



EFL Students' Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

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Proyectos de Investigación

Certifico que Víctor Efrén Alcívar Calderón 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. La metodología (instrumentos y análisis de datos) es el mismo.

Particular que comunico para los fines consiguientes.

María Rossana Ramírez Avila

Coordinadora de Titulación

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Abstract

Speaking is one of the most important skills that second language learners have to develop. However, the majority of students find it difficult and challenging to speak and express their thoughts effectively. This research aimed at exploring the speaking difficulties faced by EFL students at two different universities in Ecuador. The researcher followed a descriptive study design. Quantitative instruments were used to collect data. Results indicated that students' speaking problems are related to anxiety, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, limited practice, pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. The speaking activities they did in classes included dialogues, vocabulary practice, oral presentations, and pair-work. Regarding pair-work, students had positive perspectives about it. They agreed pair-work is fruitful to develop oral competencies. However, they mentioned that one disadvantage of pair-work is that the students with higher proficiency tended to have a sense of superiority. Implications of this study suggest the implementation of other instruments to collect data. This research constitutes a contribution to the English teaching field and a reference for further studies.

Keywords: speaking, speaking difficulties, EFL students, higher education

Resumen

Hablar es una de las habilidades más importantes que deben desarrollar los estudiantes de un segundo idioma. Sin embargo, para la mayoría de los estudiantes es difícil y constituye un desafío hablar y expresar sus pensamientos de manera efectiva. Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo explorar las dificultades que enfrentan los estudiantes de inglés al momento de hablar de dos diferentes universidades en Ecuador. El investigador siguió un diseño de estudio descriptivo. Se utilizaron instrumentos cuantitativos para recopilar datos. Los resultados indicaron que los problemas de habla de los estudiantes están relacionados con la ansiedad, el miedo a cometer errores, la falta de confianza, la limitada práctica, la pronunciación, la fluidez, la gramática y el vocabulario. Las actividades que realizan en sus clases incluyen diálogos, práctica de vocabulario, presentaciones orales y trabajo por parejas. En cuanto al trabajo por parejas, los estudiantes mostraron perspectivas positivas. Concordaron que el trabajo en pareja es fructífero para desarrollar las competencias orales. Sin embargo, mencionaron que una desventaja del trabajo entre pares es que los estudiantes con mayor proficiencia tendían a tener un sentido de superioridad. Las implicaciones de este estudio sugieren el uso de otros instrumentos para recopilar datos. Esta investigación constituye un aporte al campo de la enseñanza del inglés y un referente para futuros estudios.

Palabras claves: habilidad de hablar, dificultades para hablar, estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera, educación superior

EFL Students' Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

It is broadly known that English is a universal language that is widely spoken by around 1.27 billion people - native and non-native speakers. (Statista, 2021). In today's society, English has a great impact on different fields including economics, politics, science, technology, engineering, and education. It is important to have better opportunities, succeed in the professional realm, and come up in life (Nishanthi, 2018).

Although learning a new language involves the development of four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), languages are mainly speech. Related to that, Anuradha et. al, (2014) affirmed that a language is acquired by both listening and speaking. However, for most language learners speaking becomes the hardest skill to develop. According to Nunan (1999), this happens due to two main factors. Firstly, speaking occurs in real-time. And secondly, people are not able to edit and revise what they say. Scholars (Dalem, 2017; Leong & Masoumeh, 2017; Nunan, 1999) highlighted that most learners face difficulties in English speaking (L2) that impede them from communicating and expressing their ideas and thoughts effectively. These speaking problems include the use of the students' mother tongue (L1), low class participation, pronunciation, fluency, intonation, lack of vocabulary, poor listening, correct use of grammar as well as affective and psychological issues.

Speaking is not only hard to learn but also to teach. Nowadays, teachers have a big challenge since speaking is targeted to developing students' oral skills to communicate and interact effectively with others (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017). This demands that educators integrate and use Communicative Language Teaching methods to guarantee real and authentic speaking experiences within the classroom (Sim & Pop, 2016). Nevertheless, many teachers still use teacher-centered approaches and outdated methods with very

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predictable activities mainly focused on translation, repetition, grammar, reading, and vocabulary (Sim & Pop, 2016). In Pakula's (2019) view, other affecting factors are related to the high emphasis on writing instruction, teaching the coursebooks, preparing for tests, and teachers' lack of knowledge to teach speaking. Likewise, speaking is omitted in most English tests because it is time-consuming and it requires a lot of objectiveness according to specific criteria to grade and provide feedback (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017). For Nunan (1999), some challenges teachers confront are partially linked to learners' L1 context where its use is limited in the society and students do not have many chances to use it out of the classroom.

Ecuador is a Spanish-speaking country, which makes it difficult for students to be exposed to L2 and use the language in real communication situations. This is one of the reasons why Ecuador has a very low English level according to the EF English Proficiency Index (Education First, 2020). It is ranked in the ninety-third position of one hundred countries around the world and the last position in Latin America. Cadena et al. (2018), in their research, found that some inconveniences with the Ecuadorian curriculum development for EFL are due to the fact that teachers are reluctant to changes, the lack of emphasis on productive skills (speaking and writing), and the use of mechanical and not communicative methods focused only on grammar and vocabulary. Bolaños (2016) highlighted specific speaking problems caused by passive and boring lessons, lack of communicative activities, use of out-of-date materials and resources, and an inadequate learning atmosphere for students to feel confident and motivated.

Lately, several authors have attempted to identify what problems students encountered when they have to speak. In the international context, many researchers have carried out descriptive studies exploring speaking struggles, just to mention, Leong and

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Masoumeh (2017) analyzed a selection of previous investigations mentioning the factors affecting students' speaking skills. Similarly, Nabiyeva (2018) reported the main speaking problems that his students had in class. In the same line, Dalem (2017) stated the causes of students' speaking difficulties at a university in Lybia.

On the other hand, within the national context, there are few descriptive studies about oral production problems. For instance, Coro (2016) analyzed secondary students' learning difficulties in the speaking skill. He found students used L1 in classes most of the time. Bolaños (2016) also reported students' speaking problems they face at baccalaureate, which were linked to students' low participation, lack of authentic activities, and motivation. In his study Viteri (2019) identified speaking difficulties in tertiary learners related to lack of vocabulary and mispronunciation. Despite research done, there is still a need for carrying out descriptive studies in order to identify specific students' speaking problems at the university level.

English is a compulsory subject for tertiary students who, at the end of their study program, have to reach a B1 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2019). However, they have many deficiencies in this subject. This is the case of students from two public universities in Ecuador who showed low oral production and a lack of communicative competences. For that reason, this study seeks to examine the difficulties in speaking they encountered during their English classes.

Literature Review

This section gives a brief overview of theory and basic concepts found in literature about speaking and its components in order to lead to a better understanding of the variables in this study. First, there is a definition of the speaking skill, which is the main

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topic. Second, speaking teaching principles are presented and their application in the learning process is also described. Third, the speaking components (fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary) are listed and explained briefly. Finally, similar research conducted to explore speaking difficulties that EFL students are summarized in the last part.

Speaking

Speaking is a productive oral skill, which “consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning” (Nunan, 1999, p. 48). In other words, it is the ability to express ideas orally in different situations. For Brown (1994), speaking is a process to construct meaning which not only involves production but also getting and processing information. He also added that speaking includes verbal and non-verbal messages, which means it encompasses what people say and how they convey it with their body movements, eye contact, gestures, distance, and other non-verbal factors (Brown, 2007). On the other hand, in Burns and Goh’ (2013) words, speaking is a “complex and dynamic skill that involves the use of several simultaneous processes – cognitive, physical, and socio-cultural – and a speaker’s knowledge and skills have to be activated rapidly in real-time” (p. 166).

According to Kürüm (2016), speaking comprises three areas of knowledge:

- Mechanics. It deals with the correct use of grammar and vocabulary as well as pronunciation.
- Functions. It refers to the clarity of message exchange (transaction) and the interaction.
- Pragmatics, social and cultural issues. It includes the speaker, the receiver, the context, the subject, and the reason for the conversation.

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Speaking competence in L2 requires a deep understanding of language and discourse, core speaking skills, and communication and discourse strategies (Burns & Goh, 2013). Burns and Goh sustained that learning to speak in L2 “involves increasing the ability to use these components in order to produce spoken language in a fluent, accurate and socially appropriate way, within the constraints of a speaker’s cognitive processing” (2013, p. 167).

Speaking Teaching Principles

Teachers play an important role for students to succeed and communicate effectively and fluently in L2. To accomplish that goal, in Harmer’s (2007) view, teachers have three functions in teaching speaking: a prompter, participant, and feedback provider. First of all, as a *prompter*, teachers can help students who are struggling with speaking but in a discrete way. Second, as a *participant*, educators can motivate learners to complete their tasks without exceeding the teacher-talking-time and limiting students’ participation. Finally, as a *feedback provider*, teachers have to give adequate feedback to students within the appropriate moment.

Teaching speaking demands to take into account several methodological aspects in order to have fruitful speaking classes. In his book, Nunan (1999) suggested some principles of teaching speaking that teachers can follow, for instance:

- Differentiate between second (SL) and foreign (FL) language contexts. Every context has distinct needs.
- Provide opportunities for students to develop both fluency and accuracy.
- Include group-work or pair-work.
- Limit the time teachers talk.

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- Include activities where students can negotiate for meaning.
- Create tasks in which learners communicate for social purposes (interactional speech); and, exchange and receive something (transactional speech).

Speaking Components

Speaking requires some components for oral production. These elements are fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, stress, and intonation (Bouzar, 2019).

Fluency.

Fluency is a language element which consists of expressing orally fluently and accurately without interruptions (Kurniati et al, 2015). Fillmore (1989) considered fluent speakers:

- a) Have the ability to speak with few pauses.
- b) Can build utterances coherently, cohesively, and semantically.
- c) Can choose the correct expressions according to the context.
- d) Are creative and imaginative

In the same way, Nation (1989) affirmed fluency has the following dimensions: “the first one is the speed and flow of language production; secondly, the degree of control of language items i.e., pausing, rhythm, pronunciation, and stress; and the way of content interrupting is the last one.” (p.58).

Accuracy.

Learners should pay attention to speaking errors and mistakes in terms of lexis, phonology, and grammar (Brand & Götz, 2011) to structure accurate utterances. Firman (2012) affirmed accuracy involves precise pronunciation, correct syntax c, and adequate

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word choice.

Pronunciation.

Pronunciation refers to how clear an individual speaks. This component is linked to phonology, which deals with speech sound production. Students should know phonological rules, sounds recognition, and pronunciation. Pronunciation also includes other aspects such as articulation, stress, intonation, and pitch (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017).

Grammar.

Grammar is a collection of rules and principles used to form words, phrases, and sentences (Zhang, 2009). Grammar deals with how words are put together in order to build sentences. Oral production and well-structured speech require the correct use of grammatical structures. This allows learners to form right sentences and utterances in conversations (Kurniati et al., 2015).

Vocabulary.

When people speak, they have to choose suitable terms according to the contexts. Learners need to know how to use words and expressions properly depending on the situation they are exposed to (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017). Without a good range of vocabulary, it is difficult to communicate effectively and can be a barrier to become a proficient speaker (Kurniati et al, 2015).

Stress and intonation.

These elements receive special attention in oral production. Stress refers to the word accent, to exemplify, the voice force in which single syllables are generated (Ayoola, 2016). On the contrary, intonation comprises rhythm and melody. It can be defined as the manner people say something (Levis, 1999).

Speaking Problems

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The majority of students have problems with their communication skills. Speaking seems to be one of the most difficult skills to develop in the EFL context. A growing body of literature has examined these difficulties in an attempted to identify their causes. In his seminal book of 1999, Nunan mentioned that one problem is the lack of students' exposure to L2 due to the fact that the target language is not used in their daily life (Nunan, 1999). Authors like Leong and Masoumeh (2017) and Diaab (2016) in their studies analyzed different factors that affect EFL students' speaking performance. Some of the problems they mentioned were related to inhibition and fear of classmates' critics, lack of motivation, traditional activities, deficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, low student participation, and the excessive use of L1 in the class. Students tried to translate literally everything they say or listen to.

Nabiyeva (2018) found that these difficulties are also produced by the lack of students' interest in the English language, poor listening skills which make it difficult to understand the message and reply, lack of self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes, which can produce anxiety and a sense of linguistic inferiority. Similarly, Dalem (2017) concluded that learners do not only have problems with grammar and vocabulary but also with accent and pronunciation. He noticed that speaking problems are a result of psychological aspects. These factors included fear of mistakes and being corrected or evaluated negatively, shyness and phobia to speak in front of the class, anxiety, tension, and nervousness. Other factors are the lack of confidence to comprehend what people say and to be understood by others, lack of motivation inspired by boring and non-relevant materials and activities.

Common EFL students' speaking problems are evident when they speak slowly and have trouble formulating utterances. Their speech does not seem natural, their speaking

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segment is short, and they have repeated breakdowns and misunderstandings. These conditions limit them to interact actively and spontaneously in dialogs and conversations (Richards, 2021).

Speaking Activities

When teaching speaking, it is important to design activities that go with students' age, proficiency, context, and learning goals (Sim & Pop, 2016). These activities should be oriented to develop a sense of students' independence to speak and get involved in conversations freely and naturally. Basic speaking activities can include dialogues, repetition of rhythms and tongue twisters, oral presentations, pronunciation drills, narrations, role plays, discussions, songs, surveys/interviews, and descriptions (Hussain, 2017). Authors like Mutiara et al. (2019) suggested the inclusion of pair-work. Students have the opportunity to work with other students that have the same learning goal. It can also help students with affective factors (anxiety, nervousness, tension, lack of confidence, inhibition) that represent a speaking barrier.

To sum up, speaking is an ability that represents a real challenge and is hard to overcome by both educators and students. Teachers have to look for the most suitable mechanisms and methodologies to scaffold students and assure the development of their oral skills to communicate fluently and effectively with other language speakers. It is important that teachers can identify students speaking difficulties and the factors that cause them (linguistics, psychological, sociocultural) in order to implement strategies that mitigate the problem and help learners enhance their conversational competence.

After identifying students' problems in oral production, this paper aimed at exploring and determining what specific difficulties EFL students encounter when they speak. This study addressed the following research questions:

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- What are students' difficulties in speaking English?
- What type of speaking activities have students had in their English classes?
- What are students' perspectives towards pair work for speaking?

Methodology

Design

This was a descriptive study in nature. This kind of research project helps educators explore phenomena to describe leanings tendencies, measure observable facts, and identify causal effects. Descriptive research presents relevant aspects of a phenomenon for educational policymakers, teachers, and school administrators to make decisions and solve problems in schools and within the classrooms (Loeb et al., 2017). This research included the use of a quantitative method. According to Apuke (2017), quantitative data “involves the utilization and analysis of numerical data using specific statistical techniques to answer questions like who, how much, what, where, when, how many, and how” (p. 40), which means that the information is obtained in the form of numbers. Data was gathered by applying a survey to tertiary students from two different universities. Then, data was processed, presented, and analyzed.

Participants

Ninety-five students from two public universities located in Chone and Cotopaxi contributed to the present study. The sample consisted of 25% men, 74% women, and the other 1% preferred not to say. Participants' average age was 25. Respondents were students from different professional careers and semesters. They had a middle socioeconomic status. Spanish was the participants' mother language, however, one of them also spoke Kichwa. Regarding their English proficiency, they had different English backgrounds: 12%

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elementary level, 32% low-intermediate level, 39% intermediate level, 8% upper-intermediate; and 4% advanced level. Results obtained from the first part of the survey showed that the majority of students had access to the internet at home and at the university. They used laptops and smartphones to surf the web and use other applications to practice English.

Instruments

Speaking survey. Participants had to respond to a survey, which was divided into two sections. The first section was targeted to obtain participants' demographic information. The second section consisted of twelve questions that blended items with open-ended, multiple-choice, and Likert scale options. This section was aimed at gathering data about students' internet access, English learning background, and the speaking difficulties they had. The survey was administered to all participants through Google Forms. This instrument attempted to answer the three research questions. The survey was previously piloted with other groups and was validated by three colleagues. Cronbach's alpha was run to calculate reliability. Results indicated that the reliability of the survey was excellent (*Cronbach's alpha* = 0.912).

Data Analysis

The information gathered from the survey was coded and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. Then, the document was exported to the SPSS program to get descriptive statistics. Results from the survey were displayed in tables with the means. Not relevant results were not considered.

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly followed some ethical standards. First, consent letters were

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sent to both institutions. Authorities conceded approval and provided the facilities to conduct the surveys. Second, participants were informed about the study, its objectives, and its academic purpose. Third, the confidentiality of data was maintained during the process.

Results

In this section, the results got from the survey are presented and analyzed. Outcomes are displayed in the form of tables. Results are presented according to the research questions. The survey was directed to explore students' speaking difficulties, the activities they usually did in classes, and their perspectives about pair-work to enhance someone's oral competence.

Q1: What are students' difficulties in speaking English?

This first research question was addressed to identify students' speaking problems. Participants had to respond to a question with Likert scales. These scales were *great extent* (5), *a lot* (4), *some* (3), *a little bit* (2), and *none* (1). The next table summarizes the main outcomes:

Table 1.

Difficulties in Speaking

<i>When you speak, you...</i>	Mean
Feel confused about the topic	2.55
Feel confused for not knowing what to say	2.95
Feel anxious to respond quickly	2.81
Feel anxious trying to look for words to respond correctly.	3.41
Feel anxious because you cannot translate what you want to say	3.54
Feel afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation	2.78
Feel afraid of making grammar mistakes	2.52

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Translate everything you want to say	3.42
Can't structure a sentence	2.15
Can't continue the conversation because of lack of vocabulary	2.62
Feel embarrassed of making mistakes	3.08
Are not confident enough to speak in English	2.55
Don't understand what the other person is saying	2.50
Speak without many pauses	2.69

Results indicate that students had minor speaking problems. One of the difficulties that students had in speaking is anxiety. They tended to feel anxious because they were not able to translate what they expected to say (3.54). They also felt worried trying to use the correct words and expressions (3.41). They used translation as a basis of speaking, and they had the necessity of translating everything (3.42). Another problem to consider is the fear of making mistakes and feeling uncomfortable because of critics.

On the other hand, in the open-ended questions, some students reported having poor communicative skills, problems with pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary, as well as lack of confidence, tension, and fear of making mistakes. One of the respondents wrote, *"my vocabulary is very limited so I cannot express myself in conversation or I limit myself a lot trying to answer"*. Another issue mentioned by participants was the lack of opportunities for practicing. One participant said, *"the main problem in this reality is try to practice the speaking skill in your daily life"*. It was also evident the level of students' difficulty to structure their speech trying to find the correct word and expressions. One participant answered, *"I understand what people say to me in English but at the moment I speak I do not I know what to say"*. Similarly, someone expressed, *"All the time I take my time looking for words that I want to say. And that takes me a lot of time, in a nutshell is sad."*

Q2: What type of speaking activities have students had in their English classes?

This question was aimed at identifying the kind of activities that students usually had developed in their English classes. Respondents had to choose how often they practiced each activity. Scales went from *always* (5) to *never* (1). The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Speaking activities.

<i>Item</i>	Mean
Created a short speech	3.44
Made an oral presentation.	3.61
Participated in a forum	3.03
Commented on a general topic	3.49
Created dialogues to practice with peers	3.69
Written a dialogue from ideas from the book.	3.57
Practiced a dialogue about free ideas	3.65
Practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the book.	3.89
Practice of technical vocabulary orally	3.81
Oral practice with vocabulary of personal interest.	3.86
Oral pair work activities in the classroom.	3.94
Fill in the space with correct grammar	3.77
Practice of technical vocabulary in writing	3.80

The speaking activities that students practice more frequently are related to oral pair-work, the oral practice of target vocabulary, the creation and presentation of dialogues using ideas from the book or their own ideas, and the use of oral presentations. However, other representative activities that they often did are practicing vocabulary in writing tasks

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and filling the blanks using correct grammar. They developed these activities in their books.

Q3: What are students' perspectives towards pair work for speaking?

This question was oriented to determine students' points of view about the usefulness of pair-work to strengthen the oral production. To answer this statement, responders had to select among these scales: *Totally agree* (5), *agree* (4), *neutral* (3), *disagree* (2), and *totally disagree* (1). The responses are presented below:

Table 3.

Students' perspectives towards pair work for speaking.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Pair work is useful to practice speaking.	4.52
Pair work for speaking is difficult because the student who knows more dominates the conversation.	3.69
It is advisable although some pairs speak slowly.	3.92
It is advisable although some pairs do not pronounce correctly.	3.69
The pair makes constant interruptions.	2.98
It takes too much time.	3.23
It is good if I work with the pair I choose.	3.83

Students totally agreed that pair-work is useful to practice speaking. The average score of this item was 4.52. They believed pair-work is suitable even though partners speak slowly and mispronounce. Nevertheless, they coincided that it is good only if they select their peers. Another aspect to take into account is that they thought pair-work is difficult because their more knowledgeable classmates are perceived as threats.

When the participants answered the open-ended question, they distinguished some advantages and difficulties about pair-work. For students, pair-work had many advantages, for instance, they mentioned that they felt more confident when talking to a peer instead of

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the teacher. They also assumed that they can learn from each other by correcting their mistakes and providing feedback. Someone wrote, “*an advantage could be the feedback to improve your partner's skills*”. On the contrary, they commented that one negative aspect is the sense of “superiority” of certain students (who master the language) which made them feel not confident enough about their abilities. One responder replied, “*Well sometimes the other person thinks he is smarter than other one.*” Others referred to the little predisposition of students to work in pairs; they showed reluctance.

Results revealed that students encountered difficulties in speaking due to anxiety, the idea of translating every single word, the fear of making mistakes, tension, low levels of confidence, mispronunciation, lack of fluency, limited vocabulary, and knowledge of grammar. The speaking activities they usually use in class included pair work, oral practice of vocabulary, use of dialogues, and oral presentations. Participants showed good perspectives towards pair-work to enhance speaking, although, they complained about some students felt better than others and the lack of predisposition to work in pairs.

Discussion

Results from previous studies and outcomes from the surveys are compared and contrasted in this section. Undoubtedly, speaking is one of the most difficult skills to master in English which is caused by different factors, just to mention, cognitive, psychological, affective, and socio-cultural reasons (Burns & Goh, 2013).

The study revealed that students had difficulties with anxiety. They felt frustrated due to the fact that they cannot translate what they want to say and use the appropriate words and expressions to structure a sustained speech. Anxiety has a negative impact on students’ oral performance. This result is similar to what Nabiyeveva (2018) and Dalem (2017) found. They concluded that speaking difficulties are related to affective factors.

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Students also experienced inhibition and fear of making mistakes and being judged by their classmates. This is aligned with Leong and Masoumeh's (2017) findings, which also analyzed the factors that affect EFL students' speaking performance. Learners also reported problems with pronunciation, fluency, limited vocabulary, and grammar. These results emphasized some barriers, which according to Diaab (2016), are part of the linguistic competence difficulties. The lack of self-confidence to express ideas becomes another obstacle in speaking, students do not like the idea of speaking in front of other people (Leong & Masoumeh, 2017; Nabiyeveva, 2018). Finally, they mentioned they do not have opportunities for practicing or speaking in English with others out of the class because just a few people speak this language. That fact matches what Nunan (1999) stated regarding the importance of L2 exposure for the development of oral skills.

With regard to the speaking activities, students mentioned that their speaking activities are based on pair-work, vocabulary practice, dialogues, and oral presentations. These kinds of tasks were also suggested by Hussain (2017). Likewise, pair-work represents a chance to enhance students' speaking skills.

Findings showed they have positive perspectives toward pair-work for speaking. For students, pair-work represents an opportunity to learn from others. This also gives them a sense of confidence because they work with a partner who shares the same interest and learning expectations (Mutiarra et al., 2019). However, having classmates with a higher level of proficiency can cause a sense of frustration, insecurity, and inferiority in those who have speaking difficulties (Diaab, 2016).

Conclusion

Speaking becomes a real challenge for most language learners since it requires a lot of practice and dedication. This study investigated the difficulties in speaking that students

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have when they speak. Students can evidence difficulties due to multiple factors. In view of the findings of this study, they evidenced difficulties in speaking because of affective, linguistic, and social aspects. First, students have difficulties managing anxiety and tension, especially when they have to find the appropriate words and expressions according to the context or just want to translate what they desired to communicate.

Similarly, students are reluctant to speak, they do not feel confident enough and felt fear of making mistakes and being exposed to their classmates' comments and teacher correction. Second, the linguistic obstacles that limit their communicative skills are related to pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and limited vocabulary. Third, another difficulty was related to social factors. They do not have opportunities to speak English out the class because Ecuador is a Spanish-speaking country.

In their classes, students carried out different communicative speaking activities such as pair-work, vocabulary practice, dialogues, and oral presentations. Apart from doing the speaking activities mentioned before, they practice grammar and vocabulary through writing. Generally speaking, students' viewpoints about pair-work were positive.

Limitations

This study had some drawbacks that should be taken into account for future studies. Firstly, one of the problems was related to internet access. Some students lived in the rural area where the internet connection is very weak. Second, the research instrument was limited to one (survey). However, it is necessary to implement other instruments to gather data and assure more accurate results. Finally, the current pandemic limited face-to-face communication, so surveys were applied via an online platform. This impeded giving clear and detailed instructions to the participants at the moment they completed the survey. It was also difficult to clarify all their doubts.

Recommendations

It is suggested the use other instruments to collect data. For instance, field notes can be used to observe and register students' speaking performance. Other instruments that can be implemented are rubrics with very specific criteria to assess. It is also highly recommended to carry out an intervention project in order to help students to overcome their speaking problems. Further research is recommended to explore students' perspectives towards peer-feedback, and the use of technological gadgets in the learning process.

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