



USING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Speaking skills are often regarded as the most challenging skills to learn in the English language; nevertheless, they are crucial for language learners to become communicatively competent in this increasingly globalised world, where English is a lingua franca. English learners in Ecuador lack confidence in speaking, considering it more challenging than reading and writing. Over the last few years, the field of language teaching has seen a shift towards communicative language teaching (CLT) as a practical approach to language learning. CLT has a significant influence on language teaching worldwide and has shown its effectiveness in developing communicative competencies. The approach emphasises the importance of communication and interaction in language acquisition. The objective of this study was to diagnose the activities used by teachers to develop students' speaking skills.



Mixed-method research was carried out. Teachers from a private school in Ecuador have been interviewed and observed during class, and a survey was conducted among high school students, with 55 students responding to the questions. The data suggest that students lack confidence in practical activities where speaking is the primary skill to be developed, and have insufficient time to develop this skill due to large classes and limited vocabulary knowledge.

Key words: CLT activities; communicative competence; Communicative Language Teaching; English language; speaking skills.

ACTIVIDADES DE ENSEÑANZA COMUNICATIVA PARA MEJORAR LA EXPRESIÓN ORAL EN ESTUDIANTES

RESUMEN

Las habilidades de habla se consideran a menudo las más difíciles de aprender en inglés; sin embargo, son cruciales para que los estudiantes de idiomas adquieran competencia comunicativa en este mundo globalizado, donde el inglés es la lengua franca. Los estudiantes de inglés en Ecuador carecen de confianza para hablar, considerándolo más desafiante que leer y escribir. En los últimos años, el campo de la enseñanza de idiomas ha experimentado un cambio hacia la Enseñanza Comunicativa de Lenguas (CLT) como un enfoque práctico y efectivo para el aprendizaje de idiomas, especialmente en el desarrollo de competencias comunicativas. El objetivo de este estudio fue diagnosticar las actividades utilizadas por los docentes para desarrollar las habilidades de habla de los estudiantes. Se llevó a cabo una investigación de método mixto. Se entrevistó y observó a docentes de un colegio privado en Ecuador durante las clases, y se realizó una encuesta entre estudiantes de secundaria, en la que 55 estudiantes respondieron a las preguntas. Los datos sugieren que los estudiantes carecen de confianza en actividades prácticas

donde hablar es la habilidad principal a desarrollar y no tienen tiempo suficiente para desarrollar esta habilidad debido a las clases grandes y al conocimiento limitado de vocabulario.

Palabras claves: actividades de CLT; competencia comunicativa; enseñanza comunicativa de la lengua; habilidades de expresión oral; lengua inglesa.

INTRODUCTION

The English language is used worldwide, and due to globalisation, it has become a lingua franca. This makes it essential for people to possess practical communication skills. Speaking skills are an integral component of effective communication and are also considered the most challenging skill in language learning (Roa, 2019). English learners in Ecuador lack confidence in speaking, considering it more challenging than reading and writing. Although the Communicative Language Teaching Approach was implemented as one of the core principles in Ecuador's English curriculum in 2016, English teachers do not use the appropriate strategies to encourage learners to produce the language. (Toro et al., 2019).

Another problem is the English language proficiency of Ecuadorians. Ecuador ranks last of 19 Latin American countries in English language proficiency (Education First, 2020). In a study of Barrera & Barragán (2017), 74% of Ecuadorian English teachers scored at levels A1 and A2, lacking the necessary language skills at level B2 required by the Ministry of Education for effective teaching of the subject. According to Barragán-Camacho et al. (2020) only 35.3% of EFL teachers hold the required B2 level of English proficiency. This highlights the importance of developing strategies to enhance English language proficiency in students as well as in teachers.

Over the last few years, the field of language teaching has seen a shift towards communicative language teaching (CLT) as a practical approach to language

learning. CLT emphasises the importance of communication and interaction in language acquisition, moving away from traditional grammar-focused methods. One key aspect of CLT is the use of activities that promote real-life communication and meaningful language use, such as role-playing, group work, discussions, and information gaps. The teacher has the role of a facilitator; the approach is student-centred, so there is more student participation (Richards, 2006). Different studies conclude that the CLT approach is effective for enhancing speaking skills and motivating students to communicate in English. (Abdelmageed & Omer, 2020; Khowatim et al., 2022; Oviedo and Mena, 2021).

The objective of this study was to diagnose the activities used by teachers to develop students' speaking skills. By examining the effectiveness of these activities in enhancing students' oral communication skills, this study aims to provide valuable insights for language educators seeking to optimise their teaching practices and foster a communicative language learning environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking skills

In this globalised world, where the English Language is used for communication, people should possess communicative competence to be successful. Of the four language skills, speaking is the most important for effective communication. According to Roa (2019):

Speaking skills are the most essential skills for all learners who wish to learn English to enhance their careers, improve business, build confidence levels, secure better job opportunities, make public speeches, attend interviews, participate in debates and group discussions, give presentations, and so on. In the present modern world, everything is linked to speaking skills. (p. 9)

Communication cannot function without speaking and listening, so speaking and listening are fundamental skills. According to Anuradha, Raman, and Hemamalini (2014), as cited by Hussain (2017), speaking is learned through extensive listening to sounds, words, phrases, and sentences. They write about some principles when teaching speaking skills; encourage students to speak right from the first day, tolerate if they simply repeat or give one-word answers, let them speak actively, propose structures/phrases/words and let the learners use them in different situations and drill as much as possible, encourage back-chaining or tail-forwarding techniques to make long sentences, organize role-play and pair-work, be well prepared in advance in terms of lesson planning, activities, and tasks, let the learners commit errors and mistakes at the primary stage, give individual attention.

Lackman (2010) divided speaking skills into ten sub-skills: Functions, fluency, accuracy, appropriateness, grammar, turn-taking skills, relevant length, responding and initiating, repair and repetition, range of words, and discourse markers. These skills must be taken into account when teaching speaking skills. Making students aware of these speaking sub-skills and providing classroom practice, will improve their communication outside the classroom, in real-world contexts. Lackman describes practical exercises for each sub-skill in a meaningful and engaging way.

Ecuadorian students face various problems when it comes to speaking English. They struggle to communicate in the target language in class because they are afraid of making mistakes. As a result, they fail to communicate successfully and fluently. Students need more practice to enhance their speaking skills; however, teachers often do not employ effective methods to help students develop accurate oral production (Silva et al., 2021). This was also found by Toro et al. (2019). They claim that the lack of suitable methods, techniques, and strategies for teaching English is yielding poor results in the oral production of the language.

Speaking English also depends on confidence. Istyaning et al. (2022) stated that learners can develop their confidence by practising their speaking skills. Whenever they learn to speak in English, they should also take risks. As a result of their courage, they will gain confidence. When they are confident, they will speak more fluently. It involves numerous activities during the learning process.

Leong and Ahmadi (2017) found that learners with low self-esteem, high anxiety, and low motivation have more difficulties in speaking skills. Students need a friendly and cooperative environment to help them overcome these difficulties. Ghafar and Raheem (2023) described the same factors that affect speaking proficiency. Students should be placed in a supportive and collaborative environment that helps them overcome difficulties in oral communication. Educators need to understand the interests and emotions of their students, and should select effective approaches to ensure sustained engagement in speaking activities.

Communicative Language Teaching

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach emerged in the 1970s as a response to traditional teaching methods, such as the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audiolingual approach (Richards, 2006). These approaches were based on repetitive practice, drills, memorisation and controlled learning. The focus was grammar, which was taught deductively.

The emphasis on grammar has been questioned, as language ability involves more than just grammatical competence. What was needed was communicative competence to use the language for communicative purposes (Richards, 2006; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011).

CLT now has a significant impact on language teaching worldwide. Students participate more actively compared to traditional approaches, such as the Grammar-Translation Method. Learners will develop communicative competence by

using the target language in a meaningful and effective manner. The teacher has a dual role as both facilitator and monitor, allowing students to take on more responsibility for their learning (Richards, 2006).

Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) write about 16 important principles of applying the CLT approach:

- Whenever possible, authentic language
- Being able to figure out the speaker's or writer's intentions is part of being communicatively competent.
- The target language is a vehicle for classroom communication, not just the object of study.
- One function can have many different linguistic forms. Since the focus of the course is on real language use, a variety of linguistic forms are presented together in a single context. The emphasis is on the process of communication rather than merely mastering language forms.
- Students should work with language at the discourse or suprasentential (above the sentence) level. They must learn about cohesion and coherence, those properties of language which bind the sentences together.
- Games are important because they have certain features in common with real communicative events.
- Students should be allowed to express their ideas and opinions.
- Errors are tolerated and seen as a natural outcome of the development of communication skills.
- One of the teacher's primary responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication.
- Communicative interaction encourages cooperative relationships among students. It allows students to work on negotiating meaning.
- The social context of the communicative event is essential in giving



meaning to the utterances.

- Learning to use language forms appropriately is an important part of communicative competence.
- The teacher acts as a facilitator in setting up communicative activities and as an advisor during the activities.
- In communicating, a speaker has a choice not only about what to say, but also how to say it.
- The grammar and vocabulary that the students learn follow from the function, situational context, and the roles of the interlocutors.
- Students should be given opportunities to work on language as it is used in authentic communication. They may be coached on strategies for how to improve their comprehension.

Previous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of the CLT approach in developing speaking skills. Rezalou and Yağiz (2021) noted that for many teachers, communicative language teaching (CLT) can be one of the most effective methods for helping students practice language in everyday life and communication in the classroom. Students have improved their speaking skills through CLT activities and have demonstrated a positive perception and attitude toward these activities.

In a study by Oviedo and Mena (2021), Ecuadorian baccalaureate students were put in a control group and an experimental group that received CLT activities. They were tested on pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, interaction and accuracy. It was concluded that the application of communicative language teaching activities was practical in developing speaking skills. The CLT activities also increased the students' motivation.

Ecuadorian students believe that interactive activities are the most effective way to learn English, although most EFL classes lack techniques for oral interaction (Silva et al., 2021). Some teachers may need additional training or support to facilitate CLT activities effectively, and it is indispensable to have sufficient English proficiency.

Rengifo and Ramírez (2023) observed and surveyed teachers and students of an Ecuadorian high school and revealed that teachers know about techniques, strategies and methods to teach speaking skills using the CLT approach; however, they don't apply them properly. Almost all the instructions were given in Spanish or were translated. Students in the research had lots of problems with the English language. They lacked vocabulary and verbs to express ideas and couldn't communicate fluently due to word-by-word translation.

Many parts of the research have been applied to adolescents; however, some studies also show that CLT activities have a positive impact on younger students. According to Eddie and Aziz (2020), fun and meaningful CLT activities are practical in developing the spoken interaction skills of low-proficiency Year 2 students (8 years old) in Malaysia. They also showed positive attitudes towards the CLT activities. Reid (2016) conducted a long-term study with first-grade students, and the results revealed an improvement in communicative skills and a positive attitude.

The CLT approach is excellent for intermediate and advanced students; however, beginners require some controlled practice to develop their skills. Participating in spoken communicative activities might be strenuous for students with low proficiency levels in the target language (Ramadhan et al, 2022). Therefore, it is necessary to look critically at the CLT activities for younger learners. Activities such as group discussions and debates may be more suitable for older learners, although young learners can also effectively express their ideas and opinions.

According to Ohashi (2015), play has a key role in ‘real’ and suitable tasks and activities for young learners. They have limited reasons to use language for practical purposes and spend considerable time playing. Role-play can be a beneficial activity for young learners, as children often engage in pretend role-play, such as playing mother and father.

Basic information-gap activities are also possible for younger learners. For example, two students have the same picture, but with some differences. They have to ask each other questions to figure out the differences. Other CLT activities include task-completion activities, such as puzzles and games, map reading, and Information-Gathering activities, including student-conducted surveys and interviews. Additionally, there are opinion-sharing activities and role-play (Richards, 2006, pp. 18-19). It is essential to emphasise pair and small-group work, so students get the opportunity to practice.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method was employed in this study. An Ecuadorian private school was selected as the research site, as the researcher is currently employed there.

To gather qualitative data, three teachers were interviewed regarding their methodologies, techniques, and perceptions of using speaking activities in the classroom. The semi-structured interview consisted of eight questions focused on topics such as the types of speaking activities used, challenges faced, students’ self-confidence in speaking English, strategies for motivation, and approaches to providing feedback.

In addition, classroom observations were conducted to examine how teachers implement speaking instruction in practice. The observation form was organised into the following categories: lesson planning and objectives, materials used, content

knowledge, student engagement, methodology, and feedback and correction strategies.

For the quantitative component, 55 middle and high school students (ages 11-16) participated in a survey designed to gather their perceptions of the use and frequency of speaking activities during English classes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following are the results of the interview with teachers that was implemented. The main activities used by teachers to enhance speaking skills, based on the CLT approach, are role-plays, discussions, giving opinions, sharing ideas, storytelling, open-ended questions, and “try to guess” activities. All three teachers mentioned the lack of students’ self-confidence to speak English in class as one of the challenges when using speaking activities. They stated: “some students are shy to speak”, “they feel frustrated when they cannot tell what they want and stop talking”, “some feel nervous to speak in front of the class”, “they show anxiety”, “they are afraid to make mistake and hesitate”, “they need more time to practice becoming confident”. Other challenges include large class sizes in some courses, insufficient time, and limited vocabulary knowledge. These disadvantages were also seen in a study by Dos Santos (2020). Large classroom size influences the outcomes of the CLT approach, and students have fewer or no opportunities to interact and communicate with classmates.

The teachers believe that it is important to include interesting topics to encourage students to speak English in class. The teachers have shared the following opinions: “Include topics that are attractive to students”. “Give examples so that they can practice with them”. “Create a comfortable environment, encourage with fun activities, and recognise their effort”. “Use personal topics, what the students like”. Fun activities like games and role-plays have positive effects on both enhancing



speaking skills, and motivating students. According to Khowatim et al. (2022), the implementation of role-play activities fostered a positive learning atmosphere where students felt happy and enthusiastic, ultimately leading to a significant increase in their speaking confidence. Pham (2020) found in a study about the effects of using games that the students had a positive attitude towards the implemented games in class, they were motivated in their learning process, and their speaking performance improved.

The way of giving feedback differs. One teacher stated that giving direct feedback or one-to-one feedback after a speaking activity is beneficial. Another teacher writes down the mistakes while students are speaking, shows them afterwards, and corrects them in a friendly manner. The third teacher mentioned focusing more on fluency than accuracy; however, the teacher also corrects pronunciation and grammar when necessary. The teachers assess the students through observation and the use of rubrics twice or three times per month, focusing on main items to assess fluency, accuracy (including vocabulary/grammar), pronunciation, and body language.

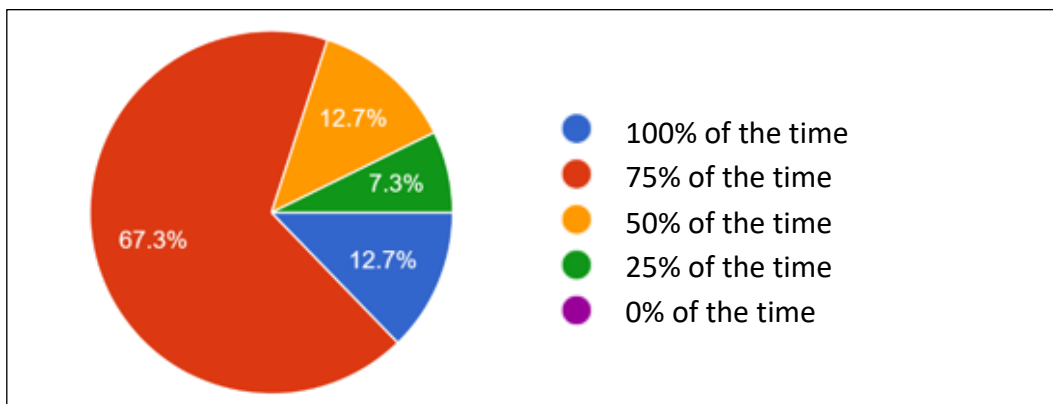
According to Scrivener (2011, p. 298 - 302), a teacher has to keep 5 questions in mind with oral errors: What kind of error has been made? (grammatical, pronunciation, vocabulary, descriptive). Whether it is necessary to correct or not? When to correct it? (now, after the activity or later. The distinction between accuracy and fluency is important. Who will correct it? (teacher, student self-correction of other students). Which techniques should be used to indicate that an error has been made or to enable correction?

The teachers mentioned that the support of flashcards, conversation prompts, audiovisuals, speaking worksheets, and synchronic speaking tools would help them to incorporate more speaking activities. The English textbooks contain speaking activities; however, teachers have to add material to practice more. Visual

materials are indispensable teaching materials to motivate and activate students, to make the environment both entertaining and instructive (Kumar, 2021). Kumar found that written-visual materials are even more effective than plain visual materials. It helps students remember vocabulary and apply it while they speak. Classroom materials should parallel the real-world, and therefore authentic resources are recommended (Richards, 2006).

Continuing are the results of the questionnaire for students, most of them stated that the teacher speaks 75% or 100% of the time in English during class. Since the target language is a vehicle for classroom communication (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), the teacher must speak English during class. The results show that the teachers speak sufficient English during class. Sometimes it might be necessary to explain things in the mother tongue for better understanding.

Figure 1: *How frequently does your teacher speak English in class?*

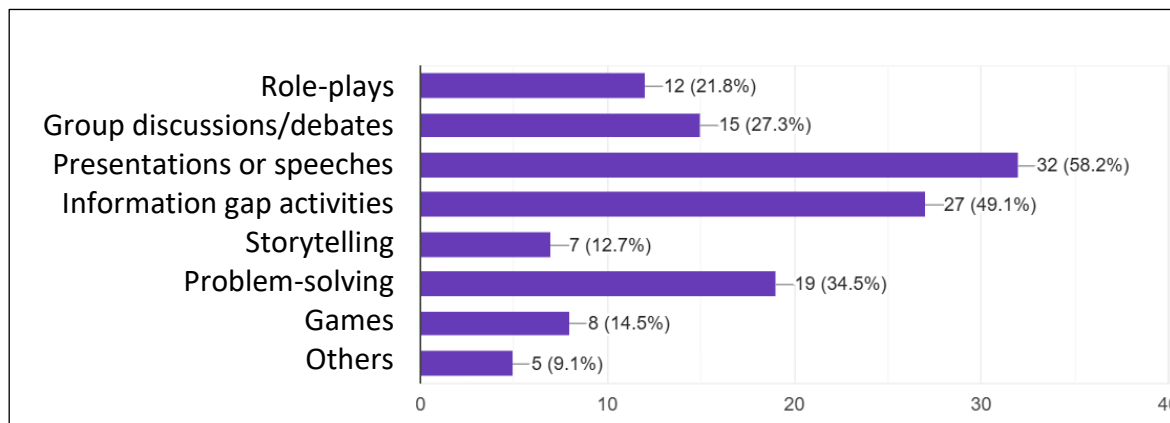


Source: own elaboration.

Students were asked to select all applicable options for the question: *What types of speaking activities does your teacher typically use in his/her lessons?* The most frequently cited activity was *presentations/speeches* (58,3%). The "Information Gap" activities were selected by 50% of the students. A smaller amount indicated *problem-solving activities* (34.5%), debates (27.3%), and role-play (21.8%). Only

12.7% of the students mentioned that the teacher uses storytelling, and 14.5% of the students reported playing *games*.

Figure 2: *What types of speaking activities does your teacher typically use in his/her lessons?*



Source: own elaboration.

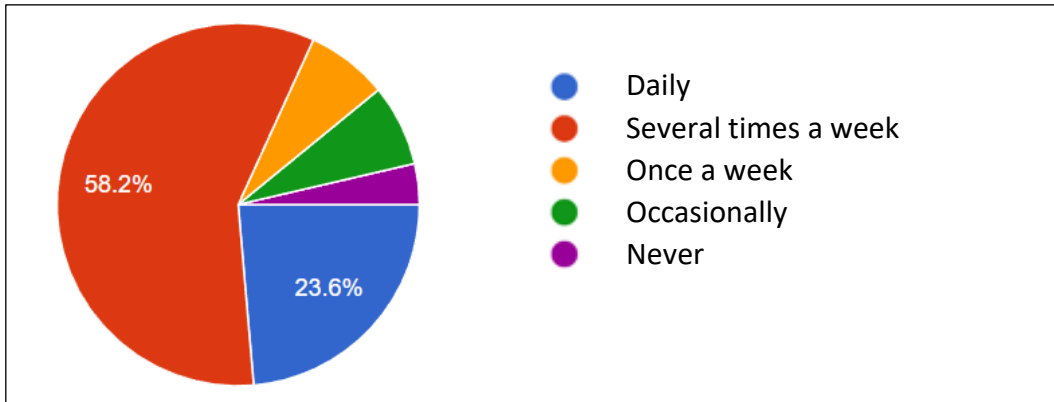
It can be seen that teachers apply different types of speaking/communication activities; however, they can enhance the use of certain activities. Games have positive effects on improving speaking skills (Dewi, R.S., Kultsum, U., & Armadi, A., 2017; Pham et al., 2020).

In the following question, students could write about other speaking activities that teachers used in class. Some students gave examples of activities that are not related to speaking activities, so those are not mentioned here. Two students mentioned games, which could also be selected in the previous question. Four students stated that they read texts aloud, four students wrote about conversations in pairs, and three students reported participating in speaking activities, such as answering questions and sharing opinions.

58.2% of the students reported that the teacher applies speaking activities with a frequency of several times a week, and 23.6% mentioned a *daily* frequency.



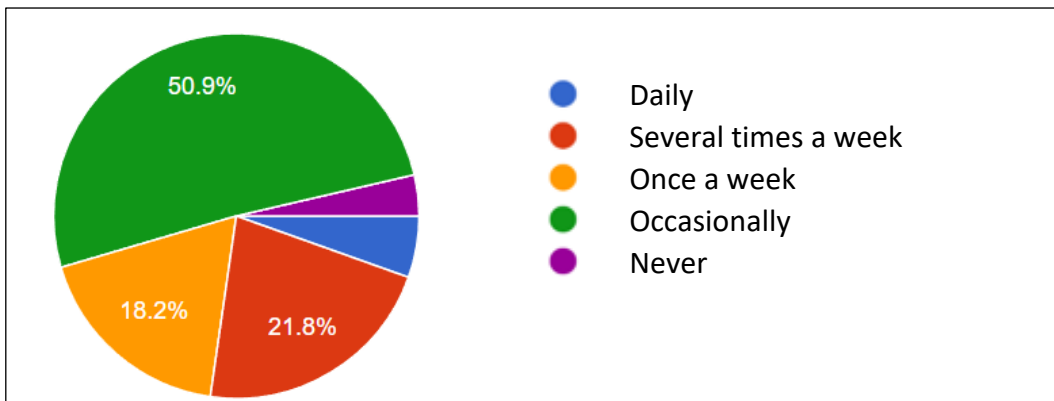
Figure 3: *How frequently does your teacher incorporate speaking activities in his/her lessons?*



Source: own elaboration.

40% of the survey takers indicated that the teacher applies *once a week / several times a week*, a pair/group activity, and 50% stated *that they do it occasionally*, as the frequency.

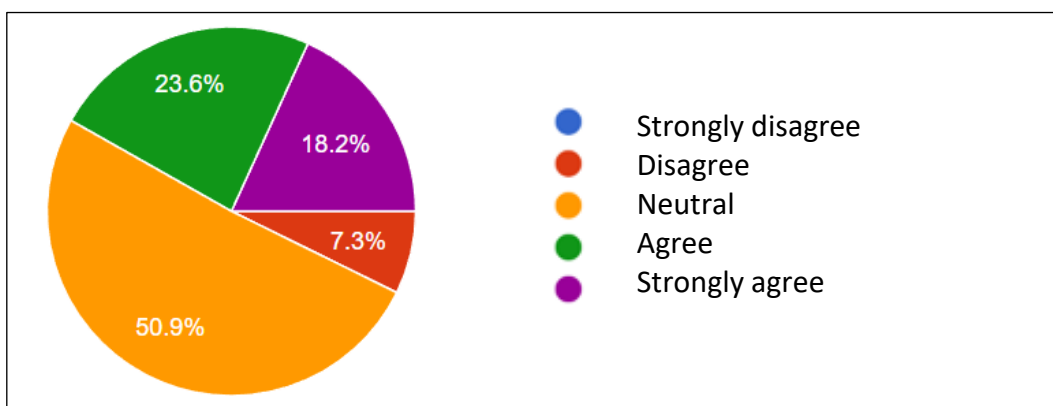
Figure 4: *How frequently does your teacher incorporate pair/group activities?*



Source: own elaboration.

Almost half of the survey takers feel confident speaking English during class (18.2% totally agree, 23.6% agree). Half of the survey takers selected *neutral*, and only 7,3% indicated *disagree*.

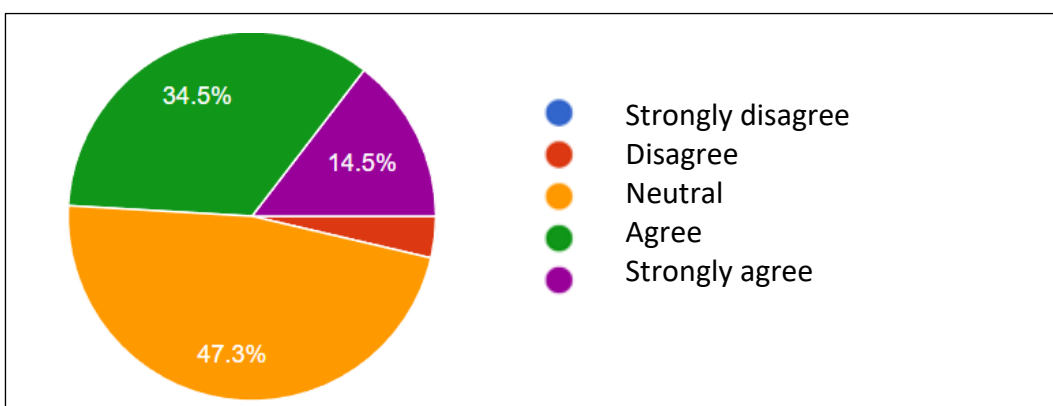
Figure 5: *Do you feel confident to speak English during class?*



Source: own elaboration.

Additionally, half of the survey participants enjoy speaking activities, and 47% were neutral.

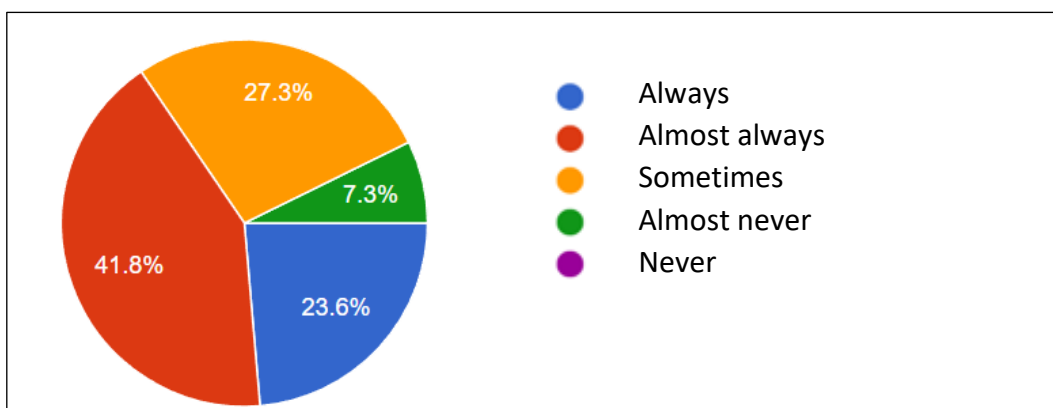
Figure 6: *Do you like to do speaking activities during class?*



Source: own elaboration.

More than half of the group indicated that the teacher gives frequent feedback (always / almost always). A quarter of the group mentioned it sometimes, and only a few students selected 'almost never'.

Figure 7: *How often does your teacher provide feedback after a speaking activity?*



Source: own elaboration.

CONCLUSIONS

Speaking skills are crucial in this globalised world where English is the dominant language of communication. Ecuadorian students face challenges in developing their speaking skills due to a lack of effective teaching methods and opportunities for practice. Confidence also plays a crucial role in improving speaking fluency, and learners can enhance their skills through practice and taking calculated risks.

The Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach is practical in developing speaking skills by focusing on the target language, utilising games and role-plays, and promoting communication in a meaningful way, thereby giving students opportunities to express their ideas and opinions. Teachers take the role of facilitators in creating communicative environments where students can develop their speaking abilities. Different studies have also shown that the CLT approach

increased students' motivation and positive attitude toward the activities. By carefully planning and implementing CLT activities, teachers can create a supportive and engaging learning environment that fosters the development of students' oral communication skills.

The results of the interviews and student questionnaires reveal a generally positive implementation of speaking activities aligned with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Teachers commonly use strategies such as role-plays, discussions, storytelling, and open-ended questions to promote oral communication. However, challenges such as students' low self-confidence, large class sizes, limited vocabulary, and time constraints hinder the effectiveness of these activities.

Students recognize that their teachers predominantly use English in class, which supports language immersion. The most common speaking activities reported by students include presentations, information gap tasks, and problem-solving exercises. Despite these efforts, less frequent use of engaging strategies like games and storytelling suggests room for wider variety and creativity in instruction.

While many students report that speaking activities occur several times a week or even daily, confidence and enthusiasm remain mixed—only about half feel confident or enjoy these activities. The perception of teacher feedback is mostly positive, though some students receive it inconsistently.

In summary, teachers are making commendable efforts to encourage speaking in English through diverse methods, but student confidence, activity variation, and classroom dynamics present areas for further development. More consistent support materials and student-centred practices—such as using familiar or

personally relevant topics and incorporating fun, low-stress activities—could enhance participation and outcomes.

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