

Chapter 4

Research Design

4.1 Approach

Considering that in this study, plenty of observation, description, interpretation and analysis were required to point out the way the speaking skill developed in eleventh graders from two rural schools, we conducted a qualitative study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), “the word *qualitative* implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on the process and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (p.10).

Additionally, qualitative research allows the researcher to be involved at the inner experience of participants and some of the questions posted for researchers can only be answered through qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). That was the case of this study that took place in a specific context, the rural area. Thus, it was important for us to observe people in their real context.

Also Richards (2009) suggests that qualitative research should be locally situated, participant-oriented, holistic, and inductive. In this research, we have analyzed participants’ development of speaking skills through contextualized learning opportunities provided in four workshops. We have also tried to identify their own views considering the context where they are and we have tried to interpret data from different perspectives.

4.2 Type of Study

The type of study that we implemented was action research. This model involves a reflective, systematic and critical perspective in which all the participants belong to the same educational community (Burns, 1999). Action Research also gives teachers the opportunity to improve teaching practices, since they can function not only as educational professionals but also as researchers (Phillips & Carr, 2010).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) asserted that “classroom action research typically involves the use of qualitative interpretive models of inquiry and data collection by teachers with a view to teachers making judgments about how to improve their own practices” (p. 561). Then, teachers interpret their own understandings and judgments and take into account that the emphasis is “practical” in order to solve a problem identified in real situations within the classroom:

Classroom action research is not just practical idealistically, in a utopian way, or just about how interpretations might be different in theory; it is also practical in Aristotle’s sense of practical reasoning about how to act rightly and properly in a situation in which one is confronted. (p.561)

According to Madrid (2000) there are four classic developmental phases to take into account in regard to action research. We followed this basic four steps proposed by Madrid because those stages were the most suitable and appropriate for this research study. Despite there are many research cycles to follow, we decided to pursue this one because it strongly depicts the process we followed alongside the investigation. The phases are the following:

- Phase 1: Develop a plan of action to
 - a) Improve what is already happening or
 - b) Identify and examine a “puzzle” or problem area in your teaching.
- Phase 2: Act to implement the plan.
- Phase 3: Observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs.
- Phase 4: Reflect on these effects.

In such a way we identified and examined an area or situation that presented some weaknesses. In this particular case, we started with a concern found in the needs analysis and the daily observations that we made to students. Students seemed not to be interested in the English classes and they did not participate using the target language. Besides that, they did not have any contextualized material that really responded and accounted for their context (rural area), opinions, likes, and preferences to learn English.

After that, as part of the second stage, we focused on the design and application of the workshops, which were designed in the light of the themes or topics students stated by means of an interview and survey, as their favorite ones. The main topics were agriculture, sports, music, and festivals. We also considered the grammatical themes proposed in the syllabus. Thus, this phase was called Plan Implementation.

The third stage we followed was to observe the effects and contributions of the implementation of the workshops. This phase demanded us to collect data as these were emerging from the implementation of the plan of action. For this purpose, we used field notes, interviews, and surveys.

The last step was related to the reflection based on the effects of the plan. At this point, we analyzed the data collected through the principles of the Grounded Theory proposed by Urquhart (2013). This analysis helped us understand better and improve the plan implemented. The following diagram summarizes the steps we followed in this action research.

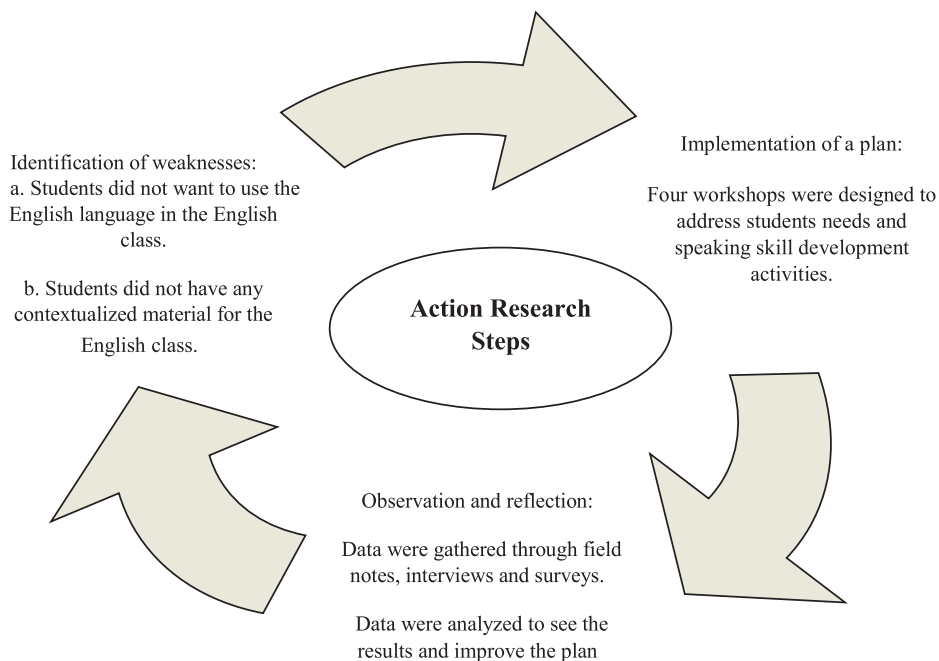


Figure 2. Action Research Cycle

4.3 Setting

This investigation was carried out at two rural schools located in Boyacá, Colombia. Both institutions intend to respond to the need to link education with training requirements of the labor force. Thus, the school's pedagogical project focuses on agriculture and cattle. These rural schools were public. They were the only institutions in the town and they served students from first to eleventh grade.

For the English class, the teacher used English textbooks designed for students who belong to the main departmental cities in Colombia. The main components of the class were grammar, reading, writing and listening. Students attended to three forty-five-minute sessions of English class per week, and each course had twenty students. Thus, the time allocated for the plan was an average of forty hours during the second semester of the year, which lasts sixteen weeks.

4.4 Population

The students who partook in this research study were forty. It is to say that all students who were part of the classes in both rural schools, agreed to participate. They were eleventh graders at both schools. Their age ranges around 16 and 18 years old. Although the students that attended the classes in which this proposal was carried out, had already taken the English courses provided by the school, during five years, they had a low English Language level. They showed difficulties when expressing themselves in English. It was evidenced when, informally, we asked them to answer a written test and speak about what they understood from a reading section related to animals care at the countryside. They could not express their ideas in English.

Instead of that, students were active and they liked to take part in the different activities with the little knowledge they had regarding English. They showed empathy towards writing instead of speaking because they were afraid of speaking in English. As a matter of fact, people from the rural areas in Boyacá do not talk too much, even in their mother tongue. Students' parents provided us with a permission to collect data that is evidenced through a consent form. Students signed it and wrote a pseudonym to be taken into account when referring to the information they provided, and everything related to the research itself in order to remain them under anonymity (See Appendix E).

4.5 Data Gathering Instruments

According to Sandoval (1996), to collect data it is necessary to deeply analysed if it is quantitative or qualitative, the type of information that is wanted, the sources of information and the time that is required for the process. Then, the instruments that we used to collect data for the diagnosis stage and for answering the research questions and sub-questions were surveys, field notes, and structured interviews. The instruments were applied before, during, and after implementing the workshops.

4.5.1 Field Notes

The first instrument was related to field notes following the observation technique. The observation helped us to find and analyze the phenomenon for the study. We observed English classes and we found that students did not have contextualized and appropriate material that responded to their needs and preferences. Likewise, this instrument provided us information in regard to the diagnosis because we realized students had certain apathy towards the topics approached in class, usually, North American stereotypes.

Field notes were also used along the study to take notes every session and observe specific aspects regarding the way students started to develop their speaking skill. Thus, they were also used to collect information while we implemented the workshops. Every class we wrote students behavior and attitude regarding the activities and tasks assigned through the workshops. Later, we categorized the information gathered through the observation and analyzed the data which were deeply connected to the core of the study, and the data that had commonalities with the ones found through the other instruments. Every slice of information helped us scaffold the emergent categories (See Appendix F).

Now, field notes belong to the observation technique and it is a written category. Field notes comprise finely detailed written accounts of what was observed. They are mainly written in the heat of the moment as events unfold before the researcher's eyes and tend to be the primary data collection tool during observation (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004, p.235). It is essential to bear in mind that taking notes implies the researcher to be non-judgmental. In this sense, we wrote just what we observed; we did not include our interpretation and comments. Furthermore, the researcher must focus on describing behavior, rather than "attributing meaning to it" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004).

4.5.2 Surveys

For the diagnosis stage a survey was implemented in order to contrast and validate the information gathered through the field notes, which was

related to students' perceptions and feelings in the English class. In fact, students stated they did not feel comfortable talking about something they did not know (North American famous people, North American cultural representations, etc). Surveys belong to a written category and to an open-ended technique. It is an instrument that allows gathering a range of written responses to set items from a specific population.

Also, this instrument is a useful tool for identifying trends and preferences across a large number of people (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). Thus, we used surveys to account for unobservable data "In second language acquisition research, surveys or questionnaires are used mostly to collect data in phenomena which are not easily observed, such as attitudes, motivation, and self – concepts" (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989, p.172). This instrument was the initial stage for gathering information about students' preferences and needs in order to set a guide to design workshops.

We chose this instrument because the group we had the chance to be in touch was considerably large. Therefore, a survey was the instrument we found the most suitable to collect data from the entire group. In this way, surveys were answered by students before and after having the experience of learning English using the workshops as the main resource or material as a guide.

The first survey we conducted had as its main objective to discover the way students liked to learn English, including themes or topics. Through this instrument, students let us know the activities and content they were interested in. From this diagnosis that encompassed questions related to the resources they used to learn English inside the classroom, activities, and topics they would like to implement in the learning process. Therefore, the topics for designing the workshops emerged. These were agriculture, music, sports, and festivals (See Appendix G).

They expressed empathy for including activities that appealed for their experiences and background knowledge. In the same way, they stressed they were interested in approaching communicative tasks

and assignments. Hence, the objective we had set to fulfill with the instrument was achieved. It was to collect information that revealed students' preferences, likes, concerns, and empathy in order to select the content and direction of the workshops.

The second survey had as objective to collect information related to the experiences and insights each student had throughout the process of approaching activities that favored the skill of speaking by means of using the workshops. The survey included questions about the perception and usefulness of the activities regarding the EFL speaking skill. In the same sense, it comprised issues in regards to students' appraisal with respect to their performance and betterment alongside the learning process. We collected relevant data that helped us approach the research question (see Appendix H).

4.5.3 Interviews

The third instrument was a structured interview. Its objective was to confirm and collect additional information related to the progress in terms of the skill of speaking throughout the implementation of the workshops. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) stated that a "structured interview aims to maximize comparisons across responses to interview questions" (p. 201). We chose this type of interview because we aimed to confine informants to particular topics and themes, in this case, the ones regarding workshops. Furthermore, we wanted to collect the perceptions of each one of the students on the same issue. The upcoming chapter encompasses the analysis of the data gathered by means of the data collection instruments mentioned above. The following table summarizes the research design (see Appendix I).

Table 2. Summary of the Research Design

RESEARCH QUESTION	INSTRUMENTS AND PROCEDURES	SETTING	RESEARCH TYPE
Main Question: What do the design and implementation of workshops, based on rural students’ needs, reveal about their speaking skill development?	Field notes. Surveys. Interviews.	- Two rural public schools located in Boyacá, Colombia. - Course: English classes with 40 students in both schools.	- Qualitative research - Action research study - Teachers- Researchers
Sub-question 1: What is the role of workshops in the enhancement of the skill of speaking?	Field notes. Surveys. Interviews.		

After presenting the components of the research design in this study, in the following chapter we describe the approach to analyze data, the procedures followed, the triangulation and validity process, and the codification of instruments.

