



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

Carlos Alberto Vélez Bravo

Guide: María Rossana Ramírez Ávila

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Abstract

An unprecedented surge in English language learning has spread all over the world. Unfortunately, interacting in such a language for EFL learners is an effort. This descriptive study focuses on the difficulties of senior students from a public high school in Ecuador when speaking in English. The research instrument was a survey that was applied to 69 students. According to the results, students struggle to self-express and understand others in oral language by the virtue of limited vocabulary, slight exposure to the language, inappropriate pronunciation, demotivation, anxiety, and translation habits. In English classes, students participated in grammar-based activities from books. They also worked in pairs to create oral dialogues. In essence, they consider that pair work promotes speaking amelioration, notwithstanding drawbacks such as little collaboration, unequal level of knowledge, and feeling of superiority from more active peers. This research represents a source of reference to similar studies in EFL teaching areas.

Keywords: Speaking difficulties, speaking activities, pair work, EFL learners.

Resumen

La creciente demanda de aprender inglés se ha extendido por todo el mundo. Desafortunadamente, interactuar en este idioma para los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera es un esfuerzo. Este estudio descriptivo se centra en las dificultades de los estudiantes de último año de una escuela secundaria pública en Ecuador al hablar en inglés. El instrumento de investigación fue una encuesta que se aplicó a 69 estudiantes. Según los resultados, los estudiantes tienen dificultades para expresarse y comprender a los demás en el lenguaje oral a causa de un vocabulario limitado, poca exposición al idioma, una pronunciación inadecuada, desmotivación, ansiedad y hábitos de traducción. En las clases de inglés, los estudiantes participaron en actividades basadas en la gramática de los libros. También trabajaron en parejas para crear diálogos orales. En esencia, consideran que el trabajo en pareja promueve la mejora del habla, a pesar de inconvenientes como la poca colaboración, el nivel desigual de conocimiento y el sentimiento de superioridad de los compañeros más activos. Esta investigación representa una fuente de referencia para estudios similares en áreas de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras claves: Dificultades para hablar, actividades para hablar, trabajo en pareja, estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

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

Since language is the principal means human beings employ to communicate thoughts and exchange information, the increasing necessity of learning English is noticeable because it is worldwide used for individuals to link different subjects of interest (Zuparova et al., 2020). Case in point, in nonnative English-speaking countries where the language is learned either English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL), it is applied for education, business, and so forth (Riadil, 2020a). In Ecuador, English is learned as a foreign language. However, by reason of some drawbacks that inhere in non-English speaking context, learners struggle to self-express orally in L2 (Dincer, 2017).

Among the four main English language skills, speaking is the most difficult for learners to master because it consists of conveying verbal messages through articulated grammatical structures and appropriate vocabulary spontaneously (Rao, 2019). Consequently, the low speaking level of students is attributed to the lack of vocabulary, grammar, a proper pronunciation that appertain to linguistic factors, and non-linguistic factors such as psychological issues that are a reflection of shyness, nervousness, and lack of self-belief (Riadil, 2020b). As an illustration, learners who undergo anxiety are averse to speaking in the target language to avoid making mistakes and being bullied or criticized by the audience (Fauzan, 2014).

Furthermore, teaching speaking in an EFL context is challenging for several reasons. To start with, EFL learners practice the language more inside the classroom and are devoid of opportunities for actual use outside (Suban, 2021). Therefore, the less learners speak and relate to the target language as in the real world, the less they can communicate effectively (Albiladi, 2019). As a result, teachers confront problems like inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, uneven participation, and mother-tongue overuse that impede learners from communicating in the target

language. For instance, inhibition is the hesitation when speaking English to avoid error corrections and criticism. Lack of topical knowledge reduces motivation. Uneven participation is the shortage of opportunities for partaking—finally, mother-tongue overuse arises in the classroom for translations (Tuan & Mai, 2015). These challenges are emanated from practice deficiency and short English hours at school (Putra et al., 2020).

A study conducted by Kara et al. (2017) revealed that both low proficiency levels of teachers and teacher-centered classroom methods characterized by grammar-based teaching and memorization prevent students from achieving high oral production. In order to develop communicative competence, principles of a communicative methodology must be applied in classrooms in lieu of traditional grammar-based approaches (Toro et al., 2019). Although the communicative language teaching method (CLT) is included in the Ecuadorian foreign language curriculum to date, educators misinterpret the approach in question (Sevy-Biloon et al., 2020). For instance, a descriptive study conducted by Angulo (2020) divulged those oral activities are underemphasized in EFL classrooms, and students commonly feel anxiety when speaking. In the same line, Alcivar (2021) concluded that students present difficulties speaking by dint of restricted practice, anxiety, pronunciation, lack of self-confidence, grammar, and vocabulary.

The present quantitative and qualitative descriptive study focuses on the difficulties in speaking English of third-grade of Bachillerato General Unificado (BGU) students from a public school in Pedernales city. The instrument for collecting data about the perspective of students is a survey. In the same way, the outcomes aim to project the factors that block high oral production achievement and permit future studies to address solutions.

Literature Review

Speaking Teaching Principles

Successful English speaking lesson depends on the fulfillment of certain factors. Firstly, students need to enter upon authentic speaking exercises that enable oral language production for real settings. Secondly, students require motivation and a secure atmosphere to create their speech regardless of criticism. Thirdly, providing equal opportunities for participation. Ultimately, teachers need to cover the educational demands of students (Thituyetanh, 2015). Therefore, in the event that students prove demotivation and require help, the teachers must assist students by applying proper strategies to ameliorate such problems (Anggraeni et al., 2020).

In accordance with the said elements for a speaking class, this section delineates some speaking teaching principles. For instance, teachers must train students to negotiate meaning with fluency and accuracy in spoken interaction (Turdiyeva & Mansurova, 2020). Teachers also need to apply motivating techniques that provoke the attentiveness of students to perform and achieve oral proficiency (Agnes & Marlina 2021). The provision of feedback on aspects such as pronunciation, fluency, proper utterance production, or any other that occurs during the speaking stage is instrumental in improving speaking proficiency (Sakale, 2019). Additionally, since spoken conversation relies on receiving and conveying messages, listening skill deserves to be stressed just as speaking due to oral communication occurs when the speaker understands the message sent by the listener (Tuğrul, 2020). Lastly, collaborative speaking group-works lay the foundations for student-centered classroom provide students equal opportunities to manifest thoughts, learn from each other, receive input, and negotiate meanings (Hung & Mai, 2020).

On the other hand, EFL students contend with poor language knowledge, low self-confidence and anxiety, demotivation, insufficient target language relation, and orthodox

grammar-based methodologies (Alrasheedi, 2020). For that reason, according to Richards (2006), the following CLT principles are in pursuit of speaking skill development:

- Learn the language through real communication
- Let learners apply acquired knowledge
- Abide by the errors learners make during the learning process
- Focus on fluency and accuracy growth
- Entail writing, reading, listening, speaking skills as in the real world occur.
- Encourage learners to discover grammar

Consequently, given that the CLT principles mentioned earlier are implemented, new activities and techniques need to be applied as opposed to traditional classroom tasks. Activities such as problem-solving, games, role-play, and information gaps encourage learners to use the language for communicative purposes (Makhmadovna & Narimanovna, 2021).

Speaking Components

Fluency.

Many researchers debate the term fluency. Speaking fluency can be defined as producing oral speech effortlessly and at a normal speed without undue hesitation and unnatural pauses that impede to convey of comprehensible ideas (Karimy & Pishkar, 2017). Fluent speakers can produce rational discourse automatically and creatively in unanticipated conversation situations (Fillmore, 1979 as cited in Xiao-yun, 2016).

Accuracy.

As another speaking component, accuracy is the proper pronunciation of accurate utterances constructed with the vocabulary related to the conversation subject (Derakhshan et al., 2016). Both Accuracy and Fluency are required in oral communication but are distinct. Fluent

speaking does not mean speaking accurately. However, accuracy contributes to the delivery of the intended message (Saputri et al., 2021).

Phonology.

Both phonetics and phonology are sub-disciplines of linguistic. Phonetics references how an individual uses the vocal tract muscles or speech organs to create articulated sound waves that a listener can perceive and identify. On the other hand, phonology studies the identifiable range of sounds patterns of a particular language that convey meanings and are decoded by its speakers (McMahon, 2002). A phonological analysis covers phonemic to allophonic levels. Additionally, phonology is intimately related to morphology, semantic, and syntax fields (Wiese, 2006).

Pronunciation.

Pronunciation is an essential element in oral communication since a discourse cannot be spoken without being pronounced. Let alone intelligible messages can be either released or received on account of inappropriate pronunciation (Plailek & Essien, 2021). In other words, pronunciation is the sounds produced when speaking that implicate both segmental features like consonants and vowel pronunciation and suprasegmental elements like stress, rhythm, phrasing, intonation, voice quality, and timing (Nurman, 2021).

Stress.

Lexical stress is the emphasized sound placed on a syllable of a word that is louder, higher, and longer in pitch than its other syllables (Roach, 2009). Inaccurate stress placement can cause breakdowns in conversations due to the listener is prone to have problems restoring the intended meaning of a misplaced stress word (Lewis & Deterding, 2018). To illustrate, in some cases, a word can be recognized as a noun if having initial stress or works as a verb if having final stress (Cutler, 2005).

Pair-work in Speaking

Pair work activities are valuable in EFL contexts and ubiquitous in modern communication classrooms to encourage two students to participate and interact actively to complete an oral task together (Mulya, 2016). Unlike whole-class discussions where active students influence more than passive ones, pair work activities promote even interaction and motivate students to produce speech freely (Yulitrinisya & Narius, 2018). However, instructors may have a hard time pairing the students. For example, the student who does the most talking can intimidate the silent one, or students can feel uncomfortable working with someone they do not trust. For that reason, instructors need to match students carefully depending on their strengths and weaknesses for the assignment (Jones, 2007).

Methodology

Design

The research design of this paper is a descriptive study that involves quantitative and qualitative approaches for data analysis. Descriptive studies describe phenomena by analyzing data collected through a research instrument application (Atmowardoyo, 2018). In this study, the research instrument is a survey. Surveys are questionnaire formats conducted to collect information about specific subjects (Nimehchisalem, 2018). Additionally, qualitative data analysis explores why or how a particular behavior is adopted or an event occurs, while quantitative research aims to interpret and test variables through a numerical and statistical process to confirm the theories of the study (Ma, 2015).

The following research questions are addressed in the present descriptive study:

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 of pair work?

Participants

Sixty-nine Ecuadorian students from the third grade of Bachillerato sublevel of a public high school were recruited as part of the present study. The high school was located in Pedernales from the Manabí province and offered three professional profiles to students. Consequently, 34 participants were from accounting, 19 from the hotel services, and 16 from the professional agricultural profiles. There were 38 women and 31 men whose ages ranged from 16 to 19 years. The mother tongue of the participants was Spanish. Concerning socioeconomic status, 30 participants categorized themselves as low-income, 37 as middle-class, and 2 as high-income. Regarding the internet connection, 68 participants had access to an internet connection from home and 1 from the Municipality of Pedernales city. On the issue of English proficiency, 16 participants labeled themselves as beginners, 38 in a basic level, and 15 in an intermediate level. During English classes, students often listened to different English sources as well as practiced reading, writing, and speaking.

Instruments

A survey was designed with a google forms format to collect data from students online. The survey consisted of two sections where open-ended, multiple-choice, and Linkert scale options were provided. The first section covered background aspects such as age, socioeconomic status, gender, course, nationality, mother tongue, English proficiency level, internet access, and device type for internet connection. The second section aimed to address the research questions of this study. Data about students' difficulties when speaking in English was gathered through 27 questions, 21 questions related to English speaking activities, and 8 questions about their

perspectives toward pair work. The questions were asked in English with its Spanish translation on the sides to prevent students from misinterpreting.

Data Analysis

The google forms survey was set up to export responses of participants to a Microsoft Excel sheet where the data was analyzed. The quantitative results were illustrated in tables with the means, and the main findings were described below. On the issue of qualitative analysis, each student answered open-ended questions regarding their difficulties when speaking in English and their perspective toward pair work for speaking. The grounded theory (GT) approach was applied to analyze quantitative data. GT methodology refers to a breaking down and categorizing process of collected information with comparison purposes to build a theory (Chun Tie at al., 2019). In this case, five themes (*English learning background, English use, speaking limitations, pro, and cons for pair work*) emerged in the open coding step. After reviewing data and classified it in the corresponding themes, the relationship between themes was presented in the axial coding step. In the selective coding step, the researcher made sure themes regarding *English learning background, English use, speaking limitations* fit into the *speaking difficulties* category, and the *pro* and *cons for pair work* themes fit into the *pair work for speaking* category. As a result, a final broader category called *Factors that affect speaking* emerged. Quantitative outcomes were reported after quantitative findings in the result section of this paper.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were considered in the corresponding stages of this study. Firstly, a permission letter to conduct the research was sent to the school director who approved the application later. Furthermore, due to participants were minors, a consent letter was sent to their parents/care-takers indicating the purpose, advantages, and methodology of the study. An extra

virtual meeting via zoom was held with them to clarify doubts and provide more details of the research process. After receiving written informed consent from their participants' parents, participants were instructed about the survey sections on a need-to-know basis and completed it voluntarily online. The anonymity of participants' names and the confidentiality of specific data characterized the research process. Ethical approval, informed consent, the confidentiality of data, and the voluntary participation of research members are ethical principles any research needs to consider since they preserve human rights by notifying the risks and consequences of the research (Arifin, 2018).

Results

The results obtained from the survey were analyzed as a means to answer the research questions of this study. This section aims to inform what difficulties students have to speak in English, what activities they mostly did in classes, and what perspectives they have toward pair work for speaking. Each research question is analyzed, and the quantitative results are projected in tables with the means along with the description of main findings and quantitative outcomes as follows:

Students responded to Likert format questions to address the first interrogative as to their difficulties in speaking in English. The standards were *Great extent* (5), *A lot* (4), *Some* (3), *A little bit* (2), and *None* (1). The results are displayed with the mean below:

Table 1.

Difficulties in Speaking.

When you speak in English, you...	Mean
feel confident about the topic	3.20
know what to say	2.57

respond quickly	2.43
look for words to respond correctly	3.48
translate everything you want to say	3.59
your pronunciation is clear	2.70
your speech is free of errors	2.70
say phrases	3.06
can interact in a conversation	2.33
feel embarrassed of making mistakes	3.04
understand what the other person is saying	2.51
speak without many pauses	2.54
speak spontaneously	2.30
consider that you speak correctly	2.41
have a good intonation of questions	2.90
have a good intonation of sentences	2.78
have a good pronunciation	2.78
use word stress	2.49
use sentence stress	2.54

Results showed that students tended to translate everything they wanted to say (3.59) and looked for words to respond correctly (3.48). They used phrases (3.06), but they had pronunciation difficulties (2.78) and when interacting in conversation (2.33). They also understood little what another person says in English (2.51). Another problem is that they felt embarrassed about making mistakes (3.04).

When it comes to qualitative results, data from the *English learning background theme* indicated that most of participants started to learn English when they were eight graders. Results

also showed that the most two difficult skills for participants to master were speaking and listening due to a poor exposure to the language. One student illustrated this when he said, “*I was not taught English in elementary school. I have learned it since I started high school and that’s why it has become difficult to learn English*”. Another respondent said, “*I find it difficult to understand conversations in English and to speak*”.

Information from the *English use theme* showed that participants did not speak English out of classes because they lacked the opportunity to do it. One student wrote, “*I have nobody to talk to, so I’m not interested in learning English*”. As far as the *speaking limitation theme* concerned, other challenges for students were the lack of linguistic knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation, which impede them from speaking fluently and accurately. They also felt worried about making mistakes. One student wrote, “*I concern about making mistakes because others laugh at me*”.

With the aim of responding to the second research question about “What type of activities have students had in classes?”, there were also two Likert scales participants had to complete. One inquired about the English activities in class whose results are illustrated in Table 2 with the number of participants who opted for standards such as *I do not like this type of activity, I would like to do it, I have not done it, and I have done it*. The other Likert scale was about speaking activities in class, and standards was *I do not like it (1), I would like (2), No (3), and Yes (4)*. The results are projected in Table 3 with the mean:

Table 2.

English activities.

Items	I do not like this type of activity	I would like to do it	I have not done it	I have done it
Fill in the space with correct grammar.	1	14	9	45
Write the correct answers to questions to practice grammar.	1	15	8	45
Practice specific vocabulary in writing of an activity or topic from the book.	1	13	16	39
Practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the book.	1	13	16	39
Oral practice with vocabulary of personal interest.	2	17	24	26
Written practice with vocabulary of personal interest.	1	15	17	36
Oral pair work activity in the classroom.	2	9	12	46
Pair work in writing activities in the classroom.	1	14	15	39
Pair work in general outside the classroom.	4	14	31	20

Relevant results in Table 2 about English activities in class suggested that most of the students wrote the correct answers to questions and did fill-in-the-space activities to practice grammar. They also practiced vocabulary through writing and oral activities from the book and

their interest. Additionally, the majority of students worked in pairs to practice speaking and writing. However, the majority of them did not work in pairs out of the classroom.

Table 3.

Speaking activities.

In English class, have you...	Mean
created a short speech?	2.97
made an oral presentation?	3.43
participated in a forum	2.77
commented on a general topic?	2.87
created dialogues to practice with peers?	3.43
written a dialogue with ideas from the book?	3.33
practiced a dialogue about free ideas?	3.41
listened to your peer`s recording?	3.17
recorded audios?	3.00
provided feedback to your peers` oral participation?	2.93
you self-assessed your oral participation?	3.28
used rubrics to provide feedback?	2.90

As far as speaking activities go, Table 3 showed that students participated in oral presentations (3.43) and created dialogues to practice with peers (3.43). The dialogues they made were usually about free ideas (3.41).

With the intention of answering the last research question regarding “What are students’ perspectives of pair work?”, participants were surveyed through a Likert scale whose standards were *Totally agree* (5), *Agree* (4), *Neutral* (3), *Disagree* (2), *Totally disagree* (1). The results are reported in Table 4 below:

Table 4.

Students` perspectives toward pair work.

Item	Mean
Pair work is useful to practice speaking	3.83
Pair work for speaking is difficult because the students who knows more dominates the conversation	3.13
It is advisable although some pairs speak slowly	3.61
It is advisable although some pairs do not pronounce correctly	3.43
The pair makes constant interruptions	2.70
It takes too much time	2.97
It is good if I work with the partner I choose	3.71

As proved in Table 4, students attached significance to pair work to practice speaking (3.83) even if their peers speak slowly (3.61) or mispronounce words (3.43). Students resonated with the fact that pair work was more effective as long as they could choose their peers (3.71). Still further, *the cons of pair work theme* revealed that some students identified the varying level of knowledge and little collaboration as the primary issues when working in pairs. One participant answered, "*when the teacher pairs us, it is possible to find someone who does not contribute enough to the assignment*". Another issue was the feeling of superiority of the most competent students about the language. One participant said, "*I learn from smartest students, but I have little influence on them and decision on the task*". At any rate, from all accounts, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. *According to the pro theme*, students felt free of making mistakes, shared ideas, helped each other, and received peer feedback when working in pairs. One participant wrote, "*I learn better because I feel safe sharing ideas in front of my partners without worrying about making errors*". Another student suggested, "*When I trust my partner, working is easier*".

Discussion

Results revealed that the participants contended with poor vocabulary, pronunciation, lack of motivation, anxiety, and tended to translate everything they wanted to say. Alrasheedi (2020) ascribed those linguistic and nonlinguistic problems to students who perform in EFL contexts where a minimum relation to the English language exists and orthodox grammar-based approaches dominate. Findings also revealed that the participants had difficulty in speaking and understanding what the other person says. Turdiyeva and Mansurova (2020) remarked that students need to be trained to negotiate meanings fluently and accurately to reduce those issues. In the same line, Tuğrul (2020) claimed that listening is as essential as speaking since conversation is constituted by both.

With the speaking activities, results disclosed that the participants worked in pairs regularly and practiced vocabulary in grammar-focused writing and oral activities from the book. On the contrary, Makhmadovna and Narimanovna (2021) suggested that such old-fashion activities must be shifted to ones based on CLT principles such as problem-solving, games, role-play, and information gaps to boost communicative proficiency. Results also showed that the participants created dialogues with peers about free ideas and participated in oral expositions. For a successful speaking lesson, according to Thituyetanh (2015), factors such as motivation, a secure atmosphere to produce speech, and effective feedback after significant speaking exercises are crucial.

Regarding the perspective of participants toward pair work for speaking, results displayed that the participants considered it valuable to work in pairs to improve speaking since they feel free of making mistakes, negotiate meanings, share ideas, help each other, and receive peer feedback. According to Mulya (2016), pair work activities characterize student-center classrooms and allow students to interact actively. Having said that, the participants agreed that

the uneven level of knowledge, little collaboration, and feeling of superiority of more brilliant students were the main disadvantages. Participants also mentioned that working in pairs is more effective when they choose their peers. Concerning that, Jones (2007) argued that those facts are common, so students need to be paired considering the type of assignment and their weaknesses and strengths for it.

Conclusion

The lack of linguistic knowledge, non-linguistic and social factors affect the performance of students negatively. Therein lay their difficulties to speak in English. For instance, participants have limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and understanding of what other speakers say. They are also inclined to translate everything and look for words to formulate accurate utterances, which hinder fluency. A non-linguistic factor that affects speaking of participants is anxiety. They are concerned about making mistakes and being criticized by the audience. The lack of motivation of participants is attributed to social factors since they find it pointless to learn a language that is little used out of classroom walls, as occurs in non-English speaking countries like Ecuador.

Regarding English activities, participants are involved in mechanical writing and oral activities from the book. They are also allowed to work in pairs to create dialogue about free ideas. Participants are in favor of pair work to improve speaking as long as they can select the peers to feel comfortable. Instructors can match students considering their strengths and weaknesses as against matching them randomly.

Limitations and recommendations

This study confronted some obstacles. During the data collection stage, one obstacle was the internet connection. Some students who completed the survey via WhatsApp had some

complications and doubts about some questions of the survey while the others who were able to join synchronous meetings on zoom received extra support from the researcher when doubt arose. Another drawback was that the students with irregular internet connections did not ask for help from the researcher when they could.

On the other hand, it is advisable to divide participants into small groups and create schedules for each to provide clearer indications of the survey sections in live, especially for those with irregular internet connections. Furthermore, applying other instruments to collect data such as conducting interviews and observing students working in the classroom fare well to gather more detail information about the subject of study.

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