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

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Abstract

Speaking is one of the ways to express ideas, feeling, experiences and knowledge to other people in a formal or informal situation. Lacking the ability to communicate orally, people cannot succeed in school or society, so the main purpose of language learning is to develop speaking proficiency. This descriptive study was applied in a high school in Loja city. The research instrument applied to collect information was a survey. The results, media, and frequency were analyzed in a program called SPSS. The findings indicated that students face different difficulties when speaking English. Students only have a limited vocabulary of English terms. In addition, students have trouble pronouncing certain words since they listen and practice during English class, and they lose track of what they have learned at home because they do not apply it. Another common problem or difficulty in teaching speaking is class management; students have limited time to practice speaking. This descriptive study can be helpful for EFL teachers who want to help their students to overcome the oral obstacles mentioned in this study.

Keywords: speaking skill, speaking difficulties, pair work technique.

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Resumen

Hablar es una de las formas de expresar ideas, sentimientos, experiencias y conocimientos a otras personas en una situación formal o informal. Sin la capacidad de comunicarse oralmente, las personas no pueden tener éxito en la escuela o la sociedad, y por lo tanto el objetivo principal del aprendizaje de idiomas es desarrollar la capacidad de hablar. Este estudio descriptivo se aplicó en un colegio de la ciudad de Loja, el instrumento fue una encuesta en Google Forms. Los resultados, media y frecuencia fueron analizados en un programa llamado SPSS.   Este estudio determinó que los estudiantes tienen dificultades para hablar inglés porque la mayoría de estudiantes cree que hablar inglés es realmente un reto. Los estudiantes tienen un vocabulario limitado de términos ingleses. Además, los estudiantes tienen problemas para pronunciar ciertas palabras, ya que sólo escuchan y practican durante la clase de inglés, y pierden la noción de lo que han aprendido en casa porque no lo aplican. Otro problema o dificultad común en la enseñanza de la destreza oral es la gestión de la clase ya que los alumnos tienen poco tiempo para practicar dicha destreza. Este estudio descriptivo puede ser útil para los profesores de EFL que quieran ayudar a sus alumnos a superar los obstáculos orales mencionados en este estudio.

Palabras clave: destreza oral, dificultades para hablar, técnica de trabajo en parejas.

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

Speaking is one of the essential abilities for English language learners to master since it allows them to engage with others and incorporates a wide variety of skills (Buitrago & Contreras, 2008; Parmawati & Inayah, 2019). Türkben (2019) defined speaking as "a process that starts with designing in the brain and ending with expressing thoughts through articulation" (p.1012). Likewise, Harmer (2007) expressed his viewpoint on speaking, stating that successful spoken communication requires mastery of linguistic elements and the ability to process information. Therefore, speaking is a productive oral skill that " produces systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning" (Nunan, 2003).

Rao (2019) claimed that speaking is the active use of language to express meaning, and for young learners, the spoken language is the medium through which a new language is encountered, understood, practiced and learned. Therefore, rather than oral skills being simply one aspect of language learning, the spoken form in the young learner's classroom is the prime source of language learning. However, speaking can present significant challenges to effective foreign language learning and communication.

Several studies showed the challenges that impede EFL students from developing their speaking skills. For instance, Coutinho et al. (2022) stated that EFL students do not have enough opportunities to practice their speaking skills because they lack meaningful and authentic activities. Furthermore, Ur (1995) mentioned that EFL students usually make mistakes related to verbal tenses, vocabulary, and grammar. Consequently, speaking in English in the classroom makes students feel uncomfortable and frustrated since they fear being ridiculed or criticized by their classmates for making mistakes in speaking English (Aziz, 2019).

According to Escudero et al. (2020), in Ecuador, EFL students face many challenges when speaking in English in the classroom; for example, the limited spaces to use the language in authentic contexts, the low motivation to learn the target language, and the anxiety and shyness that students experiment when practicing the language. Besides, teachers do not often use authentic materials and pronunciation activities to develop students' communicative competence, making them feel anxious and not allowing them to increase their productive skills (Acosta & Cajas, 2018).

Being speaking one of the most important components of communication; it is an essential factor in the teaching-learning process that requires special attention and instruction. Brown (2007) claimed that using meaningful and authentic resources during the teaching and learning process increases the students' willingness, interest, and motivation to practice the target language. For that reason, it is essential to motivate students to improve their speaking skills by applying oral activities such as songs, rhymes, role-plays, and project-based learning tasks to enable students to have more fun and enjoy learning in the classroom (Bakar et al., 2019; Ikhsanudin et al., 20019).

The present qualitative and quantitative descriptive study focuses on the difficulties that EFL students face in a public high school of Loja. To find the students' perceptions of the difficulties when speaking in English, surveys were applied as a research instrument.

Literature Review

This section gives a brief overview of theory and fundamental concepts found in literature about speaking and its components to lead to a better understanding of the variables in

this study. Furthermore, a description of speaking skills, teaching principles to teach speaking, and speaking components are addressed in this section.

Speaking

Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Brown, 2007; Gupta, 2019). With the information provided, learners can interact in conversations on familiar topics to describe events, their goals, experiences, and ambitions. In Ecuador, the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, 2016) mandated that the exit profile of Ecuadorian high school students include situations involving the ability to speak in authentic scenarios.

Speaking Teaching Principles

The formation of speaking skills is the ultimate goal of teaching a foreign language (Anatolyevna, 2021). Therefore, teachers must focus on different principles and methodologies involving students in active and authentic communication. Nguyen (2015) claimed that language teachers need to follow these principles: choose materials that advocate students' attention and motivation to practice the language, use interactive and meaningful speaking skills in the classroom, and create a friendly environment in the classroom to make students feel comfortable and relaxed to interact with their peers.

Furthermore, teachers should apply the Communicative Language Teaching approach as a method and theoretical orientation to link classroom-based language learning with the language the learners need to allow the students to speak outside the classroom (Nunan, 2003). Consequently, the teachers should be able to build classroom activities in which students must

convey meaning, practice communication strategies, correct mistakes, and work to avoid communication interruption**.**

Speaking components

To convey the message efficiently and positively influence students' quality and quantity of production, they need to acquire some speaking components (Nasri et al., 2019). As Brown (2007) proposed, those aspects are pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and accuracy.

Fluency

Richards (2009) said that natural language use occurs when a speaker maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence. This statement could be connected with fluency, which is speaking a language with speed, accuracy, and proper expression without undue pausing or hesitation (Nasri et al., 2019).

According to Tavakoli et al. (2020), fluency has different characteristics to consider when teaching languages. These aspects are related to articulation rate, speech rate, mean length of run successfully performance, and frequency of pauses and utterances that students make when speaking the target language. Hence, Ellis (2009) considered that fluency might be a rapid, smooth, accurate, lucid, and efficient translation of thought or communicative intention into language under the temporal constraints of online processing.

Accuracy

Accuracy suggests "the extent to which the language produced conforms to target language norms" (Yuan & Ellis, 2003, p.2). It involves the appropriate pronunciation,

vocabulary, and grammar to be correct or precise when speaking a language. It should not be forgotten that accuracy and fluency are not contradictory because they affect each other. Using reflecting on their language use, learners develop their oral accuracy (Krause & Murray, 2019; Willis & Willis, 1996). For instance, transcribing one's speech enhances learners' correct use of spoken language (Burns et al., 1997) and helps students achieve higher accuracy rates in terms of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (Lynch, 2007, p.311).

Phonology

Lass (1984) manifested that phonology is a sub-discipline concerned with the sound of a specific language. It is defined as the scientific study of how speech sounds and dialects of a particular language are organized (Bailey & Thomas, 2021; Odden, 2005). More narrowly, phonology proper is concerned with the function, behaviour, and organization of sounds as linguistic items, which is a somewhat more neutral study of sounds themselves as phenomena in the physical world and the physiological, anatomical, neurological, and physiological properties of the human beings that make them (Lass, 1984).

According to Kawahara (2020), studying sounds and symbolic patterns is essential in teaching languages because it provides various benefits for learners to develop their speaking skills and interactions in the classroom. However, Al-Rubaat and Alshammari (2020) claimed that studying the sounds of a language is not easy since EFL students face some issues, such as mispronunciation of words, initial consonant cluster, final consonant cluster, unfamiliar sound words, and voiced or voiceless phonemes.

Pronunciation

Pourhosein (2016) asserted that pronunciation is the production of English sounds, and it is the production of a sound system which does not interfere with communication either from the speakers' or the listeners' viewpoint (Paulston & Burder, 1976). Besides, pronunciation is the way of uttering a word in an accepted manner and producing certain sounds (Otlowski, 1998, Richard & Schmidt, 2002).

According to Pourhosein (2016), pronunciation is the production of sounds used to make meaning. Therefore, pronunciation is learnt by repeating sounds and correcting them when produced inaccurately. When learners start learning pronunciation, they make new habits and overcome the difficulties resulting from the first language. Ketabi and Saeb (2005) manifested that the rules for pronunciation stress and teaching word stress are strategies that improve students' speaking. For this reason, teachers should focus on the rules and word stress; making students aware of stress and intonation is necessary for improving pronunciation (Yangklang, 2013).

Pair Work

Dagarin (2004) stated that pair work is a strategy to organize students in ways that will maximize learning opportunities and improve classroom interaction. Furthermore, Lightbown and Spada (2021) claimed that pair work means that students collaborate with their pairs to

accomplish tasks and reach their aim. Hence, in an interactive environment, students can advance to a higher level of knowledge and performance than they would be capable of independently.

Working in pairs encourages students to have meaningful interactions and increases their interest and motivation to learn a language. This view is echoed by Spada and Lightbown (1999) when they stated that "positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning" (p. 56). Thus, adding pair work is a successful method that could result in language learning success because it aids in raising students' interest in speaking tasks.

Research Methodology

Design

This research work was set up as a descriptive study. Loeb et al. (2017) claimed that descriptive studies allow educational authorities and teachers to solve problems within their institutions by describing a phenomenon and analyzing the gathered data. To obtain data, qualitative and quantitative research instruments were applied. Stockermer et al. (2019) said that the quantitative data is based on numerous probability and statistical theories, with rigorous proofs and support from both simulated and empirical data. On the other hand, the qualitative data was used to analyze in-depth the insight of participants' perceptions of an educational problem.

A descriptive study was conducted to investigate EFL students' difficulties related to speaking skills to night-grade EGB students at public schools. To answer the research questions established for this study, surveys were employed. This form of research was more comprehensive and frequently involved collecting data from multiple sources to understand

individual participants better, including their ideas, perspectives, and attitudes (Mogea, 2021). In this study, the following research questions were established:

    1. What are students' difficulties to speak in English?

    2. What type of activities do students prefer for speaking?

    3. What are students' perspectives on pair work?

Participants

Fifty students from a public school in Loja contributed to the present study. The sample consisted of 36 males and 14 females; their ages ranged from 13 to 14. Participants were students from different grades of night grade EGB. Regarding their socioeconomic class, they identified themselves as having low socioeconomic status. Besides, Spanish all the participants speak Spanish as their native language.

   Concerning their English proficiency, the students found themselves at an elementary, low-intermediate, and intermediate English level. Previously to applying the survey, at the beginning of the academic year, authorities and teachers of the institution provided information that most students do not have access to the internet at home. Most students use laptops and cell phones to surf the web and other applications to connect to virtual classes.

Instruments

A survey (Appendix 1) was designed to gather data online using Google Forms. This survey attempted to answer the three research questions. The survey consisted of two main sections divided into open-ended questions, multiple-choice questions, and a Likert scale. The first section was targeted at obtaining participants' demographic information, and the second

section consisted of both open-ended and multiple-choice questions. The first section aimed to gather data about students' internet access, English learning background, and speaking difficulties. The result of *Cronbach's alpha* was 0.85 which means that the research instrument was reliable for the study.

Data Analysis

The information collected from the survey was analyzed to understand concepts, opinions or experiences and to gather a deep understanding of a research problem. The document was exported to the SPSS program to get descriptive statics. All the results were displayed in tables with the means of the participants' answers. Besides, the resuts were supported with the obtained results from the open questions of the survey.

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly followed some ethical standards established by Kara (2018). Thus, confidentiality, anonymity, and pseudonyms were considered when conducting this research. Furthermore, consent letters were sent to the principal of the school (Appendix 2) and parents (Appendix 3), asking permission for their kids to participate in the research. Finally, the students voluntarily participated in this study and had the right to withdraw if they did not want to continue being part of it.

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Results

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This section focuses on describing and analyzing the obtained results from the survey. The main results were gathered and displayed in tables according to the research questions of this study.

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Q1: What are students' difficulties in speaking in English?

To answer this question, students had to check the items, and a Likert scale was used to tabulate the outcomes. The scale was greatly extended (5), a lot (4), some (3), a little bit (2), and none (1). The following table summarizes the primary outcomes of this question.

Table 1.
Difficulties in Speaking

	Mean
I feel confident about the topic	2.55
I know what to say	2.80
I respond quickly	2.84
I look for words to respond correctly	3.41
I translate what I want to say	3.65
My pronunciation is clear	2.68
My speech is free of errors	2.52
I can interact in a conversation	2.90
I feel embarrassed about making mistakes	3.80
I understand what the other person is saying	2.75
I speak without many pauses	2.98
I speak spontaneously	2.78
I consider I speak correctly	2.92
I have a good intonation of questions	2.96
I have a good intonation in sentences	2.86
I have a good pronunciation	2.66
I use the word stress	2.60
I use sentence stress	2.68
I feel the topics are interesting	3.75

According to the results, students have different issues when they speak in English. One of the main difficulties is that most students feel uncomfortable speaking English because they *feel embarrassed about making mistakes* (3.80). Likewise, they *worry about using correct words and expressions before speaking* (3.41). Another problem to consider is that the participants *translate everything they want to say* (3.65). Moreover, students consider that *topics must be interesting to participate in the dialogues* (3.75).

On the other hand, in the opened- ended questions, most of the student's expressed problems with communicative skills, fluency, grammar and vocabulary. For instance, student 35 indicated that *I get confused with some words because I do not know the meaning, and it is not easy to express what I want to say*. Students 2, 10, and 11 mentioned they *feel embarrassed when speaking in English because their pronunciation is not good*. Students 20 and 22 claimed *the lack of opportunities to practice English* made them not improve their speaking skills. Similarly, student 13 indicated that *we just practice English in the classroom; outside, we use Spanish.* Student 10 manifested that *we only practice speaking skills in class; the problem is that we have limited vocabulary and do not practice the language daily.*

Students 13 and 25 indicated that it is challenging to answer fast without translation in their minds because they do not *know what to say.* Similarly, student 34 expressed that *all teachers focus only on grammar, which is why I think about grammatical structures before speaking and get confused.*

Q2: What type of activities do students prefer for speaking?

This a aimed at recognizing students' typical activities in their English classes. Responders had to select how often they applied each activity. The options were: *Yes(4), I would like (3), I do not like it (2), No (1)*

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Table 2.

English Speaking Activities in the Classroom

Item	I do not like this activity	I have not done this activity	I would like to do this activity	I have done this activity
Create dialogues to practice with peers	5	15	30	0
Written a dialogue from ideas from the book	1	5	8	36
Practiced a dialogue about free ideas	26	12	12	0
Listen to my peers' recordings	28	16	5	1
Record audios	1	4	2	43
I have provided feedback on my peers' oral participation	20	21	8	1
Self-assess my oral participation	30	15	5	0
Used rubrics to provide feedback	25	14	11	0
Pair work in general outside the classroom	1	3	4	42

The average of the main results in this table indicated that 43 participants *had recorded audio,* and 36 students *had written dialogue from ideas from the book.* Likewise, 30 students said they *would like to create dialogues with their peers.* Similarly, 42 students asserted that they *have worked in pairs in general outside the classroom.*

It was found that students do not like activities related to providing feedback to their peers or self-assess their oral participation in the classroom. Thirty students indicated they *do not like self-assessing their oral participation, and 25 do not like using rubrics to provide feedback.* Similarly, 26 students *do not listen to their peers' recordings,* and 20 participants *do not like providing feedback to their peers.*

Q3: What are students' perspectives of pair work?

This question focused on analyzing the students' perceptions of pair work in speaking English. To answer this statement, students had to select among these scales: Totally agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), and disagree (1). The answers are presented below:

Table 3.
Students' perspectives towards pair work for speaking

Item	Mean
Pair-work is useful for practicing speaking	4.9
Pair work for speaking is difficult because the student who knows more dominates the conversation.	4.5
It is advisable, although some pairs speak slowly	3.92
It is advisable, although some pairs do not pronounce correctly	3.56
The pair makes constant interruptions.	3.1
It takes too much time.	2.9
It is good if I work with the pair I choose.	3.1

As shown in Table 3, most students agreed that *pair work is a helpful strategy for practicing speaking in class*; the average score was 3.75. They believed pair-work is appropriate even though partners speak slowly and are sometimes mistaken (3.57). Moreover, they indicated that *if they select their peers, they can feel comfortable speaking without fearing mistakes* (3.30). Additionally, almost all the participants (4.5) asserted that *students who dominate the language have many opportunities to practice the English language.*

According to the opened ended questions, participants distinguish some advantages and disadvantages of pair work. Students 11, 12 and 20 mentioned they could not *speak English because of their low self-confidence when speaking in the classroom.* However, they *feel more confident talking to a peer instead of the teacher.* Students 21, 33, and 45 said they *could learn from each other by correcting mistakes and providing feedback*; student 21 wrote that *I feel embarrassed speaking English because of the lack of confidence and English vocabulary.*

In summary, results demonstrate that students reported different difficulties when speaking. One of the biggest problems is the fear of mistakes, mispronunciation, lack of fluency, limited vocabulary, and little knowledge of grammar rules. The speaking activities students usually use in class include pair work, dialogues, oral presentations, the practice of vocabulary, and rubrics to provide feedback. Pair-work activities are essential for all students; consequently, students point out that speaking activities in groups are indispensable to the consolidation of oral communication.

Discussion

In this section, the results are compared and contrasted according to previous studies related to this research. As mentioned before, speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information and requires mastery of linguistic elements and the ability to process information efficiently (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007). Furthermore, Rao (2019) manifested that speaking can present significant challenges to effective foreign language learning and communication. The results from this study indicated that even though students have performed different speaking activities in the classroom, they have faced many challenges when speaking in English.

Learners reported that they had faced many challenges when speaking English in EFL; besides, they experienced embarrassment and fear of making mistakes and being judged by their peers when speaking in English. Similarly, they claimed that they do not have enough opportunities to practice their speaking skills because of the limited spaces to use the language in authentic contexts, the lack of meaningful and authentic activities, and speaking in English in the classroom make students feel uncomfortable and frustrated, and the low motivation that students have to learn English (Aziz, 2019; Coutinho et al., 2022; Escudero et al., 2020; Ur, 1995).

This study obtained the same results since the participants explained the mentioned factors as challenges they face when speaking English in the classroom. Apart from these factors, the students claimed that speaking spontaneously is very hard since they tend to translate what they want to say from Spanish to English. Besides, they indicated that the lack of vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and expressions makes them feel disappointed when trying to speak in English.

The main components of speaking English are pronunciation, fluency, and accuracy (Richards, 2009). In this study, the participants indicated that they have experienced activities that allowed them to increase their pronunciation awareness, and they have no experience with activities that increase accuracy and fluency because almost all the activities are grammar-based related. Besides, the students are conscious that speaking is one of the essential skills to develop to convey the message efficiently. Consequently, connecting these components when teaching EFL classrooms is essential in language learning (Krause & Murray, 2019; Nasri et al., 2019; Richard & Schmidt, 2002).

In terms of students' perception when speaking in English in the classroom, the results revealed that the participants had experienced a few speaking activities, mainly grammar-based

and pronunciation activities. Students mostly wrote dialogues from the book, and they recorded audio. However, they indicated that they do not like providing feedback to their peers and self-assessing their own recordings. That is why it is suggested and imperative that teachers apply authentic and meaningful activities such as songs, rhymes, role-plays, and project-based learning tasks to increase students' motivation and willingness to improve their speaking skills (Bakar et al., 2019; Ikhsanudin et al., 20019).

All the participants perceived pair work as a meaningful strategy to increase their speaking skills. According to them, working with their classmates make them feel more comfortable and relaxed to practice the language. Besides, they indicated that working in pairs increases their knowledge by sharing ideas, negotiating meaning, and learning from their peers. Therefore, teachers must be aware of frequently applying pair work strategies and meaningful activities to involve students in active and real communication (Anatolyevna, 2021; Nguyen, 2015). Finally, based on the results, students approved to work with peers to support oral communication in English. It means that pair work represents an opportunity to learn from others and gives them a sense of confidence working with a partner who shares the same interest and expectations.

Conclusion

Speaking skill becomes a real challenge for EFL students; it requires a lot of practice, time, and dedication to develop. Diverse problems in speaking have been presented in this research. First, students feel nervous when they speak in English because they do not know how to communicate efficiently. Therefore, they translate and organize their ideas and structures in their minds before speaking and cannot answer spontaneously. Second, the obstacles that limit their communicative skills are related to pronunciation, grammar, and limited vocabulary. These

factors make students feel frustrated and discouraged to continue learning the language. Third, the lack of opportunities to speak English inside and outside the classroom is a significant problem in Ecuador since it makes students feel like they do not need English for their daily lives.

It is important to emphasize that applying activities that are grammar-based related are not enough to build oral communication for students. The EFL teachers must be aware of using authentic and meaningful activities that encourage students to involve in speaking tasks where they can interact with their peers. The students must also consider the importance of speaking components and sociolinguistic competence to develop their communication skills.

Finally, pair work activities are suitable, and EFL students in the learning process positively perceive it. The participants can practice grammar and vocabulary with some interruptions faced due to misunderstanding, pronunciation, or fluency. Furthermore, pair work activities help learners to use the language and to decrease their anxiety when performing these types of activities with their classmates.

Limitations

This study had some drawbacks, which are essential to mention. Firstly, the obtained results are not unreliable because some students did not answer some questions, and others answered them with no accurate information. Second, when carrying out the study, there were issues related to internet access; most students live in rural areas where the connection is weak, which was a significant problem for this study. Finally, surveys were conducted online; therefore, instructions could not be given clearly.

Recommendations

A recommendation for future studies is to use different instruments to collect data, such as rubrics, observation techniques, or personal interviews. Furthermore, it would be interesting to apply this research with more students in order to make the generalizability of results happens. Finally, applying this study and survey in on-site classrooms is recommended to obtain more reliable data from students.

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PERSPECTIVES OF EFL STUDENTS` DIFFICULTIES IN SPEAKING

Appendix 1

Survey: Perspectives about Speaking in English

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Consent Letter from School

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Consent Letter from Parents

PERSPECTIVES OF EFL STUDENTS` DIFFICULTIES IN SPEAKING

Available upon request.