A Comparative Study of Discussions, Debates, and Oral Presentations in Enhancing EFL Learners' Oral Proficiency

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Abstract

This case study investigated the effects of different speaking activities (oral presentations, discussions, debates) on the speaking performance of 11 young adult EFL learners at a university in central Mexico. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and an online survey and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that combining socialization with varied speaking activities and incorporating popular culture topics relevant to students increased motivation, reduced the affective filter, boosted confidence, and improved fluency and accuracy. The integration of student interests and fostering of personal relationships promoted a holistic understanding of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, enhancing overall speaking skills. However, limitations include a small sample size from the same sociocultural context. Further research with a larger, more diverse sample is recommended for unbiased results. The study highlights the benefits of tailoring speaking activities to students' interests and encourages developing interpersonal relationships to facilitate language learning.

Keywords: EFL, speaking activities, speaking skills, affective filter, socialization, student's interests.

1. Introduction

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching there are several effective pedagogical approaches to foster communicative competencies among language learners. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes spontaneous and contextualized interaction with the target language, going beyond the learning of fixed linguistic structures (Cook, 1991; Richards, 2006). The main objective of CLT is the development of learners' grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse competencies through authentic language use (Savignon, 2002). However, several factors can influence the language acquisition process for young adult EFL learners, including affective variables like motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety (Krashen, 1982; Lemana et al., 2023), as well as metacognitive strategies (Zhang & Zhang, 2018) and sociocultural contexts (Byram & Grundy, 2003). Recent years have also witnessed an increasing integration of popular culture elements into EFL classrooms, aiming to enhance learner engagement, motivation, and intercultural competence (Rabbani, 2015; Nodira & Tohira, 2023). Within this communicative setting, the present study investigates the effects of three different speaking activities – oral presentations, debates, and discussions – on the oral performance of young adult EFL learners. Specifically, it aims to determine whether these activities, which align

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with Brown and Yule's (1983) functions of speaking (performance, transaction, and interaction), impact learners' vocabulary acquisition, fluency, motivation, and confidence in producing English. By exploring the potential benefits and challenges associated with these interactive tasks, this case study seeks to fill the gap in understanding the effectiveness of different speaking activities in developing aspects of oral proficiency through empirical research. The study aims to inform pedagogical practices that can effectively support the development of learners' communicative competence. The general research motivation is to gain valuable insights that will help in the development of a successful integrative process for enhanced EFL learning. Speaking skills are arguably one of the most challenging of the English language process (Leong, 2017) due to factors that are related to the students and their context. The specific objective of this study is to design strategies to elicit meaningful and coherent speaking production in young adult learners. This comparative study aims to identify the impact of different speaking activities – debates, presentations, and oral presentations – on the enhancement of oral performance among 11 EFL young adult learners in a university in Guanajuato, México. Grounded in sociocultural learning theory and the affective filter hypothesis, a qualitative approach collects interview and survey data for thematic analysis. The research question asks which speaking tasks most effectively facilitate participation, engagement, motivation, and speaking competence gains. Findings aim to inform pedagogical choices regarding the optimal use of speaking tasks to develop oral fluency in EFL learning.

2. Literature review

2.1 *Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)*

During the decade of 1970, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emerged as an alternative approach to the traditional method of Grammar translation in English as a Foreign Language classroom (Cook, 1991). Unlike learning fixed linguistic structures, CLT emphasizes spontaneous and real interaction with the target language (Richards, 2006). Savignon (1983) discusses CLT as the development of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse competence based on the model of communicative competence first applied by Canale and Swain (1980). These competencies are developed through knowledge of the language, the ability to converse coherently and cohesively following societal norms, and the ability to effectively communicate, accordingly. The communicative approach in the English as a Foreign Language classroom allows the learners to produce language according to the context in which they are. The instruction of English with a communicative approach establishes a collaborative environment where learners interact confidently with their peers. Similarly, the collaborative nature of CLT relates to the Sociocultural learning theory proposed by Vygotsky (1985), which places socialization as the means for learning effectively to communicate (Pathan et al., 2018). The role of the learner in the CLT classroom is of a communicator; students in a classroom with communicative goals must share ideas, and convey and negotiate meaning (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Language learners become a community and develop a sense of belonging in the classroom. Through interaction, the learners acquire new interpretations and forms of the language. Speaking activities like debates, presentations, and discussions support the communicative principle of CLT, with authentic opportunities for language production.

2.2 *Factors influencing young adults' EFL learning process*

Several factors influence general language acquisition and proficiency in English learners, considering the dynamic interaction of their affective filter, cognitive abilities, metacognitive awareness, and context-specific factors (Dörnyei, 2005). One significant factor is the affective filter, a key component of a hypothesis first proposed by Krashen (1982) regarding

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language acquisition. The affective filter highlights internal factors affecting students' language learning and performance, encompassing elements of motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. A higher affective filter correlates with high anxiety levels, diminished confidence, and low motivation in language learning. Students who present a higher affective filter are more likely to be reluctant to participate in speaking activities (Lemana et al., 2023). Examining the affective filter factors concerning speaking activities allows for the discussion and identification of patterns among learners, fostering a positive environment in which they produce the language.

In addition to the affective filter, another factor influencing EFL learners' linguistic development is their access to metacognitive strategies. Such strategies enable students to self-regulate, self-monitor, and self-evaluate their learning process. Students who foster these strategies demonstrate more efficiency in conveying meaning and problem-solving (Zhang & Zhang, 2018). Furthermore, exploring how students approach their learning process in speaking activities could aid them in developing awareness and new metacognitive strategies.

Moreover, the integration of popular culture elements has become increasingly significant in English Language Teaching in recent years. This involves implementing contemporary events, current music, movies, and digital media within the classroom for linguistic purposes (Rabbani, 2015). Incorporating popular culture in the EFL classroom enhances various language skills among students, both linguistically and psychologically. This integration can increase motivation and confidence regarding language learning, as students engage with material of their interest, thus contributing to a more meaningful and successful learning experience (Nodira & Tohira, 2023). Additionally, integrating culturally relevant material can contribute to developing intercultural competence and awareness among young adult English learners (Troncoso, 2010). By understanding these factors-affective filter, metacognitive strategies, and the integration of popular culture – educators can better support EFL learners in their linguistic development and create a more engaging and effective learning environment.

2.3 *Speaking activities and functions*

Speaking abilities can be the outcomes, as discussed by Brown and Yule (1983), of talking with a purpose: talking as an interaction, talking as a transaction, or talking as a performance.

Speaking activities allow learners to develop in-context language through communicative-aimed instruction. Oral presentations directly relate to speaking as a performance, where students present a prepared speech, focusing on delivering a specific message and paying attention to the accuracy of the language used. Debating has the function of speaking as a transaction, where the learners exchange and negotiate information to persuade the audience and win the debate. The discussions in the classroom relate to speaking as an interaction, where the students are involved in active listening, turn-taking, and conveying of meaning (Richards, 2008; Celce-Murcia, 2014). This integration of language within specific and meaningful contexts, the use of appealing material, and scaffolded interaction between peers gives learners a comprehensive approach to the development of their speaking competencies.

3. Methodology of the study

The research question in this study aims to answer is "How do the different speaking activities – debates, discussions, and oral presentations – affect the oral performance of young adult EFL learners?" This research adopts a qualitative paradigm, as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), which emphasizes understanding phenomena through personal perceptions and experiences, delving into context-specific details. The method of this paper is a case study. Case

studies allow the interpretation of phenomena according to contextual influences. This case study encompasses a comparative analysis that involves three different speaking activities. A comparative analysis allows this case study to examine applications to determine which speaking activities are the most successful. To make sense of insights through the qualitative paradigm, it is necessary to employ instruments that gather qualitative data from the case study participants, such as semi-structured interviews and an online survey,

3.1 *Context and participants*

The context of the case study is an English class from the University of Guanajuato, in the Language Department in the city of Guanajuato. This class is the second hour of a three-hour-long session. These sessions are once a week, and the first and third hours are taught by the head teacher. The hours taught by the head teacher are focused on linguistic accuracy development with the support of textbooks. It is a 700-level class. There are 11 students between the ages of 18 and 28. The participants show a shared interest in relevant topics and contemporary media. All the participants of this study agreed to share the information collected for research purposes. The time frame considered for this case study is one semester. During this semester, once a week the researcher applied different speaking activities to register which received more response and engagement from the student participants.

3.2 *Instruments*

Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to have general key points to ask the participant, with the variability of delving into emerging related themes. This type of interview acknowledges students' perspectives while keeping the focus centered on the main topic (Cohen et al., 2018). In that sense, the survey gathers self-reported data that provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). This has been proven effective for the compilation of data that allows the study of EFL strategies and students' outcomes (Mackey & Gass, 2016). To complement the insights obtained from interviews and surveys regarding the perceived efficacy of the activities, participants provided numerical ratings on 5-point Likert scales (Turner, 1993), self-evaluating their preferences and engagement with debates, discussions, and individual presentations. The platform used for the survey was Google Forms, while the semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face.

3.3 *Data analysis*

In a thematic analysis of data, the researcher can identify patterns across the participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Interview and survey responses were reviewed through coding to identify common themes related to student perceptions of how the different speaking activities impact their speaking abilities and performance. Organizing thematic data enables a macro-view of processing from raw qualitative data analysis, preserving clear connections across the coding stages. Using micro-level charts promoted systematic data to highlight answers to the research question regarding the different speaking activity impacts on skill development, motivation, and oral fluency gains. The analysis of data allowed patterns to emerge, facilitating the identification of shared elements that influence communication in learners.

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4. Findings and discussion

Challenges in speaking

During the interviews, the students pointed out the most challenging aspects of communicating ideas in their L2.

In the following extract, Participant S1 identifies the challenges they face regarding speaking: "not enough vocabulary or know that I'm using the correct phrases." Appropriate vocabulary usage stands out as the most challenging element of English for successful communication, with nine participants highlighting vocabulary limitations as their primary difficulty. Having a lack of vocabulary interferes with the conveying of messages and the structure of ideas in oral expression. Consequently, limited appropriate vocabulary lowers confidence in students and hinders their oral performance directly correlating to the affective filter hypothesis.

Another challenge in speaking is fluency. In Participant S2's response: "it's complicated the fluency," they expressed difficulty with this aspect of speaking. Similarly, all the participants expressed fluency as a barrier to communicating efficiently. Fluency development includes clear integration of ideas between expressions, logic, and a steady flow of speech. Additionally, the pressure to speak fluently in real-time conversations can elevate anxiety and self-awareness, contributing to the affective filter. These challenges can lower confidence in students, affecting their general speaking abilities.

Interaction for acquisition

A pattern identified during the data collection from students' responses suggests that interaction with classmates plays a beneficial role in the acquisition of vocabulary.

In one example of this, Participant S3 stated that interacting with peers is beneficial for their vocabulary construction: "When we are talking to each other … It helps me to learn new words." Participant S4 expressed that they learned from their more proficient peers: "My classmates have advanced English and I learn from them." That view was shared by the 11 participants.

The students expressed they found benefits in collaborative tasks for their speaking skills' development, reflecting the sociocultural theory's emphasis on peer interaction for language acquisition. Developing activities where students engage in interaction and socializing promotes new context-specific vocabulary acquisition.

The data collected from the students' responses highlighted the beneficial role that plays interaction in the improvement of linguistic acquisition. Contextualized learning material facilitates the understanding and retention of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and linguistic structures. In the different activities, the students communicated and expressed their ideas by working cooperatively and individually; as well, the students were assessed by the teacher to correct linguistic inaccuracies. These activities helped develop verbal skills through the sharing of ideas through authentic language. The development of engaging activities, encourages the learners to interact and socialize with peers, promoting the understanding of new meanings, ideas, and vocabulary items. In addition to building vocabulary, peer interaction helps learners in acquiring new speech patterns, meaningful communication, and confidence. As students direct their learning process with communicative goals, the language implemented becomes meaningful and useful for further interactions.

Moreover, Participant S5 suggests: "Having conversations with my classmates is something challenging, but I feel it helps me learn new skills." Interaction among peers promotes cognitive engagement, as the learners involve several skills in their language production, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and other metacognitive processes.

The discussion of these extracts highlights the importance of interaction among peers, to contribute to a positive learning atmosphere. It can be inferred that the personal bonds between the learners allowed them to develop scaffolding strategies. As well, authentic and meaningful communication among learners is encouraged to acquire an increased domain of speaking abilities.

Improved confidence on speaking skills.

The students reported increased confidence towards the end of the case study after performing several types of speaking activities with peers.

For instance, two students, Participants S6 and S7, expressed in their survey answers: "You can feel confidence, and you can help each other," "My classmates have advanced English and I learn from them." In an extract from Participant's S8 interview response, they identify the following benefit from collaborative practices: "At first, I felt very shy and nervous to speak, but having speaking activities all the time helped me lose the nervousness."

Continuous practice with peers helps students feel more confident in their speaking abilities. These abilities can be developed through scaffolding strategies that students develop while interacting with peers of different proficiency levels. Moreover, during the interviews, the students conveyed that because of continuous practice, they felt less anxious than in the first few practices of speaking activities in the case study. Through collaborative speaking tasks, the students created a learning environment where they provided meaningful feedback. The students can learn from peers who have more proficiency in the language, having linguistic gains such as new idiomatic expressions, grammatical structure, and metacognitive skills. In the interactions with classmates, the learners also created personal connections with the sharing of interests, boosting motivation and a positive learning context.

Increased motivation in learners.

Throughout the interviews and surveys, it was discovered that implementing topics relevant to the students, there was increased motivation.

For example, one student, Participant S9, expressed: "Talking about what I like helped me feel more motivated because I wanted my classmates to know about me too."

This perspective was shared by all the participants, who stated that sharing their interests pushed them to get involved more with the class. The consensus indicates that when students use material from popular culture topics within their interests, they feel more engaged with the activities, participate more in class, and interact more with their peers. This motivation increase happens to the students when they share concepts that are meaningful for their daily lives and personal interests.

Likewise, Participant S10 expressed motivation for participating in class in their response: "I wanted my classmates to learn about things I like." Implementing popular culture material puts into practice the learners' previous knowledge of the topics. Moreover, the material provides a sense of cultural relevance in the learning process, with the students exercising respectful communication and politeness strategies. These strategies develop cultural awareness and are useful for the holistic development of students' communicative competencies. Integration of social and cultural awareness in the classroom fosters positive self-esteem among students and creates a stimulating atmosphere where students apply scaffolding techniques.

In the following participants' responses, Participants S11 and S12, they identify that: "Because my classmates know a lot, I learn new ways to express myself," "After doing lots of presentations I feel confident, unlike before, when I made a mistake, I froze." Through the collaborative and scaffolded strategies applied among students for their speaking activities, the learners developed empathetic and positive environments where learning mistakes become part

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of the process of improving at the language; this environment welcomed constructive feedback, where students corrected each other and created meaningful personal connections.

Prior preparation for speaking tasks.

The students highlighted the importance of preparation for speaking activities, reinforcing the literature review's emphasis on reducing anxiety through adequate preparation. In the interviews, the participants expressed that preparing before each speaking task serves multiple benefits in their speaking skills.

One example of this is the response of Participant S13: "Preparing before the activity helps me in feeling confident and ready to know the vocabulary." In this extract, the participant highlighted the benefits of preparing before producing any speech.

Similarly, Participant S14 explained how researching provides certainty in the use of complex concepts in a more advanced learning environment: "In the 700 level of English classes, we use many concepts that are difficult when you don't know what they mean… When I investigate to prepare for my speaking, I feel confident and sure that I am using them correctly." Asking questions, researching, and brainstorming about the topic of the class, allows the students to prepare beforehand what type of vocabulary they will use. Prior preparations for speaking tasks lowers anxiety and boost confidence in the participants' speaking performance. This reduction of the affective filter removes internal challenges in the students and lets them feel prepared for the task, leading to a more fluent and confident oral production.

The most effective speaking activity.

Each speaking activity serves different purposes according to the abilities and needs of the students. In this case study, the most effective speaking activity for the development of abilities was the debates.

An instance of this finding is the statement of a student, Participant S15, in the interviews: "… all the activities helped me in something, but the best were the debates."

In the case study, the three speaking activities applied were helpful in the development of specific abilities. However, the debates stood out as they presented the most benefits within a single activity for language development. Debates allow students to prepare, research, and reflect upon their expressions. As well, debates present important requirements of both accuracy and fluency, while communicating with peers. The debates involve several skills at different levels of speaking. The stages of debates allow students to prepare a thought coherently and deliver it to persuade. While preparing for a debate, students must explore complex concepts and structure them in an intelligible way. In debates, students manipulate meanings focused on accurate information in real-time, to argue with their counterparts and persuade audiences. Throughout the debate, the participants must reflect and reanalyze their contributions to the argument. This presents a challenge for students to create persuasive and logical ideas, contributing to the meaningful development of communicative strategies.

Another example of this finding is the self-reported data item from Participant S16 in the survey, where they indicate they find "…the debates as the most helpful speaking activity." Students' engagement in debates allowed for meaningful contributions, where students analyzed and prepared facts and arguments, resulting in the improvement of several specific speaking skills.

Conclusion and implications

The main objective of this case study was to determine whether three different speaking activities affected the oral performance of English learners and if so, how. The data from the participants was gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face and an online survey. The students' responses were examined with thematic analysis to identify general

topics that were common among the participants and their speaking performance. Throughout the semester of this case study, the student participants were involved in different speaking activities that enabled them to use the target language serving different functions. Among these language functions were the exposition, argumentation, and discussion of several topics that interested the students. The results found during this analysis were discussed to identify the effects of the speaking activities and how they impacted the students. During the discussion, the main findings highlighted that the dynamic of speaking activities benefits and challenges the students in their linguistic fluency. On the one hand, the participants' responses first identify the challenge of limited vocabulary, which hinders clear and fluent communication between the learners. On the other hand, the students expressed several benefits from participating in these activities. These benefits include increased motivation and confidence in oral performance, through the integration of topics relevant to the participants. Additionally, this study highlighted the importance of peer interaction for the development of new linguistic skills, with improvements in vocabulary gains and fluency. Finally, the finding of the debates as the most successful activity indicates that this type of speaking interaction results in students feeling more confident, prepared, and with better reasoning of their cognitive and metacognitive skills.

The implications of the present study provide a new understanding of how different types of speaking activities help learners develop communication skills. Communicative Language Teaching in the target language English and the Sociocultural learning theory strongly relate to the findings of this empirical research, by linking the performance of EFL learners with internal and external factors. Students' motivation, affective filter, and involvement with their peers can either hinder or enhance speaking production. By noticing and implementing personal interests, the CLT classroom can become a positive integrative environment where students thrive and enjoy their learning process.

The limitations of this study include a limited number of participants that belong to the same sociocultural context and the application of the study was of one hour each week during one semester. Further research is recommended with a greater number of participants from different backgrounds with an extended timeframe to assess that the results are unbiased. As well, it is also recommended that further studies are carried out with varied age groups to identify if there are other personally meaningful strategies for eliciting successful communication.

Acknowledgements

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview guide

Question	Code
1. Do you think socializing and working with classmates contributed to your English learning process? How?	IQ-1
2. Recall a classroom activity that helped enhance your English skills. What made it effective? How did it help you?	IQ-2
3. Did discussions, debates, and oral presentations help with learning new vocabulary? How did it help you?	IQ-3
4. In the first presentation, you talked about a work that is meaningful for you. Did this make you more motivated to participate in class? Why or why not?	IQ-4
5. Can you identify any changes in your confidence and ability to express yourself in English after participating in discussions, debates, and presentations in the classroom? If so, please explain.	IQ-5
6. What would you need to enhance your speaking in oral presentations, debates, and discussions?	IQ-6

Appendix 2. Online survey guide

Question	Code
1. On a scale of 1 to 5, how confident do you feel about your English speaking abilities?	GFQ-1
2. What specific aspects of English do you feel you need to improve the most?	GFQ-2
3. How comfortable are you with participating in class discussions and conversations in English?	GFQ-3
4. What types of activities or exercises in the class do you find most helpful for improving your speaking and communication skills?	GFQ-4
5. What topic seen in class is your favorite so far?	GFQ-5
6. What activity done in class is your favorite so far?	GFQ-6
7. Do you have opportunities to practice English outside of the classroom? If yes, please describe.	GFQ-7
8. What challenges do you face when trying to communicate in English?	GFQ-8
9. How would you rate the effectiveness of the communicative approach in helping you develop your English skills?	GFQ-9
10. How often do you use English in your daily life outside of the classroom?	GFQ-10
11. How do you feel about group activities or pair work in class? Are they beneficial for your language development?	GFQ-11
12. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions about the English language learning experience in our class?	GFQ-12

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