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## Students' Perspectives on Improving their English Speaking Skills through Activities Based on the Communicative Approach

Perspectivas de los estudiantes sobre la mejora de sus habilidades para hablar inglés a través de actividades basadas en el enfoque comunicativo

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## Abstract

This study explores English A1 students' perceptions of the application of communicative approach-based activities for developing conversational skills in an Ecuadorian public high school. The participants used surveys (Ss) and opinion sharing activities (OSAs) in class. The study combined the elements of the qualitative and quantitative research approaches and had a convenience sampling of thirty students. The qualitative data was collected through individual interviews and a focus group which were held at the end of the intervention. The interviews were applied to twenty learners, while the focus group discussions took place with the other ten participants. Both instruments consisted of the same five semi-structured questions regarding the application of communicative approach-based activities. Quantitative data was obtained through the administration of a pre- and a post-test to all thirty students. This was done using a validated checklist that included parameters such as topic, fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and pragmatic competence. Both tests assessed students' speaking skills before and after the intervention, measuring the progress of the participants. The results showed that the implementation of Ss and OSAs in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms does contribute to developing students' conversational skills after using them on a regular basis.

*Keywords:* communication, English, competences

## Resumen

Este estudio explora las percepciones de los estudiantes de inglés A1 sobre la aplicación de actividades basadas en el enfoque comunicativo para el desarrollo de habilidades conversacionales en una escuela secundaria pública ecuatoriana. Los participantes utilizaron encuestas y actividades de intercambio de opiniones en clase. El estudio combinó los elementos de los enfoques de investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa y tuvo una muestra de conveniencia de treinta estudiantes. Los datos cualitativos se recolectaron a través de entrevistas individuales y un grupo focal. Las entrevistas individuales se aplicaron a veinte educandos, mientras que las discusiones de grupos focales se realizaron con la participación de los otros diez estudiantes. Ambos instrumentos consistieron en las mismas cinco preguntas semiestructuradas sobre la aplicación de actividades basadas en el enfoque comunicativo. Los datos cuantitativos se obtuvieron mediante la administración de un pre y post test a todos los treinta estudiantes. Esto se hizo utilizando una lista de verificación validada que incluía parámetros como tema, fluidez, pronunciación, gramática y competencia pragmática. Ambas pruebas evaluaron las habilidades orales de los estudiantes antes y después de la intervención, midiendo el progreso de los participantes. Los resultados mostraron que la implementación de encuestas y actividades de intercambio de opiniones en clase, en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera contribuye al desarrollo de las habilidades conversacionales de los estudiantes después de usarlas de manera regular.

*Palabras clave:* comunicación; inglés; competencias

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the 1980s, the interest in learning English increased for numerous reasons namely business, vacations, and especially for accessing education abroad. The combination of these circumstances resulted in the emergence of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA) which up to nowadays has had a great impact on the language teaching curricula all over the world, especially in contexts where non-native English teachers teach English as a foreign language. This methodology shows the importance of communication rather than focusing on isolated rules of grammar or vocabulary; that is, it emphasizes the use of the language and not its theoretical knowledge (Polack Peña, 2019).

When learning a second language, we must distinguish between acquisition and learning. The term acquisition is used to refer to the gradual development in learning a language and is used naturally in communicative situations with other people who know the language. While learning refers to the conscious process of accumulation of knowledge related to elements such as vocabulary and grammar, it is more related to the educational context (Yule, 2020).

In Ecuador, English is defined as a foreign language. This is because English is not the mother tongue and is not used as the language of communication between residents therefore students cannot easily use English outside the classroom. It is also known that children can learn the meaning of many words by regular interactions with their environment, even in the absence of formal grammatical structure. This is what the CLT method permits us to achieve (Yurovsky, 2018).

One of the biggest obstacles we face in Ecuador to developing learners' English speaking skills is the severe absence of formal and casual vocabulary among second language learners. This is partly a result of their current lack of interest in learning English because they do not find it interesting or practical. Even second language learners may be proficient in writing but not in speaking (Barriga Fray & McCandless, 2020; Ismail, 2019).

Undeniably as time goes by, learning another language has been considered from a functional point of view, which response to the concept of communicative competence. Having mentioned that, some advantages related to this method can be pointed out, for instance, CLT encourages language learners to build up language skills and the ability to use language. In contrast to traditional educational approaches, CLT is a form-focused communication (Sun & Zhang, 2021; Yasmin & Sohail, 2018).

It also includes classroom activities that engage learners to use more meaningful and authentic language. CLT, therefore, supports the teaching and learning process by increasing their strength and vitality. Besides, this strategy can inspire pupils to use English in real-world interactions with others (Jabri & Samad, 2021).

During the time we have taught English as a foreign language in Ecuadorian institutions, we have realized that students have particular difficulty with speaking skills. Even though most students have knowledge of basic vocabulary and grammar structures, they have difficulties in holding a basic conversation using the target language. In fact, students avoid using English for communication in classrooms. For that reason, it is underpinning to mention that one of the possible reasons for this problem is the lack of speaking practice in real life context plus the scarce use of proper activities that promote student interaction in class. It is worth mentioning that focusing on the English language teaching-learning process on the exclusive use of grammatical structures and on the Translation is humdrum, boring, and insignificant, which means that the learner does not know what he uses the language for (Yule, 2020).

In the Ecuadorian public institution where the intervention was conducted, there are A, B, and C levels per scholar year for EFL classes. Students participating in this study were first-year baccalaureate students whose English level was A1. These students use an Oxford University Press textbook which is suitable for A1 English level students and according to the requirements of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Assessment (CEFR). Even if students use textbooks aligned with the CEFR whose content includes speaking activities, they do not use English for communicative interaction in classrooms. Can be noticed that several elements stall the development of communicative competence in a foreign language than our native language. Among the variables cited by Basante & Gaviria that have an impact on this domain are lack of vocabulary, shyness, fear of making grammar and pronunciation errors, and lack of empathy. Eventually, developing students' ability to use English for conversational purposes is one of the educational issues that instructors must face daily in public high schools in Ecuador (Basante & Gaviria, 2019).

Consequently, this research has emerged with the purpose to enhance students' English speaking skills by exploring their perspectives on the use of communicative approach-based activities.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology applied in this study is a mix of qualitative and quantitative, with emphasis on the qualitative design because it explored the students' perspectives about the influence of the communicative approach-based strategies in conversational skill development and to measure progress during and at the end of the study. Mixed methods to conduct research connect both quantitative and qualitative, combining them, but it goes beyond adding them up and considering their interaction and potential (Hernández Sampieri & Mendoza Torres, 2018).

This research work used a convenience sampling of thirty 15 – 16 years old A1 level students enrolled in the first year of Baccalaureate of an Ecuadorian Public High School. The researchers decided to choose these students for four reasons. First, they were in a class where there was the recommended number of participants for conducting a study. Second, the thirty students who were involved in the study hold A1 level according to the results of the online placement test from MM Publications. So, they shared similar characteristics regarding the English proficiency level. Third, the high school placed these students within the highest level of English proficiency which was level B according to the class they were, however, they did not demonstrate any conversational skill development required for this level. Fourth, the students of one of the researchers took part in this study because a positive characteristic about convenience sampling is that participants are available, therefore resources are easy to find.

To obtain quantitative data with the purpose of measuring students' conversational skill improvement, the researchers applied a pre-test and a post-test, at the beginning and after the intervention, respectively. This was done using a validated checklist that was adapted from Chou's study, with previous permission of its author which was granted via email.

Regarding this checklist, Mu-hsuan Chou, created and used it as part of his research work "Teacher Interpretation of Test Scores and Feedback to Students in EFL Classrooms: A Comparison of Two Rating Methods", which was conducted in Taiwan.

Specifically, this checklist included parameters such as topic, fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and pragmatic competence. Most of these parameters are considered as elements of the communicative competence of individuals. During the pre- and post-tests sessions, students worked in pairs asking each other a set of semi-structured questions about personal information, favorite activities, likes and dislikes, favorite clothes, and plans.

To know if the application of the Communicative Approach-based activities such as student-conducted Ss and OSAs influence the conversational skills development of students, we applied the paired-T test for comparing the results from the before and after interventions (pre- and post-test outcomes). This instrument has high precision and reliability. Results of this paired-T test were analyzed using IBM through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 24 (Cascante Calderón & Villacís Altamirano, 2022).

To obtain qualitative data, the researchers conducted individual interviews with twenty students, using five semi-structured questions to ask about students' perspectives regarding the application of the communicative approach-based activities, which are the Ss and OSAs during the instruction. These questions served to gather information about learners' feelings on their participation in the Ss and OSAs, whether they liked having that kind of task in their regular classes, if they thought those activities were beneficial for their conversational skills, as well as stating both the advantages and disadvantages of their use. These interviews were done once, at the end of the intervention.

Another technique to collect qualitative data for this study was the Focus groups discussions which involved ten students and was developed at the end of the intervention, using the same five semi-structured questions applied in the individual interviews. To avoid participants misunderstanding, the researchers asked students to develop this session using their native language.

Besides, the researchers who led the individual interviews and focus group discussions did not belong to the institution where the study was conducted. The decision behind this was to avoid students feeling forced to give answers susceptible to bias about the activities developed in the classroom as part of the intervention. Finally, the researchers asked students to truthfully answer the semi-structured questions included in the individual interview and focus group discussions to avoid participants' responses altering the study outcomes. The information resulting from the use of these instruments, was recorded and transcribed. The transcribed information was coded and categorized to organize the collected data for its corresponding analysis.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The outcome of this study provided detailed qualitative information about students' perspectives on the implementation of opinion sharing activities and surveys as Communicative Approach-based activities for developing conversational skills. These findings also offer important quantitative information that shows the improvement of students' speaking skills after the intervention conducted by the researchers. The categories and codes presented in Tables 2, 3 and the numerical data entailed in Table 5 facilitate the analysis and the discussion of the results of this study.

Opinion sharing activities also motivate introverted students to participate (Muhammad, 2022). Taking into consideration that most of the students in Machala, Ecuador often feel ashamed to speak English in the classroom, these activities were engaging enough so they actually worked on them with a proactive attitude. It is also important to state that:

Opinion sharing, on the other hand, is a topic-based oral activity, where the students share and engage in a topic that affects them all. It improves a student's ability to air out his or her opinion confidently and with correct grammar. (Bagheri et al., 2019, p. 88).

In this matter, we consider it extremely necessary for English teachers to teach English using CLTA activities to prepare students for using English as a means of communication. By doing this, the students' communicative competence will be effectively developed through involving learners in using the language properly in a real-life context. In this respect "language is learned through learner-learner interaction, and the teacher's role is to facilitate and guide the learning process" (Alamri, 2018, p. 134).



Other works of research on this subject reflect as well the importance of speaking-based activities to help students to improve their speaking skills. The article Concepts for teaching speaking in the English language classroom pointed out that the ability of speaking involves more than just saying words. Speaking is a highly complex and dynamic skill that involves the use of several simultaneous processes such as cognitive, physical and socio-cultural, and a speaker's knowledge and skills have to be activated rapidly in real time. It is important, therefore, that speaking should be taught explicitly in language classrooms, simply doing speaking activities is not the same as learning the knowledge, skills and strategies of speaking (Burns, 2019).

The article Classroom activities for teaching Speaking: Voices of Indonesian EFL learners supported the results on this paper as well. Seeing from previous studies, it is safe to agree that generally, people who use English as Foreign Language have various problems in speaking the language. The results suggested that designing classroom activities were appropriate to encourage students to speak English fluently. Appropriate classroom activities in language learning would result in high motivational students to actively engage in classroom learning environment (Nugroho & Nartiningrum, 2020).

The article The Nature of Speaking in the Classroom: An Overview confirmed that speaking has been viewed as a tool to communicate, think, and learn a language. Through speaking, learners can widen their vocabulary, learn concepts, and express their ideas fluently. Communicative competence has been perceived as a vital language asset that enables learners to achieve language proficiency. This review has also shed light on the vital role of the instructor in developing or boosting learners' social-emotional learning. These roles vary according to the types of speaking activities adopted and depend on the objective of each speaking activity (Guebba, 2021).

### **Qualitative findings**

In the category Students' feelings when participating in the Ss and OSAs and reasons for these feelings, students who were interviewed individually stated that while participating in Ss and OSAs they felt gladness, confidence, and enthusiasm because these activities encouraged them to interact with their peers, become closer and share special moments with them. The communicative activities also allowed them to build their confidence when speaking. In fact:

When learners work in pairs or groups, they work independently and try to speak more and produce many sentences. This will certainly be helpful for the ELLs to boost up their confidence levels and inspire them to practice these speaking skills whenever and wherever they get the opportunity to speak (Rao, 2019, p. 14)

Participants of the focus group discussions expressed similar feelings, except for confidence. Similar to the participants of the individual interviews, they reported having these feelings because the application of Ss and OSAs provided them opportunities for communicative interaction. In addition, they also mentioned feeling in that way because they could apply the vocabulary they knew and expand it.

Moreover, when pointing out the findings on students feeling glad, confident, and enthusiastic because they could improve their conversational skills. Actually, students improve their speaking skills when they are motivated (Kassem, 2018).

CLT activities help students increase their vocabulary from the interaction of the students as it happened to the students who took part of this study. We realized that the constant practice in collaborative groups or pairs promotes the increase of students' vocabulary, thereby conversation skills and confidence too. In this regard, "fluency depends on knowing more vocabulary and on confidence" Anggraini, 2018, p. 18).

Likewise, the finding on practicing the language and feeling more confident is also supported by “students’ spoken language is more productive when they are engaged in a dynamic learning environment that encourages them to do their tasks” (Toro et al., 2018, p. 111). Therefore, we can suggest that a positive learning environment prompts students to speak more confidently and motivates them to express their ideas in English.

In like manner, on the finding of developing critical thinking, “the more students communicate with each other exchanging views and ideas, the better critical thinkers will be” (Itmeizeh & Hassan, 2020, p. 8878). According to this author, peer communication boots critical thinking in students.

Furthermore, on the finding of using grammatical structures. Grammar structures and vocabulary are better used when students engage in communicative activities (Mangaleswaran & Aziz, 2019).

Through the analysis of each one of these categories, students considered that Communicative Approach based activities have a positive effect on their speaking development and enhance their learning experience in the classroom.

### Qualitative Findings

These are the qualitative results obtained from the individual interviews and focus group discussions.

#### Findings from individual interviews

**Table 1**

*Categories and codes from individual interviews*

CATEGORIES	CODES
Students’ feelings when participating in the Ss and OSAs and reasons for these feelings	Gladness
	Confidence
	Enthusiasm
Reasons why students believe that the Ss and OSAs help to develop conversational skills	They facilitate the internalization of vocabulary
	They allow learners to practice the language and feel more confident when speaking
	They have a positive effect on pronunciation
	They create a feedback environment
	They avoid monotony
	Students develop critical thinking
	They help to assimilate new grammatical structures
They increase students’ interest in learning English	



Disadvantages of using Ss and OSAs to develop their conversational skills

Students need more control when teachers apply Ss and OSAs in large classrooms

Students may feel ashamed or shy when speaking in English

**Findings from focus group discussion.**

**Table 2**

*Categories and codes from the focus group discussion*

CATEGORIES	CODES
Students' feelings when participating in the Ss and OSAs and reasons for these feelings	Gladness
	Enthusiasm
Reasons why students believe that the Ss and OSAs help to develop conversational skills	They facilitate the internalization of vocabulary
	They allow learners to practice the language and feel more confident when speaking
	They have a positive effect on pronunciation
	They create a feedback environment
	They avoid monotony
Disadvantages of using Ss and OSAs to develop their conversational skills	They increase students' interest in learning English
	Students need more control when teachers apply Ss and OSAs in large classrooms

**Quantitative Findings**

Table 3 displays the checklist used as the instrument for the evaluation of the participants' conversational skills during the pre and post-tests. In this sense, the checklist was the tool used in the collection of quantitative data.

**Table 3**

*Checklist used as the instrument for the evaluation of the participants' conversational skills*

STUDY: "Students' Perspectives on their Speaking Improvement through Communicative Approach-Based Activities."

Rating checklist for speaking test		Name:			
		Totally	Partiall y	Somewh at	Not at all
Topic Fluency	1. Are required topical elements covered?	__3	__2	__1	__0
	2. Is the language fluent?	__3	__2	__1	__0
Pronunciation	3. Is the pronunciation correct?	__3	__2	__1	__0
Grammar	4. Is grammar used correctly?	__3	__2	__1	__0
Pragmatic Competence	5. Is the participant responding correctly & appropriately to the interlocutor's utterances?	__3	__2	__1	__0

Note 1: Adapted from: Chou, M. H. (2013). Teacher Interpretation of Test Scores and Feedback to Students in EFL Classrooms: A Comparison of Two Rating Methods. *Higher Education Studies*, 3(2), 86. Copyright 2013 by Mu-Hsuan Chou. Used with author's permission.

Table 4 shows the statistical analysis of the results obtained in the pre-test and post-test. This analysis was developed by using the IBM SPSS software version 24. Since this research work involves two related interventions (pre-test and post-test) per participant, we ran the Student T-test for paired samples test, "participants at the pre-test are the same participants at the post-test and the scores between pre- and post-test are meaningfully related" (Gerald, 2018, p. 52).

**Table 4**

*Statistical analysis of the results obtained in the pre and post-test*

		Paired Differences					t	d f	Sig. (2 tailed)
		Mea n	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mea n	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Low er	Uppe r			
Pair 1	TOPIC PRE TEST	-,567	,626	,114	-,800	-,333	-4,958	2 9	,000
	TOPIC POST TEST								
Pair 2	FLUENCY PRE TEST	- 1.20 0	,610	,111	- 1,428	-,972	- 10,770	2 9	,000
	FLUENCY POST TEST								
Pair 3	PRONUNCIATI ON PRE TEST	-,800	,761	,139	- 1,084	-,516	-5,757	2 9	,000
	PRONUNCIATI ON POST TEST								
Pair 4	GRAMMAR PRE TEST	-,767	,679	,124	- 1,020	-,513	-6,185	2 9	,000
	GRAMMAR POST TEST								
Pair 5	PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE PRE TEST	-,833	,747	,136	- 1.11 2	-,555	-6,113	2 9	,000
	PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE POST TEST								

The results obtained from the statistical analysis of the pre- and post-tests using the SPSS software yield a 0,000 level of significance for the five parameters evaluated with a confidence interval of 95% (see Table 4). Therefore, we can conclude that the students' scores obtained from the evaluation of students' conversational skills before and after the intervention with the Ss and OSAs reflect a considerable improvement on students' speaking skills.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the obtained results from the current investigation, several conclusions have been made. It was possible to verify that the students' scores achieved from the evaluation of students' conversational skills before and after the intervention reflect a considerable improvement on students' speaking skills. The progress is not only shown in numbers, it has been observed that using this kind of activities, the improvement had an important impact not only in participants' speaking skills but also in students' attitudes toward speaking activities. Therefore, it is vital that language professors create friendly environments for students to improve their oral skills. Considering this fact, the CLT approach focuses on motivating students to participate actively in a cooperative way which in the end will certainly bring about their conversational skills development.

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