

Communicative approach in the development of oral skills in english

Enfoque comunicativo en el desarrollo de la destreza oral en inglés

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Artículo recibido el 22/julio/2024. Aprobado 03/agosto/2024

Abstract

In Ecuador, despite educational reforms, the teaching strategies used for teaching English as a foreign language have not been sufficient to solve the existing problems. This article examines the communicative approach in English language learning, emphasizing the importance of oral skills and aimed at developing a strategy consisting of a set of actions to improve oral communication. For this qualitative research, methods such as analysis-synthesis and inductive-deductive with a descriptive-documentary approach were used. The study used instruments such as interviews and classroom observation cards for data collection and culminated with a socialization workshop to evaluate the proposal. The population consisted of 200 students and the sample consisted of 50 first year BGU students and six English teachers. Among the results obtained, it is highlighted that teachers recognize the importance of using different strategies to motivate students, the need to use the context to develop communication. The research concludes that the communicative approach is essential for the effective development of oral skills in English by favoring exchange through communicative functions and meaningful classroom tasks such as the actions proposed in this research.

Key words: communicative approach; English language learning; oral proficiency; learning environment; classroom interaction.

Resumen

En Ecuador, a pesar de las reformas educativas, las estrategias de enseñanza empleadas para la impartición del inglés como lengua extranjera no han sido suficientes para resolver las problemáticas existentes. El presente artículo examina el enfoque comunicativo en el aprendizaje del inglés, haciendo énfasis en la importancia de la destreza oral y tuvo como objetivo la elaboración de una estrategia que consistió en un conjunto de acciones para mejorar la comunicación oral. Para esta investigación cualitativa se utilizaron métodos como el análisis-síntesis y el inductivo-deductivo con enfoque descriptivo documental. En el estudio se aplicaron instrumentos como la entrevista y fichas observación a clases para la recolección de datos y se culminó con un taller de socialización para valorar la propuesta. La población estuvo constituida por 200 estudiantes y su muestra fue de 50 alumnos de primer año de BGU y de seis docentes de inglés. Entre los resultados obtenidos se destacan que los docentes reconocen la importancia de utilizar diferentes estrategias para motivar a los estudiantes, la necesidad de utilizar el contexto para desarrollar comunicación. La investigación concluye que el enfoque comunicativo es esencial para el desarrollo efectivo de la destreza oral en inglés al favorecer el intercambio a través de funciones comunicativas y tareas significativas en clase como las acciones propuestas en esta investigación.

Palabras claves: enfoque comunicativo; aprendizaje de inglés; destreza oral; ambiente de aprendizaje; interacción en el aula.

Introduction

The communicative approach in English language learning, focusing on oral skills, is a topic of great interest to language scholars due to the importance of the language on a universal level, as English has become a global lingua franca used in situations where people, for different academic or personal interests, need to communicate. Therefore, educational institutions consider the teaching of the English language as a subject within their curriculum, with the aim of improving the communicative competence of all students who have educational needs such as deficiencies in learning oral communication in English.

Intriago (2022) states that the act of communicating is a process that depends on the skills of expression and interpretation, which goes hand in hand with oral comprehension, reading and finally writing. In other words, oral communication plays a fundamental role in daily life and in the transmission of clear and precise ideas.

Similarly, Jimenes (2019) states that teaching strategies based on oral communication should be created, which in turn should be related to the communicative approach, since it would not make sense to create strategies that do not promote real communication. In short, in order to achieve an effective development of oral communication in different contexts, it is necessary to promote interaction among students in the classroom as if they were real, everyday conversations.

Currently, strategies continue to be explored in order to simplify the acquisition of communicative competence and to find the best activity or strategy for its development. This competence depends not only on the teaching of language skills, but also on several additional factors, including the motivation, aptitudes and attitudes of the students, their learning styles, as well as the psychological environment that the teacher fosters in the classroom.

In Ecuador, the English teaching process has been approached based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is the main reference for many Latin American countries where English is taught as a foreign language. These guidelines set the standard to be followed in terms of norms, guidelines and evaluations in the teaching of the language.

However, in Ecuadorian classrooms, the desired levels are not reached despite constant reforms in the education system. Since 1912, when the teaching of English as a foreign language was implemented in Ecuador, it was not until the 1950s that it officially became a subject within the curriculum program in public and private schools.

Regarding the teaching of English in high school, several reforms have been made to the curriculum to improve content that favors mastery of the language. These proposals are flexible, worked by sublevels, developed in five curricular blocks aligned with the exit profile and the values of justice, innovation and solidarity that it promotes, as well as with the CEFR (Ministry of Education, 2016). It should be emphasized that it is necessary to have a sufficient level of English to be able to obtain a degree if required.

Within the framework of pre-professional practices at the "Cinco de Mayo" Fiscomisional Educational Institution, the presence of deficiencies in the development of oral communication skills became evident. Therefore, it was decided to carry out observations and interviews to recognize the deficiencies in terms of the organization of conversations or coherence, fluency, turn-taking, use of grammatical structures and pronunciation.

The foregoing allowed us to establish the research question: How to promote the learning of oral skills focused on the fluency of high school students at the "Cinco de Mayo" Fiscomisional Educational Institution?

The objective was to develop a methodological strategy, supported by a set of tasks, to promote the oral skills of first-year high school students at the "Cinco de Mayo" Fiscomisional Educational Institution.

Materials and methods

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this study as it allows for an in-depth understanding of human experiences within their specific contexts. By focusing on the quality rather than the quantity of data, this approach facilitates the exploration of the phenomena under investigation from the perspective of the participants themselves.

The study population consisted of a total of 200 first-year high school students of the institution. Through a non-probabilistic convenience sampling, a sample of 50 high school students was selected. The six English teachers who taught these students were also interviewed.

In order to collect the necessary data, instruments such as semi-structured interviews with both teachers and students were used. The interview with teachers focused on their perceptions about the importance of oral expression, the methodological strategies they employed and the didactic resources used. On the other hand, the interview with the students allowed us to inquire about their experiences, attitudes and difficulties in relation to the practice of oral expression in English.

Furthermore, two classroom observations were conducted to analyze the activities and strategies used by teachers in the classroom. Particular attention was paid to oral interaction activities, the frequency with which English was used as the language of instruction, and the type of feedback provided by teachers.

An important point in this research was the development of the strategy, which consisted of a set of actions characterized by techniques from the communicative approach. Each proposed action includes an objective and a method of implementation.

Once the actions were established and socialization workshop was conducted where the teachers participating in the study evaluated the proposed set of actions to improve students' oral communication in English.

During the process, structured protocols were followed for individual and group interviews, addressing relevant topics on the communicative approach and oral expression.

The data collected was analyzed through a process of coding and categorization, which allowed for the identification of patterns and recurring themes. It is important to note that this research was conducted in accordance with ethical research principles, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all involved.

Results

Classroom observation

Data collected from classroom observations with 25 students in each course, totaling 50 students revealed that the lesson objective was not clearly explained, which hindered the understanding of some of the activities by the students, especially when it came to oral communication activities where the fear that some students have of responding or participating in such tasks was noticeable. This nervousness can be attributed to a lack of self-confidence and fear of making mistakes.

As shown in Figure 1, classroom observation provided information on the students' performance in oral comprehension activities such as role-plays, debates, oral expression, among others, which revealed deficiencies in fluency, coherence, pronunciation and cohesion.

In addition to the influence of psychological aspects such as motivation, which was considered minimal by students who often felt little commitment to the activities to be carried out.

Therefore, it is important to create a supportive and trusting environment where students feel comfortable practicing and developing their communication skills.

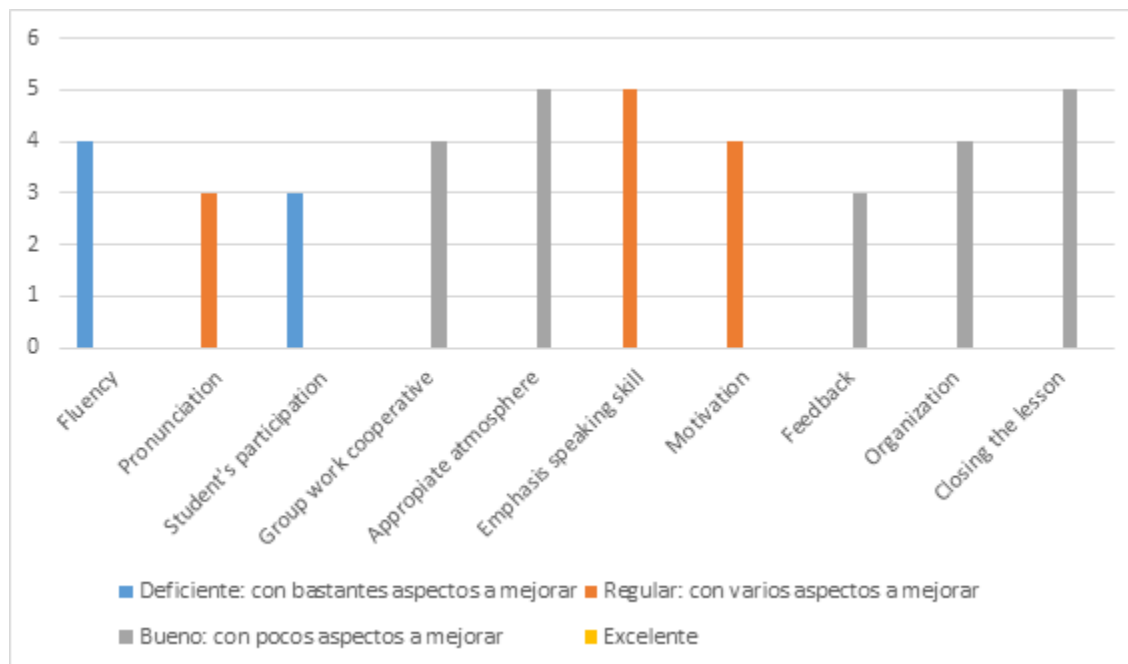


Figure 1: description of the aspects observed in classes.

Interview with teachers

Based on the responses obtained by the English teachers, a high consideration of the importance of oral communication in the learning process is revealed. This perception is reflected in terms ranging from "high" to "very high", which indicates a generalized consensus in the valuation of this linguistic skill. According to 100% of the teachers, the activities proposed to motivate students include various techniques of the communicative approach, from role-plays, simulations, debates, among others. Work in pairs or small groups is adapted to the interests and age of the students, and there are also more complex activities, such as working with new vocabulary and making individual presentations, which seek to encourage greater depth in the development of oral communication.

In terms of effectiveness, 100% highlighted activities such as role-playing, the use of songs, and projects related to everyday life to improve oral fluency. They also attached importance to confidence-building activities such as encouraging active participation in class and non-monotonous activities, which contribute to creating an environment conducive to the development of oral proficiency in English.

100% of the teachers recognized the important influence of psychological factors in this process, such as the educational and family environment, learner motivation, and the quality of the learning environment. Emphasis was also placed on the need to work on self-esteem and promote positive interactions among students to facilitate better oral proficiency development.

Although various strategies for implementing extracurricular activities were presented, such as homework, extra sessions and clubs, some teachers mentioned geographical or time constraints that may affect the implementation of these activities.

Regarding the resources and methodologies used, the use of technology, visual materials and practical activities adapted to the needs and preferences of the students was highlighted. Assessment of progress was carried out through various methodologies, such as direct observation, formal assessments and instruments such as rubrics, although challenges related to student disinterest and lack of preparation at home that may influence this assessment are noted.

Group interview with students.

A group interview was conducted with first-year high school students in which they were asked about their preferences for oral communication activities and their perception of error correction, and their experiences and opinions in this regard were explored in depth.

90% of the students commented that one of the activities they most enjoy doing is role play because this activity allows them to work in a team, develop self-confidence and improve their communication skills in a positive environment. Error correction is also perceived as a valuable tool for learning because it helps them to identify their weaknesses and improve their performance in oral communication.

70% affirm that it is more comfortable to be with other classmates and generates more confidence when exposing and speaking, while 30% consider it better to work individually, arguing that some classmates are not responsible and hinder the development of the activity. On the other hand, they are very afraid to speak during class, for fear of making a mistake, something that affects most of the students.

Strategies to foster oral communication

1. Fluency Development

Action 1: Role-Playing Activities

Objective: Enhance spontaneous speaking and reduce hesitation.

Implementation: Design scenarios relevant to students' interests and experiences. Encourage students to act out roles, promoting natural dialogue and interaction.

Action 2: Storytelling Sessions

Objective: Foster continuous speech and narrative skills.

Implementation: Students create and share stories based on prompts. Focus on maintaining a steady pace and using connectors to link ideas smoothly.

2. Pronunciation Improvement

Action 3: Phonetic Drills and Minimal Pairs

Objective: Correct common pronunciation errors.

Implementation: Regular practice with phonetic drills and minimal pairs exercises. Use audio recordings to model correct pronunciation and allow students to compare their own speech.

Action 4: Tongue Twisters and Rhymes

Objective: Improve articulation and stress patterns.

Implementation: Integrate tongue twisters and rhymes into warm-up activities. Emphasize the correct intonation and rhythm.

3. Turn-Taking Skills

Action 5: Structured Debates

Objective: Teach students to manage turns in conversation.

Implementation: Organize debates on familiar topics. Use clear rules to ensure equal participation and practice interrupting politely and re-entering the conversation.

Action 6: Group Discussions and Pair Work

Objective: Enhance interactive communication.

Implementation: Regularly arrange group discussions and pair activities. Provide prompts and guidance on how to take and yield turns effectively.

4. Coherence and Cohesion

Action 7: Guided Discussions

Objective: Promote logical structuring of ideas.

Implementation: Facilitate discussions with specific questions to guide the flow of conversation. Encourage students to use linking words and phrases to connect their ideas.

Action 8: Speech Planning and Outlining

Objective: Improve organizational skills in oral presentations.

Implementation: Teach students to plan and outline their speeches. Practice organizing thoughts logically and using signposting language to guide the listener.

Discussion of the results

A significant finding of this research is the proposed strategy, which is grounded in a set of actions designed to motivate students, foster their participation, and develop oral communication skills. This design, which addresses observed deficiencies in participants, such as fluency, pronunciation, and coherence, represents a significant contribution to the field of study.

Strategies are not limited only to the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information. According to Oxford (1990), strategies are deliberate actions that students employ to facilitate learning that is more accessible, rapid, enjoyable, self-directed, effective and transferable to new situations. This implies that it is not just a matter of receiving information, but also of carrying out specific actions that allow understanding, remembering and applying knowledge in different contexts.

The results obtained through the applied research instruments revealed valuable information about student organization in the classroom, highlighting the effectiveness of working in pairs or groups. These dynamics favor practice and communicative interaction, despite the fear experienced by some students, which manifests as nervousness due to a lack of confidence. Collaborative work and activities such as role-plays, the use of songs, and projects related to everyday life are presented as effective strategies to improve oral fluency. According to Salas-Alvarado (2016), teamwork is fundamental for personal growth and success in today's world. Implementing this methodology in the classroom not only allows for the acquisition of conceptual knowledge but

also promotes the development of values such as collaboration, teamwork, and other positive attitudes.

Donough and Shaw (1993) argue that role-play is fundamental in language teaching, as it provides students with the opportunity to practice communication in various contexts and social roles. This methodology not only fosters creativity but also allows students to adopt different perspectives. Additionally, the importance of implementing activities that reinforce confidence, such as encouraging active participation in class and carrying out tasks that avoid monotony, is emphasized, thus contributing to creating an environment conducive to the development of English oral skills.

Teachers have recognized the significant influence of psychological factors in this process, including the educational and family environment, student motivation, and the quality of the learning environment. The need to work on students' self-esteem and promote positive interactions among them is emphasized to facilitate better development of oral skills.

Furthermore, the use of technology, visual materials, and practical activities adapted to the needs and preferences of students is highlighted as an effective methodology for improving oral fluency. Students, for their part, positively value error correction as a learning opportunity, which highlights the importance of providing constructive feedback in the development of communicative competence.

Conclusions

The analysis of the theoretical and methodological aspects of the teaching process focused on the fluency of the English language, from the communicative approach, revealed the need for a comprehensive approach that combines linguistic and extralinguistic skills. The interaction in the classroom between teachers and students also highlighted the importance of establishing clear objectives and fostering participation, including activities such as role-playing and group work.

The current state of students' preparation for oral communication at the "Cinco de Mayo" Fiscomisional Educational Institution revealed deficiencies in fluency, pronunciation, and confidence when speaking. Despite the efforts made, the levels of communicative competence have not reached the desired objectives, indicating the need for more effective and personalized strategies.

However, the socialization workshop highlighted the usefulness of sharing effective practices and strategies among teachers. This not only facilitates the teaching of English but also fosters a collaborative environment and continuous improvement in the educational community.

Finally, the implementation of diverse strategies to foster oral communication in the classroom is proposed, highlighting the use of role-playing activities, which allow students to practice spontaneous speech in relevant contexts and reduce hesitation, as well as storytelling sessions that improve fluency and reinforce narrative skills. The incorporation of these strategies will enrich the learning experience and contribute to the comprehensive development of oral communication skills, therefore, it is recommended that teachers evaluate and adapt these practices according to the needs of their students, creating a more effective and dynamic learning environment.

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