



Dramatizations to improve oral production in rural high school students

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RESUMEN

La producción oral en inglés para muchas personas, especialmente estudiantes que se interesan en aprender el idioma, es uno de los desafíos mas complejos en el aprendizaje, en especial cuando nos referimos al ámbito educativo en zonas rurales del país, debido a barreras sistemáticas y afectivas. El propósito de esta investigación fue evaluar cuan efectivas son las dramatizaciones como estrategia pedagógica para mejorar la producción oral en estudiantes de primer año de bachillerato general unificado (BGU) en la parroquia rural Los Lojas.

Metodológicamente, el estudio acogió un enfoque cuantitativo con un diseño cuasi experimental, manejando una muestra por conveniencia de 46 estudiantes divididos equitativamente en un grupo experimental y un grupo de control. Los datos se recolectaron mediante pruebas de rendimiento oral (pre-test y post-test) rectificadas con el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las lenguas (MCER). Los resultados del post-test demostraron una evidente diferencia: mientras el grupo de control mantuvo un patrón de rendimiento estático y plano, el grupo experimental mostró un desplazamiento positivo valioso, donde el 26% consiguió la calificación máxima de 10 puntos. Se concluye que las técnicas dramáticas reducen la ansiedad comunicativa y que la integración de narrativas culturales locales potencia la motivación intrínseca, transformando el aula en un punto interactivo de expresión social.

Palabras clave: Dramatización, producción oral, educación rural, ingles como lengua extranjera, filtro afectivo, juegos de rol.

ABSTRACT

Oral production in English constitutes one of the most complex challenges in Ecuador's rural educational sector due to systemic and effective barriers. The objective of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of dramatizations as a pedagogical strategy to improve oral production in first year high school students (BGU) in the rural parish of Los Lojas. Methodologically, the study adopted a quantitative approach with a quasi-experimental design, utilizing a convenience sample of 46 students equally divided into an experimental group and a control group. Data were gathered using oral performance tests (pre-test and post-test) aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards. The post test results showed a marked divergence: while the control group maintained a stagnant and flat performance pattern, the experimental group demonstrated a substantial positive shift, with 26% achieving the maximum score of 10 points. It is concluded that drama techniques effectively reduce communicative anxiety and that the integration of local cultural narratives enhances intrinsic motivation, transforming the classroom into an interactive space for social expression.

Keywords: Dramatization, oral production, rural education, English as a foreign language, affective filter, role play.

INTRODUCTION

Speaking English as a foreign language remains one of the most persistent challenges within Ecuador's rural education system, where learners frequently encounter psychological hurdles alongside severe structural barriers. At Unidad Educativa Victoria Torres de Neira, located in the rural parish of Los Lojas, first-year high school students (1°. BGU) exhibit a notably low level of English proficiency, a deficit that is particularly pronounced in their oral production. This situation stems in large part from an institutional gap: prior to 2022, the school lacked a dedicated English teacher, leaving students without foundational instruction during key developmental stages. Compounding this issue, restricted access to technology and virtually nonexistent exposure to the language outside the classroom severely limit authentic interaction leading to a stagnant performance pattern characterized by high speaking anxiety, inhibition and reliance on rote memorization. While conventional, textbook-driven instruction tends to prioritize linguistic precision over spontaneous communication, recent literature suggests that action-oriented strategies can lower this "affective filter".

This research is driven by the need for culturally responsive methodologies that actively reduce speaking anxiety, transforming the language classroom into a dynamic space for social interaction, following the research question: How does the use of dramatizations as a pedagogical strategy influence the development of oral production in rural high school students? Correspondingly, the main objective of this investigation is to evaluate dramatizations as a pedagogical strategy to enhance oral production in rural high school students, comparing its outcomes against conventional textbook-centered instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges of Oral Performance in Rural English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Contexts.

When we talk about rural education, speaking skills involve emotional barriers and methodological limitation. The traditional teaching method constantly creates academic stagnation, a very slow communicative process over time. This lack of improvement happens because there's no authentic interaction, meaning they aren't constantly exposed to the language, in school education, it's common to see how English is treated as something to memorize, instead of being used as a tool for social interaction. Recent research indicates that learners in rural communities particularly first-generation students benefit from targeted pedagogical interventions to bridge this gap. In this regard, Vaishnavi and Ajit (2023) emphasize the value of drama-based strategies for these groups. By engaging in drama activities, students redirect their focus away from their own linguistic limitations and toward the “dramatic action” thereby significantly easing communicative anxiety.

Drama-Based Instruction.

Based on Kolb's (1984) contributions on experiential learning, where he argues that it is crucial for helping students connect the subject matter with their social environment through active practices and reflection, Holden (1981) adds that theater-based activities stimulate spontaneous speech and reduce communication anxiety, creating an active learning environment where student feel safe to try experimenting

Beyond these affective gains, theatre-based activities yield clear linguistic benefits. As Miccoli (2023) demonstrates, incorporating drama directly supports oral production by offering opportunities for authentic, fluid language use in realistic communicative settings. Similarly, Bessadet (2022) highlights that techniques such as

scripted plays and improvisation foster communicative abilities in student-centered classrooms. These methods enhance overall fluency while directly shaping phonetic aspects; Galante and Thomson (2017) note that integrating drama yields immediate and significant gains in student intelligibility, fluency and pronunciation compared to conventional instruction.

Addressing negative affective factors remains equally essential to this process. Alabsi (2016) confirmed that role-playing techniques substantially lower speaking anxiety among foreign language learners, enabling them to communicate with greater confidence.

This reduction anxiety is particularly striking when instruction adapts to vulnerable or resource-limited environments. Connecting activities to local culture thus becomes a decisive element for pedagogical success in rural settings. Buenaño et al. (2023) emphasize that when classroom task aligns with students' immediate lives through context-tailored drama, motivation rises and learning takes on deeper meaning. This approach aligns closely with culturally responsive pedagogy. In Peru, for instance, drama activities adapted to local narratives significantly boosted student's oral performance (Cruz – Huancayo, 2021).

Echoing this, Zambrano Pachay (2024) suggests that assigning roles grounded in real life situations and local culture serves as an effective active strategy to develop speaking skills and strengthen student performance in the foreign language classroom.

Speaking Performance

Second language oral production naturally involves a complex integration of cognitive, linguistic and sociocultural processes. As Goh and Burns (2012) state, speaking is a holistic skill that requires learners to manage grammatical, lexical and phonological resources simultaneously under the pressure of real time processing.

Nation and Newton (2009) categorize this production into four core components fluently, accuracy, complexity, and lexical range emphasizing that growth across these areas demands continuous, meaningful practice that extends beyond mechanical repetition.

Speaking a foreign language requires much more than memorizing rules, it's the result of a complex mechanism where all kinds of variables come into play. In fact, Tuan and Mai (2015) warn that fluency and confidence when communicating depend on very specific factors like momentary stress, the time given to organize ideas, prior preparation, and the way the teacher corrects. That's why real interaction as Brown and Lee (2015) rightly point out, is the true driver of learning; it's only by actively participating and emotionally connecting with the environment that the student manages to make the language structures their own.

Now, in rural classrooms, the lack of space to really talk usually stalls oral progress, in this regard, Bygate (1987) makes a key distinction: one thing is "know" a language and quite another to have the "ability" to use it. A lot of students understand grammar perfectly, but they get stuck when trying to speak spontaneously. This gap becomes even deeper due to both internal and external barriers, where anxiety about speaking and methodological limitations play a key role (Derakhshan et al., 2021)

To address these limitations, Samuda and Bygate (2008) suggested that task-based frameworks, such as drama activities, offer the necessary scaffolding for students to experiment with language in a low anxiety environment. Complementing this perspective, incorporating movement-based drama practices proves essential; according to Rieg and Paquette (2009), using theatre and physical expression reduces learner inhibition, encouraging more natural and fluid speech production, Moreover, drama-based instruction extends beyond individual self-expression, serving as an effective

vehicle for collaborative learning. Stinson and Freebody (2006) note that drama pedagogy fosters the collective construction of knowledge by requiring students to negotiate meaning, collaborate and solve communicative problems jointly in the classroom.

This approach takes on added significance in context marked by limited digital resources. As Reyes-Chua and Lidawan (2019) highlight, using group dynamics and classroom games in foreign language learning stimulates active oral participation, sustaining a lively, communication-centered environment even without advanced technological tools.

Ultimately, academic literature points to a clear fact: educational theater fits exceptionally well in rural teaching. By focusing on action and meaning instead of obsessive correctness, this approach eases the anxiety of speaking. Not only that, it also builds a direct bridge between textbooks and students' everyday lives through scenarios close to their culture. The result is a space that encourages spontaneous interaction and personal involvement even in classrooms with significant resource limitations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative approach utilizing a quasi-experimental design. This framework was selected as the most suitable method to evaluate the effect of a specific pedagogical treatment drama-based instruction on students speaking performance by comparing an experimental group against a control group. Following a deductive strategy, the research aims to the theoretical premise that drama activities lower the affective filter and enhance spoken language production.

The study population was made up of secondary school students from the rural area of Ecuador, selected through convenience sampling. In total, the sample consisted of 46 first year students (1st BGU), evenly split into two separate cohorts: and experimental group (n=23) that took part in the intervention using dramatic techniques, and a control group (n=23) that continued with traditional teaching strictly based on textbooks.

Located in the rural parish of Los Lojas, public education institution served as the setting for the development of this research. This specific environment is characterized by limited exposure to the English language outside the classroom and restricted access to digital educational tools, underscoring the need for low-cost, experiential learning strategies.

Data were gathered through speaking performance assessment administered as pre- and post-tests. These instruments were adapted from that national English curriculum to evaluate key dimensions, including fluency, lexical range and pronunciation. The methodological validity and reliability were supported by adjusting each instrument to the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The intervention unfolded over three consecutive stages:

- **Preparation Phase:** The initial test (pre-test) was applied to both groups in order to determine the baseline of their speaking skills.
- **Execution Phase:** While the experimental group took part in six dramatized sessions based on local culture stories, the control group progressed through a traditional grammar-focused teaching approach.
- **Evaluation Phase:** Administration of the post-test to measure quantitative gains and compare outcomes between the two groups.

The gathered data was processed using descriptive statistics to compare score distribution frequencies. Regarding ethical standards, the study ensured participant confidentiality, obtaining informed consent from legal guardians as well as formal authorization from school administrators.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the frequency distribution of speaking performance scores for both groups across the pre-test and post-test phases.

NOTE RANGE	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP	CONTROL GROUP	EXPERIMENTAL GROUP	CONTROL GROUP
	Pre - test	Pre - test	Post - test	Post - test
1 - <2	5	1	0	0
2 - <3	4	4	1	6
3 - <4	3	3	4	2
4 - <5	3	7	4	9
5 - <6	2	4	3	2
6 - <7	2	2	2	2
7 - <8	3	1	0	0
8 - <9	0	1	2	2
9 - <10	0	0	1	0
10	1	0	6	0
TOTAL	23	23	23	23

Pre-test data reveal a relatively homogeneous and low baseline across both cohorts. In the experimental group, 52.1% (n=12) of the students scored below 4 points, while 34.7% (n=8) of the control group nor all but one student in the experimental group achieved a score above 7 points during the initial phase, underscoring generalized speaking limitations in this rural setting prior to the intervention.

Following the pedagogical intervention, a marked divergence emerged between the two groups. The control group maintained a stagnant performance pattern; post-test

metrics painted a starkly different picture between the two groups. Within the control group, a staggering 73.9% of students (n=17) remained trapped in the lower 2-to-5-point range, with not a single participant pushing past the 8-point mark. Conversely, the experimental group saw a clear upward surge: 26% of these learners (n=6) hit a perfect 10, while another 47.8% (n=11) scored 5 or higher. Ultimately, these numerical shifts point to tangible performance gain driven by drama-based techniques, a sharp contrast to the flat outcomes of the conventional classroom.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the experimental group achieved significantly higher performance pattern. This result empirically validates Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, confirming that drama-based techniques shift students focus away from their personal linguistic limitations and toward dramatic action, thereby lowering communicative anxiety and allowing oral production to flow more spontaneously and naturally. While the conventional textbook-centered method perpetuated student inhibitions, drama instruction acted as an emotional and linguistic catalyst in an environment marked by a scarcity of digital resources.

Furthermore, integrating local narratives from Los Lojas parish proved a decisive factor in the success of strategy. Contextualizing pedagogy and fostering motivation are critical when teaching a foreign language in vulnerable areas. In line with this, Castro and Villafuerte (2019) demonstrated in rural Ecuadorian secondary schools that implementing role-playing activities learning that overcomes environmental constraints. By acting out everyday scenarios from their own community, students stopped viewing the English Language as a mechanical, distant subject and began absorbing it as an active tool for social expression and cooperation. This direct connection to their immediate reality bolstered both individual and collective confidence, conforming Méndez and Rojas's (2021) observations on how authentic interaction and cooperative learning strengthen student self-assurance in context of high educational vulnerability.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of drama-based instruction significantly improved rural students speaking performance, demonstrating a quantitative jump in post-test scores compared to traditional instruction. These drama techniques markedly reduced participant's communicative anxiety by allowing them to “embodiment” or step into characters, which fostered individual confidence and fluency during interaction. Furthermore, the success of the intervention hinged directly on linking classroom activities to the local cultural reality, showing that strategies contextualized within students' immediate environment substantially boost intrinsic motivation in foreign language learning.

Despite the positive findings of this study, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size ($n=46$) and the selection of participants through convenience sampling at a single educational institution limit the generalizability of the results to the broader rural student population across the country. Second, the duration of the intervention (six sessions) represents a short timeframe, making it impossible to determine whether the observed gains in speaking performance will be sustained over the long term.

Bearing these factors in mind, subsequent studies ought to scale up the sample size and encompass a broader array of rural schools, a step essential for bolstering external validity. Furthermore, rolling out longitudinal programs over a longer academic timeline would provide much needed clarity on how well students retain these language gains over time. Lastly, adopting a mixed-methods approach incorporating semi-structured interviews or focus groups would allow researchers to gain deeper insight into the socio-affective and psychological impact experienced by students transitioning from traditional instruction to drama-based strategies.

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