

Peer-assessment to improve speaking in fourth graders: an action research study
Evaluación entre pares para mejorar el habla en alumnos de cuarto grado: un estudio de investigación-acción
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**INNOVACIÓN Y
CONVERGENCIA: IMPACTO
MULTIDISCIPLINAR**

Enero - Junio, V°6 - N°1; 2025

- ✓ **Recibido:** 10 /01/2024
- ✓ **Aceptado:**30/01/2025
- ✓ **Publicado:** 31/01/2025

PAIS

- **Ecuador- Guayaquil**


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FORMATO DE CITA APA.

Moreira, A. (2025). *Peer-assessment to improve speaking in fourth graders: an action research study*. *Revista G-ner@ndo*, V°6 (N°1,). 616 – 634.

Abstract

This action research analyzed the impact of peer assessment on the development of oral skills in English in a private school in Guayaquil, Ecuador. 40 students with level A1 in English participated. A mixed approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. For the quantitative part, a pretest and a posttest were used, evaluated using a rubric that considered criteria such as intelligibility, rhythm and expression, intonation, grammar and content. The results showed a significant increase in oral performance, with an effect size of 2.3. In the qualitative dimension, students' perceptions were explored through a survey that included a Likert-type section and open questions. The findings revealed that the peer evaluation strategy contributed to the improvement in oral activities, and students expressed interest in continuing to apply this methodology. This approach represents a viable alternative for teachers of English as a foreign language programs who seek to incorporate collaborative assessment in their classrooms, both in private and public institutions.

Keywords: peer assessment, speaking, EFL, elementary school.

Resumen

Esta investigación-acción analizó el impacto de la evaluación por pares en el desarrollo de habilidades orales en inglés en una escuela privada de Guayaquil, Ecuador. Participaron 40 estudiantes con nivel A1 en inglés. Se adoptó un enfoque mixto, combinando métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos. Para la parte cuantitativa, se emplearon un pretest y un posttest evaluados mediante una rúbrica que consideraba criterios como inteligibilidad, ritmo y expresión, entonación, gramática y contenido. Los resultados evidenciaron un incremento significativo en el desempeño oral, con un tamaño del efecto de 2,3. En la dimensión cualitativa, se exploraron las percepciones de los estudiantes a través de una encuesta que incluía una sección tipo Likert y preguntas abiertas. Los hallazgos revelaron que la estrategia de evaluación por pares contribuyó al mejoramiento en las actividades orales, y los estudiantes expresaron interés en seguir aplicando esta metodología. Este enfoque representa una alternativa viable para docentes de programas de inglés como lengua extranjera que busquen incorporar la evaluación colaborativa en sus aulas, tanto en instituciones públicas como privadas.

Palabras clave: evaluación grupal, competencia oral, EFL, Escuela.

Introduction

The need to develop oral production skills in English has been increasing, making it necessary to address certain learning difficulties (Richards, 2006). Among these, students face limitations such as misunderstandings, brief interactions, and a reduced vocabulary (Richards, 2008). To overcome these barriers, Krashen (1982) proposed providing more "input" to students, pointing out that it is essential to promote communication and conversation in English to progress in their learning.

The development of oral skills is a recurring theme in recent communication research (Brown, 2002). In this context, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches have transformed classroom dynamics, the design of materials and the teaching role (Richards & Renandya, 2002). This approach places special emphasis on interaction, which is considered essential for second language learners to benefit. According to Syafrizal and Rohmawati (2017), oral communicative activities should be "free", offering students multiple opportunities to use the language.

However, speaking a foreign language comes with several challenges. Cognitive (Derakhshan, Nadi, & Beheshti, 2016) and emotional factors, such as anxiety, disposition, and fear of making mistakes, influence English learning (Brown, 2002). Furthermore, the immediacy of speaking (Tomlinson, 2013), the lack of personal strategies (Burns, 2019) and the fear of ridicule (Syafrizal & Rohmawati, 2017) are frequent obstacles. However, some authors have suggested solutions. Iman (2017) highlighted that exposing students to multiple oral activities increases their active participation, while the role of instruction is to identify and address oral production difficulties.

Evaluation is a key tool to identify limitations such as lack of knowledge of words, planning problems and the absence of adequate measurement instruments (Akkaya, Yilmaz, & Aydin, 2018). Syafrizal and Rohmawati (2017) highlighted the importance of communicative activities

that promote collaborative work, such as practicing, modeling scenarios, and achieving shared goals. For their part, Darmuki, Andayani, Nurkamto and Saddhono (2018) demonstrated that collaborative work significantly improves speaking skills, as evidenced by the superior results of the experimental group compared to the control group.

Local studies have also produced relevant findings. Aguilar (2019), when using self-assessment, observed that this strategy allows students to analyze their learning process and encourage self-correction, achieving improvements in pronunciation. Yépez (2019) reported that peer assessment not only improves scores in oral skills, but also fosters the ability to provide feedback, impacting other aspects of learning. For his part, Vega (2019) supported self-assessment as a strategy that increases confidence and scores in oral skills.

The objective of this study was to determine how English speaking ability improves through peer assessment. The participants were fourth grade students from a public school in Guayaquil, aged between 8 and 9 years. These ages establish goals such as communicating with peers clearly and slowly, showing a willingness to participate (Ministry of Education, 2016).

Syafrizal and Rohmawati (2017) noted that students avoid speaking due to lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes. However, working in small groups provides a safe environment to practice and negotiate meaning. Other studies, such as Setiyadi, Sukirlan, and Mahpul (2016), support the use of social strategies to improve oral skills scores. Activities such as opinion sharing and search dynamics allow students to interact on topics of interest, which encourages interaction and learning.

Furthermore, local educational authorities (Ministry of Education, 2016) recommend not focusing too much on precision in the early years of learning, but rather allowing students to experiment. Pronunciation is also considered crucial for intelligibility (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing,

2011), while other elements such as rhythm and intonation complement effective communication (Alotaibi, 2014).

The national English curriculum in Ecuador highlights collaborative learning through pair or group work (Ministry of Education, 2016). According to Zheng, Chen, Cui, and Zhang (2019), peer assessment allows students to evaluate their peers' assignments, while Joo (2016) recommended training students to use rubrics to ensure objective results. For their part, Nejad and Mahfoodh (2019) emphasized the need for students to understand the evaluation indicators to avoid bias. Peer evaluation is a pedagogical strategy that has gained relevance in the educational field, especially in the learning of foreign languages. This methodology is based on the active participation of students by assuming roles as both evaluators and evaluated, promoting bidirectional learning (Topping, 2017). In addition to fostering collaboration, it allows students to develop critical and reflective skills by analyzing the performance of their peers.

According to Zheng, Chen, Cui, and Zhang (2019), peer assessment facilitates interaction and the construction of shared knowledge, resulting in more meaningful learning. The authors point out that this process contributes not only to the development of linguistic skills, but also to improving the intrinsic motivation of students, who perceive greater control over their learning. However, they also highlight the importance of providing structured guidance, such as clear rubrics, to ensure that assessments are fair and objective.

In this context, Joo (2016) argues that prior training of students in the use of rubrics and evaluation criteria is essential. This not only ensures the reliability of the results, but also reduces the possibility of personal biases that could affect the performance of colleagues. Likewise, training in indicator management fosters a deeper understanding of learning expectations, helping students identify areas of improvement in their own performance.

Nejad and Mahfoodh (2019) expanded on these ideas by highlighting that clarity in evaluation indicators is key to avoiding confusion or discrepancies during the process. Furthermore, they suggested that peer feedback should be specific, constructive, and focused on improvable aspects, rather than generalized criticism. This approach not only increases students' confidence, but also strengthens their ability to communicate effectively in a foreign language.

On the other hand, studies such as that of Alwi and Sidhu (2013) have shown that peer assessment contributes significantly to the development of oral skills, particularly in contexts where students need to practice communicative interaction. According to these authors, the simple act of receiving immediate feedback fosters greater awareness of aspects such as pronunciation, fluency, and grammatical structure, improving performance on future tasks.

In Ecuador, the Ministry of Education (2016) highlights that collaborative learning is an essential component for the comprehensive development of students, promoting values such as empathy, respect and shared responsibility. This approach aligns with the principles of peer assessment, which seeks not only to strengthen technical skills, but also to foster an inclusive and collaborative learning environment.

Finally, it should be noted that recent research supports the implementation of this methodology at early educational levels. Aguilar (2019) found that peer assessment is especially effective in developing basic oral skills, as it allows students to learn from their peers' mistakes and progressively improve their performance. These results suggest that peer assessment can be a transformative tool in English learning, as long as it is used in a structured way and with clear objectives.

Methods and Materials

This section includes information about the participants and instruments. The present study is framed as action research since its objective was to generate changes in the current strategies for developing English-speaking skills. Action research is characterized as an evidence-based process to improve educational practices, whether in teaching or learning (Hunter, 2017; Norton, 2014). The participants and instruments used are described below. The students attended a public school where the researcher worked. The participants were 40 fourth-grade elementary school students, including 21 boys and 19 girls, aged between 8 and 9 years old. According to the results of a diagnostic test (Macmillan, 2012), 83% of the students were at level A1, while 17% were at pre-A1 level.

To answer the first research question: *What is the effect of peer-assessment on students' speaking skills?*, a rubric (Appendix D) was used to obtain scores from the pretest and posttest. This rubric evaluated three elements of speaking: intelligibility, rhythm/expression, and intonation. Additionally, two other aspects—content and grammar—were included due to the unit's content to complement overall performance. The total score was 10, with a maximum of 2 points assigned to each element.

In the pretest, students told a story about their favorite object or toy (excluding electronic devices), while in the posttest, they narrated a story about the past life of a musical instrument.

To answer the second research question: *What are students' perspectives about this innovation?*, a survey (Appendix F) was conducted at the end of the study. It contained six statements and six open-ended questions, presented in Spanish. The survey aimed to understand students' opinions about the class activities using the peer-assessment strategy and their improvement in speaking skills.

In the Likert scale section (Appendix G), students marked an “X” according to their perspectives: Totally Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Indifferent (3), Agree (4), or Totally Agree (5).

The statements were:

I feel confident speaking English in front of others.

I feel confident that I can be understood when speaking English.

I know what to do to improve my pronunciation.

Working in groups helps improve pronunciation.

I feel good practicing pronunciation with my classmates.

I would enjoy using peer assessment for pronunciation in the future.

The survey also included six open-ended questions designed to identify situations the researcher might have overlooked. These questions were:

What activities do you prefer to improve your pronunciation?

How effective is it to tell your classmates about their pronunciation?

How do you know you have improved your pronunciation?

How have your classmates helped you improve your pronunciation?

What changes have you noticed in English class?

Would you recommend working in groups and assessing each other to improve pronunciation?
Why?

In this section, students were expected to reflect introspectively. However, it was anticipated that they might need support from the teacher to provide detailed answers. For this reason, the survey was conducted in Spanish, considering the students’ English proficiency level.

Finally, the researcher included field notes. During each class, specific reactions, moments when students seemed to enjoy learning, and improvements observed in particular participants were recorded. These observations were not based on a predefined set of questions but reflected the spontaneous reactions of the students and the researcher-teacher.

Data Analysis

The rubric provided quantitative data that was tabulated in an Excel spreadsheet with the scores from the pretest and posttest. These data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS statistical program, which generated descriptive statistics. The calculation of the mean and standard deviation helped determine the study's effect size, a key indicator for comparing findings across studies (Rocconi & Gonyea, 2018; Boulton, 2016).

The survey results reflected students' perspectives through their Likert scale responses, which were coded numerically. Subsequently, Cronbach's alpha was calculated using statistical programs such as SPSS. The open-ended questions were organized based on the variables of the innovation and the similarities among responses. Field notes were used to support the research questions.

Ethical Considerations

Given the participants' age and the school context, the necessary approvals and consents were obtained (Appendix A). A document was presented to the department's Director requesting authorization to conduct the study, preceded by an in-person meeting to explain the objectives and benefits of the research. After obtaining the Director's signature, a formal letter was sent to parents requesting their consent. This letter included information about the study and assured parents that their children's personal information would remain confidential.

Results

This section is organized based on the two research questions: What is the effect of peer-assessment on students' speaking skills? and What are students' perspectives about this innovation? The first section describes the results obtained through the rubric, providing a quantitative analysis. The subsequent subsections summarize the results from the quantitative instruments, the first part of the survey, and the field notes.

Pre-test and Post-test

After completing the pre-test, a clear difficulty in students' oral expression was observed. Students showed little interest in participating in speaking activities and lacked the necessary skills to present information orally. In contrast, the post-test results demonstrated that students were able to express themselves more easily and showed an improved ability to speak compared to their initial performance.

Table 1

Test Results: Pre and Post-test

	Pre-test			Post-test		
	N	M	SD	M	SD	<i>d</i>
Tests results	40	5.01	1.51	7.72	0.67	2.31

Note. N = Amount of participants, M = mean, SD = standard deviation, *d* = Cohen's

The table above presents the general results of the pretest and posttest. The participants' average score before the innovation was 5.01. After implementing the innovation, the average score increased to 7.72. It is important to note that the elements of the rubric were analyzed. According to the results shown in Table 2, the element that showed the greatest improvement was grammar, followed by intelligibility.

The Cohen's d value is 2.31, calculated using the means of the pretest and posttest, as well as the standard deviation. This result helps determine if the effect size of the study is significant enough to be replicated in future research with similar findings. Based on this value, the effect size is large and positive.

Table 2. *Improvement in speaking components*

	Intonation	R&E	Intelligibility	Grammar	Content
Pre-test Mean	1.4	1.2	0.8	0.5	1.0
Post-test	2.0	1.9	1.5	1.2	1.2
Mean					
Improvement	37%	56%	97%	116%	12%

Mean of every component obtained from the pre-test and the post-test.

The table above shows the results obtained from the pre-test and post-test. Each score written in each descriptor represents the average obtained from every single component used to evaluate speaking. In terms of improvement, it is noticeable that the highest result was in the conjugation component, which was the descriptor with the most improvement during the implementation period.

Survey

This instrument consisted of two sections that gathered valuable insights from students. The Likert scale was first entered into the SPSS program to determine its reliability. After entering the information, the result was 0.76, indicating that the scale was “acceptable” and therefore, the results could be included in this study.

In the Likert-type section, the results showed an almost positive attitude toward the study, considering their initial reluctance to speak. The first statement was “I feel confident speaking English in front of others”: 47.5% of students agreed, and 52.5% were unsure.

The second question indicated that 30% of students feel they are understood when they speak English, while 55% were undecided. The answers for question three revealed that students know what to do to improve their pronunciation (72.5% agreed). In item four, regarding how helpful it is to work in groups to improve pronunciation, all students agreed (100%). In relation to practicing pronunciation with their classmates (question 5), 85% of students felt good during the sessions. The last item referred to recommending peer assessment to improve pronunciation in the future; 100% of students agreed with this statement.

Open-ended questions in the survey

Six open-ended questions helped encourage and prepare the participants of this study to start with the series of activities. These questions included students' personal preferences for learning and their willingness to give and accept opinions. The questions aimed to allow students to notice the improvements made in the English class. This implementation also promoted teamwork as a good means to share recommendations. A thorough analysis of these questions is discussed in the following paragraphs.

Regarding the second question of the survey, students said they never felt ashamed to give their opinions about their teammates' pronunciation. When sharing their opinions, they never felt intimidated by receiving positive or negative feedback on their way of pronouncing words in English. Therefore, it can be concluded that it was effective to have students give their opinions about pronunciation, as it encouraged them to open their minds to giving and receiving suggestions.

Similarly, in question 4, about how their classmates helped them to improve pronunciation, they expressed that their curiosity and willingness increased and kept the task going. For instance, one student showed her leadership abilities to encourage her peers and promoted an atmosphere of cooperation and courage to keep going despite their weaknesses. In question 5, students described several points that had changed in the classes.

Summary of the Field Notes

Throughout the application of these techniques, the teacher noticed that the majority of students felt curious and remained attentive to the implementation. At the beginning, some participants felt confused, but once the instructions were given along with the objectives and materials, students' enthusiasm grew. Similarly, when students were answering the open-ended questions (Appendix F), they had to be monitored, and the teacher had to take notes on some of the comments to make them more explicit.

The most notable comments from this section are: For questions 1 and 2, 20% of students said they enjoyed peer work when they had to create a story about a musical instrument; it didn't feel like a final test to them. In question 2, the teacher's field notes describe that, along with cooperation and generosity, another positive aspect of the activities was that it allowed students to showcase their progress. In particular, two students were eager to speak and were not very participative before the study. They said they wanted to perform in front of the class if they had a model. Another example is that, although it was a little difficult for them to learn how to assess, students continued with the activity, and it became a challenge that brought out the best in them.

Discussion

Prior to the study, the teacher-researcher noticed that students were reluctant to engage in conversations. Thus, the next step was to find ways to support learners in overcoming this barrier. The placement test provided a starting point to evaluate their existing competencies.

Following the pre-test, it became clear that students struggled with a skill within their A1 level (Appendix C), as they were unable to pronounce familiar vocabulary items accurately or be easily understood. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) emphasized the importance of identifying the end goal of understanding in research.

During the study, students felt more comfortable practicing their speaking skills in small groups, which boosted their confidence. As noted by Syafrizal and Rohmawati (2017), learners often avoid speaking due to fear of making mistakes, but small groups help alleviate this anxiety. Peer work and assessment through engaging activities provided a supportive environment where students could freely discuss topics of interest. The survey indicated that students gained self-confidence and, through interactions with their peers, were encouraged to speak more.

Throughout the study, students consistently applied peer assessment strategies in every session. They were open to providing and receiving constructive feedback. According to Zheng, Chen, Cui, and Zhang (2019), such peer interactions were beneficial for student learning. Additionally, the teacher's guidance, monitoring, and feedback were crucial in facilitating their learning, aligning with Joo's (2016) view on the importance of continuous training and building a solid foundation for effective learning.

The survey results indicated that students felt more confident speaking in front of others and believed they could improve their speaking skills independently. Cox, Henrichsen, and Tanner (2019) argued that effective communication is not only about speaking but also about being understood, with feedback playing a key role in enhancing speaking skills. Burns (2019) supported this, stating that understanding, correction, and feedback are fundamental in speaking activities. Derakhshan, Nadi, and Beheshti (2016) also found that interaction significantly contributes to building confidence in speaking.

After the post-test, results showed an overall improvement in scores. Students demonstrated better communication skills after receiving feedback from peers in activities such as story creation, commenting, and sharing opinions. Setiyadi, Sukirlan, and Mahpul (2016) suggested that social interaction aids learners in improving their speaking abilities, as it allows them to practice the target language with their peers. Derakhshan, Nadi, and Beheshti (2016) further emphasized that interaction plays a critical role in advancing speaking skills.

The lesson activities were designed to foster interaction through assessment. With each lesson from the coursebook, the researcher arranged group work, where students would use the lesson content to present orally. They quickly grasped the activities and adapted to the process. An important aspect of the implementation was shifting the focus from speaking "perfectly" or achieving accuracy to prioritizing the ability to be understood. Brown (2002) highlighted the significance of focusing on functional language use in order to promote more "spontaneous" communication.

Conclusion

The peer assessment strategy implemented in this study effectively reduced students' anxiety about speaking, yielding positive outcomes. This communicative approach enabled learners to develop oral competencies appropriate for their A1 CEFR level. Another key finding was students' perceptions of the collaborative activities, which involved feedback and peer interaction. These activities encouraged students to evaluate each other, discuss whether they understood their classmates, and identify areas for improvement. Specific classes were dedicated to teaching students how to offer constructive feedback to avoid misunderstandings or offense.

The data gathered from the tests revealed that students' scores improved following the peer assessment strategy. Initially, students struggled to be understood and did not use pauses effectively for clarity. However, post-test results indicated progress in their speaking abilities after

using the rubric (Appendix D) and checklist (Appendix E) to assess one another. They learned that communication is about ensuring their audience understands, and this could be practiced with their peers.

The rubric proved to be a useful tool to keep the focus on speaking skills rather than personal relationships. By evaluating aspects like intelligibility and rhythm, students were able to stay on task, minimizing distractions such as personal preferences or dislikes. This approach helped maintain a more productive learning environment.

Surveys showed an improvement in students' perceptions of speaking and peer collaboration compared to before the study. Students supported one another before presenting to the teacher, reinforcing the student-centered nature of the class. Furthermore, because students had a role in choosing the topics for their presentations, the tasks felt more meaningful, and they became more engaged in the process.

In conclusion, the findings from both qualitative and quantitative data support the effectiveness of the current practices for developing speaking skills. Students gained more confidence in speaking and overcame their fear of making mistakes. This study contributes to the research on peer assessment and demonstrates that it can enhance students' pronunciation, which is essential in elementary language learning.

Finally, the results from the pre-test and post-test confirmed that the implementation of this approach was successful. Through deliberate practice, students improved in all components of their speaking skills, showcasing the positive impact of this innovation.

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