



Perspectives of EFL Student's Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

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Proyectos de Investigación

Certifico que Alison Dayana Angulo Monar ha cumplido satisfactoriamente su investigación descriptiva como pre-requisito de graduación de Magíster en Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros con Mención en la Enseñanza de Inglés. Su investigación es parte del proyecto PERSPECTIVES OF EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN SPEAKING cuyo objetivo general es determinar las dificultades que tienen los estudiantes al hablar en inglés como lengua extranjera.

En este proyecto, cada participante reporta los resultados de una encuesta tomada en un contexto educativo diferente. Las secciones de introducción, literatura y metodología (instrumentos y análisis de datos) son las mismas.

Particular que comunico para los fines consiguientes.

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Coordinadora de Titulación

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Abstract

This article reports EFL students' difficulties in speaking in a state high school in Ecuador. The instrument included 40 Likert type scale statements and questions that measured qualitative aspects of student's experiences in terms of speaking activities, reactions to speaking tasks, and weaknesses and strengths. The survey was sent via Google Forms to 74 students, the excel document that was exported by the program was edited, tabulated, analyzed and processed through SPSS statistical program. The findings included means and frequency percentages that showed that student's perspectives tilt to a lack of oral activities in the classroom and presence of anxiety when engaging in speaking tasks. The study confirms the existence of limitations like anxiety in oral production and the influence of some factors in the class interaction time. The findings are significant for future upgrades and advances in curriculum design and teaching practice of English language.

Keywords: speaking skills, perspectives, high school level, EFL

Resumen

Este artículo reporta las dificultades para hablar de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en una escuela secundaria estatal en Ecuador. El instrumento incluyó 40 enunciados y preguntas de escala tipo Likert que midieron aspectos cualitativos de las experiencias de los estudiantes en actividades de conversación, reacciones a las tareas de conversación y debilidades y fortalezas. La encuesta se envió vía Google Forms a 74 estudiantes, el documento de Excel que exportó el programa fue editado, tabulado, analizado y procesado a través del programa estadístico SPSS. Los hallazgos incluyeron promedios y frecuencias en porcentajes, las cuales mostraron que las perspectivas de los estudiantes se inclinan hacia la falta de actividades orales en el aula y la presencia de ansiedad al realizar tareas de conversación. El estudio confirma la existencia de limitaciones, como ansiedad, en la producción oral y la influencia de algunos factores en el tiempo de interacción de clase. Sin embargo, los hallazgos son importantes para futuras mejoras y avances en el diseño curricular y la práctica docente del idioma inglés.

Palabras clave: habilidades orales, perspectivas, nivel secundario, EFL

EFL Student's Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

Learning languages is not an easy endeavor and speaking is one of the first competences that learners consider challenging. Chou (2018) stated that albeit the importance of speaking skills, it is a “complex” process to manage oral production due to underlying subskills. The challenges in communicating orally are significant, considering that, utterances are an ongoing process; there are time constraints in reacting, there are contemplations of social instances, and there are body language signals to understand (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2010, p. 198).

Some research reported how speaking challenges come from the intrinsic process of oral production. Türkben (2019) defined speaking as “a process that starts with designing in the brain and ending with expressing thoughts through articulation” (p. 1012). Tekşan et al. (2019) mentioned that speaking is a natural way of communicating, expressing ideas, and becoming part of society. In this sense, Burns (2019) established that the skill itself requires mastering difficult cognitive processes. The author reported that the challenge is reacting in a simultaneous event such as thinking and replying in a social context.

Psychological factors rank among reasons to find speaking challenging (Listyaningrum, 2017). For instance, limitations may origin from students' feelings (Akkakoson, 2016). The author mentioned the (lack of) motivation and anxiety as sources that may block students' performance. Aliyu et al. (2019) reported that learners mostly feel anxious “due to fear of negative evaluation and social-environmental factor” (p. 41). Similarly, Tridimanti (2018) pointed out that students felt an overall fear of not being able to communicate efficiently or not understanding the target language due to a lack of vocabulary and grammar.

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Other studies found anxiety as one challenge in oral activities that derived to other issues. Takkaç (2018) concluded that the fear of making mistakes or not being understood may cause anxiety in students. The author mentioned other factors such as the worry on pronunciation, accuracy, and comparing their speech to other classmates. Furthermore, in addition to anxiety, self-confidence is another factor that seems to affect speaking skills (Tridinanti, 2018).

Among external challenges, some mention class and household environment. Hasanah and Utami (2019) classified challenges naming low motivation, big class size and inefficient materials. In addition, age may be a factor associated to challenges in speaking (Gaibani & Elmenfi, 2016, p. 181). Kara et al. (2017) collected participants' perceptions on personal and educational aspects that affected their speaking through a questionnaire. The authors found that low L2 input, not having time to practice, and classes with all-grammar focus are the main challenges in the EFL environment (p. 71).

The internal and external factors were also found in another study with the use of questionnaires. Quyen et al. (2018) found that teaching practice aspects and the classroom environment affected students. However, the author highlights the awareness of lack of vocabulary and English speaking strategies as setbacks for students (p. 43).

The present study is a qualitative descriptive study using as instruments prior research and a survey to report students' perspectives. The benefit relies on creating knowledge in the EFL field and "it is a vehicle for presenting and treating" the findings as organic and evolutive (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Therefore, two research questions arose for this study: 1. What aspects of speaking do students consider challenging? 2. What are the students' perspectives on speaking activities?

Literature Review

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Speaking Teaching Principles

Principles in teaching practice guide language learning, hence speaking. Current teaching methodologies go by learner-centered and interaction-oriented approaches (Richards, 2002). Noels et al. (2016) mentioned the importance of certain values in class that learners must have, namely “autonomy, competence, and relatedness” and “engagement” (p. 45). Speaking teaching, specifically, is an activity that entices production, student-centeredness, organization, and speech elements (Türkben, 2019).

The factors of teaching and learning English language to produce orally have received some attention. Joo (2016) mentioned that with the existence of psychoaffective factors speaking is sometimes restrictive.

Wael et al. (2018) explored speaking learning strategies, they noted that memory strategies are highly frequent in teens and social strategies were important in terms of practicing oral communication.

Hasanah & Utami (2019) reported challenges in non-native English speaking countries. One problem was class size which did not allow time for practicing. The second problem was students wanted to translate or find the words in their L1. A third problem was that most activities relied on grammar and vocabulary sessions and students were bored to learn English grammar.

Wilson et al. (2016) mentioned some challenges and activities that are inherent to speaking skills in the classroom. According to the authors, English learners face speaking anxiety when in front of the class. Therefore, activities such as talking with partners, discussing a concept, vocabulary games with prompts. The dynamics might be in pairs or small groups.

Aliyu et al. (2019) reported that students were not comfortable in speaking tasks. Participants felt afraid because they did not want to make mistakes in front of their

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classmates. Also, participants felt nervous every time they had to speak in the classroom. Based on the results, the authors recommended increasing class interactions and oral presentations as they might reduce anxiety.

Oflaz (2019) highlighted that anxiety is a common feeling in speaking environments. The author mentioned that anxiety involves being uncertain and it is a feeling that may last longer than fear, for example. In language learning settings, anxiety mostly arises when the student speaks whether in regular activities or oral exams in a foreign language (p. 1000). The author concluded that “speaking scores of low-anxious students were significantly higher than high-anxious students” (p. 1005).

Speaking Components

In order to determine the challenges in speaking, it is crucial to denote the extent of this skill. Chou (2018) differentiated speaking components in the following manner: “(1) knowledge of language and discourse (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and discourse); (2) core speaking skills (chunking, signaling intention, and turn-taking); and (3) communication strategies (paraphrasing, rephrasing, and approximation)” (p. 612). Fluency and pronunciation are two elements that appear in research (Türkben, 2019).

Fluency

Studies argue on the extent to determine the meaning of fluency in speaking. Fluency might be “speech comprehensibility”, rhythm, and amount of pauses (Albino, 2017). To achieve fluency, Dejong et al. (2013) denoted that some elements that shape fluency are “speech rate” and “mean length of utterance” and disregards *pauses* as a factor. However, the ability to balance pauses was part of a study on fluency by Thomson (2017). The author asked participants “to notice the rhythm and flow” of recordings to imitate in their own speech (p. 34).

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Sapkota (2016) discussed elements detected in learners in a study to improve speaking fluency. The author noticed that students struggled with fluency based on the “awkward pauses for relatively long time”, repetition of words, and use of unnecessary terms. These factors contributed to not achieving a better fluency.

Accuracy

Accuracy is another speaking element that is defined in various manners. In a way, accuracy occurs in using vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation in an appropriate way (Derakhshan et al., 2016, p. 180). In a study, accuracy was measured based on error-free instances in sentences that participants created; acceptable accuracy was when students had no grammatical, syntactic, and lexical errors (Khaghaninejad & Bahrani, 2016; Kazemi & Moradi, 2019).

Pronunciation

Burns and Seidlhofer (2010) explained this element as closely related to speaking. For example, the authors stated, “Every lesson involving the spoken language is (also) a pronunciation lesson” (p. 197). Later, it is explained that pronunciation has its own structure and that it frames “how we employ speech sounds for communicating” (p. 198). The sub elements are: tone, when the person’s voice goes up or down with pauses; prominence, when the person accentuates some syllables; and, turn-taking signaling or contrastive stress, when the person understands the pitches and stops talking, waits turn, or makes sounds that mean *I am listening to you* (p. 205).

Methodology

This paper is a descriptive study with analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. The process included collecting information to understand a phenomenon from collecting data of the parties’ perspectives (Rahmawati, 2018, p. 19; Vaismorati et al., 2013, p. 398). In addition, as described by Lambert and Lambert (2012), the present

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study should: 1) include theory as well as an analysis of the results, 2) have an interpretation based on the data, 3) the selection of participants should be purposeful and consistent with the aim of the study, and 4) use qualitative instruments (p. 255-256).

The instrument of the study is a survey and the data was organized based on other descriptive studies. The process involved collecting, tabulating, and ordering the data. In another section, the author includes information relevant based on prior research, for instance the instrument is described with the items and sub-items that it included (Kara et al., 2017). Then, according to qualitative research guidelines (Irawan & Salija, 2017; Listyaningrum, 2017; Rahmawati, 2018), the author should analyze the data and report it with a respective explanation.

Participants

The participants of the present study were 74 students from a state high school. They were 54 women and 32 men. Students took a demographics survey that showed their level of English, according to them, 15% of participants said they had a beginner level, 72% a basic level and 14% an intermediate level.

The guest teacher allowed the author to send a link to a survey in Google form format specially created to collect the information. The contact with participants was through the guest teacher, considering that the author does not belong to the institution. The participants gave consent to participate via online.

Instrument

The instrument served to collect data relevant to two research questions: 1. What aspects of speaking do students consider challenging? 2. What are the students' perspectives on speaking activities? The survey consisted on a Likert-type questionnaire with four types of answers giving the opportunity to select options that best fit their perspectives on speaking challenges (Appendix 1).

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Students answered 40 questions of different nature. The survey was in English and Spanish due to students' English level. 22 questions consisted on selecting the degree of speaking-related statements, 18 questions involved choosing the frequency with which any given statement occurred (Table 1).

Data Analysis

The present section includes the process by which findings were tabulated and analyzed. Considering the data was collected through Google Forms, there was the opportunity to download an excel document which included the table with all the data from students.

The second step was coding each scale (Table 1). Each descriptor was assigned to a number, which served as a code. For instance, "to a great extent" was 1 and "none", 5. With the help of the "If" function, the author was able to code all the answers in order to create a new sheet with all-coded answers. This step is particularly helpful when the next stage is entering the information to SPSS Statistical program. The latter step was made with the Likert type scale sections but another process was taken in order to classify the two open-ended questions.

Table 1

Code for the scales of the survey

Scale	Code
To a great extent	1
A lot	2
Some	3
A little bit	4
None	5
Always	1
Frequently	2
Sometimes	3
Hardly ever	4
Never	5

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Source: Author

The research questions are related to the students' perspectives towards the challenges in speaking skills. For this reason, the researcher used the survey from varied English language levels in order to have better perspectives. The instrument is reliable because the Cronbach's Alpha = 0.80 indicated that the survey was internally consistent (López, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

In this section, aspects for ethical considerations are included. Confidentiality, anonymity, consent, and objectivity are important aspects in a study, and in light of the participants being minors (Espinoza, 2019). Therefore, the identity of the participants was guarded and to include the information in the present study, the names were changed to a number.

In addition, the guest teacher communicated the purpose of the study to participants, in this manner; students would answer all questions without restrictions. The guest teacher had approval from the school authorities before starting the study. The permission was given once the school obtained consent from parents in a written manner. Students were explained that they should be honest and explicit in open-ended questions but they were not led to any answer.

Results

To answer the first research question 1, what aspects of speaking do students consider challenging? Basic descriptive statistics of means is considered to give a general view of the group of participants. Afterwards, there is a specific report,

In Table 2, the items 1 to 13 give the insight of participants in terms of their weaknesses in English. Items 2 to 13 had a mean under three, which means that

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participants felt anxious and nervous to a great extent in the mentioned situations (see Table 3 for questions descriptors).

Table 2
Means for descriptive statistics

	QR1	QR2	QR3	QR4	QR5	QR6	QR7	QR8
M	3.16	2.82	2.60	2.24	2.50	2.19	2.16	2.92
	QR9	QR10	QR11	QR12	QR13	QR14	QR15	
M	2.93	2.47	2.41	2.70	2.88	3.22	3.56	
	QR16	QR17	QR18	QR19	QR20	QR21	QR22	QR23
M	3.79	3.44	3.49	3.65	3.49	3.65	3.52	3.08

Note: M=Mean

Source: Author

In addition, the frequency of the scale gives more information. In Table 3, the values show that all items have a degree of three or less. This means that feelings like anxiety, fear, and embarrassment might be a constant state of students during speaking skills. For instance, students Feel anxious because they cannot translate (52.7%), Feel afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation (62.2%), and Feel afraid of making grammar mistakes (63.5%).

In some items, a high percentage has a negative connotation. In the survey questions 14 to 22, students selected the extent of their strengths in speaking skills. In table 3, all the percentages from the mentioned items group on the 'a little bit' and 'none' sections, this indicates that participants do not master or master a little some aspects of oral communication in English language. Participants are able to interact a little bit, they do not think they have good pronunciation, sentence and word stress, and do not consider they pronounce correctly.

Table 3
Percentages per answers in each question of the survey

Statement / Value	To a great extent	A lot	Some	A little bit	None
When you speak in English, you					

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QR1	Feel confused about the topic	8.1	8.1	45.9	35.1	2.7
QR2	Feel confused for not knowing what to say	10.8	23.0	41.9	18.9	4.1
QR3	Feel anxious to respond quickly	16.2	28.4	27.0	23.0	1.4
QR4	Feel anxious trying to look for words to respond correctly.	37.8	24.3	20.3	10.8	6.8
QR5	Feel anxious because you cannot translate what you want to say.	20.3	32.4	31.1	9.5	6.8
QR6	Feel afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation.	36.5	25.7	21.6	10.8	4.1
QR7	Feel afraid of making grammar mistakes.	32.4	31.1	23.0	10.8	1.4
QR8	Translate everything I want to say.	10.8	24.3	33.8	24.3	6.8
QR9	Can't structure a sentence.	12.2	17.6	39.2	21.6	6.8
QR10	Can't continue the conversation because of lack of vocabulary.	24.3	21.6	37.8	12.2	2.7
QR11	Feel embarrassed of making mistakes.	24.3	29.7	23.0	16.2	2.7
QR12	Are not confident enough to speak in English	17.6	23.0	35.1	10.8	10.8
QR13	Don't understand what the other person is saying	12.2	24.3	31.1	25.7	5.4
QR14	Speak without many pauses.	10.8	13.5	33.8	24.3	16.2
QR15	Speak spontaneously.	2.7	14.9	28.4	28.4	23.0
QR16	Consider you speak correctly.	6.8	5.4	25.7	23.0	36.5
QR17	Have a good intonation of questions.	6.8	8.1	33.8	32.4	16.2
QR18	Have a good intonation of sentences.	2.7	10.8	33.8	36.5	13.5
QR19	When you speak in English, you) [Have a good pronunciation.	2.7	9.5	29.7	32.4	23.0
QR20	When you speak in English, you) [Use word stress.	4,1	10.8	31.1	37.8	14.9
QR21	When you speak in English, you) [Use sentence stress.	4.1	8.1	25.7	39.2	20.3
QR22	When you speak in English, you) [Can interact with the interlocutor.	2.7	12.2	31.1	36.5	16.2

To answer question 2, What are the students' perspectives on speaking activities?

Items 23 to 40 helped identifying varied tasks that students might diagnose. In table 4, the means show a general idea on which activities are more common amongst

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participants. The lower mean would show an item with more frequency in terms of how often do they engage in these tasks.

Table 4

Means for descriptive statistics

	QR24	QR25	QR26	QR27	QR28	QR29	QR30	QR31
M	3.19	3.08	3.28	3.32	3.20	3.20	3.30	3.31
	QR32	QR33	QR34	QR35	QR36	QR37	QR38	QR39
M	2.96	3.54	3.89	3.89	4.38	4.15	4.07	3.93

Note: M=Mean

Source: Author

Furthermore, in table 5, each value can be observed and they show the specific frequency. There are several scenarios and almost all items have different weights. Some statements focused on general activities but others are specifically related to oral communication. The most frequent activities are written practices of grammar and vocabulary.

The general activities with the lowest frequencies are practicing orally specific vocabulary from an activity or topic of the book, practicing of technical vocabulary in writing. The table shows that speaking related tasks have the lowest frequencies, from item 30 to 40 it can be observed that students hardly ever or never performed. For example, about 60% of participants reported low frequency of tasks such as creating short speeches, creating and performing dialogues, and commenting.

Table 5

Frequency per item

	Statement / Value You have done this activity...	Always	Frequently	Sometimes	Hardly ever	Never
QR23	Fill in the space with correct grammar.	5.4	23.0	37.8	25.7	8.1

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QR24	Write correct answers to questions to practice grammar.	5.4	17.6	43.2	20.3	13.5
QR25	Practice specific vocabulary in writing of an activity or topic from the book	5.4	20.3	43.2	23	8.1
QR26	[Practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the book.	2.7	23.0	36.5	18.9	18.9
QR27	[Practice of technical vocabulary in writing	5.4	14.9	36.5	28.4	14.9
QR28	[Practice of technical vocabulary orally	2.7	20.3	44.6	18.9	13.5
QR29	[Oral practice with vocabulary of personal interest.	5.4	18.9	39.2	23	13.5
QR30	[Written practice with vocabulary of personal interest	5.4	14.9	43.2	17.6	18.9
QR31	Oral pair work activities in the classroom.	4.1	12.2	50	16.2	17.6
QR32	[Pair work in writing activities in the classroom.	9.5	24.3	36.5	20.3	9.5
QR33	[Pair work in general outside the classroom.	6.8	9.5	31.1	28.4	24.3
QR34	[Created a short speech	0	6.8	24.3	41.9	27
QR35	[Made an oral presentation.	2.7	2.7	27	37.8	29.7
QR36	[Participated in a forum	0	6.8	10.8	20.3	62.2
QR37	[Commented on a general topic	0	5.4	17.6	33.8	43.2
QR38	Created dialogues to practice with peers	1.4	4.1	17.6	40.5	36.5
QR39	Written a dialogue from ideas from the book.	0	6.8	25.7	35.1	32.4
QR40	Practiced a dialogue about free ideas	0	13.5	25.7	39.2	21.6

Discussion

Concerning the first research question: What aspects of speaking do students consider challenging? Results show that most aspects are difficult. Students feel some

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confusion when speaking (45.9%) and for not knowing what to say (41.9%). Students felt very anxious because they tried to use the correct words and translate the words they needed (62.1% and 52.7). Regarding this response, the results show similarities with the following authors: Aliyu et al. (2019), Hasanah and Utami (2019), Oflaz (2019), and Wilson et al. (2016). These studies reported challenges in students such as anxiety, fear, and translating strategies.

In terms of speaking components, students struggle with mastering these competences. In general, participants did not consider to have good fluency and pronunciation. In addition, the results showed that learners do not interact with the interlocutor. These answers ranked in the scale “a little” and “no”.

With respect to the second research question: What are the students' perspectives on speaking activities? Participants hardly ever or never engage in speaking activities. Oral production opportunities such as pair work interaction (sometimes 31.1% and hardly ever 28.4), presentations (hardly ever 37.8%, never 29.7%), dialogues (hardly ever 40.5%, never 36.5%) or forums (never 62.2%). These activities are mostly affected by external causes and decisions in planning, sometimes class size does not allow for proper interaction (Hasanah & Utami, 2019). However, this challenges the recommendation of engaging on productive activities in speaking skills (Wilson et al., 2016).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal of the present study was to describe EFL speaking difficulty. The findings show that students face challenges in cognitive, social, and psychoaffective aspects. It can be concluded that oral communication is not achieved as the survey showed low frequency in speaking tasks. Moreover, the students conveyed a gap in the speaking planning and an opportunity to contribute in the EFL field.

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Although the sample permitted a significant result to be replicated in other educational context, the limitation of the study relied on other sources of data. The survey was sent online; for this reason, the initial process depended on the guest teacher to explain the aims and expected quality of answers from students. Hence, at the end of the analysis and report of data, contacting the participants was not possible. This process could have helped to make short interviews and giving the perspectives more depth.

This study aims to contribute in understanding and identifying challenges and opportunities of improvement in speaking skills practice. Further research in the field of oral production in EFL settings would be useful to continue the path of communicative approaches in Ecuador. Moreover, given that, this is descriptive study; fellow researchers may tie it to quantitative information. The author hopes that the present findings could elicit more interest in English language learning studies in local settings.

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Appendix 1

Survey

Available upon request.