



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

Rocío del Pilar Guncay Lucero

Guide: María Rossana Ramírez Ávila

Modality: Descriptive Study

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Abstract

English is considered one of the major languages in the world, and the productive skill of speaking is the most challenging and demanding for EFL learners. This descriptive study addresses the significant difficulties students from eighth, ninth, and tenth graders from an Ecuadorian private Institution face when speaking English. The study collected qualitative and quantitative data through a survey of 76 participants aged 12 to 15. The results demonstrated that students are in trouble with self-expressing due to the deficiency of vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, anxiety, the translation of everything, and limited exposure to the language. Most importantly, students described that fear emerged due to incorrect pronunciation. During English classes, students do mechanical activities about grammar, fill in the blanks, and practice specific vocabulary in the book. Withal, learners work in pairs to practice speaking by using dialogues created by them as suggestions given by the book. They feel comfortable working in groups because this strategy decreases their anxiety. Unfortunately, peers overuse the mother language during pair work, contribute a little, and the one who knows more does not allow equal participation. This study contributes to future research as a reference for learning speaking improvement.

Keywords: Students' difficulties, speaking activities, pair work, pronunciation, anxiety.

Resumen

El inglés se considera uno de los principales idiomas del mundo, y la habilidad productiva de hablar es la más desafiante y exigente para los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Este estudio descriptivo aborda las principales dificultades que enfrentan los estudiantes de octavo, noveno y décimo grado de una institución privada en Ecuador para hablar inglés. El estudio recolectó datos cualitativos y cuantitativos a través de una encuesta a 76 participantes, cuyas edades están entre 12 y 15 años. Los resultados demostraron que los estudiantes tienen problemas para expresarse debido a la deficiencia de vocabulario, pronunciación incorrecta, ansiedad, la traducción de todo, y exposición limitada al idioma. Lo que es más importante, los estudiantes describieron que el miedo surgió debido a la pronunciación incorrecta. Además, durante las clases de inglés, los estudiantes realizan actividades mecánicas sobre gramática, completan los espacios en blanco y practican el vocabulario específico del libro. También, los alumnos trabajan en parejas para practicar el habla utilizando diálogos creados por ellos como sugerencias del libro. Se sienten cómodos trabajando en grupo porque esta estrategia les disminuye la ansiedad. Desafortunadamente, en algunos casos uno de los integrantes de los pares abusa de la lengua materna durante el trabajo en pareja, aportan poco y el que sabe más no permite la participación igualitaria. Finalmente, este estudio contribuye a futuras investigaciones como referencia para la mejora del aprendizaje del habla.

Palabras clave: Dificultades de los estudiantes, actividades de habla, trabajo en pareja, pronunciación, ansiedad.

EFL Students' Difficulties in Speaking: A Descriptive Study

English has become a worldwide language because it facilitates communication among people from different parts of the world. Hence, speaking more than one language is required to interact and connect within this globalized world (Ministerio de Educación, 2014). Indeed, learning English as a foreign language (EFL) goes beyond memorizing grammatical rules disassociated from the real purpose of communicating. Thus, learners must use English as a means of oral production and interaction to persuade, inform listeners, and make connections with people (Sayuri, 2016).

Although learning a new language implies acquiring listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, the oral language ability is used more than the others because it supports interaction with listeners (Rao, 2019). However, a study by Klimova (2014) revealed that speaking is tough to acquire and run because of two main features. First, this skill is performed live, producing speakers' fears due to the unease of making mistakes. Second, users cannot edit or change what they say because interlocutors react immediately to what others are saying and express their views without a script since speaking is generated in real-time without time to reflect on what to say.

Likewise, speaking skill is a means of learning, practicing, and understanding a new language, where grammatical knowledge, vocabulary according to the context, and correct pronunciation are the medium to convey ideas with contextual sense (Al Hosni, 2014). Nevertheless, grasping it is challenging because students face two significant issues, linguistic and non-linguistic factors. The first one belongs to the lack of vocabulary, grammar, fluency, comprehension, and pronunciation. Meanwhile, the second refers to psychological matters, such as anxiety, low self-confidence, shyness, fear of being judged, and dread of making mistakes (Dalem, 2017). All the mentioned factors block oral language production and impede practice.

As an illustration, anxiety affects foreign language oral production because anxious learners are highly limited to speaking in English due to their emotional fears, which do not enable them to communicate orally. Generally, when students are nervous, they start trembling, sweating, and forgetting their ideas (Zhiping & Paramasivam, 2013). Furthermore, Horwitz et al. (1986) noted that nervousness is the uneasiness, tightness, fear, and edginess that block people from overcoming difficult situations due to the unknown results of a particular state.

Another factor that affects English speaking skill acquisition is that students do not have opportunities to use the language outside the classroom (Cuartas, 2014). Furthermore, a study by Rojas (2021) reported that in the EFL Ecuadorian context, learners are not exposed to scenarios that engage and help to practice English orally because they spend most of their time with their family, community, and friends where a Spanish-speaking environment prevails. Therefore, learning to speak English becomes slow and takes a long time to acquire. According to Khan et al. (2018), students cannot include new vocabulary words to communicate due to the lack of practice in English speaking. As a result, they forget the meaning and pronunciation.

Rosales and Gonzalez (2020) stated that the overuse of the mother tongue limits the students from getting in touch with the target language, reducing the opportunities for exposure to English and practicing speaking skills. Therefore, students learn more English when it is used most of the time and less when it is almost not practiced. In addition, excessive use of L1 tends to translate the information from the target language most of the time, which does not help learners acquire English (Siham, 2018). In other words, too much use of students' native language causes more dependence and decreases the input and the chance to practice the L2 (Şener & Korkut, 2017).

The Ecuadorian Foreign Language Curriculum includes the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, which promotes group and pair work tasks to facilitate learners' oral communication in learning English as a Foreign Language (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). However, it is a challenge to use such activities because when students join to work on a role-play, debates, and discussions, they use their mother tongue excessively, producing a dependence on the native language to the detriment of the English Language (Ghorbani, 2011). Furthermore, overusing the mother tongue creates issues with English pronunciation, inappropriate vocabulary and false cognates usage, and increased dependence on translating English into Spanish (Papaja et al., 2020).

The present descriptive study was held in a private high school in Gualaceo city, which aligns with local and national standards. Similarly, teachers follow the Ecuadorian curricula, which guide English teaching-learning. The participants for the survey are from grades 8th-10th, whose English level, according to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), should be A2, but most do not get this level.

The investigator has examined how learning oral language English is limited to doing it inside the classroom. Hence, there is no authentic input and output to develop this skill outside the class. Likewise, when students work in groups or pairs, they usually use their mother tongue because they cannot communicate in English or feel anxious about committing mistakes, which impedes English oral production. Besides, students who are better at English translate the instructions for those who do not understand. All these contexts have limited this challenging skill development in this institution.

Literature Review

To better comprehend the current study, this segment gives readers a short and straightforward overview of the theoretical foundation of speaking in EFL environments. Since this descriptive study focuses on speaking, this skill is defined first. Second, the

importance of speaking when learning a foreign language is provided. Third, there is a description of the main speaking teaching principles. Fourth, the speaking components are mentioned together with a brief description. Fifth, the barriers EFL students face when developing speaking are explained in detail. Finally, pair-work in speaking is addressed.

Speaking

Speaking involves verbal and non-verbal language in different real-life contexts whose final goal is to share, convey, or exchange thoughts, feelings, and opinions (Nunan, 2003). Thus, speaking is the most helpful skill that English speaker users need to express their social, business, and academic ideas. Besides, it is a process where speakers build meaning by creating, producing, and delivering information to grasp people's understanding (Burns & Joyce, 2005). Also, speaking is a skill that deserves special attention when it is learned either as a first or a foreign language since it is a fundamental means of learning a language. Through this skill, people can achieve social and professional goals. However, learning to speak demands more merits than learning other language skills (Bygate, 1987).

Importance of Speaking in EFL learners

Since the objective of learning a language is to achieve communication, speaking has to be mastered by students (Syakur et al., 2020). Likewise, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) stated that speaking is critical because people are naturally prepared to speak before they read and write, and most of the time, humans use this skill to interact with each other. Moreover, Qureshi (2007) pointed out that “without speech, a language is reduced to a mere script” (p. 10). Those, among other arguments, demonstrate the importance of developing this ability in students and not neglecting it, even though it is a considerable challenge for both the students and the teacher.

Speaking Teaching Principles

Developing speaking skills is the starting point for preparing students to use the language communicatively. Thus, according to Akhter (2021), speaking must accomplish the following requirements. First, learners must be exposed to meaningful activities that empower a speaking production based on real contexts. Second, equal student interaction inside the classroom improves understanding among speakers and listeners. Third, students require a stable atmosphere to participate without the fear of being criticized for making mistakes, where they feel supported and motivated to speak.

Furthermore, speaking skill enables communication for the simple reason that when people talk, there is an interaction with the listener due to the need to inform others. Accordingly, a speaker becomes a listener and vice versa simultaneously because talking is not just saying words. Instead, it means to convey meaning to set up communication (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Finally, group work activities facilitate student-centered learning, providing opportunities to develop communication competence where students can work cooperatively to produce oral language by solving problems through critical thinking. Indeed, through this strategy, students can listen to opinions and arguments and negotiate (Meng, 2009).

Undoubtedly, teaching speaking is not just about producing some spoken words or isolated phrases but also means being immersed in oral production to interact with the speakers. However, EFL students are worried about making mistakes and fearing criticism, low self-esteem, anxiety, usage of the target language without a context, and a learning process based on grammar structures (Baidawi, 2016). To overcome such issues, Brown (1994) suggested the following speaking principles:

- Offer students opportunities to practice fluency and accuracy altogether.
- Allow intrinsic motivation.
- Boost the use of the language in real contexts.

- Give feedback and corrections.
- Take advantage of the dual relationship between speaking and listening skills.
- Bestow students' opportunities to start oral communication.
- Stimulate students' strategies to be involved in speaking skills.

Moreover, collaborative group and pair work enhance students' speaking achievement because it positively affects oral production when learners face anxiety, lack of self-esteem, or embarrassment (Zyoud, 2016). Indeed, Sae-Ong (2010) remarked that pair work allows students to talk freely in English, fostering a unique speaking environment. Also, team working is the cornerstone of cooperative learning and a student-centered approach that facilitate meaningful communication among learner.

Additionally, since Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) introduces authentic communication, it is vital to consider its principles to support English oral production. Hence, Richards (2006) stated some principles to achieve English-speaking production. They are the following:

- Language is a tool for social interaction, where speakers can communicate using real contexts.
- Expose learners to situations that they have already known.
- Students' mistakes are allowed because the most crucial is to use the target language.
- Bear in mind that speaking, reading, and listening are connected.
- Grammar rules have to be deduced from the context.

Speaking Components

Speaking is a complex language skill and involves EFL students working on the requirements or components to perform the oral production, which includes grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation, and fluency (Harris, 1974, as cited in Kurniati et

al., 2015). Besides the mentioned elements, Rahman and Deviyanti (2012) added accuracy as a crucial aspect to consider during the speaking performance.

Grammar.

Apsari (2018) stated that grammar is the system of rules and structures that help users organize sentences to convey a precise meaning. The structures include understanding the function of words inside sentences to join them using appropriate connectors. Thus, students can quickly and accurately transfer feelings and thoughts by grasping grammar and English structures. On the other hand, if learners do not know those rules, there will be much wordiness without sense.

Vocabulary.

Kiliç (2019) pointed out that vocabulary is the set of words learners must master to communicate and express ideas straightforwardly according to specific contexts. Therefore, there is a crucial correlation between speaking proficiency and vocabulary knowledge (Khan et al., 2018). In other words, the number of words speakers use or domain will help them express their thoughts easily without hesitation. Accordingly, learning and acquiring vocabulary is essential in learning English as a Foreign Language because knowing new English words will allow people to express themselves with less effort. Also, communication cannot be held without vocabulary, so it plays a crucial role in the interaction between speakers and listeners (Dakhi & Fitria, 2019).

Comprehension.

Comprehension of spoken language occurs when a person can initiate and respond to the speech (Kurniati et al., 2015). Accordingly, comprehension is a strong indicator of people's progress in speaking. Furthermore, since the demand for communication using the English language between non-native speakers rather than between native and non-native speakers has increased, comprehensibility has become a fundamental element of oral skills

worldwide (Howlader, 2010). Hence, this speaking component has to be enriched and accomplished in the EFL classroom.

Pronunciation.

According to Pourhosein (2012), correct pronunciation is paramount in the learners' communicative competence and increases self-esteem and confidence. Indeed, inaccurate pronunciation decreases self-confidence and increases anxiety, generating pronunciation anxiety, a feeling of uneasiness that faces students due to an undesirable self-perception about pronunciation.

Namaziandost et al. (2018) claimed that "pronunciation ... involves wider dimensions of spoken language such as speed of speech, tone, pausing patterns, intonation, and even the utilize of our complete bodies as supplementary devices for getting spoken messages across" (p. 85). In other words, pronunciation allows the production of English sound systems that must be clear for speakers and listeners to ensure communication flow among them (Pratiwi et al., 2021). Gilakjani (2011) study revealed that pronunciation comprises three suprasegmental features: stress, intonation, and rhythm.

First, "stress is the relative emphasis that may be given to certain syllables in a word, or certain words in a phrase or sentence" (Himadri, & Sharma, 2018, p 115). Thus, stress is like an accent in the syllables that will be louder for stressed than non-stressed ones. Second, in the speech of an utterance, the intonation is noticed, which can be either rising or falling in the speaker's voice. Therefore, it helps to change the function of a statement produced by the speaker, either affirmative or negative sentences, questions, or exclamations. Also, speakers can express the level of their moods, attitudes, and reactions (Wongsuriya, 2020). Finally, rhythm is the regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables and pauses (Celce-Murcia, 1994).

Fluency.

Speaking fluency is the ability to keep talking spontaneously without hesitation. Also, a fluent speaker has the opportunity to produce and receive language at an appropriate pace (Ho, 2018). Furthermore, Fillmore et al. (1979) specified that fluent English speakers mean that they can first talk lengthy without stopping a lot. Second, they will structure sentences with semantic coherency. Third, they will use the correct phrases, words, and expressions in different contexts. Finally, they will express what they are saying with elegance by using their creativity and imagination.

Accuracy.

Accuracy measures the ability to correct the usage and application of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in delivering a speech. Consequently, an accurate speaker can produce oral English with free error speech (Mart, 2012). In other words, speaking accurately means producing the target language based on its rules system (Skehan, 1996).

Speaking Difficulties

Several studies have shown that EFL students face difficulties developing speaking competence. The main factors affecting students' speaking skills are linguistic and non-linguistic (Clement & Kruidenier, 1983). In addition to those aspects, Hawa et al. (2021) attested that mother tongue use is another issue that can cause speaking barriers for EFL students.

Linguistic Factors.

According to Hanifa (2018), linguistic factors affect the EFL learners' previous knowledge because they affect their linguistic competence. Students usually struggle to generate ideas when they are asked to speak about unfamiliar topics. Consequently, it is essential to propose exciting and well-known themes for the students to achieve good speaking quality. Moreover, conceptualization, formulation, and articulation of the spoken language are involved in this factor (Levelt, 1989).

Likewise, some linguistic difficulties students have to deal with when developing their oral skills include problems with grammar structures, limitations of vocabulary, and wrong pronunciation (Foppoli, 2009). Moreover, Mahripah (2014, as cited in Leong & Ahmadi, 2017) stated that vocabulary, syntax, semantics, and phonology are some linguistic components that impact EFL students' speaking skills. In addition, all these elements can affect understanding, causing embarrassment and hesitation when students are asked to speak.

No-linguistic Factors.

Zayed and Al-Ghamdi (2019) explained that the no-linguistic or affective element significantly impacts the accomplishment or failure of learning any foreign language because it belongs to the emotions and learners' personalities. In other words, the learning process is supported if students have a positive attitude toward learning L2. Otherwise, a negative perspective becomes a barrier to the target language acquisition. Al Nakhalah (2016) considered lack of motivation, shyness, low confidence, fear of mistakes, and anxiety as part of the affective component. Furthermore, Arifin (2017) asserted that even though conversation inside the classroom is the key to achieving language skills, students prefer to avoid talking due to inhibitions towards verbal participation.

The Overuse of Mother Tongue Language

Using the mother tongue in excess in the EFL environment causes a low performance of oral English production since students, instead of trying to use the English language, often transfer their L1 to the target language. In addition, the excessive use of L1 reduces English interaction among students causing dependency on the mother tongue (Hawa et al., 2021).

Likewise, Al Hosni (2014) pointed out that it is a disadvantage for students to share the same mother tongue in the classroom because they find it easier to communicate using

their language to prevent mistakes. Indeed, the lack of exposure to the target language is another significant barrier to achieving oral communication.

Pair-work in Speaking

Pair-work is a method that allows students to increase their participation and language use. This technique can be immersed in a countless number of activities, and it can work to develop reading, writing, and speaking skills (Harmer, 2001). In this scenario, interaction becomes the most significant element for L2 learners, and interactive language activities are essential to achieving communication (Curtain & Dahlburg, 2010). Besides, L2 students must express themselves orally to achieve the target language based on the cognitive learning theory and second-language acquisition theory. Thus, while students work cooperatively, their language use increases and their language experiences become more meaningful. Therefore, teachers must provide students with opportunities that multiply interpersonal communication (Lombardi & Oblinger, 2017).

Furthermore, Jones (2007) explained that pair work enables more student interaction than individual or group work, where there are not enough opportunities for every group member's participation. Hence, it is crucial to apply pair-work activities when teaching L2 students speaking skills. That is why it is necessary to carry out a teaching-speaking procedure divided into three steps: before, during, and after. In the first step, "before," the students are divided into pairs while the teacher gives them instructions about the activity they will do. In the second step, "during," the teacher monitors the student's performance and helps them when necessary. In the last step, "after," the teacher gives the students feedback to allow them to talk about their performance (Harmer, 2001). Moreover, students have to be paired, considering their knowledge about the proposed topics so they can support each other and complete the assignment (Alfonseca et al., 2006).

Methodology

Before starting a study, deciding how to carry it out is crucial and the appropriate methodology to collect data to achieve its objectives is vital. Also, researchers must determine whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research is reasonable.

Design

This research is carried out based on a descriptive study modality which involves collecting data about the object of study to interpret and report it. This method is not just gathering and tab facts; it also includes correct and proper data analyses. Kurtz & Mayo, (2012). Furthermore, Bloomfield and Fisher (2019) pointed out that a descriptive study follows the steps needed to answer the proposed research questions. The authors mentioned that researchers become architects who have first to state the problem object of study, then set up the research questions, and finally answer critical questions, such as what are the research questions? What are the variables? Where and when will the data be collected? Moreover, what will be the setting object of the study?

This study uses the survey as the primary method of collecting data that helps researchers determine the difficulties participants face when speaking in English. As a result, survey data enabled them to answer research questions (Koh & Owen, 2000). Hellerstein (2008) argued that quantitative data are numbers collected over a specific study based on a unit of measure that will be uniform to warrant meaningfulness. Therefore, statistical methods will help organize and classify the collected data. Besides, Knoke (1982) stated that there are two kinds of quantitative data discrete and continuous. The first one follows patterns of integer numbers. Contrary, the second one includes fractions and decimals.

The present descriptive study tackles the following research questions:

1. What are students' difficulties in speaking in English?
2. What type of activities do students prefer for speaking?
3. What are students' perspectives of pair work?

Participants

The participants in this descriptive study are seventy-six students from Basica Superior who studied at a private catholic school in Gualaceo, Azuay- Ecuador. Thus, 23 participants were eighth graders, 25 ninth graders, and 28 tenth graders. In addition, there were thirty males, forty-two females, and four preferers not to say the gender, whose ages ranged from 12 to 15 years old. Regarding the language participants spoke, seventy-three students spoke Spanish, one talked in Spanish and English, and 2 spoke English. Moreover, two students are American, and seventy-four is Ecuadorian. According to the student's perspective, seventy-one students belonged to the middle class. Three belonged to the high-income, and 2 to the low-income. Also, most students had internet access from home; 98.70%. 88.20% uses smartphones, 88.20% laptops, 38.20% desktop computers, and 42.10% tablets. Regarding English proficiency, 40 participants labeled themselves as the basic level, seven as beginner, 26 as intermediate, and three as advanced. A few like English; others cannot stand the idea of expressing their ideas in a language different from their mother tongue.

Instruments

A survey was used to answer the research questions and gather students' information in the institution lab, and the link was placed on the computers in advance. This survey consisted of two parts, the demographic and the speaking perspectives. The first considered the students' age, gender, language, ethnicity, nationality, social-economic class, English proficiency level, access to technology and the internet, and the device students use to connect to the internet. The second was about the speaking perspectives, which consisted of twenty-one questions mixed between multiple-choice, open-ended, and Likert scale options. The questions were in English and in Spanish to avoid misunderstanding.

Data Analysis

To answer the proposed research questions, the data from the forms was transferred into an Excel spreadsheet to analyze and code. Then, the document was uploaded to an SPSS program to get the means from the data and displayed in tables with the corresponding description under them. Regarding the qualitative analysis, four open questions were formulated to know students' perspectives on English learning background, why learners cannot speak English outside classes, drawbacks/benefits of working in pairs, and other challenges and limitations students have to speak in English.

To analyze the qualitative data, the investigators used the grounded theory (GT) approach, which gives the foundation to collect, synthesize, research, and conceptualize data for theory construction based on grouping the compiled information using the open coding step (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, this descriptive study formulated five categories or codes: English learning background, struggles in Speaking, English activities, English Speaking activities, and Students' perspectives toward pair work. Then, using the axial code, which sets up the relationship between categories, the five categories mentioned earlier give rise to the last category: Factors that interfere with the correct speaking skill development.

Ethical Considerations

Ravid (2019) highlighted some ethical considerations that researchers must contemplate when planning a study to protect participants' rights. In this scenario, researchers must inform participants about the survey and guarantee their confidentiality. Likewise, parents or legal guardians must provide consent for minors. Moreover, if the study is carried out in a school, the researcher must have permission from the supervisors.

The researcher asked for permission from the institution to conduct this research. Also, since students are under 18, their parents were informed and consented to apply the surveys. Furthermore, students' identities stayed anonymous. In addition, the researchers explained to the participants the study's objective to obtain reliable answers.

Results

After gathering the data through the survey applied to the students, the results were analyzed to answer the proposed research question. Thus, this section reports the students' difficulties in speaking in English, the speaking activities that students used to do, and the student's point of view about pair work for speaking activities. Finally, each research question is studied, and the quantitative data are presented in tables with the means, the corresponding description, and the quantitative data as follows.

Regarding the question about the students' speaking English difficulties, the answers were collected in a Liker scale format with five different responses, which were coded as *Great extent* (5), *A lot* (4), *Some* (3), *A little bit* (2), and *None* (1).

Table 1.

Difficulties in Speaking.

When you speak in English, you...	Mean
feel confident about the topic	3.55
know what to say	2.87
respond quickly	2.67
look for words to respond correctly	3.50
translate everything you want to say	3.47
your pronunciation is clear	2.75
your speech is free of errors	2.76
say phrases	3.29
can interact in a conversation	2.55

feel embarrassed about making mistakes	3.00
understand what the other person is saying	3.05
speak without many pauses	2.84
speak spontaneously	2.53
consider that you speak correctly	2.58
have a good intonation of questions	2.86
have a good intonation of sentences	3.03
have a good pronunciation	2.88
use word stress	2.64
use sentence stress	2.76

Based on the results, students feel confident about the topic worked on during English classes (3.55), becoming a strength because the interesting topics engage students. However, learners looked for words to answer correctly (3.50). Also, they translate everything they want to say (3.47) by using phrases (3.29) which limits them from interacting or exchanging ideas (2.55) and speaking spontaneously (2.53). Besides, when they talk in English, they feel embarrassed about making mistakes (3.00).

The open-ended questions revealed that 70% of participants started learning English in first grade. Contrary, 30% started studying English in eighth grade. Likewise, results reported that writing and speaking are the two most difficult skills students cannot master, and they are primarily in trouble with pronunciation and vocabulary knowledge. Students mentioned, *"I do not know the meaning of the word."* *"English becomes difficult because I do not understand the meaning of the words, and I am not clear about how to pronounce them in*

English." Another student said, *"When I tried to talk in English, I could not express my ideas. I understood what others said, but I could not reply."*

Regarding the students' English usage, the results illustrated that most learners did not speak English outside the classroom because they did not need to talk in English due to the Spanish environment around them. One student said, *"I do not speak English outside since I do not have anyone to talk to, and it is difficult for me."* Another student wrote, *"I do not have opportunities to speak English outside the classroom because my friends only speak Spanish."* In the same way, they did not have someone who spoke to them, and if someone talked in English, they could not interact due to the limited vocabulary they managed. Also, they did not like to speak English as a student reported, *"I am not too fond of the language, so I do not practice it. Also, I do not need it."* On the other side, 17 students could interact in English outside the classroom. One student mentioned, *"I speak English with my brother and some friends in the United States."* Another participant claimed, *"I practice English by talking with my grandparents."*

To address the second research question, "What type of activities have students had in classes?" the participants filled in two Likert scales. One described the English activities that students did during classes to practice English, whose information is displayed in Table 2 according to the standard *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 collected data about speaking activities done in class with the scale *I do not like (1), I would like (2), No (3), and Yes (4)*, presented 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.	2	14	5	55
Write the correct answers to questions to practice grammar.	7	17	3	49
Practice specific vocabulary in writing activity or topic from the book.	5	12	7	52
Practice specific vocabulary of an activity or topic from the book orally.	8	18	7	43
Oral practice with the vocabulary of personal interest.	11	21	14	30
Written practice with the vocabulary of personal interest.	9	12	18	37
Oral pair work activity in the classroom.	0	23	8	45
Pair work in writing activities in the classroom.	0	19	4	53
Pair work in general outside the classroom.	10	17	39	10

Table 2 displays the results of English activities in class. According to the participants, they primarily practice filling the space with correct grammar. Additionally, students used specific vocabulary in writing activity or topic from the book, exercised specific vocabulary orally of a task or theme from the book, and wrote the correct answers to questions to practice grammar. Also, they participated in pair work writing activities in the classroom. However, most of them were not part of pair work outside class.

Table 3.

Speaking activities.

In English class, have you...	Mean
created a short speech?	2.82
made an oral presentation?	2.67
participated in a forum	2.97
commented on a general topic?	3.21
created dialogues to practice with peers?	3.34
written dialogue with ideas from the book?	3.46
practiced a dialogue about free ideas?	3.01
listened to your peer's recording?	3.20
recorded audios?	3.16
provided feedback on your peers' oral participation?	2.86
self-assessed your oral participation?	3.00

used rubrics to provide feedback?	2.93
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Apropos speaking activities Table 3 crops out that students wrote dialogues with ideas from the book (3.46), created discussions to practice with peers (3.34), and commented on a general topic (3.21). Students also practiced speaking through conversations based on free ideas (3.41), which implies that learners interact to enhance their speaking.

To answer the final research question, “What are students’ perspectives of pair work?” the researchers used a Likert scale whose codes were *Totally agreed (5)*, *Agree (4)*, *Neutral (3)*, *Disagree (2)*, *Totally disagree (1)*, which results are in Table 4:

Table 4.

Students’ perspectives toward pair work.

Item	Mean
Pair work helps practice speaking	4.04
Pair work for speaking is difficult because the students who know more dominate the conversation	3.22
It is advisable, although some pairs speak slowly	3.86
It is advisable, although some couples do not pronounce it correctly	3.78
The pair makes constant interruptions	2.82
It takes too much time	3.30
It is good if I work with a partner I choose	3.63

Table 4 shows the students' perspectives concerning pair work as a means to practice speaking. With an excellent average (4.04), the mentioned technique is highly beneficial to exercising the oral English skill even though duos speak slowly (3.86) or pronounce incorrectly (3.78). However, notwithstanding the mentioned pair work strength, students considered that working in pairs would be better if they had the chance to choose their team (3.63).

On the contrary, learners mentioned that pair work activities were time-consuming (3.30) since the pair made constant interruptions (2.82), and it became tough because the pair member who has an outstanding English level led the conversation (3.22).

Concerning the open-ended questions, respondents emphasized that pair work activities have weaknesses. Namely, some students revealed, "*Sometimes my partners do not help or cooperate, so I have to do everything alone.*" Other learners stated, "*When I work in pairs, I am easily distracted. Also, I talk with my partner in Spanish all the time. Everything makes me laugh, and I do not take anything seriously.*" Another participant said, "*Sometimes my partners do not understand or are nervous and do not speak or cannot speak English.*" Withal, one respondent expressed nervousness, lack of self-esteem, and lack of chances to exchange ideas. He said, "*I do not have opportunities to speak in the classroom because the same people always participate and do not give me a chance to speak. Also, I get embarrassed a lot, and my hands sweat.*" Likewise, another student describes that "*My partner knows more, which bothers me since I would like to have the same level to be able to dialogue.*" Equally important is what another learner revealed: "*I do not know how to start a conversation, given I know few words and do not understand what they say, so I cannot answer.*"

On the contrary, some learners mentioned that pair work activities provided some strengths. Some students agreed and said, "*It feels comfortable to work with someone who*

understands my English level, and we both support each other." Another respondent said, *"Thanks to my partner, I can understand the themes better."* Furthermore, a learner said, *"Some partners know a little more and help us with words that we do not understand or cannot pronounce."*

Discussion

The findings of this descriptive study assert learners' difficulties with oral English language skills, which are linguistic and non-linguistic components. The former relates to faulty pronunciation, lack of vocabulary, and the translation of everything learners want to say. In contrast, the latter refers to anxiety and the embarrassment of making mistakes. Baidawi (2016) deemed that the problems mentioned before result from learning context based on the grammar approach, which does not allow communicative competence.

The result also described that the learners had issues with listening because they could not understand and interact or exchange ideas with their peers. To overcome those problems, Richards (2006) suggested the development of fluency along with accuracy. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) advised that speaking depends on listening because there is a synergy between both skills. There is not any communication without one of them. Besides, participants expressed that they are in trouble with their limited vocabulary, which does not enable them to interact with their peers which according to Dakhi and Fitria (2019), a lack of vocabulary knowledge limits the interaction flow between the listener and speaker. Another factor that students attribute to poor speaking is that they do not have good pronunciation, so they feel anxious about it creating pronunciation anxiety, a feeling that they perceive due to a lousy self-perception of their pronunciation (Pourhosein, 2012).

Regarding the speaking activities, frequently, learners prefer to work in pairs to do written activities from the book. They practice grammar structures through fill-in exercises and write correct answers to the questions. Instead, Richards (2006) advised that these tasks

do not allow real oral communication among learners, so the author suggested holding English practice based on the CLT principles. For instance, information gap activities, role plays, jigsaw activities, puzzles, map-readings, information gathering activities, opinion-sharing activities, information-transfer activities, and reasoning-gap activities. In addition, findings mentioned that students created dialogues based on free ideas to discuss with their peers to make comments, listen to their peers' recordings, self-assess their oral production, and receive feedback. Akhter (2021) revealed that a secure atmosphere for oral production is the cornerstone to supporting learners to overcome the fears of making mistakes by listening to proper feedback.

The results of the students' perspective toward pair work showed that learners considered it a valuable strategy because they feel comfortable talking with their peers where they are not worried about being criticized or making mistakes. In addition, Curtain and Dahlburg (2010) stated that pair work engages learners with the given activities becoming active participants and keeping them focused and motivated in their speaking English tasks. Thus, students become the center of the process where they can interact freely. Nonetheless, the students mentioned that in pair work activities, in some cases, peers talk in Spanish most of the time and translate the instruction into Spanish.

Withal, the students who know more about English do not allow equal speaking participation, and some of them are not responsible and do not contribute to the task. Therefore, respondents mentioned that working with a peer chosen by them is better. However, Alfonseca et al. (2006) suggested that it is better to pair students according to the tasks or exercises, considering their knowledge about the topics, which helps a better production and development of the scholarly activities.

Conclusion

It is plausible to mention that speaking is essential because it facilitates communication. Also, there is no speaking without listening, so those two skills have a reciprocal relationship. Accordingly, this descriptive study deals with EFL students' difficulties with English oral production. The findings provide insights into the main factors that affect the development of speaking skills related to linguistic components, such as lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation, and translation of everything they want to say. The other feature is the non-linguistic, namely anxiety, faulty self-esteem, and fear of being criticized for their wrong pronunciation.

The outcomes prove that most of the activities that learners do are from the book about grammar, writing, and speaking, where they have to fill in the gaps and repeat the audio, which does not enable learners to communicate. A positive point is the pair work activity, which the students demand because it provides opportunities to exchange and share ideas without the fear of being criticized by their peers. However, despite the benefit, students express that during pair work activities, some use their mother tongue and translate everything they want to say, which is evidence of poor vocabulary acquisition.

Limitations

The study presented some obstacles. First, due to the participants being students between twelve and fifteen, their parents had to authorize that students participate in the survey. Unfortunately, it was impossible to meet face-to-face with parents. Therefore, researchers sent the consent letter fifteen days before collecting through WhatsApp groups from the different classes to get the respective authorization. However, they did not confirm it on time. Therefore, researchers postponed the meeting to collect data. Second, despite a previous meeting to explain the content survey, some students did not understand. Thus, at the time of answering it, they got confused.

Recommendations

This research offers essential insight for further studies and investigators. First, it is worth mentioning that a face-to-face meeting with the parents is advisable and gives them the consent letter directly to get their authorization. Alternatively, if the institution has a computer lab, parents can meet there and answer the consent letter by filling it out through Google Forms. Also, it is recommendable to divide the groups into small ones to give them clear instructions to avoid misunderstanding. Moreover, setting up a schedule helps explain and get information from the students and authorization from the parents.

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