

Speaking Strategies to Increase Student Talking Time in a 9th-Grade EFL Classroom

Estrategias de expresión oral para incrementar el tiempo de participación en inglés en estudiantes de noveno grado

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Abstract

This research study examines the effectiveness of speaking strategies such as role-play, group discussions, and pair work supported by instructional materials to promote meaningful interactive activities with ninth-grade students to increase Student Talking Time (STT) in Cuenca with 40 students who have A2 elementary English proficiency level in a private institution. Specifically, in the Ecuadorian context, English as a foreign language classes tend to be more teacher-centered, which limits learners from actively participating in class and developing their oral skills, losing the focus on student-centered learning. To address this issue, this qualitative study seeks to determine whether communicative strategies enable students to speak in class. In this study, various speaking strategies are implemented during five observed classes to encourage participation and the development of communicative speaking skills. Class observations are evaluated using an observation checklist that fulfills certain criteria to be assessed during the speaking session, as specified in the process of this research. The main aspects to consider are motivation, fluency, and confidence, which help learners succeed in improving their English language skills. The findings indicate that communicative strategies increase oral participation and build self-confidence among learners. Nonetheless, it is observed that some students appear anxious, whether because of speaking anxiety or limited language proficiency, and would revert to using their native language when struggling; however, the use of communication strategies helps them feel more confident. The results obtained, the respective analysis, as well as the conclusions and recommendations, are detailed to provide engaging conversational strategies to develop in class.

Keywords: Communication; student participation; skills.

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Resumen

Este estudio de investigación examina la efectividad de estrategias de expresión oral, como juegos de rol, discusiones grupales y trabajo en parejas, apoyadas por materiales didácticos, para promover actividades interactivas significativas con estudiantes de noveno grado y aumentar su tiempo de habla en Cuenca, con 40 estudiantes, nivel A2 de inglés elemental en una institución privada. En el contexto ecuatoriano, las clases de inglés como lengua extranjera se centran en el profesor, lo que limita la participación activa y el desarrollo de sus habilidades orales, perdiendo el enfoque en el aprendizaje centrado en el alumno. Este estudio cualitativo determina si las estrategias comunicativas permiten a los estudiantes hablar en clase. En este estudio, se implementan estrategias de expresión oral durante cinco clases observadas para fomentar la participación y el desarrollo de las habilidades comunicativas. Las observaciones de clase se evalúan mediante una lista de verificación que cumple con ciertos criterios para ser evaluadas durante cada sesión, tal como se especifica en el proceso de esta investigación. Los aspectos a considerar son la motivación, la fluidez y la confianza, que ayudan a los estudiantes a mejorar sus habilidades en inglés. Los hallazgos indican que las estrategias comunicativas aumentan la participación oral y fortalecen la autoconfianza. Sin embargo, se observa que algunos estudiantes se muestran ansiosos, ya sea por ansiedad al hablar o por un dominio limitado del idioma, y recurren a su lengua materna cuando tienen dificultades; el uso de estrategias comunicativas genera seguridad. Los resultados obtenidos, el análisis, así como las conclusiones y recomendaciones, se detallan para proporcionar estrategias conversacionales atractivas para desarrollar en clase.

Palabras clave: Comunicación; participación del estudiante; habilidades.

Introduction

One vital skill in learning a language is oral expression, as it allows learners to express ideas, interact with others, and use the language in real-life situations. Despite its importance, in many English classes, there are not enough opportunities for students to speak and apply what they learn because the teacher does most of the talking during the lesson, while learners remain passive, which results in reduced participation and limited active language use (Goh & Burns, 2012). This imbalance between Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT) can limit students' ability to actively participate in classes, gain confidence to speak, and develop their communicative skills. This shows the necessity to implement strategies that promote student participation and build self-confidence and engagement in communicative activities (Sanako, 2024).

Although communicative methods have gained popularity in recent years, teacher-centered instruction still prevails in many English classrooms. These situations force learners into a passive role, giving little opportunity to participate, share opinions, or practice the language meaningfully (Richards, 2006). This contrasts with the objectives set by Ecuador's National EFL curriculum, which emphasizes developing competences and spoken production at the secondary level (Ecuadorian Curriculum, 2016).

This gap is particularly relevant in Ecuador, where teaching and learning English as a foreign language is a priority across the educational system. As society becomes more globalized and technology-driven, a more communicative approach to language teaching is needed to meet students' real needs. Although the Ecuadorian government has aimed to ensure that graduating students reach a functional level of English, this goal has not been fully achieved, partly because of the limi-

ted speaking proficiency of most pupils. This is a situation that is more pronounced in cities such as Cuenca, where exposure to English outside school remains limited.

Multiple studies have identified that an increase in student speaking time correlates with greater linguistic and communicative competence. Thus, the more oral interaction learners have, the greater the fluency and confidence they develop in speaking English (Harmer, 2020; Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

Although previous research has demonstrated the benefits of communicative language teaching, little qualitative evidence has examined how specific speaking strategies influence Student Talking Time in Ecuadorian secondary EFL classrooms through classroom observation. This is an important gap that needs further research: how might we encourage speaking participation and improve oral communication among English language learners?

This study addresses that gap through classroom observations and seeks to investigate effective oral communication strategies that increase the speaking time of 40 ninth-grade EFL students in a Cuenca secondary school and contributes to better communication in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Based on that, we will determine a set of effective strategies that encourage speaking participation during class and examine the opportunities that students have to speak fluently. This aspect is relevant to the national curriculum for teaching English as a foreign language, which focuses on oral communication at the secondary level (Ecuadorian Curriculum, 2016).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Communicative Competences

To develop effective oral communication skills in a foreign language classroom, the approach requires focusing on communicative skills rather than memorizing grammatical structures. Communicative language teaching is crucial for 9th-grade EFL students at an A2 elementary English proficiency level who need to communicate through interactive activities. In this regard, Dell Hymes (1972), establishes the concept of communicative competence. In particular, he stated that communicative skills go beyond the use of grammatical knowledge and grammatical structures as such, emphasizing that learners must acquire the language in social contexts based on their real-life experiences. Therefore, from this point of view, we examine the speaking skill, which involves understanding when to speak, what to say, and how to adapt the language according to the situation.

To apply Hymes' theory in the classroom, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) was developed as the primary methodological framework. According to Richards (2006), CLT focuses on teachers creating opportunities for meaningful language practice so that classes are not traditional and repetitive. Under this framework, interactive activities such as role-playing, group discussions, and pair work are designed. These activities are essential for promoting fluency, encouraging oral production, and reducing students' stress or anxiety while communicating. Con-

sequently, this approach encourages students to fulfill their active role in Student Talking Time (STT) by increasing their meaningful class participation, while the teacher takes on the role of a facilitator in the teaching space. Ultimately, the development and implementation of CLT principles enable students to practice English at their A2 elementary English proficiency level in social and cultural settings that reflect real-life contexts, allowing them to become active participants in their own learning.

Social Interaction Theory

To facilitate the acquisition of a new language, the theory states that contact with other people is an important element in that development. In fact, students are unable to develop their speaking skills if students simply memorize vocabulary and grammatical structures without active communication. To support this, Vygotsky (1978), states that people learn through social and communicative interaction at the linguistic and cognitive levels and that this learning is processed internally at the individual level. In this way, the acquisition of a new language occurs when learners construct knowledge through social interaction, which is then internalized by the learner. Thus, according to this approach, teaching activities should be designed as collaborative spaces that facilitate the exchange of knowledge among students.

This theoretical perspective is applied in practical terms in activities such as role-play and partner exercises in the classroom. In a 40-student classroom where students have an A2 level of elementary English proficiency, the prospect of speaking in the classroom or in public generates anxiety or concern about making particular mistakes. But participating in pair activities builds a sense of trust and reduces social pressure, which helps pupils communicate more effectively. Through these social interactions, students practice Vygotsky's (1978) theory, which defines the process of scaffolding where learners exchange and share knowledge. Consequently, the teacher needs to reduce speaking time, letting students be the protagonists of their own learning.

The balance between Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT)

To encourage learners to speak more fluently, teachers need to cut down Teacher Talking Time (TTT), which means that traditional classes must be replaced with practical classes. For instance, in many EFL classrooms in Ecuador, the teacher spends most of the time teaching grammar structures and providing instructions. The main issue is that if the teacher talks the whole time in class, this limits the students' opportunities to practice the language being taught. According to Jeremy Harmer (2007), when the teacher talks for the entire 40-minute lesson, learners are likely to lose interest and become passive. Furthermore, Scrivener (2011), points out that effective English classes should involve more interaction through Student Talking Time (STT) instead of Teacher Talking Time (TTT). Therefore, teachers must find a balance so that this leads to effective use of the language in the classroom.

Increasing Student Talking Time (STT) in the classroom helps students overcome their anxiety about communicating. In fact, in a class of forty students, if the teacher talks 80% of the lesson, the pupils have fewer opportunities to develop their speaking skills. By reducing Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and providing partner activities, every student can practice the language at the same time. This aligns with the ideas of Richards (2015), who explains that people learn a language by practicing it and using it to communicate effectively. Finally, giving students this space makes them the center of the learning process, while the teacher becomes a guide in supporting them as they learn and develop their communicative skills.

Speaking Strategies in the EFL Classroom

Getting students to speak English is a challenge for beginners, which is why the use of communicative strategies is essential. In many English-language contexts, learners do not speak in class because anxiety tends to take hold of them, and pupils remain silent during lessons for fear that they will be judged when speaking. The implementation of oral communication strategies is effective, as they serve as immediate solutions to these problems, encouraging students to use body language or appropriate vocabulary to get their message across. Brown (2001), states that these tools are crucial for reducing the affective filter, helping students manage their anxiety and fear of public speaking, while allowing them to feel more confident when expressing their ideas and thoughts. Finally, this is an essential process for effective communication.

The use of role-play, group discussions, and pair work in classrooms with 40 students encourages everyone to get involved in the development of language skills. As a matter of fact, classes become more effective when students are divided into pairs or groups, since this format encourages mutual support. Along these lines, Oradee (2012), argues that communicative activities significantly improve oral skills and are essential because they are student-centered, thereby creating a more dynamic and active classroom learning environment. Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that communicative interaction, collaborative learning, and reduced Teacher Talking Time create conditions that increase learners' opportunities to develop oral proficiency.

Methodology

Research design

This research adopts a qualitative action-research approach based on participant observation. This is an effective approach that encourages teachers to conduct educational research to enhance student learning within an educational setting (Mertler, 2020). This research design is appropriate for this study, as the primary objective is to examine how speaking strategies increase Student Talking Time (STT) by addressing factors such as anxiety and fear of public speaking. Furthermore, this study focuses on analyzing, describing, and interpreting students' interactions,

experiences, and affective factors, rather than using quantitative data to measure their participation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). In this research, the teacher takes part, observes, and interprets the results obtained from this qualitative data.

Context and Participants

For this research, a sample of 40 students from the ninth grade (10 females and 30 males) was selected. These participants were between 13 and 14 years old. The participants were from a private school that is located in Cuenca, Ecuador, and had an A2 elementary English proficiency level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). This group has 6 hours of English, where each hour consists of a 40-minute class. In addition, there is one day a week of English lab classes, in which interactive activities are used to develop their language skills. It is also important to mention that learners have access to printed textbooks and a digital platform with extra activities designed to help them improve their skills. The observational checklist was completed by the teacher, who is the researcher. The researcher carried out the five observational classes and recorded each lesson immediately after each class concluded.

Figure 1. Participant Demographic Profile

Variable	Description
Number of participants	40 students
Sex	Male and female (30 / 10)
Age	13–14 years old
Institution	Private
Class duration	40 minutes
English hours per week	6 hours
Classes observed	5
English level	Basic (between A1 and A1.1, CEFR)

Source: own elaboration.

Data Collection Instruments

Observations were conducted to gather information about students' performance to comprehend how the implementation of speaking strategies influenced Student Talking Time (STT) and how classes were transformed into learner-centered lessons. Checklists were used to ensure that the criteria were fulfilled in order to encourage student participation in class and reduce the Teacher Talking Time (TTT). The checklist focused on specific parameters such as student participation, the amount of time pupils spend speaking English, interaction with classmates, students' confidence, and student hesitation when speaking. This approach enabled an assessment of how these parameters increased student participation and performance during this educational research process.

The following figure shows the detailed observation checklist that applies to the ninth-grade students, with the criteria to evaluate the students' performance.

Figure 2. Observation checklist

Criteria	Yes ✓	No X	Comments
Students participate actively during the activity	☐	☐	
Students speak in English most of the time	☐	☐	
Students interact with classmates (not only the teacher)	☐	☐	
Students show confidence when speaking	☐	☐	
Students produce complete sentences	☐	☐	
Students stay engaged during the activity	☐	☐	
Students participate voluntarily	☐	☐	

Source: own elaboration.

Additionally, Figure 3 presents the strategies to be observed through five class sessions to analyze the impact on student oral interaction.

Figure 3. Strategies Observed

Strategy Used	Yes ✓	No X	Comments
Pair work	☐	☐	
Group discussion	☐	☐	
Role play	☐	☐	

Source: own elaboration.

Results

A qualitative research study was performed in a ninth-grade EFL classroom with 40 A2 elementary English proficiency level students to examine the effectiveness of communicative strategies and the impact of encouraging student participation. To conduct this study, permission was obtained from the director at a private school in Cuenca. Consequently, once approved, 5 class sessions were monitored to implement strategies such as role-playing, pair work, and group discussions. Moreover, an observation checklist based on specific parameters for assessment, such as students' confidence, participation, and interaction, was employed. It has been demonstrated that students initially avoided speaking during the application of grammar-focused strategies, but they progressively initiated conversations due to the considerations and variations discussed in this study. These findings are divided into the following data.

Section 1-Student Talking Time and Teacher Talking Time

Figure 4 presents the qualitative analysis and the time spent during the five observation lessons conducted in the classroom.

Figure 4. Distribution of Classroom Interaction Across the Five Observed Sessions.

Session	Dominant Speaker	Description of Interaction	Classroom Focus
Session 1	Teacher	The teacher dominated the lesson through direct explanations and instructions. Students remained passive listeners.	Teacher-Centered
Session 2	Teacher	Instructional delivery occupied most of the time, but short pair-work instances allowed minor student participation.	Mixed
Session 3	Balanced	The time was divided equally between teacher guidance and student communicative activities.	Transition
Session 4	Students	Students performed role-plays and group work, while the teacher transitioned into a facilitator role.	Student-Centered
Session 5	Students	Learners actively engaged in the communicative tasks, executing autonomous oral production during most of the lesson.	Student-Centered

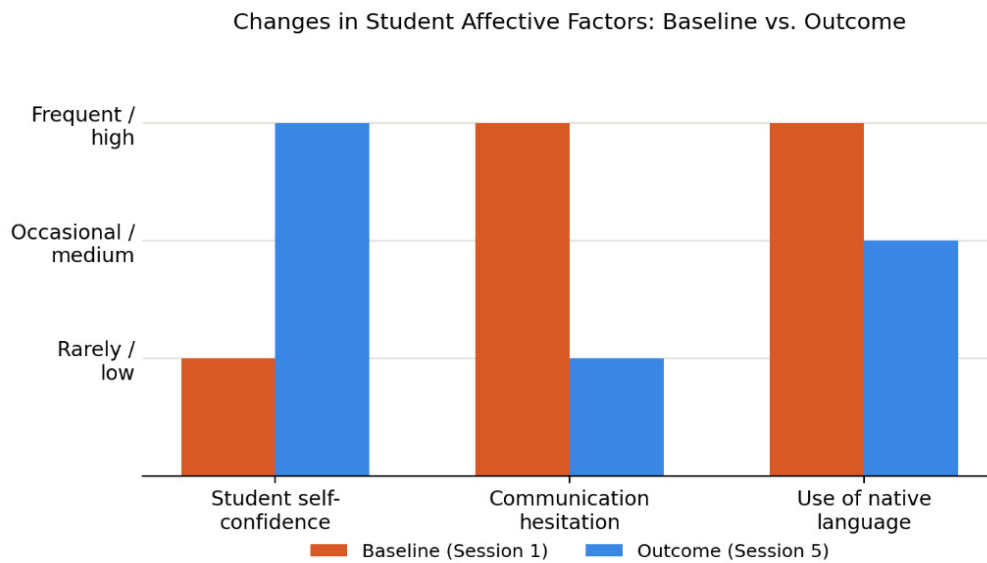
Source: own elaboration.

In this regard, as illustrated in Figure 4, Teacher Talking Time predominated extensively at the beginning of the sessions. During the initial classroom observations, the teacher took control of the class by giving instructions and explanations, which left limited time for the “production phase” of the lesson. However, in the last lessons observed in which communicative strategies were implemented, the class was student-centered, and the teacher acted as a guide and facilitator.

Section 2 -Changes in affective factors

Figure 5 illustrates the difference between how students started in Session 1 and how they finished in Session 5, using three emotional criteria. First, the students’ confidence increased significantly: at first, the learners were unwilling to participate because they experienced speaking anxiety, but by the end of the intervention, they were able to express themselves with confidence. Second, nervousness and pauses when speaking were significantly reduced, thereby enabling the students to express themselves fluently during the final session. Finally, at the beginning of the lessons, when observed, most of the students spoke Spanish during class; however, after the strategies were adopted, learners reduced their reliance on their native language and became consistent in communicating in English.

Figure 5. Changes in Students' Affective Factors Between Baseline and Final Sessions

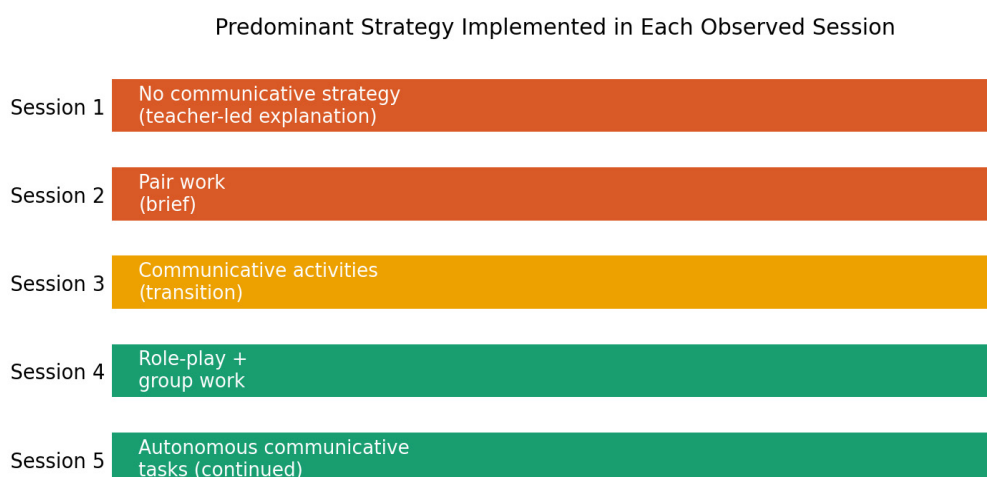


Source: own elaboration.

Section 3-Strategy and Participation

Role-playing exercises and group discussions motivated students to speak up during the lessons and ensured that the class was student-centered. After applying these activities during the five sessions, observations presented that, it was noticed that the students struggled to maintain conversations without the teacher's guidance. This highlights the argument made by Oradee (2012), who points out that communicative activities are designed to engage learners as active participants in the educational process.

Figure 6. Predominant strategy implemented in each observed session.



Source: own elaboration.

Discussion

Beyond examining the effectiveness of the Student Talking Time (STT) strategies implemented, it is important to understand why they were effective. At first glance, working in pairs seems to have been effective, since working with just one partner allowed them to build trust with each other, enabling them to ask questions and resolve their doubts without having to depend on the teacher. In role-play activities, students take on a character rather than speaking directly, which helps them reduce their anxiety and fear of speaking and encourages spontaneous responses. This type of activity distracted students so they would not feel exposed, allowing them to participate freely. Lastly, the group discussion activity achieved the objectives proposed for this research, as the participation of several learners ensured that the responsibility did not rest on a single student. Additionally, the diversity of ideas allowed students to be more open-minded when sharing ideas in groups. In this activity, the students felt more confident, which allowed the shyer students to speak up.

Comparison with previous studies

On the one hand, the results largely align with Harmer (2007, 2020) and Scrivener (2011), who link a reduction in Teacher Talking Time (TTT) to enhanced student participation, and with Oradee (2012), as role-playing and group discussions were the strategies clearly linked to an increase in Student Talking Time (STT). However, findings differ somewhat from Vygotsky (1978) and Richards (2006), who suggested that peer interaction promotes autonomy in a rather direct way. Consequently, after observing the five classes, the researcher noted that during the final session, the students continued to struggle to hold a conversation, which may mean that it will take more time for learners to develop their language skills accurately.

This study has several limitations: first, it involved a group of 40 students in a private class, which does not provide a large enough sample to reflect the intended findings. Second, the classes observed, consisting of a total of 5 sessions, were very short, since the results were achieved in the short term. Although the observation was conducted by only one educator, in fact, the same one who was conducting the research; thus, it is important to include another researcher so that they can interpret and view the reality of the classroom from a different perspective. It is crucial to mention that students' perceptions should be considered for further research projects.

Implications for Teachers' Training and Practice

Implementing communication strategies in the classroom is beneficial to reduce anxiety and improve fluency through interactive activities; they should be applied from the beginning of the school year and not just for a research project. In fact, this is consistent with the provisions of the 2016 national curriculum. On the other hand, it is important to mention that excessive use of Teacher Talking Time (TTT) limits students' ability to develop their communication skills, since

the approach is teacher-centered. Therefore, this research highlights that teachers must be highly trained through workshops to reduce Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and increase Student Talking Time (STT) by creating opportunities for students to express themselves.

Contribution to existing research

Previous studies (Harmer, 2007; Scrivener, 2011; Richards, 2006), argue theoretically that if teachers speak less, students speak more; however, this does not show how this occurs in real classrooms. This research study reveals the observed progression toward student-centered interaction, as it demonstrates how students gradually became more engaged in class, participated more, developed trust among themselves, reduced their use of their native language, and, most importantly, exchanged knowledge. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that it takes longer than expected for students to become independent learners.

Conclusion

This research study aimed to examine how speaking strategies increase Student Talking Time (STT) in an EFL class. The study was carried out with the participation of forty students from a ninth-grade class at a private EFL institution located in Cuenca. Some strategies were implemented, such as role-play, group discussions, and pair work; these strategies indicated a gradual shift from a teacher-centered class to a more student-centered one, reducing the amount of time the teacher spent speaking. As the observational classes progressed, the students became the focus of the class.

Beyond the linguistic progress, the intervention also had a positive effect on the students. The confidence of the students in speaking improved in a meaningful way between the first and last sessions; their fear of speaking decreased; furthermore, their reliance on their native language diminished, allowing them to develop their communication skills freely.

However, it is important to note that these improvements should not be interpreted as complete autonomy. Although the improvements in communicative competence were successful, the students still had difficulty maintaining fluent conversations without the teacher's guidance, and the research process was very short. It is also important to point out that a teacher observer participated in the study, which limits the possibility of obtaining different interpretations from different researchers.

For further research projects, it is recommended to involve a comparison group in order to gather data that allows researchers to analyze the effectiveness of communicative strategies in EFL learners. Additionally, it would be beneficial to work with longer observational classes to obtain more practice opportunities. Finally, including students' perceptions regarding the use of the strategies to enhance Student Talking Time (STT) would be useful for future investigations.

Despite this, this study gives empirical support for the theoretical proposals of Harmer, Scrivener, and Oradee by mentioning how a reduction in Teacher Talking Time can increase student participation, build confidence, and share knowledge in real EFL classrooms. Thus, this research confirms that communicative strategies serve as a starting point for shifting the focus of classes to a student-centered approach, replacing the traditional model in which the teacher was the center of the class. Finally, this aligns with the EFL classroom model in Ecuador, connected with the threads of the National EFL Curriculum.

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Declaration

Conflict of interest

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