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THE USE OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILL

EL USO DE LA DISCUSIÓN EN GRUPOS PEQUEÑOS PARA MEJORAR LA HABILIDAD DE HABLAR DE LOS ESTUDIANTES

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Resumen

Uno de los desafíos más difíciles que enfrentan las escuelas ecuatorianas es la cantidad de estudiantes por aula, lo cual dificulta el proceso de aprendizaje del idioma inglés, especialmente para desarrollar la expresión oral de los estudiantes. Es una habilidad importante y esencial para comunicarse e interactuar con los demás. Por esa razón, el objetivo de esta investigación es mejorar la destreza oral de los participantes en el idioma Inglés mediante grupos pequeños de conversación. La investigación utiliza el enfoque cuantitativo. La muestra está compuesta por treinta y nueve estudiantes de décimo grado de educación básica de una unidad educativa fisco-misional ubicada en Manta, Ecuador. Los instrumentos para la recolección de datos son (1) cuestionario, (2) hoja de observación y (c) prueba de habilidad oral para determinar el progreso de los participantes. Los hallazgos muestran que el uso de la discusión en grupos pequeños mejoró en 2-3 puntos el 100% de la habilidad oral de los participantes. Se concluyó que los estudiantes interactúan en idioma inglés con mayor frecuencia para compartir ideas, experiencias o conocimientos cuando participan en discusiones en grupos pequeños. Además, los participantes se dan cuenta de que participar en grupos pequeños genera un ambiente de aprendizaje amigable, lo que reduce el estrés y mejora la confianza en sí mismos al utilizar un idioma extranjero.

Palabras claves: discusión en grupos pequeños, habilidad oral de los estudiantes, efectos positivos, interactúan, mejorar.

Abstract

One of the most difficult challenges that Ecuadorian schools face is the number of students per classroom, which makes the English language learning process difficult, especially to develop students' speaking skill. It is an important and essential skill to communicate and interact with others. For that reason, this research aim is to improve the participants speaking skill in English language using small groups of conversation. The research uses the quantitative approach. The sample consists in thirty-nine students of tenth grade of basic education from a school located in Manta, Ecuador. The instruments for data collection are (1) questionnaire, (2) observation sheet, and (c) speaking skill test to determine the participants' progress. The findings show that the use of small group discussion improved in 2-3 points the 100% of participants' speaking skill. It concluded that the students interact in English language more frequently for sharing ideas, experiences, or knowledge when take part in small group discussions. In addition, participants realize that participating in small groups emerges a friendly learning environment, reducing the stress and supporting their self-confidence using a foreign language.

Keywords: small group discussion, students' speaking skill, positive effects, interact, improve.

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1. Introduction

English is the official language of 53 countries worldwide, this makes people recognize the importance of speaking English. Consequently, this creates a need in schools to manage effective strategies for developing learners' four English language skills, especially speaking.

Speaking is the most important and essential skill to communicate and interact directly with others. According to Akhter, Haidov, Majeed, and Hussain (2020) People need to express their ideas, emotions, and thoughts. And, in order to achieve an effective communication, they emphasize the development of productive abilities, particularly speaking skills. EFL/ESL students understand that improving speaking skill is necessary to stay up with the current challenges. For those reasons, teachers are responsible for selecting the most appropriated strategies to obtain better results in English language learning process from an early age, and this depends on many factors such as the number of students in the classroom, didactic material, contextualized classes and learning environments.

The study conducted by Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) shows that small group discussion gives students many opportunities to participate and express their ideas. Such as interaction greatly improves students' speaking skills and respect to different points of view.

To manage overpopulated classrooms teachers often divide students' large group into small groups, because it allows learners them to interact, practice, and discuss among themselves. This way students can talk freely communicating in English language their ideas without feeling hesitant (Crisianita & Mandasari, 2022).

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are the participants' perceptions about small group discussion to develop their speaking's skills? The participants answers are in table 2.
2. What are the changes in the participants' speaking skills before and after the educational intervention?
3. How the small groups of conversation motivate the



participants to take part in the conversation practices?

This research aim is to improve the participants speaking skills in English language using small groups discussion.

The review of the history of English language teaching in Ecuador shows 1912 as the starting date (El Comercio, 2016). After a few years in which the curriculum was modified and different programs were implemented to help teachers improve language proficiency, the current government policy for teaching English in Ecuador is more flexible. It includes five blocks aligned with the exit profile and the promotion of the values of justice, innovation and solidarity from the English class. The proposed educational reform carries out various transformations in the curricular networks of all subjects of primary and secondary education (Peña, 2019). At the same time, universities are graduating new generations of teachers of English as a foreign language who have developed their teaching skills. However, the strengthening attitudes and knowledge that support inclusive education still requires more time for

its full implementation, understanding that a successful government policy for inclusive education also requires population cooperation.

In English as a Foreign Language (ELE) classes, students must strive to expand their knowledge of grammar, expand vocabulary, improve pronunciation, choose the appropriate intonation and achieve the required fluency (Asdar, 2017). Thus, speaking is a relevant communicative skill for people in professional or academic topics, and in good interpersonal relationships.

According to Andrade (2019), the conversation classes that achieve the objective of strengthening speaking skills articulated with creativity strategies, use topics of interest to students, use appropriate equipment and, above all, deploy actions to motivate students for EFL learning. Therefore, it is essential to carry out motivational support activities for learning English (Sulon, 2021). Thus, teachers must prepare students so that they are able to face the exams of the international certification tests with solvency.

Daely, Astarini and Husnussalam (2019) state that small group

discussion allows shy and fearful students to take part in it. They also consider that students acquire more responsibility and independence when they work in groups of few students. In addition, Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) argue that since quiet students may avoid participating in large groups, it is generally better to avoid them for effective small group discussion. They believe that the small group should have 4-5 members so that the students know how to improve their skills based on their problem, which is difficult in a group of many students.

Komaruddin, Basthomi, and Roekhan (2021), consider that Small Group Discussion allows students to interact with each other, building their own point of view and expressing in turns, which motivates them to participate in the learning process. Furthermore, Tan, Polong, Collates, and Torres (2020) add that in this method in which English is used to communicate, it could be a vehicle to improve the self-efficacy of oral English.

Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) state that in small group discussion the students have a lot of

opportunities to express their opinions and ideas without embarrassing; also, they learn by sharing and correcting each other. Their research showed that when teachers used small group discussions to improve their students' speaking abilities, they responded favorably. Most students acknowledged the advantages of using small groups to improve their skills in their comments.

2. Methodology

The study used the modern paradigm, which focuses on the student as the center of learning, and the quantitative research approach. It was executed in a school located in Manta, Ecuador during 2023-2024.

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 39 students from 10th grade that attended to a basic education school. The group is 46% female and 54% male. Ages between 14 and 15 years-old. The research has the participants parents' consent to take part of the stages of this research. The identity of the participant is anonymous. The data collected and information resulting of the research will be kept



by the research team leader. It can be used only for academic purposes.

In any case, the data collected will be commerce.

Table 1. The participants

Sex	Participants	%
Female	18	46 %
Male	21	54 %
total	39	100 %

Source: Register of participants of the project.

Author: Merced Flores Limongi (2023).

2.2. Instruments

The instruments used to collect data are:

Likert questionnaire. – The instrument was designed to collect data about participants' perceptions in relation to small group discussion to develop speaking skills. The categories studies are (1) participants perceptions, (2) participants motivation, and (3) participants knowledge about speaking practice using small groups of conversation. The questionnaire was applied at the end of 5 class interventions. The instrument was evaluated for a panel of experts with more than 10 year-experience in the fields English as a Foreign Language Teaching, Pedagogy, and Educational Administration. The panel of experts recommended to reduce the number of items from 25

to 15, and to apply the questionnaire in Spanish language for a better understanding of the participants. The time required to fulfill the questionnaire is 8 minutes. The format used was printed version.

The observation sheets. - They were completed at the end of each class intervention. In them were considered what worked, what did not work, and the perception of the work done. The 5 class interventions were carried out with 4 different activities: dialogue, role play, project-based learning, and a debate, with the aim of observing the participation of students in different activities according to the number of students assigned.

2.3. Procedure

This study was conducted for elaborating a teaching methodological proposal based on

the use of small groups discussion to develop speaking skills in high school students through the following specific stages: (1) To determine the theoretical foundations of small groups discussion to develop speaking skills. (2) To know the students' speaking development during the class. (3) To design different activities of the proposal to work in small group discussion to improve speaking skills. (4) To assess the feasibility and effectiveness of the application of small group discussion to develop English language speaking skills.

2.4. The educational intervention

The educational intervention consisted in 4 different activities that allow students to develop speaking skill. It combines small groups of conversation with participative and project-based learning methodologies.

Stage 1: The first activity was considered to work with the entire group; in this activity, a party scenario was created for student interaction through a dialogue. Sweets and cookies were placed on the table as a stimulus to attract students to participate. Anjomshoa and Sadighi (2015) refer that intrinsic

and extrinsic motivation play an important role in learning. Lack of motivation can delay, since motivation is the drive that makes people act. In other words, motivation can increase the behavior of the learning process.

Stage 2: In the second activity, the group was divided into two (20 students and 19 students in each group), a role-play was applied using images and grammatical structures as support so that students can interact more easily. Celce (2001) agrees with the use of this kind of activity, she considers that to improve students' speaking skills, discussion, speeches, role-plays, conversation, audiotape oral dialogues journals, and other accuracy-based activities can be used.

Stage 3: The third activity was considered to work with 10 students per group; in this Project Based Learning activity, the students had to choose a musical genre and research interesting facts, the pros and cons of it; also, they had to make a poster and in the next class, they shared the information with their classmates in a presentation. The topic was chosen to motivate



students to investigate and participate. Kovalyova, Soboleva and Kerimkulov (2016) conclude in their paper that the application of Project Based Learning activities in EFL teaching can significantly boost students' self-confidence in utilizing English as a key means of communication in a variety of engineering activities.

Stage 4: In the last activity was considered 4 students per group. They read information about the pros and cons of dogs and cats and debate in small groups who was better. Baker and Westrup (2003) state that it is critical for students to practice the language they are

learning in scenarios that are like those encountered outside of the classroom. They must practice genuine communication by chatting about their life, discussing current events, expressing their thoughts, and debating issues.

3. Results and discussion

The data collected is presented following the research questions that appear in the introduction section.

Answering the question 1: What are the participants' perceptions about small group discussion to develop their speaking's skills? The participants' answers are in table 2.

Table 2. Participants' perceptions about small group discussion to develop students speaking's skill.

Items	TD	D	N	A	TA
Category 1: Participants' perception about attention to EFL class					
1. I stay attentive to the activity in the English class when working in small groups (4 to 5 students).	0%	2,7%	19%	<u>40,5%</u>	37,8%
2. I think that when we discuss in groups of 4 to 5 students, we achieve more interaction in the English class.	0%	5,4%	24,3%	<u>40,5%</u>	29,8%
3. I feel comfortable working in a group of 4 to 5 students.	2,7%	10,8%	5,4%	21,6%	<u>59,5%</u>
4. I feel better and more taken into account when we discuss in small groups in English class.	5,4%	5,4%	19%	<u>37,8%</u>	32,4%
5. I think it is difficult to work in a group of 4 to 5 students in English class.	<u>35,1%</u>	32,4%	10,8%	13,5%	8,2%

Category 2: Participants motivation to practice conversation in small groups

6. I like to share my point of view when we talk in small groups of 4 to 5 students in English class.	2,7%	8,2%	27%	<u>37,8%</u>	24,3%
7. I prefer to work individually in English class.	<u>45,9%</u>	18,9%	21,6%	5,4%	8,2%
8. I prefer to listen to my classmates, I don't really like speaking in English.	8,1%	18,9%	18,9%	<u>29,8%</u>	24,3%
9. I like to participate when there is a stimulus or motivation in English class.	2,7%	5,4%	<u>40,5%</u>	32,4%	19%
10. I prefer not to participate in English classes to avoid teasing from my classmates.	24,3%	21,7%	<u>37,8%</u>	5,4%	10,8%

Category 3: Participants knowledge about advantages of practice conversation in small groups

11. I know that small group discussion activities help me improve my speaking skill in the English language.	0%	0%	10,8%	43,3%	<u>45,9%</u>
12. I am convinced that when we discuss a topic in English in groups of 4 to 5 students, we can learn more.	2,7%	5,4	18,9%	29,7%	<u>43,3%</u>
13. I am sure that if the discussion group has 4 or 5 students, I will be less afraid to participate.	0%	8,2%	29,7%	27%	<u>35,1%</u>
14. I'm pretty sure that in a small group discussion we all have the opportunity to participate.	0%	0%	13,5%	29,8%	<u>56,7%</u>
15. I know that participating in small groups calms nerve and builds confidence.	5,4%	5,4%	24,3%	29,8%	<u>35,1%</u>

Codification: TD= Totally Disagree, D= Disagree, N= Neutral, A= Agree, TA= Totally Agree.

Source: Likert questionnaire used with the participants.

Author: Merced Flores Limongi (2023).

Findings in table 2 show that 40,5% of the students agree and 37,8% students totally agree that they remain attentive to the activity in English class when working in small groups (4 to 5 students). These results were also confirmed through

classroom observations where it was observed that students were more attentive when carrying out activities in groups of 4 members. When students worked in large groups or groups of 10 students, some of them were distracted by talking to each



other while other students showed greater responsibility and completed the proposed activities. These findings are supported by Daely, Astarini and Husnussalam (2019) who consider that students acquire more responsibility and independence when they work in groups of few students.

In regard to item number two, the results show that 40,5% of the students agree that when they discuss in groups of 4 to 5 members, they achieve more interaction in the English class. Similarly, students' responses show that 56,7% of the students totally agree that they are pretty sure that in a small group discussion they all have the opportunity to participate (Item fourteen.) The class observation evidenced that during the first activities that were handled with larger groups, only a few students participated voluntarily, but when the activity was developed in groups of 4 students, everyone participated, respecting each other's turns. Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) state that in small group discussion the students have a lot of opportunities to express their opinions and ideas without

embarrassing; also, they learn by sharing and correcting each other.

As it can be seen in item number three, 59,5% of the students totally agree that they feel comfortable working in a group of 4 to 5 members; moreover, 37,8% of the students agree and 32,4% of students totally agree that they feel better and more taken into account when they discuss in small groups in English class (item 4). These results agree with item six, in which 37,8% of the students agree that they like to share their point of view when they talk in small groups. During the last two class interventions, the students seemed more comfortable when they worked in groups of 4 and 10 members, and in the last intervention it was evident that when the students worked in groups of 4 members, everyone participated, even the shyest ones. These findings are supported by Komaruddin, Basthomi, and Roekhan (2021), who consider that Small Group Discussion allows students to interact with each other, building their own point of view and expressing in turns, which motivates them to participate in the learning process.

The results showed in item five that 35.1% of the students totally disagree with the fact that it is difficult to work in a group of 4 to 5 students in English class. In the same line, 45,9% of the students totally disagree that they prefer to work individually in English class (item six). According to class observation, all students worked in groups without difficulty and it was not evident that any student preferred to work alone.

Regarding item eight, 29,8% of the students agree that they prefer to listen to their classmates, they don't really like speaking in English. During the first and second class intervention, which was carried out with the whole class and then worked in groups of 20 members, the students did not participate much voluntarily, they were very shy and were afraid that everyone would hear them, even one student stated that during virtual classes it was easier to participate because he did not have to be in front of all his classmates. Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) consider that many people struggle with using a foreign language while also using their native language, feel shy and fearful about participating in English conversations, and may face

challenges when their teachers do not frequently speak English in the classroom. These are all common issues that teachers have to find solutions for them.

Although in the first interventions it was observed that the students were a little more nervous and there was not much voluntary participation when they were working with the whole group and in groups of twenty members, 37,8% of the students remain neutral about they prefer not to participate in English classes to avoid ridicule from their classmates (item ten). This is related to the following results in which 35,1% of the students totally agree that if the discussion group has 4 or 5 students, they will be less afraid to participate (item thirteen) and 35,1% of the students totally agree that participating in small groups calms nerve and builds confidence (item fifteen). These results coincide with the class observation where the majority of students were nervous and did not voluntarily participate in the activities of the entire course and when they worked with 20 students, but when groups of 4 students were made, they were more relaxed and participated with less embarrassing.



These results are supported by Daely, Astarini and Husnussalam (2019) who state that small group discussion allows shy and fearful students to take part in it; likewise, Crisianita and Mandasari (2022) believe that small group should have 4-5 members so that the students know how to improve their skills based on their problem.

In regard to item nine, 40,5% of the students remain neutral about they like to participate when there is a stimulus or motivation in English class. The first-class observation showed that the majority of students did not participate even though there were stimuli. In the first activity that was developed with the entire group, there were cookies and lollipops and later the teacher offered a participation point and few students participated. On the contrary, when students worked in groups of 4 members, everyone participated without the need for stimuli. It should be noted that during all activities the students were verbally motivated to participate or share. Bray and Kehle (2011) suggests that small class teaching not only encourages students' motivation, but also improves their enthusiasm and

confidence. Therefore, working in small classes is more productive.

Finally, the results show that 45,9% of the students totally agree that they know that small group discussion activities help them improve their speaking skill in the English language (item 11) and 43,3% of the students are convinced that when they discuss a topic in English in groups of 4 to 5 students, they can learn more (item 12). The results are aligned with the observations in which it was evident that when students worked in groups of 4 members, they achieved greater interaction and a better understanding of the topic.

It is evident that the students identified the benefits of working in small groups, this is supported this is supported by the results of item 7, in which 45,9% of the students totally disagree with working individually in English class.

In answer to question 2: What are the changes in the participants' speaking skills before and after the educational intervention?

Table 3. *Participants' pretest and posttest grades of speaking skill.*

Participants	Sex	Pretest	Posttest
1	Female	9.3	9.5
2	Female	9.3	7.5
3	Female	9.3	10
4	Male	8.9	8.5
5	Female	7	8.5
6	Male	10	10
7	Male	10	7
8	Female	9.6	10
9	Female	10	10
10	Male	8.9	9.5
11	Male	7.8	8.5
12	Male	7	8.5
13	Female	10	8.5
14	Female	7.4	9.5
15	Male	7	9
16	Male	9.3	8.5
17	Male	9.6	10
18	Male	8.9	7.5
19	Male	8.9	10
20	Female	10	10
21	Male	10	9
22	Female	9.3	8.5
23	Male	8.9	7.5
24	Female	10	9
25	Female	7.8	9.5
26	Male	9.3	10
27	Male	7	9
28	Male	8.1	8.5
29	Female	7.4	8.5
30	Female	8.5	9.3
31	Male	8.9	9
32	Female	7.8	8.5
33	Male	7.4	9.5
34	Male	8.5	10
35	Female	8	9
36	Male	8.5	9
37	Female	7	10



38	Male	10	9
39	Female	7	9

Source: Project Register.

Author: Merced Flores Limongi (2023).

Findings in Table 3 detail the students' speaking grades before the class interventions and the grades obtained after applying the different speaking activities. These results reveal that there was an improvement in their grades after the activities were developed in small groups.

In answer to question 3: How the small groups of conversation motivate the participants to take part in the conversation practices?

Based on the results and class observations, it has been shown that when working on speaking activities in small groups of 4 to 5 students, there is greater interaction between them since they have more opportunities to participate; In addition, students feel less fear and more confidence because they do not have to participate in front of all their classmates but only in a small group. At the same time, this allows students to be more attentive to activities, achieve more effective learning and further develop their speaking skill.

Another important factor that could be evidenced was the importance of creating environments that motivate and help students develop interaction; It is important to give them previous examples or a template with which they can help start the conversation and then flow on their own while they practice. Likewise, it is necessary to choose topics of interest to students because it motivates them to participate and be involved in the activity.

4. Conclusions

Speaking is the most important and essential skill to communicate and interact with others; for this reason, it is necessary to analyze what strategies to apply to obtain better results in learning speaking English from an early age, and this depends on many factors such as the number of students in the classroom. The use of small group discussion to improve students' speaking skill in the English language is of great importance and especially benefits schools that have many students per

classroom.

The fact that students prefer to listen to their classmates because they do not like to speak in English was an unexpected finding in this research, but at the same time understandable. They are students who, after two years of the pandemic, have found it difficult to overcome the shame of participating in front of all their classmates, not only in the subject of English but in general. Furthermore, the students develop in an environment in which the English language is not their mother tongue, for that reason it is important to create environments and activities that motivate them to participate.

In the results of some previous studies there are evidences to indicate that small group discussion gives students many opportunities to participate and express their ideas, and this interaction greatly improves speaking skill and allows students to learn to respect different points of view. There are many strategies that can be useful and effective in learning to speak English, but when there are large groups in the classroom, one of the best strategies is small group discussion.

It is important for future research to

carry out a greater number of class interventions to observe more the student behavior and obtain more details for the research. In addition, it is necessary conduct interviews with students to know an in-depth understanding of their point of view about the topic.

Working in small groups discussion has many benefits. Students consider that they achieve better attention and interaction by working in groups of 4 to 5 students, this makes them feel more comfortable and taken into account. Another benefit is that students like to share their point of view when they talk in small groups because they feel more confident; They are aware that small group discussion activities help them to improve their speaking skill in the English language and allow them to learn more. The positive perceptions of the students coincide with the information obtained from class observations and the grades obtained after the interventions, which demonstrate that there was improvement after applying different activities that allowed students to practice speaking in small groups.



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