EFL Student´s Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

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Modality: Descriptive Study

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Proyecto de Investigación

Certifico que Gabriela Beatríz Obaco Guaycha 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 in Speaking cuyo objetivo general es conocer desde la perspectiva de los estudiantes sus dificultades al momento de hablar en inglés. Está información nos servirá para realizar mejoras en el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje del idioma inglés en nuestro context.

El proyecto se implementa en catorce contextos y niveles de eficiencia en inglés diferentes. En este proyecto, cada participante desarrolla la recolección de datos en un contexto educativo diferente. Las secciones de literatura y metodología (instrumentos y análisis de datos) son las mismas.

Particular que comunico para los fines consiguientes.

María Rossana Ramírez Avila

Coordinadora de Titulación

Abstract

This research was designed to explore the speaking difficulties faced by EFL learners in a public high school. The researcher followed a descriptive study design in which a survey was used to collect data. The participants were high school students in a public educational institution in Zamora. Results indicated that students' speaking problems relate to linguistic, psychological, and social problems. They reported that the speaking activities based on pair-work collaboration and practice such as conversations, dialogues, oral presentations, and speech participation helped learners involve the target language and provided them effective feedback. Concerning pair-work, students had significant expectations about it. They established that pair-work is successful in improving oral abilities. This study establishes support for the English teaching field and orientation for further studies. Nevertheless, they mentioned that one disadvantage of pair-work is that the students have different English levels. The suggestions of this study propose carrying out other instruments to collect data.

Keywords: speaking difficulties, high school students, pair work

Resumen

Esta investigación fue diseñada para explorar las dificultades del habla que enfrentan los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en una escuela secundaria pública. El investigador siguió un diseño de estudio descriptivo en el que se utilizó una encuesta para recolectar datos. Los participantes eran estudiantes de secundaria de una institución educativa pública de Zamora. Los resultados indicaron que los problemas del habla de los estudiantes se relacionan con problemas lingüísticos, psicológicos y sociales. Informaron que las actividades de habla basadas en la colaboración y la práctica del trabajo en parejas, como conversaciones, diálogos, presentaciones orales y participación en el habla, ayudan a los alumnos a involucrarse en el idioma de destino y les brindan retroalimentación efectiva. En cuanto al trabajo en parejas, los estudiantes tenían expectativas importantes al respecto. Establecieron que el trabajo en pareja tiene éxito en la mejora de las habilidades orales. Este estudio establece un apoyo para el campo de la enseñanza del inglés y una orientación para estudios posteriores. Sin embargo, mencionaron que una desventaja del trabajo en pareja es que los estudiantes tienen diferentes niveles de inglés. Las sugerencias de este estudio proponen llevar a cabo otros instrumentos para recolectar datos.

Palabras clave: dificultades del habla, estudiantes de secundaria

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

Students in the 21st century should learn English communication skills in order to stimulate additional growth (Al-Jamal & Al-Jamal, 2013). People worldwide speak English as their first language, second language, and foreign language. English is now a world language (Rohmah, 2005). Students in high school usually avoid active interaction in communicative activities. According to Devia and García (2017), problems in developing oral skills hinder their language learning process. Communicating ideas orally is a fundamental skill in language learning and represents a considerable challenge for learners.

The current methodology in teaching English in Ecuador is based on the international standards of the Common European Framework for Language Reference, in which high-school graduates in public schools in Ecuador are expected to achieve a B1 level in English proficiency (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). According to Vélez and Paredes (2021), the development of communicative skills plays an essential function in the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language since comprehending a language is to rehearse it in an authentic context with communication and interchange purposes.

Learners' difficulties occur because of the lack of teacher's professional development. Moreover, teachers focus on grammatical patterns rather than working on speaking activities. Shen and Chiu (2019) claimed that not only does a lack of speaking opportunities affect the learning process, but also learners are afraid of speaking English; due to this, they feel uncomfortable making mistakes and worry about being criticized by others. As a result, they avoided speaking in class, so their participation was unsatisfactory. Considering these issues, EFL learners do not have a proper environment for practicing speaking inside the classroom.

Barokah (2014) carried out a descriptive study to find problems in speaking activities. The author focused on creating material to engage students in speaking English in class and expressing their opinions in front of their classmates. However, students faced problems such as limited vocabulary, difficulties with pronunciation, and the factor of nervousness.

Similarly, Ariati and Syahrial (2018) described pronunciation, grammatical comprehension, vocabulary mastery, and fluency as some factors which interfere in the practice of speaking skills. This descriptive study was conducted in a public junior high school in Indonesia. The researchers used Cue Cards to develop students' thinking ability to verbalize visible facts and obtain meaning. The effects demonstrated that Cue cards are appropriate media if the condition of determining and implementing the media can be satisfied, such as pupils' English capabilities, thinking proficiency, control, and time assignment. Therefore, they concluded that the attitude or behavior towards speaking activities consists of motivation in speaking English, seriousness or full attention, discipline, and practicing time to drill the speaking skill.

Finally, Pratiwi (2020) conducted a descriptive study that reported that group and pair work is adequate and appropriate to practice speaking activities. However, an action plan must be designed to give students roles and responsibilities among the group members. Also, monitoring the group is necessary done by the teacher. Besides all the opportunities designed to help students practice communicative skills, the problems are also connected with social emotions.

The present descriptive study intends to gather factors that influence speaking English development. Due to speaking being a complex skill, it requires simultaneous use of different abilities in which learners need to employ vocabulary, grammar,

pronunciation, intonation, and organization of the content of the speech at the same time (Gultom, 2016).

It is a fact that the ability to speak English as a foreign language in an unsuitable atmosphere is complex because it reflects on learners' lack of interaction during the development of speaking activities since learners feel judged by others, causing them nervousness. So, learners are not sufficiently prepared to speak beyond school boundaries due to students not working in an appropriate environment during classes. Furthermore, selecting the most appropriate methodology, activities, and material for classroom practice is a challenge since students must be comfortable to be engaged with all the applied resources. Additionally, this descriptive study focuses on seeking EFL students' difficulties in speaking skills. A survey will be applied to third high school students in Zamora town.

Literature Review

Speaking

As proposed, developing proficiency must bring numerous benefits to the English learning process, especially in speaking skills (Marzuki et al., 2016). The English as a Foreign Language curriculum contributes to developing logical, critical, and creative thinking, emphasizing verbal communication. According to the exit profile of Ecuadorian High School students (Level B1), learners must deal with most situations in an area where the language is spoken, they will be able to interact in conversation and be familiar with different fields to express in diversity circumstances and purposes, as well as give specific explanations and reasons for arguments and ideals.

Speaking Teaching Principles

The Grammar-Translation method was created to teach students traditional languages, and the teaching methods in those languages paid little attention to the oral

form (Atli & Bergil, 2012). However, this method obeyed a set of determining instruction and learning strategies, and no approaches applied the basis to confirm that these techniques produce language skills (Matamoros et al., 2017). Therefore, no guarantee that learning theories will keep their functionality (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Based on that context, communicative language teaching gains ground in linguistic learning for meaningful exchange (Farooq, 2015).

Considering this approach, Communicative Language Teaching plays a vital role by emphasizing real interaction. Moreover, it provides learning opportunities beyond the grammatical structures by memorization. It is based on the theory that the primary function of verbal use is an exchange and that linguistics is best learned through connection. In other words, its goal is to use real-life situations that need interaction (Brandl, 2019).

Speaking Components

Speaking not only involves communicating an idea but also focuses on the correct use of Grammar, suitable vocabulary, and accurate pronunciation. According to Azlina et. al (2015), there are five components of speaking skills. Therefore, it is required to comprehend these speaking components to help learners develop speaking skills. The first component is *Comprehension for oral communication*, which requires a subject to respond, speak, and initiate it. The learner can internalize some vocabulary and some grammatical structures which will improve understanding (Bashir et al., 2016).

The second component is *Grammar*, in which students place a correct sentence in conversation. The utility of Grammar is also to learn the correct way to be understood in oral and written communication (Kusumawardani & Mardiyani, 2018).

The third component is *vocabulary*; without sufficient vocabulary, users cannot communicate effectively or express their ideas (Coady & Huckin, 1997). Khan et al. (2018) indicated that English fluency is tricky for EFL learners; it is necessary to work on various strategies to develop vocabulary to motivate them to participate in classroom activities by using extensive vocabulary to acquire mastery of spoken proficiency.

The fourth component is *pronunciation*; it deals with the phonological process that determines how sounds vary and pattern a language. Celce et al. (2010) stated that learners need pronunciation instruction to achieve a high level of comprehension.

Speaking fluency.

Common ideas are understood through communication between communication speakers and listeners. According to Harmer (2001), speaking fluently assumes knowledge of language features and use them when needed. Similarly, Putri et al. (2020) stated that fluency grows when the learners comprehend English speaking skills, and fluency focuses more on meaningful communication results. Additionally, Kusumawardani and Mardiyani (2018) defined fluency as the ability to speak spontaneously without stopping and pausing a lot; thus, it can be done with familiarization.

Speaking accuracy.

Accuracy is the ability to produce correct sentences using correct grammar and vocabulary in natural interaction (Brown, 2001), so that the concept of accuracy among linguists is attributed to the use of the target language. Consequently, Robaina and Díaz (2019) defined *accuracy* as using speech adequately to satisfy the target language usage criteria of correctness in which accuracy in EFL verbal ability demands learners to use accurate pronunciation and vocabulary. Due to this, accuracy is also associated with correctness and the absence of errors during performance.

Additionally, Richards (2006) suggested that teachers can balance fluency and accuracy and use accuracy activities to support fluency activities. Similarly, Dincer and Yeşilyurt, (2012) expressed that too much emphasis on correcting mistakes is considered harmful rather than helpful because it may cause excessive monitoring. Moreover, Wang (2014) mentioned that it is affected by cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors in which EFL learners find it challenging to speak fluently and accurately. According to Tati et al. (2016), learners commonly experience shyness when talking English. They are hesitant, frightened of communicating in front of others, stressed about speaking appropriately, and lack self-confidence when talking English because the English language is not their second or primary language.

Pair-work in Speaking

According to Alfares (2017), partner activities and small-group work are a plus for the early language classroom. When students learn to work in cooperation, their opportunities for language use are multiplied.

Pair work creates a more secure and favorable classroom atmosphere. In other terms, it allows learning opportunities to increase participation in significant experiences. Jatmiko (2017) stated that pair work in learning gives students more speaking time and permits them to use English to communicate what they want to transmit. This kind of work usually motivates students because learners encounter assignments and activities more enjoyable; it can stimulate students to come to class and enthusiastically contribute to their education. The pair work requires relatively little organization on the part of the teacher to engage learners, so working in pairs could help promote meaningful interaction between the learners; as a result, that will increase their interest (Biloro et al., 2018).

Methodology

Design

Descriptive study focuses on creating new measures of phenomena, or describe samples for causal effects; descriptive analyses are part of almost every empirical paper and report (Skjott & Korsgaard, 2019).

The quantitative and qualitative data are combined to focus on research questions and methods, differentiating descriptive research from other investigations where the researcher collects mainly qualitative data for quantitative analysis (Lambert & Lambert, 2013). Considering these facts, the present study looked to answer these research questions:

Research questions:

- What are students' difficulties in speaking in English?

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

- What are students' perspectives towards pair work for speaking?

Participants

In this study, there were 35 participants selected who participated in the survey. They all belong to third high school students in Zamora town. The sample of this research was students who agreed to answer the form freely; each participant received a link to develop this survey after finishing their classes. Of the sample, 57.1 % are female, and 42.9% are males; the participants´ average age was between 17 to 18 years old. They all consider themselves mestizos, and their social status is middle-class.

The participants are in their third year of high school plays an important role in this research since the exit profile in the Ecuadorian curriculum guidelines is to achieve a B1 level of proficiency, allowing them to communicate effectively as independent users of English; they will transfer their ideas, opinions, and knowledge to others.

Instruments

In this study, the researcher applied a survey that incorporated items to get demographic information and students' perspectives about speaking; it was presented in English and Spanish to avoid any misunderstanding among participants. The survey was applied to 35 students. The survey was administered to all participants through Google Forms. This instrument attempted to answer the three research questions. It was classified into two sections. The first section was aimed at obtaining participants' demographic data. The second section consisted of twelve questions that incorporated items with open-ended, multiple-choice, and Likert scale options; this section aimed to gather data about students' difficulties, speaking activities, and perspectives towards pair work.

Moreover, learners highlighted the most appropriate activities to interact in and outside the classroom and described their perspectives on speaking English.

Data analysis

The data gathered from the survey were 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.

Ethical Considerations

The study rigorously followed some ethical criteria. It is also important to further consider the fundamentals of ethical research involving human participants (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). First, an authorization letter was sent to the institution's principal; the authority accepted permission and provided the facilities to apply the survey. Second, parents were asked for their consent about the study. The researcher explained its purposes, and its academic objective. Third, the confidentiality of data to google forms and their privacy and security guidelines were maintained during the process.

Results

In this section, the results 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 respond to a question with Likert scales. These scales were *a great extent* (5), *a lot* (4), *some* (3), *a little bit* (2), and *none* (1). The following table summarizes the prior outcomes:

Table 1.

Difficulties in speaking

When you speak, you…	Mean
Feel confident about the topic	3.63
Know what to say	3.43
Look for words to respond correctly	3.6
Translate what I want to say	3.54
Can say phrases	3.54
Can interact in a conversation	3.37
Feel embarrassed of making mistakes	3.74
Understand what the other person is saying	3.4
Have a good intonation of questions	3.57
Have a good intonation of sentences	3.49
Have a good pronunciation	3.17
Use word stress.	3.14
Use sentence stress	3.17
Consider the topics are interesting	3.86

The survey's results point out that students feel confident when they speak (3.36) and consider the topics interesting (3.86); they make their best effort to improve intonation, creating learners who express their ideas and opinions with good intonation (3.49). Due to this, students are also motivated to speak in English.

In contrast, results indicate that students had minor speaking difficulties. One of the issues students faced in speaking was that learners find problems interacting in a conversation (3.37). Another issue is that learners find difficulties in sentence stress (3.17) and word stress; they feel ashamed because others criticize how they speak, causing them not to explain what they want to communicate (3.14). The last aspect of speaking difficulties is the pronunciation of some words (3.17).

Furthermore, in the open-ended questions, students reported that the topics were interesting, which made them feel confident "I feel motivated to participate because I find the topics very interesting to talk about them". However, some students reported having minor issues in communicative abilities. They find complications with pronunciation, supporting the statement learners wrote, "Sometimes I not only look for words to respond correctly but also I look for the correct pronunciation of some words which interference at the moment of speaking." Regarding the interaction, there is an obstacle for students who stated, "I feel embarrassed of making mistakes when I speak in front of the class.

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

This question was designed to identify the type of activities students usually had practiced in their English classes. Respondents had to choose how often they practiced each exercise. Scales went from *Always* (4) to *Never* (1). The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Speaking activities

Item	Mean
Created a short speech	3.23
Made an oral presentation	3.46
Participated in a forum	2.94
Commented on a general topic	3.37
Created dialogues to practice with peers	3.31
Written a dialogue from ideas from the book	3.63
Practiced a dialogue about free ideas	3.49
Listen to my peers' recordings	3.37
Record audios	3.37
I have provided feedback to my peers' oral participation	3.34
Self-assess my oral participation	3.37
Used rubrics to provide feedback	3.14

The speaking activities that students practice more frequently are related to writing dialogue from an idea from the book (3.63). Students also reported that they practice a dialogue from free ideas (3.49). Learners stated that oral presentation during lessons (3.46). However, they often did other representative activities: comment on a general topic and listen to peers´ recordings. Moreover, learners also recorded audio and self-assess in oral presentations (3.37).

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

This question was oriented to determine students' perceptions about pair work's effectiveness in supporting 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.

Item	Mean

Pair work is useful to practice speaking	2.74
Pair work for speaking is difficult because the student who knows more dominates the conversation	2.54
It is advisable although some pairs speak slowly	2.94
It is advisable although some pairs do not pronounce correctly	2.97
The pair makes constant interruptions	2.66
It takes too much time	2.43
It is good if I work with the pair I choose	3.06

According to the table, participants showed their perspectives towards pair-work to enhance speaking so that students disagree that pair-work is useful to practice speaking (2.74). So that, learner argued that pair work is difficult because the students who know more dominates the conversation (2.54). Moreover, they noticed some pairs do not pronounce correctly (2.97), and speak slowly (2.94). Nevertheless, they feel comfortable selecting their peers, and it also creates a good atmosphere where they can express their ideas and opinions; the average score of this item was (3.06).

When the participants answered the open-ended question, they highlighted that pair-work had many advantages; for instance, they mentioned that they felt more confident when talking to a peer instead of the teacher. They also assumed they could learn from each other by correcting their mistakes and providing feedback. Someone wrote, "an improvement could be the feedback help each other to improve speaking because we feel more comfortable speaking with a friend while we are also learning and correcting mistakes."

On the opposite side, they stated that one negative aspect is the sense that students need to be trained to apply effective feedback. One responder replied, "I feel my classmate judges my way to speak like feeling she knows everything." Others mentioned they were reluctant to work in pairs activities because they do not have an

excellent English level. Results in the open-ended questions revealed that a few students encountered difficulties in speaking due to nervousness, the idea of translating every single word, the fear of making mistakes, low confidence levels, mispronunciation, lack of fluency, limited vocabulary, and knowledge of grammar.

Discussion

This section compares and contrasts results from previous studies and outcomes from the surveys; the current study critically assesses participants of Zamora EFL learners' speaking difficulties, different types of activities, and the perspectives towards pair work in order to improve speaking skills. Marzuki et al. (2016) illustrated that developing speaking skills in oral communication has many advantages in learning a new language.

The study reveals that students have problems with nervousness. They feel frustrated due to translating some words and find it difficult to pronounce them appropriately. They concluded that their difficulties in developing communicative skills are related to the sense of fear of making mistakes and being judged by their classmates. This is aligned with Shen and Chiu's (2019) findings, who argued that besides the lack of speaking opportunities, for learners who still find it difficult to speak, feeling embarrassed about making mistakes and being criticized or laughed at by others is one of the main issues. As a result, they avoided speaking in class, so their participation was unsatisfactory, causing nervousness and a lack of self-confidence. Moreover, learners reported some pronunciation, fluency, limited vocabulary, and grammar difficulties.

Therefore, speaking problems should be attributed to linguistic factors and psychological aspects (Harris,1969). Nervousness is an emotional factor that many students suffer from when they are required to speak in English class; this indicates that

the feeling of making mistakes could be a source of the problem in students' classrooms, especially in speaking classes (Tati et al., 2016).

Concerning speaking activities, the students enjoy working with their peers; even if they make grammar mistakes while speaking English, they are conscious that making mistakes is part of learning something new. Practicing dialogues from free ideas, writing dialogues from ideas from the books, and developing oral presentation support interaction, impacted the students' language learning achievement and proficiency in the classroom. Even though the class was a bit noisy, the students made their best effort to interact in class.

To sum up, the finding revealed that pair work activities have good perspectives because they motivate students to participate enthusiastically and contribute to their active collaboration in the activities. Pair-work interaction is sufficient by the teacher for most students because this lets students improve and practice verbal skills (Jatmiko, 2017). The pair work demands organization on the part of the teacher to immerse learners, so working in pairs could help encourage meaningful interaction between the learners (Biloro et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This study investigated the difficulties in speaking that students have when they interact with others. The study evidenced difficulties in speaking because of affective, linguistic, and social aspects given the findings of this study. Firstly, students have problems due to nervousness; they feel judged by others due to the lack of vocabulary, limited vocabulary, and mispronunciation of some words. This causes students to feel reluctant to speak; they are not confident enough and fear making mistakes and being exposed to their classmates' critiques and teacher corrections.

Secondly, the oral presentations and practice written dialogues based on free and interesting topics allow students to increase their self-confidence when they want to participate in oral activities in class. Likewise, the activities designed to work effectively help them overcome communicative difficulties in pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy. Thirdly, pair work activities make it possible to interact with others and provide effective feedback, which creates a good atmosphere among members to learn and interact as much as possible.

Limitations

To begin with, in this study there were a few limitations that should be considered for future studies. In addition, the research instrument was limited to one (survey) and the number of participants. However, it is necessary to implement other mechanisms to gather data and guarantee authentic results. Furthermore, another problem was related to internet access. Some students live in rural areas where the internet connection is unstable. Finally, students were very busy with projects, tests, and homework, so the online survey impeded giving precise and detailed instructions to the participants when they completed it.

Recommendations

It is advisable to use other instruments to collect data; the observation with a previous rubric should be designed in order to observe and register students' speaking performance. Exploring students' perspectives in a face-to-face class is advisable, which suggests working on oral activities that provide peer feedback. Similarly, technological tools provide the researcher with authentic data. It is also highly recommended to carry out a project in order to help students to overcome their speaking problems.

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