Pedagogical factors affecting English language learners' oral communication

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the pedagogical factors such as strategies, resources, and evaluation used by English teachers are appropriate to develop students' oral communication skills in public high schools in Ecuador. For this purpose, a sample of 310 English teachers from public high schools in Ecuador was considered. To know their perceptions on the subject, data collection techniques such as survey, interview and observation were applied. The instruments designed were two questionnaires, one with closed questions for the survey design and the other with open questions for the interview design. In addition, an observation sheet was used to collect information from one class per teacher. The data obtained allowed concluding that pedagogical factors such as strategies, resources and evaluation used by teachers in English classes help students develop their oral communicative skills. However, it is suggested the frequent use of activities that promote interaction in real contexts to achieve the desired academic objective.

Introduction

Effective oral communication in English is largely linked to a successful foreign language teaching process that involves the application of appropriate methodologies, strategies, and resources. In the absence of a positive result in oral communication at the end of a study stage, the objective established in the management of the foreign language will not have been achieved. Rubio and Martínez (2008) claim that the failure of English language learning is a social concern that involves political, educational and family agents that generate feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction in people. These feelings are reflected in several students in public schools in Ecuador who, after having studied English for six years, do not achieve the objective of communicating orally in English.

Several studies have been conducted with the purpose of knowing the causes that trigger this problem, such is the case of the study conducted by Ortega and Madrid (2009) with the purpose of knowing the perception of teachers and students of various academic levels in relation to the importance of the use of oral communication techniques for the teaching-learning of the English language. The results showed that the most used activities for oral comprehension are dialogues, texts, and movies. The authors also mention that the most used activities for oral production are questions and answers between teacher and students or between students, interviews, open dialogues and dramatizations.

For their part, Afebri, et al., (2019) conducted a study to analyze, describe and determine the factors that generate difficulties in producing the English language orally of tenth-grade students. The results showed that linguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are the ones that mainly affect students' oral communication.

Finally, Tsegaye (2020) carried out a study to explore the impact of factors affecting students' interpersonal communication. Based on the results, it is concluded that students are motivated to improve interpersonal communication skills; however, factors such as lack of confidence, experience, vocabulary, and grammar coupled with lack of interest do not allow students to use the language in interpersonal communication.

In this context, this study seeks to identify the pedagogical factors that impede the adequate development of English oral communication skills through the following questions: What strategies, resources, and types of assessment are used by public high school teachers in Ecuador to help students develop oral communication skills? Are the strategies, resources, and types of assessment used by public high school teachers in Ecuador appropriate to help students develop oral communication skills?

The results of this research allow us to identify the best solutions that directly benefit students in Ecuadorian educational institutions.

Literature Review

Oral communication in English

Gutiérrez (2009) mentions that human beings are constantly communicating as we spend almost 70% of our communication time talking. For this reason, it is important to have an effective management of communication skills since communication allows us to connect with people and thus initiate new relationships for personal or professional purposes. According to Rao (2019), with the aim of communicating internationally, many people try to learn English as this language is used all over the world. Learning English requires the management of the four language skills, but one of the most difficult turns out to be the oral skill. However, this skill is of paramount importance when presenting oneself for an interview, participating in a debate, giving speeches, among others.

(Pulido, 2004 as cited in Ronquillo & Goenaga, 2009) defines communicative competence as the ability to handle a language in order to express, interpret and negotiate sociocultural issues in the interaction with two or more people or between an individual and a text, which allows to have as a result an efficient and appropriate communication process. For his part, Tarvin (2015) defines communicative competence as the ability to use language or communicate in a culturally appropriate way to achieve social tasks effectively and fluently through interaction.

English teachers play a very important role in supporting students to develop the necessary competencies for oral communication in English since as Rao (2019) suggests they should adopt different techniques to encourage students use the language without fear of making mistakes.

Escudero, et al., (2020) conducted a study to establish the drawbacks experienced by students of English as a foreign language in oral communication. For this purpose, instruments such as an observation sheet and an interview questionnaire were used. The observation was applied to a class of 31 high school students and the interview was applied to the teacher of the class. Based on the results obtained, the authors conclude that cognitive and social difficulties are the problems affecting spoken language production.

Nijaradze and Doghonadze (2015) conducted a study to find answer for the following research questions: Are students aware of the communication strategies that they use? Does the teaching of communicative strategies increase their use in oral communication activities? What are the students' attitudes towards the teaching of communication strategies and their usefulness? For this purpose, several communicative strategies to motivate language use, take initiatives and communication challenges through activation of existing language competence were applied.

The instruments applied were 2 questionnaires and an observation sheet. Additionally, students were taught different communication strategies in different sessions. As a result, students showed positive attitudes toward the use of communication strategies and their ability to manage communication needs in real life increased as well.

On the other hand, Monsalve and Correal (2006) focused on developing a study to analyze the development of children's oral communication in English; additionally, it aimed at determining whether the activities used, and the role of the teacher provided better learning opportunities for the children. Field notes, audio and video recordings and interviews were the techniques applied for data collection. The results obtained indicated that the children's oral production improved because the teacher used topics and activities related to the students' particular interests and needs. Likewise, the creation of an adequate learning environment by the teacher allowed the students to use the language in a meaningful way.

Factors that influence oral communication in English

According to Pangket (2019), one of the problems that a large percentage of English teachers face in their classes is getting students to use English to communicate in a spoken manner. This affects students' progress as they do not have the opportunity to improve oral fluency and accuracy. The author suggests that to solve this problem, teachers should consider putting more effort into their teaching strategies, make the necessary adjustments, and use the most appropriate activities and teaching materials for the students. Pangket (2019) also indicates that, based on studies focused on teaching language learning, there are several strategies that allow improving students' language skills. Some of the strategies he highlights to favor communication and interaction in the classroom are group work, dramatizations, problem solving and discussions.

In this context, Neupane (2019) points out that the use of dramatizations in the classroom promotes the development of students' speaking skills because it develops their confidence and creativity and motivates them to participate. Additionally, dramatizations provide conducive spaces to improve fluency, vocabulary use, and communication skills. Likewise, Bohari (2019) suggests that the use of small group discussions is effective in teaching speaking skills as they have a positive effect on improving this language skill. Similarly, Firmansyah and

Valatansa (2019) assert that classroom discussions provide opportunities for students to practice speaking skill and encourage their active participation which enables them to improve this skill.

According to Asih and Wikanengsih (2018), speaking skill is better in students who are engaged in problem-solving activities. In this regard, Rahmawati and Ashadi (2018) suggest that students gain a deeper understanding by researching about the problem they are working on; additionally, they benefit from the multiple resources that can be used when applying this strategy such as the use of technology. The teacher continues to play the role of facilitator to help and guide them to achieve the proposed objective. An important aspect of involving students in problem solving is that it favors their speaking skills and helps them develop critical thinking.

Another important factor that can influence students' oral communication is the type of resources used such as the textbook, supplementary materials, and technological resources. In this regard, Richards (2021) suggests that the text used by teachers is a key component in language teaching. In some cases, the textbook forms the basis for much of the linguistic input students receive and for the language practice that occurs in the classroom. In addition, the author suggests that the textbook can complement the teacher's instruction while for the students it constitutes a source that allows them to have contact with the language they are learning.

In relation to supplementary materials, Gistituati et al., (2018) claim that visual resources are effective especially for students to describe the material they observe and thus practice and improve speaking skills. Additionally, these resources allow the learner to remember the material and its components which reduces anxiety and increases confidence in speaking. Harmawan and Amri (2018) indicate that the use of real objects in teaching spoken English allows generating a pleasant and lively environment; in this way, students feel greater interest and motivation when speaking.

An important factor that also affects spoken English communication is assessment. To assess students' oral proficiency, Jannah and Hartono (2018) conducted a study in Margasari, Indonesia to explain the implementation of the Curriculum-based oral assessment 2013, the types of assessment used by English teachers, teachers' perception of the use of the Curriculum-based assessment 2013, and teachers' perception of the use of the Curriculum-based assessment 2013 compared to the curriculum used in school.

Data were collected through the implementation of the interview, questionnaires, observation and document analysis. The results obtained showed that teachers have implemented oral assessment but that it has not being used appropriately without meeting the established standards. In addition, it was determined that dramatization is the most frequently activity teachers use for oral assessment. The teachers' perception of oral-based assessment was positive considering the problems encountered and the solutions to deal with them.

Effective assessment involves the use of feedback, for this reason Faridah, et al., (2020) conducted a study with the purpose of knowing students' perception regarding the use of peer feedback to improve their oral proficiency and critical thinking. Questionnaires and interviews were used to obtain data from 18 students who participated in the study. The results evidenced that students believe that oral peer feedback allows to improve oral communication skills and critical thinking.

Method

The methodology used in this study is mixed: quantitative and qualitative. According to Hernández and Mendoza (2008), cited by Hernández et al., (2014), mixed methods allow collecting qualitative and quantitative data, integrating and discussing them together, which allows making inferences from such information. To collect qualitative data, an interview with open-ended questions was applied to 310 first and second high school teachers from different provinces of Sierra, Coast and East of Ecuador, whose ages range from 25 to 50 years old, with a minimum experience of 5 years in the field of teaching English. The interview was conducted on-line using the Zoom tool.

To collect quantitative data, a questionnaire with closed-ended questions was applied using the Likert scale with the parameters: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The purpose of this questionnaire was to know the strategies, resources and types of assessment used by the participants to develop students' oral communication skills. In addition to the survey, an observation sheet was used to record the information obtained during the class given by each of the teachers.
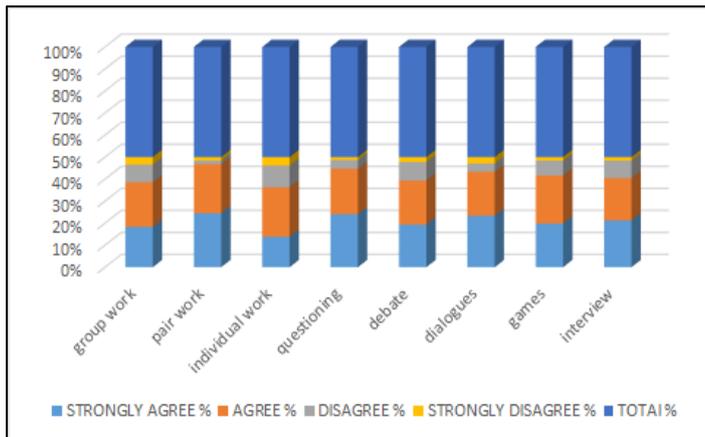
Results and discussion

Figure 1: Strategies used by teachers in class

Figure 1 shows the results of the strategies used by teachers in the EFL classroom to develop high school students' oral proficiency. According to their responses, all eight strategies in their classes are used but the most popular strategies are (considering the obtained percentages of strongly agree and agree) pair work (94%), question and answer (89%), and dramatizations (87%). The teachers believe that using these strategies in class motivates students and because it is the best way to make students communicate orally and, in this way, they practice the knowledge they have learned.

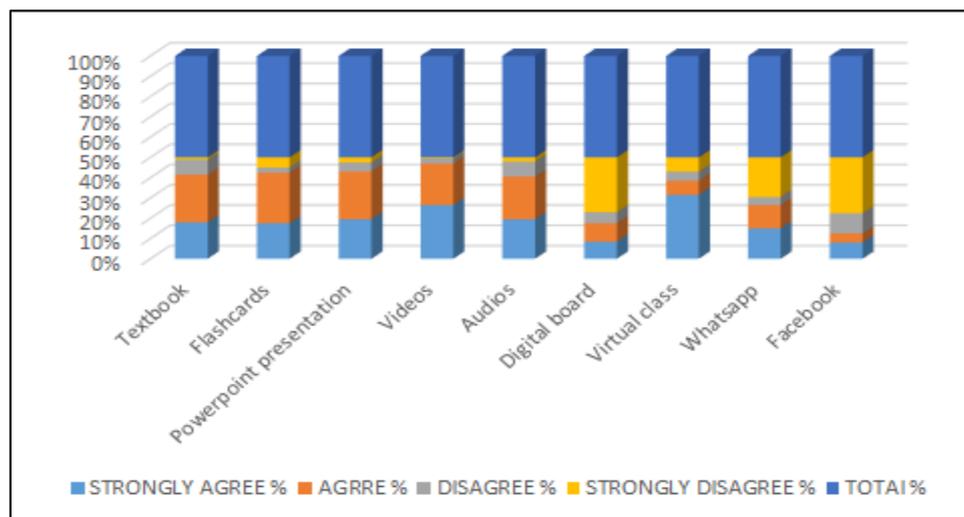During class observations, it could be evidenced that most of the students perform oral expositions of specific topics individually, in pairs or in groups. Although these types of activities allow students to practice the English language in a spoken form, it does not involve real interaction among students which is important since as Beltran (2017) argue, interaction is the basis for increasing oral production. The use of dramatizations, interviews, debates and games where students could interact with their peers was evidenced, but it is not very frequent.

When contrasting the results obtained from the teachers interviewed with the observation made, the use of strategies in class that promote students' oral participation is corroborated; however, the lack of variety in the activities that promote interaction in real contexts is noticeable. Likewise, it can be highlighted that such strategies as questions and answers and dramatizations were not the most used in the observed classes.

Figure 2: Resources used by teachers in the classroom

Figure 2 shows the resources that teachers use in class to develop oral skills in students. Based on the results in figure 2, it is highlighted that teachers use a variety of educational resources. The most used technological resources, according to the teachers' responses and considering the criteria of strongly agree and agree, are videos (94%), the use of PowerPoint presentations (86%), audios like songs, podcasts (81%), virtual class (77%), and the use of WhatsApp (53%). Regarding traditional resources, most teachers use the textbook (83%), and flashcards (85%) as a supporting material in their classes. On the contrary, a high percentage of teachers do not use the following resources in their classes Facebook (75%), and digital whiteboard (65%).

During class observations, it could be evidenced that teachers use virtual platforms such as Google classroom, Zoom and Teams. Considering the current situation, teachers have incorporated in their classes the constant use of technological resources such as videos, music, songs, podcasts to encourage oral interaction among students and active participation that promotes the use of language in the classroom. It should be added that EFL teachers use WhatsApp in their classes to record the participation of students motivating them to respond in written form the answers to the proposed questions. From this, it can be highlighted that the use of WhatsApp in most of the activities is not considered to strengthen students' oral skills. In relation to the resources, Gistituati et al.,

(2018) argue that visual resources are effective especially for students to describe the material they observe and to practice and improve speaking skills.

Teachers' answers to the interview corroborate the data obtained, in fact, the teachers confirm that the different types of resources, without a doubt, influence the students' speaking skills, most of the teachers know the characteristics of the resources in figure 2 and they apply them to provide students with opportunities to practice and use the language orally, which improve their oral communication skills.
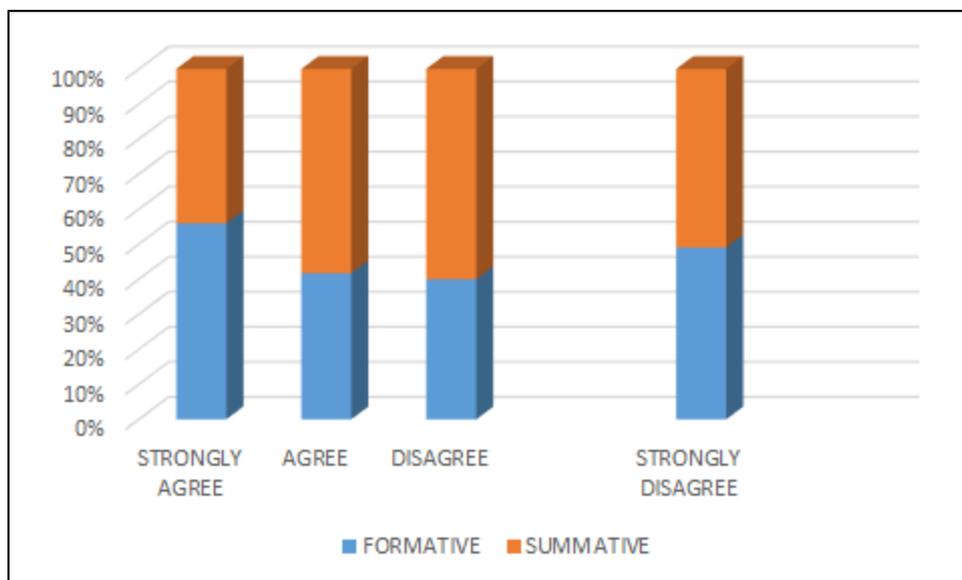

Figure 3: Types of assessment

The data in Figure 3 show the type of assessment used in English classes to evaluate students' speaking ability. A greater tendency to use formative assessment is evident; however, summative assessment also shows a considerable percentage in its use. About 70% of the teachers surveyed indicated that they use assessment for formative purposes and a similar percentage corresponding to 62% indicated that they use summative assessment.

Based on the results obtained in the observations, it is determined that teachers use observation as the unique formative evaluation technique. This technique allowed them to monitor students' progress regarding speaking skills and provide feedback on time. These data reflect that there is no use of varied techniques or activities to perform formative assessment. Regarding summative assessment, in the interview, teachers indicated that at the end of the teaching process they use oral questions and answers to assess this skill; however, this denotes that they do not have a clear concept about summative assessment since it is a process that takes place at the end of instruction, of a unit, or at the end of a course (Bachman and Dambock, 2018). According to the observations, this activity was carried out at the end of the class as another activity of the teaching process.

Contrasting the data obtained in the three figures and relating them to the observations and interviews conducted, it can be highlighted that English teachers generally use strategies that support the development of English learners' oral communication; they also apply formative assessment to improve students' learning. For example, students made oral presentations as individual work, pair work or group work using PowerPoint presentation to incorporate technology into the classroom. The teachers assessed students' oral communication skills through observations and monitored their progress, they provided feedback as well. However, it is evident the lack of application of strategies that promotes interaction among students in real contexts.

Conclusions

The results obtained indicate that the participants of this study applied individual, pair, and group oral expositions. These strategies are useful to improve speaking skills, but they do not provide students with opportunities to interact in real contexts much frequently. Additionally, it was found that teachers use traditional resources such as flashcards and the textbook and technological resources like videos, audios, and PowerPoint presentations. To assess students' oral communication skills and to provide adequate feedback, teachers mainly use formative assessment. Although teachers applied formative and summative assessment, it was found that they do not have a clear understanding of their differences Finally, it should be noted that according to the results obtained, the pedagogical factors such as strategies, resources and assessment used by teachers in their EFL classroom are appropriate to help students develop oral communication skills. However, there should be a variety in their use to achieve the desired academic objective.

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