Learning through Communication in the EFL Class: Going beyond the PPP Approach*[1]

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Today, it seems clear that the goal of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning in Colombia is to foster communicative ability. However, the role communication is usually given in classrooms, that of displaying previously taught language items, poses limitations on the value it might have for developing EFL proficiency. In this paper, we disagree with the assumption that communication can only take place when learners *have learned* and defend the position that it might happen when learners *are learning*. Our position is supported with grounded theoretical reflection as well as with data coming from the EFL class of a group of sixth graders during an ongoing action research project on the use of task-based learning (TBL) to develop citizenship and EFL proficiency.

Keywords: communication, learning tasks, PPP approach, EFL teaching and learning

Actualmente, parece claro que el objetivo de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en Colombia es desarrollar habilidades comunicativas. Sin embargo, el rol que la comunicación usualmente tiene en las clases, el de exponer los aspectos gramaticales enseñados, limita el valor que ésta podría tener para el desarrollo de la competencia en inglés como lengua extranjera. En este trabajo disentimos de la idea de que la comunicación sólo se puede dar cuando los estudiantes han aprendido, y defendemos la posición de que ésta puede darse mientras los estudiantes están aprendiendo. Nuestra posición se basa en una reflexión teórica sustentada y en el análisis de las transcripciones de la interacción en la clase de inglés de un grupo de estudiantes de sexto grado, procedentes de un proyecto de investigación en curso sobre el uso de tareas de aprendizaje (TBL) para desarrollar la ciudadanía y la proficiencia en inglés.

Palabras clave: comunicación, tareas de aprendizaje, enfoque PPP, enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés

Il apparait évident qu'à l'heure actuelle l'objectif de l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère (EFL) en Colombie consiste à développer des habiletés communicatives. Cependant, le rôle que tient normalement la communication en cours, qui consiste à exposer les aspects grammaticaux

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1 Este artículo es producto de la reflexión y la discusión de los autores durante el desarrollo del proyecto de investigación-acción "The Use of Tasks (TBL) to Develop Communicative Competence and Citizenship in the EFL Classroom". El proyecto se encuetra actualmente en curso, es financiado por la Universidad de Córdoba y los tres autores son investigadores del mismo.

enseignés, limite la valeur que cette dernière pourrait avoir pour le développement de la compétence en anglais langue étrangère. Dans ce travail nous rejetons l'idée selon laquelle la communication peut seulement se faire quand les étudiants ont appris, et nous défendons la position selon laquelle elle peut se faire lorsqu'ils sont en train d'apprendre. Notre point de vue est basé sur une réflexion théorique soutenue et sur une analyse des transcriptions de l'interaction dans le cours d'anglais d'un groupe d'étudiants de « sexto grado », en provenance d'un projet de recherche en cours sur l'utilisation de devoirs d'apprentissage (TBL) pour développer le civisme et les bénéfices en anglais.

Mots-clés: communication, devoirs d'apprentisage, approche PPP, enseignement-apprentissage de l'anglais

1. Introduction

Very recently we took part in a meeting where we were trying to tackle the planning of a learning unit in which we wanted to promote EFL learning within a Task-Based Learning framework (TBL). The meeting was the third planning session previous to the first cycle of intervention in an action research project, and we were trying to set up a series of tasks and exercises to help students talk about daily routines and tell the time. So far we had planned three lessons. For the first two we had devised a few tasks to introduce vocabulary, and some basic patterns such as *I wake up at 7:00* and *what time do you wake up?,* and encourage purposeful listening to identify a sequence of routines. For the third lesson, we wanted students to be able to ask and answer questions in a survey to find out their classmates' daily activities and the time in which they carried them out. The planning sessions had flowed really smoothly, and we were eagerly providing ideas and opinions when suddenly we were faced with a methodological dilemma: students had to answer questions about their routines using true information of their own daily activities, which meant that they could be using different numbers such as 15, 30, 35 or 45 to express the time; however, we had provided no explicit teaching of those numbers. After some time of discussion and argument, two positions emerged: the first one posed that it was totally necessary to teach our students the numbers before attempting any kind of free communication as the survey implied; the second, the one we are going to defend in this paper, sustained that we could just let the task unfold and provide the teaching and support necessary to help students tell those times if the need arose.

In our opinion, this minor dilemma reflects two major concerns in EFL teaching today. On the one hand, there is the position that in order for students to be able

to communicate anything of value it is indispensable that the teacher first pre-teaches every single item the communicative situation will require, whether it is vocabulary, grammar, or functions. On the other, there is the growing belief that learning to communicate can be seen as a situated event, where what counts is learners' participation in the communicative practice from the very early moments of instruction. In this view, the communicative event becomes both the goal of EFL education, and the means through which this communication can be reached, and communicative needs tackled. It is a dilemma between a view of communication as the final product, and a view of it as the starting point through which learning opportunities are created. We will refer to each one of these positions in turn, highlighting both their practical implications and their grounding assumptions. Then, we will concentrate on illustrating some of the points made in the paper with data from an ongoing research project about EFL development and citizenship. Although our arguments will be in favor of the second position, this does not mean that we think the first position is wrong or that it should be totally discarded. The positions underlying the first option, we believe, raise several concerns about language teaching and seem to be at odds with present understandings about how foreign and second languages are learned and what goes on in the EFL classroom.

2. Learning as the Pre-requisite for Communication

This first position holds that in order for students to succeed in communication (oral or written) they need to be taught in advance all the content and linguistic items they will use in the communicative task. Otherwise, any attempt to engage them in a communicative situation is bound to fail, for they do not yet possess the linguistic resources that this task will demand. This view is consistent with a weak version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), according to which "the components of communicative competence can be identified and systematically taught" (Ellis, 2003: 28) before communication is attempted. In our planning session this was clearly evident in such opinions as: *"How are they going to tell the time if they don't know the numbers?"* or *"They cannot start telling the time unless we teach them the numbers they need for this,"* or *"We first need to teach them how to tell the time"*. In other words, communication can only take place when learners have learned, and not while they are learning.

Perhaps the most recognized methodological procedure based on this conception of EFL/ESL learning is the PPP approach, or Presentation-Practice-Production sequence (Gower and Walters, 1983, quoted by Hedge, 2000). In the words of Ellis (2003:29) in this approach

> a language item is first presented to the learners by means of examples with or without an explanation. This item is then practiced in a controlled manner using (…) 'exercises'. Finally opportunities for using the item in free language production are provided.

In this view of teaching and learning EFL, communication usually plays a display, evaluative function. That is, the communication or free production moment of the approach is very often not an authentic communicative event in itself, but is conceived as the moment when learners have to show the forms, vocabulary or functions they have learned in the previous two stages. This being so, teachers often become obsessed with students producing the pre-taught forms and thus urge them to display the expected structure in full (hence the common 'use a complete sentence, please'). This seems to be the reason why they also feel frustrated and helpless when learners, more often than the teacher would wish, complete the communicative task or activity without using the form(s) the teacher has very carefully and intently taught (Ellis, 2003). Additionally, as the focus has been on presenting the forms and then practicing them, students tend to see that what is required from them is to produce a certain structure and thus try to use it in order to keep the teacher happy.

This view of EFL teaching and learning is not unique to the PPP approach. A weak version of Task-Based Learning (TBL) also seems to be based on such a view. According to Ellis (2003), this version of TBL conceives tasks as "a way of providing communicative practice for language items that have been introduced in a more traditional way" (p. 28). In our opinion, both the PPP sequence and the weak version of the TBL approach appear to share the same grounding assumption: communication cannot be achieved unless learners have already learnt the forms and vocabulary necessary to communicate. Communication, according to this, is the product, the output of carefully organized teaching and appropriately released input. This view of teaching and learning has endured a long time in EFL/ESL teaching and has become

a widely used model for organizing teaching and materials in this field with relative success. The reasons for this seem not only grounded on common sense: a learner cannot use a word unless he/she possesses it somehow in his/her brain, but also on pedagogical pragmatism, as pointed out by Ellis (2003: 29, following Skehan, 1996):

> it [the PPP approach] affords teachers procedures for maintaining control of the classroom, thus reinforcing their power over students and also because the procedures themselves are eminently trainable.

As a result of this, the PPP approach gives teachers a secure frame where they can stand and where chaos and disorder can be minimized, which is something teachers and learners usually value as good teaching and good learning.

However, there are some problems with this position that are worth considering in some detail and that point to the way it conceives language and language learning. First, this view sees language "as a series of 'products' that can be acquired sequentially as 'accumulated entities'" (Rutherford, 1987, in Ellis 2003:2). In contrast, research on language and language development has shown that language is not necessarily a series of products and is certainly not acquired in this way. Rather, language is seen today as "to some extent recreated every time it is negotiated (i.e. it is emergent)" (van Lier, 2004:140); which means that learners are not passive holders of the finished forms they store in their brains, but become socially active agents in the construction of the meanings these forms might have. Concerning language learning it is widely accepted that learners construct idiosyncratic language systems known as interlanguages, which grow and change, or are grammaticized and restructured, as learners advance in their language learning process (Larsen-Freeman, 2003; in van Lier, 2004).

The second problem with this view is that it assumes that language learning follows a linear, causative order in which the foreign language is first received through input, next worked on in different ways by learners and finally produced in 'free' practice activities especially designed to facilitate such production or output. That is, the presentation and then the practice of the language item cause its learning as is evidenced in the production. According to Larsen-Freeman (1997), this explanation is too simplistic and does not do justice to the complex

and rich nature of language learning, which means that a different number of influences are present in the learning process, and that such influences usually create affordances (i.e. learning opportunities) that are picked up and worked on by learners (van Lier, 2000). Additionally, language development does not seem to take place in this orderly, causal sequence that ends up in production or learning, but rather, it usually goes back and forth in interlanguage development, with frequent regression in learning as learners accommodate new structures, features, and uses of the language (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Nunan, 1998; Hedge, 2000). As Lantolf (2006:282) puts it, "regression (or 'backsliding' as it is sometimes called) is an expected aspect of the developmental process". What is more, learning is seen today as a revolutionary rather than cumulative and incremental process (R. Donato, personal communication, September 17, 2008), which means that it includes "transformations and emergent configurations of activity and cognition (..) where the nature of new processes cannot be reduced to the nature of the preceding ones" (van Lier, 2004:104). Another point of criticism is that this position seems to forget that students learn from input as well as from output. In her studies of bilingualism, Swain (2000) demonstrates that output, or pushed output as she calls it, offers equally rich opportunities for language learning. This means that what students produce can be seen as the starting point to negotiate meaning and learning and to engage in this way in the type of collaborative dialogue that is conducive to language proficiency as this author very interestingly implies.

Today it seems fairly clear that negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996 quoted by van Lier, 2004; Ohta, 2000) and negotiation of learning (Swain, 2000) are central to second and foreign language development. If we assume that students need to be pre-taught language before they actually use it, many rich opportunities for negotiating meaning, engaging in collaborative dialogue, putting cognitive skills at work, and even negotiating form will possibly be lost. If too much control is exerted over what students will have to say, then their opportunities for engaging in negotiation of meaning will be diminished. In other words, many possibilities for the interactional modifications that are thought to propel language learning will be lost. What will probably result is a display of structures and not necessarily a true, authentic communicative event in which the focus is on creating mutual understanding, meaning is negotiated

and learning opportunities are generated. As Willis (2007:209) points out, "even when learners come on to a speaking activity they are still in the mind-set that it is concerned with producing specified forms". Additionally, by approaching teaching in this bit-by-bit fashion, we might be giving students the inaccurate idea that language is a series of separate bits put together, and they will very likely miss the fact that it is a complex semiotic system, a meaningful and resourceful whole that comes to life in communication (van Lier, 2004).

3. Communication as the Means for Learning

The second position we want to discuss here is not a recent one. Back in the 70s, Christopher Brumfit proposed to change the sequence of the PPP approach and start with the production stage, followed by presentation and practice. Willis (2007) also points to the need for starting with meaning and allowing communication to take place before forms are tackled. However, what we want to emphasize has to do not only with the moment when communication starts but also with the role it is given. In our view, communication should be given the status of communication-for-learning rather than communication for displaying what has been learned, and should be encouraged from the early moments of instruction. Such a role implies conceiving communication in the language classroom as the milieu in which learning takes place and not solely as the end of learning.

This is what seems to be implied in the second alternative we outlined before and which we want to discuss in more detail now. However, before going into the complex network of the theoretical positions it entails, let us first present the route that the lesson we introduced at the beginning could take if we assumed this second alternative. The lesson so conceived would mean first allowing students to engage in the task and be challenged by the demands of communication. The teacher would be there as one of the participants of the interaction in order to provide assistance only if necessary and preferably in non-disruptive ways (Kasper and Kim, 2007). The focus on form, if needed, would be incidental and will, hopefully, come from the students with questions like *"¿cómo se dice 35 en inglés?"* (how do you say 35 in English?). Students will probably ask for help in order to say other activities of their routines that

have not been introduced before, or will try to combine them in a sequence like *"first I ....and then I ..."* in which case they would need the teacher's (or another student's) help. Throughout this process, the teacher must necessarily be tolerant of inaccurate uses of language, and students should be encouraged to take part of the communicative event actively, even if they possess few linguistic resources. In sum, the spirit of this oral, communicative task would be to create rich and varied learning opportunities through interaction in such a way that learners can benefit from it and see it not as evaluation time in which they have to display certain forms, but as a true communicative event in which they are participants, and in which the unfolding of the activity itself provides all the support needed to carry it out.

This type of communication-for-learning seems to be what Willis (2007:4) has in mind when she presents meaning-based approaches: "Meaning-based approaches are based on the belief that it is more effective to encourage learners to use the language as much as possible, even if this means that some of the language they produce is inaccurate". This, in our opinion, can be explained and supported further if we take a look into the learning processes that such a communicative event might entail. As several authors have documented, EFL learning usually involves several moments or processes. The first is *exposure*, which refers to the language that surrounds the learner and the way in which he or she gains access to this exposure-language. Contrary to other views (e.g. input), exposure-language involves characteristics of the language, of the learners, and of the setting where the two interplay. The second process of this route of learning refers to *engagement*, that is, to the receptivity L2 learners show towards the exposure-language. This receptivity has been defined as a "state of mind, whether permanent or temporary, that is open to the experience of becoming a speaker of another language" (Allwright and Bailey, 1991:157). Another process is *intake*, which refers to the language that is responded to by the learner or processed in various ways, which requires a certain investment of effort on his/her part. From intake, the learning route leads to *proficiency* (best termed as proficiency-in-progress) or, what is the same, the automatization of language use by the learners in communicative situations (see van Lier, 1996, for a detailed account of these processes). In our example class, each one of these processes can be seen to take place. For instance, we expected learners to

be exposed to the language involved in describing routines by first listening to their teacher presenting the routine and then reading a short text with blanks. This exposure-language would be also evident in the surveys when learners had to ask and answer questions about their routines. The way the activities are organized, we expect, will contribute to helping the learners pay attention to the functioning of language in communication and react to it by asking for the necessary forms to tackle their ongoing meaning-construction activity in the survey. This last part also implies an effort to use language in communication, to accommodate the new forms-in-use into their starting interlanguage, i.e. intake. Finally we expect that, by using language in almost real operating conditions (surveying classmates' routines), learners could develop the necessary degree of automatization to allow them to communicate in the activity at hand without a previous, memorized script.

The fact that students seem to find support in the activity itself through different means (Herazo, 2000) is also crucial for understanding how communication so conceived might be at the core of meaningful learning. In our opinion this is what is implied in the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which Vygotsky (1978:86) defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". Essentially, the concept means that when learners work in collaboration with other peers or the teacher they become capable of doing things with the language that they would not be able to do alone (Ohta 2000, Lantolf, 2005). Based on our experience as teacher-researchers we can say that, given a supportive atmosphere, students usually ask for or are provided with the language they do not know and which they need to communicate; in other cases, the dynamics of the interaction provide opportunities for students to borrow language from their peers and use it in their own production, an interactive process called 'revoicing' by Herazo (2002).

Other examples of studies developed along Vygotskian lines are, among others, Donato (2000), Ohta (2000), Swain (2000), Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994, quoted in Ohta, 2000), and Herazo (2000), all of which provide empirical validation of this assumption in the form of lengthy transcriptions of students' talk in interaction.

With so much evidence in favor, then it is safe to assume that once learners engage in the communication required by the survey activity in our example, and they participate in the subsequent group work, the development of the task itself will provide the support necessary for students to satisfy their on-task linguistic needs. This, we think, will allow for them to carry out the task successfully.

In terms of learning and EFL learning, and contrary to the first position, the second option means that communication should be conceived as the means through which learning takes place and that learning the foreign language should be viewed as becoming able to participate fully in such communication. This conception sees learning not as the result of input, which presupposes the pre-teaching of all the elements of communication as we have discussed above, but sees it as a situated event, which means that it "is rooted in the learner's participation in social practice and continuous adaptation to the unfolding circumstances and activities that constitute talk-in-interaction" (Mondana and Pekarek Doehler 2004: 501; quoted in Seedhouse, 2007), where 'communicating' in the foreign language is the 'social practice' at hand in our case. EFL learning can be conceived then as a situated phenomenon in which learners start their learning process as peripheral participants, with little to say and/or few resources to say it, and then, thanks to subsequent and meaningful participation they become full participants of the communicative activity, which implies that they will have developed more to say and more linguistic resources to say it. In our example, it is expected that learners' participation in the survey task becomes fuller as they discover (i.e. are told, listen to, or ask for) in the task itself how to say different times and routines. This, we expect, will allow them to suit the communicative demands of the task and their own communicative intentions or needs. If we conceive EFL in this way, then it would be pretentious to expect that learners act as full participants from their very first communicative experience, regardless of the fact that they might have been taught all the language features and skills such an experience would imply.

This line of reasoning differs substantially from the metaphor of EFL learning as acquisition, which places a great deal of emphasis on input. Alternatively, it assumes the metaphor which locates EFL teaching and learning in the realms of participation (van Lier 2005; Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000), which means that the

learner "becomes a participant in various aspects of practice, discourse, activity and community" (Donato, 2000:40). This notion seems to be gaining increasing recognition in EFL teaching as more research on the lines of sociocultural theory is carried out (see for example Lantolf, 2000; Young and Miller, 2004) and it might be linked to the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who see learning as legitimate peripheral participation, meaning that "learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move towards full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (p. 29)

In the particular lessons under discussion, full participation might be conceived as students becoming able to say and understand more in their intent to find out and then collate their classmates' routines and times. Although little research has been carried out along these lines in EFL, some of the studies done so far seem to demonstrate that such a view might reflect the foreign language learning process more closely and thus might make an important contribution to the way we understand it (see for example Young and Miller 2004, Brouwer and Wagner, 2004 quoted in Seedhouse, 2007).

All the previous argumentation seems very sound and convincing from a theoretical standpoint. In fact, as a result of our initial discussion we decided to assume the second position this paper presents, namely, the one defending a view of communication as a learning opportunity and not as a testing one. With great expectation, then, we set out to carry out the lessons and were very attentive of how the activities that we had planned worked out, the type of interaction they could generate and how these interactions could open learning opportunities. In the following section, we present some transcripts of the interaction students engaged in during the lessons and how this might be linked to learning English in the foreign language classroom as it has been presented in this paper.

4. How the Dilemma Was Solved

The first position in our dilemma was based on the assumption that students did not know how to say numbers in English and hence they would not be able to

tell the times at which they did their routines. This position was supported by the teachers' opinions, who said that the students had not studied English in previous years and in their first year of instruction they had not been taught to tell the time. The underlying idea seems to be that students come empty handed to the classroom, with no previous knowledge of the language whatsoever. In the implementation of the lessons we could see enough evidence to contradict these assumptions. As Transcript 1 below shows, students usually use what they know to help them make sense of the learning material:

Transcript 1

32	T	I get up. First, I get up at five o'clock in the morning.
33	T	Then, I take a shower at five fifteen.
34	Ss	Bañándose, restregándose. Se baña a las cinco (very enthusiastically and in a loud voice).
35	S5	Se baña a las 5.
36	T	I brush my teeth at five twenty.
37	S3	Cepillándose.
38	t	I get dressed at five twenty-five.
39	S?	Vistiéndose.
40	S5	A las cinco y veinticinco.
41	T	I comb my hair.
42	S5	Cepillándose, peinándose.
43	T	At half past five I comb my hair.
44	S?	A las cinco … a las nueve.
45	T	After that …after that…
46	S?	Más tarde (traduce un estudiante).
47	T	After that, I have breakfast.
48	Ss	Desayunando (varios estudiantes traducen).
49	T	At five forty-five.
50	S5	A las siete… a las cinco y cuarenta y cinco.
51	Ss	Xxx

This piece of interaction comes from the second lesson. The teacher is presenting her routine, accompanied by mimicry of the activities, and is trying to introduce the times for the different activities she does during her day. As can be noticed in lines 34, 35, 40, 44, and 50, students attempt a translation of the time at which she does the different activities. Although some of the translations are not accurate, they seem to be a clear indicator of their previous knowledge of numbers and times, and the use they make of it when trying to make sense of what the teacher is saying. Another important characteristic of this short segment of interaction is the fact that students try to guess when they do not know what the teacher says, as is the case in line 44 where one student risks a guess for 'half past five'. The important thing to take into account here is not that the guess was erroneous, but the fact of making the guess itself, which seems to be evidence for students' intelligent guesswork and meaning-making operating in classroom interaction. Finally, the fact that in line 50 one of them self-corrects can be taken as indicator of his growing knowledge and his ability to self-monitor, which can be counted as an indicator of learning at work. Cases like this were observed throughout this lesson and from different students. In our opinion, all these cases point to the conclusion that students indeed bring knowledge to the lesson and can become active learners whose abilities we usually underestimate.

Another important point of argument was the assumption that students were not going to be able to cope with the survey class because they did not know the numbers and the time. The following transcript, also from the second lesson, seems to show the opposite and thus lends more evidence for the position we have been defending in this paper. In this case, students are trying to write the times at which they do their daily routines based on the teacher's previous introduction of some of them. To highlight in this transcription is the fact that students not only ask for confirmation of a time which had not been introduced in the pre-task moment (turn 15), but ask the teacher for its spelling (turn 17). Additionally, in turn 38, there is evidence that students openly ask for the things they want to say when they do not know how to say them and that the teacher usually complies with their request. All of this, in our opinion, supports even more the position this paper has been defending.

Transcript 2

15	S	¿Es veinticinco?
16	T	5:20
17	S	Five twen…Como se escribe, seño?
18	SS	XXXX
19	T	Se desordenaron …los que no la trajeron, ...la traen el lunes
20	SS	XXXX
21	T	Seño, yo la tengo
22	T	Wait… wait….
23	S	Seño. venga a ver a Juan Camilo (Juan Camilo is being nasty)
24	T	Bueno, los que no trajeron el lunes sin falta. okay?
25	S	(A student shows something to the teacher)
26	T	Las en pun- …twenty five… twenty five
27	T	I'm going to give you a copy. les voy a dar una copia …okay?
28	S	Seño. ¿Tenemos que pagar?
39	T	No, no tienen que pagar
30	T	Pass the other (the teacher is handing copies to the students)
31	S	Seño, mire…Seño, cómo se dice una en punto?…
32	SS	XXXX
33	T	A ver, listen…Juan Camilo… ¿Qué vamos a hacer? Vamos a marcar... ¿Qué vamos a marcar?
34	S	Lo que está haciendo XXX
35	T	XXX Lo que hace usted… su rutina…first I… ¿qué es lo primero que hacen ustedes?
36	SS	Levantarse
37	T	Ah. entonces marcan con una X.y así en cada caso. ¿vale? Va a marcar lo que hacen
38	S	Seño… ¿Cómo es las 5 y 40?
39	T	Five forty… van a hacerlo
40	SS	XXXXX
41	T	En grupos de dos

Perhaps the central concern we had during the lesson-planning stage presented at the beginning of the paper and that raised the dilemma was the fear that students would not be able to carry out the survey task successfully because they did not know the numbers between 1 and 60 that could be used for expressing the time at which they did different activities. The survey task proved that the concern was unfounded. During this task we could observe only a few instances where they needed other times beyond sharp, quarter and half hours. This, we now think, is reasonable, for in our real daily life very rarely do we go about saying that we woke up at 6:28 or that we had lunch at 12:33; rather, we prefer round off the times to do this. However, in the moments where students wanted to be so unrealistically specific and did not know the language to do it, they simply asked for it or requested clarification from their peers. The following transcript illustrates this point:

Transcript 3

24	S1	What time do you have lunch?
25	S2	I have lunch at alas a las twenty-five
26	S1	What time do you go to bed?
27	S2	I go to bed at a las nine - five
28	S1	¿Nueve y cinco?
29	S2	Ajá
30	S2	Yo te pregunto...
31	S2	What time do you get up?
32	S1	I get up at ...I get up at 5 o'clock

In this particular example, which comes from the sixth lesson, students are surveying classmates about the activities they do during the day and the times at which they do them. To highlight in this case is the fact that in line 27 one of the students uses a time we had not previously taught 9:05. This goes together with the corresponding translation S1 makes in line 28 probably to confirm what S2 has just said, and the confirmation implied by the '*ajá' (aha)* of S2 in line 29. This again seems to provide more support in favor of the argument that the task itself can provide opportunities for students to negotiate

meaning and learning, and that the pre-teaching of all the linguistic resources a communication task implies does not seem to be an essential requisite for the task to be carried out successfully.

The interaction that was promoted through the tasks designed for this group of lessons opened other opportunities for learning the language that are worth presenting at this point. In the following transcript, which comes from the survey task in the sixth lesson as well, other opportunities or affordances seem to emerge for students to learn the language. Again, students are asking and answering questions about their daily routines.

Transcript 4

147	**S1**	What time do you *get* up?
148	**S2**	I get *up fif* o'clock
149	**S1**	What time do you take a shower?
150	**S2**	Take a shower at *fif fif….fif fif* (five fifteen)
151	**S1**	What time do you… *gu* to *schol* (school)?
152	**S2**	Go to school *fif tirty*
153	**S1**	What time do you…. have dinner?
154	**S2**	A las *fif* o'clock…. five o'clock
155	**S1**	I…Yo soy I, I, tu tienes que decir lo que dice aquí (S1 suggests S2 to use the pronoun *I* so that the sentence looks like the example)
156	**S2**	What time do you *brush yor teth* (brush your teeth)?
157	**S1**	Xxx o'clock
158	**S2**	What time do you…. do *your*… home…work ?
159	**S1**	at five, five, five
160	**S2**	Mira yo en inglés es I…I…iiiii

Very remarkable at this point is that students are not reading neither the questions nor the answers out loud, but looking at some pictures and using them as support for asking the question and, perhaps, answering them. This, in our opinion, seems to be evidence of students' uptake of the appropriate constructions and use of them

in a significant piece of interaction, in the appropriate moment. In this way, we think, students have the chance to develop their foreign language proficiency as they use the language in a meaningful way and thus might see the communicative value of their different utterances. Second, the fact that students are not using the language based on a prepared script might contribute to starting the process of incorporating the new language forms to their beginning interlanguage and thus start the journey that leads to automatization (van Lier, 1996) described above. As can be seen from line 147 to line 154, the interaction flows in a kind of ping-pong fashion, one question followed by an answer; however, something unexpected takes place in line 155: S2 suddenly interrupts S1 and corrects S2's ongoing talk. So far, S1 has not used the pronoun *I* in his answers, so S2 provides correction in this sense and explicitly tells S1 to use the pronoun by explaining that "yo" in English is said "*I"* (turn 160). This small event has different implications for the language learning process students engage in in this short extract. In the first place, the fact that students decide to focus on form within communicative activity, a process known as selective attention (van Lier, 2004), leads us to think that their grammar is emerging, and in this process it is fulfilling the role of monitoring their production in order to modify a language feature that might be necessary for the task to be successful. Additionally, the fact that it is them and not the teacher who have focused on form seems to be in itself an act of noticing, or paying attention to language, which is known as the initial step in the process of foreign language learning. All of these characteristics of the interaction that was generated throughout the teaching unit, but especially during the survey task, has undeniably contributed to developing these students' foreign language learning process and has led evidence to the theoretical and methodological position we have been sustaining throughout this paper, basically that communication in the Colombian secondary school EFL classroom should be seen not only as the product of learning activity, but as the means through which it might more meaningfully occur.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to demonstrate, based on theoretically informed reasoning and research data, how the fact of conceiving communication as the means for learning *par excellence* can have significant implications for students'

mastery of the language. Our main intention has been to contradict the common assumption that communication can only take place when learners have learned the language, and not while they *are* learning it. Thus, our central argument has been in favor of picturing communication as the propelling force for learning the language rather than as the shop window where students display their learning products. We started from a tiny methodological dilemma in a real planning situation and then moved to the practical implications and grounding theoretical assumptions of two methodological options; the first one conceives communication as the end of learning the language; the second conceives it as the means through which learning can come about, including communication itself. We then presented some transcription data from actual lessons in an attempt to provide convincing evidence in favor of the position this paper has argued for. Far from providing a comprehensive account of what underlies each position, we have centered on the main aspects and have related them to the practical example under discussion. In doing so, we have made several points worth restating: 1) The implementation of the lessons and the tasks within them usually provide unplanned opportunities for students to make sense of the language and for using it in classroom interaction; 2) we usually underestimate students' learning and communicative abilities and tend to think they do not know any English at all; as a result, we usually plan for every single language issue the communication task will probably demand; 3) students seem to be very active at getting meaning and coping with unknown language they encounter in the interaction. As seen in the transcriptions, students not only attempt translations of the language in order to do this, but engage in intelligent guess work when they do not know a word or expression.

The discussion presented in this paper, as noted above, comes from a broader research experience in which our main goal has been to develop communicative competence in EFL using a TBL framework. Above all, the research experience is generating a great deal of reflection about how EFL learning and citizenship development might work in tandem, supporting each other, during classroom interaction. Other possibilities for research within future projects include the types of interaction students and teachers might engage in during class work and how these seem to contribute to learning. With all this we hope to shed more light on the means through which EFL language proficiency can be developed in Colombian secondary school classrooms under the real conditions these classrooms live.

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