EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE

Examining tasks and elements to improve the communicative competence of Intermediate
English foreign language learners at Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano

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EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE

**Abstract**

This document addresses main pedagogical theory that supports the communicative competence development of intermediate foreign language learners at Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano. The project deals with its application to a controlled group at this institution. Learners were communicatively assessed before starting its application and evaluated afterwards. It was discovered that these students were able to improve many aspects of their communicative competence. One of the most relevant findings of this study is that teachers should integrate diverse competences to effectively improve the communicative competence.

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

**Introduction**

Historically, language methods such as grammar translation method, audio-lingual, direct method, suggestopedia, and total physical response emphasized the linguistic competence because it was thought that students could acquire chunks of language in order to put them together and communicate. The issue is that developing communicative competence is a complex task for foreign language learners and these portions of language are not enough. This competence is defined as the ability to produce language spontaneously, fluently and accurately to interact with other people. Communicative competence is much broader than linguistic competence because it involves being able to perform socially according to specific contexts. It allows the person to react when facing a specific situation Nunan (2009.) This project is focused on the pedagogical principles that tasks require to improve this skill in intermediate language learners.

Costa Rica makes more international relationships and trades everyday; consequently, the demand for people that speak English is continuously growing. Different companies need employees who have the ability to communicate successfully not only with native speakers but also with people from around the globe. Since English is the universal language it has become essential. In the past an intermediate level was enough to fulfill accurately the needs, but the proficiency level required nowadays is advanced. The country definitely asks for the preparation of its professionals in the English field to continue its progress. This research is looking forward to making a contribution to this very relevant issue.

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

This study provides some assistance for English teachers since they are the ones who must guide students in the development of their communicative competence. Consequently, this research paper analyzes activities and tasks required to help intermediate learners in the acquisition of English for oral communication purposes. The reason for focusing on intermediate learners relies on the fact that it is the most critical proficiency period because when students achieve this level, it becomes very difficult for them to improve and reach the advanced level required.

An intermediate language learner in this project is a person with a language proficiency of B1. According to the European Framework of reference for languages this level is an independent user and it is described as: a person who is able to understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, and leisure. The person can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. He or she can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. An intermediate learner can describe experiences, events, dreams, hopes and ambitions that he or she has. This person can give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

There are many language institutes in the country preparing people in the acquisition of English as a second language. Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano is one of the most important, technological, successful and highly developed schools in the nation, and for this reason the research instruments for this study are being implemented in this prestigious institution. The instruments for this study are two tests that students take in order to evaluate their communicative competence. The majority of students at Centro Cultural are the professional working population of society which makes possible the

achievement of the purposes of this document. Most current teachers do not have a university degree in English teaching; therefore, this document is very helpful for the institution itself.

The intermediate learners influenced by this project will grow not only personally increasing their motivation, autonomy, confidence, leadership, but also professionally improving their working rapport, cultural competence and general performance.  In this way sympathizing with the working population which contributes in the main goals proposed by the general population, teachers, schools, and international market related to the development of English communicative proficiency. Its contribution is crucial due to the fact that it helps in the development of the country to fulfill the requirements of current labor demand.

The research question of this project is**:** What elements should be present to effectively develop the communicative competence of intermediate language learners' at Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano? The hypothesis of this research is the following: if the speaking practice is connected to the exposure of the target language through class tasks and activities; then, intermediate language learners will improve their communicative competence. The general objective of this study is to explore speaking tasks and its elements at an intermediate level to analyze their efficiency in the improvement of communicative competence.  The specific objectives are: to examine pedagogical principles to consider in the use of class tasks aimed to develop intermediate language learners' communicative competence; to analyze Centro Cultural intermediate language learners' improvement in regards communicative competence; to perform real activities in the classroom in order to evaluate their communicative effectiveness; to use reliable

sources in order to collect information related communication competence improvement for

intermediate language learners; to discover different communicative strategies that can

complement class activities.

**Literature Review**

According to Ur (2004) oral communication is the most important element in a

language classroom due to the fact that students study a foreign language to interrelate with

other people. This author also establishes that this element is one of the most problematic

ones in class because it is much easier the pull out students correct answers in a controlled

activity than make them express themselves freely. There are different aspects to be taken

into consideration to successfully achieve the improvement of communicative competence.

In the acquisition of a second language the exposure to the target language plays a

very relevant role; this exposure is defined as input. According to Krashen (1985) not all

the input is useful for the second language learners due to the fact that some of it is not

understandable. The understandable input is defined as intake, and it is helpful indeed for

students to successfully improve their language skills. According to Nunan (2005) when

learners interact with each other they have to negotiate meaning by analyzing the receptors

response, asking questions about what was not clear enough, seeking for confirmation and

all these brain processes convert input into intake. The communicative tasks and activities

for intermediate language learners must take into consideration this negotiation meaning to

be totally effective. When class tasks and activities give the opportunity to negotiate

meaning students make an effort to be understood. They try to pronounce as clear as

possible, apply grammar rules, look for the right vocabulary and use all the knowledge

available to express their ideas to the other person. Students try to be as accurate as possible

to assure that their receptor comprehends their ideas. "Negotiation of meaning pushes

students to the limits, and then extends their competence" (Nunan, 1999, p. 226)  Since

students are negotiating meaning input is reflected, interpreted and analyzed in their

language proficiency level this process makes it understandable and permits the language

knowledge enrichment.

Nation (2009) argues that the purpose of an activity is one of the most important

elements because it motivates learners and shows them what they are learning is useful

outside the class. Also, stating a purpose makes students be truly engaged in the activity

itself. Purposes should reflect real life experience. Nunan (2005) establishes two types of

purposes interpersonal and transitional.  The first one refers to the social part of talking for

instance sharing ideas with different people in order to establish friendships etc. The second

term is related to the interaction between people to get a result for instance a service, deal,

or solution. Most communication outside the classroom is composed by one of these two

elements and it might not involve predictable responses. For this reason, intermediate

communicative classroom activities should contain these two purposes.

Penny Ur (2004) establishes that tasks must have a clear and interesting topic to

make the communicative practice real and meaningful. Asking and answering questions is

not enough. Students need to have established reasons to discuss about a topic. Without

clear reasons or immediate aims for them it is much more difficult to express themselves. It

is just not logical for them to talk at the class time.  When teachers ask students to just

discuss some news, they simply do not have a reason that will benefit them at the moment

besides learning English. The topic must come hand by hand with the reasons to talk about

it. Activities must have class purposes. Each activity should lead to a result and that result

is the class purpose.

Nunan (2005) establishes the importance of personalizing activities. Personalization

can be done in many different ways. Teacher may use the students own experiences,

interests, names, hobbies, etc. This is very relevant because it activates students' previous

knowledge. It also motivates students since it increases the engagement feelings in the task

itself. When students are motivated they make more effort and show much more interest in

the acquisition of language skills which makes the teaching learning process easier.

Personalization has also the advantage of adapting knowledge to students own

circumstances. When applying this principle, teachers not only should link their creativity

in the lesson but also encourage students to be creative as well in order to make activities as

meaningful as possible. This principle can be applied to speaking skills development by

creating diverse real life settings that make learning much more meaningful. This recreation

in the classroom should be done according to the students' personal experiences and needs.

Other very relevant principle a task for intermediate language learner should

consider is culture. Communication involves more than words. It includes environment,

purpose, manner, intention etc. It is not only what it is said but the way in which the person

chooses to say it and the reason to say it in that specific way. Communication is so broad

that includes gestures and subtext that changes meaning across situations. It is universal and

for this reason is that it is so relevant to expose students to it. Developing communicative

competence must include the culture element because it allows learners to use the target

language anywhere.  (Thanasoulas, 2001)

Tomilson (2011) argues that learning is hand by hand with reflection. The more the students reflect the more they learn. For this reason, materials should incorporate tasks in which students interpret, reflect and analyze on. According to Edge (1998) attitudes play one of the most important roles in the development of autonomy. If a student has good attitudes towards the learning process, intrinsic motivation will definitely increase and independence will take place as well. Students should be able to monitor their own progress because it assists them in the development of self confidence.

## Tasks and activities analysis

*Tasks*

A task is an assignment that encourages students to discuss different topics. A communicative task must contain some important elements. Students should not be encouraged to repeat and reproduce what they receive in contrast, they should produce new utterances, new language. The task should give students meaningful contexts and situations. Furthermore, the task should involve the students' creativity and or critical thinking skills. A task necessarily needs some thought. Students should think interpret and analyze to successfully accomplish a communicative task.  Also, the communicative practice give to students should be unpredictable. This last aspect might result in a lot of mistakes and errors from students which according to Nunan (1999) should be seen as part of the natural learning process. Finally, Ur (2004) establishes that a real task has with itself a purpose. Students are communicating to achieve an objective and this is probably one of the most important characteristics of a task. It makes the interaction interesting and meaningful.

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE

When students complete the task, there is room for feedback not only from the teacher but

also the rest of the students.

There are several aspects that can make a task more or less difficult. Every person

is very different and for this reason people can behave in diverse way when performing the

same task. Communicative tasks require that people work with other people supporting and

discussing different things. In these tasks students should work collaboratively and

cooperatively in order to achieve the result they are looking for. For this reason, the

communicative success depends much on the other person skills and competence.

Facilitators should provide students with enough input before asking them the performance

of the communicative task. Students definitely need this preparation to succeed. Tasks that

are concrete tend to be easier than those that are more abstract; for instance, giving an

opinion or answering a question versus solving a common problem.

The role of the teacher and the learner during communicative tasks is unique.

Teacher should provide activities that give the opportunity to students to talk to each other

as natural as possible. The facilitator also should observe carefully and assess all the

communicative elements in order to guide the learner in the process of acquiring this

competence. Teacher also provides enough input, for instance culture presentation in

diverse contexts. The role of the learner is very simple. He or she should act naturally.

Speak the language as he or she knows. Say what she or he thinks is best and do what it

considers the best. Learner is a good listener of the teacher who gives advice and

recommendations to improve and fit into each context.

*Role Plays*

In this type of activity students are given a situation and a role to play. The situation in this case is of great importance due to the fact that it establishes the context in which students will develop the communicative practice. Students are asked to explore their role and act it out in order to practice language through another figure but themselves. A lot of people prefer to perform as someone else. During this activity mimic might be present and help to convey ideas. Students exploit their creativity by showing off their thoughts and imagination. This activity can be presented with students standing, sitting etc. Ur (2004) emphasizes some advantages. For instance, students are not limited to use the classroom language because they can pretend to be someone else and use his or her vocabulary. Also, students can interpret the usage of language according to different aspects such as social status, profession, mood, personality, attitudes etc. Furthermore, teachers plan these tasks considering real life situations; which might be useful in the future when students find themselves in a real life condition.

Nunan (2005) establishes that role plays are appropriately indeed for intermediate language learners because they allow students use appropriate utterances to perform in the best way. Since the teacher provides context students can develop communicative competence for a wide range of cultural, social and interpersonal situations. According to the planning of this activity teachers can push students to use communicative and learning strategies to succeed.

Ur (2004) also presents some limitations in the use of role play to achieve communicative competence. Some students feel more embarrassed to participate as

somebody else. They might feel they look ridiculous. They may not have the necessary

willingness to participate effectively in the task. Furthermore, students may rely too much

on mimic and realia instead of language which limits the communicative performance.

*Collaborative story telling*

This activity requires the use of different pictures. Pictures use in the language

classroom is highly recommended for many reasons. Firstly, pictures provide topic and

context to talk about, pictures activate students' brain so that they are able to relate the

pictures with previous experience or knowledge, and students don't have any trouble

remember them. Also, pictures are quiet convenient; they are easy to carry and practical,

they encourage students to think critically. Carrying out collaborative story telling activity

is very simple, in groups or in pairs students organize the pictures in any order they decide

with the purpose of creating a story. Learners' imagination and originality are very

relevant for this task. Students can invent and recreate what comes to their minds and this

aspect makes the activity meaningful indeed for them. The communicative practice in this

activity is very real due to the fact that is not predictable. They do not know their

classmates thoughts for the story. An important aspect to emphasize is that students should

get into an agreement of what the plot of the story is about, the setting and closure.

Intermediate language learners have some language knowledge that is very useful in this

type of task. Nunan (2005) explains that this communicative activity is very successful

because it makes intermediate learners transform their receptive vocabulary into productive

vocabulary which is very significant for students. Therefore, if a student knows a word that

other students do not master. When they are exposed to this word they analyze it in the

context and meaning is negotiated which facilitates the acquisition of that new word.

Students who didn't master it before now are capable of using it. Nunan (2005) recommends using different pictures in every group with the purpose of having totally different stories at the end of the activity. The class can vote for the best, most interesting or funniest story. In these activities students are encouraged to react towards the story spontaneously which also contributes with their improvement.

### Logic puzzles

This type of task is very important for intermediate language learners. It not only engrosses communicative practice but also critical thinking skills. Students are given different facts, they should use them in order to deduce other facts; they are usually asked to complete a grid. The most relevant characteristic of this activity is that students must negotiate meaning in order to solve the problem and get into an agreement. This activity has many variations. In terms of communication, one that results very effective is to give students different information that complements with what others have  in this way, students discuss their information in order to reach the solution of their problem. The clues provided contain the language focus the teacher is looking for. The activity can aim that students use past tense or comparatives and so on. This task develops their communicative competence because is very meaningful due to the fact that in real life situations learners must be able to discuss together certain issues and aspects to solve different problems, and also it requires students to talk in absence of predictable responses and controlled practice.

### Debates

Debates are very engaging activities for adult learners. They provide students with the opportunity of expanding the oratory skills. In real life debates are very common.

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

People usually argue different perspectives regarding music, movies, books, politics, ethics, etc. During a debate students should be able to listen, understand the classmates' opinion about the topic and spontaneously react to this comment; consequently, they are very helpful in the communicative competence development. In this type of task students are required to sit together and discuss all the points in favor of the topic given and predict the arguments that the other group may prepare in order to be able to defend their point of view. After this, the two groups face each other in order to defend the perspective given. Debates must be planned carefully because if students get too excited they will rather start arguing in their native language.

*Publicity campaigns*

When students are asked to create a publicity campaign they have to plan with a lot of detail and agree on different aspects to promote a product or a service. This activity is useful to develop communicative competence because its purpose is very real. Every day students need to sell and buy different services. The communication is not predictable and the content chosen for the activity can vary according to the course needs. This activity allows students to have real communication.

*Importance communicative strategies*

Communicative strategies should be included in some of the class activities. They are very important because they foster the students' autonomy and self development. Strategies also facilitate the students learning process which is the main goal. Also when students apply communicative strategies is much easier to achieve the conversation objectives and avoid frustration. The following communicative strategies are taken from

(Tarone, 1980) they assist the learner when communication problems are faced.

A) Circumlocution this strategy is about describing the word that the person doesn't know. This strategy is at the same time looking for help from the receptor which is very useful as well. B) Translation this one is probably the most common one among learners. Students look for the word in their native language and translates it to the second language and backwards. Along with this looking for words, it is very valid to look for synonyms or key words to communicate ideas. C) Pointing different objects and mimicking actions to picture what is being said is also very helpful to convey meaning. Pica (1987) explains that to negotiate meaning with the receptor there are three different strategies that can be used. First the speaker can repeat and rise intonation in order to look for confirmation. Second, the phrases what do you mean? Or I don't understand can be used to make the other person rephrase the message and finally it can be asked to the other person if he or she is following the conversation in this way checking for his or her understanding.

**Methodology**

The gathering of data will help us to discover the effectiveness of speaking tasks and activities to improve oral communicative competence. The achievement of this goal will be carried out with the application of two instruments to evaluate students' communicative competence. The first evaluation is a diagnostic test to measure students' current communicative skills.  After its application, the teacher carries out speaking activities and tasks for a one-month period. At the end of this lapse, students will take a

second test. This assessment will measure the progress of the communicative competence

obtained through the use of these tasks and activities.

The analysis is going to be presented in quantitative terms. The intention is to

compare the results of the first and the second evaluation. Charts and graphs will be used to

illustrate the final results. Qualitative information will also play a very important role due

to the fact that communication is in a way subjective. In real life situations there are no

right or wrong answers; many answers are possible in a given context. The communicative

tests have a scale or a rubric that expresses both qualitative and quantitative results of the

communicative competence achieved by the student who has taken the test.

There are many methods to assess communicative competence; for instance,

interviews, cloze tests, discussions, gap fills, picture based tests etc. For this project the

method chosen was role play. Although a role play test has some limitations it is the closest

to real conversation and it has a lot of advantages. Role plays are highly recommended by

Underhill (2002) and Rodriques (2000). Students are given the opportunity to express

freely and spontaneously which evidences very well their communicative competence.

Each test in this project will provide students with a context. Students should

perform according to it and their role in the specific situation. Students will be given three

minutes to read the situation, imagine the real life circumstances and get comfortable with

their role. The time allotted to do this is very relevant because if the evaluator gives them a

lot of time students might plan the conversation and it might become predictable, also very

rehearsed.  Each test is composed by two different situations that are not linked to each

other and are aimed to evaluate different language functions. The author shows that it is

better to assign situations that are not connected to make students adapt their talk and use strategies to convey their messages. The test must be as real as possible and to do so there should be only two situations per test; if students are given many situations one after the other they won't feel the assessment as real as it intended to be. In real life there are no times in which the speaker has to change the context that quickly. Additionally, it is very hard for students to truly modify their role several times in a short lapse.

The situations used in these instruments were first published by (c National Certificates, 2003) and in this project they are taken from Alderson and Bachman (2004). There are several reasons to use these situations in this project are several. The context is authentic which makes easier for students to picture themselves in this kind of problem. The language functions aimed are varied since the examinee must show ability to request, apologize etc. It is motivational for them due to the fact that students' main purpose is to use English in a working environment. These situations involve culture reactions which is really important for the communicative competence.

Both tests outcomes are evaluated using the same rubric. This rubric is divided in all the aspects that are part of the communicative competence fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, comprehensibility, culture. Most of these elements are worth four points of total test in the rubric designed. The only aspect with a different value is comprehension. According to Underhill (2004) this aspect is the most important in communicative competence due to the fact that evaluates the response given in sense of context and specific conversation objectives. In this project this aspect will be worth eight points instead of four as the others. The total amount of points for each test is twenty eight.

**Methodology procedures**

The exam will be taken in pairs. The total sample population is eight students who study English at night in the institution.  Students role play the situation given and evaluator observes, takes notes using the rubric presented below; moreover, she records students performance to complete the evaluation analysis and make it as objective as possible. Students who take the test must go home immediately to maintain situation unpredictable for the rest of the students. The length of the test will vary due to the fact that it is a conversation that depends on the students' performances and responses; however, it will not exceed eight minutes.

**Limitations of the study**

The project was indented to be as reliable as possible; nonetheless, the methodology used presents some unavoidable limitations. Since the time allotted for the project was short it was conducted with a small sample population. The institution applies a different type of speaking tests; consequently, students were not accustomed to perform a role play and be assessed. The evaluator was the author herself which leads to some subjectivity in the project.

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

**Oral communicative competence test #1**

*The following test will be carried out with academic purposes only. The information will be used by the evaluator to present a final graduation project at ULACIT (Latin American University of Science and Technology)*

**General Instructions:**

- ❖ Read the situations given
- ❖ Place yourself mentally in each situation
- ❖ Relax and answer what comes to your mind at the moment of speaking
- ❖ If you do not understand vocabulary or you have any questions do not hesitate to ask

**Name:** _____

**Part I**

1- Read carefully the situation number one in order to react as if you were living that issue at the moment.
2- Talk to your partner about it.
3- Make sure to pay attention to your partner in order to answer his questions or statements the best as possible.

**Situation #1** An British colleague has been working with you and sharing your workspace. Yesterday your supervisor told you that she believes your colleague has been using your phone to make personal calls to the United Kingdom. Your supervisor asks you to inform your colleague about the office policy of using phones for company business only, although local calls are fine. What do you say to your colleague?

**Part II**

1- Read carefully the situation number two in order to react as if you were living that issue at the moment.
2- Talk to your classmate about it.
3- Make sure to pay attention to your classmate to answer his questions or statements the best as possible.

**Situation #2:** You are meeting a coworker in the Airport. His plane from London seems to be an hour late and the information board is not working any more. You go to an airport official and ask for news about your friend's flight. What do you say?

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE

**Oral Communicative Test #2**

*The following test will be carried out with academic purposes only. The information will be used by the evaluator to present a final graduation project at ULACIT (Latin American University of Science and Technology)*

**Name:** _____

**General Instructions:**

- ❖ Read the situations given
- ❖ Place yourself mentally in each situation
- ❖ Relax and answer what comes to your mind at the moment of speaking
- ❖ If you do not understand vocabulary or you have questions do not hesitate to ask

**Part I**

4- Read carefully the situation number one in order to react as if you were living that issue at the moment.
5- Talk to your classmate about it.
6- Make sure to pay attention to your classmate to answer his questions or statements the best as possible.

**Situation #1**

Imagine that you went on a work field trip abroad. You are a foreign tourist in England. You want to visit Edinburgh, so you go to see a travel agent. After you have explained the situation, ask him about Edinburgh. (Ask for hotels, restaurants, price, etc.)

**Part II**

4- Read carefully the situation number two in order to react as if you were living that issue at the moment.
5- Talk to your classmate about it.
6- Make sure to pay attention to your classmate to answer his questions or statements the best as possible

**Situation #2**

You are a manager. You have an employee that hasn't been performing well. He/she is often late. He/she also spends a lot of time checking his/her private emails and strange websites instead of doing work. Yesterday, you caught her/him sleeping at his/her desk. Please fire the employee

# EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

**Rubric to evaluate Oral Communicative Tests**

**Total Points   Obtained points_____ Grade_____**

| Fluency Criteria | Pts |
|---|---|
| Pauses are natural, ideas are easy to follow, effective use of communicative strategies | 4 |
| Pauses do not interfere with the message, ideas are clear, communication strategies are very basic | 3 |
| Long pauses, but it is able to complete the task, ideas generate some confusion, but it is able to deliver the message; communication strategies are weak | 2 |
| Long pauses hinder communication, ideas are not clear and cause confusion to the listener, lack of communication strategies | 1 |
| **Comments:** | |

| Comprehensibility (Pronunciation accuracy)  Criteria | Pts |
|---|---|
| The response given is clear. Pronunciation does not interfere with meaning. | 4 |
| The response given is does not hinder communication. Minor errors are present. Message is understandable. | 3 |
| The message is not as clear but the message is conveyed with some difficulties | 2 |
| The response given doesn't allow communication. Message is not comprehensible | 1 |
| **Comments:** | |

| Comprehension  Criteria | Pts |
|---|---|
| The performance matches the context, follows instructions, it successfully achieves the conversation objectives | 8 |
| The response given is related to the context and the conversation objectives are not fully achieved | 6 |
| The response given is not as coherent within the conversation itself and objectives are poorly achieved | 4 |
| The response given doesn't have any relation with the conversation and objectives are not achieved | 2 |
| **Comments:** | |

| Grammatical Accuracy  Criteria | Pts |
|---|---|
| Expected structures are used correctly and naturally | 4 |
| Expected structures are used correctly but no naturally. Some errors and self correction is present | 3 |
| Expected structures are used but no consistently. Sentence structure shows some errors for this level | 2 |
| Expected structures are not used. Sentence patterns used are below expectations | 1 |
| **Comments:** | |

| Body Language and Culture  Criteria | Pts |
|---|---|
| Body language, gestures and movements assist communication in a polite, smooth and natural way. Phrases used are culturally appropriate in the context given | 4 |
| Body language, gestures and movements are interfering neither negatively nor positively in the communication process. Phrases used do not affect the cultural background in any way. | 3 |
| Body language, gestures and movements are influencing the communication process in a negative way. Few phrases used are considered inappropriate within the situation presented | 2 |
| Body language, gestures and movements are considered impolite within the context given. Some phrases are culturally unacceptable | 1 |
| **Comments:** | |

| Vocabulary  Criteria | Pts |
|---|---|
| Vocabulary and phrases are used appropriately in the context of the conversation. | 4 |
| Vocabulary is used partially correct some minor confusions among adjectives, nouns, etc. | 3 |
| Vocabulary restricts the conversation. Message is conveyed with many difficulties | 2 |
| Message is not conveyed successfully due to the lack of vocabulary. | 1 |
| **Comments:** | |

## Discussion and Results

This chapter will analyze the results of the communicative tests applied. The application of the instruments went as expected. There were no inconveniences. The interpretation of data is presented using graphs. Each graph shows the number of points that students loose in their evaluations. Each percentage represents the amount of students. The objective is comparing what students failed in the first test with what they failed in the second test; and in this way to discover what they were able to improve through the use of learning strategies, tasks and activities.

The research question stated for this project is: What elements should be present to effectively develop the oral communicative competence of intermediate language learners'

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE

at Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano? The comparison of the first and the

second test reveals that the activities and tasks carried out for a one month period were

effective. The graph below presents the scores obtained in the first test.

**Grades obtained in the first test**

■ Eighty Five ■ seventy five ■ seventy one

38%  25%  37%
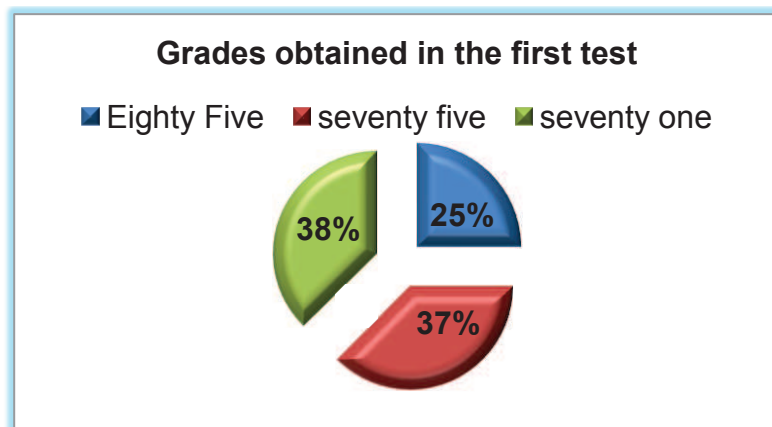
The lowest grade was a seventy one which shows that students didn't have a very

low communicative competence before the application of the activities and tasks. The

highest grade was an eighty five. This means that students definitely needed to improve

their communicative competence. The following graph illustrates the scores for the second

test.

**Grades obtained in the second test**

■ Eighty two ■ Eighty five ■ Eighty nine

13%  37%  50%
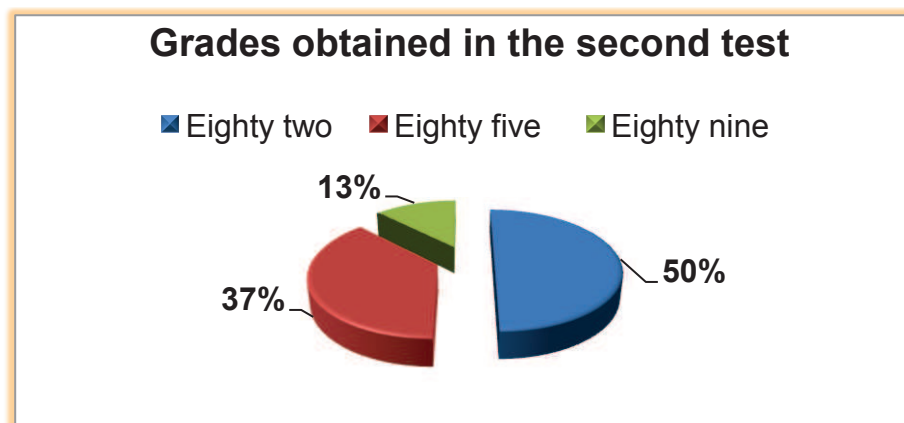
Students performed better in the second test which indicates the effectiveness of the

tasks and activities. The largest percentage in this graph is for students who obtained eighty

two in the test while in the previous chart the largest percentage was for the people who

obtained a seventy one. The improvement is evident. The following graphs will specify on

the improvement per area of communicative competence.

**Fluency**

Fluency is one of the most important aspects of communicative competence. When

students are fluent they are able to express their ideas naturally. Messages are clearer and

communication is not only more successful but also much more interesting than when there

is a lack of fluency. Most students, teachers and English language programs focus on

accuracy rather than fluency. Communicative activities presented in this project proved to

be more effective in the development of fluency than accuracy. During the first

communicative test students obtained the following results:
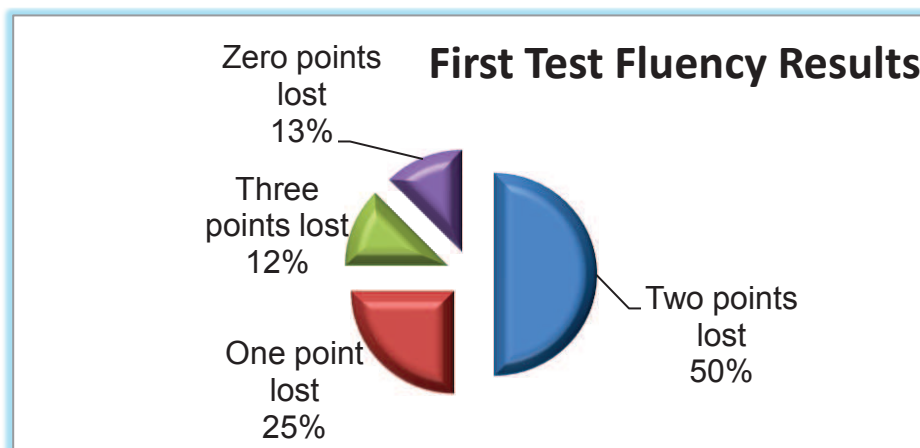


Fifty percent of students lost two points in the test. According to the rubric their

fluency skill allows them to convey the message; however, long pauses and some confusion

are found. Learning strategies were not very strong in these students performance. The

percentages of the learners who didn't have any difficulties in this skill and the ones who

lose three points are very close. Twenty percent of students had minor fluency difficulties.

Since fifty percent actually present long pauses and confusing ideas these students

definitely needed to improve this skill.  The graph below gives the percentages for the

second test.

**Second test fluency results**

Two points lost
13%

Zero points lost
25%

One point lost
62%
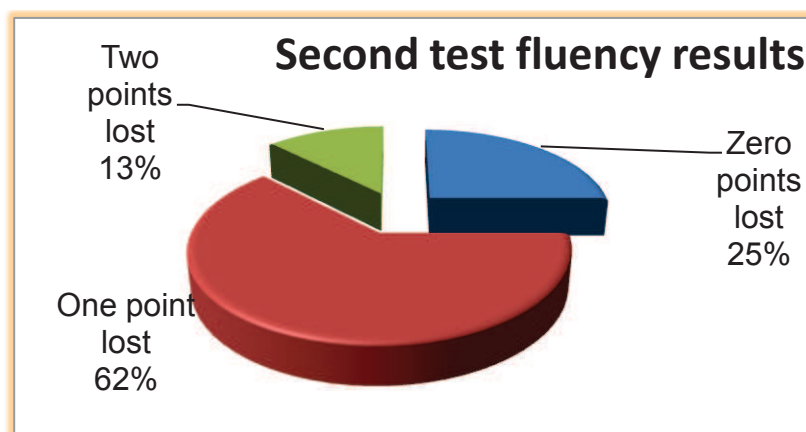
Learners demonstrated the development of this skill.  Sixty two percent of  learners

showed that the pauses do not interfere with the message and that they could use some

learning strategies to convey what they say. Although there is still thirteen percent of the

students with long pauses and some confusion in their ideas; the most worrying percentage

was completely eliminated. There are no long pauses strong enough to hinder

communication anymore.   Fluency is the aspect that was most positively influenced by the

tasks completed in the classroom.

**Grammar**

Grammar plays a very important role when communicating orally. Accurate

structures definitely enhance the messages conveyance. Conversation is much more

successful when structures are accurate. Grammar results were not very high; fifty percent

of students were penalized for not using the structures expected for the level. There were

several grammar mistakes that should not occur at this level. Students performed below the

grammar expectations. The graph below shows clearly the grammar test results for the first

test.

**First Test Grammar Results**

■ One point Lost ■ Two points lost ■ Three points lost

12%

50%

38%
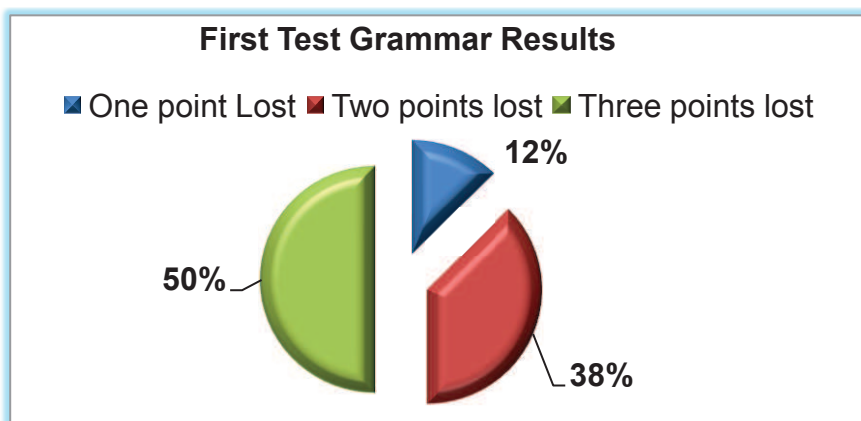
The second test shows better results; taking this into account activities

performed in class assisted students in the learning of this important linguistic element.

Fifty percent of students who didn't use the appropriate grammar structures for the level

passed to zero percent.  The chart below illustrates the second test results.

**Second test grammar results**

two points
lost
50%

One point
lost
50%
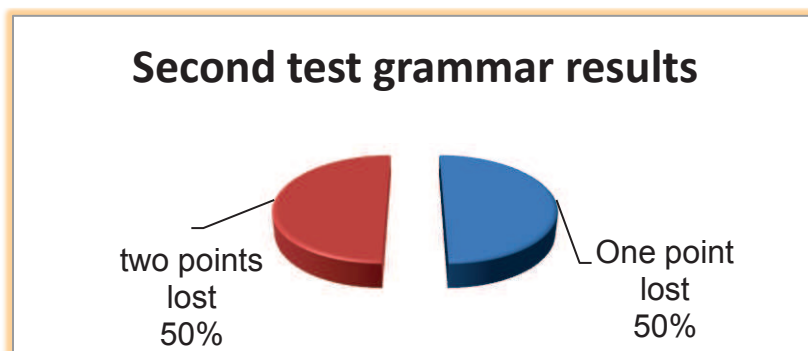
Second test results are much more positive than the ones of the first test. Fifty percent of the students used the structures expected with some errors and some self correction. The other fifty percent used some of the structures for this level however not very consistently or naturally.
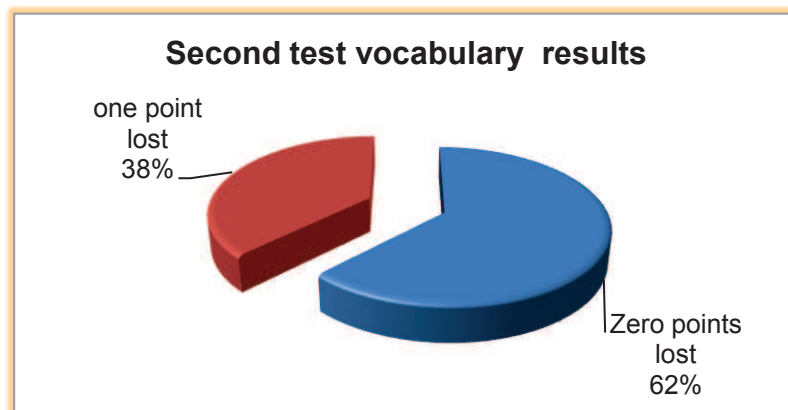
**Vocabulary**

The first results showed that students did not present any inconveniences in regards vocabulary. They were able to express their ideas with vocabulary they knew. Conversation was not totally successful due to other aspects like pronunciation, grammar and others. Eighty percent of students did not lose test points in the area of vocabulary.
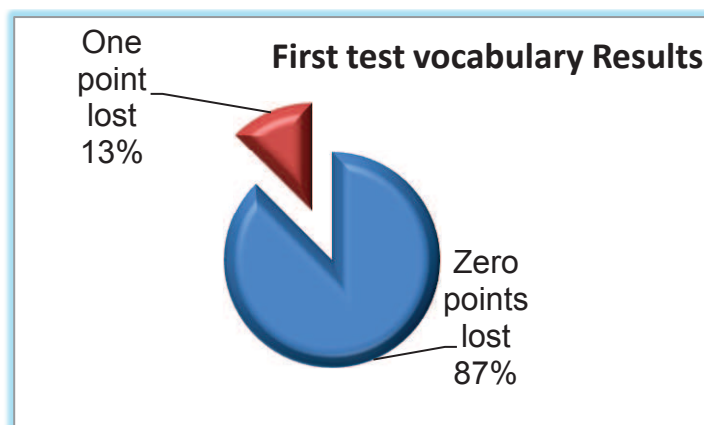


The second test results for this area were not as successful as the outcomes of other skills. The following chart summarizes these results.

**Second test vocabulary results**

one point
lost
38%

Zero points
lost
62%

Thirty eight percent of students lost one point. This percentage is very high. In the

first test only thirteen percent of students lost one point. The test results show that activities

and tasks were not that effective to teach vocabulary. An important aspect is that since

students didn't present any difficulties in this area not too much attention was dedicated

during the month period.  A very positive aspect is that more than half of students did not

lose any points.

### Pronunciation

Pronunciation definitely affects communication. This influence can be good or

really bad. Pronunciation mistakes might create some confusion and when this happens the

objectives of the conversation can't be achieved.  During the first test students performance

showed some problems linked to pronunciation. Thirteen percent of students had difficulty

to convey their ideas. Twenty five percent of students had different mistakes that they were

not supposed to present for their level however those mistakes didn't hinder

communication. The following chart illustrates these percentages.

**First Test Pronounciation results**

Three points lost
13%

One point lost
25%

Zero points lost
62%
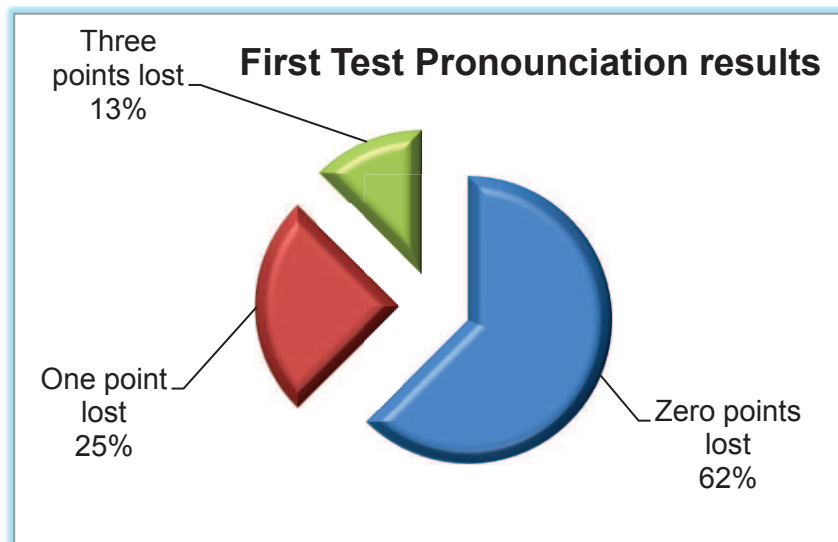
More than sixty percent of students didn't lose any points. This by no means shows

that students pronounced every word perfect. Students did not lose any points due to the

fact that the mistakes made were normal at their language proficiency level. The following

chart demonstrates the results obtained for this skill in the second test.

**Second test pronounciation mistakes**

Two points lost
25%

One point lost
75%
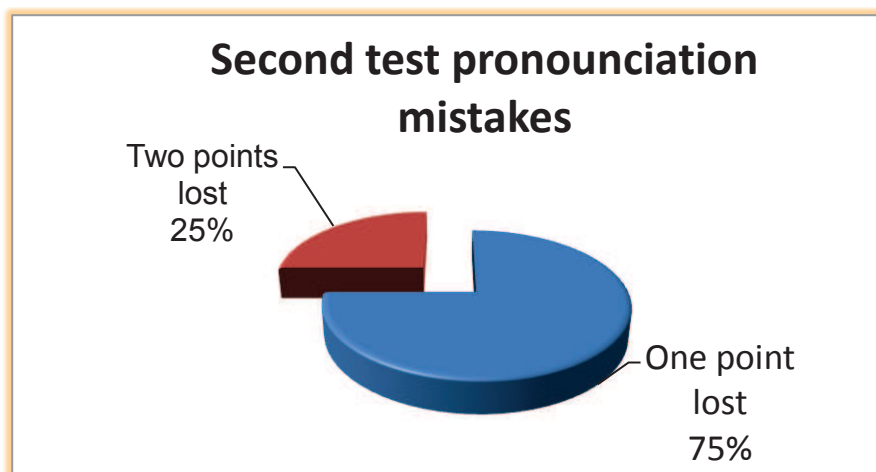
Even though, all students made pronunciation mistakes it is visible that the learning

activities assisted students in the development of a better pronunciation. One hundred

percent of students were able to communicate and achieve their conversation objective

without pronunciation barriers. Seventy percent of students presented minor mistakes but a message totally clear. The rest twenty percent of students could convey message however with more trouble. Results are good although there are no students who had all the points as in the previous test. Activities absolutely assisted students in this pronunciation accuracy. There was a zero percent of students who couldn't give away their message.

### Comprehension

Comprehension is evaluated using the students response by taking into consideration the phrases used and specially the context. This part measures if students really followed instructions. The first results show that more than sixty percent of students did not have a totally coherent conversation or accomplished successfully the conversation purposes.

**First test comprehension results**

Two points lost 63%

Zero points lost 37%
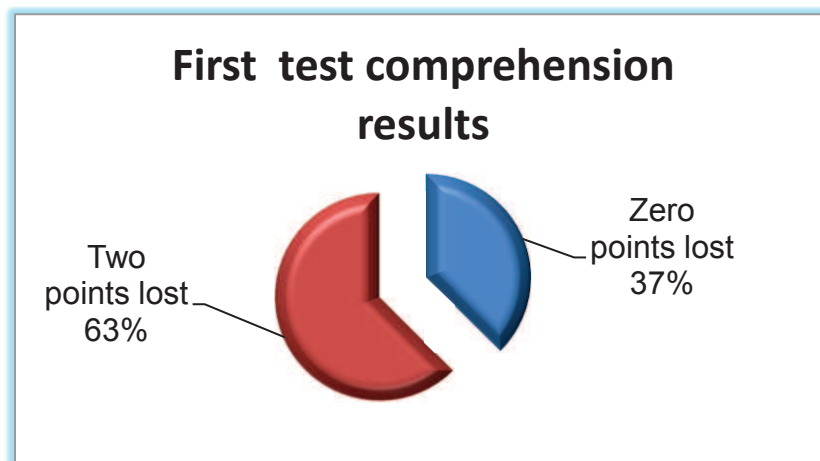
Thirty percent of students had a regular conversation and comprehended instructions. The second test exemplifies different outcomes. They are much better. Tasks and activities really helped students to perform better in for this final test.

**Second test comprehension results**

One point lost
25%
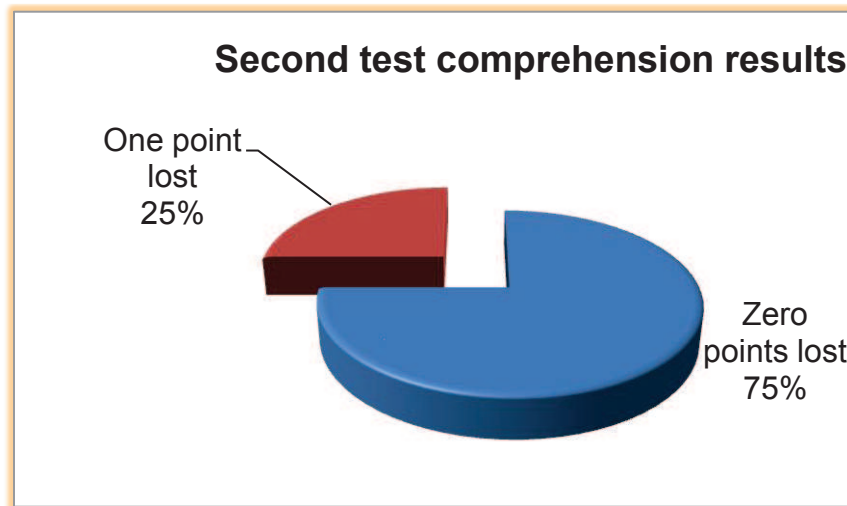
Zero points lost
75%

Seventy percent of students did not lose any points due to the fact that their performance was coherent, natural and instructions were perfectly understood and followed. Twenty five percent of students lost one point because they might answer or respond according to the topic and context of the questions but they did not provide the answer that their receptor was looking for and for this reason the purposes of the conversation were not reached.

**Body language results**

In this aspect is important to establish that what people are able to see and interpret is as important as what they hear. When a person talks; his or her facial expressions, gestures and body position tells the degree of interest, boredom, politeness etc. This kind of language is much linked to culture as well.

**First test body language results**

One point lost 38%

Zero points lost 62%
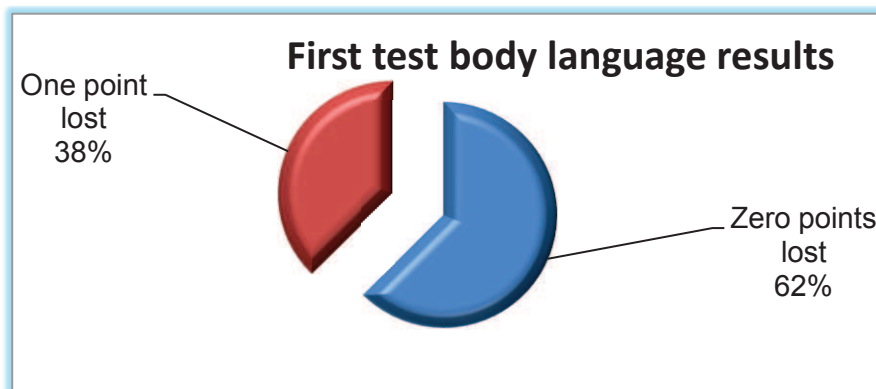
Most of students performed well this aspect since the first test. Sixty two percent of students used their body and facial expressions to assistant them in the conveying of the messages and achieve the communication purposes. Using body in conversation is very important. Thirty eight percent of them did not make any movements or expressions that showed to be disrespectful or to assist the conversation.

**Second test body language results**

One point lost 13%

Zero pints lost 87%
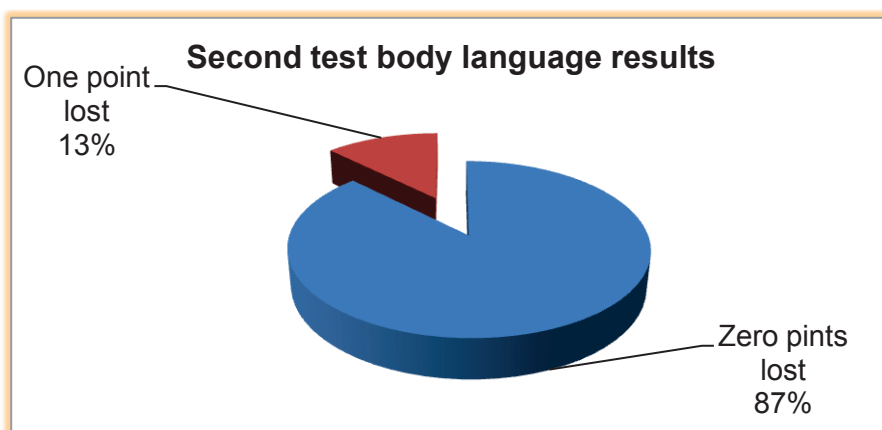
Taking a glance to the chart above it is easy to conclude that most students improved at this. During the month they understood the importance of body and their expressions. Eighty seven percent showed interested, politeness and respect towards other people and this was the most relevant.

**Conclusions**

Developing the communicative competence is one of the most important for the majority of learners in Costa Rica it is the most important of the goals when learning a language. This competence requires many competences within itself. Oral communication is much more than accurate linguistic phrases; it involves behavior, expressions, culture, and discourse. The teaching and learning process must be focused on everything because linguistic skills are very relevant as well. Without the linguistic part oral communication would not be possible. Students need the linguistic part in order to produce an outcome that is successfully comprehended by others. When students do not have a good grammar and syntax the receptors may not understand exactly what tense they are referring to or what words they are trying to use due to mispronunciation or lack of vocabulary. (Schimdt, (2000).

Activities and diverse tasks should assist students to acquire many different skills at the same time in order to enhance successful oral communication. Since oral communication involves linguistic and also social competence each activity planned should consider both sides. The purpose or the main objective for each activity should be very clear in order to make sure that it was reached. (Schimdt,2000)

Applying learning strategies assists students to develop their oral communicative skills. These strategies also made them much more independent and autonomous. Strategies are always very easy to implement in the class.

Intermediate language learners require a lot of monitoring and feedback to help them improve their skills and language proficiency. This population knows many

grammatical rules but the problem is that they do not apply them when speaking and for

this reason is that feedback at this level is important indeed.

The main characteristics of tasks and activities to be effective are:

Students should know that they are performing the task for a purpose within it.

Students should show a visible result of the task. Their purpose of completing it is to get

that outcome that is being expected. Oral communication must not be rehearsed; it must be

as real as possible. Language learners need to learn to be spontaneous, natural, and fluent.

When students practice and make the dialogue in advance the communication stops being

real.  Students simple start repeating, remembering what they did instead of making an

effort to convey a message. (Pillar, 1997)

**Recommendations**

- Implement oral communication as the core of your class.

- Plan specific communicative objectives for each class and activity.

- Integrate linguistic, social, and cultural objectives in each class.

- Teach and guide students in the use of communicative strategies.

- Enhance students' autonomy by providing opportunities to reflect.

- Create a classroom atmosphere that allows learners to express their ideas naturally,

  spontaneously, and appropriately. (Pineiro, 2002)

EXAMINING ELEMENTS IN TASKS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE

**Specific Recommendations:**

- **Fluency:** Provide an atmosphere that makes students be spontaneous.

- **Grammar and pronunciation:** Give a lot of feedback. When students are supposed to master the content correct them immediately. When the content is new for them do not interrupt them.

- **Culture:** provide input with different specific differences of culture around the world. Make activities in which students can interpret their own culture.

- **Comprehension:** Provide students with different listening exercises. Include different accents and circumstances.

- **Comprehensibility:** Recreate real life situations in order to make students discuss their ideas and negotiate meaning with their classmates; in this way students must try as hard as possible to make themselves understood.

- **Vocabulary:** Provide input according to the students proficiency level. Using class activities and tasks students should produce it and utilize it for communicative purposes.

- **Autonomy and motivation:** Guide students in the use of communicative strategies in order to enhance autonomy and motivation simultaneously.

(Pineiro, 2002)

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