# REVISTA KRONOS

# Action research: promoting speaking in EFL College students

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ABSTRACT This research study is an action research project carried out by two EFL teachers and a group of ten university students who have taken English as a requirement in college. This project aimed to promote participation, accuracy, and fluency in speaking ESL students. The researchers used four strategies: Collaborative Group Work, Input Strategy, Interactive Activities, and Corrective Feedback in a seven-week course. In the end, students showed more confidence and fluency when expressing their opinions and feelings as well as sharing their comments with their classmates while interacting in class. The researchers also observed that they reduced their pronunciation mistakes when talking about specific topics.

KEY WORDS Speaking, action research, collaborative work, input strategy, corrective feedback.

## Investigación-acción: motivando la expresión oral en estudiantes universitarios de inglés como lengua extranjera

RESUMEN Este estudio es un proyecto de investigación de acción realizado por dos maestros de inglés como idioma extranjero y un grupo de diez estudiantes universitarios que han tomado inglés como requisito en la universidad. Este proyecto tiene como objetivo promover la participación, precisión y fluidez al hablar inglés. Se usó cuatro estrategias: trabajo grupal colaborativo, estrategia de entrada, actividades interactivas y retroalimentación correctiva en un curso de siete semanas. Al final, los estudiantes mostraron más confianza y fluidez para expresar sus opiniones y sentimientos y compartir sus comentarios con sus compañeros de clase. También se observó una disminución en sus errores de pronunciación al hablar sobre temas específicos.

PALABRAS CLAVE Producción oral, investigación acción, trabajo colaborativo, estrategia de entrada, retroalimentación correctiva.

# INTRODUCTION

As English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, the professors-researchers had the opportunity to work with a group of 10 university students after a short oral diagnostic assessment inside the classroom. The teachers could see that most of the learners had difficulty with speaking skills. All of them were at the A1.2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which means that students can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to fundamental personal and family information, shopping, location, and food. Learners also manage to communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Students can describe in simple terms aspects of their background (Council of Europe, 2001).

Concerning their speaking ability, students can interact simply and directly. They can exchange information with difficulty where they must repeat or rephrase words or phrases and speak at a slow rate with some accuracy (Council of Europe, 2001).

The group of students, the researchers worked with, struggled the most with speaking skills. Researchers found three significant weaknesses: fluency, shyness, and accuracy. After a short interview with the students, they mentioned that other subskills or aspects than learning grammar and vocabulary to be competent in the target language were needed. Students felt that they needed to practice speaking to communicate. They mentioned that after acquiring this skill, they would feel encouraged to learn more every day and be able to use English for life. It means to have English in their long-term memories. So, after this action research project, the teachers-researchers feel proud of their accomplishments with the group they worked with.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question is how to improve speaking skills in EFL learner. The sub questions are:

a. How to promote participation in speaking activities in a foreign language learner?
b. How to promote accuracy in speaking in a foreign language learner?
c. How to promote fluency in speaking in a foreign language learner?

# METHODOLOGY

Action research is a methodology that includes a learning cycle emphasizing logical reflection so that students can effectively learn. As Stringer (2013) mentions, action research is a participative methodology that helps to develop an understanding between teachers and students. For this research project, the teachers used action research as the methodology because it studies a social situation, in our case, a classroom problem, with the view to improving students speaking skills. They decided to use this methodology because it is a flexible approach that helps teachers look for solutions to their everyday classroom problems. Additionally, working directly with their students encourages researchers to be aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it, and how they can improve. This flexible methodology helps teachers and students. In the first stage, the teachers-researchers used a diagnostic test and an interview to collect data. After using the strategies, they used an observation checklist and a speaking rubric to assess the activities performed by

the students. After assessing the students using the different strategies, teachers analyzed the information provided by students and made an improvement plan to be applied in the next academic period.

## IV. DISCUSSION

To improve students speaking skills in English, the researchers sed four types of strategies with different activities. These strategies were used to foster oral communication considering our students' weaknesses. Students needed to speak English more fluently, accurately, and confidently.

### 1. STRATEGY ONE: COLLABORATIVE GROUP WORK

Collaborative group work is a teaching strategy that offers a supportive and secure learning environment where students can become active participants. They learn cooperative working, respecting each other, their ideas, and their weaknesses (Gödek, 2004). In this action research study, the teachers used collaborative group work to promote participation and fluency in the students. Learners were asked to get together in pairs or groups of three. The task was to create a recipe and make an oral presentation, including ingredients, steps, and the final recipe. For this activity, the researchers already introduced new vocabulary and expressions using mind maps and input charts. Additionally, they modeled some examples of recipes.

The main activity in this strategy was JIGSAW GROUPS with a minor modification. Each group became an expert on each recipe. As each group had a different recipe. The students did not regroup; however, they had to present their own recipes to the whole class. Students became experts on their recipes, had to report on how to prepare a typical dish from different parts of Ecuador, presented to the class and answered questions from the professors and their classmates. Teachers used some techniques suggested by Gibbons (2015) to make group work effective: Clear and explicit instructions were provided as in the aspects described below.

a. Talk was necessary for the task.
b. There was a clear outcome for the group work.
c. The task was cognitively appropriate to the learners.
d. The task was integrated with a broader curriculum topic.
e. All students in the group were involved.
f. Students had enough time to complete the task.

To evaluate this strategy with the students an observation check list was developed as shown in table (see Table 1).

### Students' response

Students were enthusiastic about working together to create a recipe they liked eating or enjoyed making. They spent some time trying to choose the perfect recipe. Students shared information about ingredients, quantities, recipients, measurements, and ways of cooking. They also debated the correct way of preparing the recipes. It was interesting to see that

Table 1. Observation checklist

| N.º | PARAMETERS | YES | NO | NOT OBSERVED |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Students have enthusiasm to participate in discussion | | | |
| 2 | Students can pronounce English well | | | |
| 3 | Students can identify new vocabularies and use a lot of vocabularies when they speak English | | | |
| 4 | Students become active in the classroom | | | |
| 5 | Students ask and answer the question bravely | | | |
| 6 | Students respond to talk moves | | | |
| 7 | Students ask and answer the question bravely | | | |
| 8 | Students work in group | | | |
| 9 | Students participate actively in the group | | | |
| 10 | Students speak accurately | | | |
| 11 | Students complete the task | | | |
| 12 | Students can be confident to speak in front of class | | | |

Adapted from Gödek, Y. (2004). Research on group Work and Collaborative Work and its Implications for primary School teachers.

each student had their own way of making things depending on where they lived and the food type they ate.

Students could create their own recipes with poster papers, markers, and magazine pictures. They finally presented each recipe, and the teachers and the rest of the class asked questions about it. They thought it was a fun activity for everyone, and the most relevant task, while students had the opportunity to participate in the oral presentation and practice English (see Figure 1).

## 2. STRATEGY TWO: INPUT STRATEGY

The teachers-researchers' input was an INPUT CHART (see Figure 2) related to restaurants and menus to improve participation and accuracy. With the information provided in the input chart, students were required to talk about their favorite restaurant. They also had to use word cards to recycle information and practice using the vocabulary and expressions related to the «at the restaurant» input chart.

Learners were also encouraged to talk and connect with what they acquired in class and heard from their classmates by using TALK MOVES. Chapin, O'Connor, and Anderson (2003) stated that there are five productive talk moves:

1. *Revoicing*: So, you are saying that …
2. *Asking students to restate one else's reasoning*: What you repeat what he just said in your own words?
3. *Asking students to apply their own reasoning to some else's reasoning*: Do you agree or disagree and why?
4. *Prompting students for further participation*: Would someone like to add one?
5. *Using wait time*: Take your tie… we'll wait.

**Figure 1. Students group presentations**



Data: Students presentations about different menus.
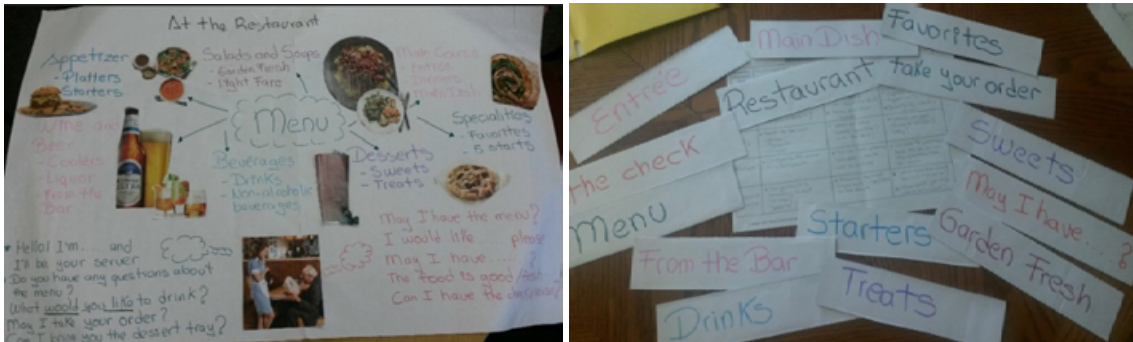
**Figure 2. Input chart**



Chart data: restaurant vocabulary and menu.

In this action research study, the teachers asked: What did your partner say? Who can re-phrase what ____ said? Why do you think that? How did you arrive at that conclusion? were approached in class. As the project for that week, students had to role-play a restau-rant event, in which they had to include the information provided in the input chart they had been working on for several weeks. A speaking rubric was used to grade this activity, as shown in table (see Table 2).

## Students' response

With these activities, students could practice pronunciation and accuracy, using the vocab-ulary and expressions related to restaurants. Learns enjoy this activity because they can use authentic material and for a real purpose, which was to communicate in a restaurant. The students usually go to restaurants; therefore, vocabulary, expressions, and conversa-tions were beneficial to them. Additionally, all the learners in the class had the opportunity to interact and become familiar with the topic and discussion. Talk moves were a conve-nient tool to develop participation among the students. Their final task was to role-play a restaurant situation where students performed an excellent job using and recycling the vocabulary, expressions, and structures used in class.

## 3. STRATEGY THREE: INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES

Different interactive activities were used in class to promote speaking among the students. Learners could express their feelings, emotions, and opinions in groups and in front of the

Table 2. Speaking rubric

| | 4. Distinguished | 3. Proficient | 2. Apprentice | 1. Novice |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Fluency**: Clarity and volume. | Appropriate volume throughout presentation.Varied volume when appropiate. Proper inflection throughout presentation. Spoke clearly and understandably. | Spoke at an appropriate volume for most of presentation. Good inflection and enunciation. Occasionally sounded monotone. | Spoke quietly. Increased volume briefly after being asked. Spoke with little inflection. | Barely audible, even after requests to speak up. No inflection. Sounded bored or uninterested. Paid little attention to proper pronunctiation. |
| **accuracy**: Related to topic, detailed,and accurate. | All content direclty related to topic. Content was throughly developed and demonstrated detailed knowledge of the topic. Options were supported by fact wherever possible. | Content directly related to topic. Included many details that demonstrated knowledge of the topic. Most opinions were supported by facts. | Hardly difficulty explaining how the content and topic relate. Many opinions were not factually supported. | Presentation did not relate to topic. Included few details and relied heavily upon unsupported opinion. |
| **Vocabulary**: Relevant to the topic | Entire presentation focused on the topic. Able to answer audience questions without straying from subject. | Majority of presentation was on-topic. Made effort to return to topic when presentation or audience questions strayed. | Some material was unrelated to the topic, or presenter used unrelated material to pad the presentation. | More than half of the presentation did direclty address the topic. |
| **Oral Presentation-Pauses**: Pauses to collect thoughts or organize materials. | Used pauses to emphasize points or to elicit audience response. Did not need to pause to shuffle papers, organize materials or gather thoughts. | Did not pause for more than a couple of seconds to adjust notes or materials. Pauses between sentences and topics were occasional and very brief. | Paused one or more times to find place in presentation or to look through notes. Paused two or more times to gather thoughts while speaking. | Repeatedly stopped to look through notes. Paused repeatedly to form sentences. |

Adapted from rubric-maker.com (2019).

whole class. One of the activities used in class was DONUT CIRCLES to promote fluency and participation. The participants gather in two circles. The outer circle faces inward, and the inner circle faces outward, so each student faces someone in front of the other circle. The pairs talk in turns to each other for a minute or two about a specific topic (Gibbons, 2015). Each pair of learners was asked to discuss a particular question: What is your favorite food? Where do you like to go when you eat out? Which is your favorite restaurant? For this strategy students had the opportunity to interact with their peers in the target language, take turns and speak freely and fluently.

## Students' response

Interactive activities in the class develop intrinsic motivation in students. This activity «allows for practice and rehearsal of an idea or a sentence structure since the student can repeat the same thing to each of the new partners as the circle moves on. It allows for peer scaffolding». Gibbons, 2015, p. 67). Students repeatedly practiced questions and answers until, at one point, they were fluent and accurate when speaking about specific topics related to restaurants and food choices. Finally, they were aware of their improvement, which was their intrinsic motivation (see Figures 3, 4).

## 4. STRATEGY FOUR: CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

Corrective feedback is one of the options for improving accuracy in ESL students. Teachers-researchers used RECASTING as a way of corrective feedback to help students develop their accuracy in speaking. «Recasts involve the teacher's implicit provision of a correct reformulation of all or part of a student's ill-formed utterance» (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 46). Using recast, the teachers can correct grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation mistakes only when necessary, trying not to affect the students' confidence in speaking English. Recast was very casual by correctly rephrasing words, words, or phrases. It is imperative to mention that recasting was carried out in class in several instances and with all the students during the entire course. For this strategy to be evaluated, a Can-do checklist was used (see Table 3).

## Students' response

Students respond to corrective feedback positively. They corrected their mistakes when they noticed them with the help of the teachers by using recasting. As Scrivener (2005) stated, «If the objective is accuracy, then an immediate correction is likely to be useful; if the aim is fluency, then lengthy, immediate correction that divers from the flow of speaking is less appropriate» (as cited in Ellis & Shintani, 2014, p. 251). Students corrected themselves on multiple occasions with the help of recast. Teachers rephrased the words, expressions, or sentences that needed correction, and then students repeated them correctly. Corrective feedback is an ongoing process, and not because the instructors correct it once, students will automatically remember it again. Teachers had to repeatedly correct the same error until students no longer made the same mistakes.

## CONCLUSIONS

By carrying out this action research project, the teachers-researchers learned that the best ways of learning are by combining several strategies. This action research project used collaborative group work and interactive activities, working with input strategies, talk moves, and appropriate feedback. Students had more opportunities to interact with other speakers, so they increased their use of the English language. Another benefit was that the learners improved their English language comprehension because they could ask, answer, clarify, and exchange information to accomplish their tasks. In addition, as Gibbons (2015) says, «Learners who are not confident in English often feel more comfortable working with peers than performing in a whole-class situation» (p. 50). The teachers-researchers believe this is one of the strengths of this study because, in the process, students helped and supported each other to complete the task and improve their English language.

Table 3. Oral examination

| n.º | QUESTION | CORRESPONDING «CAN DO» STATEMENT | YES/NO | OBSERVATIONS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | What's your name? How do you spell your surname? | I can spell my name | | |
| 2 | Where are you from? | I can say countries and nationalities. | | |
| 3 | Did you learn English at school? For how many years? | I can talk about things that happened in my life. | | |
| 4 | What do you do now? Do you work or are you a student? | I can talk about jobs. | | |
| 5 | What do you do in your free time? | I can talk about my free-time activities and say when I do them. | | |
| 6 | Do you like football? What sports do you like? | I can say what I like and don't like | | |
| 7 | What do you do every day? What time do you get up/start work? | I can describe my daily routine. | | |
| 8 | What subjects did you study at school? What exams did you take? | I can talk about exams and studying. | | |
| 9 | Tell me something you could do well at school. And something you can do well now | I can talk about things I can do in the present and could do in the past. | | |
| 10 | Tell me about your favorite food | I can talk about food and describe what I like and what I don't | | |
| 11 | Tell me about the weather in your country. | I can talk about the weather. | | |

Adapted from Cambridge University press, face2face (2013).
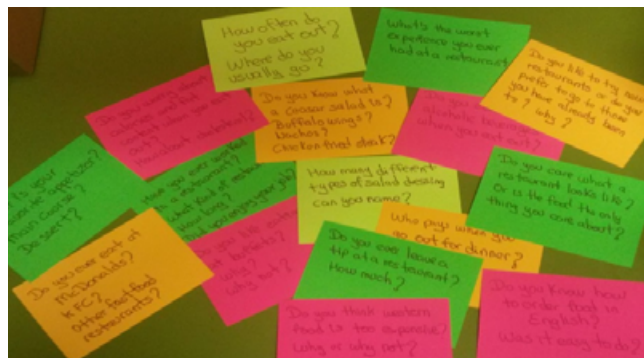
Figure 3. Flash cards



Figure 4. Donut circle

As Ellis & Shintani (2014) mentioned, «group-work is a means of increasing students' participation and self-reliance in the classroom» (p. 22) because there are more opportunities for language practice, there is a range of language functions, and learners are engaged in self- corrections. Additionally, students can negotiate meaning, which is one of the most crucial communication skills. In this regard, it was evident that students improved their speaking skills. In the last activities students performed in class, they were more confident when expressing their opinions and feelings. Additionally, they are not as shy as they used to be, they are not afraid of speaking or making mistakes either. They also speak more fluently and accurately at beginning level. However, students must continue practicing becoming even more fluent in English. Finally, this action research study helps teachers identify our students' weaknesses and understand their needs so that teachers can work with them to develop their speaking language skills.

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