The pre-test responded to the first specific objective, the post-test responded to the second specific objective, and the focus group was conducted to approach the third specific objective in this study. The quantitative data were codified and analyzed with SPSS software. The qualitative data were transcribed and categorized in a conceptual network. To correlate the results of the instruments and the main goal, the findings are represented in the next section.

Findings

The intervention sought to approach the main objective: To determine the impact of information gap activities on young EFL learners’ oral fluency. The group of learners took the “Cambridge Young Learners English: Flyers Speaking” as a pre-test to identify their fluency level (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2017a). In part one, they took a “spot the difference” task, and in part two, “information

exchange” task. The rubric for the test included criteria that went from 0 point for “not met” when there were utterances in Spanish or no utterances at all, to 4 points for “fully met” where utterances, occasionally hesitant, were characterized by an evenness and flow, circumlocutions and connectors were used effectively as fillers, and there was, very occasionally, rephrasing (see Appendix A).

Table 1 shows the preliminary students’ results obtained in the pre-test. The mean for fluency fluctuates close to the “partially met” criteria from the rubric. Furthermore, about the type of tasks, in the “information exchange” task, learners got higher fluency scores than in the “spot the difference” task.

After the intervention, the group of learners took another “Cambridge Young Learners English: Flyers Speaking” as a post-test to examine their fluency level through information gap activities (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2017b). The international test had a similar format to the pre-test. To get the scores of the test, the same holistic rubric was used.

Table 2 shows that results of fluency in the post-test were near the “good” criteria from the rubric. Furthermore, the scores were higher than the ones obtained in the pre-test. Therefore, there were meaningful differences statistically between both tests in their fluency level ($p < 0.001$) and $t (5.284)$.

Table 1. Information Gap in Preliminary Oral Fluency Level

Pre-test parts	Minimum	Maximum	Acceptable score	Mean	SD
Spot the difference	0.0	3.0	4	1.391	0.6564
Information exchange	1.0	3.0	4	2.000	0.6742
Total pre-test	0.5	3.0	4	1.696	0.6168

Table 2. Information Gap in Preliminary and Post Oral Fluency Level

Total Pre-test and Post-test	Minimum	Maximum	Acceptable score	Mean	SD
Total pre-test	0.5	3.0	4	1.696	0.6168
Total post-test	1.5	4.0	4	2.870	0.8689

In a secondary analysis, there were unexpected results that required close attention (see Table 3). The “Spot the difference” task saw an increase in the post-test over the pre-test results. The “Information exchange” task also obtained an increase in its post-test in contrast to the pre-test. Finally, between the two types of activities, learners equated their fluency scores in the “spot the difference” post-test and in the “information exchange” post-test.

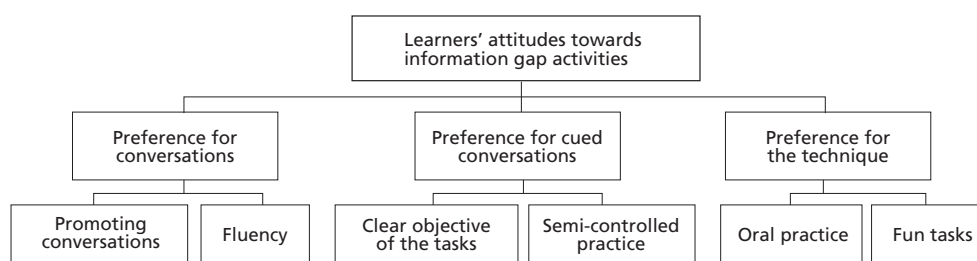
The following results were taken from the focus group to uncover and analyze the young EFL learners' attitudes towards information gap activities. Figure 1 shows the students' most recurring answers that

represented and reflected such attitudes in terms of preferences about the use of information gap activities during the intervention. The focus group included opening questions, introductory questions, transition questions, key questions, and ending questions (adapted from Krueger, 2002. See Appendix B). Only the questions and answers that were useful to address the third objective were considered. Every utterance was transcribed, translated into English, and categorized. The categories were: preference for conversations, preference for cued conversations, and preference for the technique.

Table 3. Information Gap in Both Task Types for Oral Fluency Level

Pre-tests and Post-tests Parts	Minimum	Maximum	Acceptable score	Mean	SD
Pre-test: Spot the difference	0.0	3.0	4	1.391	0.6564
Post-test: Spot the difference	1.0	4.0	4	2.870	0.9679
Pre-test: Information exchange	1.0	3.0	4	2.000	0.6742
Post-test: Information exchange	1.0	4.0	4	2.870	0.9197

Figure 1. Answers About Attitudes Towards Information Gap Activities



Discussion

In accordance with this action research implementation, the EFL young learners evidenced a positive impact in their oral fluency. Information gap activities were essential for real-life communication and learners improved their oral communication because this technique was helpful to make them interact as they

felt the need to communicate (Harmer, 2001). After the intervention, learners demonstrated a better oral fluency performance in their speaking skills in the post-test in comparison to the pre-test. This could be caused by the progressive practice and the internalization of the activities procedure. There were similar empirical results in the studies of Jondéya (2011), Putri (2014),

Defrioka (2016), Ratnasari (2016), and Rini (2017), in which they had significant results by using information gap activities with young learners.

The learners showed positive attitudes towards speaking activities by using information gap activities. They expressed their attitudes described in three main categories: preference for conversations, preference for cued conversations, and preference for the technique. Students pointed out that information gap activities helped them to learn how to communicate more fluently through conversations and to learn new words and pronunciation. They also felt that the activities helped to improve their spoken English and they were suitable for promoting conversations instead of the traditional use of the textbook. In comparison with free practice conversations, they argued that tasks had a clearer objective, the topics were specific, conversations were more direct containing visual cues and written chunks of language. Regarding this idea, Willis (1996) states that it is easier for learners to know their progress by using semi-controlled tasks because they can have more specific objectives with different ways of achieving a goal through a motivating procedure. Furthermore, about how the activities helped them and what learners thought by recalling the technique, learners stated that the activities provided the chance to know what to say, they were more fun than textbooks and good for guided practice of English in the classroom. They believed that the activities made conversations and their thinking process easier as they were innovative.

In terms of limitations, the young EFL learners' fluency level was inferior prior to the intervention. Their lack of speaking skills may have been caused by their EFL context and their limited opportunities to interact with native speakers outside the classroom in real-world situations. It was also observed that learners seemed to have experienced limited opportunities to approach speaking activities inside the classroom. Time was a factor because the task procedure took

longer than expected. Consequently, the length of the intervention had to be reduced. Only three students, who did not participate in the focus group, expressed having felt tired of the activities. To solve the issue previously mentioned, the activities had to be redesigned to make them friendlier and slightly shorter. Afterwards, such learners' attitudes changed positively during classes. Through observation, it seemed that the level of anxiety apparently decreased during the intervention. Age and gender were not considered in this action research study. Perhaps a study over a longer period would have revealed more gradable results. These previously mentioned aspects could be a relevant matter for further research.

Other teachers in EFL context, especially in South America, should use this technique because of the improvements it could provide in speaking fluency and learners' attitudes. Students felt guided while the tasks were being developed. Learners could also produce oral utterances in a fluent way and for them it was an innovative technique in contrast to other traditional activities they were accustomed to doing. Young learners should use this semi-controlled activity (Brown, 2002) because it avoids the use of traditionally controlled tasks and promotes participation with motivating tasks that are learner-centered (Lindsay, 2000). With information gap activities, teachers may use contrived material and they can adapt elements of authentic material to be used as well. Furthermore, EFL teachers may include these types of activities to promote and refine speaking skills in the classroom, as they can be adapted and carried out by using any topic and content (Lindsay, 2000) from the national curricular framework. It should be noted that the information gap activities procedure must be followed as it is presented in the pre-test and post-test to achieve meaningful outcomes; otherwise, teachers may not meet their expectations and benefits from this technique. As a suggestion, because of the positive results obtained in this action research, the Chilean Ministry of Education could modify and incorporate

new designs based on information gap activities to bolster the communicative approach in the National Curriculum.

Conclusions

This research project replicated the studies of Jondeya (2011), Putri (2014), Defrioka (2016), Ratnasari (2016), and Rini (2017) in which they used information gap activities to provide the practice of spoken English in a motivating and fun way (Ur, 1996) and it contributed to meaningful real-world communication with a semi-controlled technique (Brown, 2002). Furthermore, in Chile, the students' performance in speaking activities tend to present poor results (British Council, 2015) and the abovementioned studies proved to be pertinent within the context of this action research study. Therefore, the participants chosen for this study were 23 eighth graders from a high school in southern Chile. These types of students seemed to need more spoken English input to achieve and refine their oral fluency production and, according to preliminary suppositions, the use of information gap activities was going to improve the students' oral fluency by the end of the intervention. Subsequently, the results of the pre-test and post-test showed that the students had an improvement in their oral fluency. Additionally, this intervention helped most of the young learners to increase their positive attitude towards speaking activities by using information gap activities according to what they expressed in the focus group. Both of the previously mentioned aspects responded to the main objective of this action research. Furthermore, these kinds of tasks could be useful for students who tend to feel overwhelmed, lost, and frustrated with speaking activities because of their poor performance within similar contexts. To sum up, EFL teachers may eventually find support and relief in their teaching practice with the benefits that information gap activities can cater for their learners, as it is an advisable technique to motivate and provide interesting material for speaking activities.

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About the Author

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Appendix A: Fluency Rubric (Adapted From Weir, 1993, p. 44)

Name:

Date:

Fluency

Part 1: Find/spot the differences	4 = Fully met Utterances, when occasionally hesitant, are characterized by an evenness and flow. There are, very occasionally, rephrasing and circumlocutions. Connectors are used effectively as fillers.	3 = Good Signs of developing attempts at using cohesive devices, especially conjunctions. Utterances may still be hesitant, but are gaining in coherence, speed, and length.	2 = Partially met Utterances stopping and often incomplete except in a few responses. Sentences are, for the most part, disjointed and restricted in length.	1 = Needs improvement Utterances stopping, fragmentary, and incoherent.	0 = Not met Utterances in Spanish or no utterances at all.
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Appendix B: Focus Group¹

Opening questions

1. What did you like the most about the speaking activities?
2. How did you use the activity to speak?

Introductory questions

3. Tell me, what do you think about speaking activities now?
4. What are the characteristics of a motivating conversation for you?
5. Would you give an example about how you can distinguish when it is an “information gap activity”?

Transition questions

6. Think back over the semester and tell me, what was the most enjoyable memory regarding a speaking activity in any class?
7. If you could change something about the classes you had this semester, what would you do to make them better?

Key questions

8. When did we use the “information gap activities” technique? What is the difference between a traditional conversation and a conversation by using the “information gap activities” technique?
9. Think about the “information gap activities”, what comes to mind?
10. How did the “information gap activities” technique help you to speak English?
11. What can each one of us do to improve the “information gap activities”?

Ending questions

12. Let us suppose that you had 30 seconds to talk to the people in charge of designing the eighth graders' syllabus, what suggestions would you make?
13. Of all the things we discussed, what is the most important for you?
14. Was this an appropriate summary?
15. Have we forgotten something?

¹ Translation of the focus group has been made for publication purposes.