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Self-Assessment of Students' Role Play to Improve Speaking Skills

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Nowadays, English is considered one of the global languages in the modern world. It has become an international and communicational language for business, science, technology, and travel. In the field of education, English is an important subject in public and private schools, and mastering it can help students have study opportunities abroad, increase their career opportunities, get a job in international companies, have a good salary, or meet people worldwide (Ministerio de Educación de Ecuador, 2016). As a result, most countries include English classes as part of their school syllabi, and students start them as soon as they turn six years old.

In the case of Ecuador, the government designed an English curriculum in public schools for students in Educación General Básica (2nd to 10th) and Bachillerato General Unificado (1st to 3rd). This curriculum aims to support the policy of developing citizens that can effectively communicate in today's globalized world (Ministerio de Educación de Ecuador, 2016). In other words, the main objective of this Ecuadorian English curriculum is to encourage learners to communicate and learn this foreign language. However, it is a reality that even though the government implemented this new curriculum to reach the B1 level of English proficiency in classrooms, the standards have not been accomplished yet (Paucar, 2016). According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), "Ecuador continues to have a low level of English language proficiency" (Education First, 2022 p.1).

There are several reasons that account for this situation. First, teaching grammar and vocabulary is still prioritized in Ecuador and old-fashioned teaching methods similar to those of the beginning of the last century are still used. That is to say, the instruction remains traditional. Likewise, when students speak English, they become nervous and worried about making mistakes. Since most of them feel embarrassed when they make mistakes in front of other people, they try to limit their English use. In fact, Taiqin (1995) found that ninety-five

percent of students expressed that they had difficulty speaking because they were afraid of making errors in class. One method to decrease this fear is using role plays which can help learners improve their confidence and perception of communicating. Richard (2006) stated that role playing is a fundamental key to enhancing communicative skills in English learners. It lets students to use English in a safe environment where mistakes are not a big issue. Also, it is essential to incorporate an innovate teaching method, and the self-assessment technique is proposed. The technique helps develop speaking and leads students toward autonomy. Researches suggested that self-assessment is a strategy that facilitates the teaching and learning of language. (Marzuki et al, 2020). Jonsson and Svingby (2007) argued that "the advantages of using a checklist in self-assessment due to the increased consistency of judgment when learners assess themselves in authentic tasks" (p.1).

Consequently, the main purpose of this action research is to help learners become independent and confident during speaking tasks; therefore, the teacher will apply the self-assessment technique through a checklist to analyze its impact on the speaking performance of A1 English students during role plays. For this purpose, two research questions are posed:

1. What effect does the self-assessment technique have on students' speaking skills?

2. What are students' perspectives about the use of self-assessment on their speaking skills?

Literature Review

This section explores what self-assessment is within the educational field. Specifically, definitions for the terms of speaking, self-assessment, and role play are provided. Also, the advantages and disadvantages of the speaking skill and self-assessment technique are discussed.

Speaking

When you learn English as a foreign language, it is very important to master the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking; however, the speaking skill is one of the most important since the main objective for learning any language is for communicative purposes. According to Kusnierek (2015), "speaking is the most important competence that a person should dominate when learning a new language" (p. 74). Penny Ur (1996) remarked that

> (…) of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as "speakers" of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign languages learners are primarily interested in learning to speak (p. 120).

Considering the views of Kusnierek (2015) and Penny Ur (1996), this research has as a main goal to develop speaking skills in students when learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Since speaking is a key part in language learning, it is important to find out an appropriate method which encourages learners to talk in English, and for this purpose, some experts identify self-assessment as a good strategy for improving oral skills in EFL students.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is the ability of individual students to judge their own performance and make decisions about themselves and their abilities. In fact, Blatchford (1997) saw "self-

assessment as a process involving judgments of one's own attainment in relation to other children" (p. 2). According to Brown and Dove (1993), students use higher levels of reflection through self-assessment since they develop a questioning and self-analytic approach to their professional practice and engage in deep rather than surface learning. Similarly, Gardner (2000) acknowledged that successful self-assessment breeds confidence which in turn enhances motivation, and Oscarsson (1989) added that the motivational effect of self- assessment in terms of goal orientation influences classroom activities to the direction which best serves students' communicative goals. Also, Zimmerman (1990) argued that learners' use of self-regulated learning strategies such as self-assessment reported high self-efficacy and intrinsic task interests in term of motivational process.

Likewise, McMillan and Hearn (2008) recognized that self-assessment has beneficial impact on students' motivation to learn. In other words, students can maintain their confidence and motivation to address the learning activities.

Advantages of applying self-assessment

The application of the self-assessment technique can bring several benefits to the classroom. To begin, Underhill (1987) maintained that self-assessment and speaking skills are related since the former can be considered as a general type of oral test. Likewise, Ellis and Sinclair (1989) argued that students should be enabled to monitor their own spoken language for problems and disfluencies as they will need to do so in real-life situations when they no longer have a teacher to rely on, so practicing self-assessment can prepare students for those future situations. In addition, students feel confidence in domaining their own learning, develop the value of responsibility, eliminate fear about the teacher being the only who judges their work, and finally they can improve their cognitive level (Jamrus & Razali, 2019). In other words, they develop autonomy. In addition, Oskarsson (2009) argued that learners get the opportunity to think and take charge their own learning.

Further, Nikolovska (2015) argued that some benefits of self-assessment include reflective skills, critical thinking, becoming aware of learning objectives and how to achieve them, raising students' responsibility for learning.

Disadvantages of self-assessment

Although self-assessment has its benefits, drawbacks are identified. First, Heilenman (1990) recognized that "one factor which may affect the process of self-assessment is the level of proficiency of students" (p. 176). The incorrect learners' perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses could affect the results of any self-assessment. For example, less proficient learners tend to overvalue their language abilities, and more proficient learners tend to undervalue their skills. Consequently, Gurbanov (2016) argued that self-assessment can produce negative results.

Another study emphasized that "self-assessment is not a popular strategy used in educational institutions: 1) students feel that assessment is the responsibility of teachers, 2) teachers are not yet ready to trust student's judgment and, 3) students lack the sufficient assessment skills" (Lee, 2016, as cited in Thawabieh, 2017, p.15).

Role play

To improve students' speaking skills, teachers need to implement engaging techniques in class. One of them is role playing. Budden (2006) defined role playing as an English-speaking activity in which you put yourself or someone else in an imaginary situation. In other words, role play engages students in situations which facilitate speaking skills. Also, Gusmuliana et al. (2021) argued that role play provided a great source of motivation in which students become more confident and active in speaking English. So, role play has contributed to motivation and confidence in improving EFL students' speaking skill.

Innovation

The proposal for this innovation consisted of using the technique of self-assessment through which learners examined their performance on speaking skills. Thus, students were guided to listen to and analyze their own oral output as well as consider actions for improvement. This procedure took place as a regular learning unit (one of the four units required in the school year 2022-2023) and lasted 4 weeks. The selected teaching modality was face to face.

The course unit was planned using a backward design, and students received 12 hours of instruction in total (See appendix A). In other words, students had 3 hours of English lessons weekly based on their school schedule. With regards to the backward design, the first and final task of the course unit involved interaction activities to identify if self-assessment provided the desired results in the learning process. The researcher determined the evidence for those results through the checklist of self-assessment. In addition, the researcher provided students with authentic materials and activities to practice speaking abilities and help them reach the goals of the unit. These activities were classified into acquisition, transfer and meaning making so that students can acquire the required vocabulary and grammar to develop the activities of the unit. To support these activities, slides, games, videos, and other technological resources were used. Also, the Gradual Release of Responsibilities to help the students to get autonomy in class was applied. This model required the teacher to move from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task to situations which students assume all of the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211)

Finally, the unit had four lessons. Each lesson had vocabulary such as action verbs, sports, and adverbs of frequency, and students practiced structures required for the final task about the simple present tense. Also, training on how to self-assess took place. The students had a pretest pair activity in which they asked and answered questions about their free time

activities and used the strategy of self-assessment through a checklist (See appendix B). This activity was recorded. Further, they received feedback from the teacher who used a rubric (See appendix C). During the lessons of the unit, the students had the opportunity to practice vocabulary and grammar structures and presented short dialogues that they self-assessed. At the end of the unit, in the post-test, the learners presented a dialogue and prepared a role play in which two students interacted asking and answering questions about their free time activities and favorite sports.

Research Methodology

The present study adopted an action research approach which collected qualitative and quantitative data to determine the effects of self-assessment on speaking skills and to find out students' perspectives on the technique in an attempt to discover a sustainable solution that other teachers may apply to enhance speaking abilities. According to Creswell and Guetterman (2019),

> "action research is a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding or a topic or issue. At a general level, research consists of three steps: 1) Pose a question 2) Collect data to answer the question, and 3) Present and answer to the question" (p. 3).

Altricher et al. (2005) recognized that "action research is intended to support teachers and groups of teachers in coping with the challenges and problems of practice and carrying through innovations in a reflective way" (p. 4). This means that action research allows teachers to reflect on data to better understand how effectively a method or strategy help students learn.

Participants

The participants of this action research were 34 high-school students enrolled in the tenth year in a public school. The school offers elementary, middle, and high-school

programs and is located in a rural area of the city of Cuenca, Ecuador. The group of participants was composed of 20 girls and 14 boys whose ages ranged from 14 to 15 years old. As to the participants' actual level of proficiency, diagnostic evaluations based on the evaluation criteria presented in the National Curriculum Guide were applied, and the results showed that the participants were at the A1 level of English proficiency. It is worth highlighting that there was one participant with special needs, so class adaptations in terms of materials were necessary; that is to say, her adaptation did not include changes in neither class objectives nor skills. Specifically, the teacher had to use flashcards to motivate the student to work. Finally, a relevant aspect to mention is that most of the participants did not have additional EFL instruction outside school.

Instruments

In order to examine the effect of self-assessment on the speaking skill and students' perspectives about the use of self-assessment, the instruments used to collect the data were the following:

Pretest and Posttest

To answer the first research question about the effect of the self-assessment technique on speaking skills, a pretest and a posttest task were designed. In the pretest and posttest, students worked in pairs and role played based on three questions about free time activities provided by the researcher. While role-playing, the students recorded themselves.

The oral performance in the pretest and posttest was self-assessed by the participants through a checklist (See appendix B). The checklist is "a list of items created to allow the assessor and student to verify each item has been presented" (Ulker, 2017, p. 135). Because of the English proficiency level of the students, they worked with an English-Spanish version of the checklist. This tool encompassed the main abilities that students should achieve at the end of each speaking activity, and it had three levels of grading criteria, i.e., "yes",

"sometimes", and "not yet" which were equivalent to 1, 0.5, and 0 points, respectively. The self-assessment checklist aimed to evaluate vocabulary and grammar (words related to the target language, the simple present tense in statements and questions and answers), pronunciation (intelligible pronunciation), and interaction (responding questions on their own without extra support). This checklist was adapted from a Cambridge rubric to assess speaking at the A1 level. Then, it was revised by a professor expert in the area to make necessary adjustments to the tool. As a result, the fulfillment of the premise of validation was ensured.

In addition, it was necessary to examine students' self-assessment accuracy, so the scores of the checklist were compared with the scores assigned by a capable agent, i.e., the class teacher (Brown & Hudson, 1998). The teacher assessed students using a general rubric taken from Celce-Murcia et al. (1996). This rubric included the components of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, and after obtaining the teacher's assessment results, they were compared to the scores obtained by the students. It was seen that they were similar. However, for statistical purposes, only the scores assigned by the students were used.

Interview

To answer the second research question about the students' perspectives on the use of the self-assessment technique on speaking skills, a semi-structured interview was carried out. An individual face-to-face interview was conducted by the researcher. According to Ryan et al. (2009), "one-to-one interviews are the most commonly used data collection tools in qualitative research" (p. 313). The group of interviewees was composed of three participants, two boys and one girl. The participants were selected based on the principle of purposive sampling; thus, one student with a high score, one with an average score, and one with a low score were chosen for the interview. After that, the interviewees were asked with three open-ended questions about their views on the application of self-assessment and what progresses

they perceived in their speaking. This interview was done in Spanish because of the English proficiency level of students (See appendix D) and recorded for later analyses and interpretation.

Data Analysis

To answer the first research question about the effect of the self-assessment technique on speaking skills, a quantitative analysis of data was conducted on the scores of the pretest and posttest. First, descriptive statistics like the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation were calculated. Then, to identify whether there was a significant difference between the scores of the pretest and posttest, a paired-sample *t*-test was run. Then, the results were analyzed under the light of the *p-value* ($<.05$). These statistical calculations required the use of Microsoft Excel and its Analytic Tools Pack.

DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) stated that "the technical aspect of how interviews are recorded for documentation and later analysis is something that researchers must decide in advance, and it includes videotape, recording and note-taking, transcribing tape-recorded interviews into text, and using computer-assisted software" (p. 318). Hence, to answer the second research question about the students' perceptions on the use of the self-assessment technique on speaking skills, the interviewer used the method of transcribing tape-recorded interviews into text and then translating them into English to report findings.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, all the participants as well as their parents were informed about the purposes of the innovation, and the appropriate approval of the school's principal (see appendix E) to apply the project in the school was requested. According to Burns (1999), it is vital that participants know about the purpose, procedures, and how the research will be used as well as assurances of anonymity, voluntary participation and withdrawal from the research without penalty. As a result, a consent form (see appendix F) including those pieces of

information was written up. Then, because the 34 participants were minors, their parents were

asked to sign the consent form to grant permission for their children to be part of this action

research. All these permissions were requested through written documents in order to keep

evidence about the freedom they had to choose to participate, decline, or even withdraw

during the study.

Results

Research question 1: what effect does the self-assessment technique have on students' speaking skills?

Table 1 shows the results obtained from the pretest and posttest after applying the

innovation project. It is seen that the implementation of this project had a positive impact.

The minimum score was 2.78 in the pretest and 5.0 in the posttest, and the maximum score

was 9.44 points in the pretest and 10.0 in the post-test. Based on those data, there was an

improvement in the speaking skill of the participants in the posttest compared to the pretest.

Following this, the applied t-test resulted in a p-value less than .05 which means that the

improvement obtained was significant. In conclusion, the quantitative results showed that the

students had a statistically significant improvement in their speaking skills after the

application of self-assessment.

Table 1.
Pretest and Posttest Comparison

Test	N	Min	Max	M	SD	Sig.
Pretest	34	2.78	9.44	6.46	1.70	.00
Posttest	34	5.00	10.00	8.20	1.55	

Note: N= Sample. Min= Minimum. Max= Maximum. M= Mean. SD= Standard Deviation.

Research question 2: what are students' perspectives about the use of self-assessment on their speaking skills?

The conducted interview was composed of three open-ended questions about students' perceptions regarding self-assessment on the speaking skills. After the interview, the participants' answers were translated into English. The findings are reported next.

Interview Question 1: Describe how you felt about self-assessment after each task

Based on the interview data, it is noticed that the participants had not had any experience with self-assessment strategy, so they felt unsure about it. However, they became confident about self-assessing their oral work through practice and aware of the importance of reflecting on their speaking performance. The comments made by the interviewees support these findings.

Interviewee 1: "In my first activity, I felt nervous because I was not sure what I was doing. At the end, I felt more comfortable using self-assessment because I could practice more. It was great because I could reflect about what I needed to improve".

Interviewee 2: "I felt a little confused because in any class we evaluated ourselves. It was the first time I did this kind of activity. After many practices, I felt confident about my answers since I could understand the importance of reflection about our strengths and weaknesses".

Interviewee 3: At first, I was afraid of making mistakes giving my answers then after practices I felt sure with my answers since I could notice it with my speaking improvement.

Interview Question 2: Do you consider self-assessment helped you improve your speaking for the next task?

It is seen that all the participants agree that the use of self-assessment helped them reflect about their own speaking skills, and they could realize that their errors allowed them to have better results at the end of each speaking activity when correcting them. Also, they took the activity seriously after each speaking practice because they recognized the importance of identifying strengths and weaknesses in their learning process.

Interviewee 1: "After many practices using self-assessment, I could notice my mistakes in speaking and I could improve them. Also, the guide of my teacher in the process helped me notice my strengths and weaknesses, and I could be better in the last speaking activity".

Interviewee 2: "In my first activity, I was not completely honest because I only looked for a good result. Then I could realize that if I did not take responsibility of my mistakes, I would not improve. Also, my teacher helped me take into consideration that mistakes are part of learning".

Interviewee 3: "I think that self-assessment was very useful for understanding my mistakes".

Interview Question 3: Did you notice any difference between the first and the last activity after the self-assessment technique?

Overall, the participants agree that there was a difference between the first and the last oral activity. They notice improvement in their speaking skills since they pronounced words better, and their dialogues were more organized and structured.

Interviewee 1: "In the first activity, I was not sure, and I had a bad pronunciation; however, I felt happy with my pronunciation in my last activity".

Interviewee 2: "In my first activity, I only could say short phrases or words, but in the last activity I could include more sentences. My answer improved a lot".

Interviewee 3: "I felt unsure with my answers and pronunciation in the first activity, but I could realize my improvement due to my teacher's observations and I felt happy and motivated"

Discussion

Concerning the first research question about the effect of self-assessment on students' speaking skills, the present action research obtained positive results. The results are similar to

Marzuki et al. (2020) and Harris (1997) who stated that self-assessment is one significant strategy that allows students to know, discover, and develop their speaking skills. Similarly, Oskarsson (2009) maintained that learner autonomy entails ability to reflect on and understand their own learning through self-assessment. Apparently, when students self-reflect, they notice their faulty areas in speaking and then amend their errors. Also, self-assessment gives learners autonomy in their learning process and become engaged in experimenting with language. It seems that the strategy of self-assessment helps students polish their speaking skills as seen in the mean score of the posttest compared to the pretest. To this, Zimmerman (1990) emphasized that learners' use of self-regulated learning strategies such as self-assessment has been found to play a significant role in their academic achievement.

For the second research question about students' perspectives on the use of self-assessment on speaking skills, the findings of this study show that when self-assessment is applied, students raise awareness of their strengths and weaknesses reflecting on their own performance. In addition, by taking part in their own assessment, learners become active and motivated to continue doing self-assessment. These findings are consistent with Nikolovska (2015) who argued that some other benefits of self-assessment include reflective skills, critical thinking and raising learner's motivation for learning. Further, McMillan and Hearn (2008) recognized that self-perceptions developed by self-assessment can increase motivation for learning. In other word, the technique of self-assessment makes students become critical thinkers about their own learning process. However, at the beginning, students are more interested in scoring high rather than improving their oral skills, but with the teacher's guide and exposure to self-assessment, learners leave their idea of perfect grades behind and focus on correcting their errors for the sake of learning. All in all, they become motivated to learn.

Conclusions

The purpose of this innovation was to determine to what extent self-assessment could improve students' speaking skills. Based on the results, it can be concluded that using self-assessment gave the students the opportunity to reflect on their performance, and they were capable of noticing and correcting their errors to later enhance their level of preparation in completing oral tasks to obtain better results.

Furthermore, students had active participation in their learning process since they reflected on their own performance. They could be conscious of their strengths and weaknesses in each activity, so they took a significant role in their academic achievement. The scores for the pretest and posttest demonstrate that students increased their speaking skill at the end of the unit after the use of self-assessment.

During the implementation of self-assessment, the students expanded their self-confidence when speaking. Learners increased their persistence on difficult tasks as well as their confidence and responsibility. They took the control of necessary actions and corrective measures to have better results in their next speaking activities. Also, the use of real student speaking examples as well use of flashcards and other materials helped them feel sure to develop their speaking skills. According to the student's opinions, self-assessment helped them to increase their confidence to develop their speaking skills. They took initiative and responsibility for their own learning, and found this learning meaningful. As a result, they could identify those areas of speaking that needed to be improved and step-by-step they could reinforce their speech to talk about their free time activities with greater accuracy.

Limitations

The limitations encountered during the innovation's implementation were the place, the time, and initial attitudes. The only place that students practiced the language was in class. They did not practice the learned vocabulary, grammar or content outside of the classroom, so this aspect did not help the students to remember important information or

retain vocabulary in order to perform the oral activities. In addition, students only had three synchronic classes per week. This period of time was insufficient for the self-assessment technique to be extensively used since both the activities associated with this innovation and those needed by the school had to be completed at the same time. Lastly, at the beginning of the application of self-assessment, the students only wanted to get good grades. They were unconcerned about what they needed to do better. Perhaps, it was because they had never used this kind of strategy, and they did not have a clear idea about its function, so training time in the technique was needed.

Regarding research limitations, the size of participants, the research design, and the applicability of these results represented some problems. First, they were only 34 participants for the quantitative part and three for the qualitative part which represent a small sample. Second, there was only one treatment group and not a control group. As a result, the self-assessment strategy was not compared to other teaching strategy; however, considering this is action research, the absent of a control group did not negatively impact on this study. Put differently, the aim of this innovation was to find a possible solution to a problem of a particular class and not of a universe which would require a study adopting control-group design. Finally, the findings of this report cannot be generalized to contexts other than the one of this study.

Recommendations

It is suggested that teachers encourage students to study, practice, and reinforce the learned content through strategies and methods that students are not used to like self-assessment. These innovative strategies help students understand and find a purpose for learning so that language learning can become meaningful for them. Further, teachers should create more opportunities in class to practice speaking using simulations, group work, or pair work to decrease the level of anxiety that students demonstrated at the beginning of the

innovation. Teachers should explain to the students the importance of self-assessment and the benefits of this strategy for developing the speaking skills. Put differently, students need to feel comfortable and comprehend that even if they have low results at the beginning of the innovation, they will get more advances to overcome their weaknesses and enhance both their grades and knowledge.

For upcoming analysis, it is endorsed that teachers should examine various educational levels in the future to see which ones work better for implementing this innovation. Also, it is suggested that groups under study be varied in age and number. Moreover, this strategy can be analyzed by adopting an experimental or quasi-experimental approach. Lastly, it is proposed that teachers and researchers use this technique with other language skills to find out what effects it has.

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Appendix A

Model Unit Instructional Design for a Unit (Backwards Design)

Available upon request.

Appendix B

Checklist

Available upon request.

Appendix C

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix D

Interview Model

Available upon request.

Appendix E

Authorization for students

Available upon request.

Appendix F

Authorization for authorities

Available upon request.

Appendix G

E-portfolio

Available upon request.