

The importance of oral Spanish teaching to multilingual students:

A case study of USIU.

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Abstract

This paper explores important aspects of teaching Spanish, both spoken and written, to multilingual students, with specific reference to United States International University (USIU), a private institution located in Nairobi, Kenya. The beginner students of Spanish at the University speak at least 3 languages, one of which is Kiswahili. This polyglot characteristic, the strong African oral tradition and the fact that Kiswahili and Spanish have similar aspects like pronunciation, offer the students great advantages in learning Spanish. Initially, however, students generally show some resistance to learning the oral skills because their intention is to acquire writing skills. Research conducted for this paper among the University students and the foreign language teachers in Nairobi, provides useful comparisons between two methodologies of teaching Spanish (and probably other foreign languages as well) one of these emphasizes the acquisition of oral skills and the other, which involves a more traditional method of teaching, emphasizes acquisition of written skills. The research findings discussed in this paper offer strategies that can help promote the teaching of spoken Spanish, including the study of the complex grammar at the beginning level. The findings also demonstrate that acquisition of oral skills facilitates the acquisition of knowledge about the Hispanic world culture, and is also crucial to development of higher levels of oral proficiency which is essential to using the language in real life situations.

Key words: multilingual, oral skills, second language, learning, strategies.

1. Introduction: What is the problem in the teaching of the speaking skill in a foreign language?

It would be useful to know the various types of motivation that a university student has when he faces the learning of a second language like Spanish. Let's talk about an average student who is not the one that just needs to pass the final examination. If he is really interested in knowing the language and culture of that precise language, I wonder what would be the goals that he wants to achieve and it seems evident that one of the important skills he wishes to acquire is the Speaking skill.

For a long time the teaching of Spanish as a second language was focusing on the Writing aspects and even when research started to underscore the gap in listening and speaking, it seemed in the main that teaching methodologies remained the same. A few years ago, Applied Linguistics started to give importance to the use of the oral language and dialogue structures instead of Writing structures. If we ask an average student about his goals, most likely he will say that he wants to speak Spanish with fluency and precision. However, Speaking is still one of the most difficult skills to teach and to learn. Ernesto Macaro (2003) says that in spite of the emphasis in the last 20 years on communicative language teaching, Speaking skill still needs to be illuminated by research. "Perhaps the concern then is that learners don't make much progress with their speaking or rarely develop the confidence to initiate a discussion." Besides, unlike the development of the Task approach which is focusing on real communication in the target language there is a concern about the particular knowledge and culture of the learners. How can this background influence learning and teaching? Is the lecturer aware of this? So, in spite of the clear interest about the oral language there are still many obstacles to learning and teaching it properly and this may have to do with various factors such as the expectations and fears of the students, the methodology of the lecturer, the lack of proper and effective materials as well as the void in strategies of listening and speaking.

In this paper I will try to achieve the following objectives:

- to show the need to reorganize the class in order to give more importance to oral skills.

- to demonstrate that oral ability is an essential part of the class to get a great influence in the motivation and the learning itself.
- to analyze and develop strategies in two classes of beginners in which there is a combination of oral practices, writing and reading tasks.
- to establish the relationship between teaching of culture and real life situations and the improvement of oral skills.

It is possible that the improvement of Speaking skills especially in the first courses may entail the reduction of the grammatical aspects. However, in terms of motivation and development of oral skills we consider this more of a positive aspect than a gap. As Maximiano Cortes (2005) says "...This obsession for the perfect performance goes against the interest of the fluency, overall in the spoken but also in the written language" (my translation)

We face the following challenges: the review of the contents of the beginning courses' syllabus and especially the objectives of those courses. There is much grammar and not relevance speaking goals; the change in motivation students' to speak in an outside of the classrooms; the break of the linking between oral and writing-reading tasks, etc.

2. What is the profile of my students?

The experience of teaching Spanish that I am going to describe is based on the environment of a private centre in Nairobi, the United States International University. Our students here are multilingual, most of them Kenyans but some come from other African countries and also from Europe and America. Kenyans are able to speak in at least three languages: the mother tongue which can be Kiswahili, Kikuyu, Luo, Kalenjin or one of the 42 languages of Kenya. Then they learn Swahili and English which are the official languages of the State. Moreover, some of them have knowledge of French as the first choice of foreign language in Kenyan universities as well as other foreign languages although this learn is not the common pattern. This polyglot situation is like good soil to a new language, and the way they learn to speak English and Swahili is in my opinion, one clue to understand their excellent capacity for acquiring a new language. In that regard, Muasya (2008) says, "In most cases, Kiswahili is acquired by the child

as he interacts with his play mates, or in the house, especially if the house help speaks a different language from that of his mother tongue or she is not conversant in English.” So, Kenyans should not be afraid of either listening or speaking a new language. One of the conclusions of Muasya (2008) about the teaching of Spanish at USIU is that ”multilingual learns Spanish faster than a bilingual owing to the fact that he has a greater exposure to a diversity of phonemes” and also...”the fact that Spanish and Swahili are so different from one another both genetically and morphologically constitutes a strength: there is little interference, and most of information is new.”

So, although Spanish does not have many similarities with either Swahili or English, it is crucial to know that for example Swahili and Spanish are phonetic mostly read as pronounced. Furthermore, there are some common words that have something to do with Arabic speakers who conquered Spain and Kenya at different times. This could be a simple explanation to encourage the students in the beginners’ classes. These factors that talk about similarities between Swahili and Spanish are important to motivate the students during the first lessons. The affective component in teaching is essential for both lecturer and students and has not been studied with accuracy in relation to teaching of second languages. I believe, for instance, there is a significant connection between the lack of motivation to learn a new language with the difficulty to talk and understand it.

In contrast to these claims, our experience during the USIU sessions is different from what we could expect. The students at the beginning show some resistance to listen and speak the foreign language and are mostly willing to read and write. It seems that they are used to learning foreign languages without listening or talking at the beginning. Another factor which is very well known by lecturers of USIU is the existence of peer pressure at the time the students speak and the fear to make mistakes.

The high value that oral tradition has in Africa is also another factor that benefits students in learning a new language. It would not be strange or so difficult for Africans to hear the sounds of a new language since they belong to a continent in which stories, news and legends are orally transmitted. Oral cultures use the repetition, mimic and other gestures as skills to remember all kinds of information. In that sense they also have an advantage respected to writing cultures in

where people are not so accurate in remembering if they do not have the document in hand. As Jomo Kenyatta (1965) says about the Gikuyu people: “ Without notebook or diary to jot down memoranda, the African learns to make an impression on his own mind which he can recall whenever it is wanted.”

3. What are the views of USIU language lecturers?

In a survey related to oral skills conducted at USIU to 10 lecturers of second languages (or maybe we should say third and fourth languages) as Spanish and Swahili, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic and French, some questions were asked related to oral skills with beginners and the following facts were found:

- Everybody finds that Speaking and Listening are the most important skills as well as the most difficult to teach and learn.
- Almost all the teachers agree in including between 10 and 20 minutes of oral skills in every class but using the reading and writing at the same time.
- Most of them use group work and role-playing as exercises to practice speaking and listening, and dialogues are highly valued.
- All the lecturers recognize that the course for beginners is conducted in English although some of them introduce gradually the target language.
- Half of the lecturers think that oral tasks are easier and more interesting to teach to beginners. However, the others described many obstacles related to motivation, lack of oral abilities or confidence and fear of mistakes.
- 1/3 of the lecturers confirm that after two semesters the students can perform basic conversations. The other 1/3 says they are not able to do it for lack of time or the language(Japanese) is difficult. The rest agrees that it depends on the motivation and interest of the student.
- 2/3 of the lecturers are of the opinion that most of their beginning students are not very interested in speaking the target language properly. The rest of the teachers says they do not have enough time to teach conversational skills.

4. A brief review of the literature

The teaching of foreign languages has changed extensively during the 20th century and especially in the last 30 years. The need to adopt a communicative point of view has been proposed as opposed to an analytical view, and communication has become a prime objective in all language classes. Since the Direct methodology and even before in the 19th century, the oral language and pronunciation had been considered as essential elements in the process of language learning. Students learn to understand a language listening and learn to speak as they speak. The oral expression was considered as a previous stage to the reading comprehension, thus, the reading activities were performed after the oral ones. In this way, the reading tasks were used to boost the oral structures studied before. (Richards and Rodgers.1995). This method may be incomplete but full of good suggestions at the time of teaching the speaking skills: for instance, they encourage the use of mimes, pictures and demonstrations. I think this concept is really effective because it links the object with the word as the way children learn their first language.

In the sixties the Audiolingualism proposed a system based on the behaviorist ideas where oral skills had also a great consideration. Again, “Language skills are learned more effectively if the items to be learned in the target language are presented in the spoken form before they are seen in written form” in Richards and Rodgers(1995). Dialogues and linguistic models were learnt through mimic and memory techniques. The benefit of these procedures was increased motivation among students due to the repetition exercises that diminished initial inhibitions and reduced errors.

When the Communicative approaches appeared, researchers were more aware of the cognitive and affectionate dimensions of the student. They argued that the student was a responsible person with an important link to the group he is working with. The learning of the language was seen as a process and mistakes must be accepted as an important part of that process. Indeed, Macaro (2003) has also demonstrated that students undergoing a communicative course are more motivated and achieve higher scores than others in grammar-translation courses.

Marta Giralt (2006) describes a pilot experience conducted by herself in Dublin and states that “it is possible to initiate the students in Spanish while avoiding the use of reading and writing tasks.” (my translation). She also finds that motivation is maintained in those classes and

the same objectives are accomplished as in other previous courses . The teaching of pronunciation is also one of her goals because she thinks that “in the Spanish teaching as a foreign language you can hardly find space to teach pronunciation, but only using methodologies that are very far from the communicative and task approach.” (my translation)

Yet, considering that pronunciation has only been taught through writing tasks she adds that the written word interferes with the learning of pronunciation. Then her proposal is an approach totally based on oral tasks for the teaching of Spanish, performed with the beginners of Spanish in Cervantes Institute of Dublin. The first six sessions (six weeks) were taught from an oral point of view and no writing or reading at all. Then, the next ten sessions slowly introduced the reading and writing tasks.

In my opinion, this project is very innovative and brave but the results have also been influenced by two important factors: the motivation of the students was very high (they really wanted to learn the language in order to use it) and most of them had studied French which is a romance language very connected in grammar to Spanish.

5. Changes in the teaching of oral skills

In the environment of USIU mentioned before it would be impossible to have so many exclusive oral sessions in the Spanish courses due to lack of time and a very grammatical syllabus. However, what I find challenging and interesting is the possibility of having a whole 20 minutes session devoted to teaching oral skills to beginners; In my experience, the aims of oral tasks for beginners should be as follows:

-to introduce vocabulary and simple structures in Spanish without reading or writing references through the use of pictures, cards, frames or cartoons.

-the students should be able to listen and repeat vocabulary and simple structures as well as oral little dialogues without any writing but following the lecturer or some audiovisual material. The use of repetitions, drillings, questions and answers and dialogues practicing in pairs are essential and this happens after the lecturer with a student or after seeing any kind of audiotape.

-The first part of the class which is the speaking one is mostly conducted in the target language and oral techniques should be adapted to the level of the students.

-Before the beginning of every class, the teacher asks questions to review the previous session and same pattern will be used at the end to summarize that session.

-The oral section is organized around real life situations like introductions, shopping, visiting the doctor, going to a party or a restaurant, etc. It could be used authentic materials which are useful to reflect the use of the language in the real life. Nevertheless, introducing some modifications into authentic materials is convenient in order to adapt and make them easier to every task.

-Language learning is a social activity and learners enjoy interacting with each other but it is important to give the students clear instructions especially in the beginners' courses.

Before describing the tasks and strategies that I have found useful in my classes it would be important to talk about the organization of the course. Language courses at USIU are designed to have 14 weeks per semester with 2 classes of 1 hour and a half every week. If we take into account the final exams we finally have 39 hours for each of the two levels of Spanish. Although time is not much I have established that oral skills can be taught between the first 20 and 30 minutes. Then the rest of the class will be concerned about writing and reading.

This study is based on the analysis of two sessions of beginners: Spanish 1000 and Spanish 1001. The first unit is the Beginners' level 1. Previously they had received an explanation of the syllabus and how the classes were going to be conducted. It is important that the lecturer asks the learners about the reasons why they are studying Spanish, and then a thorough explanation of the two different parts of the lesson follows, the oral session and the writing and reading one. It has to be clear that in the oral session they will not be allowed to speak in other languages or write anything. Then, even before explaining the alphabet, the lecturer said to them in Spanish that they have to introduce each other and she is the first to do so.

Hola, me llamo Natalia. Soy española. Tengo 30 años. Trabajo en la universidad. Vivo en Westlands. Hablo español, inglés y algo de francés.

(Translation) Hi, my name is Natalia. I am 30 years old. I work at the university. I live in Westlands. I speak Spanish, English and some French.

Then the lecturer asks still in Spanish who wants to introduce themselves to the others. Of course, the common experience is that nobody wants to answer. So, the lecturer asks a question to one of the students:

- *¿Quién quiere presentarse? ¿Nadie? Venga, alguien valiente...*

(Who wants to introduce himself? Nobody, come on, somebody brave...)

And she asks one of the students:

- *¿Cómo te llamas?*

(What is your name ?) If there is no answer I look for another student or I change the sentence for

- *¿Cuál es tu nombre?*

(What is your name?) Since this is similar to English they answer: Peter, Jane, Carol, etc.

And the lecturer says:

- *Necesito que contestes con la frase completa, así: Me llamo Peter*

(I need you to answer with the whole sentence, like that: Mi name is Peter.)

And the student repeats the sentence. Then the same with other questions:

- *¿Cómo te llamas? Te pregunto por tu nombre. NOMBRE . Soy Natalia*

(What is your name? I am asking for your name. Name. I am Natalia.)

- *¿De dónde eres? Te pregunto por tu NACIONALIDAD. Soy de España/española*

(Where do you come from? I am asking for your nationality. I come from Spain. I am Spanish.)

- *¿Dónde vives? Te pregunto por tu RESIDENCIA. Vivo en Nairobi.*

(Where do you live? I am asking for your residence. I live in Nairobi)

-¿Qué haces? ¿En qué trabajas? Te pregunto por tu PROFESIÓN. Soy profesora de español.

(What do you do? I am asking for your profession. I am a Spanish lecturer.)

-¿Cuántos años tienes? Te pregunto por tu EDAD. Tengo 30 años

(How old are you? I am asking for your age. I am 30 years old.)

-¿Cuántas lenguas hablas? Te pregunto por las LENGUAS que hablas. Hablo inglés, español y algo de francés.

(How many languages do you speak? I am asking for the languages you speak. I speak English, Spanish and some French.)

Once the lecturer has asked those questions individually to different students, she asks again for a brave student who wants to go in front of the class and perform a dialogue with the lecturer. And later every one can perform it with his partner. Most of the students try to write the questions but the lecturer advises them not to do so. Those 20 or 30 minutes of oral tasks are about listening and speaking and it is extremely important not to write or read in order to encourage the learners to use their memory, background, and intuition. Moreover, the fact that they just speak and listen with no other help written, makes it easier for them to use the language in other places, like on campus, because they are getting used to listening and speaking.

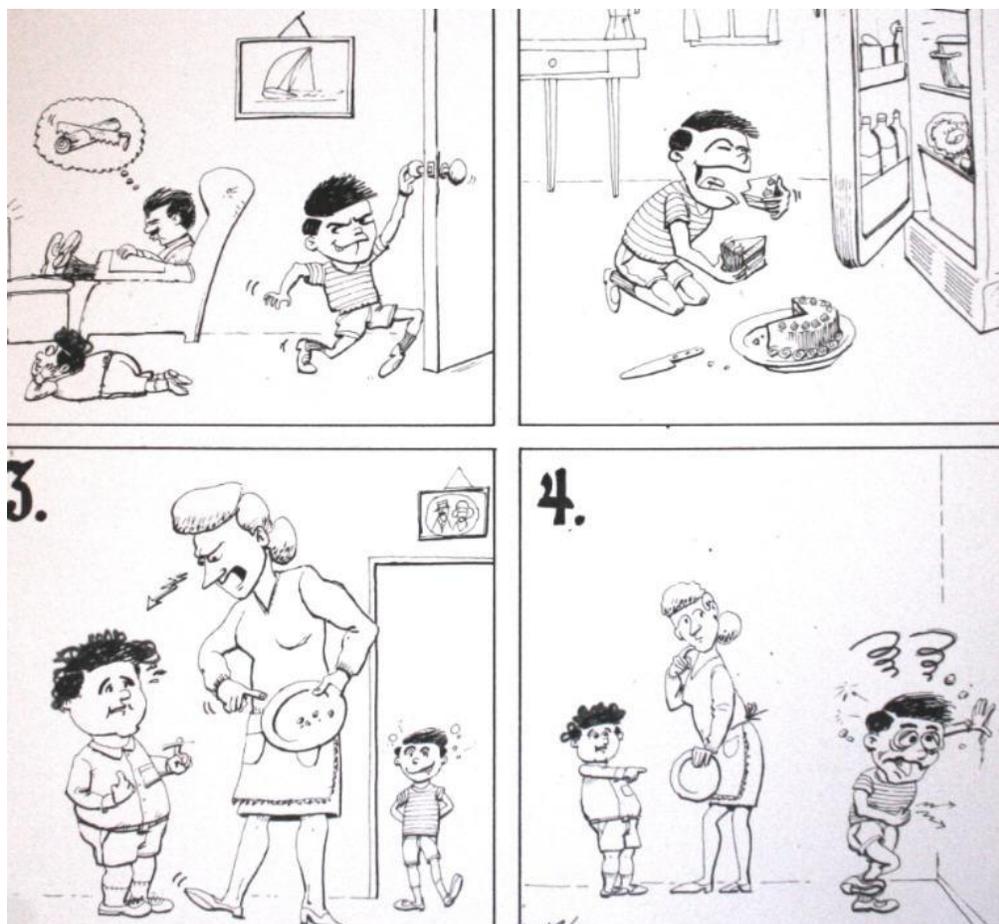
It is very important in the first classes to speak very slowly and to ask students to repeat a lot. Although some students can think that this is childish, after some sessions they find that the results are good and they are able to have basic conversations quite fluently. They then realize that the procedure is worthy.

After 20 or 30 minutes, we can start the grammar section which in this case consists of writing individually what they remember of the previous oral introduction. They have to work in pairs and some of them just write some answers, others questions and answers, but it is very surprising to check the assignment and confirm that they can write pretty well.

Lately, group work of students is recommended as a very good task for them to improve an active participation and communication, relationships and even creativity. Another advantage of group work is that weaker learners may be helped by the stronger. However, they must be supervised by the lecturer so that they are able to perform equally. In this first session the lecturer will help to correct the exercise but in the future the corrections will be made occasionally between students. Moreover, the lecturer can use English to solve some grammar doubts and sometimes to translate. This has the advantage of making the students relax and builds their confidence.

The study of the grammar is inductive and will be explained always also after some oral exercises. This means that we start from an example and then we explain slightly the grammar pattern. For instance, ¿Cómo te llamas? Me llamo Peter. ¿Dónde vives? Vivo en Nairobi. From those sentences we can deduce that the present verb in Spanish normally ends in **o** for the first person and in **s** for the second one. It is not necessary in the first classes to go through complex grammar explanations that can be dealt for later on.

The second unit is the Beginners' level 2, Spanish 1001, and it will be analyzed taking into account that learners have already studied a previous Spanish course, Beginners 1000. The previous session dealt with greetings and review of the basic knowledge. Then, the lecturer delivers a strip cartoon to every pair of students and explains still in Spanish that they are going to tell a story in the present tense. This story seems very simple but it is appropriate for them to use different verbs and nouns. The lecturer can also take advantage of the students' sentences and explain different grammar concepts when the oral session ends. As we have said before, this activity is exclusively oral and they are not allowed to write or read anything. They will work in pairs telling the story to each other. Some of them may ask for meanings and vocabulary but it is important to tell them that they should wait for the corrections. After 10 minutes some groups tell the story to the rest of the class and the lecturer corrects the mistakes.



Some of the stories they constructed without correction were as follows:

- A) 1. El padre es dormir en noche y un hijo grande miro televisión. Luego hermano sali cuarto.**
- 2. Hermano gustan poster y come poster.**
- 3. Su madre enfada hijo grande.**
- 4. Pero hijo grande dece a madre hermano es enfermado.**
- B) 1. La familia es en casa. Un padre dorme siesta y un hijo mira tele. Otro hijo abre puerta.**
- 2. En la cocina es un fridgo. Hijo malo come cake.**

3. *Un madre grito un hijo pero otro hijo rei.*

4. *Final hijo malo es sick porque come mucho.*

In this task, while telling a story they may read it all and then the lecturer corrects the mistakes. They must repeat what it is wrong and if any sentence is good it would be nice to encourage them. This exercise, devoid of writing, makes them do a great memory effort to remember the vocabulary and the sentence's structure.

In addition, some cultural Spanish explanations can be developed related to different habits like the nap or the timetable for meals by asking the students about these customs. For instance, the lecturer can have the following dialogue with the students:

¿Está el padre durmiendo la siesta? (Is the father taking a nap?)

¿Qué hora es? (What time is it?)

¿Duermes tú normalmente la siesta? (Do you normally take a nap?)

¿Es esta una costumbre en Kenia? (Is this a normal use in Kenya?)

After the oral session the grammar work follows. First of all, they write what they were speaking for 10 minutes and after that some of the stories are written on the blackboard. After the lecturer corrects the sentences some grammar explanations are developed:

For instance:

- *Hermano gustan poster* is*

-*Al hermano le gusta el postre.* (His brother likes the desert.)

And the following explanation about the verb *gustar* which means to like, but in the Spanish language the English subject becomes the indirect object and the English object becomes the subject. This explanation and some examples can be in English because it will be easier to understand. Then, the lecturer provides a proper story in Spanish and they can work with different verbs like *gustar*, *dormir*, *hacer*, *comer*, *ser*...etc.

- A) Son las 4 de la tarde. En el salón el padre duerme mientras Juan, el hijo pequeño, mira la televisión. Entonces Pedro, el hijo mayor, va sin hacer ruido a la cocina.
- B) En la cocina después de abrir el frigorífico, Pedro saca un pastel y se come un gran pedazo. A Pedro le gusta mucho la tarta de fresas!
- C) Después de media hora, la madre descubre la travesura y se enfada con Juan. Entonces Juan explica que él no ha sido.
- D) En ese momento llega Pedro y Juan le dice a su madre que su hermano está enfermo por el pastel.

6. What have I found after these sessions?

After using this particular methodology the results obtained are as follow:

1. In the first course and after three or four weeks most students do not feel ashamed or scared of talking in Spanish and they find stimulating and enjoyable the different performances especially the dialogues.
2. In the second course and from the very beginning it is noticeable that students that have followed this method are not afraid of answering the lecturer, they understand better than the rest and they are able to ask different questions in the target language.
3. In both courses motivation to learn and to speak in Spanish is considerably increased and the atmosphere in the class is favorable to conversations and apprehension of the Hispanic culture.
4. Once learners experience some successful communication, the effort that is required to study is not seen as an impossible challenge, although the difficult grammar requires of a good memory and several hours of studying afterwards.
5. At the end of both courses, students had to perform a previously prepared dialogue in front of their peers and the lecturer. In those activities it is observed that in most cases fluency, creativity and enjoyment were remarkable ingredients of the works in spite of some grammar errors. However, there were some students whose presentations were poor and showed a lack of interest.

7. Conclusions

It is the thesis of this paper that the teaching of oral Spanish skills to Kenyan beginners needs to fill an important part of the class, regardless of obstacles like lack of time, initial students' resistance, lack of student confidence, etc. The fact that after some classes the students were able to reproduce a basic conversation made them have good feelings of relying on themselves and it may enhance the wish to improve their knowledge of Spanish.

The organization of the sessions explained above has demonstrated that the time exclusively dedicated to speaking and listening in Spanish with neither written nor reading references has accomplished good results in terms of fluency and loss of inhibitions to speak. Furthermore, at the same time students are trying to express in the target language, some cultural ideas come up and some simple conversations may be performed between lecturer and learners. This will benefit the learner because he will observe, interpret and reflect about a new culture in the target language.

The working of oral tasks in the first part of the class with no link to written or reading documents produces a great impulse to the speaking due to the effort that learners make just using the Spanish knowledge that they have. So, whether they strive to speak outside the class it will be easy because the situation is quite similar to this one.

From the above classes and through my two semesters' experience at USIU I have found that memory and repetition in the beginning are essential and then both gradually combined with the other skills tasks are favorable to be able to communicate and understand abstract concepts. It is not enough just to speak to learners in the target language and make them repeat without some reading and writing tasks which help to fix the contents. The exclusive use of the target language in the oral session lets them get used to listening and speaking in the new language only. That way, there are no English interferences. However, in the second part of the class some English explanations help to clarify complex ideas and avoid the students' inhibitions.

The kind of lecturer that these classes need is always an active teacher who will use gestures, mimic and body languages as an important part of the class as well as encourage the students to talk and pronounce as well as they can. Most USIU learners expect to be taught by traditional methods and initially they show some disappointment. Nevertheless, as sessions make progress the students notice the improvement of their knowledge.

Dialogues, interaction and the interventions of a dynamic lecturer are crucial to the good development of oral skills. When learners work together trying to create a dialogue or story they use their memory, imagination and background and they receive the influence and help from each other.

Since the students were multilingual and belonged to a strong oral tradition they had developed more abilities to achieve oral goals. This also proves that the situation and the context of every class are unique and have to be carefully considered. Establishing communication demands a message, a code, a speaker and a listener but also a context. So, the teacher of a second language has to analyze the environment of the class where he is going to teach. In this sense, not every task is necessarily effective but it depends on the group of learners.

The teaching of grammar aspects has also been discussed and we believe in the inductive teaching from the beginning, which is first they know the use and later the structure of the language. However, the complexity of some aspects as for example the subjunctive mode of the Spanish verbs might be left for advanced courses. The inductive teaching of grammar permits to show real acts of communication that introduce learners to the normal use of the Spanish language. Then, although some grammar teaching comes along, is always based on previous examples of conversations and readings that belong to real life situations.

New interesting researches related to the teaching of a language to multilingual learners might be concerned about the connections between the target language and the official language of the country. For example, my students normally compare Spanish with English and not with Kiswahili and it would be an achievement to analyze the factors behind this phenomenon. Moreover, the connection between motivation and the achievement of Speaking a foreign language is one of the hints that need further research.

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