

The effectiveness of phonological instruction for the development of oral skills in A1 level students

La efectividad de la instrucción fonológica para el desarrollo de las habilidades orales en estudiantes de nivel A1

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DIMENSIÓN CIENTÍFICA

Enero - junio, V°7 - N°1; 2026

Recibido: 12-04-2026

Aceptado: 12-04-2026

Publicado: 17-04-2026

PAIS

- Ecuador, Durán
- Ecuador, Durán
- Ecuador, Durán




INSTITUCION

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FORMATO DE CITA APA.

Alarcón, M., Campoverde, J. & Bonilla, J. (2026). The effectiveness of phonological instruction for the development of oral skills in A1 level students. *Revista G-ner@ndo*, V°7 (N°1). Pág. 4061 – 4074.

Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of a phonological instruction program in developing oral skills among A1-level students in a rural school in Ecuador. The research was conducted at La Siberia Educational Unit in Mache, Pedernales (Manabí), with a group of seven elementary school students. The program incorporated phonological activities, including explicit instruction on segmental features (vowels, consonants, and minimal pairs), as well as suprasegmental elements such as stress and rhythm. In addition, communicative pronunciation tasks were implemented to promote meaningful oral production. A mixed-methods design was adopted, combining quantitative data from pre- and post-speaking assessments with qualitative data obtained through classroom observations and student perception questionnaires. The findings revealed noticeable improvements in students' intelligibility, pronunciation accuracy, and confidence when speaking English. Furthermore, students showed positive attitudes toward the phonological activities, which helped them organize and use language more effectively. Overall, the results suggest that this type of instruction can support the development of oral skills and contribute to more equitable language learning opportunities in rural contexts.

**Keywords:** Phonological instruction; oral expression skills; pronunciation teaching; phonological awareness; EFL teaching.

Resumen

Este estudio examinó la efectividad de un programa de instrucción fonológica para el desarrollo de las habilidades orales en estudiantes de nivel A1 en una escuela rural del Ecuador. La investigación se llevó a cabo en la Unidad Educativa La Siberia, ubicada en Mache, Pedernales (Manabí), con un grupo de siete estudiantes de educación básica. El programa incorporó actividades fonológicas que incluyeron instrucción explícita de características segmentarias (vocales, consonantes y pares mínimos), así como elementos suprasegmentales como el acento y el ritmo. Además, se implementaron tareas de pronunciación comunicativa orientadas a promover una producción oral significativa. Se adoptó un diseño de métodos mixtos, combinando datos cuantitativos obtenidos a partir de pruebas de expresión oral aplicadas antes y después de la intervención, con datos cualitativos provenientes de observaciones de aula y cuestionarios de percepción estudiantil. Los resultados evidenciaron mejoras notables en la inteligibilidad, la precisión en la pronunciación y la confianza de los estudiantes al expresarse en inglés. Asimismo, los estudiantes mostraron actitudes positivas hacia las actividades fonológicas, lo que favoreció una mejor organización y uso del lenguaje. En conjunto, los hallazgos sugieren que este tipo de instrucción puede contribuir al desarrollo de las habilidades orales y a la promoción de oportunidades de aprendizaje más equitativas en contextos rurales.

**Palabras clave:** Instrucción fonológica; habilidades de expresión oral; enseñanza de la pronunciación; conciencia fonológica; EFL teaching.

## Introduction

Phonological instruction has been widely recognized as a key pedagogical component in the development of oral skills among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly at the initial stages of proficiency. By emphasizing the systematic teaching of segmental features—such as vowels, consonants, and minimal pairs—and suprasegmental elements including stress, rhythm, and intonation, this type of instruction supports the development of phonological awareness, articulatory accuracy, and intelligible speech (Foote & Trofimovich, 2020; Gordon & Darcy, 2021). When integrated into communicative practices, phonological instruction can enhance learners' ability to participate effectively in spoken interaction.

Despite its importance, the development of oral skills remains one of the most challenging aspects of EFL teaching, especially at beginner levels such as A1. At this stage, learners frequently encounter difficulties related to pronunciation, intelligibility, and the control of prosodic features, which limit their ability to communicate orally and often reduce their confidence in speaking activities (Derwing & Munro, 2021; Saito & Plonsky, 2019). These challenges tend to be more pronounced in rural educational contexts, where students typically have limited exposure to authentic English input and fewer opportunities for sustained oral practice.

From a communicative perspective, oral language development is closely linked to communicative competence. This concept refers to the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in real communicative contexts through the integration of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies (Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia et al, 2010). In EFL settings, phonological control plays a central role in communicative competence, as intelligible pronunciation is essential for successful spoken interaction.

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Learners who struggle with pronunciation are more likely to experience communication breakdowns and increased anxiety, which can further hinder their participation in oral tasks (Horwitz et al, 1986).

Recent studies have demonstrated that targeted phonological instruction can lead to significant improvements in both intelligibility and learners' confidence at the A1 level, particularly when compared to traditional approaches that prioritize grammar and vocabulary without systematic attention to pronunciation (Saito et al, 2022; Thomson & Derwing, 2023). Moreover, the integration of phonological instruction with communicative activities has been shown to positively influence students' motivation and willingness to engage in oral interaction (Leong & Ahmadi, 2022). These findings highlight the importance of addressing pronunciation in an explicit and contextualized manner, especially during the early stages of language learning.

Within the Ecuadorian context, English proficiency has become a priority in the education system in response to current social, academic, and professional demands. However, research indicates that students in rural schools face greater difficulties in developing communicative competence in English, particularly in oral skills. These challenges are associated with limited instructional time, reduced opportunities for oral practice, and the absence of specific strategies for teaching pronunciation (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2023; Pizarro & Calderón, 2022). Despite the growing body of international research, there is still limited empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of phonological instruction in rural Ecuadorian contexts, particularly in institutions located in the province of Manabí. This gap highlights the need for studies that examine how context-sensitive phonological programs can support the development of oral skills in learners with an initial level of proficiency (Armas & Pila, 2025).

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In response to this need, the present study was conducted at Unidad Educativa La Siberia, located in the rural parish of Mache, Pedernales canton, in the province of Manabí. The aim of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of a phonological instruction program in the development of oral skills among A1-level students in a rural Ecuadorian setting. To achieve this objective, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data from pre- and post-speaking assessments with qualitative data obtained through classroom observations and student perception questionnaires. The findings are expected to contribute empirical evidence to support the design of contextualized pedagogical strategies for English language teaching in rural contexts, thereby promoting more equitable educational opportunities and strengthening oral communicative competence among Ecuadorian EFL learners.

### **Métodos y Materiales**

#### Location

This research was conducted at Unidad Educativa La Siberia, located in the Mache parish, Pedernales Cantón, Manabí province, Ecuador. The institution is situated in a rural area, characterized by limited access to technological resources and constant exposure to the English language, which is relevant for analyzing the development of oral skills in A1-level learners.

#### Participants

The study population consisted of seven elementary school students enrolled in the A1 level of English. The sample was selected through non-probability convenience sampling, based on participants' availability and institutional authorization. Although the

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sample size was limited, it was considered appropriate for the exploratory nature of the study and the specific conditions of the rural educational context.

Participants were between 7 and 8 years old and had received basic English instruction through formal schooling. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from the educational institution, and ethical principles were strictly followed, including confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation throughout all stages of the research.

### Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach with a quasi-experimental design, utilizing a single-group pretest-posttest structure. The quantitative method measured students' oral performance before and after the intervention, while the qualitative method provided information on classroom dynamics and students' perceptions of the phonological instruction program. The integration of both data types enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of phonological instruction in environments with limited linguistic input.

### Procedure

This research was structured in three different phases. The first phase, a diagnostic speaking test (pre-test), was administered to identify students' initial oral proficiency. The test included minimal pair repetition, a short reading-aloud task, and guided personal speaking questions. Students' performance was assessed using the phoneme accuracy rubric and the oral message production rubric, establishing a baseline for comparison.

The second phase, a phonological instruction program, was implemented over eight weeks, with weekly sessions that integrated phonemes, syllables, stress, rhythm, and intonation into communicative activities.

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### Speaking Practice Activities

Speaking activities were developed in accordance with the instructional focus of each treatment. Activities included repetition drills, minimal pair discrimination, guided dialogues, short oral descriptions, and role-play tasks. Each session lasted approximately 40 minutes, allowing time for practice, to receive feedback, and reinforcement of phonological features.

Students were encouraged to participate actively and apply pronunciation features within meaningful communicative contexts rather than isolated drills, ensuring alignment with communicative language teaching principles.

In the third phase, at the end of the intervention, the same oral production test was administered as a post-test. Students' post-intervention performance was evaluated using the same rubrics applied in the pre-test. Additionally, the student self-perception survey was administered to gather learners' reflections on their confidence, pronunciation improvement, and attitudes toward speaking English. All data collected during this phase were organized for statistical analysis and comparison with pre-test results.

**Tabla 1.** *Research timeline and procedural distribution*

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Period</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Frequency/Duration</b>
<b>Phase 1: Diagnosis</b>	Week 1	Administration of Oral Production Pre-test	1 session (individual assessment)
<b>Phase 2: Intervention</b>	Week 2	Implementation of Phonological Instruction Program	2 to 3 sessions per week
	Week 2-4	Segmental features (vowels, consonants, minimal pairs)	Focus on phonemic accuracy

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Phase	Period	Activity	Frequency/Duration
	Weeks 5-7	Suprasegmental elements (stress, rhythm, intonation)	Focus on fluency and prosody
	Weeks 8-9	Consolidation (communicative speaking tasks)	Focus on real-time interaction
<b>Phase 3: Evaluation</b>	Week 10	Post-test administration & self-perception survey	1 session (assessment and closing)
<b>Data Analysis</b>	Weeks 11-12	Statistical data organization and processing	Comprehensive data analysis

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#### Data Analysis

##### Quantitative instruments

##### Oral Production test (Pre-test and Post-test)

This instrument was applied to quantitatively measure students' oral skills before and after the implementation of the phonological instruction before and after the implementation of the phonological instruction program. Learners completed guided dialogues and short descriptive speaking tasks designed to elicit controlled and semi-controlled oral production. Performance was assessed using an analytical speaking rubric aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) A1 descriptors. The rubric evaluated pronunciation accuracy, intelligibility, fluency, word stress, and intonation using a 7-point scale, where 1 indicated very low performance, and 7 represented high performance. The results obtained from the pre-test and post-test allowed for the statistical comparison of students'

##### Qualitative information

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### Classroom Observation Checklist

A structured classroom observation checklist was employed to qualitatively document students' oral participation, use of phonological strategies, confidence, and interaction during speaking activities. Observations were conducted throughout the intervention period to collect descriptive evidence of learners' engagement, behavioral changes, and progress in oral communication.

### Integration of Data

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data within the mixed-methods framework enabled a process of methodological triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility, depth, and overall trustworthiness of the findings. The quantitative results offered clear, measurable evidence of improvements in students' speaking performance, particularly in terms of pronunciation accuracy, intelligibility, and overall oral production. At the same time, the qualitative data provided a new perspective by capturing learners' affective responses, levels of engagement, and observable changes in classroom behavior throughout the intervention.

This convergence of data sources allowed for a more comprehensive interpretation of the results, moving beyond purely statistical descriptions to incorporate the experiential and contextual dimensions of the learning process. In this sense, the qualitative findings helped to explain and contextualize the quantitative gains, revealing how increased confidence, motivation, and willingness to participate contributed to the observed improvements in oral performance.

Overall, this integrated analysis strengthened the explanatory power of the study and offered a deeper understanding of the multifaceted impact of phonological instruction. It

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highlights not only its effectiveness in fostering linguistic development but also its role in shaping positive affective outcomes, which are essential for sustained engagement and meaningful participation in EFL learning, particularly in under-resourced rural educational contexts.

### Analysis of results

This section shows the quantitative results obtained from pre-test and post-test speaking assessments administered to seven A1-level EFL students. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on mean scores, percentage improvement, and observable progress in pronunciation accuracy, oral production, and speaking confidence.

**Table 1.** *Overall speaking performance (pre-test vs. Post-test)*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Pre-test Score</b>	<b>Post-test Score</b>	<b>Gain</b>
<b>S1</b>	2.5	4.5	+2.0
<b>S2</b>	3.0	5.0	+2.0
<b>S3</b>	2.0	4.0	+2.0
<b>S4</b>	3.5	5.5	+2.0
<b>S5</b>	2.5	4.5	+2.0
<b>S6</b>	3.0	5.0	+2.0
<b>S7</b>	2.0	4.0	+2.0
<b>Mean</b>	<b>2.64</b>	<b>4.64</b>	<b>+2.00</b>

Table 1 shows a consistent improvement in overall speaking performance among all participants. The mean score increased from 2.64 in the pre-test to 4.64 in pos-test, representing a 75.7% improvement. This indicates that the phonological instruction program

had a positive and uniform impact on students' oral performance, despite differences in initial proficiency levels.

**Table 2.** *Pronunciation Accuracy and Intelligibility*

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Pre-test Mean</b>	<b>Post-test Mean</b>	<b>Improvement (%)</b>
<b>Phoneme accuracy</b>	2.7	4.8	77.8%
<b>Word stress</b>	2.5	4.5	80.0%
<b>Intelligibility</b>	2.6	4.7	80.7%
<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>4.67</b>	<b>79.5%</b>

The results in Table 2 indicate substantial gains in pronunciation-related variables. The most notable improvements were observed in intelligibility (80.7%) and word stress (80.0%), indicating that explicit instruction on segmental and suprasegmental features significantly contributed to clearer and more understandable speech. These findings confirm that systematic phonological training enhances learners' control of pronunciation at the A1 level..

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of phonological instruction in the development of oral skills among A1-level EFL students in a rural Ecuadorian context. The results obtained from the pre-test and post-test speaking assessments provide consistent evidence that systematic phonological instruction had a positive impact on learners' overall speaking performance, particularly in terms of pronunciation accuracy, intelligibility, and control of suprasegmental features.

The quantitative findings revealed a uniform pattern of improvement across all participants, with a mean gain of +2.00 points and a percentage increase of 75.7% in overall speaking performance. This consistency suggests that phonological instruction can be beneficial even for learners with differing initial levels of proficiency. These findings are in line with previous research emphasizing the importance of explicit pronunciation instruction in the early stages of language learning (Foote & Trofimovich, 2020; Gordon & Darcy, 2021). The structured emphasis on segmental features—such as vowels, consonants, and minimal pairs—appears to have contributed to the development of learners' phonemic awareness, enabling more accurate sound production and increased confidence during oral tasks.

More specifically, the results related to pronunciation accuracy and intelligibility showed substantial gains, with improvements exceeding 77% across all evaluated criteria. Intelligibility showed the highest increase (80.7%), followed by word stress (80.0%), which highlights the relevance of addressing both segmental and suprasegmental features in a balanced manner. These findings support the argument proposed by Derwing and Munro (2021), who emphasize that intelligibility should be a central goal of pronunciation instruction in EFL contexts. By integrating these elements, the phonological instruction program facilitated the production of clearer and more comprehensible speech, which is essential for effective oral communication.

From a communicative perspective, these improvements can be understood as a direct contribution to the development of communicative competence. As established by Canale and Swain (1980) and further developed by Celce-Murcia et al. (2010), communicative competence involves not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to convey meaning effectively in real communicative situations. In this study, enhanced phonological control appears to have supported learners' ability to participate more actively in oral tasks, reducing communication breakdowns and facilitating interaction. This suggests

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that pronunciation should not be treated as an isolated component, but rather as an integral part of communicative language teaching.

In addition to the linguistic gains, the qualitative findings revealed important affective outcomes. Data from classroom observations and student perception questionnaires indicated increased willingness to participate and greater confidence in speaking English. These results suggest that the structured and supportive nature of the phonological instruction program may have contributed to lowering affective barriers, which are often associated with anxiety and limited participation in foreign language classrooms. This aligns with previous research highlighting the role of affective factors in language learning processes (Horwitz et al., 1986).

Furthermore, the integration of phonological instruction within communicative activities appears to have been a key factor in the observed improvements. Rather than relying exclusively on mechanical drills, pronunciation features were practiced through meaningful and contextualized speaking tasks. This approach is consistent with the findings of Leong and Ahmadi (2022) and Saito et al. (2022), who underline the importance of contextualized pronunciation instruction in fostering motivation and oral engagement. The use of communicative tasks likely facilitated the transfer of phonological knowledge to real-life speaking situations, thereby reinforcing learning outcomes and promoting more sustained oral interaction.

Despite these positive results, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The small sample size and the absence of a control group restrict the generalizability of the findings and limit the possibility of establishing causal relationships with greater certainty. However, the use of a mixed-methods design strengthened the study by allowing for data triangulation, thereby enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings (Saito & Plonsky, 2019). Future

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research could address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples, as well as comparative or longitudinal designs to further explore the long-term effects of phonological instruction in similar contexts.

Overall, the findings confirm that phonological instruction constitutes a valuable pedagogical strategy for enhancing oral skills at the A1 level, particularly in rural educational settings where exposure to English is limited. This study contributes empirical evidence to the Ecuadorian context and supports the implementation of context-sensitive phonological programs as a means to promote more equitable and effective English language education.

### **Conclusiones**

This study provides evidence that phonological instruction can be effectively implemented as a structured component of early EFL teaching, particularly in rural contexts where exposure to the target language is limited. Rather than functioning as an isolated skill, pronunciation emerges as a foundational element that supports the development of oral communication from the initial stages of learning. The findings also suggest that incorporating phonological instruction within communicative activities creates more meaningful learning opportunities, allowing students to engage with language in a functional and contextually relevant way. This approach not only facilitates the development of oral skills but also promotes more active participation, which is essential in environments where opportunities for spoken interaction are scarce.

From an educational perspective, the study highlights the need to reconsider the role of pronunciation in language curricula. Future research should continue to explore how phonological instruction can be adapted to different contexts, learner profiles, and instructional conditions in order to maximize its pedagogical impact and sustainability.

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