

Integrating open educational resources in general english courses to strengthen speaking skill

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abstract

The current research integrated Open educational resources —OER— in a general english course at Uniminuto, a private university located in Bogotá. The primary objective was to innovate the process of teaching English as a foreign language through the use of Open educational resources to develop speaking skills in students with a B1.1 level. As a result, it was possible to identify that the OER allowed students to improve the way they speak and communicate with others in English. Moreover, the resources helped the students to develop an autonomous learning style and improve their digital skills.

Keywords:Autonomy, Internet, Open educational resources, speaking, interaction.

La integración de los recursos educativos abiertos en los cursos de inglés general para fortalecer la habilidad para hablar

Resumen

Con esta investigación se buscó determinar el impacto que produce la integración de Recursos Educativos Abiertos —REA— en el proceso de enseñanza aprendizaje de un curso de inglés general en Uniminuto —institución privada de educación universitaria en la ciudad de Bogotá— con el fin de plantear modelos de integración que faciliten el desarrollo de la habilidad del habla en inglés como segunda lengua. Finalmente, se evidenció que el uso de los REA permitió a los estudiantes mejorar de manera general la manera de hablar y comunicarse con otras personas en dicha lengua, además de potenciar en ellos el aprendizaje autónomo y una mayor destreza en habilidades digitales.

Palabras clave: Autonomía, internet, recursos educativos abiertos, habla, interacción.

Introduction

Over the years, the process of teaching English has incorporated technology into regular classes, however there are some other resources that have not been explored deeply, as a result the English as a foreign language classroom continues to be traditionalist even if teachers use Information and Communication Technologies — ICTs— in their classes. Due to these preceding events, some tools were implemented not only to improve the students' speaking skills but also to help teachers monitor these students' progress during the classes and help students to become competent in the target language.

As a result, it was decided to incorporate to the classes the use of Open educational resources, which are online free tools available in the public domain and used for educational purposes by different teachers and institutions (Eduteka, 2001). The Open educational resources were introduced as innovative tools to emerge as novel components in the traditionalist learning environment, because they favor free learning.

Precisely, that was the purpose of the institutions that got together to create web sites to teach and learn in a free way. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology(MIT) and some other universities joined that initiative with projects such as *Opencourseware* from the MIT, *Connexions* from Rice University, *Open learning initiative* from Carnegie Mellon University and the Center of open and sustainable learning from Utah University. Those efforts gave origin to what is known now as OER.

In the current study report, three main Open educational resources were used to improve speaking skills in English. They were EIllo², Voxopop³ and English central⁴ that aimed not only to improve speaking skills and sub skills (Ascher, 2008), but also to prioritize learning through different environments and, as Vidal (2006)points out, transform traditional instruction through the use of the technology.

The OERs selected to teach and reinforce English as a foreign language allowed students to interact with native speakers, taking advantage of the technologies and resources that can be used by the teachers within the classroom. In this sense, students could improve their English skills and not only learn from the information given in their classes, since they might use these resources everywhere due to the fact that they are available on the Internet.

Nowadays, there are many websites that offer courses and information to learn English, but what makes those places useful is when they really allow students to interact and learn without any charge. Additionally, with the use of technology and OER, it was possible to see that students learn based on Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1995),an important concept that can now be applied to English instruction through the interactions that occurs with the use of Open educational resources.

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- 2 Online resource where students can watch videos, pay attention to pronunciation and later record their voices. The resource gives them feedback about fluency, pronunciation and intonation; also students obtain a grade at the end of the activity. Available in <http://es.englishcentral.com/>
 - 3 Resource with which students can interact, create conversations and answer inquires created by the teacher. Through this resource, students can express their opinions and check their own improvements. Available in <http://www.voxopop.com/>
 - 4 Online resource where people from different places around the world record themselves and give opinions about different topics. Also teachers can find recordings with quizzes to evaluate student's progress. Available in <http://elilo.org/>

Method

The current research follows the methodology of an exploratory study as part of a qualitative research, with which was intended to show the real impact of using Open educational resources in controlled situations, in order to go beyond a descriptive study. Therefore, an intentional non-probabilistic sample was taken: 13 students, some of them administrative staff, assistants and others teachers at Uniminuto⁵ between the ages of 25 and 40; two men from The Faculty of Engineering and 11 women belonging to different units such as The Faculty of Communication, Office of the Vice Provost, Unicorporativa⁶ and The Faculty of Engineering, all of which have a B1.1⁷ level.

That sample favored the study taking into account that it was a mixed group in terms of English proficiency as well as in ages and roles in the university, where the study took part. During the data collection, it was possible to monitor the progress of the students every time they communicated in English during different evaluative moments to assess the impact of OER. These evaluations were done during oral presentations, oral interaction with their classmates, as well as with the teacher and the evaluation done directly through the resources used in class.

The study demanded not only qualitative data but also the use of statistics and percentages to measure the real impact of OER implemented in an English course. In this way, semi-structured interviews (Appendix A), observations (Appendix C) and field notes (Appendix B) were used from the qualitative method. These were used to inquire about the students' perception of the resources that were implemented, their impact, appropriateness and the way they motivated them—the students—to practice English outside of the classroom and make them autonomous learners.

On the other hand, rating scales (Luoma, 2004) based on the Common European Framework⁸ and quantitative grades were used to analyze the impact of the OER on student's grades with the highest grade being 5. It was also necessary to design a rubric with which students could understand how they were going to be evaluated in every step of the research.

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5 Corporación Universitaria Minuto de Dios, institution that offers education to the Colombian population since 1992 with the motto "Educación de calidad al alcance de todos" [Quality education for all].

6 Administrative unit in charge of providing studying aids to teachers who want to train themselves in different fields.

7 According to The common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), in this level students become independent users.

8 Common Reference Levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use.

Table 1. Common Reference Levels: qualitative aspects of spoken language use

RANGE	ACCURACY	FLUENCY	INTERACTION	COHERENCE
Has enough language to get by, with sufficient vocabulary to express him/herself with some hesitation and circumlocutions on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events.	Uses reasonably accurately a repertoire of frequently used “routines” and patterns associated with more predictable situations.	Can keep going comprehensibly, even though pausing for grammatical and lexical planning and repair is very evident, especially in loner stretches of free production.	Can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest. Can repeat back part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding.	Can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.

Note: Qualitative aspects for Independent users Level B1. Source: own elaboration.

Consequently, it was compulsory to adapt the qualitative aspects proposed by the Common European framework to evaluate the spoken language use and turned them into real goals into the class. So, during the evaluative moments of the class, a sub-skill scale (Ascher, 2008) was also used to monitor the progress of students to give students a more accurate feedback about their speaking progress.

Table 2. Speaking Sub-skills

Appropriate	Able to produce reasonable responses to questions and tasks.
Complete	Able to produce a suitable amount of detail and use varied vocabulary.
Fluent	Responds with ease and confidence; response flows smoothly and is not halting.
Intelligible	Speaks clearly and can be readily understood.
Accurate	Response is grammatically correct and uses expressions correctly.

Note: These are the sub-skills that make up a part of the overall ability to communicate effectively in the target language. These help the learner to identify his/her needs and at the same time to improve his/her speaking ability. Source: own elaboration.

Taking into account these qualitative aspects and the need of assessing the effect of OER to strengthen speaking skills, the teacher and students followed a qualitative rubric for every speaking evaluative moment in which students were graded applying to:

- * Fluency: 5 points
- * Intelligibility: 10 points
- * Accuracy: 20 points
- * Appropriateness: 15 points

As a result, the research became a mixed method one, with both qualitative and quantitative instruments with three main categories, that emerged to see the real impact of OER in the English classes: integrating technology in learning environments, Open Educational Resources and teaching English using Open educational resources. With the first category, it was possible to enquire how technology can be an effective tool in the learning process and if autonomous learning can be developed through it. According to the second category, it was possible to think of OER as innovative tools in education as well as to evaluate their appropriateness for adults and tertiary education. With regards to the third category, the impact of OER directly on language teaching and the improvement of speaking skills were evaluated. At the same time the progress of every sub-skill in relation to student's needs was also taken into account.

Findings

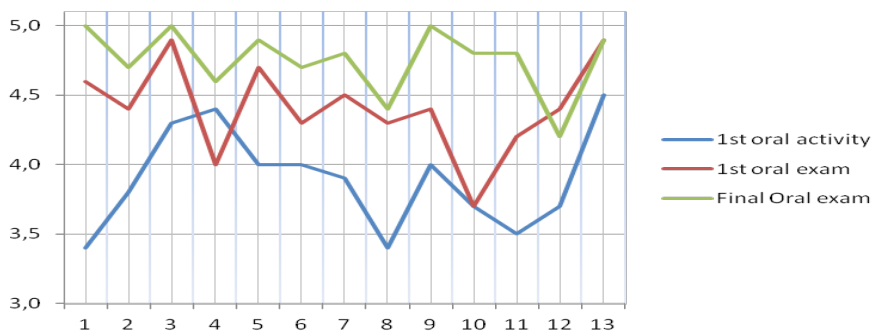
Since some OERs were implemented, the students could experience the difference between an English class with traditional elements (board, tape recorder, copies and text books) and an innovative class using technology and Open educational resources. In the first half of the course, they had a traditional class and by the second half they already knew how to use OERs during the classes as well as for independent work at home. By this point, the teacher decided to relocate the classroom sessions to one of the many labs at the University.

The students received the initiative with a good attitude and from the first moment, they started to use the resources during the classes as well as on their own, according to their individual needs. Besides, the rating scale established during the current research, helped the students to pay attention to details that they didn't do before. Knowing every sub-skill and the components of each one of them, eased the process and allowed them to work on the sub-skill they needed the most.

During the observations, the teacher recognized that as they got in touch with OERs, they became more participative and their sub-skills gradually improved. In addition, because of the implementation of the semi-structured interviews (Appendix B), it was seen that the students considered OERs to be an interesting and an easy tool to use while they were learning.

On the other hand, while the research was being carried out, the students' improvement became quite evident every time they communicated orally, for example in their oral presentations and the first and second term oral exams. The tracking was done by the teacher in charge of the group and also by the following OERs implemented for this purpose: English central⁹, Voxopop¹⁰ and Ello¹¹.

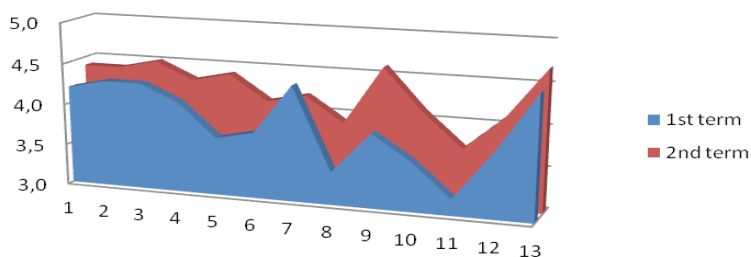
Figure 1. Students' speaking progress tracking



Student's progress taking into account first term grades based on speaking activities and contrasted with the final grades they got at the end of the course. Source: own elaboration.

According to the data presented in figure 1, we can see the student's progress during different evaluation moments when sub-skills such as fluency, pronunciation, use of language and coherence were also evaluated. Thus, students could pay more attention to the sub-skills with which they had the most difficulty and this significantly improved their second term grades (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Comparative chart: first and second term grades



Comparison made between first and second term grades based not only in speaking, but also evaluating the other skills such as writing, reading and listening. It showed visible advances in the target language. Source: own elaboration.

9 Available in <http://www.ello.org/>
 10 <http://www.voxopop.com/>
 11 <http://es.englishcentral.com/videos#>

In this way, it must be said that technology and the use of OERs are effective means to improve speaking skills in English classes. With OERs the students learn expressions and ways of thinking faster than in a traditional class. They help students to track their individual progression and support them in their learning process. Also, these resources are helpful to the teacher in order to show students how to take advantage of the free content and put to use what they have learnt in real life situations. Dukes (2005) states that the use of technology and its use in the foreign language classes increase the understanding that the students can have about it, and OER eases this acquisition in this case.

Due to this fact, Open educational resources are open sites that deserve to be present in foreign language classes and especially in English ones. They include multimedia content that makes the learning process faster and easier. Also, the resources used in this study showed that they are appropriate for students with different interests and backgrounds because they are easy to use and understand. They also supported students because they received feedback from the same resource providing them tools to improve speaking every time.

Therefore, OERs are suggested tools for teachers who want to innovate and apply to the five senses due to the fact that they can develop multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1987) and benefit learning using technology not as an end but a mean of learning English and improve language skills in different ways. If OERs are seen in detail, they also promote social constructivism that, in terms of Vygotsky (1995), allows students to learn from the interactions that they establish with others; in this case those other were students, teachers and English speakers who upload their videos and recordings to the web places where the OERs are available.

Going further and using the technology to teach and learn English, OERs can be also used as part of an emerging paradigm called Computer supported collaborative learning —CSCL—. Mainly through Voxopop, students collaborated, listened to others and gave classmates advice about different problems they faced. The activity helped students to analyze situations, improve speaking and cooperate with everyone's learning process.

To sum up and according to these findings, the OERs considered in this research improved speaking skills and its sub skills, provided feedback, tracked students' progress and additionally involved them in an interactive environment that helped them to develop their own intelligences, mainly intrapersonal, interpersonal and verbal-linguistic. Those "digitized materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research" (OECD, 2007, p. 10) should be more used and explored for teaching English nowadays because of the benefits they bring for the face to face classes.

Discussion and Conclusions

Incorporating OERs and their impact on a traditional English class helped both the students and the teacher to understand the need for a different kind of interaction within the classroom. As a result, the regular classes became innovative ones, changing a traditional role stated by Wilkings (1976) and Nunan (1996): a linear instruction where students only can learn what is taught in class and by the teacher, who “is viewed not only as the organizer and the controller of all classroom activities but also as the evaluator of the learner’s performance” (Syam Choudhury, 2011, p. 36).

On the contrary, students had the opportunity to learn and reinforce their previous knowledge and learn according to their needs, every student was responsible for their own learning and the teacher was a manager of student’s learning more than a controller, as Syam Choudhury (2011) suggests, what allows the learner to have a greater say in the determination of the course of the lesson.

The current investigation drew other conclusions according to effectiveness and appropriateness of the resources mentioned and their impact in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. The experiences of Rodríguez Altamirano et al. (2010), Ramírez and Burgos (2010) and Temoa¹², a repository initiative from Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM), confirms that Open Educational Resources can be implemented in different fields and those investigations were the bases for the implementation of these new tools in EFL classes.

Furthermore, other investigations have expanded the perception we have about OERs. Bryant (2013), Beaven et al. (2013) and Capellini (2013) demonstrated that the use of OERs promotes learner autonomy that does not necessary imply learning alone. With the current investigation it was possible to see that students enhanced autonomy as they were motivated by the content of the OERs implemented and the benefits they brought for their English learning process.

Nevertheless and as Capellini states, during the implementation of OERs—in classes where they have been never used—the teacher should perform an important role since students need the guidance to choose the right OER intended to provide more benefits according to their individual needs. Also, “the mediation of peers through shared practices allows learners to discover other ways to use OER” (Capellini, 2013, p.214) with which students can learn how to learn and prepare themselves for lifelong learning.

Despite the fact that few studies with OERs have been done in the Colombian context, they do make the English classes more interesting and relevant. With this in

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12 Open educational resources portal available in www.temoa.info

mind, teachers can transform their classes while at the same time reducing the digital breach. It is not only a matter of knowing how to use ICTs but also teaching how to learn with the aid of technology and Open Educational Resources that are now widely available.

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