Chapter 16
Peer Feedback Through Voki to Raise Students' Awareness of the Register in Spoken Activities

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is challenging in EFL students living in a Spanish-speaking country. It was the case of the participants of this study. They were teenagers of a public high school located in Ecuador. An action research was implemented. The design was quasi-experimental. Data was collected with through pre- and posttests and pre- and post-surveys. Cohen's d=3.34 indicates a large impact for improving speaking with the use of peer feedback and Voki; a p=0.000 shows statistically significant results that were due to the intervention. The instruments also collected information regarding students' perspectives towards fluency, pronunciation, peer feedback, and register. Results indicated a large change of students' opinion favoring peer feedback and register, as well as a slight change in their opinion related to fluency and pronunciation. The findings also show that this research study has implications for educators, directors, and principals of institutions who are interested in improving the English-speaking skills of their students.

INTRODUCTION

Learners believe that communicating ideas in English is challenging (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). They have that opinion because they believe they do not have enough knowledge to face that barrier. English speech practice may be hindered if students are afraid to make mistakes when expressing their thoughts, if students do not feel confident in their speaking abilities, or if they do not feel motivated to practice (Tok, 2009).

There have been interventions conducted in Ecuador to improve speaking (Abad, 2020; Aguilar & Ramirez-Avila, 2020; Armijos, 2020; Bonifaz, 2020; Davila, 2020; Lucas, 2020; Pereddo, 2020; Rivera, 2020; Romero, 2020; Saltos; 2019; Vega; 2019; Viteri, 2019; Yepez; 2019; Zambrano; 2019). Some authors conducted their action research in public institutions (Bonifaz, 2020; Davila, 2020; Lucas, 2020; Vega, 2019; Viteri, 2019; Zambrano, 2019), while the others in private ones. Their participants were children (Armijos, 2020; Romero, 2020; Vega, 2019), teenagers (Bonifaz, 2020; Lucas, 2020; Rivera, 2020; Saltos, 2019), and adults (Abad, 2020; Aguilar & Ramirez-Avila, 2020; Davila, 2020; Pereddo, 2020; Viteri, 2019; Yepez, 2019). They implemented formative assessment strategies such as self-assessment, peer feedback, and peer assessment. Results of their studies were all positive in terms of the intervention. Most of them included a mixed methods design, while a few of them collected data only through quantitative instruments. Among the factors hindering students' oral production, they indicated: anxiety, shyness, fear of mistakes, lack of vocabulary, confusion, lack of previous English instruction, fossilization, and misunderstanding of others when they speak (Al-Eiadeh et al., 2016; Derakhshan et al., 2016). From the results of these studies, it can be concluded that difficulties with speaking are present regardless of age and the type of institution and/or the specific EFL context.

The participants of the current study shared the same difficulties. Additionally, they have to reach a B1 proficiency level according to local authorities' regulations (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). Nonetheless, a test taken to describe participants' level indicated that their level was A1 or A2. These results were similar to the other authors in the local context. Their participants had a low proficiency, except for Saltos (2019) who reported that some students had a B1 level. These were the reasons to strengthen speaking skills of students at a public high school located in Duran, Ecuador. The strategy chosen was peer feedback and an engaging website. None of the studies conducted in Ecuador applied Voki as a technological tool.

The use of technology fulfills a requirement of the educational quality standard established by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, specifically the item that requires in-service teachers to include technology in classes to enhance lessons (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). After reviewing several applications, the educational tool Voki (https://www.voki.com/) was selected. It is the name of an innovative blended learning tool that encourages students to have intrinsic motivation to practice speaking (Yoshida, 2018). Yoshida mentioned that Voki is available online and as an application. Users can create a virtual character (avatar) and can dress it according to the different options available. They can also customize the appearance of the avatar. The avatar has an artificial voice that is provided by the users through recording their voices (Yoshida, 2018).

However, technological resources do not guarantee an improvement in students' speech skills, unless teaching strategies are applied properly. The strategy implemented here was feedback. It is a method that maximizes students' learning process by monitoring the progress of acquired knowledge to compare educational performance to an established standard (Hepplestone et al., 2016). One type of feedback is peer feedback, which according to Smith (2017) consists of engaging one student critically with the work of another partner; this way the feedback provider is able to know, investigate, verify, and give solid arguments about a specific topic.

Thus, to reduce the gap in proficiency among students and to increase their spoken skills, as well as to fulfill local requirements in EFL education, an action research project was conducted. It integrated peer feedback and the use of Voki to determine whether or not there was improvement, and to learn students' perspectives towards the approach. Students' perspectives will provide feedback to the researcher for application with other group of students.

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