



Perspectives of A1 Students' Difficulties in Pronunciation

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Abstract

Among the four primary skills to acquire in studying a foreign language, speaking represents a significant challenge for most English learners whose mother tongue is Spanish since its phonology differs significantly from their language. This research aims to describe some of the difficulties that EFL learners face in English pronunciation, which do not allow them to develop speaking skills. This research is a descriptive study, and the instrument applied is a survey. The participants of this investigation were registered at the introductory level, aiming to achieve the A1 level. Findings show that participants are aware of the importance of speaking skills. In addition, most of them agree that pair work in the classroom is of great help for them to develop speaking skills. Moreover, most learners agree that the more they practice in class, the more likely they will use English outside it and vice versa. This study has practical implications in the EFL classroom since teachers can be aware of the roots of the pronunciation problems, and even the students would be able to identify the obstacles to get over.

Keywords: Pronunciation, Speaking, phonology, EFL.

Resumen

Entre las cuatro destrezas principales a adquirir en el estudio de un idioma extranjero, la producción oral representa un gran desafío para la mayoría de los estudiantes de inglés ya que su fonología difiere mucho de la española, su idioma natal. El objetivo de esta investigación es describir algunas de las dificultades que los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera enfrentan en la pronunciación de este idioma los cuales no les permiten desarrollar la destreza oral. Este trabajo es un estudio descriptivo y el instrumento aplicado es una encuesta. Los participantes de esta investigación son estudiantes quienes toman clases de inglés registrados en el nivel principiante, teniendo como objetivo alcanzar el nivel A1. Los resultados muestran que los participantes están conscientes de la importancia de desarrollar las habilidades comunicativas orales. Adicionalmente, la mayoría piensa que la interacción en parejas es un buen tipo de actividad para desarrollar sus habilidades orales. Adicionalmente, los participantes están de acuerdo que mientras más participan en clase, más probable es que utilicen el idioma fuera de ella. Este estudio tiene implicaciones prácticas en las aulas de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera dado que los profesores pueden tomar conciencia de las raíces de los problemas de pronunciación, e incluso los estudiantes serían capaces de identificar los obstáculos a superar.

Palabras clave: pronunciación, habilidad del habla, fonología, EFL.

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It is undeniable that language makes possible the cohesion of society at all levels, allowing the development of this latter as an enterprise. Hargie (2016, p. 22) pointed out that "successful companies have skilled managers who communicate well with people at all levels." This is an example of the very foundation of success. Hence, speaking multiple languages is required to interact and connect within this globalized world (Ministerio de Educación, 2016).

The lingua franca allows all speakers from different cultures to get connected (Marlina, 2018). Additionally, when it comes to learning a foreign language, a part of the communication process starts with listening and understanding what the interlocutor says. If what he/she says is unclear, this could bring about problems with intelligibility (Çakır & Baytar, 2014). Furthermore, Pourhosein and Sabouri N (2016) remarked that "understandable pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence" (p. 5).

According to some researchers, speaking is the most challenging skill. For example, Al Hosni (2014, p. 22) pointed out, "Speaking is considered the main language skill that students should improve" since students face problems such as linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use, and inhibition.

Furthermore, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) added that inhibition, lack of motivation, low participation, and excess L1 use in the classroom are common problems in EFL students. These problems do not allow them to develop their linguistic skills. Also, many students fear making mistakes in front of their teachers and classmates, a common educational challenge (Ur, 1996).

In like manner and based on personal experience, students avoid participation in discussions or dialogues. This behavior reflects their lack of confidence to express themselves in the target language. Another difficulty on stage that teachers face while teaching speaking is the lack of motivation. This fact could unchain various consequences on students' performance in developing linguistic skills (Tohidi & Jabbari, 2012).

When students are not frequently immersed in the target language or, even worse, live in a country where English is not the primary language, they have almost zero chances to practice their skills. Therefore, they have zero chances to boost those they have already acquired. Likewise, there is always the strong presence of the learners' mother tongue, which often wrongly shapes the sentence structure and vocabulary they use in English.

Literature Review

This section will discuss the speaking skill issue since it is the main objective of the research. Additionally, some conceptions of the speaking components, like speaking skill, pronunciation, and anxiety, will be explored. Furthermore, some aspects like pronunciation and phonology will be approached.

Speaking Skill

Defining speaking skill is quite nuanced due to their complexity. Thornbury and Slade (2006) highlighted that the reason for its complexity is because of its ubiquity in our daily language use (p. 5). Similarly, Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) pointed out that this productive skill is essential since the learners are judged the most from this point of view in actual life.

Pronunciation

According to the Merriam-Webster (2023) online dictionary, pronunciation is the act or manner of pronouncing something, and the verb "pronounce" means to employ the organs of speech to produce. One reason for pronunciation errors is the lack of mastery in using our speech organs. How you pronounce words is an essential factor in effective communication. It can create difficulties in understanding if not done correctly (Çakır & Baytar, 2014) when the context of the speech is ambiguous (think/sink - best/vest). The pronunciation of every language has its particularities which give them their identity, and it is necessary to master the correct production of their sounds to develop proper communication. Pourhosein and Sabouri (2016) stated

that “in today’s world, it is not only necessary to comprehend what other speakers utter, but it is also important to make one’s speech understandable for the others” (p. 196).

Spanish Speakers

The fact that Spanish and English have different roots states that they have essential disparities in several aspects. One of these differences is the syllable structure. According to Roca and Johnson (1999), the nucleus of the English syllable may fall on a consonant, whereas in Spanish, this is not possible; besides, final consonant clusters in Spanish are not as common as in English; and finally, there is an almost direct correspondence in Spanish between spelling and sound whereas in English one grapheme may have different pronunciations and some are not even pronounced.

This statement may explain one of the main reasons for the mispronunciations Spanish speakers who learn English fall into. The features analyzed previously are considered this study's most essential and main points.

The noticeable phonological differences between Spanish and English are reflected in their many consonant and vowel sounds that do not exist in Spanish and the position of these sounds in words, which also differ in both languages. For example, in Spanish, five vowel sounds match their corresponding letter. That is one single sound for every single letter. This is different in English; there is more than one way to pronounce the vowel sounds, and they do not always match the corresponding letter. For instance, the letter “**a**” in the following words: **sand**, **car**, and **face**, have different pronunciations.

The dominant theoretical perspective attributes accents to deficient L2 perception arising from a transfer of L1 phonology, which is thought to influence L2 perception and production (Kartushina & Frauenfelder, 2014). Furthermore, people from specific locations like coastal regions may experience a presence of negative phonetic transfer in English pronunciation, produced by the influence of its Spanish dialect variant (Miranda, 2020).

This negative transfer is a “natural phenomenon within the learning of a foreign language, and its appearance was generated mainly by two factors: the influence of the mother tongue (Spanish) and the lack of conceptual and linguistic foundations” (Miranda, 2020, p. 121).

Anxiety

Psychology defined anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system” (Spielberger, 1983, in Horwitz, 2001, p. 113). Therefore, the learner’s feelings and emotions are inevitable in language learning (Örmeci, 2013). Among affective variables, foreign language anxiety has been recognized as the most crucial factor influencing L2 learning success. Many studies have been conducted to explore it since the 1970s. One of the latest studies on this exposes the effects of anxiety on English learning. “The findings demonstrated that the more students experienced anxiety, the harder they made responsible decisions or vice versa. When people feel anxious or out of control in a stressful time, it is indispensable to minimize anxiety” (Demir & Zaimoğlu, 2021, pp. 18-32).

Shyness

Shyness may be a significant issue in language learning. Five reaction-provoking situations are distinctively associated with shyness: Interactions with authorities, one-to-one confrontations with the opposite gender, conversations with unidentified individuals, being focused by other persons in a small group, and situations in which a person is being evaluated (Henderson & Zimbardo, 1998). All these situations are every day in a day-to-day school setting, and English language learning is not an exception.

Research Methodology

In human research, a descriptive study can provide information about a particular

group's naturally occurring health status, behavior, attitudes, or other characteristics. The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (2001) provided a definition of the term as the process of gathering and presenting information or events in a visual form that is organized, illustrated, and tabulated; and is a protagonist in the scholarly investigation. This study collects and depicts information from experts and research findings. In addition, it surveys participants and portrays their situations in terms of the answers they provide.

Quantitative Data.- According to Goertzen (2017), quantitative data is all information “that is structured and can be represented numerically” (p. 12). Goertzen added that it is possible “to build accurate and reliable measurements that allow for statistical analysis” in quantitative data” (p. 12). Since quantitative research focuses on data that can be measured, it is very effective at answering the “what” or “how” such as “How many?”, “How often?” or “How much?”; that is why it is suitable for statistical analysis.

For this reason, in this descriptive study work, an analysis of quantitative data will be implemented to explore the problems that EFL learners face regarding pronunciation subskill. The following research questions will be analyzed in this study:

1. What are students' difficulties in speaking English?
2. What type of activities have students had in their English classes?

Participants

The participants of this descriptive study are students at a private English teaching institution registered in the *Introductory Course* and *Preparation Course* of English classes. They are, on average, 25 years old, 23 men and 41 women. They are considered *mestizos* with a medium education level, with middle economic status, and whose mother tongue is Spanish. The sample is 65 students selected because they are current students of the researcher.

Instruments

A survey was elaborated using a google forms format to gather data from students

via online. This survey comprised two segments providing multiple-choice and Likert scale options. The first segment contained background aspects such as age, socioeconomic status, gender, course, nationality, mother tongue, English proficiency level, internet access, and device type for internet connection. The second segment focused on addressing the research questions of this inquiry. The survey consists of a total of twenty-one questions, eleven of which are related to personal information. The remaining ten questions are focused on the main topic of the survey, with seven of those questions related to English-speaking difficulties and three focused on students' perspectives on pair work. By analyzing the responses to these ten questions, valuable insights can be gained into students' English challenges and their perspectives on pair work activities. The questions were demanded in English with Spanish translation over and above to impede students' confusion.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed to get the percentage. A survey was applied to students to find out their opinion on pronunciation difficulties. The results of this survey were analyzed using the SPSS program.

Ethical Considerations

According to Banegas and Villacañas-de-Castro (2015), “a variety of ethical issues must be considered. Many of these involve negotiating the relationships between people involved in a given study”. These authors list the following ethical issues: “collaboration, young learners, power, confidentiality, anonymity, authorship and ownership, representation and voice, benefits, and sustainability” (p. 60)

The application of the instruments in this document and the research within it, in general, was authorized by the pertinent authorities of the institution previously mentioned. The participants were informed of the process by mail, guaranteeing absolute confidentiality and requiring academic honesty. All these considerations fall into the issues of collaboration, power, confidentiality, and voice listed by the above-cited authors.

Results

Section 1: Students' Difficulties in Speaking English

To address the research question of "What are students' difficulties in speaking English?" the survey asked students about their experiences with different types of speaking activities in their English classes and their self-perceived strengths and weaknesses in speaking English. Analysis of the data revealed several key findings:

- Many students reported feeling nervous or anxious when speaking English in class or outside of class, which may be a barrier to developing their speaking skills.
- Pronunciation is the most challenging aspect of speaking English.
- Students who reported more frequent opportunities to practice speaking in class tended to rate their speaking abilities more highly.

These findings suggest that students may benefit from increased support and opportunities to practice speaking English, particularly pronunciation. Teachers may also need to be aware of the impact of anxiety on students' speaking performance and may need to provide additional support to help students overcome these barriers.

Section 2: Classroom Activities and Instructional Strategies

To address the research question "What type of activities have students had in their English classes?" the survey asked students to describe the types of activities they had done in their English classes. Analysis of the data revealed several key findings:

- Speaking activities were the most common type of activity reported by students.
- Pair and group work were the most common instructional strategies reported by students.
- Students who reported more frequent opportunities for pair work tended to rate their speaking abilities more highly.

These findings suggest that speaking activities and pair work may be effective instructional strategies for promoting English speaking skills among students. Teachers may need to balance different types of activities in their classes and incorporate opportunities for pair work and group work to help students develop their speaking

abilities.

The answers to these questions are clear and analyzed in Figures 1 and 1.1. Most students who said they spoke English outside classes also mentioned that they spoke during classes. On the other hand, students who affirmed speaking English inside the classroom mentioned that they do not speak English outside the class. This confirms the importance of speaking inside the classroom and its relationship with speaking outside the classroom.

Figure 1

Do you speak English outside your classes?

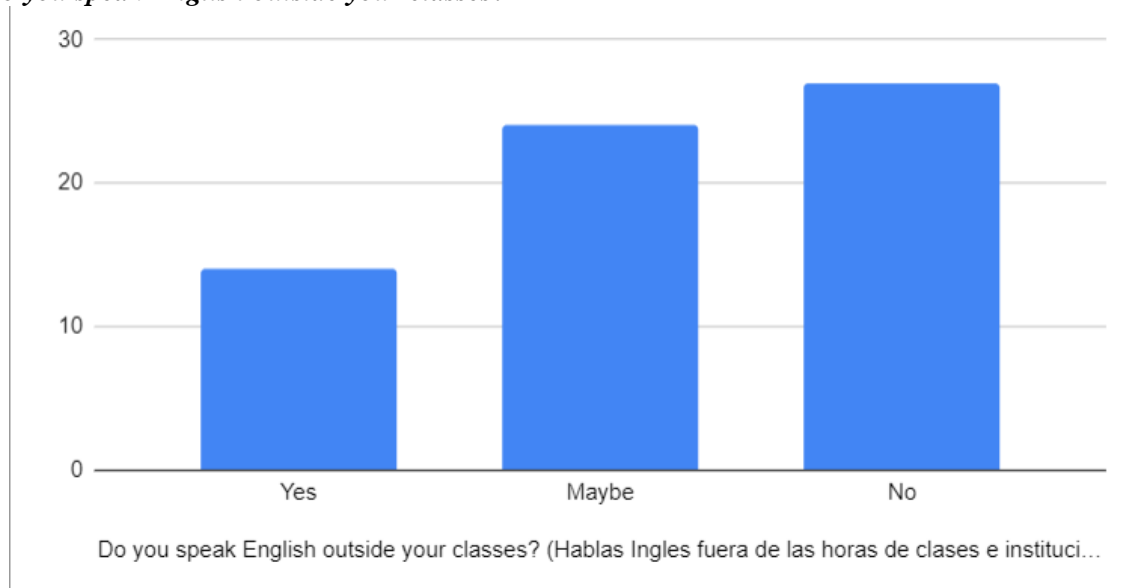
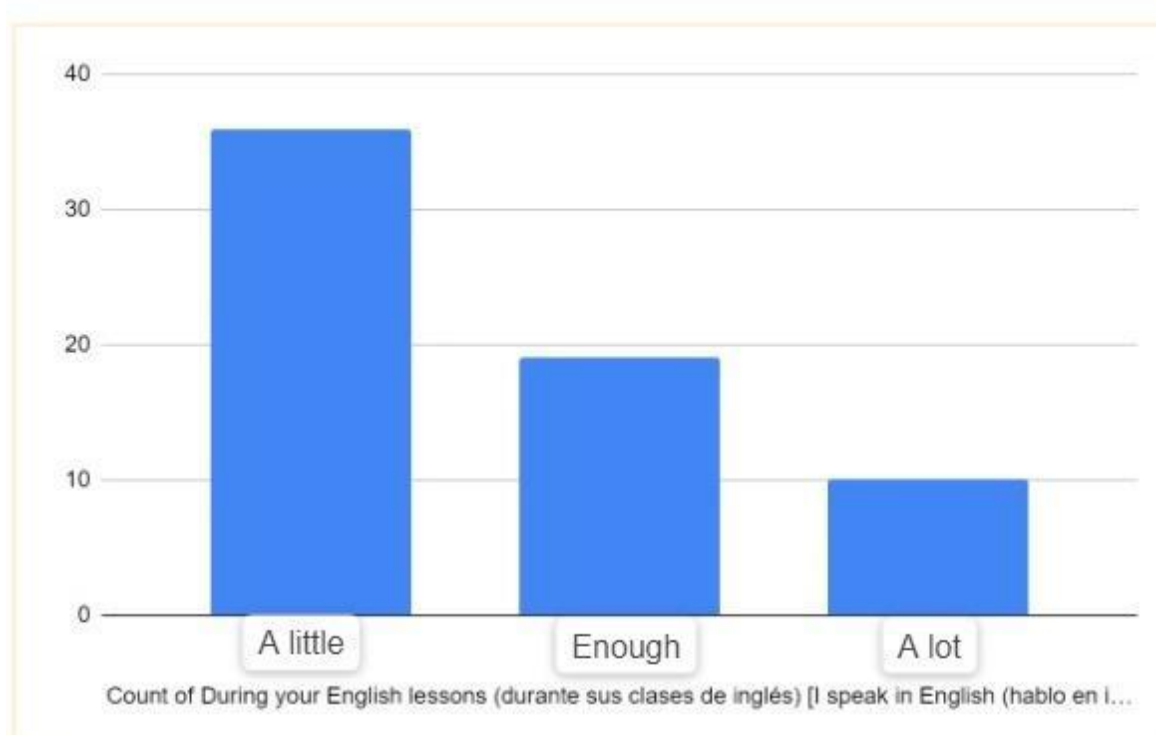


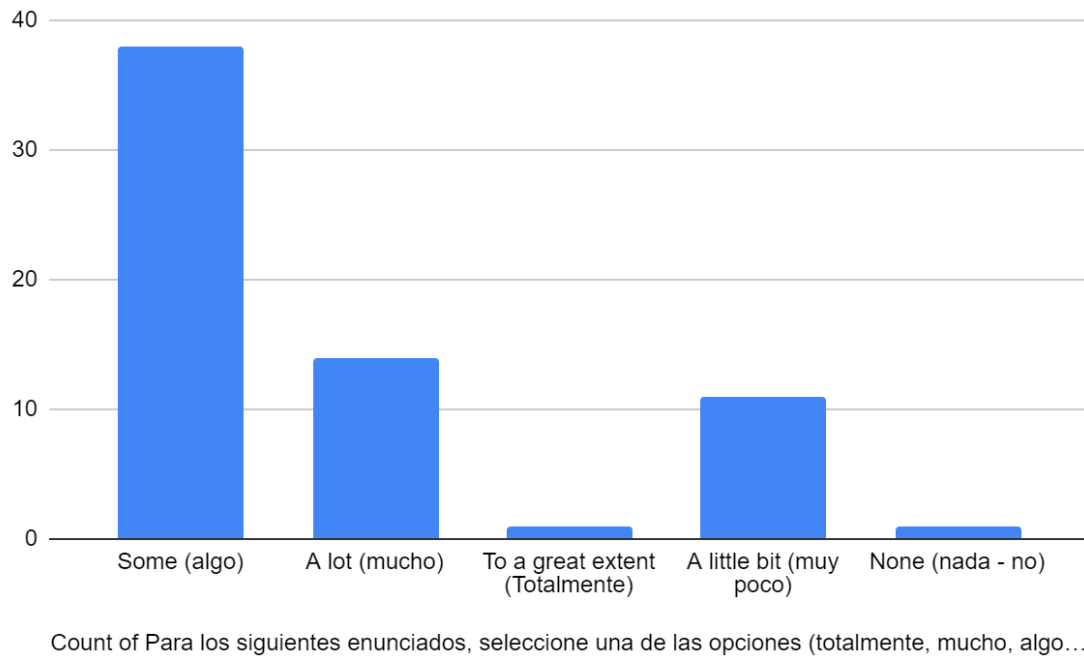
Figure 1.1

Do you speak English during your classes?

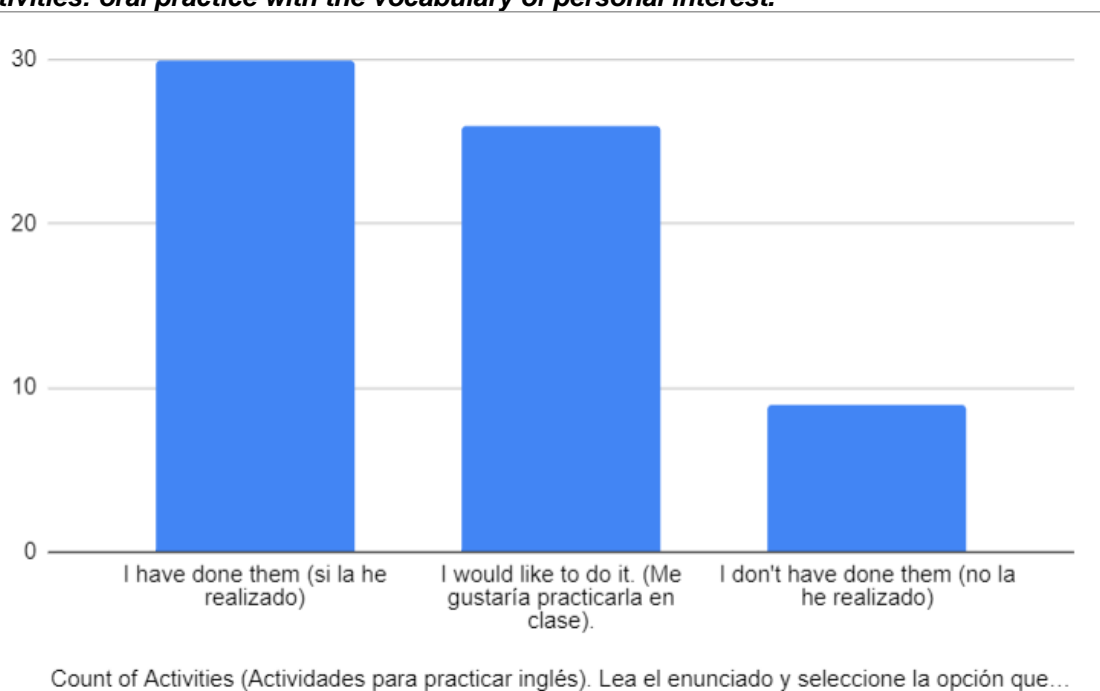


Figures 2 and 2.1 have the following questions: Is your pronunciation clear when speaking English? To evaluate this aspect, students were asked, "Is your pronunciation clear when speaking English?" The answers to this question were analyzed and are presented in Figures 2 and 2.1. The data shows that ten students rated their pronunciation as transparent, 19 reported difficulties, and 36 mentioned that they struggle significantly with pronunciation. Have you done activities about oral practice with the vocabulary of personal interest? This chart shows that all the students who consider having a clear pronunciation to a great extent, and a lot, are the same who have done oral activities with the vocabulary of personal interest. Another result is that students who would like to practice these activities are the same whose pronunciation is not clear.

Figure 2
Is your pronunciation clear when speaking English?

**Figure 2.1**

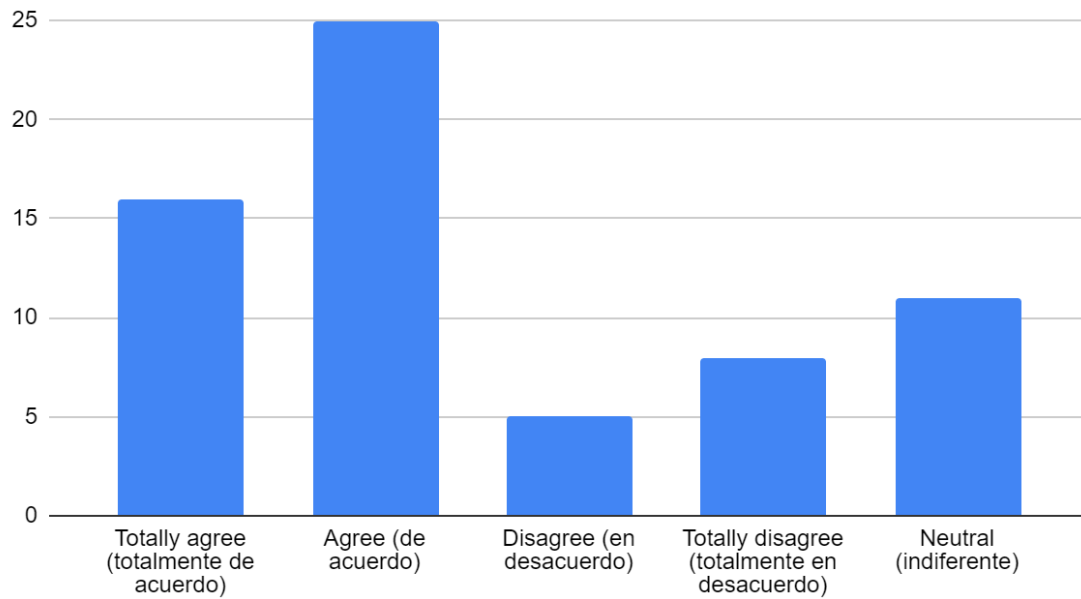
Activities: oral practice with the vocabulary of personal interest.



The questions in Figures 3 and 3.1 are if pair work is helpful to practice speaking and if they have done pair work activities in the classroom. Most students who have done this activity also agree or disagree on the importance of pair work to practice speaking. Moreover, students who have not done them agree that these activities help improve speaking skills.

Figure 3

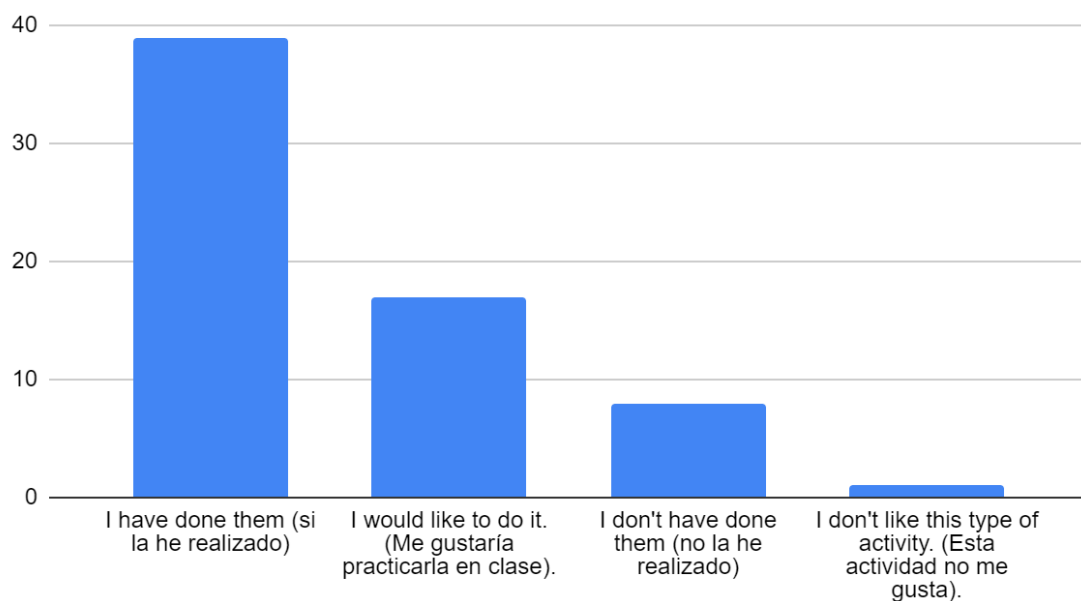
Pairwork is useful for practicing speaking.



Count of Perspectives towards pair work. (perspectivas sobre el trabajo en parejas). [Pair work is u...

Figure 3.1

Have you done pair work activities in the classroom?



Count of Activities (Actividades para practicar inglés). Lea el enunciado y seleccione la opción que...

Discussion

Research Question 1: What are students' difficulties in speaking English?

- The first pair of questions related to the importance of speaking showed a strong correlation between speaking in and outside the class.
- Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) noted that speaking skill is essential as learners are judged most from this point of view in actual life and when learners use English outside the classroom in actual life.

- Providing learners with more opportunities to practice the target language would reduce anxiety and contribute to better performance in the target language.
- Foreign language anxiety is crucial to L2 learning success (Ormeçi, 2013).

Research Question 2: What type of activities have students had in their English classes?

- The second pair of questions found that students who consider having clear pronunciation to a great extent have done oral activities with the vocabulary of personal interest.
- Pronunciation plays a crucial role in communication and can bring about intelligibility problems (Çakır & Baytar, 2014).
- Teachers need to focus more on providing opportunities for learners to practice and develop their pronunciation.
- The results of the last pair of questions related to the implementation of pair work and its relationship to speaking development demonstrate that learners would use the target language in different settings and contribute to diminishing the use of their mother tongue (Miranda, 2020).

Conclusions

Research Question 1: What are students' difficulties in speaking English?

This study showed a strong correlation between students' participation in English in class and their use of the target language outside of class. This suggests that students may have difficulty using English in real-life situations and that increasing opportunities for speaking practice in class may help improve their proficiency. Additionally, the study found that students who placed high importance on clear pronunciation were more likely to have done oral activities with vocabulary related to personal interests. This highlights the importance of providing opportunities for students to practice pronunciation and connect language learning to their personal lives.

Research Question 2: What type of activities have students had in their English classes? The study found that pairwork was the most common activity in English classes.

Students who did more pairwork also reported more significant development in their speaking skills. This suggests that pair work can be an effective strategy for promoting speaking development in the classroom. However, the study also found that some students reported not having enough speaking opportunities in class, indicating a potential need for a greater variety of speaking activities.

Limitations

The results of this study have been quite relevant and helpful for improving students' performance in the English language. However, some limitations may be a cause for obtaining even more detailed and relevant data. The following are some of these limitations.

Though the study was applied to a small population, the results were relevant and helpful. However, it could have been implemented on a larger population to make the data more accurate.

The implementation of the instrument was not an issue. Still, because of the type of study, it could have also focused on students' preferences for topics to include in the type of activities.

Since the study is descriptive, applying the suggested activities was impossible. A larger project may include this and apply a pre and post-test upon the application.

Recommendations

It is then recommended to replicate this study on a larger scale to have more learners' perceptions of their language acquisition process regarding speaking skills. In addition, it can also be very informative to teachers to find out students' personality facts and feelings so they can be of support during the teaching-learning process.

Since the study did not focus on students' preferences, it is recommended for future studies on this topic add this aspect. This would give learners a more sense of ownership and, thus, contribute to better performance.

Implementing this study on a larger scale and implementing the different activities is also suggested. This would allow researchers to measure students' starting points before

implementation, a monitoring process to see their development, and a final assessment upon project completion.

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Appendix 1

Survey

Available upon request.