

Enhancing EFL Speaking in Rural Settings: Challenges and Opportunities for Material Developers

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UNIVERSIDAD PEDAGÓGICA Y TECNOLÓGICA DE COLOMBIA
TUNJA
2018

Enhancing EFL Speaking In Rural Settings: Challenges and Opportunities for Material Developers / Ramos Holguín, Bertha; Aguirre Morales, Jahir y Torres Cepeda Nancy María. Tunja: Editorial UPTC, 2018. 120 p.

ISBN 978-958-660-261-7

1. Material development. 2. Rural settings. 3. English as a Foreign Language. 4. Speaking skill. 5. Culturally responsive pedagogy

(Dewey 32/21).



Primera Edición, 2018

200 ejemplares (impresos)

Enhancing EFL Speaking In Rural Settings: Challenges and Opportunities for Material Developers

ISBN 978-958-660-261-7

Colección Libros de Investigación No. 77

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Avenida Central del Norte 39-115, Tunja, Colombia.

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Libro resultado de Investigación del proyecto titulado “Instructional Material for Rural Schools: Design, Implementation and Evaluation” con código SGI 1277

Citación: Ramos Holguín, B., Aguirre Morales, J. & Torres Cepeda, N. (2018). Enhancing EFL Speaking In Rural Settings: Challenges and Opportunities for Material Developers. Tunja: Editorial Uptc.

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Introduction

One of the main interests of the research group TONGUE (Teaching on New Grounds Unexplored English Possibilities) from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC) is to reach and explore the rural school context in Boyacá, Colombia. The research group has started an endeavor to develop teaching and learning material for the EFL population in rural schools. This material not only aims at supporting rural school teachers but also at enhancing rural school students' possibilities to learn English. Part of this effort has been supported by the Vicerrectoría de Investigaciones from the UPTC to carry out academic research in this area. One of these initiatives is called "Instructional Material for Rural Schools: Design and Implementation"

In this sense, the research report that we present in this book belongs to the aforementioned macro research project. It is focused on developing speaking skills with eleventh graders in two rural High Schools in Boyacá. This study also aimed at creating EFL material for teachers and learners enrolled in educational rural institutions.

Among the four main language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) speaking was selected for this research because this is an active skill in which the students strive most. Listening and speaking are probably forgotten skills in the EFL rural school environment. This has to do with the fact that too much attention has been devoted to reading comprehension in the curriculum. Although educators in rural areas in Boyacá do an outstanding job and they hold teaching degrees in diverse fields, when it comes to teach EFL they are not experts in this specific area of knowledge. Then teachers opt to concentrate their efforts on what they feel comfortable teaching.

Speaking is one of the most intimidating, complex and demanding skill for foreign language learners (Celce-Murica, 2001). Teachers and students should strive to achieve progress in the foreign language learning process. This situation becomes even more difficult for students who attend rural institutions because they try to use the foreign language to communicate orally in a context where the foreign language is only used in the school setting. Hence, the teaching and learning processes need to be supported by appropriate material that encourages students to start developing the speaking skill by expressing feelings, thoughts, and emotions in a less intimidating way. From the previous statements and situations, the idea to design contextualized workshops to foster the speaking skill emerged.

In this book the qualitative action research aimed at analyzing what the design and implementation of workshops, based on rural students' needs, reveal about their speaking skill development. Three instruments were used to collect data: field notes, surveys, and structured interviews. Because of the nature of the study and the instruments we used, we present participants' voices through the analysis of the information.

We expect that the findings of this study can support more studies in the area of rural education and materials development. In fact, we agree with Canagarajah (1999) when he stated that pedagogies need to be appropriated to different degrees in terms of needs and values of the local communities. In the same thread of thought, Tomlinson (2003) added that "there is an increase in attempts to personalise the learning process by getting learners to relate topics and texts to their own lives, views and feelings" (p.7). Thus, this study presents primary results to understand how instructional materials can be used to address local needs and then support students' English learning in rural areas.

This book is essentially divided into eight chapters. The chapter of problem statement encompasses some background information for the study, the research question, and objectives. The chapter of literature review encloses the main theories and studies underpinning the nature of this paper. The instructional design depicts the procedure followed

to develop the materials (in this particular case, workshops). The research design includes the type of research and methodology, setting, population, and data collection instruments. Subsequently, the data analysis describes and exemplifies the categories and subcategories that emerged from the information collected, and analyzed in the light of the Grounded Theory proposed by Urquhart (2013).

Regarding the conclusions, this chapter presents the final assertions that emerged from the whole document, but especially from the one about data analysis. The last chapter, “Challenges and opportunities for material developers in rural settings”, entails aspects regarding what material design and the skill of speaking demand to the educational community when learning English in a contextualized way.

