

## **From Strengths to Weaknesses: Guiding Students in Their Development of Oral Skills**

**De las destrezas hacia las debilidades:  
Guiando a los estudiantes a través del desarrollo de sus habilidades orales**

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This article intends to report on a small research project carried out with a group of adult EFL learners at the National University extension program, in Bogotá. Founded on a needs analysis process, some activities based on students' strengths were proposed and developed in order to meet the students' main need: oral skills. The proposal was implemented and evaluated revealing oral portfolios and debates as useful tools in the development of oral proficiency as well as support in students' self-regulation processes.

**Key words:** Adult Second Language Acquisition-Methodology-Evaluation, English-Teaching-Evaluation, Oral Communication-Teaching-Methodology, Teaching Adults-Programs

El objetivo del presente artículo es dar a conocer un proyecto de investigación a pequeña escala, desarrollado con un grupo de estudiantes adultos de inglés como lengua extranjera en la Unidad de Extensión de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia, en Bogotá. A partir de un proceso de análisis de necesidades, se plantearon y desarrollaron algunas actividades basadas en las fortalezas de los estudiantes con miras a suplir la principal necesidad de los estudiantes: las habilidades orales. La implementación y evaluación de la propuesta mostró que los portafolios y los debates son herramientas claves en el desarrollo de la proficiencia así como en el apoyo de los procesos de autorregulación de los estudiantes.

**Palabras claves:** Adquisición de una segunda lengua-Metodología-Evaluación, Inglés-Enseñanza-Evaluación, Comunicación oral-Enseñanza-Metodología, Educación de adultos-Programas

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## INTRODUCTION

Being a teacher implies adopting different roles from guides to counselors, from observers to promoters. This great variety of roles implies commitment and responsibility towards our teaching practice. Through our teaching experience we have learned to identify the main needs in every group of students we have under our guidance and its our responsibility to make the right decisions along the process in order to meet those needs and best help our learners.

A common characteristic I have noticed among advanced EFL learners is the difficulty in observing progress in terms of achieved goals. This appreciation may cause frustration and lack of motivation in learners and, at the same time, a prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty as teachers do not know how to most efficiently help advanced students to notice their progress and to work on their weaknesses.

This article deals with a proposal to meet adult EFL learners' linguistic needs in terms of guiding their development of oral skills and taking advantage of their strengths.

## NEEDS ANALYSIS: A DECISION – MAKING PROCESS

Needs analysis refers to the process of gathering information from the students with a view of identifying what they need in their English learning process as well as determining what students need English for. Once the needs are identified, they are classified according to the area they belong to thus, some of the information collected might center on the students' human aspects. These type of needs are referred to as *situation needs*. On the other

hand, some of the information gathered relates to the language aspect which is conceived as *language needs*. The third step in this process is to analyze the information found and arrange those needs according to priorities in order to focus on the most frequent and important ones (Brown, 1995).

The main purpose of a needs analysis is to make decisions on curriculum design, choosing appropriate instructional strategies and designing materials which will respond to the students needs.

A needs analysis process was carried out in a group of eleven EFL learners from different professional backgrounds taking part in an advanced sixty-hour course at the "Unidad de Extensión" at the National University. Other participants who were extremely important in this first stage of identifying students needs were three colleagues who have been working for the university, giving classes to students in the same English level. They answered a survey which served as an instrument to verify information gathered by means of other instruments.

Four main instruments were used in order to collect data on the learners' needs. First, an oral group interview (Appendix 1) was developed in order to explore students' previous experiences with English learning as well as the aspects they consider as their main strengths and weaknesses. The second instrument was a written questionnaire (Appendix 2) adapted from a format suggested by Hadfield (1992). This tool explored students' beliefs on their learning of English and the aspect(s) they needed more guidance with. This questionnaire had two main objectives. On the one hand, I wanted to contrast the information I had collected by means of the group interview in order to identify similarities and discrepancies.

On the other hand, I wanted to know more about the social aspects of their learning process and what they expected from the course.

The third instrument was a short written interview (Appendix 3) applied two weeks after the initial information was collected. The main purposes of this tool was to account for the information collected through the other instruments and to inquire about activities students carried out outside the classroom in order to help their learning process. Finally, a written interview (Appendix 4) was applied to three colleagues from the institution who had had experience with advanced courses in the same setting. The main goal of this tool was to look at the same aspects explored through the other instruments from a different perspective, the teachers' one.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

"Only when there is cooperation between both sides involved in the interaction can communication effectively take place, and learning occurs." Malamah-Thomas (1987, pp. 11). This quote states the idea of interaction as a process that goes beyond the concept of an action followed by a reaction. Interaction presupposes a reciprocal acting which has certain influences in all the participants. This draws our attention to a specific concern we, teachers, share: how to make students interact actively.

Tsui, A. (1995) provides a very complete review of multiple factors influencing the low rate of learners' interactions. Among the most important issues I want to highlight students' low English proficiency; "face-saving" which entails students being afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at; the pressure students may feel to give "right answers"; and teachers' intolerance of silence.

My conviction is that natural language learning processes can enhance learning in classrooms as it implies tackling real life situations and using problem-solving procedures to interact and carry out communicative tasks effectively. Willis (1996) states that using the language freely to learn to speak is a way to guarantee real interaction among learners. The rationale behind this conviction is that this is the way we learn to speak when acquiring another language naturally.

Students need opportunities to express their ideas, feelings and experiences as well as to test hypotheses they have about ways the language works in a non-threatening and supportive atmosphere. Within this conception of language learning and use, a task-based learning framework offers opportunities for students to experiment with both written and spoken language.

In task-based learning, communication tasks involve learning in a different mental process as students create what they want to express. This is the theoretical support for one of the activities my innovation proposed: debates. O'Malley and Valdez (1996) present debates as oral assessment activities. The authors also acknowledge the potential debates have: "Debates present opportunities for students to engage in ongoing extended chunks of language for a real purpose: to convincingly defend one side of an issue" (pp. 87), and I would add, to argue other peers' positions. Debates require a great amount of preparation by learners. They also promote interaction in groups and promote the use of diverse language functions such as explaining, describing, negotiating information, persuading, agreeing and disagreeing.

### FINDINGS

In order to analyze the data gathered, I established the similarities in the information

provided by the four instruments implemented and arranged them in order of the ones most frequently mentioned. The following chart outlines the results found.

1. All the students have more than one year of experience with the language
2. They need English for their professional development, because they want to study abroad, or just because they like it
3. Students' main strengths are reading, grammar and writing
4. Students' main weaknesses are speaking, listening and pronunciation
5. The person who can help them best is the teacher, themselves and their classmates.
6. Among the most useful ways to learn are practicing as much as possible, having access to extra materials, thinking in English and listening to materials
7. Learning a language is interesting but involves hard work

Based on the findings I decided to address speaking as the most highlighted need shown in the multiple instruments used for data collection.

### The Innovation

The first cycle of the innovation was the design process which entailed looking for suitable material, classifying it, categorizing material according to difficulty, elaborating activity guides and writing the format for the debates as well as for the cassette recordings. The second stage entailed the implementation of the activities that will best meet the students' main need: to improve their oral expression. Two activities were selected for this purpose, the first one initially proposed was to record four readings on a cassette. The topics were negotiated with students. As a result of this negotiation process, two readings on cultural aspects of the United States together with two readings about critical issues in society

were selected. Each reading was handed out on Mondays, was read in class on Wednesdays and students recorded it at home on the cassette, to be collected on Thursdays. I listened to students' recordings on the weekends and recorded individual feedback on each cassette focusing on pronunciation, intonation, stress, fluency and accuracy, along with my reading of the article. Additionally, individual written feedback was prepared and given to students the following week. For the last two recording exercises, students were asked to record a four-minute talk about two of the topics included in the readings.

The second task, designed to work on students' oral ability, involved two debate sessions. The topics of the debates were the main themes of the last two readings concerning some critical issues for society taken from a book by Alexander (1970) entitled *For and Against*. The students were given the main guidelines of what debates were about and the purpose of the activity. A week before each debate was held, they divided the group into two teams, one made up of students for the topic and the other of those against it. The students also decided on the organization of the debates and the main aspects to be tackled. The teacher introduced the task and played the role of moderator. The first debate was developed around the information presented in the article entitled '*World Governments Should Conduct Serious Campaigns Against Smoking*'. It was held on November 6 and lasted one hour even though it was programmed for forty-five minutes. The second debate was based on the reading '*Television is Doing Irreparable Harm*'. It was developed on November 14 and lasted forty minutes.

The rationale supporting this part of the innovation is based on two main facts. Firstly, I considered it appropriate to take advantage of

reading as one of the aspects detected as a strength through the needs analysis. Secondly, I do believe that oral production is a process which may be developed gradually. I base this conception on the premises of scaffolding knowledge proposed by Vigotsky. Students started using one of their main strengths in English: reading in order to move toward working in one of their common weaknesses: speaking. Finally, I want to highlight that constant and constructive feedback supported students in their process and made them feel confident in order to start a dynamics of self-assessment and self-regulation. This is demonstrated in one of the instruments used to evaluate the innovation.

### **Innovation Evaluation**

There were three main instruments to evaluate this innovation implementation. There was continuous and systematic feedback from students after every task implemented, as suggested by Rodgers (2002). I prepared a guide to carry out informal oral group interviews (Appendix 5), the main aspects of which were the way students felt after performing the task, what they liked and disliked about the task, advantages and disadvantages they could detect in the task-cycle, and the importance of the activity in their learning process.

Students evaluated the cassettes exercises as very challenging and time consuming but it was rewarding for them to be able to listen to their first recording and to the last one and detect progress in aspects such as pronunciation and fluency. Four students reported to have felt nervous when recording the exercises at home. The main cause for their apprehension was to know that it was going to be listened to and 'evaluated' by me. The rest of the students stated that they felt very comfortable with this activity as they could take as much time as they

wanted to record the exercises. An aspect which was highlighted by students was that they liked the idea of having feedback both on the cassette and as a written report. The idea behind this comment is that they felt they were helped on an individual basis which gave them a sense of confidence and motivation.

The tasks concerning debating were first evaluated through the same instrument. I consider it important to report the aspects mentioned in students' feedback on the activity. First, students highlighted the importance of having had an article as an initial source of information on the topic. Some others said this task was valuable since it allowed them to form coherent sentences. Another student commented on how the task gave him the opportunity to use prior knowledge as well as to speak freely to express what he thinks about the topic. For him it was very important to have the possibility to interact in a real-life situation in which 'you can't prepare'. A third learner reported on the importance of spontaneous use of language and various opportunities to participate, while a disadvantage she encountered was that the topic was not limited so there were many aspects to talk about and that they were not able to discuss due to time constraints. Regarding the same task, another learner found it very useful in terms of vocabulary and listening practice as well as a way to try to think in English. Finally, a student emphasizes the fact that this task promoted 'speaking without pressure' and it became a profitable opportunity to overcome the lack of practicing the language outside of the classroom.

The second instrument to evaluate the innovation was the teacher's field notes on the analysis of the cassettes recorded by students and the video recordings of the debates. The

cassette recording tasks was rewarding as I noticed progress in most students who carried it out according to the guidelines we had agreed. Learners' improvement in features such as pronunciation and fluency was noticeable. There were three cases in which the task was not carried out effectively. In two cases students did not hand the cassettes in on time and did not complete the sequence of six exercises proposed. In one case a student recorded all the first four exercises at once with the idea of catching up with deadlines. In this case progress was not perceived as the task was not progressive and changed in nature and purpose. A drawback of this task was the fact that not all learners may have access to the equipment required to perform the activity.

Regarding debates I can conclude that they have many advantages. All students participated actively, coherently fulfilling the purpose and achieving the goal desired. I want to reflect on the fact that at the beginning of this course, two students used their native language in some instances, they did not participate very actively in oral activities during lessons and tended to be isolated from the rest of the students. During the course of all the activities their behavior changed, and in the debates they participated on more than one occasion, they used English most of the time and I could notice they had researched the topics to be debated, which entails motivation

to be prepared in order to take an active role in the task-cycle.

The last instrument used to evaluate the varied tasks which constituted the innovation was a written questionnaire (Appendix 6), which students answered after the implementation of the last activity. The heading of the questionnaire collected some personal information. Then there was an introduction which explained the purpose of the interview followed by ten different questions which addressed features such as the aspects they liked and disliked most about the class. There were two questions about the positive and negative aspects of the cassette recording exercises. The following two questions collected information about the benefits and drawbacks of the debates. Next, there was a question about the way the oral tasks help learners in their process –if it happened. Later, students were asked to list other activities developed in class which contributed to their English learning. The following item explored what students would change about the class. The last question encouraged the learner to write any additional comments regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the multiple activities carried out in class. The following chart shows the most relevant data collected through this instrument.

**1. ASPECTS STUDENTS LIKED THE MOST ABOUT THE ENGLISH CLASS:**

Debates	9
Listening Exercises	6
News shared	6
Tape recording	5

**2. ASPECTS STUDENTS DISLIKED ABOUT THE CLASS:**

Nothing	8
Some activities lasted too long	1

<b>3. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE CASSETTE RECORDING EXERCISES:</b>	
Be aware of mistakes	6
Good opportunity for improving pronunciation and fluency	5
Build confidence for speaking	1
They were really challenging	1
Receive individual Feedback	1
<b>4. NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE CASSETTE RECORDING EXERCISES:</b>	
Lack of time for more dedication	4
Nothing	4
Lack of equipment	1
Feeling nervous in front of the cassette recorder	1
<b>5. BENEFITS OF THE DEBATES:</b>	
Improve speaking	5
Be able to defend one's ideas	5
Need to think in English	3
Best way to improve fluency	1
Opportunity to use all you have learned	1
Confidence to speak without feeling stressed	1
Realize mistakes through feedback given	1
<b>6. DRAWBACKS OF THE DEBATES:</b>	
Nothing	5
Not having more than two	2
Feeling nervous	2
<b>7. THE ORAL EXERCISES HELPED STUDENTS IN THEIR LEARNING PROCESS:</b>	
Yes	11
No	0
<b>8. THE WAY THE ORAL EXERCISES HELPED:</b>	
They promoted speaking	6
Students realized mistakes and worked on them	4
Students lost fear to speak in English	4
They promoted listening	3
Feedback was important	2
They promoted thinking in English	2
<b>9. OTHER ACTIVITIES IN CLASS WHICH HELPED STUDENTS IN THEIR LEARNING:</b>	
Listening exercises	6
Games	5
Cassette recordings	4

**10. WHAT STUDENTS WOULD CHANGE IN THE CLASS:**

Nothing	8
The English level of some partners	1

**11. GENERAL COMMENTS:**

'I would like to have more time for debates'	2
'I liked this course because I learned a lot'	1
'I think we have a lot of opportunities and ways to learn, but unfortunately I didn't enough time to take advantage of those activities'	1
'Aleida has a good performance like a teacher, we could enjoy and learn in this level'	1
'I liked a lot the course. This was my first course and I liked all the activities and the teacher's way to do the activities and to prepare the feedback'	1
'I think that the course and the activities were goods'	1

The results found in the evaluation of the innovation, through the multiple instruments used, show that students' needs were met up to a certain point. Students acknowledged the benefits obtained through the tasks proposed in specific aspects such as improving oral skills, highlighting mistakes in order to work on them, building confidence when communicating in English and thinking in the target language.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The needs analysis process demonstrated to be a key aspect when making decisions on curriculum, as well as on instructional strategies and materials to be implemented in a course. Carrying out a needs analysis at the beginning of a course allows the teacher to identify what students most need in their English learning process and to set up a proposal to tackle those needs.

Classroom innovation does not necessarily mean to change every single aspect in a curricular plan or to start from zero. An innovation proposal can be designed in a way in which it can be an integral part of curriculum supporting its key components.

A task-based approach to teaching and learning proved to be useful in this innovation proposal as it involves using English in the process with the aim of achieving a goal. Thus, activities within this framework became opportunities for students to express their ideas, feelings and experiences freely and meaningfully. An advantage of the task-based approach is the combination of the four basic communicative skills as they are the tools students have to reach the task goal.

The cassette recording task –Oral portfolio– was useful in detecting progress in oral production as well as in building students' confidence when using the target language with a meaningful purpose. Furthermore, authentic assessment of oral language should focus on the students' ability to interpret and convey meaning in contexts which are authentic.

Using students' strengths in order to work on their weaknesses proved to be a successful technique in order to tackle those aspects students need more help or practice with.

Both the teacher and students found opportunities in the debates to express their ideas and experiences, to defend their positions

and to argue respectfully other's points of view about key issues in our society. Likewise, this activity promoted speaking as well as listening which led to working on specific problems students have in these fields.

### PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

- One of the teachers' duties is to select tasks and materials that will motivate students, engage their attention, entail an intellectual and linguistic challenge and promote their language development.

- Feedback must be valued beyond its evaluative aspect. Continuous and systematic feedback helps teachers to redirect their learning tasks and allows students to become critical informants of their own process, and to be more committed with what learning a language implies.

- Teachers should lead learners to regard their errors in a positive way, treating them as a normal and important part of learning. There should be a supportive atmosphere in the classroom in order to encourage learners to take risks when participating actively in the multiple tasks proposed by teachers regardless of possible mistakes. The rationale behind this implication is that all learners need to experiment and make errors.

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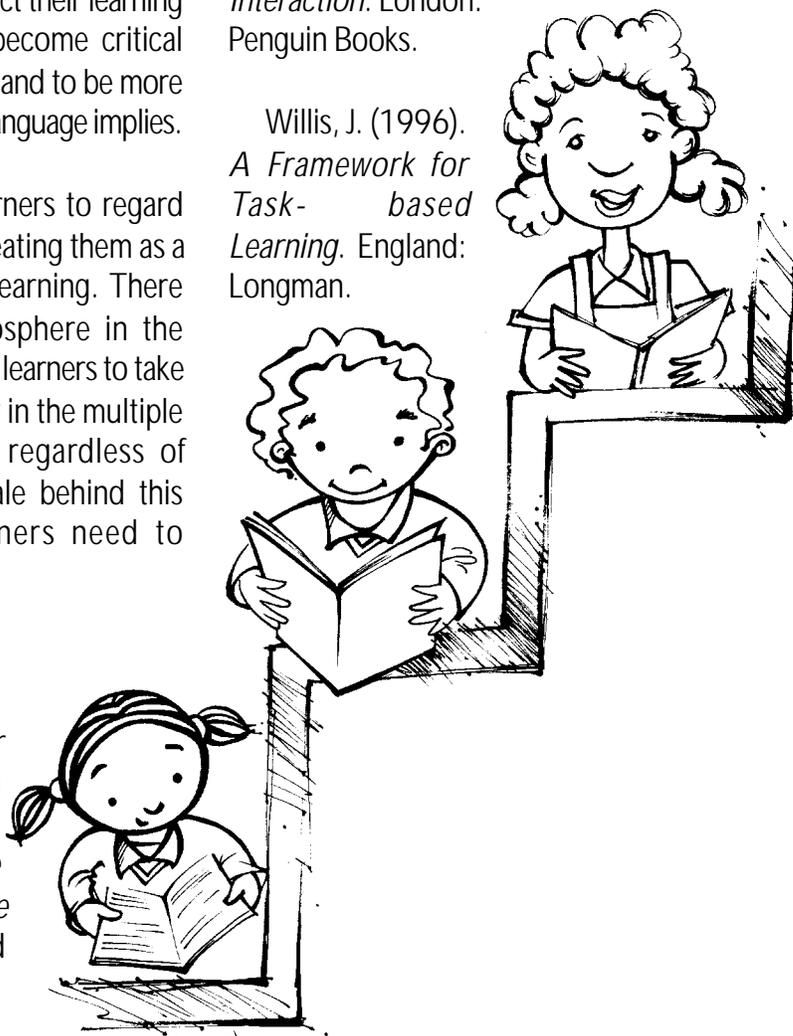
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**APPENDIX 1: NEEDS ANALYSIS - ORAL GROUP INTERVIEW****Protocol**

1. How long have you been studying English?
2. Why are you studying English?
3. What aspects of English are you good at?
4. Which aspects of English do you feel you need more help with?

**APPENDIX 2: NEEDS ANALYSIS - EXPLORING BELIEFS AND WEAKNESSES**

WHAT KIND OF LANGUAGE LEARNER ARE YOU?  
(Adapted from Hatfield, 1992)

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ SEX: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Tick the three activities you think are most similar to language learning, and say why.

Learning a language is like...

- |                            |       |                                  |       |
|----------------------------|-------|----------------------------------|-------|
| Learning to ride a bike    | _____ | Learning mathematics formulae    | _____ |
| Learning to play chess     | _____ | Learning to swim                 | _____ |
| Learning to walk           | _____ | Learning dates in a history exam | _____ |
| Learning words in a play   | _____ | Learning to play cards           | _____ |
| Learning to play the piano | _____ |                                  |       |

2. Try to number the sentences in order: 1: most useful way for me. 12: least useful way for me.

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| Learning lists of vocabulary by heart                               | _____ |
| Writing down the translation of every new word or phrase            | _____ |
| Learning grammar rules with examples sentences                      | _____ |
| Reading as much as possible in class                                | _____ |
| Speaking as much as possible in class                               | _____ |
| Writing everything down in a notebook and learning it               | _____ |
| Forgetting about grammar and listening to people instead            | _____ |
| Doing lots of grammar exercises _____ Written                       | _____ |
| _____ Oral  | _____ |
| Getting the teacher to correct you every time you say sentences     | _____ |
| Trying to think in English and not translate into your own language | _____ |
| Writing essays and getting them corrected by the teacher            | _____ |

3. Which aspect of language do you think / feel you need most help or practice with? Number them in order: 1: Need to practice most 7: Need to practice least

- |            |       |           |       |               |       |
|------------|-------|-----------|-------|---------------|-------|
| Grammar    | _____ | Listening | _____ | Writing       | _____ |
| Vocabulary | _____ | Speaking  | _____ | Pronunciation | _____ |
| Reading    | _____ |           |       |               |       |

4. How do you think the following people can help you best?

- |              |       |                               |       |
|--------------|-------|-------------------------------|-------|
| Your teacher | _____ | The other people in the group | _____ |
| Yourself     | _____ | Your family                   | _____ |
| Workmates    | _____ |                               |       |

**APPENDIX 3: NEEDS ANALYSIS – WRITTEN INTERVIEW**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 AGE: \_\_\_\_\_ MALE: \_\_\_\_\_ FEMALE: \_\_\_\_\_  
 HOW LONG HAVE YOU STUDIED ENGLISH? \_\_\_\_\_

This questionnaire has been designed to identify the different needs you have as an advanced student of English.

Please respond to each sentence accurately and precisely.

1. In your experience what works best to learn English?

- .
- .
- .
- .

2. How important is it practicing English outside the classroom? Why?

3. What are your strengths as an English student?

- .
- .
- .

4. What aspects of English language do you feel/think you need most help or practice with?

- .
- .
- .

5. How do you work on the aspects you mentioned in the previous question outside the classroom? Mention the activities as well as the procedure.

**APPEDIX 4: NEEDS ANALYSIS - QUESTIONNAIRE TO PROFESSORS**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

1. How long have you been teaching English in the advanced courses at Extension?
2. What have you noticed as students' main strengths?
3. What aspects of English have you noticed your students have more problems or need more help with?
4. How have you helped your students work on the aspects they have more problems with?

**APPENDIX 5: INNOVATION EVALUATION – INFORMAL ORAL GROUP INTERVIEWS**

1. How did you like this task?
2. How did you feel about your participation in it?
3. What are the advantages of the activity?
4. What are the disadvantages of the activity?
5. What would you change about the task?
6. Do you have any additional comments on the task? Explain

**APPENDIX 6: EVALUATION – QUESTIONNAIRE TO STUDENTS**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
AGE: \_\_\_\_\_ MALE: \_\_\_\_\_ FEMALE: \_\_\_\_\_

This questionnaire has been designed to evaluate the multiple activities carried out in the English class and the possible benefits you may have obtained through your interaction in the different class activities.

Please answer each sentence accurately and precisely.

1. What aspects do you like the most about the English class?

.  
.

2. What aspects did you dislike the most about the English class?

.  
.

3. What are the positive aspects of the cassette recording exercise you did in this class?

4. What are the negative aspects of the cassette recording exercise you did in this class?

5. What were the benefits of the debates we carried out in class?

6. What were the drawbacks of the debates held in the class?

7. Do you think that those oral exercises helped you in your English learning? How? Why? Explain your answer.

8. Which other activities developed in class helped you in your English learning?

9. What would you change in this class? Why?

10. Write in the space below any additional comment you may have regarding the advantages or disadvantages the diverse activities in the English class have.