STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH SPOKEN COMMUNICATION ON THE BA

IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING

LUISA FERNANDA CASTAÑO CASTRILLÓN

CARLOS ALBERTO MARÍN ARANGO

ADVISOR: JUAN DAVID MURILLO

UNIVERSIDAD CATÓLICA DE ORIENTE

LICENCIATURA EN LENGUAS EXTRANJERAS

RIONEGRO – ANTIA

2020

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**Abstract**

This study investigated the challenges faced by students regarding spoken English at a private university. For this, 8 participants were selected, all students in training from the eighth semester.

Interviews and questionnaires were carried out, the ones in which the participants could share the challenges that each one of them has faced in spoken English, either in terms of pronunciation or linguistic items. This exploratory study is framed within a methodology of qualitative design and systematization of experiences.

Additionally, the results of the study reveal that the participants have faced many challenges in spoken English, most of all them regarding pronunciation and in terms of expressing themselves publicly.

Which mostly relates to social pressure factors and even personal insecurities. However, most of the participants let us know about how they have been able to overcome these challenges and actually, they have already.

**Literature review**

The purpose of this study was to identify the oral communication challenges that some students of a foreign language teaching program perceive after taking the last integrated English language course. Our intention during this section is to provide support from studies previously conducted regarding oral communication challenges to our investigation. Thus, we describe some local and international research that have explored the challenges that some students have faced in learning English as a Foreign language. In addition, there is a wide variety of aspects related to the experiences they have had when using the language. Several factors are described, so the reader can picture the scope of the topic and have a clearer concept about our research. At a local level, to our knowledge oral communication challenges have not been studied enough recently. After a careful search in the main Colombian language journals available online (Ikala, HOW, Profile, Folios, etc.) We found no evidence of recent studies and consequently some older ones were included in this review.

Miho Yanagi (2016) identified the specific challenges that Japanese students face when confronting oral communication skills while studying at Australian universities. This inquiry included 33 participants whose ages ranged from 18 to 37 (21 women and 12 men) from 18 Australian universities. Participants were divided into three groups: the first, current TESOL graduate students (5); the second, TESOL graduate students (3); the third, undergraduate, and graduate students enrolled in non-TESOL majors (25).

This study used a mixed-method approach and involved an online questionnaire and face-to-face or Skype interviews. The questionnaire was done on SurveyMonkey, and it had 68 closed items, a 6-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, agree slightly, disagree

slightly, disagree, strongly disagree) and five open questions that requested additional comments derived from items from previous questionnaire studies. All the items in the questionnaire were presented in English and Japanese.

The Interviews were applied to five former and current TESOL students. The semi-structured interview contained 12 questions with a focus on gaining a better understanding of the participants' experiences of learning at Australian Universities. The interviews were conducted in Japanese after the participants completed the questionnaire, and they were then translated into English. Pseudonyms were used for all interviewees.

The researcher found the following five difficulties: general skills, listening, speaking, pronunciation, and those related to previous learning in high school in Japan. The participants' responses indicated that the most difficult skills area was pronunciation with 64%, followed by speaking with 58% and listening with 36%.

Abid (2018) carried out a similar study in Indonesia at the Universitas Negeri Gorontalo to investigate the perceived challenges of a group of pre-service teachers who were studying an English education program and attempting to improve their oral proficiency in the language.

Pre-service teacher data was collected primarily through individual semi-structured interviews. The participants were seven pre-service teachers, and these were selected through two criteria: the first criterion was their teaching experience, and the second criterion was their academic reports, thus, the semi-structured interviews were applied individually and were subsequently recorded and digitally transcribed. Furthermore, these interviews were conducted in English and Indonesian and lasted between 25 and 45

minutes. Before conducting the interviews with the participants, pilot interviews were conducted.

The present study found that the causes of the oral communication challenges in English experienced by pre-service teachers were classified into three different categories: linguistic, socio-cultural competence, and opportunities for participation in the English language. All of these challenges were related to various problems; such as prior English instruction and exposure to English use during high school study, teaching methodologies and resources, and confidence of pre-service teachers in speaking English.

Ismail, Tuspekova and Mustaffa (2018) performed a study at a secondary school level in Kazakhstan; looking forward to having a different perspective of the traditional university level (in which this issue has been mostly explored). The main objective of this inquiry was to find out the insights and challenges perceived by students regarding oral communication skills. The participants were 18 Kazakh 9th graders from 9 different public schools, and they were selected through purposeful sampling.

Data was collected through qualitative interviews with the aim of understanding the world in the way participants did. By asking them about the type of speaking activities they had in class, the things they wanted to change, and their opinions about personal challenges, the researchers wanted to discover oral communication conditions in this specific context. They focused on three "levels of influence" micro, meso, and macro. The results showed that the current activities were lacking in spontaneity, they were too teacher-centered and individual-oriented, which translates into a big focus on the "oral" but a forsaken "communication". At the micro-level, female participants showed a more

emotional-related influence on their speech, whereas male participants felt it as more linguistic-related. At the meso-level, females felt a lack of emotional support from the teacher, when males were more connected to "out of class" help. Finally, at the macro level, males showed to be more influenced by social and cultural conditions than females.

In Colombia in 2001, Cohen, Andrew, Fass, and Lydia carried out a study to find out the perceptions and practices of the spoken skills taught by university teachers and students. They wanted to know why it was so difficult for EFL learners to develop proper speaking skills. Data was collected through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation with a group of 63 university students (from low, intermediate, and advanced level) and 40 teachers. They looked forward to answering the following three questions:

> 1. How do teachers and students believe oral instruction should be handled in the classroom? To what extent do the beliefs that teachers have about students' oral production in the classroom and the students' own beliefs match the reality? 2. How are teachers using the required materials for oral language production? 3. How.do teachers assess students orally?. (Cohen, Andrew, Fass & Lydia, 2001, pp 3).

Based on these, they found that the classroom practice and the actual speaking activities and assessment were not consistent, since the first one was teacher-centered and the second one student-centered. Also, the assessment was too accuracy-based and other linguistic features of oral language were left aside. These results suggest a need for guidance and training for teachers on teaching speaking skills and on how to assess properly real and natural language.

These aforementioned studies are key to our research study, since they provide us with a practical reference to what has already been studied in relation to the topic of this study. This gave us a path to follow in order to understand the steps and aspects we had to focus on.

## Statement of the problem

Nowadays, the English language is the "lingua franca" used for having effective communication in many different fields, from business to education, from technology to medicine. It is used and learned worldwide, and it is getting stronger every day. Because of this, the educational settings around the globe are improving their English teaching programs, making them more intense, specialized and demanding. Students all over the world are getting more training on the language in order to be more successful in terms of professional opportunities. This is why they are not only required to spend more time studying, but they are also required to show results on standardized exams such as APTIS, IELTS or TOEFL.

In Colombia, language teachers had been required to achieve a B2 level on these international exams, which had forced the universities' teaching programs to have specific curriculums. Nevertheless, due to the decree18583, the Ministry of education modified its politics, and changed this level to C1 (based on the Common European Framework of Reference), in order to guarantee a higher bilingualism rate. The quality of teacher profiles in the language learning and teaching process plays an important role in students' second language learning. Because of this, the ministry of education considers that it is vitally important to have teachers with a high performance in English in all their skills.

This research was conducted in a private university in Antioquia. Specifically, in a BA in foreign languages teaching. As this university looks for graduating teachers with a very high English level in order to prepare them properly for the job of teaching English in different contexts, we wanted to explore the perspectives of some preservice teachers about their speech, with the aim of understanding how this recent reform has impacted Colombian

university language teaching programs and their students. That is to say, their voices and thoughts were recorded and analyzed because of the fact that it is not only from laws and regulations that teaching can be improved and understood, the experience of people who have lived the experience can also provide meaningful insights.

Due to the time and extent of our research, we could only focus on just one skill because people's speech involves more features than the ones we are physically able to analyze. Therefore, we decided to focus on spoken communication. This means that we were interested in the way an input is processed and an output is produced. In other words, receiving information and giving a response or listening and speaking.

It has been observed that communicative skills may have been forgotten and put aside. Instead, there is a wider focus on the grammatical accuracy of the language (in terms of judging someone's level of language), and actually, standardized exams' biggest focus is usually on the written accuracy of the person taking the test. We are particularly interested in spoken communication since it allows authentic interaction and a very natural way of expression. In this sense,  Leong and Masoumeh (2017) affirm that we spend way more time having oral interactions instead of using written language, and, since oral language is basically used all the time by almost everyone, they consider it as the most important skill. However, more than just saying it is the most important skill, we feel it is the most forsaken in terms of research.

By communicating with peers, teachers, friends and family, students improve their spoken production. While students struggle to get  the C1 level, they also have to take care of many other subjects, which makes it more difficult and trickier for them. This project aims at identifying the challenges students who have passed the last integrated English

language course have faced, so they can be recognized, and a pathway can be set for implementing strategies to reinforce and help students to make better improvements, particularly those regarding these challenges.

## Research question

What are the challenges, foreign language teaching students face, in spoken English communication after having passed the last integrated English course in a private university in Colombia?

## Justification

As future teachers it is key to understand what kind of communication challenges students from advanced levels can face. It will help us to identify certain patterns that can be presented on further teaching experiences, this project might help us to understand different strategies for overcoming these challenges.

Identifying the main challenges of students in learning a foreign language such as English could potentially promote changes to the program the university offers to its students. These changes might include determining if they have the tools that allow students to strengthen those challenges identified within the process of learning English. Additionally, this identification of challenges and the actions the university takes could allow it to gain recognition for the quality of education of its academic programs and also for its professionals who will have great skills to face the demanding world of work.

Finally, the development of the research project could also be very useful for students, since knowing what their main challenges are while learning a foreign language, will allow them to improve their skills and overcome difficulties through the formation of

study groups, tutoring assistance, training courses and additional preparation to those offered within the academic program.

## Objectives

**General objective**

To identify the challenges, foreign language teaching students face in spoken English communication after having passed the last integrated English course in a private university in Colombia.

**Specific objectives**

To explore participants' experiences and opinions regarding their learning process and challenges in oral communication.

To identify the challenges that participants face or have faced in the English learning process.

To analyze the challenges that participants have faced in relation to oral communication in English.

<div align="center">**Conceptual references**</div>

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges students who have passed the last integrated English course face in spoken communication. In this section, we are going to present the key terms that we consider are crucial for our project. The terms are Interlanguage, speaking in EFL contexts, errors, EFL and FL, Oral communication.

**Interlanguage**

At the moment of talking about SLA and the development of an L2, an important term to take into account is "interlanguage". It is an individual system created by the learner and used as a bridge to get to learn the target language. This system is different depending on the first language of the learner; it means that students who share the same L1 tend to have similar interlanguage. Hamad (2015), reviewed the term and the different theories that analyse and support interlanguage in the SLA context.

> The main theoretical assumption of IL theory is that when a FL/L2 learner is trying
> to communicate in the TL, he/she uses a new linguistic system different from the
> NL and the TL. (Hamad, 2015, p.125).

**Speaking in the EFL context**

In the EFL contexts, we can see that the methods and approaches used are very often focused on accuracy and the form of the language; making it very hard for students to develop good communication skills. No matter the country or culture, if it is an EFL context, the same characteristics appear. The question many people may ask is: "what communication might serve in an EFL context for?" Savignon (1983) cited in Sohlan

(2017) said that regardless of whether it is an EFL or ESL context, communication skills and practice in the classroom are important as they create interest and language identification.

In 1992 a quantitative survey about the use of spoken language was conducted in a university of Malaysia (Malaya) among 88 in-service teachers, in order to find out how was English used in the EFL classes and how well their students could communicate. After asking them, the researchers could analyze that most of the participants (84.1%) agreed that their students could not speak well English, and that they had communication problems. 50% said that speaking was the ability in which their students were the weakest and 43% agreed that it was writing. This finding shows that production skills are the hardest for EFL learners.

They concluded that for getting students to achieve a good speaking level it is necessary to implement not only the traditional syllabus but mixing it with approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching, therefore, the combination of accuracy and use of the language will result in a wider understanding. Sohlan (2017) concludes that "even as structuralism provides the accuracy of language forms, language teaching electism should express itself by applying the principles of Communicative Language Teaching which work towards fluency. Such a balance is necessary to develop fluency and accuracy in spoken English." (p. 8).

**Error**

Errors are a crucial item when it comes to SLA and communication skills. Various theories suggest that depending on the errors learners make, they have a determined level of proficiency. With the help of the updated version of the list of studies made by Rod Ellis in 1985, Pachette and Leśniewska provided the field of SLA with a wider understanding of how the L1 is related to errors of L2 learners. These lists were made up with the participation of people of different nationalities and L1 in order to comprehend how the different languages affect the learning and errors in L2, in this case, English.

The objective of this article was to present an updated version of the mistakes that L1 students face in the process of learning a L2. Pichette and Leśniewska (2018) affirm that:

> The extent to which the L1 affects the process of acquiring an L2 has been a crucial question in SLA research. One (but by no means the only one) of the ways in which the impact of the L1 on the acquisition of the L2 can be manifested is through L1-induced errors in the L2 production of learners.(p.1)

Corder (1967) said that (as cited in Pichette and Leśniewska, 2017) another challenge is based on the need to know the real errors that are the reflection of knowledge deficiencies and accidental errors as failures where the speaker can self-correct if necessary.

It is considered that before any mistake in speaking it is important to keep in mind what ability the student has in the grammatical part since it is crucial to be able to reach the public with a strong message, for this it is necessary to have coherence in our speech, and it

is here where this study shows us the challenges that students have in handling prepositions when speaking. In addition, students may be frustrated because their use is difficult.

Prepositions are one of the main challenges when it comes to using a new language. it is very common to see advanced students facing big issues regarding prepositions. In 2017 this research was conducted in order to have a better understanding of the errors of students from A2, B1 and B2 levels regarding prepositions, based on the interlanguage hypothesis and the error analysis method. they found out that "However, the relative frequency of errors shows that the frequency of errors is low in comparison to the attempts of use, which means that prepositions do not represent a significant source of errors among the courses." (Parada, Ruiz and Sanchez, 2017, p.109).

Finally, the research led to the conclusion that the notional-functional approach is the one that can integrate both, accuracy and communication. Parada et al (2017) state that:

> This new approach provided the opportunity to utilize grammar and vocabulary as the vehicle to convey students' needs. The Notional-Functional approach is designed to allow learners to direct their conversation according to their needs in any given situation. (p.111)

**EFL and FL.**

In the acquisition of a new language that is not the mother tongue, it is common to speak about "foreign language" (FL) which is the term used to describe the learning of a different language that is not nor officially nor commonly spoken in the immediate context (country, region)

In a country like Colombia, English language is learned as a FL, or more specifically, EFL (English as a foreign language) due to the fact that it is neither the official language nor the one spoken around the country. It means that students learn it without stimuli from real life; they do not need it for living and don't often use it. Stakanova (2018) explains it with the next example "In other words, there is no English environment in Russia to practice English with the native speakers on a regular basis."

Developing communication skills in an EFL context is a thing of struggling. Students don't need English in their daily lives and they do not have to use it for pretty much anything, then it sets boundaries regarding oral language, as it is usually experienced in its written form. Beltrán (2017) affirms that "the student has the opportunity to develop English language learning only during their training, when they are in educational institutions, and rarely in other types of activities" (p.91).

Based on Spanish students' reflections on the importance of written and spoken skills in their EFL classes at High School and at University, the focus on education is often aimed at the didactic component and/or the legal requirements for the courses, but, the actual teaching should be related to what students want/need to learn. A very important element of the learning process is the like of the student about the language and what he/she

needs to learn, this is why this kind of research helps the field and expands the knowledge about the realities lived. After arduous work interviewing, analyzing and collecting information about 38 EFL students and their opinions, regarding the importance given to written skills as well as oral skills, in pre-university and university courses Calvo discovered that "it seems that most of the interviewees are not happy with the attention paid to spoken skills nor to cultural aspects in their EFL lessons at pre-university and university levels" (2016, p.15). All because in their usual tasks, they faced too many written based activities and they lacked enough input as to be able to improve their oral proficiency.

**Oral Communication**

Communicating orally is a daily basis activity. As humans we are in constant communication with each other, we have the need to express our feelings, the things that we think, what we want and so on; because of that, we have language as the bridge in which communication is passed to others, and that process, is given by interaction. Gutiérrez (2005) says "Interaction is the basis of human communication and all elements of communicative and interactive competence (grammar, discourse, sociolinguistics and pragmatics) are involved in human interaction. They must work together for successful communication to take place." (p.84).

Oral communication is quite related to language learning. Learners of a foreign language must face different linguistic features, such as writing, reading, listening, and speaking. After analyzing the written language, learning its grammatical rules, and understanding its syntax, they make their own hypothesis about the TL and create a set of beliefs about it. At the moment of interacting with a native speaker, or someone who has a

wider knowledge about the language, learners can test those beliefs and see how their own "interlanguage" works in terms of communication. Aparicio (2012) affirms that it is the scenario in which the learner tests and verifies his own hypothesis about the TL.

Learning a TL is a process of meeting oneself. Learners choose the words they like the most, use expressions they feel identified with, and make their own hypothesis about the language. Here is where the term "interlanguage" fits perfectly. It is defined as a linguistic system which the learner develops at the moment of producing meaningful communication in a TL. Interlanguage is helpful in the way that supports learners to feel comfortable when producing output. When learners receive native speakers input, it might be quite challenging and get them scared, however, interacting with other students is easier and less stressful as they are all learning, and interlanguages are shared. Bocanegra (1998) says that the interactions between learners inside the classroom either in groups or pairs. This interaction is known in the literature as nonnative speaker - Nonnative speaker interaction.

## Methodology

This research aims to identify and analyze students' challenges in spoken communication. It falls under the qualitative paradigm because as LeCompte (1995) affirms, qualitative research is a category of research design that describes observations that take the form of interviews, narratives, field notes, recordings, audio and video transcription cassettes, records of all types of writing, photographs or films, and artifacts.

We decided to carry out our project based on the systematization of experiences because we want to know about the experiences of the participants and we also want them to tell us from their own voices the experiences they have had regarding the challenges in spoken communication, so we can have the information of those who are involved in the process it is relevant so that we can understand the process they come from and have an overview of it. Systematization of experiences is defined by Jara (2012) as the manner in which a phenomenon is understood from the process of its occurrence, and then, the information of this process is compiled and organized in order to have a wider understanding. We consider it as a crucial tool for approaching the students' challenges, for the reason that not only we can get the participants to express themselves and tell us their experiences, but also we can have our own interpretation and arrangement of the phenomenon, which makes it easier for us and the reader to understand this reality.

The participants were eight students of a BA in foreign languages teaching at a private university in Colombia, who have already taken and approved the course integrated English V; all the students in the eighth semester were asked to answer an initial questionnaire that allowed us to establish if they had had any challenges in spoken communication, if they were willing to participate and if they had the time to participate in

this study. In this way, a total of eight students were identified and invited to participate in the next stages of the study.

Our project adopted a qualitative approach, and consequently qualitative instruments were selected to collect data from the participants. The information we collected allowed us to obtain evidence of the challenges, opinions and conceptions that the participants have had regarding spoken English. For this inquiry, we applied surveys and interviews.

According to Check and Schutt (2012), surveys are a collection of information from individuals and their responses. This study is mainly used to identify the human behaviors and preferences of its participants, in addition, the main uses of this instrument are focused on obtaining opinions for academic programs; These surveys can contain open-ended or multiple-choice questions and are commonly used to identify characteristics within a group of individuals, and in turn allow the researcher to know how to proceed, within social preferences, when analyzing the data. Regarding interviews, Altrichter, Posch, and Somekh (2000) state that interviews are useful tools to communicate positions, opinions, conceptions, and connotations in order to obtain a broader understanding of a situation. In this way, the researchers formulate a list of questions to ask during the conversation. An interview will be arranged in order to talk about the aspects of their speech.

Semi-structured interviews were applied with the intention of getting the participants to talk and give us the information about their own perception of the challenges presented. The interviews were nice and calm encounters with us, so the participants felt in an open environment to speak about these topics. The purpose of having semi-structured interviews was to make sure that the participants felt comfortable enough so they could

speak about more things than just the questions we prepared, in this way, we were able to get more information and unexpected responses.

The data collection methods used were Semi-structured interviews, with the intention of getting the participants to talk and give us the information about their own perception of the challenges presented. The interviews are thought to be nice encounters with us and also quite calmed, so the participants might feel in a proper environment to speak about these topics. The purpose of having semi-structured interviews is to make sure that the participants feel comfortable enough so they can speak about more things than just the questions prepared, in this way, we will be able to get more information and unexpected aspects.

Regarding ethical considerations, it is crucial to keep in mind that the participant were approached with personal questions that refer to sex, drugs, or social status since they are questions that participants could consider intrusive (Kumar, 2011). Participants were introduced to this study and were informed about the theme and methodology that would be used in the project. As they all agreed on participating, they signed a consent form before the intervention had started. In this document, besides certifying their voluntary participation in the study, they also certified being aware of the purpose of the study, the different data collection techniques that would be used, the data processing and the right to withdraw from the study at any moment. Finally, we undertook to protect the data and the identity of the participants.

**Data Analysis**

The analysis of the information collected was carried out in two stages. The first one has to do with the organization of the challenges in categories, which leads to a more comfortable approach to the whole collected data section by giving names, reasons and context to the challenges of our participants. We also organized some general reasons that created or helped creating the challenges, which summarize and structure the information provided by the participants.

In order to analyze the data collected, we conducted the process suggested by Burns (1999). The author recommends following five steps: (1) assembling the data, (2) coding the data, (3) comparing the data, (4) building interpretations, and (5) reporting the outcomes. Furthermore, I used triangulation and peer examinations to increase the validity of the data. In order to triangulate, I created tables to compare and reduce the data coming from the different sources. This triangulation of the findings permitted me to establish relationships and patterns among the emerging categories while my thesis director acted as a critical friend along the process. The result of this analysis helped us to understand the data from a deeper point of view.

## Results

The objective of this study was to systematize the experiences of the students regarding the challenges they have had in terms of spoken language. To do so, we classified students' experiences into four main categories: personal, academic, linguistic, and social.

For collecting all the necessary information, we conducted eight semi-structured interviews and these were recorded in order to validate the information given in the interviews. Additionally, students filled out a survey in which they tackled some aspects related to their oral skills and challenges faced in the language.

The analysis of the semi-structured interviews and surveys revealed that throughout their learning process of English participants had faced different challenges related to the orality of this language.

That is why in this next section we will provide more details of the aforementioned categories.

**Personal**

This personal category refers to aspects related to the perceptions, beliefs, feelings of the participants and their individual and unique ways of interacting with language.

One of the main challenges faced by our participants in terms of spoken English was the fear, grief or shyness when speaking in public because each of them has faced different situations in which they have felt uncomfortable regarding whose reactions when they make a mistake using the language.

It was evidenced that the participants feel more comfortable and more secure when speaking in front of people with whom they had more confidence or where they felt a comfortable environment to express themselves. The following paragraph is an excerpt from a semi-structured interview which describes the aforementioned statement.

I feel more comfortable when I express myself in public with people with whom I have more confidence than when the public is different from my friends. (Semi-structured interview, Erika)

Similarly another participant said the following; I feel more confident when I am expressing myself in front of my classmates and when they are subjects that do not require such an advanced vocabulary. (Semi-structured interview, Cindy)

These previous excerpts indicate how the environment directly affects the participants facing fear when speaking in English, for them it is vitally important to feel confident to be able to participate in the activities.

**Linguistic**

The third category has to do with the meta language elements that conform our participants' skills, strengths and weaknesses.

It was evident that some participants had challenges when speaking in English since on different occasions they felt that they did not have the appropriate vocabulary to participate in conversations on a specific topic or that on many occasions due to the nervousness they felt they could not use grammar adequately affecting their understanding.

This next excerpt shows some of the challenges described by participants related to the Linguistic category.

"Pronunciation mistakes, Colombian accent, suprasegmental aspects... Not knowing the vocabulary or not having a clear context" (Survey, Angel)

As explained before, pronunciation, accent and vocabulary seem to be some of the main challenges directly related to the language itself and the use of it by the pre-service teacher. These ones affected the oral performance and skills of the participant, ending up by creating communication issues when tackling a speech.

Challenges were not the only thing found in this category, also strategies for improvement and overcoming difficulties were related to Linguistic elements. As you can read, the next excerpt explains some of the strategies used by participants.

"to search some words in the dictionary when I am not sure about its pronunciation" (Survey, Nicolas)

Searching words, understanding their pronunciation and use are a common strategy used for improving participants' speech and oral communication performance.

Oral skills were proven to be the most challenging Linguistic aspect explained by our participant. As stated in the next opinion, oral production was a key point to be improved.

Oral production has been the skill that has caused the most challenges for me, throughout my career I have been improving through a lot of practice (Semi-structured interview, Nicolás,)

Practice is the way in which participants reinforce their abilities. Oral communication environments were challenging in different aspects, from personal, academic and social reasons, however when it comes to the Linguistic field, participants expressed to have challenges related to pronunciation, accent and sentence making.

On the other hand, one of the participants says that in order to have a good understanding of what someone is saying, he/she must have a very good handle on the part of grammar. then the excerpt:

Grammar is very important when using communication skills because with this tool I can have coherence and cohesion. (Semi-structured interview, Nicolas)

In this excerpt, this participant says that fluency in this language goes hand in hand depending on the amount of vocabulary they have.

From my point of view, fluency in language has a lot to do with the topic at hand. I would say that my fluency depends on how much vocabulary I have about a specific topic. (Survey, Luciana)

**Social**

Several of the participants referred both in the survey and in the semi-structured interview that they practiced speaking skills with their peers or with people from other countries, which is extremely gratifying for them because by this means they believe they can hone this skill.

All the participants stated in the interviews that they practiced speaking with their closest friends, family or on online pages with people from other countries where these

people, being native (English mother tongue), helped their constant improvement in this use. The following excerpt is an example of this:

I practice with some friends. (Survey, Luciana)

Something similar said another participant in the following excerpt.

Technology is also a very useful tool for our participants, as stated in the next answer, it is even used for communicating with people from other countries.

"Through apps where I can interact with people from other countries and practice my English." (Survey, Cindy)

"Getting into Hellotalk and Freetalk, talking with my foreign friends" (Survey, Diego)

Oral communication needs interaction and technology is very helpful for getting people connected. By using apps, some participants get in touch with people from other countries in order to improve their skills.

"Sometimes I do not feel the confidence to talk or to demonstrate the actual knowledge I got in English when talking to several people" (Survey, Angel)

Talking to people is an anxiety generating experience and as explained before groups of people are usually intimidating for our participants; they expressed how their oral performance is affected when addressing big groups of people, it can relate to fear, nervousness and even vocabulary forgetting, all of these having in common social pressure as their catalyst.

**Work**

This is a category related to job environments and learning experiences that have taken place due to job requirements. Some of the participants expressed that they have had some experiences related to their work and that assuming the role of teachers in different contexts and for different reasons was challenging.  They also suggested that this experience allowed them to make improvements to their oral production and gave them the opportunity to set new goals.

One of the aspects mentioned included work as a source of motivation, which makes participants desire to become better in their performance. The following opinions are excerpts taken from the survey implemented with our participants.

"Not only am I going to teach... I need to be a professional in the proper sense of the word" (Survey, Diego)

As explained in the next response, their own definition of what being a professional means was actually an influencing factor for improving their language performance. Based on their answers, having the moral responsibility on their knowledge due to their teaching job was a big reason for overcoming their challenges.

"Now that I am a pre service teacher and I have synchronous classes, I must speak English most of the time" (Survey, Angel)

This excerpt indicates how work experiences boost pre-service teachers' motivation and help them overcome challenges and fears, since, being prepared for students means having to be even better than if it were only for themselves.

Moreover, we found that these job environments led students to overcome different challenges such as speech mistakes, thanks to the amount of time they spend practicing and using the language in the aforementioned places.

"watching my recorded classes again and making notes of my mistakes" (Survey, Angel)

Participants expressed how they take advantage of these spaces in order to interact with their peers/students in order to improve their skills. This next response relates to this phenomenon.

"sincerely, I just practice with my classmates and students" (Survey, Angel)

As stated before, some of the participants revealed that they only had practicing time with their students and classmates, which focuses their oral communication development on a couple of very specific contexts, such as work and academic environments.

These responses relate to the opportunities that these job spaces provide to pre-service teachers, helping them to improve their level of knowledge and use of the language, and more specifically, their oral communication skills.

**Academic**

This category was quite common among our participants.  Academic factors and environments such as presentations, class participations and socialization were the source of many challenges and spaces for improvement; participants expressed how connected were their oral skills and academic experiences. Usually, these academic spaces were titled

as the first ones in which participants had their starting point in language learning, and ironically, after working so much in these spaces, many challenges came up from them years later.

It was very common that these environments provided much practice opportunities for our participants. These next opinions were taken from the survey  indicating how practice and academic spaces relate to each other.

"I have been practicing my oral skills in the classroom along with teachers and classmates" (Survey, Pipe )

These answers show us how important academic spaces are for pre-service teachers to be able to practice and have improvements in their language skills.

Challenges related to academic vocabulary seem to be a common factor among our participants. 

 Extracts from the surveys shows it.

"But if I had to talk more academically, or advanced topics like science field, I have to struggle a bit in order to use the appropriate vocabulary " (Survey, Pipe)

It seems like participants feel more comfortable talking about things in a more informal way, because tackling academic topics might affect their speech in terms of vocabulary or fear.

However, another of our participants said that to improve their speaking ability to use all the spaces that the University offered, this is his excerpt:

The University promotes through its various courses and scenarios the improvement of expression through discourse. (Martin, Semi-structured interview).

## Discussions and Conclusions

This study suggests that most participants have faced challenges related to personal reasons, such as nervousness, insecurity, feelings about the language, beliefs, etc. Besides, most participants recognized they have faced linguistic challenges, which are the second most common generators of difficulties, linguistic challenges include aspects such as phonetics, accent and pronunciation. Finally, the third largest challenge generator relates to academic factors, and it has to do with institutional-like environments and experiences.

In his study Abid (2018) shows how the lack of vocabulary creates important barriers to having a good pronunciation and also its participants feel limited to express their ideas regarding specific topics in this language. Similarly, our participants expressed that their greatest challenges have been linguistic since they pointed out that having a limited vocabulary does not allow them to express themselves correctly on certain topics and this makes them feel frustrated.

However, Abid (2018) shows that in his study participants faced great challenges in terms of grammar. Conversely, participants in our study suggested that they felt comfortable enough with their grammatical skills when communicating orally; they emphasized that grammar did not represent a challenge for them.

Ismail, K., Tuspekova, A. & Mustaffa, R. (2018) found that most of their participants faced challenges in speaking when they had to talk in public. In other words, they were blocked. In this same way, our participants also expressed that social pressure was one of the most important concerns for them and that having to communicate with others in settings such as classrooms makes them feel uncomfortable and /or insecure about what they are saying.

Miho Yanagi (2016) suggests that his participants faced challenges regarding the pronunciation of the English language. Our findings go in the same line because our participants also reported having faced many challenges in terms of the pronunciation of English.

One strength of our study is that we consider that here many challenges faced by students regarding the communication of spoken English were evidenced, in this way the University could take these challenges into account and work on them in a meaningful way with future teachers or students of this degree since most of our participants expressed that their strongest challenges were in terms of communication, so from the classroom you can begin to mitigate these fears and as teachers provide more confidence, try to enter more comfortable environments so that future students feel comfortable when it comes to participating.

Due to the pandemic, the proper development of the study was difficult in terms of time, because as we were working virtually the participants' schedules and ours almost did not coincide but somehow we had to establish a schedule to be able to carry out the interviews and the surveys, we also consider that if the interviews and questionnaires had been carried out in person, each participant in a more conscious way would have given much more congruent answers in terms of those who were asked, we regard that due to the fact of being in virtual way they left everything for the last and in this way the answers were basic.

Other studies with the same research topic have had the opportunity to work with a larger population and in this way have had the opportunity to see how not only the

academic sphere affects their ability to use this language. Unlike us, we had the limitation of a contingency (covid) which prevented us from conducting the interviews in person, as we mentioned earlier, this was a great weakness in our degree work.

We were able to observe that some factors of insecurity and nervousness, linguistic ones such as pronunciation and accent and social pressure were the most representative challenges in our participants, resulting in a connection between the challenges they have faced and showing how the Interlanguage of all of them correlates to the difficulties they have had in their learning process.

We suggest to other future students (researchers) to go deeper into this topic and investigate what factors can cause these challenges at the level of oral communication to their participants, what strategies they have or can find to overcome them, in addition they can explore other contexts, not only in private institutions but also public institutions and in this way they can make a broad comparison between public and private contexts in which different cultural backgrounds might  have an influence.

**Appendix A**

# QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is part of our research project, and it seeks to explore the challenges that the students of the language teaching program face in the courses that are taught in English. The information that you provide will be confidential and only used for our research project. This questionnaire can be answered in 3 to 5 minutes.

* Este formulario registrará su nombre, escriba su nombre.

[_____]

1. Name:

[_____]

2. Do you feel comfortable with your oral communication in English?

○ Yes

○ No

3. Have you ever faced any challenges in the English language in general? Which?

[_____]

4. How would you describe your speaking?
   1:Insufficient, 2: Bad, 3: Fair, 4: Good, 5: Very good

   1   2   3   4   5
   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○

5. How would you describe your listening?
   1:Insufficient, 2: Bad, 3: Fair, 4: Good, 5: Very good

   1   2   3   4   5
   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○

6. How would you describe your writing?
   1:Insufficient, 2: Bad, 3: Fair, 4: Good, 5: Very good

   1   2   3   4   5
   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○

7. How would you describe your reading?
   1:Insufficient, 2: Bad, 3: Fair, 4: Good, 5: Very good

   1   2   3   4   5
   ○   ○   ○   ○   ○

8. Would you like to join our study and be part of it as a participant?

○ YES

○ NO

# SURVEY

Students' challenges in oral communication.

In this survey you will find 16 questions related to your experiences in learning oral communication skills in the English language, these ones will help us understand the challenges you have faced and the reasons why they came up

\* Este formulario registrará su nombre, escriba su nombre.

1. DATE:

Formato: d/M/AAAA

2. NAME:

3. Where and how did you study English before starting your university studies?

4. How would you describe your experience regarding the learning process of oral skills in the University?

5. How motivated are you towards oral communication in English? Why

6. Are you fluent when speaking in English?

7. What strategies do you use to improve and practice your fluency?

8. How good is your pronunciation in English?

9. What strategies do you use to improve and practice your pronunciation?

10. How would you describe your use of vocabulary when speaking in English?

11. What strategies do you use to improve and practice vocabulary?

12. How do you consider your grammar skills?

13. What strategies do you use to improve and practice grammar?

14. Do you have any strategies for other skills such as pragmatics, discourse, or morphology? Which?

15. How do you practice English speaking outside the university? Who with?

16. Describe external factors that have affected your oral communication in English. For example, being shy, the attitude of your classmates, etc. Include as many details as possible.

17. Are you still struggling with the issues you describe in the previous question?

18. Tell us in depth what you think are the reasons for the challenges you have faced?

**Appendix C**

## CONSENTIMIENTO INFORMADO

*STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH SPOKEN COMMUNICATION ON THE BA IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING*

The main goal of this project is to get to know what kind of oral communication challenges, the students from the BA in foreign languages teaching have faced in their learning process. You will be part of a semi-structured interview in which you will talk about those challenges, as well as you will have to fill out a survey in which you will have the opportunity to explain those experiences in a written form.

Usted ha sido escogido como participante en un proceso de investigación para identificar los retos que los estudiantes de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras enfrentan en la comunicación hablada del inglés después de haber aprobado Inglés integrado 5. Para esta selección se ha tenido en cuenta sólo 5 participantes.

Su participación en este estudio es necesaria y consistirá en dar información que permita dar a conocer qué retos han enfrentado a lo largo de su proceso académico en la Universidad Católica de Oriente a través de cuestionarios y entrevistas semi - estructuradas.

**RIESGOS Y BENEFICIOS**

Su participación no representa riesgo alguno a su integridad personal ni a su buen nombre. No obstante, será necesario destinar un tiempo prudencial para la realización de las acciones anteriormente mencionadas.

**ANONIMATO**

La información siempre permanecerá en el anonimato y solo será suministrada en caso de ser requerida para validar la información. Al momento de describir el estudio, tanto escrito como verbalmente, se usará un seudónimo que le será asignado a fin de proteger su nombre y sus datos personales.

Luisa Fernanda Castaño Castrillón y Carlos Alberto Marín Arango, estudiantes e investigadores, me podrán entrevistar un máximo de tres veces acerca de los retos que he enfrentado en el Inglés hablado tanto en el salón de clases como por fuera de él. Las actividades se llevarán a cabo en el lugar y hora de mi conveniencia y no tendrán una duración de más de una hora.

Las entrevistas serán grabadas en audio con el propósito de facilitar el análisis de los datos. La información suministrada en dicha entrevista será leída sólo por el investigador y su asesor y será archivada bajo seudónimos con el fin de proteger la identidad de los entrevistados.

Mi participación es totalmente voluntaria y podré retirarme del proyecto cuando lo desee sin ninguna consecuencia para mi calificación en el curso.

Si tengo alguna pregunta, puedo contactar a los investigadores a los siguientes correos electrónicos Luisa Fernanda Castaño Castrillón lcastano96@gmail.com y Carlos Alberto Marín Arango carlosama260@gmail.com.

**Nombre del participante que acuerda:**

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