



Playful Strategies to Strengthen Communicative Skills in Basic Education Students

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ABSTRACT

The development of oral expression in basic education English classes is regularly affected by the limited oral practice of young learners, as they do not find the enjoyment of learning. This study determines the contribution of playful strategies to strengthening communicative skills among basic education students at institución educativa publica de Chone, province of Manabí, Ecuador. Under a mixed approach with a convenience sample of 19 students and two English teachers, the study combined a teacher diagnosis, oral evaluations before and after the intervention, and classroom observation records in sessions based on play strategies. The statistical data of the t-test for related samples indicate a significant increase in oral communication scores between the pretest ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.68$) and the posttest ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.58$; $t(18) = -12.43$, $p < .001$), accompanied by a reduction in intragroup variance. Regarding the qualitative data, it was determined that the playful strategies used in the intervention reduced the affective filter by reducing dependence on translation into Spanish and shifted the attention of the classroom from fear of error to communicative intention. The

results suggest that structured play activities provide a viable pedagogical framework to activate oral production at basic education levels.

Keywords: Playful strategies, oral communication, young learners, English language

RESUMEN

El desarrollo de la expresión oral en las clases de inglés de educación básica se ve afectado con frecuencia por la limitada práctica oral de los jóvenes estudiantes, quienes no encuentran disfrute en el aprendizaje. Este estudio determina la contribución de estrategias lúdicas al fortalecimiento de las habilidades comunicativas en estudiantes de educación básica de una Institución Educativa Pública de Chone, provincia de Manabí, Ecuador. Mediante un enfoque mixto con una muestra de conveniencia de 19 estudiantes y dos profesores de inglés, el estudio combinó un diagnóstico docente, evaluaciones orales antes y después de la intervención, y registros de observación en el aula durante sesiones basadas en estrategias lúdicas. Los datos estadísticos de la prueba t para muestras relacionadas indican un incremento significativo en las puntuaciones de comunicación oral entre la prueba previa ($M = 1.63$, $DE = 0.68$) y la prueba posterior ($M = 3.68$, $DE = 0.58$; $t(18) = -12.43$, $p < .001$), acompañado de una reducción en la varianza intergrupar. En cuanto a los datos cualitativos, se determinó que las estrategias lúdicas empleadas en la intervención redujeron el filtro afectivo al disminuir la dependencia de la traducción al español y desviaron la atención del aula del miedo al error a la intención comunicativa. Los resultados sugieren que las actividades lúdicas estructuradas constituyen un marco pedagógico viable para activar la producción oral en la educación básica.

Palabras clave: Estrategias lúdicas, comunicación oral, jóvenes aprendices, idioma inglés

INTRODUCTION

Oral communication is an indispensable component in learning the English language because it is the means by which students can transmit their ideas through speech, which is often limited due to the fact that learners are not able to use the target language in an oral context. Playful learning strategies of games are pedagogical components that encourage the communicative development of young learners because they combine tasks oriented to multimodal objectives to use language through dynamic action. Several studies report that language learning improves when activities are introduced that are based on dynamic games that transform the way knowledge is acquired, since learning becomes an active activity (González & Álvarez, 2022; Pacheco, 2022).

In educational environments in Ecuador, learners present difficulties in oral production caused by factors that can be both affective and knowledge-related, for example, fear of peer judgment or limited language proficiency that often translates into limited participation.

The ability and willingness of students to participate in interactive environments are also conditioned by low motivation, especially basic education young learners, aspects that Krashen in his theory relates to the functioning of the affective filter as an important aspect in the development of oral communication. (Uquillas & Córdova, 2021)

From a pedagogical perspective, despite the theoretical exposure to English vocabulary and grammar, basic education students have difficulties in articulating spoken sentences since they cannot put into practice what they have learned, despite the fact that students at this level should develop oral expression as the main axis of their learning.

Liu (2022) states that in the teaching of English to young learners, both listening comprehension and oral production skills must be developed before prioritizing reading and

writing, because auditory contact and oral use of the language are the basis for the subsequent development of other skills.

The limited oral production in young learners is a difficulty that can hinder their communicative development in English, because it restricts the opportunities to use the language to express ideas; when students participate little in oral exchanges, they also have fewer opportunities to gain confidence in the use of the language.

The present study addresses the application of a small-scale intervention on the Ecuadorian coast; its purpose is not to establish generalizable causality, but to document changes in scores and patterns of participation in elementary school students in a structured sequence of playful tasks. Consequently, the main objective of this research is to determine how playful strategies contribute to strengthening communication skills in basic education students.

To answer the central research question: How do playful strategies contribute to the development of communication skills in basic education students? The study was structured around four specific objectives: (1) to identify the teachers' perception of the difficulties presented by students in oral communication; (2) assess the level of oral communication before the intervention; (3) apply a structured sequence of playful activities focused on oral production; and (4) assess post-intervention changes in students' oral communication skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Playful strategies in teaching English

Playful pedagogy is defined as a teaching model that integrates four interdependent elements, which are fun, which is the motivating factor that drives the activity; play, which is the activity itself; the playful attitude, referring to the disposition of the teacher and the

student; and positivity that is associated with the affect resulting from the learning experience (Tovar et al., 2023).

Playful learning is conceived as a set of mind-on, hands-on, and body-on activities that may or may not be supported by technology (Zambrano et al., 2025), as it seeks to position the student as an active agent of the communicative process (Pincay et al., 2026). That is, playful learning linked to student-centered pedagogies with positive education, focusing on play as a bridge between linguistic form and authentic communicative use

According to Pillco (2025), playful strategies are characterized by being developed in four pedagogical phases oriented towards planning, guidance, play, and elaboration, in which the teacher assumes the roles of facilitator, supervisor, and even co-player. Playful strategies, in the words of Pacheco (2022), also create a low-risk environment in which young learners make mistakes in order to learn from them without fear of punitive evaluation, an approach that encourages oral practice in foreign languages.

Authors have pointed out that the affective dimension of play such as enjoyment and playfulness are elements that act as a support for intrinsic motivation throughout the task, beyond the simple use of playful materials (Kaizar & Alordiah, 2023; Kristina et al., 2026).

Types of play strategies

From the perspective of Bustamante (2025), the playful strategies used in language teaching are based on the gamification of existing platforms such as Kahoot and Quizizz, which are the most common in learning based on various games used by teachers to stimulate student participation.

Pacheco (2022) groups playful strategies into five activities based on constructive games, focused on drawing or elaborating to stimulate creativity; argument games to form

the child's personality and language; outdoor games, which combine movement and emotional development; and mechanical games, designed by the teacher for pedagogical purposes.

Benefits and limitations

Among the benefits reported by Aco and Suwandi (2025), gamification as part of playfulness has shown consistent positive effects on motivation, engagement, and vocabulary learning. Hema and Sanjula (2026) add that gamified dynamics contribute to creating a collaborative environment favorable to the development of communicative competence.

Chica et al. (2025) establish that the main limitations in play strategies are caused by technical problems or fixed learning routines that reduce the variety of practice, the risk that the play element does not necessarily translate into an effective improvement in language skills (Portilla, 2026), and increased anxiety in highly competitive learning contexts (Liu et al., 2024).

Communication skills in English

Communicative competence, according to Quishpe et al. (2022), integrates both the underlying knowledge and the performance skills necessary to communicate, either orally or in writing. Therefore, oral performance is defined, by Tiu et al. (2023), as the ability demonstrated by a student to use the language effectively in real communicative situations, not only as theoretical knowledge of the language which, according to Mala and Mendoza (2026), is composed of linguistic elements such as fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical accuracy.

Oral fluency is currently understood as a multidimensional construct linked to the automation of linguistic processing (Grasso, 2024), which is substantially related to the

emotional intelligence and academic enthusiasm of language learners (Suquillo, 2026), suggesting that fluency does not depend on linguistic factors but also on affective ones.

Sokyrska (2023) suggests that pronunciation is considered a key component of oral fluency and a bridge between linguistic knowledge and actual interaction. For their part, Figueroa and Intriago (2022) believe that English pronunciation can be understood as the student's ability to produce the sounds, rhythm, and intonation of the language in a clear and understandable way, so that the message can be understood by an interlocutor without additional effort.

Nurfadhilah et al. (2025) state that vocabulary through play is a process by which students acquire lexical units of the foreign language through gamified, game-based activities. León et al. (2022) mention that playful components replace repetitive memorization with interactive dynamics of immediate feedback, friendly competition, and motivational reinforcement.

Grammatical accuracy, according to Tahang et al. (2024) and Pereira and Guevara (2025), is the degree of correctness with which a student applies the grammatical rules of the foreign language when speaking or writing, which is developed not through the repetitive teaching of rules, but through game activities that integrate grammatical practice in an interactive context and low evaluative pressure

Playful interaction in oral practice

In the words of Simbaña et al. (2023) and Biynazarova et al. (2024), playful interaction in oral practice for authors as the communicative exchange that is generated between young learners in game activities such as role-play, dramatizations or competitive dynamics to promote the spontaneous use of the foreign language that simulates real communication, without the rigidity of traditional oral exercises.

METHODOLOGY

Approach and design

A mixed approach with a pre-experimental design of pre-test and post-test in a single group was used to inquire about teachers' perception of oral communication difficulties and quantitatively assess students' progress before and after the intervention. Also, through the application of inductive-deductive and statistical-descriptive methods, the problem was interpreted from its theoretical particularities and numerical processing of the results obtained in the evaluations of communicative skills in the English language through playful strategies.

Context and participants

The research was carried out in a public educational institution located in the city of Chone, province of Manabí, Ecuador, which has a total population of 160 basic education students, from which a sample of 19 seventh-grade students, parallel "A", was selected through non-probabilistic sampling for convenience, along with the 2 English teachers. The selection criteria used were based on the accessibility of the researcher and the willingness of the teachers to carry out the intervention within their regular classes throughout the process.

Intervention with playful strategies

The intervention was implemented in four sessions of 45 minutes each, integrated within the English classes, which incorporated a different playful strategy in each section, including role-playing, branching vocabulary dynamics and game-based grammar practice activities, with the purpose of moving young learners from guided oral practice to a more spontaneous use of the language.

The design of each session was based on providing repeated speaking opportunities under conditions of low evaluative pressure in order to encourage the participation of students with less confidence in public speaking.

Instruments

Three main instruments were designed and implemented for data collection; the first consisted of an oral communication assessment rubric, structured in the dimensions of fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical accuracy, which was applied to the students before and after the intervention in order to determine the initial level and measure the final impact.

Regarding the second instrument, it was an observation record used in intervention sessions to record the performance in terms of participation of the trainees. In relation to the third instrument, it corresponded to a semi-structured interview administered to the English teachers of the institution to know their perception of the difficulties in oral communication presented by the *young learners*.

Data collection procedure

In the data collection, interviews were first carried out with both teachers, then the rubric was applied as a pre-test to later carry out the four intervention sessions, in which the observation record was applied in each meeting. At the end of the intervention, the post-test rubric was used to determine the changes achieved.

Data analysis

The pretest and post-test data were analyzed in SPSS using means and standard deviations; after checking the distribution of the differences with the Shapiro-Wilk test, T-test was applied for related samples to determine the statistical significance of the change;

quantitative information was processed through thematic analysis to categorize the most important findings in the dimensions addressed.

Ethical considerations

To carry out the investigation, an authorization was issued to the management of the institution and then informed to the representatives of the students, because they are minors. In the intervention, the young learners were explained that the activities were games and that no one would be singled out for making a mistake when speaking. Teachers were also guaranteed that their answers would not be used to evaluate them; for this reason, the names of the participants do not appear in the instruments or in the writing.

RESULTS

Interview results

Table 1

Teachers' perception of students' oral communication difficulties

Dimension	Evidence reported by teachers
Fluency	Recurrent long pauses accompanied by hesitation with prolonged recurrence to the use of the mother tongue to complete oral ideas.
Pronunciation	Inaccuracies in the articulation of sounds when reading unknown words aloud.
Vocabulary	Slowness in remembering words with a rather limited lexicon, which restricts communication to basic expressions.
Grammatical accuracy	Persistent errors in verb tenses, such as incorrect word order due to omissions in sentence structure.

Note: Moreira, J (2026).

The teachers' perceptions, presented in Table 1, show that young learners' oral difficulties are not isolated, but respond to a problem of automation that is reflected in the linguistic confidence of schoolchildren; for example, long pauses accompanied by the

mother tongue make students resort to mental translation before speaking, a routine that slows down spontaneous production, by generating insecurity when articulating sentences.

Classroom observation results

Table 2

Summary of the observation of performance and participation in the play intervention

Session and Playful Strategy	Observed Dimension	Performance and Engagement
Session 1: Vocabulary dynamics	Vocabulary	The young learners applied new words without immediately resorting to mental translation since they had a visual support to remember.
Session 2: Grammar Practice at Play	Grammar	Use of verbs through a manual activity to communicate within an environment of low evaluative pressure.
Session 3: Role Play	Fluency	The roles played by the students make them speak without fear of making mistakes, increasing their fluency, although with mistakes.
Session 4: Production	Pronunciation	More continuous oral production with fewer errors as a result of the oral repetition of what was learned in the previous sessions.

Note: Moreira, J (2026).

The playful intervention functioned as a progressive scaffolding that eliminates the pressure of direct assessment, the students prioritized communicative intention over linguistic perfection to transform passive knowledge into a prolonged production where young learners gained confidence to express themselves continuously despite residual errors.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics of Pretest and Posttest

Test	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Pretest	19	3.00	6.00	4.55	0.80
Posttest	19	6.50	8.50	7.50	0.60

Note: Moreira, J (2026).

Table 3 confirms a clear advance in the group's performance, since the average rose from 4.55 to 7.50, with significantly higher grades after the intervention; In fact, the drop in the standard deviation from 0.80 to 0.60 highlights that the group leveled its results upwards, making learning much more even among the students.

Table 4

Shapiro-Wilk Test of Normality

Variable	N	Shapiro-Wilk Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest–Posttest Differences	19	0.956	19	0.489

Note: Moreira, J (2026).

The Shapiro-Wilk test in Table 4 presents a value of $p = .489$ which at first glance is higher than the established significance level of .05; Consequently, the assumption of normality of the differences between the pre-test and post-test scores is not rejected.

Table 5

Paired-Samples t-Test

Comparison	Mean Difference	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest – Posttest	-2.95	0.78	-16.50	18	<.001

Note: Moreira, J (2026).

The comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores in Table 5 consolidates a mean difference of -2.95 in the post-test scores were higher than those of the pretest; therefore, the t-test for related samples indicates a statistically significant difference $t(18) = -16.50, p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Young learners' oral communication scores increased after the application of the four game-based sessions, because scores rose between the diagnostic assessment and the final assessment, while intra-group variance decreased; that is, structured activities reduced performance difficulties among students. Several authors have a similar position, pointing out that interactive tasks support language learning through playful exposure that is reflected in participation (Chimarro, 2023; Hidalgo et al., 2023).

For the interviewed teachers, the difficulties of oral production arise from a lack of linguistic automation that is characterized by frequent pauses and limited vocabulary that gives way to mental translation. Mayorga et al. (2023) explain that structured play, from playful strategies, reduces anxiety while increasing the willingness to communicate. Krashen, in his Affective Filter Hypothesis, argues that low motivation caused by emotional factors can interfere with the process of acquiring a second language (Moreno, 2017).

In oral production, these conditions can reduce young learners' willingness to participate, express themselves in English, and interact with others, especially when there is a fear of making mistakes or being negatively evaluated. Therefore, providing repeated opportunities to speak in a low-pressure environment helps to reduce hesitation so that students can transition from passive knowledge to oral production.

The observations recorded in the intervention sessions highlight that visual support and vocabulary games are useful for young learners to remember terms without immediately resorting to Spanish. Also, role-playing and grammatical activities shift students' attention from fear of error to communicative intention. These patterns correspond to research that shows that curriculum-aligned practice connects classroom activities with active language use (Rincón, 2024; Pico et al., 2025).

However, the data from the present research do not show that playful strategies are superior to conventional teaching, nor that they completely eliminate grammatical errors. As Bolaños (2025) pointed out, by comparing different modalities of instruction with adequate exposure and the implementation of a pedagogical approach, the acquisition of communication skills can be influenced by the dynamics used by the teacher.

In this study, both lexical and grammatical inaccuracies were maintained in the speech of the learners; thus, research cannot isolate the effect of game dynamics versus teacher guidance, such as practice time or the novelty of the intervention.

The playful strategies selected for the intervention consisted of creating a practical space for the structured oral exercise of young learners, but, as Basurto and Mendoza (2023) argue, they do not replace the explicit teaching or teacher feedback required to polish accuracy over time.

Limitations

Certain methodological limitations condition, for example, the intervention had a small non-probabilistic sample of 19 young learners belonging to a single classroom, restricting the generalization of the results. That is, the single-group design lacks a control group, so variations in scores cannot be attributed exclusively to play strategies.

Post-evaluation measured performance immediately after the intervention, leaving long-term retention unexamined, therefore it is recommended that future research should incorporate large samples that integrate control groups and time-delayed evaluations to verify the durability of advances in oral fluency.

CONCLUSIONS

The teachers' perception reports that young learners' oral difficulties do not respond to cognitive deficiencies, but arise from affective blocks caused by the lack of linguistic proficiency that results in fear of error in oral production.

The initial assessment of traditional classroom conditions reinforces hesitation in speaking because vocabulary and grammar are maintained as passive knowledge rather than active second language production.

The application of playful strategies is effective in building a low-pressure environment that shifts the student's attention from structural perfection to communicative intention, turning play into a practical scaffolding.

The final evaluation shows that playful tasks reduce dependence on the mother tongue because they level the performance of the group, by proving that play is a valid complementary tool to activate oral confidence in the process of learning the English language.

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