

21

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EL CONTEXTO DE GUAYAQUIL: DESAFÍOS EN EL DESARROLLO DE HABILIDADES ORALES EN EFL EN EL COLEGIO SANTA ANA

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ABSTRACT

The ability to speak in a foreign language is perhaps the most difficult to develop since it demands constant practice and real-time interaction in the target language. In Ecuadorian high schools, EFL students, even those with strong comprehension skills, struggle to express themselves effectively in spoken English. Both linguistic and psychological factors influence their ability to communicate. This research explores the challenges EFL learners face in developing their speaking skills at a Catholic private school in Guayaquil. Students registered in the First Year of High School take part in the investigation. Employing a mixed-method approach, following the explanatory sequential design, the research first collects quantitative data through student surveys, followed by qualitative data insight from teacher interviews. The results allow for a better comprehension of the anxiety and avoidance behaviors students have when speaking English.

Keywords:

Speech, oral expression, foreign languages, language instruction, anxiety, speaking skills.

RESUMEN

La habilidad de hablar en otro idioma es quizás la más difícil de desarrollar ya que exige práctica constante e interacción en tiempo real. Los estudiantes de reciben inglés a nivel de secundaria y bachillerato en colegios ecuatorianos, incluso aquellos con una buena comprensión del mismo, todavía tienen dificultades para expresarse eficazmente de forma oral. Tanto factores lingüísticos como psicológicos impactan en la habilidad de los jóvenes para comunicarse de forma hablada. Este trabajo busca identificar los retos que encuentran los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en el desarrollo del speaking. La investigación se realizó en un colegio privado católico de la ciudad de Guayaquil. Los participantes fueron los matriculados en el primer año de Bachillerato. El estudio se llevó a cabo con un enfoque de método mixto, siguiendo el diseño secuencial explicativo. En primer lugar, se recogieron datos cuantitativos a través de una encuesta realizada entre los estudiantes. Luego, se recopilieron datos cualitativos mediante entrevistas con los profesores, para ayudar a explicar el problema. Los resultados permitieron tener una visión más clara acerca de las razones por las que los jóvenes se sienten ansiosos y exhiben conductas evasivas cuando se trata de hablar en inglés.

Palabras clave:

Habla, habilidades orales, idioma extranjero, enseñanza de idiomas, ansiedad, destrezas orales.

INTRODUCTION

Learning a language involves developing four linguistic skills. Speaking is often considered the most important skill as it allows the learner to communicate directly with others and engage in different kinds of social interactions. Developing speaking is crucial in language learning due to its impact on the student's motivation and the learning process as a whole (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022).

However, the teaching of speaking constitutes a difficult task since this is a skill acquired through constant practice and the use of the target language (Salamea-Avila & Fajardo-Dack, 2023). In the context of Ecuadorian schools, that teach English as a foreign language (EFL) for only three pedagogical hours a week (Ecuador. Ministerio de Educación, 2023), classes are often bigger in size than it is recommended for language teaching, leaving little time to effectively exercise the speaking skill and offer feedback to students (Newman et al., 2023).

Studies on speaking have discussed how the worry of saying things wrong in front of their peers, as well as feelings of anxiety and insecurity, hinder the student's ability to speak in the English class (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022; Irene et al., 2023; Kucuk & Daskan, 2024). Apart from these psychological barriers, poor knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation are also considered linguistic obstacles that impact the students' oral production (Qasim, 2021). To overcome this issue and make sure their words are understood, learners opt for answering in their first language, which interrupts the conversation flow, as noted by Chukwugozie Okafor et al. (2023).

On the other hand, researchers have pointed out how the use of audiovisual resources, such as videos, audio recordings, and interactive online activities, help improve students' oral comprehension and production (Salamea-Avila & Fajardo-Dack, 2023). These types of resources are thought to facilitate the learning of new words, improve pronunciation, ease the nervousness, and ultimately encourage learners to participate in the lessons, but the struggles in speaking persist.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the issues related to the learn to speak in countries where English is not the first language (Qasim, 2021; Khasawneh, 2023; Ork et al., 2024; Alvarez et al., 2024). Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the particular challenges that learners in Guayaquil face regarding speaking, considering that even after schools attempt to improve their procedures and increase the presence of technological resources in the EFL classroom, this skill continues to represent a challenge for teachers and students (Alvarez et al., 2024).

This study aims to identify the challenges that learners face in developing the speaking skill. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design is followed in which quantitative data is collected first from the pupils of the First year of High School in Santa Ana School, in Guayaquil,

via survey, to identify the factors that impact their speaking practice, what affects their accuracy and confidence, and why they resort back to their native language or avoid speaking at all. In the second phase of the study, qualitative data is collected via interviews with the English teachers of the school to explore their perspective on how the students respond to speaking class and what strategies they apply as teachers to help students improve their oral expression.

Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory consists of five distinct hypotheses: the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). Second Language Acquisition is among the most prominent concepts in the world of language learning, and its hypotheses help us understand the process by which a second language can be acquired. It also describes how motivational and emotional factors impact this process (Pauzan, 2024).

Krashen establishes a clear distinction between acquiring and learning a language. Acquisition is the natural and unconscious internalization of linguistic abilities, while learning occurs in a formal and systematic context. In both scenarios, motivation is a key element, but it varies depending on the goal, whether it is communication or academic achievement (Pauzan, 2024).

For this research, the Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a valuable framework to examine the challenges that EFL learners face during their speaking practice. This hypothesis touches on how the desire to learn, self-assurance, and fearfulness are factors that can promote or negatively affect the language acquisition process (Pauzan, 2024). Krashen (2013), suggests that when a learner feels anxious or does not view himself as a potential speaker of the language, the filter becomes a barrier to learning, which hinders the student's ability to practice and improve their oral production. This issue is notorious in speaking classes, where the learner is required to use the target language and talk instead of just passively receiving content.

Regarding the learners' feelings of insecurity, it has been stated Horwitz et al. (1986), in their Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), that the more anxious a student feels, the more they will avoid engaging in tasks they consider difficult, like speaking in the target language. The authors also define FLA as a unique type of anxiety born from judgements and presumptions particular to the language learning process in a classroom.

Anxiety in the EFL classroom undermines the learning process as it becomes a barrier for most learners, including those who perform well in other subject matters. Language anxiety comes with strong feelings of worry, stress, and nervousness that affect students' performance, generate negative emotions like frustration and fear, and make them reluctant to participate in class (Oteir &

Al-Otaibi, 2019). Hence, the importance of studying the causes of the intense worry and the lack of self-confidence students experience in the foreign language class.

Speaking belongs to the set of linguistic abilities needed to communicate in any language. It is a fundamental part of the language acquisition process since it allows the student to construct meaning and share information verbally in different situations (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022; Khasawneh, 2023). Speaking is described as the vocalization of language, which needs at least one listener to establish interaction (Qasim, 2021). Speaking can and should be used in a wide variety of contexts and scenarios, both formal and informal, to convey the speaker's ideas, opinions, and feelings. Speaking goes beyond the mere sharing of factual information, it also helps establish social relationships (Ork et al., 2024).

However, it is considered the most challenging ability to master a foreign language as it asks the learner to practice a lot (Salamea-Avila & Fajardo-Dack, 2023; Palomargareta & Astutik, 2023; Ork et al., 2024). Furthermore, by the nature of the skill, it demands constant negotiation between speakers, as well as a good understanding of social and cultural context (Ork et al., 2024). For communication to be effective, speech must be understandable. It is not necessary to imitate the accent of native speakers but to use the appropriate sounds and symbols of the language to be understood by other speakers (Chukwugozie Okafor et al., 2023). Additionally, good knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is fundamental to be able to communicate clearly (Alvarez et al., 2024).

When the learners speak, they exchange information by using of spoken words as well as nonverbal cues (Khasawneh, 2023). To struggle to speak is to fail to communicate, to fail to convey ideas or report personal experiences, and high school students often find themselves struggling to produce speech in the EFL class (Ork et al., 2024). Poor knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation is considered a linguistic feature that difficult the learning of speaking, while nervousness, insecurity, lack of self-confidence, and lack of motivation are mentioned as psychological obstacles to the oral expression (Qasim, 2021; Alvarez et al., 2024).

A good lexicon is indeed and key element of the learning process of a language as it is present in all the linguistic skills and helps students expand their knowledge and communicative abilities. Alvarez et al. (2024), mention that *“vocabulary and listening skills are strongly associated with effective speaking”*. Learners who lack vocabulary often struggle to comprehend what they hear and, in consequence, cannot respond accordingly (Friza & Wahyu, 2023). During the EFL class, students may find it hard to answer the teacher's questions or participate orally because they are unsure about the vocabulary words they need to express themselves (Palomargareta & Astutik, 2023). However, vocabulary words not only exist

as written symbols; they have sounds, and it is equally important that learners are able to pronounce them correctly at the moment of speaking.

Pronunciation is defined by the accurate production of sounds, and it becomes a fundamental component of communication, given that good pronunciation is the main source of understanding between speakers of a language (Abdul-Samad & Mahmood, 2021). Problems with pronunciation generate difficulties in language learning since students' mistakes in pronunciation affect the clarity of the message they try to convey and generate feelings of insecurity and anxiety (Gilakjani, 2012, as cited in Sukarman & Algiovan, 2022). When the activity developed in class involves speaking in front of others, either to introduce themselves or to respond to a question, students often experience nervousness and fear of making mistakes, worried that their peers may judge or laugh at their pronunciation, which makes them less likely to participate in speaking activities (Datuin Pantano & De la Cruz Ponce, 2024).

It is also common for EFL students to feel unsure on how to organize their ideas before speaking. In other words, they have a hard time producing grammatically accurate sentences. Typical issues are the use of prepositions, articles, and verb tenses (Khasawneh, 2023). Grammar is critical to produce speech, too many grammatical errors in a conversation become a distraction and make it difficult to understand the message (Alvarez et al., 2024). In Guayaquil, most students have Spanish as their mother tongue and it is important to consider that English and Spanish structures are often different from one another; therefore, students who unconsciously transfer rules or structures from their mother tongue to English end up making numerous mistakes (Chukwugozie Okafor et al., 2023). Learners who struggle with grammar feel more anxious during speaking classes than those with a better understanding of tenses and rules (Kucuk & Daskan, 2024).

Students' lack of confidence in their pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary fosters complications in the speaking practice. Horwitz et al. (1986) declare that *“anxiety can affect the communication strategies students employ in language class”* (p. 126). Those learners who feel insecure often speak too fast or too quietly to be understood, laugh nervously in an attempt to hide their errors, avoid eye contact, or even outline their ideas in a sort of script to guide their performance (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022). The fear of saying the wrong thing, along with the pressure of performing in front of their peers and under the teacher's judgment, increases learners' levels of anxiety (Ork et al., 2024). Speaking anxiety negatively impacts the language acquisition process and may lead students to failure (Kucuk & Daskan, 2024).

As a result of speaking anxiety, students may avoid participating in speaking activities, especially when required to give detailed answers to a question or sustain a short

conversation (Irene et al., 2023; Kucuk & Daskan, 2024). Another way in which learners show avoidance when facing a difficult task is by resorting back to their mother tongue (Irene et al., 2023). This strategy makes learners feel safe and with less probability of making mistakes since it is easier than to talk in the foreign language (Palomargareta & Astutik, 2023).

High levels of language anxiety impact students' motivation towards learning, too. This factor, in addition to the limited time devoted to the practice of speaking in regular EFL classes in high school and the big number of students per class, affects learners' performance in the target language (Alvarez et al., 2024).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is carried out within a mixed-method approach, a methodology that makes use of quantitative and qualitative techniques and that is commonly used in social sciences (Nagpal, 2020). This approach is selected as a way to obtain a better understanding of a phenomenon through the compilation and analysis of data as well as taking into consideration the participants' perspectives.

The study follows the explanatory sequential design divided into two phases. Quantitative data is collected first by conducting a poll among the first group of participants, the students, in order to have a general picture of the issue regarding the development of speaking skill. In the second phase, qualitative data is collected via interviews with the teachers to compare the two different perspectives and help explain the issue.

For this investigation, the sample consists in high school EFL students, and they were selected through a convenience sampling process, which is a common choice for language research (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The participants available for the study are those enrolled in the 1st year of High School, classes A and B, at Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana, a private Catholic school in the center of Guayaquil. The total number of students is 77, 35 of whom are girls and 42 boys. All the students have Spanish as their mother tongue and live within the urban areas of the cities of Guayaquil and Duran.

Additionally, the four English teachers of the school are interviewed. They are all professionals in education, with several years of experience as EFL teachers. Three of said teachers are certified B2, while the fourth one is certified C1 in English. They are all Ecuadorian and have Spanish as their mother tongue.

The instrument is designed based on Gardner's (1985), Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB), adapted for the EFL context. It seeks to collect data about students' feelings of anxiety and their attitude towards the practice of speaking in class. It consists of ten statements measured through the Likert scale. For each statement, there are

five possible answers ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree (Jamieson, 2024).

The first seven statements are taken from Gardner's AMTB. The items are selected considering their relevance to the research topic, which is speaking, meaning that the ones relating to other skills or elements of the learning process, and opinions about educators, are not taken into consideration. The last three statements of the instrument, however, are developed by the researcher and aim to explore the perception of the learners on what factors are impacting their oral production.

A pilot test is conducted with the collaboration of five teachers and a small group of teenage students selected at random from other classes of the same institution in which the research is taking place in order to validate the instruments. The test is administered on paper for both the teachers and the students, and the instrument is translated to their mother tongue to avoid any confusion. During the pilot, it is found that two statements regarding anxiety are too similar and that a few others are worded in a way that made them difficult to understand, and in consequence, adjustments are made. The survey does not take long to complete, and both groups can finish within a few minutes, so time is not a concern.

For the second phase of the research, a semi-structured interview containing nine open-ended questions is elaborated and aims to explore the teachers' perception of the practice of speaking. The instrument is developed by the researcher according to the specific objective of the investigation; it is also developed in Spanish and piloted among other language teachers from the same institution after getting the consent of the school authorities. The feedback received from both students and teachers is very useful to refine the instruments and support their validity for the research.

Phase 1

During this phase of the study, a letter is sent to the school authorities asking for their permission to conduct the research in the institution. Then, a consent form is sent to teachers and the students' parents so they can state their voluntary will to participate in the study. These documents are addressed in Spanish to ensure the clarity of the message. Total confidentiality is granted to all participants.

To conclude Phase One, the survey is conducted among the participants during one of their regular English classes in paper format.

Phase 2

During Phase Two, qualitative data is collected by the researcher via interviews with the English teachers at Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana. The interviews are conducted face-to-face at the school during different sessions according to the teachers' work schedules. The

resulting information is coded to identify patterns and then classified into categories with the aid of a word processor software and transcriptions.

The present study intends to identify the aspects that have a negative effect in the developing of the speaking skill in high school EFL students to gain a clearer perception of the learners' experiences in the classrooms, specifically within the frame of the Ecuadorian system of education, culture, and society. After years of trying to include audio-visual material in the lessons and numerous techniques to improve students' linguistics skill, and even in current days, when teenage students have a wide variety of technological resources at their hands, the issue with speaking persists. Hence, the need to question teachers and learners on the topic.

The results may support previous studies that list aspects like anxiety, lack of confidence, or poor knowledge as some of the reasons why learners fail to speak in the target language. However, new information on the issue may arise from the data submitted by the participants, laying the ground for further research to be developed and offering a fresh perspective from which adjustments can be made in the classroom to meet the learners' needs and help them achieve their linguistic goals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data is collected through a survey conducted among the students enrolled in the 1st year of High School at Santa Ana School in Guayaquil. Two students declined to take part in the study; therefore, sample was reduced to 75

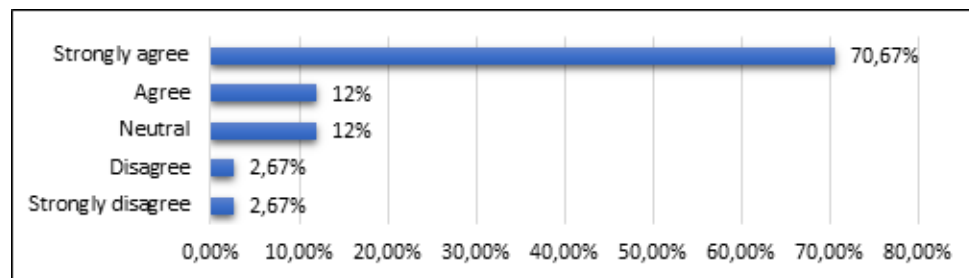


Figure 1. Speaking English is Important to Meet and Communicate with New People.

The figure shows how the majority of the participants (a total of 82.67%) agree that speaking English is important in order to meet and communicate with new people. Interestingly, 4 of the students surveyed, who represent 5.34% of the total, do not consider speaking an important skill.

2. Classroom context

Statements two to seven of the survey aim to explore the contextual factors that result in the students' avoidant behavior towards speaking. The participants are required to evaluate their experiences regarding the speaking practice in the context of their class by using the values of a Likert scale again (See Figure 2).

learners: 34 girls (45.34% of the sample) and 41 boys (54.66% of the sample). Their ages are detailed in Table 1. The instrument is translated into Spanish to avoid any possible misunderstanding of the statements, and the participants are asked to read each statement carefully before marking the option that better describes their experience.

Table 1. Profile of the participants.

	Age			
	15		16	
Girls	23	30.67%	11	14.67%
Boys	22	29.33%	19	25.33%
Total	45	60%	30	40%

Their responses are measured using the five levels of a Likert scale, that goes from Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and up to Strongly Agree. The information is organized into three categories to address each of the research questions concerning the difficulties that EFL learners encounter along the way when working on their speaking skill: (1) Importance of Speaking English, (2) Classroom context, and (3) Factors Affecting Speech Quality.

1. Importance of speaking English

Figure 1 displays data obtained from the first statement of the survey, which focuses on the importance that students give to the development of the speaking skill.

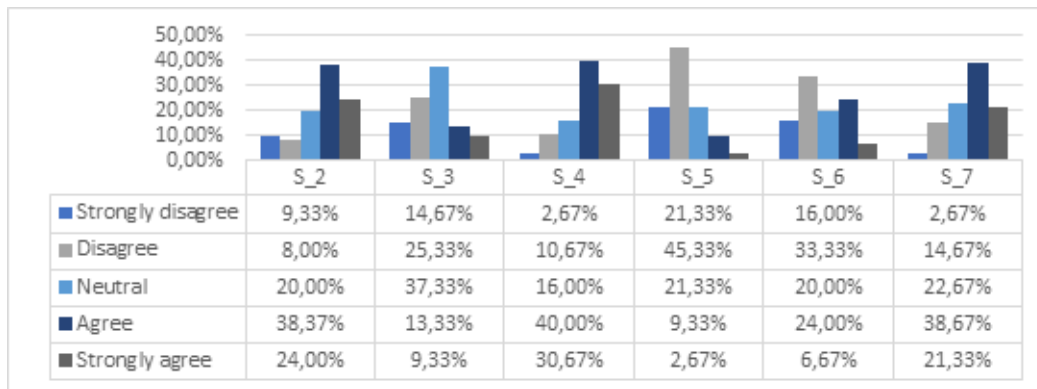


Figure 2. Classroom Context and Interaction.

Statement Two asks students about their feelings of anxiety towards speaking activities. Only 17.33% of the students say they do not feel nervous about speaking, and another 20% prefer to remain neutral. However, over 60% of the participants agree that they feel nervous when required to answer questions and speak English in class.

Statement Three is related to the students' concerns about the opinions of their peers when speaking English and how insecure they feel when talking in front of others. A total of 22.66% of students report feeling worried that their peers would judge their oral participation, while 40% of the sample express little concern about their classmates' perceptions.

Statement Four explores the fear of engaging in conversations or interactions in the target language. Most of the participants (70.67%) agree they would get nervous if they had to engage in a conversation in English, especially if the exchange occurs with a native speaker. In contrast, 13.33% of the students manifest not feeling nervous in that situation.

Still, regarding interaction, Statement Five proposes that students feel confident speaking in English in a realistic

scenario, such as giving directions to someone else. Over 60% of the participants express disagreement, versus a total of 12% who say they have no issues with this kind of interaction. The rest of the students' responses remain neutral.

This perception appears to vary in different scenarios. In Statement Six, one-third of students report feeling more confident if the interaction occurs in the context of a restaurant, like ordering food, for example. However, half of them still feel insecure about speaking English in that familiar context.

The last statement of this section explores the role that the student's mother tongue has during speaking lessons. The majority of the learners (60%) say they prefer to answer in Spanish when unsure of how to express their ideas in English, while 22.67% stay neutral, and only 17.34% do not agree with resorting back to their mother tongue.

3. Factors Affecting Speech Quality

The last section of the survey aims figure out the linguistic features that affect the students' accuracy when talking in English (Figure 3).

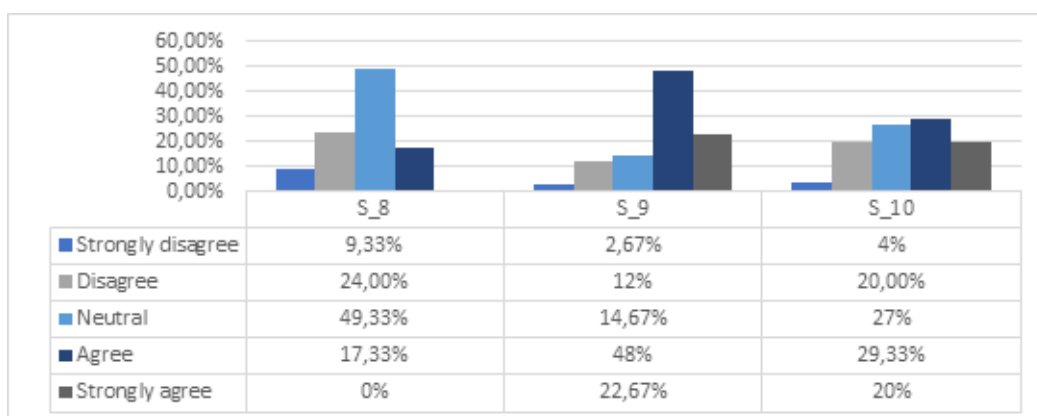


Figure 3. Factors Affecting Speech Quality.

Regarding the quality of their speech, 33.33% of the participants reported that, even though they can express themselves orally, they do not think their speech ends up being clear or well-organized (S_8). A slightly smaller percentage

of students (37.33%) do not agree or disagree with the statement, and only 17.33% of the participants manifest feeling confident about the clarity of their speech.

Similarly, students are questioned about their knowledge of vocabulary, and approximately 70% of them reported struggling to find the right words to effectively express their ideas in English (S_9). On the other hand, 14.67% of the participants consider otherwise and state that they do not have issues finding the words they need to communicate.

The last item of the survey is about pronunciation. Nearly 50% of the students declare feeling insecure about their pronunciation (S_10), while 26.67% stay neutral in that regard. Only 24% of the participants refer to not being concerned about this aspect of speaking.

The results of the survey reveal interesting information regarding students' feelings of anxiety and insecurity when speaking, especially when they have to interact with others and sustain short conversations. The learners describe difficulty when they have to turn their ideas into words in the target language. Pronunciation and vocabulary appear as relevant factors impacting the student's production of speech. Nevertheless, the vast majority of participants consider speaking an important skill to develop, which indicates positive feelings towards the subject in general.

Separate interviews are held with a total of four English teachers at Santa Ana School to discuss the issues related to the development of the speaking skill among their students. The participants are asked nine open-ended questions about the way they carry their speaking lessons, their perception of the student's behaviors in class, as well as the strategies they use in and outside the classroom to support their students' language learning process. The teachers interviewed have worked with different groups through the years, ranging from young learners to teenagers, and they have several years of experience in teaching EFL.

To facilitate the interpretation and analysis of the teachers' answers, they are classified into three categories (see Table 2).

Table 2. Teachers' Interviews Results.

Category		Teachers' answers
Importance of Speaking		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very important. • Little practice of English outside of the class.
Classroom Interaction	Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer pressure is a bigger concern. • Competitiveness. • Fear of failure. • Anxiety. • Frustration. • Mother tongue interference.

Factors Affecting Speech Quality	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure is an important issue. • Pronunciation is also a concern. • Lack of vocabulary

It is clear, from the table, that teachers acknowledge the importance of speaking. When asked how they incorporate this skill in their lessons, teachers mention the use of short conversations, role-play activities, and lots of questions at different moments of the class. Three out of the four teachers admit to carrying out their lessons both in English and in Spanish, though they constantly try to promote the use of the target language.

Regarding the opportunities the students have to speak English after the classes, most of the participants consider them to be extremely limited. The interviewed teachers mention that only a handful of students are enrolled in extracurricular language lessons or count on someone to help them practice and study at home. Teachers reported feeling worried about the little time most students dedicate to practice at home, either by using the digital resources available to record themselves speaking or by revisiting the material, which puts them at a disadvantage compared with the few ones that take extra classes.

To tackle this lack of extra practice, one of the teachers explains how she tries to have conversations in English with her students during recess, in an attempt to encourage them to speak outside the context of the class and without the pressure of grading.

When asked about the challenges that EFL students face regarding speaking, different answers are obtained. While all the teachers mention nervousness and insecurity, one teacher is also concerned about the little time they have in class to dedicate to speaking and the little practice students do on their own despite having access to a digital learning platform. Two of the participants take into account poor knowledge of grammar patterns and limited vocabulary as challenges, and another one of the teachers went as far as to include a lack of interest in the subject as a reason why students do not speak in class.

About the reasons behind the feelings of anxiety and insecurity, teachers reported that they perceive a lot of competition between peers, which usually derives in criticism or teasing, and increases the insecurity and nervousness of the ones participating. The fear of making mistakes is also mentioned as a common feature. Interestingly, when asked to further describe the effect of interaction in the EFL class, two of the teachers recognize that, depending on the activity proposed, it is possible to have students cooperating with each other, providing positive feedback and encouragement rather than criticising or mocking their peers. Teachers have noticed how this kind of interaction helps lower the levels of anxiety and increases class participation.

Another reason why students avoid talking in class, from the teachers' perspective, is the students' lack of confidence in their pronunciation, even among those who perform well in class. Teachers describe how some students usually show signs of discomfort and anxiety, talk in a low voice, and make lots of pauses when asked to speak in English. One teacher stated: "They are worried their friends will laugh at them if they say something wrong". The participants also point out that it is common to see EFL students mixing English with Spanish or choosing to answer directly in the latter during class, especially when they lack the necessary vocabulary words to clearly express themselves in the target language.

Regarding speech quality, teachers consider grammar mistakes as the more prominent factor impacting students' performance when speaking in class, with them failing to conjugate verbs correctly or misplacing words in sentences. Teachers say they offer feedback after the activities and clarify grammar rules when necessary. One of them added: "I usually ask the students to organize the idea in their heads, then we form the sentence together and identify the grammar mistake. I also help them translate the words they have forgotten or do not know in English".

After the grammar mistakes, the next concern for teachers is pronunciation, more than vocabulary, since they often find students enunciating words the way they would do it in Spanish or just struggling to say complicated words. The participants address this issue in different ways. One teacher mentioned: "We do a lot of practice with repetition of words so they learn the correct pronunciation". Two teachers said they use short readings to model pronunciation and have students copy the sounds and rhythm of the sentences. All of the teachers concur that the use of the digital book and audiovisual resources is helpful to teach pronunciation, but they do not always have enough time to incorporate them in the lessons.

The study confirms that most EFL students at Santa Ana School in Guayaquil, as well as their teachers, value the development of speaking skill and consider it a fundamental aspect of their learning process since it offers the opportunity to communicate with people from abroad. This willingness to interact with others in English constitutes a significant source of motivation for language acquisition (Pauzan, 2024).

Teachers at Santa Ana constantly try to open spaces to the practice of speaking in their lessons. However, a contradiction is found during the interviews with said teachers, who point out the little practice students carry outside the classroom and how most of them do not use the digital platform provided by the institution to exercise their linguistic skills, suggesting little interest for the subject once the school day is finished. This finding aligns with Irene et al. (2023), who states that most students stop trying to communicate orally in the target language outside

the context of the class as they perceive the practice as stressful.

The research finds different contextual factors affecting the developing of the oral communication skills of high school learners. On the one hand, the qualitative data suggest that large classes and limited time to teach the foreign language reduce the opportunities of students to practice their oral skills, and this lack of practice hinders their language acquisition process, a perception shared by Alvarez et al. (2024). On the other hand, anxiety and fear of failure also constitute considerable limitations for student's speaking performance, which is consistent with the findings of Nurilahi & Suhartono (2022), who mention fear of evaluation, fear of teacher's correction, and fear of not being understood among the psychological factors behind students' anxiety. Nevertheless, a positive aspect found during the interviews is the availability of digital learning platforms and resources that facilitate the inclusion of recordings, audio-visual content, and songs in the speaking lessons.

The results of the survey reveal moderate to little concern regarding peer pressure on the students' part. Still, this perception contrasts with the views of teachers, who indicate that EFL learners at Santa Ana school do worry about being negatively evaluated on their performance, both by their peers and teachers. These feelings of insecurity impact negatively on learners' motivation, increase their nervousness and ultimately make them reluctant to answer questions or take part in dialogues during the English class, even when they may know what to say. These findings align with the views of Horwitz et al. (1986), about Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety, who stated that anxiety in the classroom leads to avoidant behavior in students.

Further into the topic of anxiety, it is found that students fear oral interaction in the target language in general. EFL learners at Santa Ana School appear to feel particularly stressed when required to engage in conversations, a situation that arises from their perceived lack of knowledge of the language, insecurity about pronunciation, fear of making mistakes and poor self-confidence. This observation is supported by previous studies on the matter (Oteir & Al-Otaibi, 2019; Irene et al., 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2024) which have also found lack of confidence, embarrassment, poor knowledge and little motivation as contributors to language anxiety. One way to help mitigate this issue would be for teachers to lower the weight of speaking activities in the grading system; at the same time, encouraging a more cooperative environment in the classroom will allow students help each other, offer positive feedback, and build confidence in their speaking (Alvarez et al., 2024).

The impact of anxiety and the lack of confidence in their linguistic skill is reflected in the students' way of communicating in class. Teachers indicate that their pupils tend

to respond in a hesitant way, give very short answers, and more often than not, end up using their mother tongue instead of English. Most of the surveyed students agree with their teachers on this issue. This perception has also been found by other researchers who state that choosing to communicate in their first language during the speaking class comes from the comfort and confidence it provides, helping students express themselves freely and convey their message faster as the language comes naturally to them and feels easier than English (Alshayban & Alghammas, 2020; Palomargareta & Astutik, 2023). It is suggested that teachers carefully redirect the students to the foreign language without disrespecting the use of their mother tongue in class seeing that it helps process new information and understand meaning (Alshayban & Alghammas, 2020; Ork et al., 2024).

The study finds another inconsistency between the teachers and students' perspectives regarding the factors that impact the accuracy of speaking. The majority of the students identify vocabulary as the decisive factor for their oral production. For them, not having the words to say what they want to say in English is an obstacle to participate in speaking class. But when the conversation moves around a more familiar topic, involving a vocabulary they have already mastered, the feelings of anxiety decrease and the engagement in the activity improves. These findings are coherent with those of Alvarez et al. (2024), who suggests teachers reinforce the instruction of key vocabulary in order to improve the students' speaking proficiency.

In contrast, teachers consider that the difficulties with producing grammatically accurate sentences have a bigger impact on the students' speaking skill, more than vocabulary or pronunciation. The insecurity that students feel when having to choose the right tenses and structures within seconds leads to nervousness, fear of making mistakes and frustration, and ends up damaging the students' motivation to speak, as implied by Pratiwi (2024).

The one factor in which both groups coincide is the value of pronunciation. Teachers and students recognize its importance and reflect that the fear of mispronouncing words generates anxiety in most students, disregarding how good they are with grammar or vocabulary. Mistakes in pronunciation affect the learner's self-confidence and motivation as they lead to negative feelings towards the subject and, particularly, speaking activities, which hinders the student's language learning process. This finding is consistent with other research on the topic of pronunciation (Abdul-Samad & Mahmood, 2021; Datuin Pantano & De la Cruz Ponce, 2024; Alvarez et al., 2024). To address the pronunciation issue, teachers should dedicate more time to practice sounds, stress patterns and intonation, taking advantage of the available audiovisual resources, such as songs, videos, and interactive digital activities

that allow students to listen to and replicate the correct pronunciation of words.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aims to recognize the challenges that high school EFL learners face while learning to speak in the target language, to have a richer interpretation of the issue, and to leave room for future research and improvement in the teaching of speaking. The information is collected from two groups of participants separately, conducting a survey among the students first and then sustaining interviews with the teachers to determine the importance they give to the speaking skills and the reasons behind the students' struggles when performing communicative activities and talking to others in English.

From the results, it is possible to conclude that both groups are aware of the importance the speaking skill in the learning process of the English language. However, most learners stop using the language as soon as their class is finished and show little interest in the subject outside the classroom, as noted by the interviewed teachers. This little presence of the target language in the students' environment constitutes an obstacle to the development of speaking (Qasemi, 2020), leads to language anxiety (Kucuk & Daskan, 2024), and a response to the stress experienced by the learners in the language class (Irene et al., 2023).

Despite the initial positive feelings towards English as a subject, it is found that feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and lack of self-confidence on the students' part impact negatively in the development of the skill. According to the participants, the fear of making mistakes while speaking with others in English discourages students from using the language in class. It is recommended that teachers use strategies to reduce the students' anxiety, open spaces to discuss topics of interest for the learners, and use a more communicative approach in their lessons (Alvarez et al., 2024).

The interviewed teachers also mention other barriers to the development of speaking, including class size, peer pressure, lack of practice, and lack of knowledge of the language. Among the factors affecting the accuracy of the students' speech, insecurity about their pronunciation is relevant to the two groups of participants, and it is considered the main aspect behind students' hesitation and reluctance towards speaking in the classroom. Another relevant issue is the lack of knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures, that limit the learner's ability to organize their ideas and produce understandable phrases.

It is pertinent to describe the limitations found during the study. One issue is the size of the sample, consisting of only 75 teenagers enrolled in one private school in downtown Guayaquil. This fact might prevent the generalization of the results to other contexts and populations. In

addition, the results rely on the information provided by the participants, and the differences in the language proficiency of the students surveyed, despite them being at the same educative level, may have influenced their answers. Future research on this topic may benefit from a larger sample of participants, different data collection techniques, such as tests or classroom observations, and longer intervention time.

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