

Factors influencing the development of speaking skills among Ecuadorian EFL learners: Teachers' perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Secondary school students in Ecuador face significant challenges in developing English speaking skills, which are crucial for effective communication. This study aims to explore the factors affecting the development of speaking skills and identifies teachers' suggestions for addressing these challenges. The literature indicates factors on performance, methodology, linguistics, affective, and contextual factors. Employing an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, quantitative data were first collected through a survey of 142 EFL experienced teachers across various Ecuadorian regions, followed by qualitative insights from semi-structured interviews with seven experienced teachers. Findings from qualitative data reveal that large class sizes, limited instructional time, and insufficient speaking-focused activities in course materials impede effective practice. Methodological issues, such as inadequate English exposure outside the classroom, further hinder proficiency. Linguistic challenges include reliance on native language and pronunciation difficulties, while affective factors like anxiety and low confidence also impact students' speaking willingness. Recommendations include reducing class sizes, increasing instructional time, and including more speaking activities in curricula. These recommendations are not just theoretical but practical and feasible, emphasizing their potential impact on students' oral proficiency. Emphasis is also placed on fostering a supportive classroom environment, enhancing teacher professional development, and integrating authentic language use into lessons. These findings have broader implications for EFL education globally, highlighting the need for curriculum reforms, improved classroom management, and targeted teacher training. The study provides valuable insights into the complexities of teaching and learning speaking skills and offers practical recommendations for enhancing students' oral proficiency.

Keywords: EFL secondary education, factors, speaking skills, teachers' perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamic and evolving nature of the English language demands that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers remain adaptable to meet the emerging needs of language learners. As society progresses, the linguistic demands on individuals change, placing greater emphasis on practical communication skills in English. This is especially true in the context of EFL learning, where students often prioritize speaking over other language skills

to perform well in diverse contexts. Leong and Ahmadi (2017) highlight that, much like acquiring our mother tongue, speaking is the foundational skill from which reading and writing skills develop. However, despite its importance, students often find it challenging to apply their speaking skills effectively in real-life situations (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018).

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Improving speaking skills has become a significant challenge for EFL teachers and students. The dynamic nature of speaking, which requires the synchronization of linguistic knowledge, idea conveyance, and conversational norms, adds complexity to the teaching and learning process. In this regard, Bhattacharya (2017) states that mastering speaking involves coordinating linguistic resources, pragmatic skills, and conversational strategies, making proficiency in spoken English a demanding task.

In Ecuador, English is considered a critical communication tool across various educational fields. The urgency to adopt and implement effective communicative teaching methods to enhance Ecuadorian students' language proficiency is evident in the new planning outlined in the *Currículo de Lengua Extranjera* (2016). Despite these efforts, initiatives to improve speaking skills have been unsuccessful (Burgin & Daniel, 2021). In many classrooms, the emphasis remains predominantly on grammar and vocabulary, often to the detriment of speaking practice (Al-Tamimi et al., 2020; Rahman & Pandian, 2018). This focus has turned students into passive recipients of grammatical structures and vocabulary lists, making active communication in English a significant challenge.

The situation has prompted the Ecuadorian government to evaluate English proficiency levels in 600 public schools nationwide. The results revealed that most learners struggle to use English to meet their social and academic needs at a fundamental level (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2017). This outcome underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the factors affecting the development of speaking skills among EFL learners in Ecuador.

Several studies have investigated various aspects of EFL learning across different educational levels, from young children to adults. Different professionals who conducted research in EFL classrooms have contributed to understanding the mastery of EFL speaking skills in Ecuadorian students by examining various influencing factors. Al Jawad and Abosnan (2020) explore the impact of classroom dynamics and teacher-student interactions, while ElNaggar (2019) focuses on curriculum design and its effectiveness. Hamouda (2020) investigates motivational strategies, and Namaziandost and Imani (2020) highlight the role of technology and multimedia resources in the language classroom. Collectively, these studies offer valuable insights into improving speaking proficiency across different educational levels, primarily from the students' perspectives. However, a significant research gap remains concerning the factors contributing to weak speaking performance from the teachers' perspective (Santos et al., 2020). Understanding these factors from the teachers'

viewpoint is crucial, as teachers are on the front lines of implementing educational strategies and witnessing firsthand students' struggles and progress.

This study aims to fill this research gap by identifying and analyzing the factors that high school teachers perceive as affecting their students' development of speaking skills in Ecuador. By focusing on teachers' perspectives, this research seeks to uncover the complexities of teaching speaking skills and identify potential solutions to help students overcome their difficulties. Accordingly, the significance of this research extends beyond the Ecuadorian context. Globally, EFL teachers face similar challenges in helping students develop effective speaking skills. The insights gained from this study can inform educational practices and policies in other regions facing similar issues. By understanding the specific challenges and effective strategies from the teachers' perspective, this research can contribute to the broader field of EFL education, offering practical recommendations for improving speaking skills among EFL learners worldwide.

By addressing these questions, this research will contribute to the existing literature on EFL education, providing valuable insights into the complexities of teaching and learning speaking skills and offering practical recommendations for enhancing students' oral proficiency. Therefore, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influence the development of EFL students' speaking skills at the secondary school level from the teachers' perspective?
2. What do teachers suggest addressing the identified challenges in developing EFL students' speaking skills?

Literature Review

Factors affecting the development of speaking amongst EFL students

Several research endeavors have underscored the diverse factors and challenges hindering students' speaking abilities. The results of the majority of the studies in this domain indicate that EFL learners may confront pedagogical, linguistic, affective, and methodological challenges in the development of their speaking skills (Hamad & Seyyedi, 2020; Houn & Em, 2022; Huwari, 2019; Khasawneh, 2023; Santos et al., 2020; Sevy-Biloon et al., 2020; Soomro et al., 2019; Tayyab et al., 2023).

The methodology used by teachers is one factor that influences speaking across levels (Pangket, 2019). Leong and Ahmadi (2017) claimed that despite the importance of learning English worldwide, in places where this language is not spoken actively, there is a tendency to teach English using traditional methods focusing on a teacher-

centered style where the speaking skill is almost ignored. Emphasis is given to reading and writing skills. As a result, students are unwilling to actively participate or attempt to communicate since their teachers are the main characters in the classroom. Besides, the excessive focus on descriptive aspects of grammar in the target language and ignoring students' communicative activities minimizes the students' chances of becoming proficient and confident in using English for real-life communication (Afebri & Muhsin, 2019; Dinh & Tran, 2020).

Regarding practicing opportunities for the target language, Albiladi (2019) stated that students' exposure is insufficient to use the language authentically. The inadequate time assigned to teaching English is another methodological factor that hinders the efficient improvement of students' skills (Fandiño et al., 2019). A lack of authentic or semi-authentic communication opportunities can impede students' progress and potentially impede the achievement of high levels of linguistic proficiency. Thus, creating a supporting semi-authentic environment and encouraging the widespread use of authentic materials beyond the scheduled lessons can help compensate for the lack of a natural language environment and provide students with contact with the target language (Adwani & Shrivastava, 2017; Dayag-Tungpalan, 2023).

Another aspect influencing the development of speaking is linguistic factors. Linguistic factors refer to the learners' knowledge of the target language that impedes their speaking ability (Schmid & Leeuw, 2019). Denston (2021) argues that speaking ability is interconnected with listening ability since listening provides the input for speakers to produce their utterances. Erlam and Ellis (2018) support the view that as a receptive skill, listening is vital in providing learners with the necessary input to produce language and develop speaking abilities.

A good grasp of vocabulary is also essential for mastering receptive and productive language skills (Khan et al., 2018). Many EFL students usually stammer due to the need for even basic vocabulary to express their ideas and words that fit in a specific context (Ali et al., 2019). Consequently, English students may feel frustrated and limited in interacting with their counterparts due to the struggle to understand the content, causing a significant barrier to improving their speaking skills (Haidara, 2016).

In addition to vocabulary knowledge, learners must show a good command of grammar to communicate accurately. Grammar has effects not only on writing but also on speaking. While grammar rules may not be relevant at first when trying to communicate, having too many grammatical errors in speech can become distracting, making the meaning and the intent of a

message difficult to understand. (Vasuki, 2019). With a knowledge of grammar, learners can identify language patterns that will allow them to express themselves clearly (Rao, 2019). Teachers must combine the teaching of grammar and speaking skills naturally and effectively so learners can convey the desired meaning effectively (Navaz & Hanaan Khaathoon, 2020).

In the foreign language field, several scholars have claimed that affective factors, such as anxiety, inhibition, lack of confidence, and motivation, influence students to develop their speaking skills (Elkhayma, 2020; Jahbel, 2017; Kiruthiga & Christopher, 2022; Santos et al., 2020). According to Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan (2017), anxiety eliminates students' self-efficacy, preventing them from expressing their thoughts confidently. These psychological aspects decrease students' unwillingness to participate in speaking activities. (Mouhoubi-Messadh, 2017). Xie (2020) reported that speaking experiences seem to generate anxiety for students, while Seraj et al. (2021) identified shyness, anxiety, self-efficacy, and confidence as obstacles to developing English speaking skills. Thus, as suggested by Bao and Liu (2021), students must have the opportunity to choose topics first until they are confident enough to speak, which will help lower their anxiety while developing their language competence.

Additionally, speaking performance conditions also affect the development of fluency. Factors such as planning time, time pressure, and the amount of teacher support often puzzle students (Bhattacharjee, 2013; Hanifa, 2018). The results provided by Ho et al. (2020) revealed that participants felt pressured time made them unable to perform speaking tasks effectively. When an assigned task had limited time, students were discouraged and relied on other students who had more ability to speak during the task presentation. Therefore, time pressure appears to cause struggle in students during their poor speaking performance, increasing the difficulty level. John et al. (2021) asserted that giving learners sufficient time to generate ideas, produce, and organize the task before their presentation in class can help attain effective results in both language production and students' confidence.

Among other factors, Rao and Chen (2020) asserted that large classes and grammar-based examinations are also barriers that hinder students from fostering their speaking skills. Songbatumis (2017) also claimed that having too many students in the same classroom decreases the quality and quantity of interactions within the classroom and diminishes the quality of teaching. Therefore, smaller classrooms in public schools are necessary to provide frequent communication opportunities and favorably impact students' performance (Roshan et al., 2022).

Finally, using the native language is also a factor that could impede or foster students' English-speaking skills. Savran-Celik and Aydin (2018) asserted that "L1 naturally influences the quality of further utterances, raises awareness, and facilitates EFL learning" (p.7). These facilities assist in teaching new words and structures and using L1 to learn complex content or prevent misunderstandings of the target language (Seraj et al., 2021). However, the frequent use of L1 in EFL classrooms may limit students' exposure to L2 acquisition (Aminifard & Mehrpour, 2019).

METHOD

Research Design and Methodology

This research applied an explanatory sequential mixed-method design, which enables gathering qualitative input to explain and extend quantitative results and gain a comprehensive insight into the research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). A questionnaire was constructed and administered to obtain quantitative input regarding the teachers' perceptions of the factors influencing the development of EFL speaking skills. The qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews. Integration occurred during the development of the interview protocol, which was shaped by the initial quantitative phase findings, enabling a deeper exploration of survey results and providing a more comprehensive set of conclusions.

Participants and Settings

The study was conducted in public secondary schools across three regions in Ecuador: the Highland, Coast, and Amazon regions. The participants in the quantitative phase included 142 Ecuadorian EFL teachers, 111 females and 31 males. The upper secondary schools include 1st through 3rd-grade baccalaureate, and English is taught as a foreign language from three to five 40-minute weekly lessons. This broad sample was chosen to provide a diverse and representative cross-section of EFL teachers, reflecting the varied educational contexts within the country.

For the qualitative, a more targeted sampling strategy was employed. Seven teachers were selected based on specific criteria to ensure they could provide deep insights into the research topic. The selection criteria included a minimum of 15 years of teaching experience, possession of both a bachelor's and master's degree in TEFL, and a willingness to participate in the interviews. These criteria ensured that the participants had salient expertise and experience in the field, enhancing the reliability and depth of the qualitative data. Thus, these seven teachers participated in the interviews since they accomplished the selection criteria to provide their perspectives on the topic of this study (Rabiee, 2004).

Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

Data were collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews, administered in Spanish to ensure accurate responses and reach solid interpretation issues from the participants. The survey, employing a five-point Likert scale, consisted of 20 questions divided into four constructs: performance, methodological, linguistic, and affective factors. This structured format allowed comprehensive quantitative analysis of the factors influencing speaking skills.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the survey instrument, it was piloted with a small group of teachers in advance. Feedback from the pilot test had been used to refine the survey questions, ensuring they accurately captured the intended constructs.

In the quantitative phase, data were analyzed using SPSS 23. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data and identify significant factors and relationships. This quantitative analysis provided a solid foundation for understanding the broad trends and patterns in the data.

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted to delve deeper into the findings from the survey. The interviews comprised four primary questions and follow-up questions related to time pressure, planning time, teachers' support, and general factors influencing students' speaking skills. Thematic analysis has been used to analyze qualitative data, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were systematically coded to identify recurring themes and insights. This method allowed for a nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives, revealing the complexities and subtleties of the factors affecting speaking skills.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed the ethical consideration procedures proposed by Kaewkungwal and Adams (2019). First, an online consent form was sent to all the participants explaining the research objectives and informing them that all information found would maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, to ensure the credibility of the instruments and findings, all the research instruments received expert judgment and were piloted to ensure content validity.

FINDINGS

To address the first research question concerning the factors influencing the development of students' speaking skills, the questionnaire focused on Performance factors (Table 1), Methodological factors (Table 2), Linguistic factors (Table 3), and

Affective factors (Table 4). The responses were measured using a Likert scale consisting of five levels. Each level was assigned a numerical value to facilitate data presentation and analysis. I.e., neither agree nor disagree was assigned a value of 0, totally

disagree = 1, disagree = 2, agree = 3, totally agree = 4. Consequently, the results were numerically displayed, ranging from a maximum of 4 (indicating total agreement) to a minimum of 1 (indicating total disagreement).

Table 1
Performance Factors that Influence Students' Speaking Skills

| Statements | Value* |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| Time pressure | 2,57 |
| Planning time for speaking activities | 3,22 |
| Teacher support | 3,10 |
| Collaborative teacher-student support | 3,04 |

*Max value = 4

As observed in Table 1, a relatively low value (2,57) confirms that time pressure is a significant concern for students when it comes to speaking activities. Participants mentioned that students likely feel that they do not have enough time to think and articulate their responses effectively, leading to increased anxiety and decreased performance. The value of Planning Time for Speaking Activities (3,22) is moderately high, indicating that providing adequate planning time allows students to organize their thoughts and feel more prepared, thus enhancing their confidence and effectiveness in speaking activities. Esthela's comment complements the finding related to Planning time for speaking activities. She emphasizes the importance of preparation and topic familiarity, which directly contributes to students' comfort and confidence levels: *"Teachers should provide students with sufficient time and knowledge about the topic, helping them feel more comfortable and confident to express their ideas without pressure."* By providing more planning time and ensuring that students are well-versed in the discussion topics, teachers can significantly reduce the pressure and frustration that

students might experience, aligning with the relatively low score for Time pressure.

Additionally, the value (3,10) shows that Teacher support seems to be perceived positively by participants since effective teacher support, which includes guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback, is crucial for developing students' speaking skills. Finally, the value (3.04) suggests that Collaborative efforts between teachers and students could further support students in overcoming challenges associated with speaking activities. Manuel's comment aligns well with the data: *"Guidance, encouragement, and constructive feedback are crucial for language development, as students may feel shy or inhibited when speaking in front of others."* His observation underscores the importance of a supportive environment where students feel encouraged and not judged. The sense of inhibition or shyness can be alleviated by fostering a classroom atmosphere of trust and openness, where students feel safe to practice without fear of judgment, highlighting the importance of collaborative support to build confidence.

Table 2
Methodological Factors that Influence Students' Speaking Skills

| Statements | Value* |
|--|--------|
| Communicative activities/real-life context | 3,88 |
| Authentic communication in the classroom | 3,29 |
| Ample opportunities for pair/group discussions | 3,67 |
| Using authentic materials | 3,17 |
| Providing constructive feedback | 3,54 |

*Max value = 4

Table 2 presents the main methodological factors teachers perceived that influence students speaking skills. The high value (3,88) indicates that students find Communicative activities and real-life context exercises beneficial for improving their speaking skills. These activities likely provide practical and engaging opportunities for language use, making learning more relevant and effective. Gabriela's comment aligns strongly with the high value of communicative activities/real-life context when she said: *"Creating authentic and meaningful*

classroom activities is necessary to foster students' language skills." Her emphasis on authenticity and meaningfulness supports the idea that students benefit most from activities that mirror real-life language use, making the learning process more engaging and relevant. Norma's insights resonate with the values for communicative activities/real-life context (3,88) and Authentic communication in the classroom (3,29). She highlights the necessity for teachers to create simulated real-life scenarios within the classroom, which can compensate for the

lack of authentic practice opportunities outside of school.

EFL students have limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom, so teachers need to create at least simulated activities that approach them to real-life situations (Semi-structured interviews)

This suggests a need for more structured and immersive classroom activities that provide real-world practice.

While authentic communication is appreciated, there is a room for enhancing its implementation. Ensuring classroom interactions mimic real-life conversations more closely can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. In addition, the high value (3,67) reflects the effectiveness of Ample opportunities for pair and group discussions in improving speaking

skills. These activities provide students with frequent practice opportunities in a supportive setting, fostering collaborative learning and confidence. Esthela's comment is directly related to the values of Using authentic materials (3,17) and providing ample opportunities for pair/group discussion: *"The coursebooks do not provide enough speaking activities; for that reason, EFL teachers have to create other projects, such as English clubs to improve their speaking skills."* These initiatives offer students more practice opportunities, fostering their speaking skills outside the conventional curriculum. Finally, providing constructive feedback (3,54) is highly valued by students and crucial to language learning. Feedback helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses, guiding their improvement.

Table 3
Linguistic Factors that Influence Students' Speaking Skills

| Statements | Value* |
|--------------------------------------|--------|
| Strong grammatical knowledge | 3,22 |
| Addressing grammar errors | 2,94 |
| Strong listening comprehension | 3,45 |
| Rich and varied vocabulary knowledge | 3,73 |
| Adequate pronunciation | 3,12 |

*Max value = 4

According to Table 3, the high score (3,73) indicates that having a rich and varied vocabulary is perceived as one of the most critical factors for effective speaking. A broad vocabulary allows students to express themselves more clearly and accurately. Edgar's comment emphasizes the importance of vocabulary for contextual understanding and accurate expression. His observation underscores the need for vocabulary development to enhance students' confidence and effectiveness in speaking. He said: *"Students know only some words in English, and they always get confused when using words according to the context."*

The relatively high value (3,45) highlights the importance of listening comprehension for speaking skills. Good listening skills help students understand and respond appropriately in conversations, which is crucial for effective communication.

Teachers seem to perceive strong grammatical knowledge (3,22) as important as addressing

grammar errors to improve speaking skills. It suggests a need for more effective strategies in teaching and correcting grammar. Pamela said: *"Teachers should tailor activities to students' English levels and provide preparatory tasks to consolidate vocabulary and grammar before peer discussions."* She highlights the importance of scaffolding activities to ensure students are well-prepared, suggesting that building a solid foundation in vocabulary and grammar is crucial before engaging in speaking tasks. Laura added

EFL students find grammar challenging due to confusion between their native and target languages. Besides, the lack of grammatical knowledge impedes the clear expression of ideas (semi-structured interviews).

Her comment emphasizes the challenges students face with grammar, which can lead to reluctance in speaking. Her observation suggests a need for more targeted grammar instruction to help students overcome these barriers.

Table 4
Affective Factors that Influence Students' Speaking Skills

| Statements | Value* |
|--|--------|
| Anxiety = lower levels of spoken English | 3,53 |
| Fear of making mistakes = inhibition of willingness to speak | 3,50 |
| Motivation | 3,97 |
| Low confidence = less participation in class | 3,86 |
| Fear of being mocked by classmates | 3,84 |
| Promoting intrinsic motivation | 3,40 |

*Max value = 4

In Table 4, Motivation receives the highest score (3,97), indicating it is perceived as the most influential affective factor in students' speaking skills. High motivation can drive students to engage more actively in speaking activities, overcome fears, and persist in learning the language. In his comment, Edgar emphasizes that personalized, meaningful activities that connect with students' lives enhance motivation, making language learning relevant and engaging, which fosters a strong desire to improve speaking skills: *"Motivation is key to developing speaking skills; teachers should connect language learning to personalized tasks and projects related to students' lives (semi-structured interviews)."* This high value (3,86) suggests low confidence is a major barrier to active participation in speaking activities. Students who lack confidence are less likely to engage in class, limiting their opportunities to practice and improve their speaking skills. Gabriela's insight connects with the score, and he acknowledges the difficulty of fostering intrinsic motivation due to a lack of students' confidence: *"Low confidence hinders students' speaking skills, and there is a need for a supportive and motivating environment where they can practice speaking without fear."* Fear of Being Mocked by Classmates (3,84) and Fear of Making Mistakes =

Inhibition of Willingness to Speak (3.50) are very close to that of low confidence, highlighting that the fear of being mocked by peers significantly impacts students' willingness to speak leading to reduced participation and further diminishing their confidence. Finally, Esthela's insight connects with the score for promoting intrinsic motivation (3,40)

Increasing students' intrinsic motivation to speak in English is challenging, but teachers can foster it by creating activities that promote autonomy, skill development, and real-world application of the language (semi-structured interviews).

She acknowledges the challenge of fostering intrinsic motivation. However, she highlighted its importance, suggesting that activities promoting autonomy and growth can help students appreciate the real-world value of using English, thus enhancing their intrinsic motivation.

Table 5 includes the themes emerging from the teachers' responses to the interview questions. In this section, participants were asked to provide their opinions on other contextual factors affecting the development of students' speaking skills and suggestions to address the identified challenges in developing EFL students' speaking skills.

Table 5
Contextual Factors that Influence the Development of Students' Speaking Skills

| Statements | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Excessive number of students per class | 10 | 100% |
| Materials provided by the Ministry of Education | 8 | 80% |
| Speaking activities in the coursebooks provided by the Ministry of Education | 8 | 80% |
| Use of L1 in the classroom | 9 | 90% |
| Lack of teaching training | 10 | 100% |
| A limited number of hours are allotted for speaking activities in the classroom | 10 | 100% |

As observed in Table 5, the consensus on the limited time allocated for speaking activities (100%) and the excessive number of students in each class (100%) underscore a critical issue. Large class sizes hinder individual participation, reduce the effectiveness of speaking activities, complicate classroom management, and limit the time available for students to practice and develop their speaking skills. Edgar's comment reflects the concerns about class size and the limited time for speaking activities: *"The large number of students, ranging from 35 to 45 per class, and the limited 40-minute periods make it difficult to manage speaking tasks effectively. As a result, students often speak Spanish to quickly complete activities, hindering their progress in speaking skills. Increasing students' intrinsic motivation to speak in English is challenging, but teachers can foster it by creating activities that promote autonomy, skill development,*

and real-world application of the language (semi-structured interviews)."

Most participants see the materials provided by the Ministry of Education (80%) as a factor influencing speaking skills. This suggests these materials may not fully support or align with effective speaking instruction. Similar to the materials, the speaking activities included in the coursebooks are perceived as inadequate by 80% of the participants. This points to a gap in the resources available for promoting speaking practice. Pamela's observation reflects concerns about the Ministry of Education's materials and the inadequacy of speaking activities in coursebooks, indicating that current resources may need additional materials to support better speaking skill development: *"The National Curriculum offers modern methodologies, but they are unsuitable for Ecuador. Additionally, MINEDUC resources focus mainly on reading and writing, neglecting speaking skills."* Likewise,

Esthela's comment confirms the limitations of the coursebooks regarding speaking activities: *"Unfortunately, the required books lack sufficient speaking activities, focusing mainly on vocabulary, grammar, writing, and reading, with inadequate attention to listening and speaking (semi-structured interviews)."*

All participants agree that a lack of teaching training (100%) is a critical factor. This indicates that insufficient professional development impacts teachers' ability to teach speaking skills effectively. Moreover, many participants acknowledge the influence of L1 (native language) use in the classroom. Gabriela's comment about pronunciation issues relates to using L1 in the classroom, highlighting the need for more focused pronunciation instruction and strategies to minimize L1 interference: *"Students often mispronounce English words due to transferring their L1 pronunciation, as they pronounce words based on Spanish reading habits."*

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the factors influencing the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' speaking skills from the perspective of secondary school teachers in Ecuador and to identify teacher's suggestions for addressing these challenges. Even though speaking is a demanding language skill to master, due to its importance, there is still a need to reveal Ecuadorian EFL teachers' perspectives on the factors influencing the development of their EFL students' speaking skills and the teachers' suggestions for addressing these challenges. This happened because of the lack of studies that address this issue in the Ecuadorian context.

The findings reveal that teachers identify various performance, methodological, linguistic, affective, and contextual factors affecting students' speaking skills. Teachers highlighted the importance of planning and preparation time for students. They reported that allowing students to choose topics of personal interest and providing adequate planning time can significantly enhance their speaking skills. This finding is supported by Bao and Liu (2021), who emphasize that familiar topics and sufficient preparation time help reduce anxiety and increase student confidence and performance. Similarly, Tuan and Mai (2015) emphasize that well-prepared students are more likely to participate actively in oral tasks.

The study underscores the value of communicative and authentic activities. Teachers emphasized that creating real-life contexts and engaging students in meaningful tasks are crucial for developing speaking skills. This aligns with Pangket (2019) and Leong and Ahmadi (2017), who argue that diverse and authentic language use

opportunities are essential for effective language acquisition. The need for authentic materials and real-life context in language learning is a common theme across different educational settings. Adapting curricula to include authentic communication scenarios and relevant materials can make learning more engaging and effective (Dinh & Tran, 2020). This approach could be applied in other EFL contexts to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world language use. Teachers also identified gaps in the current course materials the Ministry of Education provided. Many educational systems face criticism for textbooks and materials emphasizing reading and writing over speaking skills. Advocating for curriculum reforms that balance all language skills and incorporate more interactive speaking activities can address this issue (Savran-Celik & Aydin, 2018).

Vocabulary knowledge, grammar instruction, listening comprehension, and pronunciation are critical for speaking proficiency. The study's findings indicate that while vocabulary and listening skills are strongly associated with effective speaking, grammar and pronunciation need more focused attention. Supporting this, Afeбри and Muhsin (2019) highlight that comprehensive vocabulary and strong grammatical knowledge are fundamental for language production. Therefore, teachers should incorporate targeted vocabulary and grammar instruction into their teaching practices to enhance speaking proficiency.

Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, motivation, and confidence affect students' willingness and ability to speak. The study finds that motivation is the most influential factor, with teachers suggesting that personalized, engaging activities can boost motivation (Elkhayma, 2020). Anxiety and fear of mistakes, as noted by Kasbi and Elahi Shirvan (2017), can inhibit speaking performance, highlighting the need for supportive classroom environments where mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities. Educational systems should foster a growth mindset and promote a supportive learning environment where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities and students are encouraged to participate actively (John et al., 2021).

The study identifies several contextual challenges, including large class sizes, limited time for speaking activities, and insufficient professional development. These issues are well-documented in the literature (Roshan et al., 2022). The challenges related to large class sizes and limited instructional time observed in this study are not unique to Ecuador. Many educational systems worldwide face similar constraints. The recommendation to reduce class sizes or improve classroom management strategies could benefit educational settings globally. Shamim (2012) discusses how overcrowded classrooms reduce individual attention and negatively impact language acquisition,

supporting the argument that reducing class sizes or improving management strategies is crucial. Additionally, managing large classes by creating smaller groups for speaking practice is essential, encouraging greater individual participation and more focused interaction (Shamim, 2012). The British Council (2023) also highlights various strategies to manage large classes more effectively, such as cooperative learning and technology integration. This strategy also includes effectively managing large classes by dividing students into smaller groups for speaking practice, which enhances individual participation and interaction. Teachers also call for more comprehensive professional development to equip teachers with current pedagogical strategies. This is relevant for educational systems everywhere, as up-to-date training can enhance teaching effectiveness and address emerging challenges in language education (Khan et al., 2018). Furthermore, managing the use of L1 in the classroom is essential. While excessive reliance on the native language can impede the development of speaking skills, it can also serve as a tool to boost students' confidence when used appropriately. Educational systems should develop policies that strike a balance between using L1 for clarification and maximizing exposure to the target language (Aminifard & Mehrpour, 2019; Seraj et al., 2021). Strategies to encourage using the target language while addressing students' needs in L1 can enhance language acquisition.

Enhancing teacher support and fostering collaborative dynamics are essential for improving students' speaking skills. Personalized feedback and a supportive classroom environment contribute to students' oral proficiency. Building rapport and trust with students, integrating collaborative activities, and providing constructive feedback are vital elements that lead to a more effective and engaging learning experience (Johnson & Johnson, 2017). In addition, integrating authentic activities and materials into the curriculum makes language learning more engaging and practical. Designing activities that simulate real-life contexts and using authentic materials align with the communicative approach and support the development of speaking skills. Revising coursebooks to include more speaking activities and authentic materials further supports this goal.

Improving linguistic instruction is also vital. Emphasizing vocabulary expansion, effective grammar instruction, and pronunciation practice should be integral to the curriculum (Afebri & Muhsin, 2019). Teachers should incorporate activities that enhance listening comprehension and language production to support students' overall language development. Finally, addressing affective barriers is critical. Creating a classroom culture that reduces anxiety and fear of making mistakes is necessary for fostering a positive learning

environment (Kasbi & Elahi Shirvan, 2017). Teachers should focus on building intrinsic motivation by designing engaging and meaningful activities, boosting students' confidence through positive reinforcement, and maintaining a respectful and supportive atmosphere in the classroom.

The findings from this study offer valuable insights for improving EFL teaching practices globally. Educational systems can enhance students' speaking skills by addressing classroom management challenges, revising curricula to include more speaking activities, investing in teacher professional development, and fostering a supportive learning environment. These strategies can be adapted to various contexts, considering local constraints and opportunities, to foster more effective language learning experiences across different educational systems.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to identify the factors that influence the development of students' speaking skills at the secondary level and to ascertain the teachers' suggestions to address the challenges identified in enhancing EFL students' speaking skills. Using an explanatory mixed methods design, a survey was administered to English language teachers, followed by semi-structured interviews to provide deeper insights into the identified factors. According to teachers, five primary factors hinder students' speaking abilities in English classes: performance, methodology, linguistics, affective, and contextual factors.

Performance issues arise from large class sizes and limited instructional hours, hindering effective speaking lessons and challenging classroom management. The noise and crowding often prevent students from hearing and engaging with the teacher's explanations. Methodological factors emphasize the lack of English exposure outside the classroom, restricting students' language use and proficiency. Teachers can enhance speaking skills by integrating authentic scenarios into lessons, employing varied strategies to manage large classes, and adopting a communicative teaching approach instead of focusing solely on grammar.

Linguistic factors reveal that limited English proficiency and frequent use of the native language during speaking tasks impede language acquisition and lead to confusion. Despite using various speaking activities, teachers often concentrate more on grammar and vocabulary rather than actual speaking practice.

Affective factors show that while group oral activities can motivate students, fear of errors and ridicule, along with anxiety and low self-confidence, hinder participation. To address these issues, educators should implement diverse motivational strategies to build students' self-assurance.

It is recommended that class sizes be reduced and English instructional hours be increased to improve speaking skills. Curriculum flexibility should allow teachers to adapt to their teaching contexts, and coursebooks should incorporate more speaking activities. Teachers would benefit from targeted professional development on innovative pedagogical strategies. Additionally, fostering a supportive classroom environment and creating extra opportunities for language practice, such as English clubs or projects, can further enhance students' speaking skills.

This study faced limitations, primarily relying on self-reported information from participants. Future research should incorporate more classroom observations and gather student perspectives to provide a more comprehensive view. Additionally, exploring factors influencing students' speaking abilities across a broader range of institutions would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, comparative studies between different regions within Ecuador or between Ecuador and other countries could highlight cultural and contextual differences in EFL education. Integrating technology and multimedia resources in teaching speaking skills could also offer innovative solutions to current challenges. Finally, investigating the impact of extracurricular activities, such as English clubs and language exchange programs, on students' speaking abilities could provide valuable data for developing comprehensive language learning programs.

The study highlights various factors influencing EFL students' speaking skills, from performance and methodological issues to linguistic, affective, and contextual challenges. By addressing these factors through strategic changes in teaching practices, materials, and classroom management, teachers can create a more effective and supportive environment for developing students' speaking skills. Implementing these recommendations can improve language proficiency and confidence among EFL students, ultimately enhancing their ability to communicate effectively in English.

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