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Speech enhancement through information gap filling technique

Mejora del habla mediante la técnica de llenado de espacios de información

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates English language use with classroom students after applying the Information Gap Filling Technique (IGT) at the Paiguara public school in San Juan-Gualaceo, Ecuador. A sample of 22 students (12 boys and 10 girls) from the third level of BGU was selected. The research was conducted in two phases. The quantitative part used a pre- and post-test of oral interaction and in the qualitative part, a questionnaire with open-ended questions. The findings of the study showed that students increased their use of English in the classroom as a result of the application of IGT in the variables of comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, fluency and pronunciation with values of (0.37, 0.50, 0.27, 0.05, 0.32) respectively. Consequently, the Information Gap-filling technique has proved to be effective in promoting the use of English language in classrooms as a means of communication.

Descriptors: Speech education; second language instruction; language instruction. (UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

Este estudio investiga el uso del idioma inglés con estudiantes de aula después de aplicar la técnica de llenado de espacios de información (IGT) en la escuela pública Paiguara en San Juan-Gualaceo, Ecuador. Se seleccionó una muestra de 22 estudiantes (12 varones y 10 mujeres) del tercer nivel de la BGU. La investigación se llevó a cabo en dos fases. La parte cuantitativa utilizó un pre- y post- test de interacción oral y en la parte cualitativa, un cuestionario con preguntas abiertas. Los hallazgos del estudio mostraron que los estudiantes incrementaron el uso del inglés en el aula como resultado de la aplicación de IGT en las variables de comprensión, gramática, vocabulario, fluidez y pronunciación con valores de (0.37, 0.50, 0.27, 0.05, 0.32) respectivamente. En consecuencia, la técnica Information Gap-filling ha demostrado ser efectiva para promover el uso del idioma inglés en las aulas como medio de comunicación.

Descriptores: Educación de la expresión oral; enseñanza de una segunda lengua; enseñanza de idiomas. (Tesauro UNESCO).

INTRODUCTION

Learning can be structured in various ways. It is frequently conceived as either formal or informal. Many educators have tried to define the difference (De Wilde et al. 2020). Formal learning is usually planned and determined by the teacher and is systematically delivered to the student for later evaluation. Informal learning, on the other hand, occurs routinely and naturally. In this kind of learning, students learn from each other and themselves, and learning content is undefined since it arises from a social context and is not formally evaluated.

Speaking is usually considered a skill that learners must acquire gradually. Speakers express themselves in diverse, real-life situations. Spoken communication fulfills the fundamental function in the daily life of directly transmitting thoughts to others. Therefore, it influences individuals' participation in social, political, business, and educational realms (Ward et al. 2016).

By using comprehensible speech, clear and simple sentences, and understandable pronunciation, people can express ideas, thoughts, and feelings. English is one of the most universal languages used both in informal social interactions and in formal instruction throughout the world. Through the use of the speaking ability, the first interactions are given and thoughts are collected to express coherent and valid ideas that allow effective communication between people, in addition, it helps people to access important global information about, health, science, and life out of the territorial domain. However, students can be instructed by using speaking strategies that promote continuous interaction (Syakur et al. 2020).

Some studies have suggested the use of different teaching strategies to promote the use of English among students who are acquiring a second language (Prabawa, 2016), but shallow information has been investigated with the specific strategy which is *information gap-filling* as the main means of verbal interaction in the school. Although there is some research on the use of this strategy to cope with fostering speaking in classrooms, these

investigations have been carried out mostly in Middle Eastern countries (Eddie et al. 2021). In addition, there is just a little research of this type in South American countries and none in the rural areas of Ecuador, where the needs in all fields are the common denominator that hinders the personal development of students, due to superficial information and the lack of experience of the teachers on this field which affects students from basic education to high school (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of the English language after applying the information gap-filling technique among students in the third year of high school (Bachillerato General Unificado BGU) in the rural area of San Juan-Gualaceo at Paiguara High school to rise the oral interaction in the classroom.

To complete this research project, a mixed-method was utilized, created in two stages: initial, a quantitative stage that incorporates the use of an adjusted pre-and post-test toward the start and the finish of the investigation. For the next phase, the qualitative part, first, an observation activity recorded students' verbal interaction through the entire investigation process. Then a questionnaire with open-ended questions was carried out to search students' opinions at the end of the intervention. Questions that accept open-ended answers allow participants to generate options to answer them (Creswell, 2021). The more open questions are, the more elements and criteria to be scored are given to the examiner considering the answers are personal based on their knowledge and understanding (QuestionPro, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The sociocultural theory and the Zone of Proximal Development

The sociocultural theory and the Zone of Proximal Development from Lev Vygotsky help to understand that learning takes place through social interaction in and out of the classroom.

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The human race has used language as means of communication and oral interaction has played an important role to convey the message. Lev Vygotsky asserts that language is social from childhood and first appears in verbal exchange and communication (Vigotsky, 1962). This leads to the concept that language first occurs in its external form as a function of communication, then, when people develop the ability to internalize language (internal talk), dialogue becomes one of the main forms of human thinking (Ohta, 2013).

In concordance with his theory, not only interaction is needed to foster communication but scaffolding which means the range of skills that a person can perform with assistance, but cannot yet perform independently. Vygotsky said in his theory: "the gap between one's actual development level as measured by autonomous issue solving and one's prospective development level as determined by problem-solving under the direction or in partnership with more capable peers" (Eun, 2019 et al. 2021, p. 2). This is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

This method applies tasks and games related to information Gap filling activities destined to learners, they will get into speaking interaction which will promote the use of the language in the classroom. Gap-filling is a scenario in which one of the participants possesses the missing knowledge that the other participants require (Almziad et al. 2020). This will prompt the participants to talk, inquire, and debate with the person who possesses the required knowledge, resulting in a process of engagement and information exchange (Eun, 2019).

The concepts used to develop this investigation are social interaction and ZPD. These two terms help to understand the overall direction that this research work will take and by understanding them, the readers would have an idea about the topic under the study and the upcoming results of the present investigation.

Furthermore, this theory is related to the research aim because it can explain that learning takes place through social interaction and by scaffolding students on the process of

learning; it is also appropriate for the context of this particular research because the objective is that interactive activities foster speaking skills in class.

Stephen Krashen (1982) The Comprehensible Input theory

The comprehensible input theory from Stephen Krashen supports this research project because it focuses on the claim that language acquisition occurs when learners understand the structure that is a little beyond the current level ($i + 1$). This specific assertion supports the idea that when students will perform gap-filling tasks, they will do it in pairs or groups that face a little challenge to foster their speaking ability. The best, and maybe the only, manner to teach speaking is simply to deliver understandable input. This is achieved with the support of additional linguistic information or environment. On this matter, by challenging students to produce new utterances in a familiar topic, speaking interaction is promoted. Furthermore, language acquisition does not need substantial application of conscious grammatical rules or time-consuming activities (Krashen, 1982). Meaningful contact in the target language is required, as is a natural conversation in which speakers are not concerned with the form of their sentences, but rather with the contents they transmit and understand.

The concepts used to develop the research are comprehensible input and context. These two terms give a clear view of the theoretical support, which is important to carry out the research project.

This theory is related to the research aim because it can explain that by working with ideas that are a little above the students' current level, it would challenge to produce spoken language when performing conversations in pairs or groups using the information gap-filling technique to improve the speaking skill.

STATE OF THE ART/LITERATURE REVIEW

Common findings

Studies carried out on the use of the Information Gap Activity or well known (IGT) to improve the ability to speak has resulted in the general agreement that this technique increases to different degrees not only the ability to speak but also pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and even confidence in learners. The purpose of the IGT is to appeal to the students' position in accomplishing the work and to promote the authenticity of the target language for the students. In addition, most of the studies conducted on this subject use a quantitative method where data was collected by a pre-experimental design that performs a pre and post-test to measure the difference before and after the intervention. In quantitative research when the relationship between two variables is explained, the researcher is interested in finding the influence of one variable over the other. This affirmation gives to the reader an overview of the investigation's purpose (Creswell, 2021).

Definition of Information Gap Technique

The gap-filling technique is used in classes to promote different types of interaction between students. It is generally performed in pairs where one student needs the information that the other has to complete the activity. IGT helps students communicate because there is a desire and purpose to communicate. As a result, the learners need to work with a peer. (Defriota, 2017). The action of asking and giving information in information-gap activities moreover improves students' readiness to communicate finding the need for information (Laelasari, 2018). For this research project, IGT will foster the speaking ability by applying engaging activities where students need to exchange information about a common topic that has a gap and need to be filled altogether. In information gap activities, one person possesses specific information that has to be shared with others to solve an issue, acquire information, or make judgments (Defrioka,

2017). In other words, learners have to work together to complete the task by sharing the information they have. The information gap is like an “empty space” of speaking interaction that needs to be filled by the people in account to reconvene similar information in a spoken manner (Harmer, 2016).

Teaching Speaking Ability

The ability to speak another language fluently is an essential skill when the language is different from our mother tongue; for this reason, speaking is considered a major skill to foster communication (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Speaking is a “meaning-construction” procedure to obtain, process, and generate information (Shatalebi et al. 2019). On this matter, the speaking ability can be instructed by applying a series of strategies and steps that learners can follow to accomplish real communication doing specific tasks (Atek et al. 2020). Activities that activate communication to interact with their peers and obtain a response to complete a real communication to get their objectives. (Soleimani & Khosravi, 2018).

When people learn to speak English, students need not only to use grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation in an acceptable way to deliver a message but also, they need to understand the context to retrieve an accurate answer, (Lado, 1964) states that students can speak the language if they utilize it frequently. He even claims that a sentence is not fully integrated until the learner can express it clearly and understandably.

The objective to teach students to Speak English is to accomplish communication with competence and accuracy. Among the main problems associated with teaching English in Latin America are: Focus on the teacher. No cooperation in the development of language skills. Lack of strategies to improve learning by teachers. Lack of knowledge related to improving the use of English by the students. (Dabaghmanesh et al. 2013). Even though these global problems, to teach English as a

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Foreign Language (EFL) teachers should improve and encourage the development of students' oral skills (Namaziandost et al. 2018).

METHODS

The plan is to conduct a blended-method design to better comprehend the research problem of the topic under the investigation which is “The reluctance of students to use the English language in class as a means of communication”. The mixed research method is a process to collect, scrutinize, and mix both the quantitative and qualitative methods in several or a single study to understand the research problem (Savaşçı, 2014, p. 2682). In this study, the pre-experimental method was used in the way of carrying out two types of tests, pre-test, and post-test. This design will be used because there will be qualitative and quantitative data available after the intervention. When we have quantitative and qualitative information available "we have a powerful source of information" (Creswell, 2021, p. 537).

Participants

The participants of this research project are a convenience sample of students enrolled in a public school called “Unidad Educativa del Milenio Paiguara” which is located in the province of Azuay in the rural area of San Juan, Gualaceo. The students belong in the third year of high school, it is named Bachillerato General Unificado or BGU in the academic year 2021-2022 and their age range is between seventeen and eighteen years old. The analyzed sample of students is 22 and it is made up of twelve male students and ten female students.

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Figure 1. Location of UEM Paiguara
Google Maps. (2022). Escuela del Milenio Payguara. Retrieved from: shorturl.at/aluDF.

Data collection

For this study referring to the first part of the research, a test was used twice to obtain the data in the following sequence: first, a pretest on the speaking ability in the quantitative portion of the research, then a post-test at the closing part of the investigation. For the second part: first, an observation activity was carried out during the entire intervention and then an interview with open-ended questions in the qualitative section of the research when the intervention finished.

The first and second parts were based on the range of 9-10 (Excellent), 7-8 (Acceptable), 4-6 (Fair).

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Data Analysis

In the quantitative section of the study, results from the pre-test and post-test to measure the students' speaking ability were examined with the support of the programs SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Data were evaluated and a comparison was done between the results. The qualitative portion used a predetermined chart to collect the information.

For the statistical analysis, Cronbach's alpha correlation was used, which is already standardized.

Tables 1 and 2 show the test reliability. The instrument reaches a value of 0,730 in Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized elements. Cronbach's alpha (α) is an often-utilized proportion of reliability that evaluates the level of irregular estimation mistake in a total score or normal delivered by a multi-thing estimation scale (Hayes & Coutts, 2020). This value is acceptable within the limitations, and as a result, the instrument can be used to assess students' English-speaking competence.

Test reliability

Table 1.
Case Processing Summary.

		N	%
Cases	Valid	22	100,0
	Excluded	0	,0
	Total	22	100,0

a. Delete by list is based on all variables in the procedure.

Table 2.

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Reliability statistic.

Cronbach's alpha	N of elements
,730	5

Many characteristics were measured during the pre-test and post-test in the following charts, including comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation.

Frequencies

Table 3.
Pre-test Comprehension.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid Comprehension is acceptable regularly.	1	4,5	4,5	4,5
Understands much of the conversation, only shows minor difficulties at some points.	8	36,4	36,4	40,9
Can understand only a small part of the conversation, needs repetition at a slow rate.	13	59,1	59,1	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

Table 4.
Post-test Comprehension.

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	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid Comprehension is acceptable regularly.	5	22,7	22,7	22,7
Understands much of the conversation, only shows minor difficulties at some points	8	36,4	36,4	59,1
Can understand only a small part of the conversation, needs repetition at a slow rate.	9	40,9	40,9	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

Tables (3 and 4) illustrate that a total of 59.1 percent of students presented problems understanding conversations delivered at slow speed when the intervention began, but only 40.9 percent of them continued with the same problem after the investigation; the remaining values fluctuate with a tendency to improve at the end of the research, except for 36.4 percent of the learners who are still at the same level of conversation comprehension before and after the intervention. Analyzing these numbers, it can be said that social interaction improves the understanding of students because utterances and expressions become part of the internal language system of the person (Vigotsky, 1962).

Table 5.
Pre-test Grammar.

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	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid Grammar errors do not interfere with understanding, but the user lacks confidence in the accurate use of structures.	1	4,5	4,5	4,5
Grammar errors are present in a great amount the interlocutors still can understand.	21	95,5	95,5	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

Table 6.
Post-test Grammar.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid The use of grammar structures is quite good. Users can handle a conversation at an acceptable level.	3	13,6	13,6	13,6
Grammar errors do not interfere with understanding, but the user lacks confidence in the accurate use of structures.	6	27,3	27,3	40,9
Grammar errors are present in a great amount, but the interlocutor still can understand.	13	59,1	59,1	100,0

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Total	22	100,0	100,0	
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Elaboration: Authors.

In terms of students' performance in the use of grammar, tables (5 and 6) show that 95.5 percent of learners make mistakes in the use of grammatical structures at the beginning of the investigation, but only 59,1 percent continue after the intervention; the remaining values keep a tendency to improve in this specific variable after the intervention. As a result, this percentage of improvement helps students to acquire positive interaction to access global information and develop their speaking skills to talk about general topics related to their family, friends, daily activities, emotions, feelings, among others. (Syakur et al., 2020).

Table 7.
Pre-test Vocabulary.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid Vocabulary is used at the basic level to get into formal and informal conversations.	1	4,5	4,5	4,5
Speaker does not have sufficient vocabulary to express fluently, only expresses basic ideas.	21	95,5	95,5	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

Table 8.

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Post-test Vocabulary.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid Vocabulary is used at the basic level to get into formal and informal conversations.	7	31,8	31,8	31,8
Speaker does not have sufficient vocabulary to express fluently, only expresses basic ideas.	15	68,2	68,2	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

According to tables (7 and 8), when the pre-test was administered, 95.5 percent of learners demonstrated handling new words in basic levels, but after the intervention, only 68.2 percent persisted with the same problem, indicating that 27.03 percent of the population has improved on the use of vocabulary after the investigation. As (Krashen, 1982) states, by delivering comprehensible input and challenging them to work in pairs or groups, learners can acquire language. So, the use of IGT helps to acquire vocabulary systematically and activates the desire to communicate (Soleimani & Khosravi, 2018).

Table 9.
Pre-test Fluency.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage

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Valid Presents certain difficulty in handling conversations when interacting in social situations.	4	18,2	18,2	18,2
Fluency is below the average.	18	81,8	81,8	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

Table 10.
Post-test Fluency.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid Presents certain difficulty in handling conversations when interacting in social situations.	5	22,7	22,7	22,7
Fluency is below the average.	17	77,3	77,3	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

When the fluency variable is addressed, Tables (9 and 10) show that 81.8 percent of the students experienced fluency issues before the intervention and only 77.3 percent had equivalent problems after the intervention. According to the findings, 4.5 percent of students improved their fluency in the Use of the English language.

Table 11.
Pre-test Pronunciation.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage

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Valid Pronunciation errors are present in a great amount, but the interlocutor still can understand.	22	100,0	100,0	100,0
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Elaboration: Authors.

Table 12.
Post-test Pronunciation.

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Accumulated Percentage
Valid Pronunciation improves at a limited level, but errors are still committed.	7	31,8	31,8	31,8
Pronunciation errors are present in great amounts, but the interlocutor still can understand.	15	68,2	68,2	100,0
Total	22	100,0	100,0	

Elaboration: Authors.

In Tables (11 and 12), 100 percent of the students make errors in word pronunciation before the intervention, but only 68.2 percent continued with the same pattern of error after the investigation. Pronunciation improves in 31.8 percent of learners, according to the data.

Table 13.
Pre-test statistics.

	Comprehension	Grammar	Vocabulary	Fluency	Pronunciation
N Valid	22	22	22	22	22
Lost	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1,45	1,05	1,05	1,18	1,00

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Median	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Mode	1	1	1	1	1

Elaboration: Authors.

Table 14.
Post-test statistics.

	Comprehension	Grammar	Vocabulary	Fluency	Pronunciation
N Valid	22	22	22	22	22
Lost	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	1,82	1,55	1,32	1,23	1,32
Median	2,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Mode	1	1	1	1	1

Elaboration: Authors.

Tables (13 and 14) show the learners' performance in each one of the variables before and after the application of the IGT technique. Taking into consideration the means as a point of reference, it can be said that all of the variables improved when the research ended within the following values: Comprehension 0.37, Grammar 0.50, Vocabulary 0.27, Fluency 0.05, and Pronunciation 0.32. The median and the mode remain the same in both tests except for Comprehension where the difference is 1 .00 points higher in the post-test.

Qualitative data analysis

Table 15.
Qualitative Results of the questionnaire.

Questions	Category	Answers
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of them like this technique except one student.
<p>1. Did you like the activities proposed for class? yes___ or no___</p> <p>Why?</p>	<p>Perception of benefits or drawbacks of IGT in class</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because they were interactive and fun. • Because we improve vocabulary. • Because we learn pronunciation. • Because we can understand the English language better.
<p>2. What is your opinion about the information gap-filling technique applied in class?</p>	<p>Ability to handle IGT in class</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It was quite good because we can communicate in English. • Low anxiety in class. • It is simple to follow.
<p>3. What was the best speaking activity you have experienced in this course?</p>	<p>Good personal experiences with IGT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All of the active practices were good. • Activities referred to favorite hobbies. • Activities related to self-introduction.
<p>4. What was your worst experience with this technique?</p>	<p>Bad personal experiences with IGT</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We have no bad experiences using this technique

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To write the answers that peers elicit. • Trying to pronounce the new words
<p>5. How the implementation of this technique has helped you to speak English in the classroom?</p>	<p>Oral interaction in class</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It improves our pronunciation. • Make us feel confident and promotes the use of English in class. • We can get information easily from peers in oral form.

Elaboration: Authors.

About table 15, it is evident that the activities applied with the gap-filling technique are interactive; they promote the use of the English language while improving pronunciation and vocabulary. In addition, an important factor to mention is that anxiety decreases when students interact orally with their classmates promoting the use of English as a means of communication in class. Anxiety affects second language acquisition and causes poor learners' performance (Chan & Tang, 2022). However, some problems result from oral interaction such as transcribing the responses that are produced by peers in written form to grids created for sharing activities and the difficulty when trying to pronounce some words.

Despite some difficulties presented, learners may have a sense of achievement when they get the desired information from peers by interacting in the oral form inside the classroom.

RESULTS

The outcomes of this investigation confirm that the use of English in the classroom increased after the application of IGT. However, one of the variables has a minimal rebound even though the others show a perceptible increase; we talk about fluency. IGT offered the opportunity to exchange information and consequently oral interaction among students improved. Although the pronunciation of the words represented a problem for many of the students, IGT allowed practicing and improving not only pronunciation but the use of grammar, vocabulary, and a better understanding of conversations.

IGT promoted the use of the English language in the classroom letting students interact with their peers. Also, the findings of this investigation show that learners tend to interact orally using the language under instruction with the facility when they are involved in a low anxiety environment. By taking into consideration the results after the intervention, it can be said that IGT is appropriate for promoting and improving verbal interaction among students of the third level of BGU at “Paiuguara High School” to an acceptable level where learners produce utterances and questions that before they had not done.

After the application of this teaching technique (IGT), it can be observed that the use of English in the students of the third year of high school at the UEM Paiguara is higher than initially shown; in consequence, it can be concluded that the utilization of the information Gap-filling technique is successful to expand the use of the English language in the classroom. With the results obtained in this research project, it is also intended to give school English teachers an inside about a good technique for teaching speaking to foreign language learners.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this investigation, it is possible to infer the employment of the information Gap-filling Technique is a reliable tool to promote oral interaction in the classroom. In addition, IGT reduces the anxiety level among students, fostering a friendly environment that allows learners to produce oral language with relative ease. It is also

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important to mention that IGT is a simple teaching technique that is easy to follow and understand.

Since there is not much evidence of the application of IGT in the rural areas in Ecuador to promote speaking, this technique can be used by teachers to encourage dialogue and it could serve as a spark to conduct further investigation in this field.

In conclusion, it is important to implement IGT if teachers want to improve students' ability to use the English language as a means of communication in the classroom. This technique has been proven to be effective in promoting oral interaction in a friendly environment making possible to increase pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar comprehension, and fluency.

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