



**EFL Students' Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study**

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### **Proyectos de Investigación**

Certifico que Andrea Gabriela Cedeño Olivares 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.

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### **Abstract**

This descriptive study aimed at EFL students' difficulties in speaking. Fifty students between ten to thirteen years old participated in this research. They belonged to a public school in Guayaquil, Ecuador. They were at A1 level according to the Common European Framework. In this descriptive study, quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed. The instruments applied for the study were a demographic survey, a Likert scale survey and 2 open-ended questions. The results were tabulated in Excel to determine the mean scores. The findings disclosed that the participants had problems with pronunciation and fluency. They do not perform activities to enhance speaking skills in classes. Regarding students' perspectives, results disclosed that learners are neutral about pair-working. The findings might have implications for EFL researchers, teachers, and learners.

*Keywords:* speaking skill, speaking difficulties, speaking activities, pair-work, perspectives.

### **Resumen**

Este estudio descriptivo se centró en las dificultades para hablar de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. En esta investigación participaron 50 estudiantes de entre diez y trece años. Pertenecían a una escuela pública en Guayaquil, Ecuador. Estaban en el nivel A1 según el Marco Común Europeo. En este estudio descriptivo se analizaron datos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los instrumentos aplicados para el estudio fueron una encuesta demográfica, una encuesta en escala Likert y 2 preguntas abiertas. Los resultados se tabularon en Excel para determinar las puntuaciones medias. Los hallazgos revelaron que los participantes tenían problemas con la pronunciación y la fluidez. No realizan actividades para mejorar las habilidades del habla en clases. Con respecto a las perspectivas de los estudiantes, los resultados revelaron que los estudiantes son neutrales sobre el trabajo por parejas. Los hallazgos podrían tener implicaciones para los investigadores, profesores y estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

*Palabras clave:* habilidad para hablar, dificultades para hablar, actividades del habla, trabajo por parejas, perspectivas.

### **Students' Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study**

Speaking is a complex process for communication. Each person uses this process according to their own goals. In the case of EFL learners, speaking skill is an aspect for language learning development, and success is based on the student's ability to maintain a conversation in English (Leong & Ahmadi, 2016).

In Ecuador, one of the basic principles of the National Curriculum for English mentions that the teaching of this language must focus on communicative language. Language is best learned when it is used as a means to interact and communicate. In the same curriculum, it is mentioned that students are expected to reach a level of B1, at the end of the last year in senior high school (Ministerio de Educación, 2016).

Education First (2020) highlighted that during the edition of the evaluation on the level of English proficiency "EF EPI 2020" Ecuador showed a very low proficiency, which is equivalent to an A1 level according to the Common European Framework, positioning Ecuador almost at the bottom (93) of 100 countries evaluated. In the current study, speaking was examined and the difficulties that this presents in students.

Ibnian (2019) pointed out some speaking difficulties in his study. He found that when students speak in English they hesitate and show little confidence, so they are unable to express themselves clearly, correctly and understandably. This researcher designed a questionnaire about the difficulties that students may face when speaking in English, for 77 students from 2 different institutions. The results showed that students' fear of making mistakes and lack of motivation are factors that prevent them from speaking, but they are not the most relevant, as the fear of criticism is the main problem of the students.

On the other hand, Ghaleb (2003) revealed in his study the importance of strategic competence and the use of communication strategies in language teaching, presenting both as the problems and at the same time as the solutions to a persistent difficulty in speaking a foreign language. This agrees with Hosni (2014) who mentioned that the main difficulties in speaking occur because learners lack the necessary vocabulary and grammatical structures. That is why they are not able to form sentences and prefer not speaking. The study also showed that teachers believe in the importance of teaching speaking, but do not spend enough time on that. Rather, they prioritize coverage of textbook topics, emphasizing the teaching of reading and writing instead of speaking.

Finally, Ibnian (2019) also highlighted four vital conditions for students to have a better development of this skill: exposure, opportunities to use language, motivation, and instruction. According to this researcher, the students need a supportive atmosphere so as not to feel threatened. For that reason, this descriptive study aimed to know some EFL students' difficulties in speaking skill from a public school in Guayaquil, Ecuador. They belonged to the seventh grade of basic general education, in the middle sublevel. Their ages ranged from 10 to 13 years old.

### **Literature Review**

This section will analyze a brief description of speaking skill which is the object of this study. Additionally, some of the speaking teaching principles will be discussed. Furthermore, there will be some conceptions of the speaking components such as fluency, accuracy, phonology, pronunciation, and stress. Finally, the importance of pair-work will be examined.

## **Speaking**

Kayi (2006) described speaking as an essential part of learning and as a process in which depending on the context learners construct and share meanings through verbal and non-verbal symbols. Speaking is not an exercise of memorizing or repeating meaningless dialogues, but rather the development of communication skills in students. This is in harmony with what Babikir (2016) mentioned, he highlighted that speaking is more than memorizing vocabularies and grammar rules. Speaking implicates not only knowing the linguistic characteristic of the language but a practice of it through oral activities.

### **Speaking teaching principles.**

According to Anora (2020), the affective filter of a student is a fundamental principle in language learning. This process can be described as an emotional experience of the student in which motivation, attitude, anxiety, and confidence are involved. For this, Du (2009) suggested that teachers must pay careful attention to the learning of their students, discovering effective teaching tactics such as interest, fun, and variety that can cultivate the affective factors of active learning. So, the learners can have a strong desire or motivation to speak a foreign language.

Additionally, Anora (2020) said that another basic principle is that students must be participants in an active process. They must be in constant practice of what they are learning so all that information is internalized. They must also experience real communicative situations so that they feel involved in everyday situations and express their points of view. This is in agreement with Richards (2006) who highlighted the functions that each teacher and students should have in the classroom. He said that students now had to participate in meaningful cooperative work and teachers had to

assume the role of facilitators and monitor. He called this Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is a set of principles on the objectives of language teaching in which the functions of teachers and students in the classroom are included.

### **Speaking components.**

Vanderkevent (1990) stated three components in speaking: the speakers, the listeners, and the utterances. For this researcher, these components are useful and necessary since in this way it is possible to produce, express, and receive opinions or feelings. On the other hand, Harris (1974) held that there are five components of speaking: comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency. Following, other components of speaking skill will be analyzed for the purpose of this study.

### ***Fluency***

According to Albino (2017), fluency is related to communication and the speed with which a person can deliver a speech. Although a student makes some grammatical mistakes during this process, this does not hinder communication. This agreed with Richards (2006) who cited that fluency occurs when a speaker participates in a meaningful and understandable interaction, despite of the limitations. The development of this is reflected in the activities in which students use communication strategies and it can be contrasted with accuracy.

### ***Accuracy***

Accuracy is based on correct pronunciation (intonation and accent), proper grammar (how words and their components are combined), and choice of the right word (vocabulary). All of these factors are highly dependent on imitation and repetition. For this reason, the teacher must have a good pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary so that the students can imitate their teacher (Firman, 2021). On the other hand, Dinçer,



Yeşilyurt, and Göksu (2012) pointed out that each student is responsible for reaching accuracy and fluency in the language he/ she is learning, participating in extra activities inside and outside of class. To do this, students must be familiar with the listening and speaking skills, practice what he/she has learned, and review lots of new vocabulary through reading.

### ***Phonology***

According to Pennington (2014), phonology is the description of sounds (the relationship of one to another or, on the contrary, their differences). Also, she said that phonology is the pronunciation patterns of speakers. This agrees with Anderson (2001) who mentioned that phonology deals with the structure of sound, to differentiate linguistic elements and the sound structure of the "same" that varies according to other sounds in their context.

### ***Pronunciation***

Burns and Richards (2012) said that three things are necessary to teach an effective pronunciation. First, it is important to have knowledge of the relevant characteristics of the pronunciation (segmental and suprasegmental). Second, to take into account the factors of language acquisition (negative and positive). Lastly, to make wise decisions regarding aspects of the pronunciation that must focus on. Additionally, Saito (2007) showed that the suprasegmental part refers to the group of thoughts, prominence, intonation and syllable structures, and the segmental parts to consonants, vowels and clustering.

### ***Stress***

Stress is the relative voice force that can be given to certain syllables in a word, or on the other hand, to certain words in a phrase or sentence and are louder than

unstressed syllables (Learning English, 2021). Also, Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines stress as “the way that a word or syllable is pronounced with greater force than other words in the same sentence or other syllables in the same word” (n. p.).

### **Pair-work in speaking.**

Harmer (2001, cited in Mulya, 2016) highlighted that working in pairs is a way to increase the use of the language and student participation. It is important to note that pair-work is very practical and can be used in many speaking activities. Something similar, Curtain & Dahlburg (2010, cited in Carvalho, 2017) mentioned. They said that opportunities for the use of language are increased once students learn to work cooperatively. Furthermore, working in pairs multiplies the opportunities to get involved in concrete and meaningful experiences.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

This research is a descriptive study with analysis of quantitative data which will examine the difficulties that EFL students present in speaking skill. The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (2001) pointed to the descriptive study as the collection of data or events that are described, organized, and tabulated; and play an important role in educational research. Usually, it uses visual aids as graphics to help the reader understand how the data is distributed. Furthermore, the descriptive study can be quantitative or qualitative.

As already mentioned, this research will be quantitative in which the data obtained will be tabulated in numerical form. Quantitative data has a unique numeric value associated. These can be used for mathematical calculations and statistical

analysis. In addition, these answer questions like How many?, How often?, How much? (Question Pro, 2021).

The following research questions will be analyzed in this study:

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

### **Participants**

The present research was addressed to 50 students from the seventh grade of a public school in Guayaquil city, Guayas province. According to the demographic survey the participants were 22 women and 28 men. 48 of them were Ecuadorians and 2 were from Venezuela. Regarding their social economic status, 30 were in middle class and 20 in low-income. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference, they were in A1 English level. Their ages ranged from 10 to 13 years.

### **Instrument**

The instrument to collect data and answer the research questions was a speaking survey.

#### **Speaking survey.**

This survey is a Likert- scale with questions of different nature. It contained 4 parts with questions of multiple choices and two open-ended questions. It was in English and Spanish according to the students' English level. This was completed by the 50 students by using Google Forms format online.

### **Data Analysis.**

Results obtained of the speaking survey were placed in an excel document. These responses were displayed in tables with the means. To classify the two open-ended questions was used excel as well but with another process.

### **Ethical Considerations.**

It is relevant to mention that in the current research some ethical aspects were considered, such as the confidentiality of the participants since they are minors, permission of the authorities of the institution and the parents of the participants. The survey was anonymous and the purpose of this was communicated so that the answers were honest.

### **Results**

To respond the first research question of this study, “What are students' difficulties in speaking English?”, it was applied a Likert scale survey which contained 20 statements with 5 different options to answer from 5 “To a great extent” to 1 “None”. Additionally, it had an open-ended question. The most outstanding results of the survey tabulated in Excel (Table 1) disclosed that they cannot speak English spontaneously (M= 2,02). Also, they considered they do not have the ability to speak it correctly (M= 2,10). Finally, they concluded that they cannot understand what the other people are saying (M= 2,18).

**Table 1.**

*Likert survey results about difficulties in speaking.*

<b>Difficulties in Speaking</b>	
	Mean
When you speak in English, you feel confident about the topic.	3,11

When you speak in English, you know what to say.	2,30
When you speak in English, you respond quickly.	2,50
When you speak in English, you look for words to respond correctly.	3,24
When you speak in English, you translate what you want to say.	3,14
When you speak in English, your pronunciation is clear.	2,58
When you speak in English, your speech is free of errors.	2,38
When you speak in English, you can say phrases.	2,54
When you speak in English, you can interact in a conversation.	2,22
When you speak in English, you feel embarrassed of making mistakes.	2,98
When you speak in English, you understand what the other person is saying.	2,18
When you speak in English, you speak without many pauses.	2,20
When you speak in English, you speak spontaneously.	2,02
When you speak in English, you consider you speak correctly.	2,10
When you speak in English, you have a good intonation of questions.	2,26
When you speak in English, you have a good intonation of sentences.	2,30
When you speak in English, you have a good pronunciation.	2,38
When you speak in English, you use word stress.	2,36
When you speak in English, you use sentence stress.	2,20
When you speak in English, the topics are interesting.	3,08

In the open-ended question, 27 students agreed that the major difficulty in speaking is pronunciation. One of the respondents wrote “I know what people are talking about but I limit myself to answering for fear of my pronunciation”. 8 students said they do not have problems when they speak. One of them cited “I have no difficulty when I speak English”. 5 participants stated that have lack of vocabulary. A student answered “lack of vocabulary for a specific topic”. 4 students mentioned that they speak in English without fluency and they always need to translate what they have in their minds. One learner wrote “I can't speak fast, I need to find the answer, translate and say it”. 2 students mentioned that they are afraid when they speak. Someone expressed “I am ashamed to be wrong”. 2 do not understand the language, so they cannot speak it correctly. A participant claimed “I get frustrated because I don't understand the language”. Finally, 2 students did not answer.

The second research question, “What type of activities have students had in their English classes?”, was answered through 2 surveys (Table 2, 3). The first survey (Table 4) stated 9 activities to practice English with 4 different possibilities to answer: 4 “I have done them”, 3 “I don't have them”, 2 “I would like to do it”, and 1 “I don't like this type of activity”. The results revealed that learners do not use the activities proposed to practice English ( $M = 3,08$ ).

**Table 2.**

*Survey results about activities to practice English.*

**Activities to Practice English**

	Mean
Fill in the space with correct grammar.	3,24
Write correct answers to questions to practice grammar.	3,20

Practice specific vocabulary in writing of an activity or topic from the book.	3,14
Practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the book.	3,20
Oral practice with vocabulary of personal interest.	3,02
Written practice with vocabulary of personal interest.	3,04
Oral pair work activities in the classroom.	3,02
Pair work in writing activities in the classroom.	3,02
Pair work in general outside the classroom.	2,86

The second survey (Table 3), included 12 statements related to speaking activities in English class. Students had 4 options to choose: 4 “Yes”, 3 “No”, 2 “I would like”, and 1 “I don’t like it”. The results showed that learners do not practice speaking activities in their classes (M= 3,06).

**Table 3.**

*Survey results about activities to speaking activities in English class.*

### **Speaking Activities in English Class**

	Mean
In English class have you created a short speech?	2,90
In English class have you made an oral presentation?	3,42
In English class have you participated in a forum?	2,90
In English class have you commented on a general topic?	3,06

In English class have you created dialogues to practice with peers?	3,02
In English class have you written a dialogue from ideas from the book?	3,06
In English class have you practiced a dialogue about free ideas?	3,02
In English class have you listened to your peers' recordings?	3,26
In English class have you recorded audios?	3,20
In English class have you provided feedback to your peers' oral participation?	2,94
In English class have you self-assessed your oral participation?	3,12
In English class have you used rubrics to provide feedback?	2,84

Finally, to respond research question 3 “What are students’ perspectives towards pair work for speaking?” was employed a Likert scale survey (Table 4) with 7 statements about perspectives toward pair work from 5 “Totally agree”, 4 “Agree”, 3 “Neutral”, 2 “Disagree”, and 1 “Totally disagree”. Also, it had an open-ended question. The data analysis defined that their perspectives toward pair work were neutral (M= 3,18).

**Table 4.**

*Survey results about perspectives toward pair work.*

**Perspectives towards Pair Work**

	Mean
Pair work is useful to practice speaking.	3,34



Pair work for speaking is difficult because the student who knows more dominates the conversation.	3,28
It is advisable although some pairs speak slowly.	3,32
It is advisable although some pairs do not pronounce correctly.	3,30
The pair makes constant interruptions.	2,86
It takes too much time.	3,00
It is good if I work with the pair I choose.	3,16

In regard to the open-ended question, the learners mentioned more disadvantages than advantages. Concerning the disadvantages, 11 students mentioned that working in pairs is complicated since many times if one person makes an effort to carry out the work the other does not, so they prefer individual work. Someone wrote “sometimes the other person does not help and only one does, the one who has more interest”. 8 find it difficult to pronounce correctly when speaking. A students cited “There would be a small disadvantage since I do not pronounce English well”. 6 indicated that they do not understand what the partner is trying to tell them. One participant said “sometimes we do not understand when others speak”. 3 of them pointed out that most of the time they are interrupted by their partners when they speak. Someone expressed “sometimes the partner interrupts what I am going to say”, for that reason it is difficult to work in pairs. A student mentioned that feels embarrassed, another distracted, and finally, one said that time is not enough to practice speaking in class.

On the other hand, in the advantages, 4 students indicated that working in pairs can help them to develop their speaking skills. One learner expressed “as an advantage I learn to master the language orally”. 4 said that through working in pairs they can learn

more from their peers. Someone answered “I learn more”. Finally, 11 students did not mention any other advantages or disadvantages.

### **Discussion**

This study shows that the greatest difficulty students have in speaking English is pronunciation. According to Burns and Richards (2012), pronunciation is a critical skill, in which it requires teacher preparation. It is vital that the teacher has a useful and relevant knowledge of the characteristics of pronunciation, as well as, the use of a correct methodology that helps the student. Likewise, the survey indicates that the learners consider that they cannot speak English spontaneously, which must be given naturally. It occurs when the student is involved in a meaningful and understandable interaction despite his/her limitations (Richards, 2006).

With reference to the English activities described in the survey such as oral practice with vocabulary of personal interest and oral pair work activities in the classroom, the results mostly showed that there is an absenteeism of them, so that the students cannot boost their language skills in their classes. Babikir (2016) was conscious about this when mentioned that learning a language is not about memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, but practicing orally through significant activities.

At the same time, the survey demonstrated that the speaking activities stated are not worked during classes. This is in contrast with what Anora (2020) claimed, one of the speaking teaching principles is that students are part of an active process that involves communicative activities with constant practice. Therefore, students get to internalize knowledge. For that reason, it is important to set meaningful activities with real contexts in the planning.

Finally, the results show that the students' perspectives toward pair-work are neutral; this means they do not disagree or agree. Nevertheless, many of them consider pair-work as a disadvantage, since they prefer to work individually because they think that their partner will not make the same effort as them to learn. Curtain & Dahlburg (2010, cited in Carvalho, 2017) pointed out that working in pairs multiplies the opportunities to practice English and to have meaningful experiences. Consequently, if there is no interaction there is no oral communication.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to show the difficulties that EFL students face in the speaking skill. As a result, it was found that the greatest difficulty is in pronunciation. Furthermore, students cannot speak fluently and correctly. On the other hand, it could be noted that they do not perform oral activities to improve speaking resulting in mispronunciation and poor fluency. In regard to pair-work, there is no pair-work in classes since students prefer to work individually as a consequence of the lack of commitment on behalf of their peers.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

The main limitations in this study were lack of technological resources and internet. The students were not motivated enough to answer the surveys because the researcher did not have the opportunities to persuade them and make them perceive the benefits of this study since the global pandemic has framed us in a virtual context. So, there were not enough meetings to explain more deeply the objectives and the impact of this study.

As a recommendation, it is imperative to work much more on students' motivation through consequent and meaningful informative talks to explain in detail the

study, how the instruments work, and elucidate doubts. As a result, students would be more involved and conscious about their contribution.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Survey**

Available upon request.