Universidad Casa Grande

Perspectives of EFL Students' Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

Barbara Roucciell Macías Veloz

Guide: María Rossana Ramrez Ávila

Presented as Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of Magister Magíster en Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros con Mención en la Enseñanza de Inglés. CES: RPC-SE-19- N˚.140-2020. Cohort 2018 -2020. Correspondence to barbara.macias@casagrande.edu.ec. Guayaquil, April 26th, 2021.

Abstract

This descriptive study aimed to determine students' difficulties in speaking. This study was carried out in a public high school in Ventanas, Ecuador. In this descriptive study, quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed. The instruments included a demographic survey to gather information from 70 participants and a speaking survey was applied. It had a Likert scale format which included 47 statements that measured students' difficulties, activities, and perspectives towards pair work in speaking. The surveys were sent via Google Forms, and the data were analyzed through SPSS program. Findings showed that the main challenges in students are to have the correct pronunciation and also, the lack of vocabulary that prevents students from speaking since they feel afraid of making mistakes. The study confirms that the use of pair-work activities helps students to develop their speaking skill. These results could be of interest to EFL teachers who try to overcome speaking difficulties in students.

Keywords: speaking, pair-work, high-school level, EFL.

Resumen

Este estudio descriptivo tuvo como objetivo determinar las dificultades de los estudiantes para hablar en inglés como lengua extranjera. Este estudio se llevó a cabo en una escuela secundaria pública de Ventanas, Ecuador. En este estudio descriptivo se analizaron datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los instrumentos incluyeron una encuesta demográfica para recopilar información de 70 participantes y se aplicó una encuesta acerca de la destreza del habla en inglés. Esta encuesta tenía un formato de escala Likert que incluyó 47 enunciados que midieron las dificultades, actividades y perspectivas de los estudiantes hacia el trabajo en pareja en la destreza del habla en inglés. Las encuestas se enviaron a través de Google Forms y los datos se analizaron a través del programa SPSS. Los hallazgos mostraron que los principales desafíos en los estudiantes son tener la pronunciación correcta. También la falta de vocabulario la cual impide que los estudiantes hablen porque tienen miedo de cometer un error. Además, el estudio confirma que el uso de actividades de trabajo en pareja ayuda a los estudiantes a desarrollar su habilidad para hablar. Estos resultados podrían ser de interés para los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera que intentan superar las dificultades del habla en los estudiantes.

Palabras clave: habilidades orales, trabajo en pareja, educación secundaria, EFL

EFL Students' Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

The current methodology for English teaching in Ecuador is based on the standards of the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2012) that explicitly emphasizes the communicative approach. According to Muñoz (2016), developing oral skills is fundamental for students to deal efficiently with communicative situations. However, one of the main issues to follow the communicative approach for English language teachers worldwide is the students' resistance to talking (Al Hosni, 2014; Arifin, 2017; Fauzan, 2016; Gebhard, 2006; Nunan, 1999; Savasçi, 2014).

In Ecuador, the TOEFL exam results showed that Ecuadorian students' proficiency in English is from medium to low, and oral proficiency was rated as weak or basic (British Council, 2015). In public schools in Ecuador, students are expected to have a B1 level in English proficiency by the time they finish their secondary studies; however, diagnostic tests taken by the British Council (2015) displayed they barely reach an A2 level of proficiency. According to the British Council (2015), one of the main factors that impedes students in Ecuador to develop fluency in speaking is that teachers do not give much importance to speaking activities.

In this sense, Ecuadorian students' speaking skills are underdeveloped because teachers focus more on grammar instruction. Students have limited opportunities to speak the target language outside the classroom or to practice with someone who speaks English. Moreover, in order to develop speaking skills in students, teachers often opt for repetition of words or memorization of texts. Therefore, speaking competence reduces drastically to only memorized vocabulary (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Kayi, 2006; Oxford, 2008).

In 2015, DeaAries et al. conducted a descriptive study to determine significant speaking performance problems. In this study, researchers used Likert-scale questionnaires and video recording as the tools for data collection. The results showed that the main problem in developing speaking was students' psychological problems, followed by a lack of confidence and anxiety.

Similarly, Gan (2012) carried out a descriptive study in a tertiary level institution from Hong Kong that reported the weak performance in speaking was due to grammar as a stumbling block and inadequate opportunities to practice English (p. 50). Moreover, Susanti and Amri (2013) recognized in their descriptive study that students need to practice in order to speak; however, teachers cannot find the appropriate strategies to overcome students' fear and lack of confidence (p. 456).

Finally, Rachmawati, in 2013, described the strategies used by language learners in speaking in order to improve this skill. In this descriptive study conducted in one Senior High School with students from twelfth grade, the researcher used SILL questionnaires to collect data. The results showed that most of the learners used memory strategies in order to learn and retrieve new information and cognitive strategies such as repetition and summarizing. Therefore, the way speaking is taught directly influences how learners will develop their speaking skills.

Although these language teaching speaking challenges and difficulties occur at all levels, no study has been carried out with students at the elementary level. This descriptive study intends to gather into speaking challenges that ninth-grade students face in a public school. These students are from 11 to 14 years old, and they belong to the urban and rural area of Ventanas city in Los Rios province.

Literature Review

Speaking

Jones (1989) considered speaking as a form of communication. Since communication is the main objective determined in the current Ecuadorian English Curriculum (Ministerio de Educacion, 2014), speaking is one of the main skills students must develop. Moreover, Harmer (2001) established speaking as a skill where learners must practice real events rather than use it to specific language points. Therefore, the objective for teachers, in order for their students to develop good speaking skills, is training them to communicate efficiently in different contexts by building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal symbols (Kayi, 2006).

Speaking teaching principles.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the principal approach for language teaching was the Grammar Translation Method (Celce-Murcia, 2001). However, although this method helped learners understand the language's grammatical context, it did not allow learners to develop their speaking ability. In this way, since English learning's main focus is to communicate, the Communicative Language Teaching approach gained ground in the language teaching practices.

Considering this approach, teachers seek communicative competence among the students, which includes using language to get meaning for different purposes (Richards, 2006). Therefore, CLT strategies enhance the "process of creating meaningful and purposeful interaction through language" (Richards, 2006, p.4). Moreover, in order to create meaningful learning, CLT practices are genuine and based on real-life situations (Alwazir & Shukri, 2016; Hiep, 2007).

Speaking components.

According to DeaAries et al. (2015), speaking is the most demanding skill in learning a language. The main goal when people start to learn a language is to be able to speak in the target language. However, speaking not only involves expressing an idea or

thought but also using grammar correctly, the appropriate vocabulary, and having a good pronunciation to be understood. Therefore, it is necessary to understand these aspects of speaking to help learners develop speaking skills as a whole.

Speaking fluency.

Albino (2017) expressed that fluency is related to whether the message was communicated rather than grammatical excellence. According to Schmidt (1992), fluent speech does not require much attention because it is automatic, and speech planning and production perform quickly and efficiently. In the same way, Brand and Götz (2011) defined fluency as the "automaticity and speed of speech production" (p. 256). Carter (2001) stated that to improve speaking fluency, learners must be able to recall vocabulary in order to achieve productive use of language.

Moreover, Koizumi and In'nami (2013) stated that easy access to vocabulary enables the learner to speak adequately, contrary to learners who lack vocabulary. Consequently, they will take longer to find the words affecting their speaking fluency. However, the speed and production of speech do not always imply the understandability of the message. In this case, in order to be understood, the learner must develop speaking accuracy.

Speaking accuracy.

Accuracy in speaking is focused on grammatical proficiency and absence of errors that affect the syntactic or semantic discourse features (Byrne, 1986). Willerman (2011) stated that grammatical errors affect speaking performance since they can result in fossilization and delay speaking accuracy development. On the other hand, Hunter (2012) explained the importance of analyzing these errors since they help the teacher understand what the learners are trying to say and guide them through their natural

language use. Moreover, accuracy involves not only the correct use of grammar but also

the correct vocabulary and pronunciation (Gower et al., 1995).

Pronunciation.

Fraser (2000) defined pronunciation as a sub-skill and the most essential in

English speaking. Similarly, Gilakjani (2011) stated that pronunciation in English

Language Teaching is one of the most important sub-skill since a wrong pronunciation

can lead to a misunderstanding of the message and interrupt the communication. Good

pronunciation allows the speaker to be understood even if he has other errors. However,

understanding someone with poor pronunciation is complicated even if the speaker has

an extensive vocabulary and correct use of grammar (Saito, 2007, p.17). Therefore, in

order to teach pronunciation correctly, a teacher must be aware of the articulation,

stress, intonation, and rhythm patterns (Burns & Richards, 2012).

Phonology.

According to Nasr (1997), phonology is the features of a sound that are

systematically structured (p. 2). Similarly, Yule (2014) defined phonology as the

"description of the systems and patterns of speech sounds in a language" (p. 43).

Understanding the language's phonology can help the learner notice the lexical

differences in vowel and consonant sounds like *pen* and *pan* or *sin* and *shin*

(Pennington, 2013). Phonology is divided into two main branches: segmental features

as consonant and vowels; and supra-segmental features as rhythm, pause, intonation,

and stress (Nasr, 1997, p.2).

Stress.

Crystal (2008) defined stress as "the degree of force used in producing a

syllable" (p. 454). In this case, stress is the increase of loudness or emphasis in one

specific syllable when the speaker is pronouncing a word. Also, the words with more

lexical value in a sentence and are essential to understand the message are stressed, which is called "sentence stress" (Fromkin et al., 2018).

Pair-work in speaking.

Zohairy (2014) asserted that pair-work is an essential resource in English classes since it promotes speaking and exchange of meaning. Similarly, Nunan (2003) stated that pair-work could help learners speak in the target language more time than they usually could (p.55). Achmad and Yusuf (2014) claimed that teachers could monitor and help students who have problems speaking in English by pairing them with stronger learners to improve their communication abilities. Nevertheless, Harmer (2001) stated that working with weaker students can be problematic for some students. Additionally, the exercise's objective can lead to something completely different since students can talk about anything else.

Methodology

Design

The present research is a descriptive study since the main goal is to describe the difficulties learners present in speaking and focus on *what* rather than *how* or *why* (Atmowardoyo, 2018; Nassaji, 2015). As Nassaji (2015) stated, the primary purpose of descriptive studies is to summarize the frequency and the most important characteristics of a population problem. In this descriptive study, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. Quantitative data help the researcher to collect concrete information. These data are structured and statistical. They provide the necessary support to reach general conclusions of the investigation (Stage, 2007). On the other hand, qualitative data show the participants' perspectives and help the researcher to focus on specific areas of interest (Agee, 2009).

In this descriptive study, the questions to be addressed were:

1. What are students' difficulties in speaking in English?

2. What type of activities have students had in their English classes?

3. What are students' perspectives towards pair work for speaking?

Participants

This study is addressed to 70 students from the ninth grade of elementary school at a public school in Ventanas from Los Ríos province. The participants were from an English class taught by the researcher. According to the demographic survey, participants were 47% (N=33) women and 53% (N=37) men. Their ages ranged from 11 to 14 years (M=12.91). All of them were Ecuadorian. Most of the participants had been learning English at school for approximately seven years, except for one participant who mentioned not having any English background.

Instruments

To answer the research questions, the following instruments were applied:

Demographic Survey

In order to have verified information of the participants, a demographic survey was implemented (Appendix A). This survey allowed the researcher to better understand some general characteristics of the participants, such as their age, gender, course, language, ethnic group, English level and background, access and knowledge about technology.

Speaking Survey

To answer the research questions, the speaking survey was applied (Appendix B). The survey was in English and Spanish to avoid any misunderstanding. The survey had a Likert-scale already validated (Viteri, 2019). This survey consisted of four parts. The first one measured the attitudes and students' performance towards speaking skills

with 22 questions. The second part consisted of 11 questions regarding activities to

practice English. The third part involved activities related to speaking in seven

questions. The fourth part asked students' perspectives towards pair work with seven

questions. This survey was taken in Google Forms format and the students were able to

answer it online.

Data Analysis

An Excel data sheet was generated with the students' responses and data was

checked in order to find duplicate data. The reason for the duplicate data was that some

students got confused and took the same survey twice. However, a follow-up was

carried out so that the students could answer both surveys. This survey format was sent

to 100 students; however, only 70 answered both surveys.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher asked for permission from the director of the school in order to

apply the research. A consent letter (Appendix C) was also prepared to indicate that the

researcher was allowed to take the survey in the institution. Additionally, since the

participants are minors, their parents or tutors were asked for permission (Appendix D)

to participate in the research. All the data was confidential, and participants remained

anonymous.

Results

In order to answer the first question, "What are students' difficulties in speaking

in English?", open questions and Likert scale survey were tabulated. In the open

questions, 47% of participants stated pronunciation as the main challenge they face in

speaking English, 13% said the lack of vocabulary and not knowing the meaning of

words in English prevents them from speaking in English, 10% indicated they feel

nervous when talking English and with fear of making any mistake. In addition, 11%

stated they do not have any problem with speaking; however, some of them face some

challenges in other English skills, and 19% did not answer.

In the same way, in the Likert scale survey, the questions had five options from

1 "None" to 5 "To a great extent". In this survey, the most outstanding difficulties are

that all participants feel in some way confused and anxious about the topic (M=2.51),

not knowing what to say (M=2.65), or not knowing the correct words to respond

correctly (M=3.17). Also, they feel afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation

(M=3.10) or grammar (M=3.18).

Table 1.

Likert survey results about difficulties in speaking.

Difficulties in Speaking					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
When you speak in English, you feel confused about the topic.	70	1.00	5.00	2.5143	1.15147
When you speak in English, you feel confused for not knowing what to say.	70	1.00	5.00	2.6571	1.01989
When you speak in English, you feel anxious to respond quickly.	70	1.00	5.00	2.7143	1.35286
When you speak in English, you feel anxious trying to look for words to respond correctly.	70	1.00	5.00	3.1714	1.36171
When you speak in English, you feel anxious because you cannot translate what you want to say.	70	1.00	5.00	2.8857	1.19834
When you speak in English, you feel afraid of making mistakes in pronunciation.	70	1.00	5.00	3.1000	1.36361
When you speak in English, you feel afraid of making grammar mistakes.	70	1.00	5.00	3.1857	1.28867
When you speak in English, you translate everything I want to say.	70	1.00	5.00	2.8429	1.16265

When you speak in English, you can´t structure a sentence.	70	1.00	5.00	2.7143	1.16896
When you speak in English, you can´t continue the conversation because of lack of vocabulary.	70	1.00	5.00	2.6857	1.30265
When you speak in English, you feel embarrassed of making mistakes.	70	1.00	5.00	3.0143	1.57418
When you speak in English, you are not confident enough to speak in English.	70	1.00	5.00	2.7714	1.36383
When you speak in English, you don´t understand what the other person is saying.	70	1.00	5.00	2.8857	1.19834
When you speak in English, you speak without many pauses.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9714	1.10298
When you speak in English, you speak spontaneously.	68	1.00	5.00	2.5735	1.21331
When you speak in English, you consider you speak correctly.	70	1.00	5.00	2.5286	1.22441
When you speak in English, you have a good intonation of questions.	70	1.00	5.00	2.8429	1.11167
When you speak in English, you have a good intonation of sentences.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9286	.99741
When you speak in English, you have a good pronunciation.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.16905
When you speak in English, you use word stress.	70	1.00	5.00	2.7857	.99116
When you speak in English, you use sentence stress.	70	1.00	5.00	2.7714	1.09242
When you speak in English, you can interact with the interlocutor.	70	1.00	5.00	3.0286	1.25076

Regarding the second question, "What type of activities have students had in their English classes?", participants answered a Likert scale survey with questions about different activities related to both English classes and speaking activities. In this Likert

scale survey, participants had five options to answer the questions being Option 1 Never

and 5 Always.

Table 2.

Likert Survey about Activities in English Class

Activities in English Class					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Have you executed any of these activities? Fill in the space with correct grammar.	70	1.00	5.00	2.7286	.97685
Write correct answers to questions to practice grammar.	70	1.00	5.00	3.0000	1.10335
Practice specific vocabulary in writing of an activity or topic from the book.	70	1.00	5.00	2.7714	1.16931
Practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the book.	70	1.00	5.00	3.1429	1.21924
Practice of technical vocabulary in writing.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9857	1.14832
Practice of technical vocabulary orally.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9714	1.16683
Oral practice with vocabulary of personal interest.	70	1.00	5.00	2.6857	1.05697
Written practice with vocabulary of personal interest	70	1.00	5.00	2.8000	1.12417
Oral pair work activities in the classroom.	70	1.00	5.00	3.1000	1.34218
Pair work in writing activities in the classroom.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9714	1.32939
Pair work in general outside the classroom.	70	1.00	5.00	2.2143	1.39245
Speaking Activities. In English class have you… Created a short speech	70	1.00	4.00	2.0571	.97632
Made an oral presentation.	70	1.00	5.00	2.5714	1.16185
Participated in a forum	70	1.00	4.00	1.6714	.94365
Commented on a general topic	70	1.00	5.00	2.2429	1.02767

Created dialogues to practice with peers	70	1.00	5.00	2.6286	1.18164
Written a dialogue from ideas from the book.	70	1.00	5.00	2.8714	1.26172
Practiced a dialogue about free ideas	70	1.00	5.00	2.8143	1.14579

As the table shows, the activities most practiced in English classes are:

- To write correct answers to questions to practice grammar (M= 3.00).

- To practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the book. (M=3.14).

- Oral pair work activities in the classroom. (M=3.10).

Finally, regarding the third question, participants answered both open questions and a Likert scale survey. In open questions, 73% of them were positive concerning pair work in speaking. Some of their reasons were that in pair work they can help each other to improve their pronunciation. Also, since some of them have a higher English level, they consider they can help students with a lower English level. On the other hand, 27% who consider pair work is not helpful in English speaking stated they cannot understand when their partner is talking since they do not have a good pronunciation. Also, instead of pair work the activity can become a monologue since some students do not let their partner talk.

On the Likert scale, participants had five options from One "Totally Disagree" to Five "Totally Agree". As the table below shows, most of their perspective is positive towards pair work in Speaking (M=3.89) even more when the participant chose their partner (M=3.61), and they speak slowly (M=3.65). However, they also agree about the difficulties that can arise in these activities, such as interruptions (M=2.90) and monologues from the student with a higher English level (M=3.15).

Table 3.

Perspectives towards Pair Work

Perspectives towards Pair work					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pair work is useful to practice speaking.	69	1.00	5.00	3.8986	1.31892
Pair work for speaking is difficult because the student who knows more dominates the conversation.	70	1.00	5.00	3.1571	1.36876
It is advisable although some pairs speak slowly.	70	1.00	5.00	3.6571	1.26130
It is advisable, although some pairs do not pronounce correctly.	70	1.00	5.00	3.5000	1.23652
The pair makes constant interruptions.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.21762
It takes too much time.	70	1.00	5.00	2.9000	1.42595
It is good if I work with the pair I choose.	70	1.00	5.00	3.6143	1.39661

Discussion

This study shows that the main difficulty for English learners in Speaking is

pronunciation. As Fraser (2000) stated, this is the most important sub-skill in speaking

since learners agreed that a lousy pronunciation can lead a misunderstanding and

prevent proper communication, which is the main objective of learning a language

(Giakjani, 2011). Moreover, the surveys revealed that most learners give more

importance to know the correct pronunciation of a word rather than knowing the correct

use of grammar. This outcome is supported by Saito (2007), who explained that even

when a speaker knows the right words and how to express himself correctly, it is

practically impossible to understand him without a good pronunciation.

Additionally, through the survey, learners expressed their concern about their

lack of vocabulary and not knowing the meaning of the words. Also, the Likert scale

survey shows that students feel anxious trying to look for words to respond correctly

(M=3.17) and feel anxious for not knowing what to say (M=2.65). Therefore, fluency in

students can be affected since to achieve speaking fluency, it is fundamental for the

learner to know and be able to recall vocabulary easily (Carter, 2001). Furthermore,

Koizumi and In'nami (2013) supported this theory declaring that learners with an

extensive vocabulary can develop speaking fluency faster and adequately.

Moreover, the surveys show that one of the most practiced activities in their

English class is to practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the

book. This can be argued by Richards (2006), who stated that teachers must create

meaningful interaction and use the language for different purposes to enhance

communicative competence among the students. Also, Hiep (2007) affirmed that

learners' activities must be based on real-life situations; therefore, this task can improve

students' vocabulary learning.

Another activity that the literature review supports is oral pair work activities in

the classroom. Nunan (2003) stated that pair-work helps learners practice the target

language more than they usually could outside the classroom. In this way, learners can

improve their speaking skills, and they lose their fear of speaking in English or making

a mistake. Moreover, Achmad and Yusuf (2014) stated that using this activity, teachers

are able to spot mispronunciations or lack of vocabulary.

Students' perspectives towards pair-work are similar to Achmad and Yusuf

(2014), who stated that learners with higher English levels can help weaker students.

However, they also agreed with Harmer's (2001) affirmation that working with weaker

students can lead to problems not only for the student with a higher English level but for

both of them. For instance, the stronger student cannot be able to understand their

partner's pronunciation. On the other hand, the weaker student may not be able to talk

since the stronger learner can take control, interrupt their partner, or dominate the conversation.

Conclusions

This study aimed to gather into the speaking challenges that students face during English classes. The results of this study showed that the main challenge in students is to have the correct pronunciation. Therefore, this concern prevents students from speaking since they feel afraid of making mistakes. The study also showed that students lack vocabulary even though they expressed they performed activities based on vocabulary from texts or books. Similarly, students feel afraid of making grammar mistakes in speaking even though one of the most practiced activities is grammar.

Regarding pair-work, most of the participants agreed that this activity can improve their speaking skill. In this case, they feel that by choosing a partner who has a higher English level, it can help them to improve their pronunciation; even more when this student speaks slowly. However, they also accept that a stronger partner may interfere with their development as they may not have the opportunity to speak, or there may be interruptions from the student who knows best.

Limitations and Recommendations

The main limitation in the development of this study was the lack of technology and internet connection. For instance, some participants could not fill the survey since they did not have internet connection. In this way, the number of participants that were 100 at the beginning of this study was considerable reduced to 70. Since they did not have internet connection, they took longer to answer the survey taking them even a week after the others. Moreover, some of the students did not understand the questions so that they could not answer them, although the researcher had a meeting to explain each question in the survey.

As a recommendation for future studies, the researcher should make sure all students understand the survey questions and implement pilot surveys in order to ascertain all students have understood the questions. Also, to inform participants of the time limit they have to answer the survey. In this way, it will not take a week to have the survey data.

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Appendixes

Appendix A

Demographics Survey

Available upon request.

Appendix B

Survey about Speaking.

Available upon request.

Appendix C

Consent Letter from School

Available upon request.

Appendix D

Consent Letter from Parents

Available upon request.