English Classes as Scenarios for Higher Thinking and Autonomy

Clases de inglés como escenarios para un pensamiento superior y autonomía

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Resumen

Este documento describe los hallazgos preliminares de un proyecto de investigación en torno a la implementación de metas SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-based) en contextos de EILE (Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera) con el fin de fomentar habilidades de pensamiento superior (Analizar, Evaluar, Crear). El estudio se realizó en la Universidad Santo Tomás (Villavicencio-Colombia), bajo el enfoque de la investigación cualitativa e implementó el ciclo de investigación-acción. Luego, los instrumentos de recolección de datos fueron el diario de los estudiantes, una rúbrica para evaluar la habilidad de habla y una encuesta. Los resultados revelaron que la población (estudiantes de sexto semestre de derecho) adquirió destrezas en el análisis, la evaluación y la creación a partir del estudio de problemáticas actuales. Además, dieron los primeros pasos hacia interacciones comunicativas más elaboradas, y avanzaron en la senda hacia la autonomía.

Palabras clave: metas SMART, habilidades de pensamiento de orden superior, habilidad de habla, autonomía, EILE.

Abstract

This paper outlines the preliminary findings of a research project on the implementation of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-

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based) goals in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) settings in order to foster Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS). This study was carried out at Universidad Santo Tomás (Villavicencio-Colombia) under the framework of the qualitative research approach, and the action research cycle was implemented. Thus, the instruments used to collect data were students' journals, a speaking rubric and a survey. The results show that the sample population (sixth semester law students) became quite skilled in analyzing, evaluating and creating based on the study of current problematics. Furthermore, they took the first steps toward a more elaborate speaking performance, and advanced along the path toward autonomy.

Key words: SMART goal-setting, HOTS, speaking, autonomy, TEFL.

Introduction

Argumentation constitutes a key skill to be developed among law students as in their professional exercise they are required to display strong arguments so as to lay the foundation for claims and other legal proceedings. In this regard, among law students at Universidad Santo Tomás (hereafter referred as USTA) in Villavicencio, Colombia. it was perceivable that they had issues with speaking and supporting arguments effectively. In fact, in their mother tongue (Spanish) they were able to defend their viewpoint concerning legal matters by means of resorting to a wide range of legal sources and jurisprudence; nonetheless, this sort of skills was not substantially well-developed in English. Based on the needs analysis conducted prior to the pedagogical intervention, hampering factors for speaking in English included: lack of vocabulary, low levels of self-directedness and no correlation between the English class and their field of studies.

Argumentation is guided by legal reasoning, and argument is reasoning implemented as a manner to solve an unsettled issue (Walton, 2018). In consequence, an individual requires thinking as a prior step to argue. If thinking is not encouraged within the educational settings, the development of adjacent skills as reflecting, contrasting, analyzing, evaluating, arguing, among others will be constrained. In other words, thinking and communicating are codependent inasmuch as they both foster mutual development.

Thus, as a pedagogical strategy to assist students in improving their speaking performance, English lessons were designed by embedding SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-based) goal-setting and the HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) framework into the foreign language classes. In this sense, it is worthwhile highlighting that lesson planning served a three-fold objective: providing students with tools and training to become autonomous, fostering higher thinking and developing speaking skills in English.

Concerning tools and training to become autonomous, students were introduced to the SMART goal-setting framework and partook in a workshop aiming at teaching them how to self-set SMART learning goals as a manner to keep track of their own learning, and determine a course of action intended to tackle their own learning

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difficulties. In relation to higher thinking and speaking skills, lessons were planned in the light of Bloom's taxonomy. As a result, lessons provided students with opportunities to become involved in analyzing, evaluating and creating based on existing current issues that society is facing.

This paper displays the results after analyzing students' learning path and their performance during the speaking tasks proposed. It presents the context and participants as well as the research methodology. Furthermore, it also accounts for the data analysis conducted under the principles of Grounded Theory and the conclusions arisen from this research project.
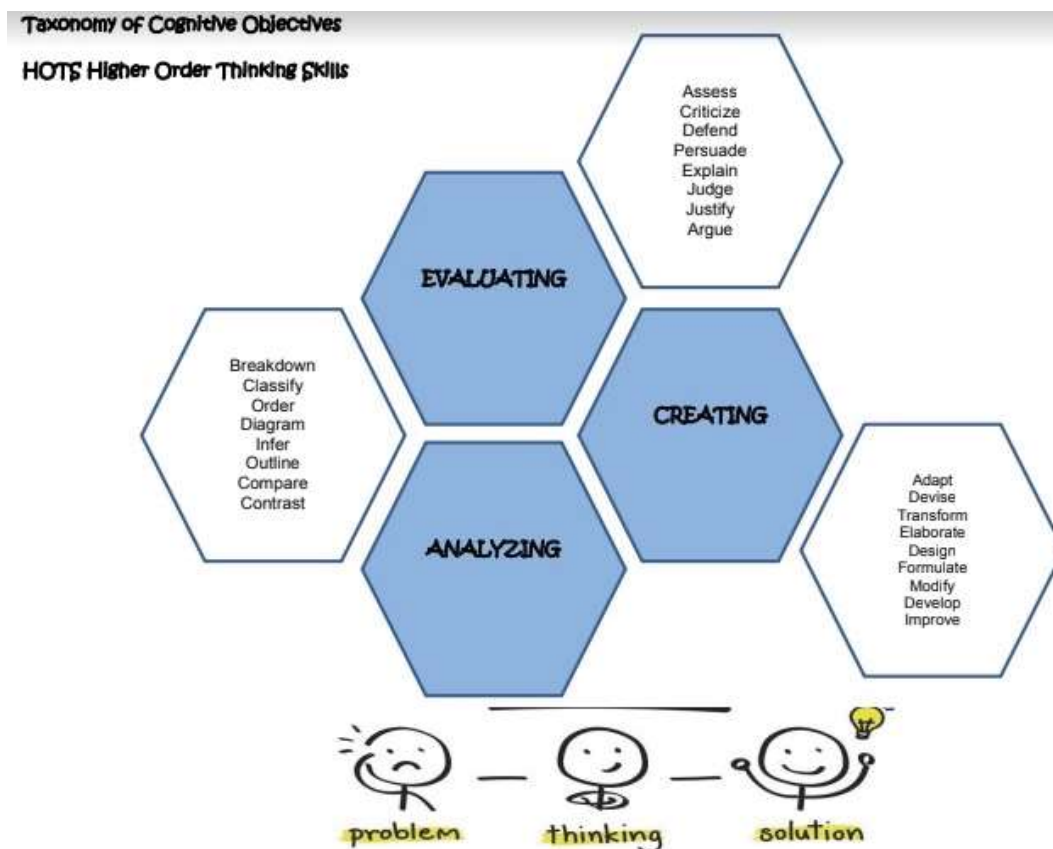
Theoretical framework

This study's theoretical constructs comprise previous research on HOTS, SMART goal-setting and autonomy within EFL settings.

Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

Bloom *et al.* (1956) consolidated the taxonomy of educational objectives, which is considered as a set of learning goals structured in six major categories known as: Remember, Understand, Apply, Analyze, Evaluate and Create. In this regard, Lewis and Smith (1993) declare that basic and higher order skills may be simultaneously nurtured and triggered in the classroom, and draw attention on "learning to be effective in higher order thinking" (p. 136). Thus, higher thinking should be conceived as a must for everyone since people are constantly confronted by complex situations where they should make decisions, and define a course of action.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned, this research intended to propose, execute and assess a learning path aimed at fostering analysis, evaluation, creation and auto-nomy within the English classes. Consequently, this pedagogical endeavor was directed toward expanding the current notion of the English lessons just focused on develo-ping communicative competences in foreign language. As lessons were designed as a sequential cycle based on Bloom's taxonomy, students were prompted to progressively improve their communicative and thinking skills. This idea is supported by Wijetunge (2019) whose research on Bloom's taxonomy-based lessons gradually exposed students to more difficult tasks as their cognition enhanced. As a result, "Exposure to a gradual process of learning and speaking, [gave rise to] autonomous speaking and performan-ce" (p. 82). A synoptic graph representing some essential features of HOTS is displayed as the following:

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Figure 1. HOTS outline

Source: *adapted from Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001.*

Based on the aforementioned postulates, within the framework of this research the lesson planning interwove students' background knowledge, past experiences and prospective situations so that HOTS were fostered, while they were involved in English classes around controversial issues in which law plays a relevant role.

SMART Goal-setting

As for SMART goal-setting, it is estimated as a strategy to guide students to active engagement in their own learning process by means of reflecting on their weaknesses and strengths, in order to draw up an action plan to overcome their difficulties. Rubin (2015) conceives SMART goals as being S (Specific), M (Measurable), A (Achievable), R (Realistic) and T (Time-based). Nonetheless, they are prone to being divergently interpreted, and Lazarus (2004) suggests that they may be connoted as S (Significant), M (Meaningful), A (Agreed-upon), R (Rewarding) and T (Thoughtful). In the framework of this research, both approaches were taken into account, and vastly enriched by students' notions constructed over the implementation stage.

Within language learning scenarios goal-setting is perceived as a strategy to foster autonomy. In this respect, Moeller *et al.* (2012) assert that "appropriate goal-setting, along with timely and specific feedback, can lead to higher achievement, better

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performance, a high level of self- efficacy, and self-regulation" (p.154). Thus, if students become acquainted with their learning needs, it may serve as a basis to engage in self-setting SMART learning goals suited to their own learning process. As a result, learners may develop a reflective approach to address their learning difficulties and challenges.

Autonomy

As it was previously mentioned, SMART goal-setting contributes to foster autonomy among learners and responds to the challenge of guiding students to become autonomous. In this regard, Ariza (2008) declares that "students should be regarded as active agents vis-a-vis their own learning process, which would imply being the ones who make the most decisions about their learning" (p.50). Within the framework of the present research students were encouraged to assume a self-reflective stance toward their learning with the aim of determining their learning needs, and making decisions on specific actions to meet their own learning goals. Along the same line, Buendía (2015) asserts that "the better control students have over their learning strategies, the more autonomous they will become as language learners" (p. 38). At this point, it is worthwhile mentioning some features of an autonomous learner who, according to Cirocki (2016), should

> make cogent decisions and assume responsibility for their own learning [...]
>
> set realistic individual targets for themselves as well as regulate their behavior with regard to previously formulated goals; manage their foreign language learning experience [...] systematically monitor their progress and critically evaluate outcomes. (pp. 29-30)

Research Methodology

The present study has an action research nature seeking to elicit to what extent SMART goal-setting along with the HOTS framework may contribute to the development of skills such as EFL speaking, autonomy and higher thinking among sixth semester Law students at USTA in Villavicencio (Colombia). Cohen *et al.* (2007) assert that action research is implemented as an alternative to obtain solutions for a problem which involves people, tasks and procedures. In this sense, the present study intended to propose, execute and assess a learning path aimed at fostering analysis, evaluation, creation and autonomy within the English classes. For this purpose, it subscribed to the action research methodology.

Burns (2009) points out four stages: planning, acting, observing and reflecting. In the first place, a plan is devised to handle a problem. Subsequently, the plan is applied and monitored by conducting observation sessions based on some established protocols. Finally, outcomes are analyzed for further planning, intervention and examination. As part of the four stages aforementioned, the researcher conducted actions concerned with collecting specialized bibliography, designing and piloting data collection

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instruments, schematizing pedagogical interventions, creating material, among others. As a result, the present study took 1 year to be conducted and responded to the nature of action research in the sense of gathering data with the purpose of "gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes [...] on educational practices in general, and improving student outcomes" (Mills, 2003, p.4).

Setting. The present research was conducted at USTA. It is a private, catholic and accredited university in Colombia, which was founded by the Order of Preachers in 1580. Its pedagogical model emphasizes the development of the person's dimensions known as being (ser), doing (hacer) and acting (obrar).

Participants. The target population consisted of 40 sixth-semester law students (23 women and 17 men) enrolled in a course of Pre-intermediate English. Students aged between 18 and 21 years old and were from Villavicencio and nearby towns in the department of Meta. Concerning the English component within the curriculum, law students take nine English levels from elementary to upper intermediate (B2), and it is mandatory to take each course and approve them all as a requisite for graduation.

Data collection instruments

The research required a four-month pedagogical intervention. Thus, over the course of this stage the data collection instruments used were: students' journals, a speaking rubric and a survey.

Students' journals. According to Cohen *et al*. (2007), action research involves keeping a journal as a technique for students to record their learning experiences. In this case, students were requested to keep a journal so that they could register their learning memories. As a manner to guide their reflection on their learning process, they should respond to questions concerning the speaking tasks. Thus, they expressed their insights regarding their own speaking performance, and also gave account of situations that may have hampered their participation, as well as the strategies implemented to tackle their difficulties at speaking in English.

Speaking rubric. Rubrics render a myriad of benefits to teachers and students alike. Pineda (2014) declares that they guarantee the transparency of the assessment process, as they provide clear criteria to evaluate students' performance. In the same line of thought, De Silva (2014) adds that rubrics assist students in goal-setting and planning. Nonetheless, she highlights teachers should explain how the grading is done. Over the course of this study, students received constant feedback as part of the assessment process, and were instructed on the grading criteria.

The students' performance during the speaking tasks was graded by the implementation of a rubric, which is the official assessment instrument endorsed by the Foreign Language Institute at USTA. It aimed at examining whether students

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managed a wide repertoire of vocabulary as well as their performance in terms of fluency, interaction, pronunciation and the appropriate usage of language structures.

Survey. "Surveys are characterized by a structured or systematic set of data" (de Vaus, 2014, p.4). At the end of the study, a survey was conducted to collect students' insights concerning the three strands of this research, namely students' autonomy, the development of HOTS and speaking skills in English. Thus, the survey intended to inquire into aspects such as: SMART goal-setting, the contribution of the English class to the development of HOTS along with speaking skills, and the effectiveness of the pedagogical strategies implemented over the study as the oral presentations, debate sessions, case analysis, folder and learning memories.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted under the principles of Grounded Theory as it allows the researcher to systematize and categorize information in order to be analyzed and interpreted. Glaser and Strauss (1999) declare that Grounded Theory tends to merge concepts and hypotheses derived from data with existing information and emphasizes the resultant notions. Hence, data analysis aimed at defining commonalities and deviations, which served as a guide to generate categories and subcategories along with responses to the research question and the target problem.

As the first step to analyze data open coding was conducted. Once data were contrasted and separated, the next stage corresponded to axial coding. At this stage, "the emerging relationships between the elaborated concepts need to be integrated into an overarching framework with one core category" (Vollstedt & Rezat, 2019, p.87). After discovering the core category selective coding began. "Selective coding means [...] to delimit coding to only those variables that relate to the core variable in sufficiently significant ways as to produce a parsimonious theory" (Glaser & Holton, 2004, p.55).

Discussion

Based on the analysis conducted with 36 students out of the initial sample population, some findings in relation to the three pillars of this research: SMART goal-setting, HOTS and speaking, are displayed hereafter. In the first place, findings provide content to the idea that setting personalized SMART goals is a manner to tackle academic needs. Secondly, this study results account for the development of HOTS and speaking skills within English classes. At this point, it is worthwhile mentioning that the present study served a three-fold objective: providing students with tools and training to become autonomous, fostering higher thinking and developing speaking skills in English.

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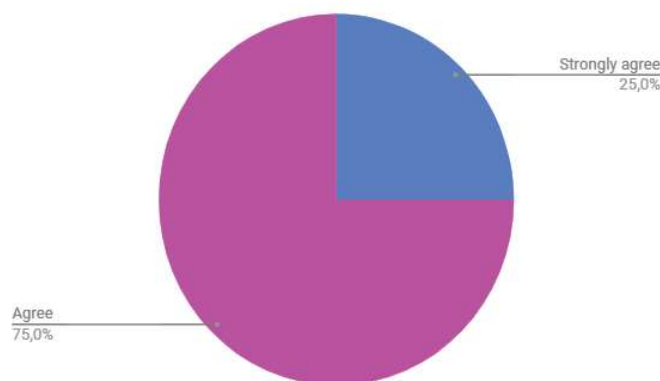**Table 1**. Research questions and emerging categories

Guiding question	Categories
To what extent can the intertwining alliance between SMART goal setting and the HOTS framework contribute to the development of EFL speaking skills in sixth semester law students at Universidad Santo Tomás-Villavicencio?	Setting personalized SMART goals as a manner to tackle academic needs
	Fostering of HOTS within English classes.
	Boosting students' speaking performance.

Source, own elaboration

Setting personalized SMART goals as a manner to tackle academic needs

Concerning students' acquaintance with SMART goal-setting, Rubin (2015) emphasizes the students' involvement in setting their own goals. In her view, "by stating and then evaluating their own SMART goals learners can gain a sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy" (p. 71). Within the framework of the present study, most of the students concluded SMART goal-setting greatly contributed to the betterment of their performance in English classes, as they took advantage of the various opportunities they had in order to get conversant with this approach to become autonomous learners, reflect on their own learning process and self-set actions to tackle their main drawbacks while speaking in English. In this regard, one student asserted that "At the beginning, it was difficult to set the learning goals, but as soon as I got it, I achieved improving and making progress in my learning process" (Survey, Student 2, 16-11-2017).

Figure 2. Setting your personalized SMART goals was effective bearing in mind your own academic needs.

Source: own elaboration

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Before the pedagogical intervention, students took part in a preparation workshop concerning how to set their own SMART goals. The teacher guided them to fill in a grid in which they would record their SMART goals for the English course. The sample grid is displayed in the following table.

Table 2. Sample grid implemented to guide students to set their learning SMART goals.

AIMS	GOALS			
What do you want to achieve? (To do what)	*What is that for? (Concrete action)*	*So, you will*	*by means of what?*	*When?*
I want to write	short e-mails	to communicate with friends	through the use of sample papers	by the end of January
I will write	a 60-word informal e-mail	to request advice about my final English scores to my professor	through the use of a set of sample papers	by September 11th

Source: adapted from Rubin (2015)

Setting personalized SMART goals became a manner to tackle academic needs in the sense that students were capable of reflecting on their current English level and communicative skills as a starting point to take responsibility for their own learning. In this regard, the present study confirms that "when learners set their own goals, they can judge for themselves if and when they have accomplished a goal. Making such judgments can allow learners to feel more in control of their own learning" (Rubin, 2015, p.71). Hereafter, a students' grid of learning SMART goals is presented.

**Figure 3.** Student's grid of learning SMART goals

Source: elaborated by one law student who participated in the present study

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Fostering of HOTS within English classes. The following figure depicts students' insights regarding the English classes contribution to the development of HOTS.

Figure 4. The English classes contributed to develop your Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS): Analyze, Evaluate and Create

Strongly agree
44,4%

Agree
55,6%
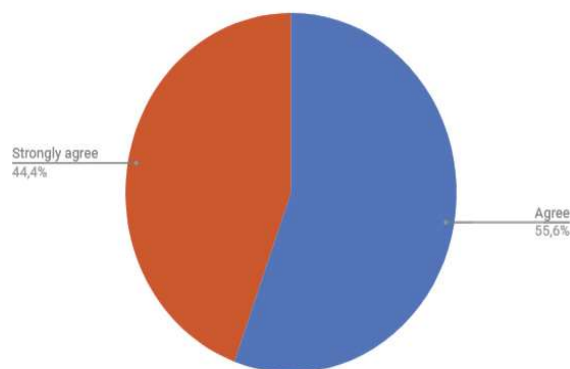
Source: own elaboration

All the students declared that the English classes and the methodology implemented positively affected their levels of criticality, and fostered skills such as: analyzing, evaluating and creating based on current problems they could observe nearby, and even endure by themselves. In this sense, one student referred to the studied topics as "debatable, nice and interesting" (Survey, Student 35, 16-11-2017). In the same fashion, another student declared that the English classes "were a perfect way to push me and make my best effort" (Survey, Student 30, 16-11-2017). In this sense, this study concurs with the research conducted by Ghanizadeh (2017) showing that high-order activities encourage students' engagement and reflection on their own learning styles and subsequent learning processes.

Concerning the methodology, lessons were designed as a sequential cycle based on Bloom's taxonomy. In consequence, they engaged in activities oriented to the development of analysis, evaluation and creation. In terms of analyzing students used to discuss on given issues, contrast data, connect ideas and facts, make categorizations, among others. In relation to evaluation, they were prompted to defend their viewpoints, judge and value information, appraise and even criticize certain positions. Finally, in regard to creation they proposed alternatives to tackle issues discussed in class, hypothesized divergent realities, role-played legal situations or formulated procedures to respond to legal cases. In this sense, the present study corroborated that gradual exposure to more complex and demanding tasks contributes to improve cognition (Wijetunge, 2019).

Boosting students' speaking performance. Regarding the speaking skill, they considered their oral performance was boosted as they were capable of overcoming some of their drawbacks. Furthermore, they developed abilities such as: self-setting

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learning SMART goals, monitoring their attainment and devising strategies to assist themselves in their learning path.

Figure 5. English classes contributed to develop your speaking performance
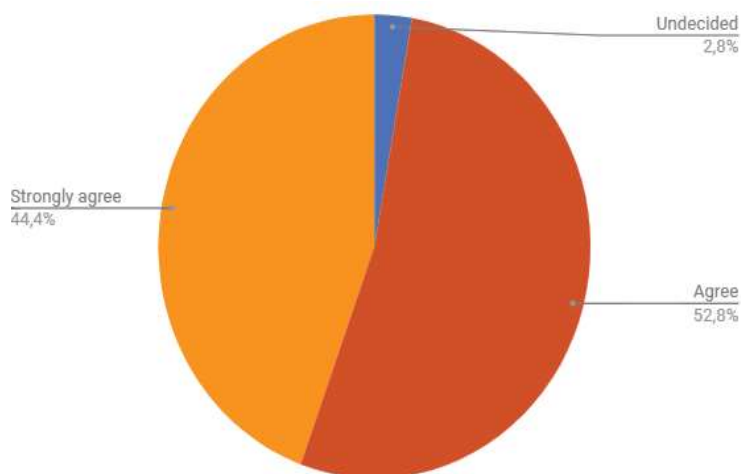
Source: own elaboration

8 students out of 36 (22,2%) explicitly referred to having gained confidence while speaking. In this respect, one student asserted that "I felt confident at speaking and arguing my opinions during this sort of activities" (Survey, Student 16, 17-11-2017). In terms of the class focus, one student highlighted the importance of oral activities within the English class: "I think 80% of activities should be oral, and 20% should be written as it influences students' motivation in the English class" (Survey, Student 20, 17-11-2017). In this regard, Chen (2016) emphasizes the role of teacher questioning and group work so as to integrate higher thinking into L2 speaking. She states that

> The teacher questioning stage was the most essential because students learn to conduct higher-order thinking and acquired the skills necessary for discussion. Group work involving thinking tasks was applied to create a social context for learning and provide students with a low-stress environment to enable them to conduct higher cognition proactively. (Chen, 2016, p. 224)

This sort of pedagogical strategies described by Chen (2016) were implemented while involving students in speaking activities about issues such as: death penalty, child prostitution and right to health.

Conclusion

In the first place, the aim of the present study was to foster analysis, evaluation, creation and autonomy within the English classes. Secondly, it intended to grasp to what extent the intertwining alliance between SMART goal-setting and the HOTS framework may contribute to the development of EFL speaking skills in sixth semester

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Law students at USTA (Villavicencio-Colombia). Thus, students were prompted to reflecting on their own learning needs as a first step to self-set SMART learning goals. Furthermore, the English lessons were pervaded by stages aimed at fostering the in tandem development of skills for analyzing, evaluating and creating on the basis of current controversial issues aligned to law such as: death penalty, child prostitution and right to health. As a result, students were capable of setting a course of action to meet their learning needs. Additionally, they became engaged in higher order thinking while taking part in speaking activities.

Despite the growing necessity to foster thinking skills within the EFL scenarios, it seems that the primary emphasis lies on the development of communicative skills at the expense of providing more meaningful and enriching EFL learning experiences. As a matter of fact, it is much easier for English language teachers to limit English classes to the attainment of linguistic goals. In the present study a sequential cycle based on Bloom's taxonomy was implemented in order to overcome this view, and render opportunities to cultivate higher thinking and autonomy while strengthening speaking skills in English. As a result, some aspects to be considered prior to designing and executing similar sequential cycles are the teacher training so as to become acquainted with Bloom's taxonomy and approaches to make English classes scenarios for higher thinking and autonomy.

Concerning students' performance, it is possible to assert that they took the first steps toward a more elaborate speaking, and advanced along the path toward autonomy and higher thinking. In this sense, the English classes transcended the linguistic goals and served to equip students with some tools such as SMART goal-setting and HOTS-oriented in-class activities to assume their EFL learning process in a better way. Finally, it is hoped that thanks to having been involved in this sort of English classes, students may be encouraged to gain a more reflective position about their learning needs and the most appropriate ways to handle them on the basis of self-setting learning SMART goals and nurturing higher thinking.

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