



**Developing Speaking Skills Through Self-Assessment in EFL Young
Learners**

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Research Report

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English has become the language of international communication. Nowadays, people are connected by using this language worldwide, even in social media, international corporations, and virtual platforms. Due to this relevance of learning a second language, Ecuadorian education has included in its curricula a subject in order to learn English as a Foreign Language, improving students' abilities in the four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

In Ecuador, the subject "English as a Foreign language" is mandatory for private and public schools from second grade to 3rd Baccalaureate. According to the Council of Europe (2018), the level where kids start is Pre-A1, in which acquiring vocabulary, listening, and following short conversations are some of the skills that need to be developed at this level. For young learners, it is crucial to find in their English classes, engaging strategies with useful content which give them the opportunity to apply what they learn in their daily lives.

Speaking is one of the most challenging skills which needs to be developed in Second Language Acquisition. It is also the beginning of being communicative for L2 learners. The problem the researcher observed in young learners' oral skills is the integration of new vocabulary in their daily conversations. Students from Pre-A1 level are able to identify and recall vocabulary. However, it is challenging for them to follow up short conversations by asking and answering questions with someone different than their teacher.

For that reason, it is necessary to apply a suitable technique in order to prepare young learners to become communicative individuals. Encouraging language learners to actively engage in the dynamic interactions within the classroom is essential for fostering fluency and proficiency in spoken language (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019). Interaction among learners will be essential due to the opportunities that students could have to improve their creativity and vocabulary while sharing ideas with their peers. That is the reason why to prepare young learners to become communicative individuals, interaction is needed.

During this research, interaction between students will be an essential part of the assessment with a role-play in order to test not only the vocabulary acquired, but the use of the language with others. This study aimed to answer to what extent self-assessment improves oral production in young learners, and how students feel about their oral production after the self-assessment. Therefore, this action research will focus on improving speaking skills in Pre-A1 learners through the elaboration of short conversations, which will be scored using self-assessment.

Literature Review

This research is focused on the improvement of speaking skills through self-assessment. In order to provide deeper studies, considerations about speaking skills in young learners and considerations about self- assessment in pre A1 Level (CEFR), this section will emphasize information about it.

Speaking in Young Learners

While learning a Second Language, the goal is not only to understand the target language, but to be able to communicate new ideas. Being a communicative individual

provides the opportunity to be in touch with other people's thinking, listen to different ideas, and discover new cultures. Pratama and Awaliyah (2015) pointed out that Communication and collaboration become essential in diverse and multinational communities, where language barriers must be addressed. Being communicative is not only required for adult learners but also for young learners.

To develop speaking skills, establishing appropriate teaching techniques is needed to avoid the common problem of acquiring *content without meaning*. According to Jones and Kimbrough (1987), when someone is studying a foreign language, they memorize vocabulary (information gap) without real context, causing confusion while interacting with L2 speakers in real situations.

For language to be well-rounded, it should initiate with input that prioritizes meaning. Specifically, learning through attentive listening and reading, where the learner focuses on grasping the ideas and messages communicated by the language (Newton & Nation, 2020). Besides, input is not enough to assure that students will be capable of using new words and structures in a daily conversation. That is the reason why the output and interaction are needed, so that students can use what they learn in real situations.

Oral production will not appear from nowhere. Interaction is needed, too. Al Hosni (2014, p. 23) pointed out that “Although it is widely recognized that input is very essential for language acquisition, it is not sufficient if not followed by interaction and output (the language a learner produces)”. The best way to improve speaking skills is through verbal expression and written communication, with the learner's focus on conveying ideas and messages to someone else.

Learners' production is necessary in order to improve speaking, and interaction with their peers. Moreover, the Council of Europe (2018) also included the importance of having speaking interaction in order to improve communicative skills. The structure advocated by the CEFR aligns more closely with the practical use of language, emphasizing interaction where meaning is collaboratively constructed. Tasks are categorized into four communication modes: comprehension, expression, interaction, and mediation.

Interaction Effect on Speaking Skills

“The lack of interaction or the use of the language will negatively affect language learners in their communications” (Namaziandost & Nasri 2019, p. 219). It is necessary to encourage L2 learners to interact with their peers in order to improve their fluency and accuracy while speaking the target language. Classroom interaction also helps students to figure out in this new language how to express their points of view, opinions, and reflections, aspects that only vocabulary repetition cannot improve.

An impactful method for enhancing speaking skills in education involves employing an interactive teaching strategy. This approach fosters self-directed learning among students and contributes to their overall growth by involving them in collaborative activities with their peers (Türkben, 2019). Engaging in communicative tasks encourages the negotiation of meaning and interactive communication within contexts where the emphasis is on accomplishing specific tasks. Learners stand to gain from the interactions that arise from task-oriented activities, as they are exposed to meaningful input, receive feedback on their language production, and have opportunities to generate modified output.

For young learners, their learning cannot be limited to their classroom, a textbook or teacher talks. They need to improve their independence skills and accept other opinions (Phillips, 1993). Having short guided conversations will help them to develop tolerance and acceptance to other points of view, and help them to understand how to express their opinions in a good manner. Giving the students the space to interact with their peers and giving them the pertinent feedback, they will manage their anxiety and shyness while speaking to others.

Recording in Speaking Development

Recording can be used to evaluate speaking progress. There were some studies that prove how recordings help teachers to assess their students' development. Gromik (2015, as cited in Putri & Rahmani, 2019) showed how in over a 12-week period, students utilized their smartphones' video recording function to create a weekly 30-second video aligning with a designated theme provided by the teacher. The outcomes demonstrated the students' ability to craft digital video narratives expressing their perspectives on the assigned theme in the target language. This investigation highlights the feasibility of employing the video recording feature for the assessment of students' speaking proficiency.

Moreover, López and Bertani (2017, as cited in Putri & Rahmani, 2019) also made a research about the effect that a video recording can have in order to improve L2 learners' speaking skills. The research spanned eight weeks, involving fifteen participants tasked with creating scripts for TV cooking shows. They recorded their performances for feedback. The study utilized video recordings, structured interviews, and reflections from the students for data collection. Findings suggest that the

substantial increase in participants' oral production is attributed to their self-analysis of exercises, enhancing the teacher's ability to provide more meaningful feedback. The results also demonstrated enhancements in vocabulary, confidence, motivation, fluency, and improved pronunciation.

In summary, there are some studies showing good effects that video and voice recording can generate in order to evaluate students' progress, and it gives the opportunity to provide accurate and specific feedback to learners. Additionally, students can listen to their own recording as many times as they want and self-assess their pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary, which develop their ability to recognize and correct their own mistakes.

Self-Assessment

Ioannou-Georgiou (2003) defined assessment as:

A general term which includes all methods used to gather information about children's knowledge, ability, understanding, attitudes, and motivation.

Assessment can be carried out through a number of instruments (for example, test, self-assessment, checklist, rubrics, etc.), and can be formal or informal (p.5).

It is important to clarify that more than providing a good teaching method, assessment will be the tool that lets teachers know if the selected skill is being developed. Assessment contributes teaching and learning processes by furnishing feedback to students, so that students will be able to learn from their mistakes and improve their skills.

It is important to have the learners engaged in their own process by identifying their own mistakes, but it is only possible while using new types of assessments.

Different forms of assessment applicable to various English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes encompass the utilization of checklists, portfolios, teacher observations, journals, logs, conferences, self-assessment, and peer-assessment (Brown & Abeywickrama 2010, as cited in Esfandiari & Tavassoli 2019).

For primary teachers, applying the self-assessment can be challenging due to the level of honesty and responsibility this method requires. For that reason, it is crucial to introduce it and explain it quite extensively so that, young students will understand and apply it properly. To avoid possible anxiety and increase interest, it is necessary to introduce the assessment as an integral component of the learning process (Shaaban, 2007). One good example of how to train the students to have a good self-assessment is recording their conversation, and after that, they could listen to what they said again and assess their performance.

Innovation

The innovation related to this research was designed to improve speaking skills in Pre-A1 level. The participants were around six and seven years-old from the second grade of Primary. The problem observed in young learners' speaking skills was the integration of new vocabulary in their daily conversations. Students from this level showed that they are able to identify and recall vocabulary, but it was challenging for them to follow-up short conversations by asking and answering questions with someone different than their teacher.

The lesson plan followed a process that helped students to improve their speaking skills in daily conversations in which the teacher had a guidance role and the

students were the center of the process. First, self-assessment was introduced to students and the importance of being honest and responsible in order to have real results. They had to use a checklist in order to identify the aspects they had to work on while following-up short conversations, such as understanding vocabulary, using grammar expressions and having an intelligible pronunciation.

Students were trained to understand how to apply the checklist with the teacher, at first, the teacher read with students each aspects and explained how to answer them; with a thumb-up signal, if they think they got it, and the thumb-down signal if they think they need to keep working on it. The performance task selected was recording a short dialogue which includes formulaic expressions and open-questions in order to share personal information. This pretest was recorded.

After this first part, the teacher assessed their performance with a special rubric in order to have initial data. Then, students had three training sessions which also included self-assessment and feedback for each session. Tasks were different, such as role-play games, communicative activities, and little presentations. The objective of this training was to improve their interpersonal communication skills, and get ready to evaluate their progress. The final part included the posttest with a similar performance task as the pretest. Students did not need to assess themselves, but the teacher evaluated their progress with the same rubric applied at the beginning. Further description about the lesson plan can be found in the appendix 1.

Research Methodology

This section described the participants, methodology and instruments that were used in order to build up this study. This research methodology is Action research due to the kind of data collected and the objectives that it has. Feldman and Minstrell (2000) stated that action research has two main purposes: first, teachers start this research in

order to identify their failures and improve them, and the second purpose is to do the pertinent research so that their teaching practice will improve and others can learn from this process and improve their own teaching process.

This study started in order to improve the students' speaking skills in young learners. So this Action research was focused on answering the following research questions:

- To what extent can self-assessment improve the oral production in young learners?
- How do students feel about their oral production after the self-assessment?

Participants

In this study, there were 12 students who participated, 7 females and 5 males between 6 and 7 years old. Participants are part of second grade at primary school.

They are Pre-a1 students who start their preparation courses for the Cambridge test “Starters” from second grade to third grade. During the school-year they acquired vocabulary from Pre-A1 level. They can identify most vocabulary words without problems, but they need to improve their communicative skills. It is necessary for them to follow-up short conversations with their peers, and that is what this study worked on. For this study, participants had sessions of 3 hours for three weeks.

Instruments

According to Efron and Ravid (2019), “In teacher research, the data collection effort is purposeful, deliberate, organized, and systematic. The information we gather from our data may serve as evidence that confirms our insights and validates our intuition” (p. 85). This is the reason why in this study research, the author needed to choose the correct data collection instrument in order to gather qualitative and quantitative data that answer the previous questions.

To answer the first research question: to what extent can self-assessment improve the oral production in young learners? A pre-test and post-test were applied in order to evaluate students' abilities. Students used a checklist to self-assess their work. The teacher used a rubric to grade the recordings.

Everything began with the presentation of the checklist's use and how important it is to assess themselves honestly. The checklist included four questions about their skills while introducing themselves. The pre-test included a short recording where in pairs, they had to have a recorded conversation of sharing personal information. After the conversation, teacher could assessed the students' performance using a special rubric found in appendix 2. Simultaneously, students could check their production by doing a checklist found in appendix 3.

After three training practices, students were ready to take the post- test. This post-test consisted in a pair presentation about sharing personal information while using wh-questions "introducing myself". It was applied in order to observe the improvement of students' speaking skills. The teacher assessed students' interaction skills, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary guided by a rubric.

To answer the qualitative question: how do students feel about their oral production after the self-assessment? A survey and an interview were applied at the end of the pretest and posttest. The survey helped to analyze how the students felt while assessing themselves after the conversation. On the other hand, the interview helped students to share their thoughts about their achievements and their failures, and to communicate which aspects of the project could be improved.

The interviews helped the researcher to analyze the impact on students after each session. It also allowed the teacher to identify which aspects needed to be improved in order to assure a better learning environment, and have better results. On the other hand,

observations' notes were important to clarify how students reacted in front of those different activities.

Data Analysis

All the collected data was analyzed by using some tools. Quantitative data was tabulated in an Excel document where the vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and interaction were taken into account to analyze the mean, maximum, minimum, and standard deviation. It was also important to calculate the *p*-value of the pretest and posttest to identify if the study research was meaningful.

The information obtained from the pretest, posttest, the interviews and the survey were divided according to the type of data, those instruments collected. The pretest and posttest results helped to answer the quantitative research question, and the interviews and survey answered the qualitative research question. This analysis helped to recognize the impact of this study research on the participants.

Ethical Considerations

This action research considered the procedures of ethical considerations. First, the researcher asked the school principal to apply the pedagogical innovation. Then, the author explained the objectives of the research and got consent from the parents in order to allow students from second grade to participate in this program. The researcher only worked with voluntary participants which represents 40% of the enrolled students from the section. Parents were free to decide whether to participate or not. During the research, participants were protected by anonymity through the use of pseudonyms (Banegas & Banegas, 2015).

Results

This section presents the findings of the study, which sought to examine the impact of self-assessment on the oral production of young learners. The study focused on two primary research questions:

Research Question 1: To what extent can self-assessment improve the oral production in young learners?

In addressing the first research question, the study analyzed the effectiveness of self-assessment as a tool to enhance the oral production skills of young learners. After the application of this study, the results of pretest and posttest were compared and analyzed. In table 1, it is shown that the students' improvement was about from 12.8 in the pretest to 17.3 over 20 points in the posttest.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics of oral production pre-test and post-test

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Minimun	Maximun	Mean	Std. Deviation	<i>p</i> value
Pretest	12	11.00	16.00	12.58	1.79	0.00
Posttest	12	14.00	20.00	17.63	1.82	0.00

To reach that number, it was needed to include 3 exercises where the students could practice vocabulary, grammar and their interaction skills with different students. They were able to listen to their recording and identify their own mistakes while receiving their teacher's feedback. The standard deviation was about 1.79 in the pretest and 1.82 in the posttest with a *p* value of 0.00.

Table 2

Results of pre and post-test in every sub-skills.

	Vocabulary	Grammar	Pronunciation	Interaction	Total
Pretest Mean	3.17	2.54	3.79	3.08	12.58
Posttest Mean	4.46	4.00	4.79	4.38	17.63
Improvement	1.29	1.46	1.00	1.29	

Every sub skill had a positive improvement after the study. Students started the innovation without knowing how to structure a question while introducing themselves. The sub-skill grammar was the one that reached more improvement by the students. It was necessary to introduce each question as a part of a common conversation like an initial game where students try to meet new friends, so that they could understand how questions work in real - life situations.

Research Question 2: How do students feel about their oral production after the self-assessment?

Addressing the second research question, the study explored the students' opinions and emotions concerning their oral production after engaging in the self-assessment process with a survey based on a Likert Scale and an interview where 5 participants were chosen randomly.

The Likert Scale showed how the participants felt about assessing their oral production. It was necessary to explain the responsibility of their answers so that the researcher could have a clear idea of their point of view.

Table 3

Results of Likert Scale

Likert Scale results		
Student	Pretest	Posttest
Student 1	5	5
Student 2	3	5
Student 3	4	5
Student 4	5	5
Student 5	3	4
Student 6	5	5
Student 7	5	5
Student 8	5	5
Student 9	3	5
Student 10	3	5

Student 11	5	5
Student 12	4	5

During the pretest, 6 participants over 12 students rated 5, 2 participants over 12 rated the self-assessment with 4, and 4 students over 12 rated it with 3. The findings shed light on the students' positive attitudes towards self-assessment. After the posttest, 11 over 12 participants rated the self-assessment process with a 5 and 1 over 12 of them rated it with 4. Students commented on the comfort they felt while assessing themselves due to the challenge of being well-assessors and having the objective to improve their skills. It helped to know how the process influenced their motivation and self-confidence.

Table 4

Likert Scale mean

	Likert Scale				
	N	5.00	4.00	3.00	2-0
Pretest	12	6	2	4	0
Posttest	12	11	1	0	0

An interview was conducted using English and Spanish to 5 participants chosen randomly, and the answers were grouped and analyzed in 3 different categories. The first category was related to the application of self-assessment: *Do you think that self-assessment helped you to recognize your mistakes?* This question had positive answers which reflect how responsible they feel when they have to assume their own learning progress. Student 3 answered “It helped me a lot because I had to pay more attention to the words I used”. Student 4 answered “It helped me to be more concentrated and assess myself as a teacher” Student 5 answered that “It helped me to be more responsible and to assign me a real grade”.

The second category was about their perceptions of their improvement after this project, and it was divided into 2 questions. The first one was: *Do you think that this was a good struggle? why?* Most of the answers highlight the opportunity to practice with their friends in English, to have the chance to improve their learning in a funny way, and it would be better to have more time to practice. Student 1 answered “Yes, we could make new friends and chat with them in English”. Student 2 answered “Yes, I could have a conversation with my friends only in English”. Student 3 answered “Yes, because I did my best and I could make questions in English”

The second question of this category was: *What do you think you need to improve?* Participants answered and mentioned vocabulary and grammar issues. Student 3 answered “I think I need to keep practicing how to say my age”. Student 4 answered “I must practice my vocabulary and how to say the questions in English (grammatical structure)” Student 2 “I should practice how to ask for more information”.

Observation Notes

This study aimed to improve student’s speaking skills through interactive conversations. While explaining the objective of the project, students paid attention and felt engaged to the proposed activities. During the pretest, students made their best effort to use all their previous knowledge. Most of them could do it good at their first time, but some of them did not feel comfortable with the idea to talk with their peers. After the conversation part, they listened to their feedback and were ready to assess themselves. They asked questions during the whole progress and that is why they could do their activities. This project was student-centered were the teacher is more a facilitator than the center of the learning process.

Students found out their strengths and weaknesses in the first part. Those findings helped them to focus their training sessions in what they needed to improve. As

young learners, they are easy to forget their development so that, at the beginning of every session, the researcher needed to make an introduction that helped them to remember what they were working on. On the other hand, students participated actively in the different activities proposed, they discovered new words, questions and expressions in each training session. They demonstrated how self-assessment helped them to notice their development to the point where they correct their mistakes alone.

With the teacher guidance in the whole process, students were ready to do the posttest. There were students who improve their interaction level and felt more comfortable and confident while speaking with others, because of the time they had to find their mistakes by themselves. Students, in general showed their improvement. Overall, the results provide valuable insights into the impact of self-assessment on young learners' oral production abilities and contribute to our understanding of its effectiveness as a pedagogical approach.

Discussion

After the application of the action research, positive results were obtained and indicate how beneficial self-assessment can be in order to improve speaking skills in young students. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010, as cited in Esfandiari et al., 2019) mentioned the importance of having the learners engaged in their own process identifying their own mistakes, but it is only possible while using new types of assessments.

The findings obtained with the first question: To what extent can self-assessment improve the oral production in young learners? were positive due to the engagement that self-assessment produced to the students while listening and evaluating their own process. The application of this action research let them improve their pronunciation,

grammar and interaction with their peers. They were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and find a way to improve their speaking performance.

The findings obtained to answer the question: How do students feel about their oral production after the self-assessment? were positive. Assessment holds significance in both teaching and learning processes, offering valuable feedback to students (Esfandiari & Tavassoli, 2019). In this case, students had the opportunity to assess themselves while working on interactive activities. Students felt good and willing to participate due to the interactive exercises which gave them the opportunity to share and learn with their peers while sharing ideas. The speaking interaction in PRE-A1 young learners is new. They felt the main character of their learning by trial and error basis, and they could reach the goal: share and ask for personal information.

Conclusions

The study started with a problem identified by the researcher concerning young learners' oral skills pertaining to their ability to seamlessly incorporate newly acquired vocabulary into their everyday conversations and how self-assessment could contribute to improve their speaking skills.

Specifically, this action research answered To what extent can self-assessment improve the oral production in young learners? After the application of this action research, this study has demonstrated that incorporating self-assessment into language learning environments can yield significant benefits such as vocabulary, grammar expressions and interactive skills improvement. Specifically in this action research the grammar was the one which had more progress by the students.

This project also answered How do students feel about their oral production after the self-assessment? And all the findings indicate that self-assessment not only enhances speaking skills but also encourage students to work on their mistakes and

strengthens confidence while speaking with others. It helped to foster a heightened sense of motivation among students to actively engage in English language practice with their peers.

Limitations

While this action research has provided valuable insights into the development of speaking skills through self-assessment, there were some limitations which are important to mention. The relatively small sample size did not help the study to uncover more points of view about the program. The age of the participants was difficult to manage at the beginning and it was essential to explain the importance of the self-assessment so that the results could be real. The last limitation was the time, it would be better if the program included more sessions, so that the participants could have more chances to interact with their peers.

Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness of future studies aiming to improve speaking skills through self-assessment, several recommendations can be considered. Firstly, increasing the sample size would contribute to the generalizability of findings, providing a more representative understanding of the impact of interventions. A larger and more diverse group of participants can help identify patterns and trends that might be missed in smaller samples. Additionally, choosing older students for the study could offer valuable insights. They may face different challenges and exhibit distinct learning patterns compared to younger counterparts, they could offer more reflection about the use of self-assessment. Lastly, extending the duration of the study over a longer time frame would allow for a more comprehensive assessment of the sustainability and long-term effects of interventions. Overall, this study shows that self-assessment can make a big difference in language education, and I hope more people will study it in the future.

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Appendix 1

Lesson Plan

Available upon request.

Appendix 2

Rubric

Available upon request.

Appendix 3

Checklist

Available upon request.

Appendix 4

E-portfolio

Available upon request.

Appendix 5

Grades

Available upon request.