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

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Modality: Descriptive study

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Proyecto de Investigación

Certifico que Mayra Alexandra Díaz Ramos 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. Esta información nos servirá para realizar mejoras en el proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje del idioma inglés en nuestro context.

El proyecto se implementa en varios niveles de eficiencia en inglés. 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

The present study is a descriptive research and quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to answer questions and to get deep information about students' difficulties in speaking. This skill could be a big challenge for most of students and teachers. In addition, this research was carried out in a Higher Education Institute in Riobamba city. The results were obtained through an online survey and the results were tabulated and ordered in the SPSS program to obtain descriptive statistics. The findings showed that the main challenge for students is to have correct pronunciation. Therefore, this concern creates fear of making mistakes and anxiety about speaking in public. The study also showed that students do not express themselves well. This investigation corroborates that the use of pair-work activities helps learners to develop and improve their speaking skills. The results should be interesting to EFL teachers who try to enhance students' speaking difficulties during the learning process.

Keywords: speaking difficulties, correct pronunciation, pair-work, EFL learners.

Resumen

El presente estudio es una investigación descriptiva y los datos fueron analizados de forma cuantitativa y cualitativa para responder a las preguntas y obtener información sobre las dificultades de los estudiantes en la habilidad hablada del idioma inglés. Esta habilidad puede ser un gran desafío para la gran mayoría de los estudiantes y profesores.

Adicionalmente, esta investigación fue llevada a cabo en un instituto superior en la ciudad de Riobamba. Los resultados fueron obtenidos a través de una encuesta online y los resultados fueron tabulados y ordenados mediante el programa SPSS para obtener estadísticas descriptivas. Los hallazgos demostraron que el principal desafío es una correcta pronunciación en los estudiantes. Además, este problema ocasiona que los estudiantes se sientan asustados de cometer errores y sentir ansiedad al hablar en público. También, este estudio mostró que los estudiantes tienen un vocabulario deficiente y no entienden la conversación y por lo tanto no pueden expresar sus ideas de forma correcta. Este trabajo corroboró que el uso de actividades en parejas ayuda a los estudiantes a desarrollar y mejorar sus habilidades de expresión oral en inglés. Los resultados pueden ser interesantes para profesores de inglés quienes tratan de mejorar las dificultades de la expresión hablada del inglés en los estudiantes dentro de las aulas de clase.

Palabras claves: dificultades al hablar en inglés, pronunciación correcta, trabajo en parejas, estudiantes del idioma inglés.

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

The globalized world considers that English is the main language that many people speak worldwide (Shen et al., 2019). EFL students should develop speaking skills to face the challenges of this globalization context. In addition, developing learners' English communication will help students achieve their objectives and it means that individuals have to face the challenges of learning a second language.

Some investigations reported that there are speaking challenges and one of them is that EFL teachers have inadequate training in teaching young learners in general (Copland & Burns, 2014). Another challenge identified by the same authors was the technology because it had considerable development in recent years and teachers have not always been able to access its benefits and the situation is especially acute in poor or rural areas. Lastly, Yusuf and Zuraini (2016) added about students' lack of vocabulary, grammar structure, and pronunciation problems. Undoubtedly, grammatical structures, words and their proper use, and a certain extent of accuracy need to be taught and respected during the teaching-learning process. The classes demonstrate that there are endless opportunities to express their feelings, thoughts, and culture. Therefore, these previous investigations helped to identify some challenges in learning English.

Yusuf and Zuraini (2016) carried out a study that described the challenges that the teachers face in teaching English speaking to their students in Aceh. The findings showed that students' lack of vocabulary, pronunciation problems, nothing to say, lack of motivation, and the use or interference of the mother tongue are the most influential challenges in teaching speaking. According to Richards (2006), learning the language does not always guarantee the learner will be able to use the language fluently. It happens due to the lack of strategies to involve students in communicative activities. A study of teacher-

student interaction conducted by Musumeci (1996) showed that the teacher's talking time occupies about 66% or 72% of the class. It means that students have little chance to talk and when they share ideas, answers, or comments, the teacher penalizes their mistakes. Thus, the teachers do their best to overcome these challenges along the process of their teaching in the classroom.

Another study made by Copland and Burns (2014) focused on the challenges faced by EFL teachers to young learners. It showed several challenges and difficulties in speaking skills such as the different educational contexts, namely, teaching speaking, motivation, differentiating learning, teaching large classes, discipline, teaching writing, and teaching grammar.

Lastly, this problem is not far from what is perceived in Ecuador. There is a study made by Gonzalez et al. (2015) in the Amazon region. Its findings revealed that the completion of exercises based on dialogues and repetition drills were the most frequent activities applied to develop speaking. Meanwhile, teachers have limited options to enhance their teaching skills inside the classroom. For example, there could be a few hours of English per week, limited technological equipment and materials in the schools, and a lack of training for teachers.

Therefore, educational authorities consider the introduction of languages in primary, high schools, and high education institutes. The Ecuadorian government also established some policies and learning English as a foreign language has become a necessity in these times. For instance, the Higher education council (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2017) in Ecuador stated that university students must approve B1.1 and B1.2 English levels based on the Common European Framework in order to finish their studies. There are some studies based on students' proficiency. For instance, Education First (EF) made a census in 2021 around the world and this study showed that some counties have

increased or decreased English level. In the case of Ecuador, it is in 90 places out of 112 countries and its English level is low, and some authors give pieces of advice to improve this productive skill. One of them is Jeyasala (2014) who asserted that teachers should encourage students' communicative competence all the time, and they should provide students spaces to interact with others or to immerse them in speaking activities that enhance their ability to use the target language.

The current situation at the Higher Education Institute in Riobamba city reflects a low English proficiency level. It may be due to the lack of appropriate methods, techniques, and strategies for teaching English. The poor participation, low grades, and relevant amount of desertion could be evidence that learners need to improve and the instructors need to enhance their teaching-learning process in order to develop these important skills and create a good learning atmosphere.

Literature Review

This section explains the main concepts for this descriptive study. Moreover, this section analyzes the literature, issues, and studies for speaking skill development. The parts are the speaking teaching principles, and the speaking components: fluency, phonology, pronunciation, and stress.

Speaking Teaching Principles

For many years, people thought the teaching of speaking was to repeat sentences and chant memorized dialogues. People were supposed to learn to speak by practicing grammatical structures and then using them in conversation. However, Nunan and Carter (2001) believed that a child acquires his first language by interacting with others and this process is repeated with young adults because they acquire the second language by learning the pieces of language through interaction with other people. Together with that, different approaches to teaching English have emerged to serve as a guide to teaching English

methodologically and effectively as well. However, Thituyetanh (2015) pointed out that “there has been no perfect method of teaching English, so teachers have very eclectic applications of approaches to their teaching in combination with their experience” (p. 49). In this respect, a teacher should consider the following principles when teaching and developing speaking skills inside the class.

The first principle is “to make sure the teaching takes place in an intended way, it is critical to creating a high level of motivation” (Ur, 1981, p.4). So, effort alone does not increase motivation, but the desire and satisfaction in any activity count. That is the key consideration in determining the preparedness of learners to communicate. Motivation plays an important role in the development of EFL communicative skills because it creates a positive attitude towards the development of oral communicative competence (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008).

The second principle is when teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. Kayi (2006) suggested that “ESL teachers should create a classroom environment where students have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language”. Communicative language teaching and collaborative learning serve best for this goal. In brief by using these methods in EFL classes, students will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language.

The third principle is related to feedback. Teachers or instructors provide some methods or strategies to cope with the students' difficulties in speaking. Laeli (2019) listed kinds of feedback which are oral feedback, written feedback, evaluative and descriptive feedback; informal and formal feedback; and peer and self-feedback. Commonly, teachers provide oral feedback in speaking class. However, the feedback that is given to the students must have a positive effect on their learning achievement. Not all types of feedback affect the

students positively and it is sometimes frustrating and burdens them in the learning process (Spiller, 2009).

The fourth principle is about negotiation for meaning (NFM) in second language acquisition. Ellis said that “negotiation of meaning is the process by which two or more interlocutors identify and then attempt to resolve a communication breakdown” (2003, p. 346). The features of negotiation inside the class include that the student requests for message, clarification, and confirmation, then the teacher may repeat, elaborate, or simplify the original message. The impact of NFM could help learners to find ways to better foster communicative competence as part of their language development.

The last principle is to choose interesting topics in order to draw students’ attention and inspire them. The teachers need to create interest in the themes by talking about the topic and by communicating enthusiasm. In this way, students have the opportunity to express their ideas, and teachers can exploit their previous knowledge to get them into the lesson. The idea is to raise learners’ curiosity and interest. As a result, students have a reason to attend the lesson and to talk for themselves (Harmer, 2002).

To sum up, teaching a target language requires the teacher to play certain roles. In addition, he has to interact, communicate and deal with students so that pupils can improve their skills. In particular, teaching speaking skills is quite challenging as it has to be achieved with several principles.

Speaking Components

In the English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, EFL learners have limited opportunities to practice English outside of a classroom (Ekanayake et al., 2017). They may have books to read, CDs to listen to, television programs to watch, and a variety of social media to navigate but they may not always have English users with whom to practice

speaking. Nonetheless, 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 and they need special attention in the EFL teaching contexts such as fluency, phonology, pronunciation, and stress.

Fluency.

The term “fluency” has a strong relation to the meaning of “communication” (Harmer, 2007, p. 142). To give an example, a learner can make a grammatical error, such as *Jose live in Riobamba*, but the learner can still speak the sentence with some fluency without attention to grammar rules (Crowther et al., 2015). In other words, the student can speak without searching for words, so that his or her speech is quickly understood. In fact, speaking fluency has been defined as the “automaticity and speed of speech production” (Brand & Götz, 2011, p. 256).

Pronunciation.

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 interrupting the communication. Fraser (2000) also defined pronunciation as a sub-skill and the most essential in English speaking. Teaching speaking and pronunciation involves a variety of challenges for the teachers. Gilbert (2008) mentioned that drilling sounds repeatedly leads to a monotonous experience in the classroom, discouragement, and may lead to total avoidance of learning altogether. A pronunciation class should include much more than sound contrasts in words, pronunciation of consonants, and vowels. Therefore, in order to teach pronunciation correctly, a teacher must be aware of the articulation, stress, intonation, and rhythm patterns (Richards &

Burns, 2012).

Stress.

On the other hand, English has stressed syllables that normally occur at regular time intervals. Thus, in English, rhythmic patterns are based upon a fairly regular recurrence of stressed syllables. That is why English is often called a “stress-timed language.” (Scarcella & Oxford, 1994, p. 225). For example, a phrase or sentence level stress is used in order to provide emphasis on a certain element of a given point, whereas phonetic stress focuses the audience's attention on what is most important in the message.

Phonology.

The last component is phonology, which deals with sound structure in individual languages: the way distinctions in sound are used to differentiate linguistic items and how the sound structure of the same element varies as a function of the other sounds in its context. Grimaldi et al. (2018) indicated that phonology involves integrating speech properties into mental representations exposed to categorical processes. For example, it can help students perceive the linguistic differences in vowel and consonant sounds like pat and bat.

Pair work.

Curtain and Dahlburg set that pair work is an essential activity inside the class because it creates an opportunity for interaction and gets interpersonal communication which helps to increase cognitive learning and second language acquisition. In other words, pair work benefits the students to express themselves orally (2010). One of the benefits of this kind of activity is to increase the moments for language use. Many students talk, more like one-on-one, a chance for asking for and answering questions (Nerenz & Knop, 1982).

Methodology

Design.

The present study is a descriptive research that focuses on collecting data to test hypotheses or to answer questions concerning data and to get deep data and information about the difficulties learners present in speaking skills (Sahin & Mete, 2021). This means this kind of research helps to show the difficulties learners have while speaking English. In this descriptive study, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed. The results were obtained through an online survey and the results were tabulated and ordered in the SPSS program in order to obtain descriptive statistics.

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

- What are students' difficulties to speak in English?
- What type of activities do students prefer for speaking?
- What are students' perspectives of pair work?

Participants.

The participants of the present study were 65 students from a Higher Education Institute in Riobamba city. There were 42 women and 23 men between 20 to 40 years old. According to the student's perspectives, the survey showed that 82% of the students belong to the middle socio economic class and 3% of them belong to the high socio economic class. There was a high percentage of participants who had access to the technology by desktop (43%). Other students used laptops (39%) and smartphones (18%).

Instruments.

Speaking survey.

The author sent a link to a survey in Google form. It is specially created to collect information. Each student read the questions carefully and answered them at the Institute. It means the contact with participants was face to face for the survey and they gave consent to participate online. Students answered around 40 questions about their personal information, what kind of institution they study, and their perspectives on speaking English. Also, they were asked about the kind of activities they used to do in their English classes. Finally, the survey was in English and Spanish in order to avoid misunderstandings.

Data Analysis.

The data from the survey were entered into the SPSS program. Each scale of the survey was coded (Table 1). Each item was assigned a number as a code. For example, “I have done them” means 4, and “I don’t like this type of activity” means 1. To analyze the results, participants answered the questions according to their perspectives towards on pair work. For instance, if the students chose “totally disagree” it means 1 and shows that working in pairs is not useful for them and if the students chose “totally agree” which means 5 showing that working in pairs is very useful for them. In addition, participants answered the questions about students' difficulties to speak in English and the type of activities students prefer for speaking. Then, the next step was to find the mean of each item to get the data. Irrelevant results were not considered.

Table 1

Code for the scales of the survey

| Scale | Code | Scale | Code |
|------------------------------------|-------------|------------------|-------------|
| I don't like this type of activity | 1 | Totally disagree | 1 |
| I would like to do it | 2 | Disagree | 2 |
| I don't have done them | 3 | Neutral | 3 |

| | | | |
|------------------|---|---------------|---|
| I have done them | 4 | Agree | 4 |
| | | Totally agree | 5 |

Source: Author

Ethical Considerations.

Ethical considerations were crucial to the development of this investigation. First of all, the researcher asked for permission from the coordinator of the Foreign Language department in order to apply for the research (Agarwal & Bhandari, 2022). A consent letter (Appendix 1) was also prepared to indicate that the researcher was allowed to take the survey in the institution. 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?” the SPSS program tabulated this information and 30% of participants stated pronunciation as the main challenge they face in speaking English, 22.5% said the misunderstanding of information during a dialogue is another challenge to face, and 7.5% indicated they cannot speak fluently. In addition, 12.5% stated they feel nervous to speak in public and do not express themselves well. Finally, 5% do not have any problem with speaking.

Table 2

Results about challenges faced in Speaking skills.

| What other challenge/difficulty/limitation do you have when you speak in English? | | | | |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Frecuencia | Porcentaje | Porcentaje válido | Porcentaje acumulado |
| None | 2 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 5.0 |
| Speak fluently | 7 | 17.5 | 17.5 | 22.5 |
| Correct pronunciation | 12 | 30.0 | 30.0 | 52.5 |

| | | | | |
|---|----|-------|-------|-------|
| Not express himself well | 5 | 12.5 | 12.5 | 65.0 |
| Not understand the information | 9 | 22.5 | 22.5 | 87.5 |
| Speak in public and feel nervous | 5 | 12.5 | 12.5 | 100.0 |
| Total | 40 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

Source: Author

Regarding the second question, what type of activities do students prefer for speaking? participants had five options to answer the questions. As table 3 shows, the activities most practiced in English classes are: To do an oral practice with the vocabulary personal interest (M=3.53). To practice specific vocabulary orally of an activity or topic from the book (M=3.90). Oral pair work activities in the classroom (M=3.64).

Table 3

Results about the type of activities students prefer for speaking

| | Write correct answers to questions to practice grammar | Practice specific vocabulary in writing activity or topic from the book | Oral practice with the vocabulary of personal interest | Written practice with the vocabulary of personal interest | Oral pair work activities in the classroom | Pair work in writing activities in the classroom | Pair work in general outside the classroom |
|-----------------------|---|--|---|--|---|---|---|
| Media | 3.53 | 3.9077 | 3.6000 | 3.5077 | 3.6462 | 3.4923 | 3.3538 |
| Moda | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Desv. estandar | .81157 | .38418 | .76649 | .77304 | .71656 | .79300 | .71656 |

Source: Author

Finally, regarding the third question related to what are students' perspectives of pair work?, participants answered this question using five options from One "Totally Disagree" to Five "Totally Agree". Most of the answers reflect positive concerns about pair work in speaking. Some of their reasons were that pair work is useful to practice speaking (67.7%).

On the other hand, 38.9% consider pair work is not helpful in English speaking because the student who knows more dominates the conversation. As table 4 below shows, most of their perspectives are positive towards pair work in Speaking (M=4) even more when the participant chooses their partner (M=4), and speak slowly (M=4). However, they also agree about the difficulties that can arise in these activities, such as incorrect pronunciation (M=4).

Table 4

Results about students' perspectives of pair work

| | Pair work is useful to practice speaking | Pair work for speaking is difficult because the student who knows more dominate the conversation | It is advisable although some pairs speak slowly | It is advisable although some pairs do not pronounce correctly | The pair makes constant interruptions | It takes too much time | It is good if I work with the pair I choose |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|--|-------------------------------|--|
| Válido | 65 | 65 | 65 | 65 | 65 | 65 | 65 |
| Perdidos | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Mediana | 4.00 | 3.0000 | 4.0000 | 4.0000 | 3.0000 | 3.0000 | 4.0000 |
| Moda | 5 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 | 4.00 |
| Desv. estándar | 1.582 | 1.17670 | 1.40620 | 1.43480 | 1.31376 | 1.24383 | 1.39108 |

Source: Author

Discussion

This search reveals that the main difficulty for English learners in Speaking is pronunciation. As Fraser (2000) and Gilbert (2008) 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 communication. Additionally, the survey expressed learners' concerns about their lack of vocabulary and not understanding the information. It could happen because there is a lack of negotiation of meaning. The learners may request clarification and confirmation of the information and the other person may repeat and re-built the original message (Ellis, 2003). The surveys showed that the majority of the

learners give more importance to knowing the correct pronunciation of a word instead of knowing the correct use of grammar. This idea is supported by Gilakjani (2011) who explained that mispronunciation can lead to a misunderstanding of the message and as a result, it can interrupt communication.

Additionally, the survey expressed learners' concerns about their misunderstanding of the information (87.5%) and not expressing themselves well (65%). Therefore, the term "fluency" has a strong relation to the meaning of "communication" (Harmer, 2007, p. 142). In fact, speaking fluency has been defined as the "automaticity and speed of speech production" (Brand & Götz, 2011, p. 256).

Moreover, the surveys show that there are activities that students prefer for speaking such as practicing specific vocabulary in writing with activities or topics from the book. This idea is supported by Kayi (2006) who believed that learners' activities must be based on real-life situations because those tasks can improve students' vocabulary learning. Also, Richards (2006) stated that teachers must create meaningful interaction and use the language for different purposes to enhance communicative competence among the students.

Finally, the students' perspectives about pair work are positive because learners think that it is useful to practice speaking (M=4). So, effort alone does not increase motivation. It means that learners with higher English levels can help weaker students. However, working with weaker students can lead to problems not only for the student with a higher English level but for both of them (Harmer, 2001). To give you an example, the stronger student cannot be able to understand their partner's pronunciation. In the same way, the stronger students dominate the conversation and the weaker students have less participation in the speaking activities.

Conclusions

This study aimed to gather into the EFL students' difficulties in speaking. The results of this study showed that the main challenge for students is to have correct pronunciation. Therefore, this concern prevents students from speaking since they feel afraid of making mistakes and feel anxious about speaking in public. The study also showed that students lack vocabulary even though they showed misunderstanding during the conversation and they do not express themselves well.

Regarding pair-work, the majority of the learners share the idea that pair-work could improve their speaking skills. It is very important that they feel relaxed when they choose a partner who has a higher English level because he can help them to improve their pronunciation. However, this causes struggles when the weaker student speaks slowly and the stronger partner may interfere most of the time and the other speaker loses the opportunity to participate in the conversation actively.

Limitations and Recommendations

The main limitation in the development of this study was the lack of computers and internet connection. For instance, some participants could not complete the survey correctly because they did not log in to their e-mails and forms on time and they took longer to complete the questions in the survey. Another limitation is about some students did not get a clear idea of the structure of the survey and they felt anxious and confused, although the researcher had a meeting to explain every single question in the survey.

This study offers important support to further studies and researchers for a better understanding of speaking difficulties. As a recommendation, for future studies should implement pilot surveys in order to identify some limitations. Another piece of advice could be to invite native teachers and students to join the English class in order to create spaces where students have real contact with the second language and interact with each other. It

helps to provide communicative opportunities.

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Appendix 1

Survey about Speaking

Available upon request.

Consent Letter from School

Available upon request.