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Oral Language Instructions: Teacher and Learner Beliefs and the Reality in EFL Classes at a Colombian University

Andrew D. Cohen

Lydia Fass

En una universidad colombiana, un grupo de profesores-investigadores estudian las creencias y los tipos de instrucción de la práctica oral en inglés y su evaluación. 40 profesores y 63 estudiantes de diferentes niveles participaron en esta investigación. Cuestionarios, entrevistas y observaciones de clase fueron los instrumentos aplicados. Entre las implicaciones pedagógicas se destacan la necesidad de orientar los actores de este aprendizaje hacia una práctica verdaderamente comunicativa y la de capacitar a los profesores en la evaluación de la misma.

Palabras clave: creencias de los actores del aprendizaje, EFL, instrucciones de la práctica oral en inglés, seguimiento.

Dans une université colombienne, un groupe de professeurs-chercheurs analysent les croyances et les types d'instruction lors de la pratique orale de l'anglais et les modes d'évaluation adoptés. 40 professeurs et 63 étudiants de différents niveaux ont participé dans cette recherche. Au cours de celle-ci, des instruments comme des questionnaires, des entrevues et l'observation des classes ont été utilisés. Les conséquences pédagogiques qui en découlent sont de deux ordres: orienter les acteurs de cet apprentissage vers une pratique réellement communicative et former de manière plus intensive les professeurs à une évaluation suivie de cette pratique. Mots-clés: croyances des acteurs de l'apprentissage, EFL, instructions de la pratique orale en anglais, évaluation suivie.

A group of teacher-researchers took a bottom-up, in-depth look at practices and beliefs about oral language and its assessment. Forty teachers and 63 students in beginning, intermediate, and advanced courses at a Colombian University's English program participated in the study. Instrumentation included questionnaires, follow-up questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation. The pedagogical implications included a need for guidance both to teachers and students in how to make EFL teaching and learning truly communicative in nature, and more teachers training in how to conduct language assessment in the classroom. Key words: teacher and learner beliefs, EFL learning and teaching, English oral language instruction, language assessment.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching and assessment of oral language in university-level English as a foreign language classrooms in some parts of the world continues to be a challenging endeavor. In cases where the teachers of English are nonnatives and not necessarily fluent in English, they may lack confidence about their oral language skills. As for the EFL students, they may be reluctant to speak English in class and often do not have much opportunity to practice using the language outside of the classroom. Classes may be large, the curriculum may favor the written language, and the focus may be on grammar rather than on oral communication. Hence, the speaking skills among these EFL students may not be well exercised and consequently underdeveloped.

Commensurate with a lack of emphasis on speaking instruction, there may be reluctance on the part of teachers to assess oral language in the classroom. Aside from the issues of time and logistics, a plausible explanation is that EFL teachers do not receive adequate training in or exposure to how to assess oral language performance so as to feel comfortable doing it. Along with a possible lack on the part of teachers to promote speaking in the classroom and a sense of inability on the part of EFL students to speak English adequately, there may also be a set of beliefs on the part of both students and teachers supporting a more traditional approach to language instruction - that a reasonable way to proceed is to focus on the other modalities (that is, grammar, reading, and writing) rather than on oral communication. A

logical explanation for this would be the special demands that oral communication puts both on the nonnative English-speaking teachers who must serve as a model of English fluency and on the students as well, who are called upon to perform orally in front of their peers and possibly lose face as a result.

1. A BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The current popularity of communicative approaches to ESL and EFL instruction in many parts of the world has prompted teachers to look for varied means of assessing their students' oral abilities in the classroom (see Brown, 2001, Ch. 3)¹. With this shift in the focus of oral language assessment from more traditional interviews with pat questions to more communicative, performance-oriented measures (see,

for example, Brown, 1998; Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998), perhaps there will be an increased trend in foreign-language teacher training programs around the world towards these more performance-oriented measures. As the professional literature provides more such varied and flexible examples of how to evaluate oral performance, teachers may feel more motivated to conduct oral language assessment in the classroom.

With regard to teachers' beliefs about oral language instruction, much of the research on teacher and student beliefs in foreign language classrooms has so far relied primarily on Horwitz's "Beliefs about

Language Learning Inventory” (BALLI 1983, 1987). The BALLI is comprised of 34 broadly-tuned items, including items relating to various aspects of speaking, such as beliefs about the ease of learning to speak, the importance of pronunciation, committing errors in speaking, and the role of practice.

Studies using the BALLI have, for instance, compared the beliefs of Russian learners of English to those of American learners of French and Spanish (Tlimposky, 1991). Interestingly, in that study, the 54 Russian students were more likely to hold the belief that it was important to take risks and to practice speaking the language, while

The current popularity of communicative approaches to ESL and EFL instruction in many parts of the world has prompted teachers to look for varied means of assessing their students’ oral abilities in the classroom

the 36 Americans were holding themselves back from practicing the speaking skill, although they were motivated to achieve fluency. These American students believed that the learning of the target language was not viewed by their compatriots as an important or valued achievement, nor would it necessarily lead to better employment opportunities. It should also be pointed out that the Russian students were a select group of undergraduates who were in the U.S. on an orientation program

before being placed as exchange students in American colleges, so they had already committed themselves to risk taking and were in an ESL, not an EFL, situation.

A more recent study by Kem (1995) demonstrated how the BALLI could be used to compare teacher and student beliefs and to tease out differences that may exist. In a study of the beliefs of 288 first and second-semester college French students and their instructors, it was found that in certain domains teachers’ beliefs bore little, if any, relationship to students’ beliefs. For example, students’ and instructors’ opinions on pronunciation, error correction, and the importance of rule learning contrasted more at the end of the semester than at the beginning. Kern highlighted the importance not only of the nature of the textbook but also of the test materials. As he put it, “In the final analysis it is not what we say that is important or unimportant, but rather what we assess, and how we assess it, that will send a clear message to our students about what instructed language learning is all about” (Kern, 1995: 81).

2. THE NEED FOR THIS STUDY

Given the myriad of reasons why EFL students may not develop speaking skills and why the assessment of these abilities may be limited, there has emerged a clear need for research on beliefs and practices regarding the teaching, learning, and assessment of speaking. In addition, since the issues are so deeply embedded in classroom practices, it would seem imperative to engage classroom teachers in

the research effort. Hence, a plan for study would entail both quantitative and qualitative forms of action research by teachers, including the design of interview schedules and questionnaires, and the collection of data (Hopkins, 1993; Seliger and Shohamy, 1989; Freeman, 1998; Wallace, 1998; Burns, 1999). Action research has been defined as “systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to some decisions about what your practice should be” (Wallace, 1998:4). Wallace also underscored the benefits of collaborative action research — that is, working in subgroups of teacher colleagues.

The study reported on in this article reflects a research project involving issues that were raised by teachers at the grass-roots level. It reflects action research in the true sense of the word where local teachers in an English as a Foreign Language program met together repeatedly until a research study emerged. In response to this need for research on beliefs and practices regarding the teaching, learning, and assessment of speaking, nine Colombian teacher-researchers took an in-depth look at instructional practices and beliefs about oral language and its assessment. The study arose out of an awareness that in order to be more competitive on a global scale, citizens of third world countries need to be proficient in English and as a response to a 1994 mandate by the Colombian government that students be bilingual in order to procure a professional degree. Because language instruction in the past had not emphasized listening and

speaking, the local teachers got together to do research on the oral component of their EFL language classes.

The Research and Development Unit2 at the Language Center at EAFIT University gave nine of its teacher- researchers a mandate to devise research projects consistent with the center’s goals of internationalizing the curriculum and implementing a more communicative approach to language teaching. The group identified three areas of concern related to oral production in the classroom that they wished to investigate: students’ and teachers’ beliefs about oral production in the classroom, materials used for providing the oral component of the class, and the measures used in oral assessment.

The research questions were as follows:

1. How do teachers and students believe oral instruction should be handled in the classroom? To what extent do the beliefs that the teachers have about students’ oral production in the classroom and the students’ own beliefs match the reality?
2. How are teachers using the required materials for oral language production?
3. How do teachers assess students orally?

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Sample

The sample was drawn from teachers and students involved with the Adult English Program at EAFIT University, Medellin, Colombia. The teacher sample at the Adult English Program consisted of fifty-one



Bodegón con curubas. 1997 Acuarela sobre Arches. 56 x 76 cm.
Rodrigo A. Uribe M.

teachers (plus the nine teacher-researchers, who did not participate in the study). The vast majority of teachers were native speakers of Spanish who had grown up in Spanish-speaking countries or were bilinguals, having lived at least part of their childhood in the U.S. These teachers came mostly from upper-class areas and the majority had spent time abroad.

Slightly fewer than half of the EFL teachers at the Language Center were university students who were working on their undergraduate degrees. Those with post-secondary degrees came from a wide variety of specializations. Only about a quarter of them had undergraduate degrees in language teaching, others had undergraduate degrees in education, although not necessarily in language teaching, and the majority had no training in education at all. Those teachers with experience in language education were

most familiar with the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methodologies since this was the way that they themselves had learned languages in school and was consequently the method of instruction that most of them employed in their classrooms.

The student sample consisted of 63 subjects, reflecting 5% of those enrolled in beginning, intermediate and advanced level EFL courses. Information was gathered from five different classes for beginners with a total of 42 student respondents, three intermediate classes with 15 students, and two advanced classes with a total of 6 students. Courses were chosen according to the number of students enrolled in order to have the sample mirror as closely as possible the percentage of students at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels in the program. Adult courses were attended by both employees sent from

large companies in the city and students from the surrounding wealthier communities.

3.2 Instrumentation

3.2.1 Beliefs Questionnaires, Interview, and Classroom Observation Instrument

An initial questionnaire was constructed in Spanish by the three teacher researchers in the group focusing on beliefs, referred to from here on as “the Beliefs Group.” The group asked the EFL teacher respondents for their beliefs about:

(1) the ideal percentage of class time for teacher talk and why, (2) the ideal percentage of class time for student talk and why, (3) the characteristics of successful oral production by students in a class, and (4) the types of oral activities appropriate for learning and practicing English in class. The questionnaire was designed so that it could be used for both teachers and students. (Copies of all instruments used in the study may be obtained from the EAFIT University Language Center.)

On the basis of responses from the administration of the first questionnaire regarding types of oral activities that were appropriate, the three Beliefs Group teachers realized that they needed to know how appropriate teachers felt each type of oral activity was. As a result, they generated a list of activities based on those activities provided by teachers and students, and created a follow-up questionnaire in which they asked their teacher colleagues to score each activity on a scale of Five: from “very appropriate” to

“not appropriate” for oral practice in the classroom.

In an effort to determine whether teacher and student beliefs matched the reality, a class observation instrument was also designed on the basis of responses from the first questionnaire. The instrument consisted of a chart containing a list of types of oral activities based both on responses to the teacher and student questionnaires, and on the professional literature: Brown and Yule’s task types (1983), Cohen’s suggestions for assessing speaking skills (1994), and Wallace’s (1998) observation techniques. The instrument called for identification of all oral activities, and an indication of whether they were conducted as a whole class, in pairs, or in groups, and for timing of the amount of teacher talk and student talk.

3.2.2 Materials Questionnaires and Interview

An initial questionnaire was designed by three teacher researchers (henceforth referred to as “the Materials Group”) focusing on the materials used for teaching oral language requested that teachers indicate: (a) what they thought the strengths and weaknesses of the required textbook series were with regard to oral production activities, (b) whether they used the series’ activities the way they were designed and why, (c) the kinds of changes they made to the books’ oral activities and why, (d) whether the textbooks lent themselves to these changes, and (e) whether they provided additional oral activities for their classes and why. The textbook series being used was the

Spectrum ESL Series Volumes 1- 4 (Dye & Frankfurt, 1993-1994) and Volume 5 (Costinett & Byrd, 1994).

As with the Beliefs Group, the Materials Group teacher researchers used responses from the first, open- ended questionnaire to construct a second one. Their goal was to obtain more information from teachers regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the oral activities appearing in the textbooks. They created a list of nine strengths and eleven weaknesses supplied by respondents to the first questionnaire and asked teachers to indicate the extent to which they agreed with these judgments about the strengths of the activities appearing in their textbooks. Teachers were also asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that each activity actually related to oral production.

In addition, an interview was designed to focus on how the teachers carried out specific oral activities in the required textbooks in order to gather more detailed information on what was actually happening in the classroom. The three teacher-researchers in the Materials Group chose two representative book activities for each level so that they were able to ask teachers about the level they taught most frequently. The intention was to show the teachers the book task, ask them how they taught the exercise, and ask probing questions if responses lacked detail. The teacher-researchers were concerned with what the teachers did first, what instruction they gave students, how the students responded, the kinds of materials they used for the exercise, the time they spent on the exercise, and how they wrapped it up.

3.2.3 Assessment Questionnaires and Interview

The teacher researchers focusing on language assessment (henceforth “the Assessment Group”) designed an initial questionnaire which asked the teachers to list the features that they considered when assessing students’ oral production and to rank these features from most important to least important. Then the questionnaire provided a list of possible tasks for assessing students orally - such as describing an object or picture and performing a dialog (based on Brown & Yule, 1983), and requested the teachers to indicate for students at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels, the number of times per quarter they typically did each task. In addition, teachers were to indicate the extent to which feedback was given to individuals, pairs/ groups, or the whole class. Within each of these categories, they were asked if the feedback was given in a written form (i.e., through a journal, a note, or an evaluation form) or orally (i.e., in conjunction with a form or on tape). Finally, the teachers were asked to indicate how often they gave students feedback on their oral production: after each oral task, once a week, three times during the term, in the middle and end of the term, at the end of the term, or when needed.

In analyzing the responses to the Assessment Group’s survey, the teacher researchers found that teachers in their sample had misunderstood their third question about methods of feedback on oral production. Many teachers thought that written feedback on students’ oral

production actually meant feedback on students' written work. Therefore, the investigators decided to clarify this and ask the question again in a follow-up questionnaire. They also realized that it would be useful to know which methods of feedback were the most and least used, so in addition they asked teachers to identify the methods that they used the most and least frequently. On the question about the frequency of feedback on oral production in the initial questionnaire, many teachers had given more than one response when asked to give only one. Therefore, this question was clarified and also included in the follow-up questionnaire.

The three Assessment Group teachers focused the design of an Assessment Interview on gathering more details on how teachers assessed students orally. The interview included questions on: (a) how they decided on the number of times to implement an oral assessment task, (b) how they chose which tasks to use with a particular class, (c) how feedback to students regarding their performance on an oral assessment task was given, (d) how they decided on how often to give the students feedback, and (5) the step-by-step procedure that was employed when giving students feedback.

4 Data COLLECTION and ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

4.1 Teacher Questionnaires and Interviews

The questionnaires for the Beliefs and Materials Groups were fairly short, so they were combined and distributed to 25 teachers. Over two-thirds of these teachers

responded (68%). Interviews by the Materials Group were conducted with a random sub-sample of over half the teachers from the original group (56%) subsequent to their responding to the questionnaire and an interview was also conducted with the Adult English Program Coordinator. The Oral Assessment questionnaire was given to the other 26 teachers and 77% were returned. In addition, 42% of the teachers who received this Oral Assessment questionnaire were asked to participate in interviews.

The two teacher questionnaires (Materials/Beliefs and Oral Assessment) were distributed randomly in a mandatory teachers' meeting where the project and its benefits to the teachers were explained. Teachers were also asked to sign a consent form at this meeting. The Follow-Up Questionnaires for the Beliefs Group and the Materials Group were again combined and distributed to twenty-two of the original sample of twenty-five teachers at the Language Center. The Follow-Up Assessment Questionnaire was distributed to twenty of the twenty-six teachers who had been given the first Assessment Questionnaire. Eleven teachers responded to this follow-up questionnaire.

4.2 Student Questionnaire

For the student Beliefs Questionnaire, the researchers visited classes to explain the project, ask students to participate, and have them sign consent forms. The students filled out the questionnaires in class, with a researcher present to answer any questions and collect the questionnaires. Again, strict procedures

and scripts were adhered to in the collection of the student data and in responding to students' questions. The procedures indicated the steps to be taken both before and during the interview, and also included written instructions for the interviewer to use.

4.3 Classroom Observation

The Beliefs Group teacher researchers decided to observe six different classes for six consecutive hours each. Of the six classes observed, four were at the beginning level, one at the intermediate, and one at the advanced, reflecting the relative distribution of students across levels. Before the observations, the researchers went to the classes involved to explain what would be happening, why the class was being videotaped, and to get consent from both the students and their teacher. Procedures and scripts were written for this process as well. The reason for observing six consecutive hours was that this was the amount of time allotted for completing a unit, and researchers felt that within a unit, all types of oral activities were typically represented. In order to compare actual oral language activity in the classroom with teachers' and students' beliefs about the amount of teacher talk and student talk there should be, the group videotaped the observed classes and timed the amount of teacher and student talk.

5 DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Simple frequency counts for the raw data and/or percentages by category were used in the reporting of the findings because of the small sample size and unequal data entries across categories.

6 RESULTS

6.1 How did teachers and students believe oral instruction should be handled in the classroom? To what extent did the beliefs that teachers have about students' oral production in the classroom and the students' own beliefs match the reality?

6.1.1 Amount of Teacher Talk and Student Talk

The Belief Group's first question concerned the amount of teacher talk that students and teachers felt was ideal.

While a full half of the teachers felt that they as teachers should be speaking only 30% of the time, many fewer of the students (only 14%) shared this opinion. Fourteen percent of students felt that teachers should talk 60% of the time, 37% indicated 50% and 16% indicated 40% (see Table 1). The reasons given most frequently by teachers for teacher talk were: "in order to provide instruction," "to provide students with an opportunity to practice," and "to give students feedback." Students also felt that "providing instruction" and "providing students an opportunity to practice" were important. However, another reason students gave for extensive teacher talk was "to help the students develop their language skills."

Regarding the amount of student talk the teachers and students felt was ideal, almost half of the teachers felt that students' oral participation should be at 70%. Almost half of the students, however, felt that they should be speaking no more than 50% of the time (see Table 2). When looking only

at the amount of time that the videotaped ranking "grammar" as the most

Table 1

Ideal Percentage of Teacher Talk		
Ideal % of Teacher Talk	Out of 14 teachers, number indicating a given %	Out of 57 students, number indicating a given %
75	0	1
70	0	4
60	0	8
55	0	1
50	3	21
40	1	9
35	1	0
30	7	8
	25	1
20	1	4

class-room interactions involved the teacher and/or students talking (excluding the other activities), 57% comprised teacher talk and 43% student talk or group work. This finding was consistent with what

With regard to what teachers and students believed were the characteristics of good oral production, there were both similarities and differences in teachers' and students' responses. In addition, there was also a disparity between the oral production goals as articulated by the Director and Academic Committee of the Language Center and the teachers' beliefs as to what constituted good oral production. While the articulated goal of the Language Center, as noted above, was to emphasize fluency and meaning, teachers tended to value form and accuracy in oral language as can be seen by their

important. students believed should happen in the classroom, but less than what teachers believed was appropriate. In fact, some teachers believed that students should be talking as much as 80% of the time.

6.1.2 Characteristics of Good Oral Production

With regard to what teachers and students believed were the characteristics of good oral production, there were both similarities and differences in teachers' and students' responses (see Table 3). Forty-seven percent of the teachers believed that good grammar was a major aspect of good oral production, whereas only 18% of the students believed this. In contrast, 40% of the students believed fluency to be important vs. 29% of the teachers. Seventeen percent of the students believed listening comprehension to be important while only 6% of the teachers did.

In addition, there was also a disparity between the oral production goals as articulated by the Director and Academic Committee of the Language Center and the teachers’ beliefs as to what constituted good oral production. While the articulated goal of the Language Center, as noted above, was to emphasize fluency and meaning, teachers tended to value form and accuracy in oral language as can be seen by their ranking “grammar” as the most important, and “vocabulary” and “pronunciation” second of the items they listed as characteristics of good oral production (see Table 3).

6.1.3 Beliefs about Range of Oral Activities and Classroom Observations

Table 2

Ideal Percentage of Student Talk		
Ideal % of Student Talk	Out of 14 students, number indicating a given %	Out of 57 students, number indicating a given %
90	0	1
80	1	4
78	1	0
75	2	1
70	7	5
65	1	0
60	1	8
50	2	27
45	0	1
40	0	10
30	0	2

In comparing the results of the beliefs classroom observations revealed that there

Table 3

Characteristics of Good Oral Production Listed by Teachers and Students*			
Characteristic	Percentage of Teachers (N=25)	Percentage of Students (N=63)	
Good grammar	47	18	
Good vocabulary	29	30	
Good fluency	29	40	
Good pronunciation	29	46	
Effective discourse	24	3	
Effective communication of message	18	8	
Staying in the foreign language	12	19	
Ability to converse	12	5	
Creativity	6	3	
Responding appropriately to questions	6	3	
Good aural comprehension	6	17	

- The characteristics are actually the investigators' characterization of teacher and student open-ended responses.
- Percentages total more than 100 because subjects could indicate more than one characteristic.

questionnaires with the data collected in the class observations, it was found that there was a sizeable difference between the activities that teachers listed as appropriate in the questionnaires and what was actually observed in the classroom. Although teachers felt that a great variety of activities were appropriate for learning English, few were actually employed in the classroom; 46% of the oral activities observed were "question and answer" activities. While two-thirds of the teachers had indicated on the questionnaire that whole-class work was either "appropriate" or "very appropriate," many more than that (89%) employed this class arrangement in the oral activities that were observed.

In addition, whereas ninety-five percent of teachers felt that pair work was appropriate and 100% indicated the same belief about group work, only 8% of the oral activities observed were actually carried out in pairs and only 3% in groups. Finally, the

was an average of three oral activities per 100-minute class, lasting for an average of 8.5 minutes. That meant that only one-quarter of the class time comprised oral activities. Hence, there was a conflict between the communicative approach that the Language Center aimed to employ and the limited role of communication as observed by means of the videotaping.

6.2 How did teachers use the required materials for oral language production?

6.2.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Required Textbook Series

The following nine strengths of the Spectrum series emerged from the teacher questionnaire responses to the initial questionnaire. The series was found to: (1) promote oral language use, (2) clearly explain features of dialogues, (3) have realistic situations in dialogs, (4) have language appropriate for all levels of

formality, (5) facilitate the statement of ideas, opinions, and feelings, (6) sequence speaking tasks logically, (7) promote communication from beginning levels, (8) promote oral interaction, and (9) provide authentic situations. The weaknesses reported in the initial questionnaire were that it: (1) contained mechanical practice, (2) was boring, (3) was repetitive, (4) did not contain authentic situations, (5) was written for ESL, not EFL, (6) lacked learning strategies focus, (7) did not contain enough explanation concerning structures, (8) contained repetitive structure exercises, (9) had too many structure exercises per unit, (10) had too few activities, and (11) had too many topics. Interestingly, while these two lists were compiled from the teachers' reactions to the materials, there was so much diversity in the teachers' reactions that they did not reach as a group reach consensus on the follow-up questionnaire as to the strengths and weaknesses of the series.

Activities involving the "giving of instructions" were more prevalent in the lower-level texts, and activities involving "narration" and "giving opinions" more in the upper level texts. It would appear, therefore, that teachers tended to use the types of tasks presented in their texts, possibly meaning that the texts, rather than the teachers, were dictating the types of tasks used.

6.2.2 Teachers Used the Oral Activities in the Textbooks

Teachers indicated that they sometimes altered the way they used lessons from the textbook series in order to make oral activities more student-centered and to make the book situations more meaningful

and realistic. In addition, some teachers indicated attempting to make the lessons more communicative or to give the students an opportunity to practice the language. A third of the teachers noted that adaptations were easy to make because the books' oral activities could be related to the students' lives.

6.3 How did teachers assess students orally?

6.3.1 Characteristics Considered When Assessing Students Orally

Regarding the characteristics that teachers considered when assessing students orally and the importance given to each characteristic, the top two characteristics generated by teachers were found to be pronunciation and grammar. ¹¹¹⁶ tact that all of these characteristics were based on accuracy ran counter to the communicative approach to teaching. One of the elements emphasized in a communicative classroom, making oneself comprehensible, was ranked last out of nine characteristics, along with discourse (see Table 4).

6.3.2 Tasks for Assessing Students Orally

The teachers reported using a wide variety of tasks in oral assessment of students. This was true across levels as well. In the Spectrum series (Dye & Frankfurt, 1993-1994; Costinett & Byrd, 1994), description, role-play, and dialog activities were found throughout. Activities involving the

It would seem important to investigate why the fit between teachers' beliefs and classroom instructional practice was not closer. It was evident from the information gathered by the Beliefs Group that both teachers and students could benefit from a better sense of what a

“communicative” classroom actually entails. In addition, perhaps teachers could benefit from training in how to apply their beliefs to their classroom practice.

“giving of instructions” were more prevalent in the lower-level texts, and activities involving “narration” and “giving opinions” more in the upper level

7.1 Summary

The Beliefs Group researchers found that there was some disagreement between student and teacher beliefs regarding the appropriate amount of student and teacher talk in the classroom, with teachers



Bodegón con anones. 1995 Acuarela sobre Arches. 100 x 140 cm.
Rodrigo A. Uribe M.

texts. It would appear, therefore, that teachers tended to use the types of tasks presented in their texts, possibly meaning that the texts, rather than the teachers, were dictating the types of tasks used.

6.3.3 Feedback Method for Oral Production

With regard to the methods teachers employed for giving students feedback on their oral production, the results indicated that when given to individuals, pairs, or small groups, there was reported variety in whether feedback was presented orally or involved some written format, such as an evaluation sheet. However, when given to the class as a whole, the teacher most frequently reported delivering feedback orally.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

believing in more robust student participation. In comparing these beliefs to actual classroom observation, there was an observed discrepancy in that teacher talk dominated the observed classes. In addition, teacher beliefs and the reality did not always match the Language Center's oral language goal which was to “enable students to communicate orally through a communicative approach to teaching: providing student - centered courses, encouraging interaction in the classroom through pair work and group work, and presenting a variety of opportunities for students to produce spoken language.”

The findings from the Materials Group indicated that the teachers in the study had differing opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their textbook series* and employed a variety of methods for making the textbooks work for them.

However, because the types of changes teachers were making most frequently would have needed to be made with any textbook in order to meet the needs of the specific population being taught, and because teachers felt that it was easy to make these changes, it would seem that the series was serving its purpose. On the basis of these data, therefore, the researchers concluded that the series did not need to be replaced.

Assessment Group researchers found that teachers reported focusing on pronunciation and grammatical accuracy when assessing students' oral abilities, rather than on more communicative aspects of oral production (e.g., fluency, making oneself comprehensible, and discourse). In addition, there was no prevalent method across teachers for giving feedback, with a preference for using the assessment tasks provided in the textbook.

7.2 Limitations

The researchers faced some limitations in drawing these conclusions. In many cases the sample size was limited. With the Beliefs Group, the large difference in teacher and student sample sizes made it difficult to compare the two groups numerically. Another limitation was that the teacher population was not fully sampled because of the difficulty of getting questionnaires back from teachers. In addition, even when questionnaires were filled out, it appeared that both teachers and students did not necessarily understand the wording of items on the pilot questionnaire and sometimes even on the

revised versions.

In some ways, it was a challenge for the teacher-researchers to be doing the study in a context where local perspectives on what constituted research and how to conduct it were sometimes at odds with conventional approaches to applied linguistic research in the Western world, and where there was no means for compensating participants since this was an idea foreign to the local culture. Still another limitation was that because the questionnaires were anonymous, it was not known whether the six teachers who were observed teaching had filled out the Beliefs questionnaire. Had they done so, it may have had some impact on their observed behavior (such as the amount of their teacher-talk and types of oral activities).

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research and Pedagogical Implications

It would seem important to investigate why the fit between teachers' beliefs and classroom instructional practice was not closer. It was evident from the information gathered by the Beliefs Group that both teachers and students could benefit from a better sense of what a "communicative" classroom actually entails. In addition, perhaps teachers could benefit from training in how to apply their beliefs to their classroom practice. The main pedagogical implications of the study were twofold: (1) there was a need to provide guidance both to teachers and students in how to make EFL teaching and learning truly communicative in nature, and (2) teachers needed more training in how to

conduct oral language assessment in the classroom.

8 CONCLUSIONS

One of the strengths of this study was its efforts at convergent validation by having three different groups of teacher researchers converging on the same issue, namely oral language instruction and assessment from different vantage points. Overall, what the research on oral language production at the EAFIT University Language Center showed was that although the program claimed to have a communicative approach to teaching, the teachers had not been completely successful in implementing this approach.

Some of the data gathered, especially from the Materials Group, showed that teachers were aware of the elements of a communicative classroom and were trying to implement this approach when teaching. However, they had not applied these concepts to all areas of their classes, as was especially evident in the data gathered by the Assessment Group. Moreover, the beliefs held by teachers and by students did not generally reflect a communicative approach to second language teaching. What this meant for the Language Center was that more training of the teachers and more education of both teachers and students needed to be done in order to have a truly communicative language program.

NOTES

1 Brown offers six interconnected characteristics as a description of communicative language teaching - focusing on all components, engaging

learners in use of language for meaningful purposes, striking a proper balance between fluency and accuracy, teaching for out-of-class communication, focus on the learning process, teacher as facilitator (Brown. 2001:43)).

2 The research team was headed by the author of this article, Lydia Fass. and included the teacher researchers acknowledge. The second co-author. Andrew Cohen served as an external consultant to the project.

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