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Improving EFL students' speaking skill through academic oral expression tasks at the high school level

Mejora de la habilidad oral de los estudiantes de EFL mediante tareas académicas de expresión oral en el nivel de secundaria

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ABSTRACT

One of the major concerns of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) is to get students to interact in the classroom; in this sense, this study analyzed the perceptions of specific strategies to improve speaking skills used by students at the "Ramona Auxiliadora Marcillo Chica" Educational Unit. A questionnaire was used to collect data, the results showed how students learn English and what strategies they use for this purpose; also, the data analysis indicates levels of commitment, autonomy, and a certain indifference with respect to EFL learning. This leads us to conclude that, students can improve their oral skills as long as English teachers implement effective strategies and methodologies in the classroom, such as reading aloud and the use of songs, which will enable students to improve their oral skills with accuracy and spontaneity.

Descriptors: Oral expression; speech education; cultural education. (UNESCO Tesauro).

RESUMEN

Una de las mayores preocupaciones de los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) es conseguir que los estudiantes interactúen en el aula; en este sentido, este estudio analizó las percepciones sobre las estrategias específicas para mejorar la habilidad de expresión oral que utilizan los alumnos de la Unidad Educativa "Ramona Auxiliadora Marcillo Chica". Para recoger los datos se utilizó un cuestionario, los resultados mostraron cómo los estudiantes aprenden inglés y qué estrategias utilizan para este fin; asimismo, el análisis de datos indica los niveles de compromiso, autonomía, y cierta indiferencia respecto al aprendizaje de EFL. Esto nos lleva a concluir que, los estudiantes pueden mejorar sus habilidades orales siempre y cuando los profesores de inglés implementen estrategias y metodologías efectivas en el aula, como la lectura en voz alta y el uso de canciones, lo cual permitirá que los estudiantes mejoren su habilidad oral con precisión y espontaneidad.

Descriptores: Expresión oral; educación de la expresión oral; educación cultural. (Tesauro UNESCO).

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INTRODUCTION

To learn, EFL students must “construct” their own knowledge by developing proficiency in the four micro-skills of the language (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) in an integrated way, this learning modality is called ‘constructivism’ in which learning is based on the active contribution of the student to successful communication that requires the mastery of many skills such as linguistic competence involving the reasoning of grammatical rules (Chomsky, 1965). Consequently, before students speak, they have to know what they are going to say, they also have to know how to pronounce each word correctly (Buhari, 2019).

Furthermore, to give significant insight into this deficiency in foreign language learning, a study conducted by (Education First, 2021) has been considered, which found that in Ecuador the level of English proficiency of its inhabitants is deficient, ranking 90th, which represents a very low level compared to 112 countries, while Ecuador's position in Latin America is 18th out of 20 countries, this is due to several factors, among them that public education is deficient and the rate of people who do not finish their studies is almost half of the population (Education First, 2021). It is believed that the main reason for the limited knowledge and use of the English language by students who develop this learning is related to the absence of effective teaching strategies (Calle, et al. 2012).

According to (Krashen, 1991) & (Chomsky, 1980), the speaking ability can be developed through communicative strategies that incorporate puzzles, games, problem-solving activities, and role-playing; therefore, communicative strategies have the possibility of motivating students and establishing good relationships between teachers and students, as well as among themselves, thus fostering an environment conducive to language learning.

In this regard, music and reading aloud could be good strategies used by EFL teachers to improve their students speaking skill; teachers have used music as a resource to correctly develop the ability to communicate in a foreign language, allowing students to

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speak with confidence and giving teachers a chance to teach in a fun way (Duarte, et al. 2012).

For these reasons, this study focuses on analyzing EFL students' perceptions of promoting the development of communication skills in English to shed light to help in the improvement of this oral skill in class through songs in English and reading aloud, and thus the deficiencies in this ability among high school students of the educational institution "RAMONA AUXILIADORA MARCILLO CHICA".

This study attempts to describe if these strategies (the use of songs and reading aloud) can help secondary school students improve the speaking skill and analyze students' perceptions of the use of these strategies.

Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Studies on the Target Research

There are several studies on the development of oral skills; in this regard several authors' points of view on the implementation of strategies based on reading aloud to develop oral communication were considered (Bahrani & Soltani, 2012; Birch & Fulop, 2020; Brown, 2005; Chomsky, 1980; Dörnyei, 2003; Harmer, 2001; Jiménez, 2018; Krashen, 1991; Muslem et al. 2017; Patrick, 2019; Richards & Schmidt, 2002; Thornbury, 2005); in addition, other authors who studied the development of communicative skills through the implementation of strategies based on songs were analyzed (Bahrani & Soltani, 2012; Chomsky, 1980; Cuesta, 2006; Gibson, 2008; Harmer, 2001; Jiménez, 2018; Krashen, 1991; McCarthy, 2006; Morales, 2008; Muslem et al. 2017; Orlova 2003; Philips, 1993; Richard & Schmidt, 2002; Stanovich, 1991).

For (Patrick, 2019), who studied Krashen's theory, second language (SL) acquisition theory is made up of five main assumptions that attach importance to affective components, these assumptions remain directly implicated in both the process of acquisition/learning and long-term outcomes, and the assumptions are as follows; (a) *The acquisition hypothesis* establishes that students have two different ways of developing

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their skills in the target language, one is acquisition and the second is learning, (b) *The natural order hypothesis* establishes that the constructions of the language are acquired in a predictable order, even by speakers of different mother tongues, (c) *The monitor hypothesis* establishes that conscious learning plays a rather reduced role in the linguistic functioning of the pupil because it could only be used as a monitor or corrector of productions initiated by the acquired system, (d) *The fourth hypothesis is the comprehensible input* which establishes that a language is acquired (not learned) by understanding messages that remain subtly above the current degree of acquired competence that it has the acquirer, the so-called "income + one" (I+1), (e) *The emotional filter hypothesis* states that motivated and low-anxious learners perform better in language learning (Patrick, 2019).

(Chomsky, 1980) argued that the only plausible specification of the efficiency with which children acquire their mother tongue is that children are born with an innate ability to learn languages, just as they are born with an innate ability to walk, for example. In the same vein, (Krashen, 1991), following Chomsky's mentalist theories, conceives acquisition as a process of evolution of the mind, personal and interior, in which learners do not need to speak or write, according to this model, learning is automatically created when students hear or read and understand fragments of the target language.

Meanwhile, Brown (2005) argues that there are three focal categories of learning styles defined by physical and sensory preferences, thus, the three focal categories of learning styles are; (1) auditory, when students use their ears as the primary mechanism when learning; (2) visual, when students use their eyes; and (3) kinesthetic or tactile, when students enjoy using different parts of their human body as they learn.

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The Speaking Skills

According to (Chomsky, 1980), any subject endowed with the faculty of speaking can express himself correctly in his/her own language and interpret and understand what another subject in his/her linguistic society can communicate to him/her. Therefore, people have the capacity for speaking, as a result of this when people learn a new language, people do not reason coherently about it, although have the necessary mechanisms to express themselves in their own language, that is, called "linguistic competence" (Chomsky, 1980).

Thus, planning the development of the speaking skill and teaching strategies is necessary to make teaching more effective and meaningful (Jiménez, 2018). Furthermore, the role of oral skills is essential for language learning, as the success of language use, especially of a foreign language, can be measured based on this skill (Muslem et al. 2017).

Speaking Learning Strategies

Reading Aloud. How can reading aloud help students learn this novel speaking strategy? Making accurate connections between graphemes and phonemes is essential in reading to speed up word recognition and to help pronounce and learn a new word (Stanovich, 1991). In the same vein, (Birch & Fulop, 2020) mention that reading aloud should be practiced to improve oral skills, in this way, learners can gain useful information about their speaking skill, the same author, also mentions that, reading aloud can help develop reading fluency.

Therefore, when a teacher listens to a student reading aloud, the teacher will be able to find more persistent problems such as pronunciation, comprehension, grapheme-phoneme relationships, etc., and therefore uses it as a diagnostic tool, it is the only way to verify that these connections are made correctly (Gibson, 2008).

English songs. Morales (2008) appreciates that after singing, students have an opportunity to improve their English skills and practice their pronunciation, in addition,

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students have the opportunity to discuss several themes of the lyrics such as love, hate, vengeance, etc., students have the opportunity to practice dialogues to express opinions and reflections on the content of the songs. Similarly (Philips, 1993), contemplates music is a rhythm essential part of language learning for young learners due to, students enjoy learning and singing; thus, the same author refers to the use of music as an element that is much easier to imitate and remember and states that many songs give them the advantage of being part of the English-speaking culture.

According to (Orlova, 2003), these are some of the advantages of working in class with songs; it improves the effect of rhythm, accent, and intonation of the English language, it also helps to improve vocabulary and grammar; in this sense, teachers have a special preference for songs when they are exploring the use of verb tenses, another advantage is that dialogues can be taught, for this, songs, and mainly lyrics, are used as a stimulus for discussion in class, with this the students learn to listen to the melody which can become useful for understanding by developing writing skills.

In the study developed by Cuesta (2006), students improved their oral production and showed relaxed, interested, and participative attitudes while working with the songs and, especially, when they focused on expressing their ideas freely rather than worrying about accuracy. To conclude, after having developed a musical project, Cuesta (2006) states that students showed behaviors, emotions, or feelings, especially interest or enthusiasm for the work related to the class. Likewise, (McCarthy, 2006) argues about the use of songs to explain more than just vocabulary as songs allow teachers to cover specific grammatical topics without much effort, for example, one teacher who shared her experience in a café about the use of songs in the class had mentioned that while students listened to a song about the story of a cat in a lesson using the future tense "will" and "going to" she was also able to teach the "if" clause.

On the other hand, the accuracy of terminology demands the accurate usage of background and terms; therefore, students' deficiency of lexical items makes them use

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similar words in different situations to express the meaning (Thornbury, 2005). In addition, (Thornbury, 2005) also argues that mastering other skills such as intonation, pitch, and stress helps students speak the English language effectively and naturally.

Language Input and Communicative Output

The principles of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) recognize that speaking languages is programmed into the human brain, there is no doubt that every learner can acquire a foreign language (Patrick, 2019), (Krashen, 1982) argues that acquisition occurs when learners receive comprehensible messages in the target language; therefore, listening and reading are two forms of linguistic input.

In addition, research in support of this principle indicates that both forms of input are necessary for acquisition, meanwhile ultimately reading is slightly more effective; furthermore, human beings are capable of acquiring human language even with sight and sound impairments; thus, sight and sound are the usual way through which humans acquire language (Patrick, 2019).

According to (Bahrani & Soltani, 2012), to help students develop effective oral communication, teachers can use an active approach that combines linguistic input with communicative output, language input includes teacher speech, listening activities, reading passages, listening to the target language, and reading outside the classroom; in addition, the same author suggests providing learners with the materials they need to start producing their own language.

Motivation and Learning Strategy

According to (Harmer, 2001), motivation is important to success, and in the absence of it, students will almost certainly not make the necessary effort. Therefore (Richards & Schmidt, 2002), argue that motivation is “the combination of learners’ attitudes, desires, and willingness to expend effort to learn a second language, motivation is generally

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considered to be one of the primary causes of success and failure in language learning” (p. 344).

Brown (2005) states that although it takes a lot of time and energy to help students understand not only where they have gone wrong but also what they need to do to improve, students also need to be told what they have done well, to help them understand what is good about their work and how they can build on it and develop it further; besides, the same author concludes that motivation is derived in two types, external and internal, i.e. once students are pressured by others to learn, motivation would be external; however, if students continue to learn because they are willing to learn for their own purposes, it means internal motivation, then self-motivation is internal and the motivation of others is external.

In the same vein, (Harmer, 2001) called extrinsic motivation (which comes from outside or external factors) and intrinsic motivation (which comes from inside); the last is optimal. Moreover, motivation strategies are techniques that students use themselves to improve learning effectiveness, in this sense, the use of strategy constitutes specific examples of motivated learning behavior (Dörnyei, 2003). The most systematic attempt at dating the generation of such taxonomy was carried out by (Dörnyei, 2003), who proposed four primordial magnitudes, (1) *Creating basic motivational conditions* means creating a respectable teacher-student relationship so, generating a pleasant and supportive classroom, setting establishing standards, (2) *Generating initial motivation* means using strategies planned with the student's appetite to (a) increase the learners' expectancy of success and (b) develop positive attitudes toward the language learning, (3) *Maintaining and protecting motivation* means encouraging situation-specific task motivation (e.g., through the use of stimulating and enjoyable tasks), providing students with experiences of success, allowing them to maintain a positive social image and promoting learner

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autonomy, (4) *Encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation* means increasing learner satisfaction, and offering grades in a motivational manner.

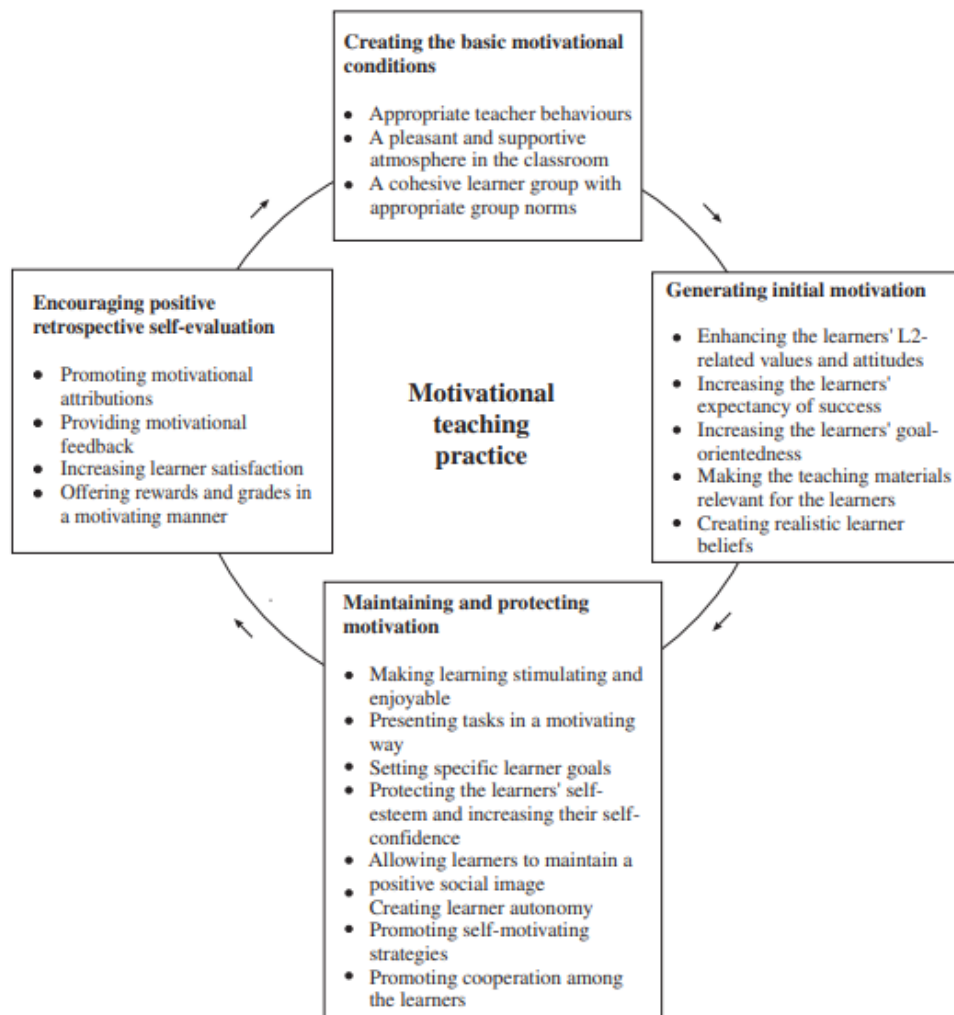


Figure 1. Components of motivational teaching practice in the L2 classroom. From Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom.

Source: Dörnyei (2003, pág. 24).

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Rhythmic Elements and Language Development

According to (Mizener, 2008), music lessons are the perfect opportunity to integrate language and music development; consequently, students can develop all forms of communication by listening to music; therefore, listening lessons involve receiving and transmitting information orally and receiving and transmitting information visually; thus, learners can experience auditory reception and transmission of information by listening to the musical work and discussing its many aspects; additionally, students can also engage in the reception and transmission of visual information for the development of oral communication; also, this method offers students many opportunities for language development as well as higher-order thinking skills. As a result, it is important to know and verify what students think about the implementation of these two strategies to develop oral communication skills and to shed light on this important situation in EFL classes.

Consequently, this study addresses the following research question:

- ✓ What are EFL students' perceptions on the implementation of strategies based on reading aloud and songs to develop EFL oral communication?

METHOD

This research has a quantitative approach and focused on the analysis of EFL students' perceptions on the promotion of the development of communication skills in English, the dimensions taken into account were; intrinsic motivation, learning strategies, and self-correction for learning, it also tries to discover self-learning strategies and practice outside the classroom. In addition, the type of research was an exploratory and descriptive case study that attempts to describe and analyze the participants' perceptions of their own English language learning process and aims to discover the participants' study methods and learning strategies based on the use of reading aloud and songs activities to develop EFL oral communication.

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Furthermore, the students who were invited to participate in this study regularly attend classes in the previously mentioned institution, there was no objection to completing the questionnaire, it was decided that the students who are attending the last years of education would be suitable candidates, as they have various levels of English and have been regular students in the classes this school year. The population in this study consisted of a group of 100 students from different grades, who are enrolled in the last year of "Ramona Auxiliadora Marcillo Chica" school, in the academic period 2021-2022, and ranging in age from 11 to 17 years, and comprised 51 females and 49 males.

Procedure

In the first place, to carry out the study, it was necessary to request the corresponding permission from the director of the educational institution, then from the parents of the selected population, since the students are under 18 and this was done using a letter of consent. In the second place, the instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire, which was presented in Spanish to avoid the loss of relevant information and was completed by each student during the two-week process; in addition, it is important to mention that the questionnaire was classified by closed answers 0-3 being; (always=3, usually=2, often=1, and never=0) thus allowing to interpret intrinsic motivation, learning strategies, self-correction for learning, self-learning strategies and practice outside the classroom.

Additionally, the questionnaire was previously used by different authors such as (Franco, 2012), (Kassem, 2018), (Riadil, 2020). It was translated to Spanish (the student's mother tongue) and adapted to the needs of the present research; in this way, the result of the required information is clear and accurate; thus, this questionnaire was validated by four teachers, after validating the relevant changes were made and finally the questionnaire was completed by the students.

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Data Analysis

The validation process of the dimensions was carried out with Exploratory Factor Analysis. In this regard, the unweighted least squares method with five forced factors was applied with SPSS 25 software (Lovia Boateng, 2018). Although the matrix was not certain positive, the explanation of variance for the five factors reached 53.52%, a minimum factor saturation of 0.436 and a maximum of 0.826 of the items concerning their factors (Varimax Rotation) was reported. The reliability of the instrument was evaluated with Cronbach's alpha and a very good coefficient of 0.927 was obtained for the total of the 44 items.

In order to obtain an average value for each factor, the mean and the Standard Deviation (SD) corresponding to the items located in each dimension were used, together with the minimum and maximum values. Additionally, the values of the five factors are compared to identify which are significantly higher or lower. For this purpose, error bar charts are plotted in which the means are observed with bars representing the 95% confidence of the data (Field, 2018).

FINDINGS

The results of the five dimensions are presented in a table showing the mean and variability, and an error bar chart is used to illustrate how different the factors are from each other.

Table 1 shows the average of the items that make up the five factors obtained from the original rating scale ranging from 0 to 4 response options. The first one corresponds to Intrinsic Motivation and is the result of the average of 13 items which means is 1.81 points (SD 0.57). The Learning Strategies factor, with its 12 items, obtained an average of 1.93 points (SD 0.56). Self-correction for learning generated an average score of 1.69 points (SD 0.67) from the eight items assessed. The Self-Learning Strategies factor, considering its seven items, generated an average score of 1.73 points (SD 0.67). Finally, the Language practice outside the classroom factor, which has four items, generated an

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average of 1.33 points (SD 0.74). As can be seen, out of 4 points, the best score is close to 2 points and the worst score is close to 1 point, thus it must be recognized whether the lower or higher score is significantly different.

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Intrinsic Motivation	100	0,75	2,92	1,81	0,57
Learning Strategies	100	1,00	2,91	1,93	0,56
Self-correction for learning	100	0,38	2,88	1,69	0,67
Self-learning strategies	100	0,57	3,00	1,73	0,67
Practice outside the classroom	100	0,25	3,00	1,33	0,74

Source: Field research.

To establish whether there are significant differences concerning the values obtained, an error bar chart with a 95% confidence interval was generated. According to this diagram, if the top or bottom of a bar (black) equals or exceeds the circle (grey) belonging to another bar, there is a significant difference. The results illustrated in Figure 1 shows three subgroups. The first and highest one is composed of Intrinsic Motivation and Learning Strategies which average range around 1.85 points. The second group is mainly made up of Self-correction for learning and Self-learning strategies whose values are around 1.7 points; however, in this case, Intrinsic Motivation can also be grouped, although with less similarity to the group. Finally, the lowest factor corresponds to Language practice outside the classroom which average is 1.33 points. Therefore, the significantly lower level

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corresponds to English practice outside the classroom. It seems that the students use the second language only for classroom use.

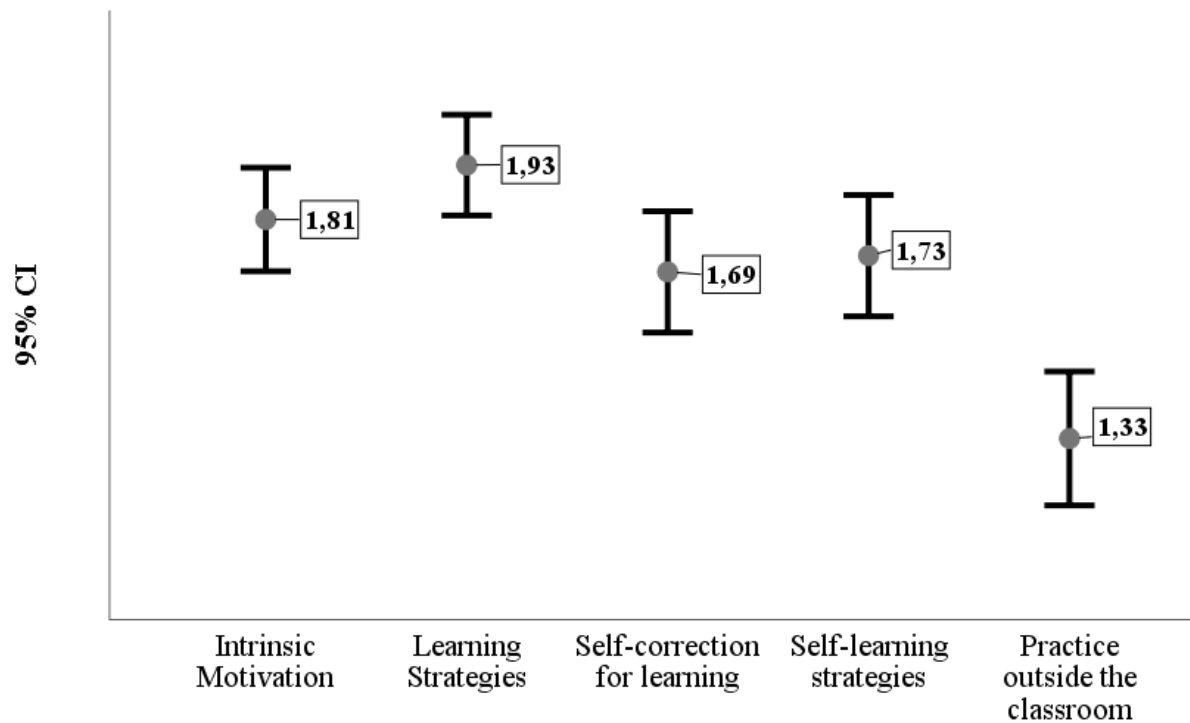


Figure 2. Factor means in bars error diagram

Source: Own elaboration.

According to the explanation of Chomsky (1980) & (Krashen, 1991) about intrinsic motivation they argue that children are born with an innate ability to learn languages, just as they are born with an innate ability to walk, thus, these authors also consider acquisition as a process of evolution of the mind, personal and inner, in which learners do not need to speak or write, according to this model, learning is created automatically. According to

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this argument and verifying the results concerning intrinsic motivation, it can be stated that learners have an innate, self-motivation to acquire knowledge and develop it authentically. An important finding of learning strategies coincides with earlier studies by Chomsky (1965) who states that, for a learner to communicate successfully, he or she needs to master skills such as linguistic competence which involves reasoning about grammatical rules. Likewise, Birch & Fulop (2020) mention that reading aloud should be practiced to improve oral skills, in this way, learners can gain useful information about their speaking skill. In this sense, the present study indicates that learners are engaged in learning strategies to understand the language.

On the other hand, we have a similarity about students' intrinsic learning with (Harmer, 2001) who states that this innate ability is optimal since due to this as Dorney (2003) states that it fosters student satisfaction and offers grades in a motivating way. Thus, it was observed that there is self-motivation in the student of this research without depending on circumstances. About self-correction for learning (Thornbury, 2005) also agrees when he states that the lack of lexical items on the part of the students makes them use similar words in different situations to express the meaning. Likewise, (Morales, 2008), appreciates that after singing, students have an opportunity to improve their English skills and practice their pronunciation, in addition, students have the opportunity to discuss several themes of the lyric's students have opportunity to practice dialogues to express opinions and reflections on the content of the songs.

This would show that the learner is self-correcting as he/she wants to express him/herself by mastering other skills, such as accent, thus helping the learner to speak the English language naturally. As a contribution to self-correction (Brown, 2005) adds that, learners also need to be told what they have done well, to help them understand what is good about their work and how they can build on and develop it. In this sense, it can be said that the learner tries to correct him/herself by learning from each mistake in expressing an idea and from each feedback.

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In addition, regarding the self-learning strategies in the research carried out by Cuesta (2006), it is observed that the students showed comfortable and involvement while working with the songs and, above all, when they focused on expressing their ideas freely instead of worrying about accuracy. In the mentioned study, the author not only confirms that the students are more interested and participatory, but also that the self-learning strategy allows the student to spontaneously express their ideas without worrying about whether or not they are correct.

PROPOSAL

Based on the analysis of the obtained results, it can be stated that intrinsic motivation, learning strategies, self-correction for learning, self-learning strategies, and practice outside the classroom, are shown to be a great supporters when putting the target language into practice, which shows that the two strategies studied in this research; reading aloud and listening to songs in English, allow us to recognize the perceptions that the students have regarding the development of oral skills. The results also showed that EFL learners need dynamic reinforcement in order to feel motivated to develop the target language; thus, revealing that the traditional methods and resources currently used do not allow for the development of the oral skills that learners need to develop.

In addition, most of the students' report having an intrinsic motivation that facilitates the improvement of oral skills, allowing them to develop language learning using studied strategies (reading aloud and listening to songs in English). Thus, establishing that teachers might use these strategies as it would allow them to better manage the students' performance in class and promote self-confidence; consequently, students would lose the fear of expressing themselves in class.

The following chart demonstrates the development of communicative skills that students develop while learning.

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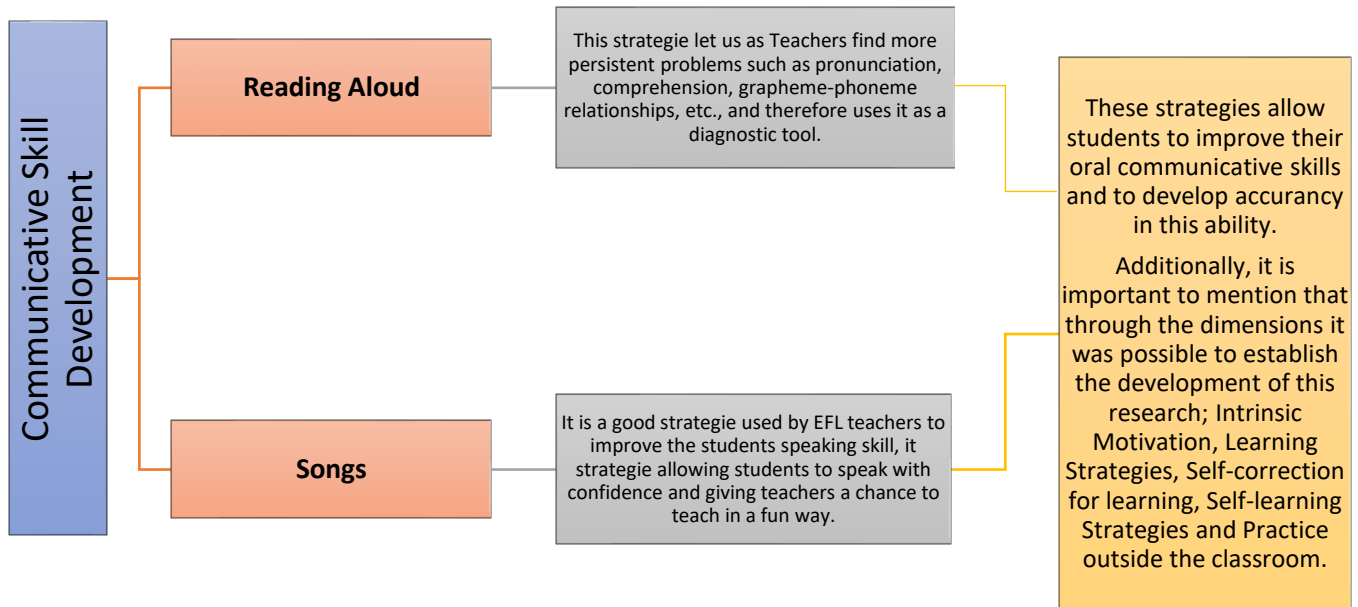


Figure 3. Proposed Structure for the development of communication skills.

Source: Own elaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyzed learners' perceptions of their oral skill in English and learners' motivation to participate in speaking activities in the classroom. Furthermore, after the analysis of the results, the study found that success in learning a language other than the mother tongue does not depend only on the learning materials or activities provided by the teacher, but also on the learners' interest, self-motivation, and autonomy.

The present study helped us to identify that the lack of motivation, interest, effort, and commitment to learning on the part of the student are very important factors that affect both learning and the autonomy of the student to find his or her own method of study in order to reinforce the knowledge of the language learned. Thus, to help these students, it

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is necessary to enhance the teaching-learning processes to achieve the change of attitude that we want to see in both students and teachers.

It has also been found that there are students who are aware of the benefits of learning English, therefore, these students are involved in the process to improve oral skills, and do their best to learn and improve at every learning opportunity, these students are of great help to foster the interest and commitment that not all students possess.

It has also been found that; grades positively influence students' motivation, whereas, fear of failure in class activities can negatively influence participation.

Consequently, it can be summarized that by combining learning strategies such as reading aloud and listening to songs in the target language, learners can interact voluntarily achieve better results in the learning process; thus, learners can combine intrinsic motivation with self-correction to help the development of communicative skills in English.

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