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Communicative activities in the development of oral competence in Ecuadorian students compared to the Cambridge Key Exam

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Abstract

The development of skills for oral communication in English is a necessity in today's society, given the importance that the use of this second language has acquired, both for academic training and for development in the workplace. Thus, the objective of this article is to demonstrate the impact generated on the development of oral competence at level A2 by the implementation of communicative activities in students candidates to take the international KEY test. The method included surveys to the group of participants from the High Challenge Language Institute in Riobamba, Ecuador. The results show that, regarding the oral competence and performance of former candidates who have taken the KEY international exam, the majority of students had difficulties with some sub-skills during this test and in their performance in classes; It was observed that carrying out these types of activities helps to improve the students' oral expression skills, even more so if they are carried out in an enjoyable and motivating way. It is concluded that the lack of significant practice during the development of the A2 level preparation course at High Challenge Language Institute affects the oral competence of the students.

Keywords: Communicative activities; oral competence; Cambridge Key Exam; High Challenge Language Institute; Riobamba-Ecuador.

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Actividades comunicativas en el desarrollo de la competencia oral en estudiantes ecuatorianos frente al Cambridge Key Exam

Resumen

El desarrollo de competencias para la comunicación oral en inglés es una necesidad en la sociedad actual, dada la importancia que ha adquirido el manejo de esta segunda lengua, tanto para la formación académica como para el desenvolvimiento en el campo laboral. Siendo así, el objetivo de este artículo es demostrar el impacto generado en el desarrollo de la competencia oral en el nivel A2 por la implementación de actividades comunicativas en estudiantes candidatos a rendir la prueba internacional KEY. El método incluyó encuestas al grupo de participantes del High Challenge Language Institute en Riobamba, Ecuador. Los resultados demuestran que, en cuanto a la competencia oral y el rendimiento de los antiguos candidatos que se han presentado al examen internacional KEY, la mayoría de los estudiantes tenían dificultades con algunas subhabilidades durante esta prueba y en su desempeño en clases; se observó que la realización de ese tipo de actividades ayuda a mejorar la capacidad de expresión oral de los alumnos, más aún si se realizan de forma amena y motivadora. Se concluye que la falta de práctica significativa durante el desarrollo del curso de preparación de nivel A2 en High Challenge Language Institute, afecta la competencia oral del alumnado.

Palabras clave: Actividades comunicativas; competencia oral; Cambridge Key Exam; High Challenge Language Institute; Riobamba-Ecuador.

Introduction

In a world as competitive as today's, it is convenient that education, in its different facets, considers the need to reinforce students' oral skills in the English language. Especially, when it comes to preparing them to pass exams such as the Cambridge Key Exam, which is designed precisely to measure this ability. In this sense, one of the possibilities to positively influence the development of oral skills may be to encourage activities that involve communication and its components.

In this regard, one of the concerns of teachers working in this area is the possibility of using new methods and approaches to learn English more effectively and to be able to use the language in real situations outside formal education. Some consider that in schools, high schools, and universities, students are not taught with an approach that allows them to communicate spontaneously in Language

2. Possibly, due to the lack of innovation in some teaching practices, especially in oral expression. Besides, the scarcity of a good command of English in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in teachers has caused a serious detriment in their learning of the second language.

Thus, according to the literature on the subject, one of the skills that has been most affected by the lack of attention and useful activities for learning English as a foreign language is speaking. This situation has affected institutions such as "High Challenge School of Languages" in Riobamba Ecuador, where there are candidates who despite obtaining outstanding results in the international exam, speaking is the skill that has been the most difficult for them. Some students seem unable to use all the grammatical and lexical structures in a real communicative situation, which makes it impossible for them to produce new output despite all the input and

knowledge they have.

In this globalized world, students now understand that the purpose of any language is communication, with writing and speaking being the ways to represent their thoughts and ideas in their communities. To this extent, teachers must be more aware of global circumstances and try to provide students with all the tools they need to grow academically and professionally (Moreira-Aguayo, Solorzano-Solorzano & Del Pino-Yépez, 2021, Rojas & Guido, 2021; Leiva et al., 2022). Thus, it is a fact that students who learn to use English communicatively and orally have more access to formal education, to the best universities around the world, and to the useful resources that the web provides today.

Taking into account these ideas, and guided by concrete teaching experiences of the authors, this research has been proposed to demonstrate the impact generated in the improvement of oral skills at an A2 level by the implementation of communicative activities in students who are candidates to take the international KEY test at the High Challenge Language School in Riobamba, Ecuador. In order to achieve this goal, we start with the diagnosis of the current oral performance of KEY exam candidates who are studying at the A2 level preparatory course at High Challenge Language School, and the implementation of communicative activities proposed by several recognized specialists in the area.

In short, although the orientation of the article focuses on the concrete reality in an educational institution in Ecuador, it seeks to shed light on the nature of the formative processes of students who intend to develop English language skills and the teaching strategies that can contribute to accelerating these processes. It is important, in this sense, to consider the opportunities that can be opened for those who are trained in a second language. Thus, enhancing the spaces for the development of the country in equivalence with the statements of the Constitution and the Good Living.

1. Theoretical foundation

1.1. Regarding the teaching of English in Ecuadorian language institutes

Some years ago, there was no broad regulation or supervision referred to language institutes in Ecuador. The Ministry of Education was the only institution that, with difficulty, regulated the offer of language courses and the granting of certificates. In 2016, this ministry created a document called Strengthening English, in which three main commitments are established to promote a more real and effective command of English in Ecuador. According to this document, students must interpret their culture and English curriculum to start having a better understanding of the world in which they live, develop new personal and social skills necessary in this new globalized world that has the English language as a base and, be in contact with the language since they are young (Peña, 2019).

In the same year, the Ministry of Education created a new governmental institution that will be in charge of not only of language centers but also of all organizations that want to offer courses in any subject. This new institution is called SETEC and its main function is to establish all the parameters that a course must meet to be offered and recognized in Ecuador. This institution established six main levels which are the same as those described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). These levels are A1 and A2 for students who want to start learning a new language, B1 and B2 for those who have upper-intermediate knowledge, and C1 and C2, for those who are advanced learners (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte [MECD], 2002). In this article, the focus is on level A2.

Considering this institutional framework, Cambridge University Press was present in Ecuador. Cambridge University Press is a worldwide recognized industry that

dedicates its reason to preparing candidates to obtain international English certifications. Today, it continues offering services to the academy in Ecuador. However, its monopoly has been affected by its competitors and their novel and cheaper products. In addition, the Ministry of Education has approved more international exams that can be valid when a teacher or student wants to demonstrate their language skills.

In short, various options have opened up in the country for those who wish to acquire or strengthen their English language skills and, in consideration of this circumstance, it is urgent to pay attention to those teachers and institutions that have taken on the challenge of supporting this possibility. This is not a fad, it is a global reality that demands greater strength in educational policies aimed at preparing human talent in a transcendental area for the commercial, cultural, and social development of the country.

1.2. Oral competence

The oral competencies of any person are transcendental in the context of globalization and the rapprochement that occurs today between individuals with different origins and nationalities. Therefore, according to Pérez (2018); and Olivero, Acosta & Tamayo (2022), it is important to pay attention to the progress of methods, techniques, and strategies that can support the development processes of these competencies by students at different educational levels, so that teachers can implement innovative strategies inherent to strengthen oral skills.

In this order of ideas, English language teaching has been resized in such a way that it has boosted scientific productivity around the need to improve pedagogical strategies that can boost the level of specialization or communicative competencies of students. This pretends to go beyond the ordinary, repetitive, and demotivating training that has so far permeated the educational praxis in this field (Cañarte, Quevedo & García, 2013).

From the point of view of the

approaches to this topic, it is necessary to consider the proposals of Moreira-Aguayo & Venegas-Loor (2020), who state that the development of oral competencies in English has become a necessity and a demand derived from the vertiginous advance of technological globalization. This includes the areas of academic training, and of course, its incorporation into the workplace. Cornbleet & Carter (2001), add that, if the use of this language is taught or enhanced, the conditions for success in today's competitive world will be improved.

The second approach from which the definition of speaking can be understood is what some authors call the top-down method. From this conception, speaking is an oral result that arises from the interaction of two or more people who share the same time and context (Poggio & Funes, 2020). Unlike the first approach, this approach advocates the need to encourage learners to participate in spoken language from the beginning so that, over time, they will be able to handle the smaller units of the language.

Summarizing, there seems to be some theoretical consensus that speaking fluently and assertively is a productive skill that learners should be aware of from the beginning. The development of this awareness means that they must have received some prior input beforehand to develop their speaking skills. Especially, considering that these skills will be conditioned by the level of lexical and grammatical features they already know at the time of oral production. This is the only way to enhance the skills that will subsequently allow these students to improve their oral English language skills.

1.3. Aspects of oral competence

When delving deeper into the ability to speak and its importance, it is necessary to determine the general aspects that make up this ability. In this regard, Valdez-Esquivel & Pérez-Azahuanche (2021), state that speaking is a fundamental skill that will allow people to establish a real dialogic interaction with

any interlocutor. According to these authors, in addition to the ability to interact, speech enhances the capacity for creative thinking since it is a symbolic exchange that occurs both in oral expression and in its intellectual processing.

Thus, when working with communicative competencies, the aim is to emphasize those qualities that people develop to facilitate the process of socialization and interaction with others. Likewise, when talking about the lack of communicative skills in students, it is about showing their weaknesses in effective communication, which is a factor that weakens self-confidence and social development (Dávila et al., 2022). If this circumstance is located in the handling of a foreign language, it can limit the student's aspirations to venture into an interaction that takes them to talk to people of different nationalities.

Likewise, students need to be able to express themselves orally with fluency and conviction. Oral expression according to Bautista (2021): "Is the ability to produce complete, relevant, and meaningful oral messages. The difficulty lies in immediacy and pronunciation since the interaction between listening and speaking is involved" (p. 21). In this sense, by learning to express themselves orally, students are developing one of the linguistic skills involved in the development of communicative competence.

Indeed, the development of oral competence is a core element for the progress of harmonious and effective socialization for any human being, even more so for those who interact in academic or educational environments. Speech is the most frequently used vehicle to establish relationships with others, generating from it, the empathy necessary to transcend other communicative levels such as the ability to convince, persuade, or lead groups in the pursuit of collective objectives.

1.4. Functions of speech

Speaking has been defined as a complex skill with different functionalities. In this

regard, Brown & Yule (1993), established two main functionalities of this skill. First, it is transactional, which means that it helps to exchange information between people; and second, it is interactional, a function that allows establishing and maintaining social relationships.

Other authors such as Scivetti (2007), consider that "speech or voice is the instrument of communication par excellence, it brings to language aspects that go beyond cognitive communication. It translates feelings, emotions, more through tone and accent than through the content of the words" (p. 3). In this sense, dialogic interaction is usually closer when it is carried out through verbal communication.

According to Holtus & Sanchez (2021), communicative interaction possesses functions dependent on the meaning of "speaking". These authors propose, among other meanings, the following: Speaking is a cultural and historical fact; it is a dynamic intentional activity or adaptable to each communicative situation; it is a social practice, that derives in a set of dynamic relationships between speech representations and the social reality in which it takes shape and; speaking is part of argumentative processes that are shaped from certain social patterns, commonplaces or stereotypes.

These approaches reinforce the notion of oral competence as an element that goes beyond mere communication. The word certainly makes it possible to establish linguistic links, but no less important are the aspects related to the intonation of the spoken discourse, the prioritization of the use of some words over others, and the speaker's ability to tune in emotionally to his or her interlocutors. Thus, the speaker creates the closeness necessary for mutual understanding, which is crucial when it comes to interacting in dialogue.

1.5. Speaking sub-skills

In line with this complexity of oral

expression, Lackman (2010) argues that rather than simply getting students to ‘talk’ in the classroom, emphasis should be placed on developing specific oral skills, known as sub-skills or micro-skills. This means creating the potential for students to improve their communicative profile outside of strictly academic experiences. Among the sub-skills proposed by this author, the following stand out:

a. Fluency: This is the ability to produce language with a degree of naturalness and ease.

b. accuracy with words and pronunciation, i.e., speaking with a certain vocabulary and pronouncing words accurately.

c. ability to use common expressions in certain circumstances, such as giving advice, apologizing, asking for help, among other.

d. Turn-taking skills: People know when to intervene in a dialogue.

e. ability to produce language based on the range of words and some grammatical structures stored in long-term memory.

Oral expression is a complex skill that involves the holistic development of human socialization. People need to be close to each other, not only because they have functions that require it, as would be the case between pupil and teacher; closeness with peers, in turn, defines the socio-emotional development of the human being. It goes without saying that this closeness can be achieved in different ways, but in each of them, oral expression can be the best way to make oneself understood.

1.6. Communicative competence in English

It is important to understand oral proficiency in English holistically. This means that it is only developed as an integral part of communication skills, as defined by Chandia (2015). This refers to both reading and listening comprehension, the ability to express oneself orally, and the ability to use the language in written form.

Likewise, according to this holistic

perspective, linguistic competence in a foreign language reinforces the humanistic character of education in a multicultural country such as Ecuador. This circumstance requires a greater pedagogical commitment since teachers have to provide students, more than the tools of vocabulary, with a concept of language as an agent of socialization, from which there is a greater possibility of further strengthening other communicative competencies that are not accessory but integral (Ceballos, Ramírez & Isaza, 2015).

In the educational context, students with adequate oral proficiency in English can maintain a conversational level and interact with greater fluency in learning or work environments that require establishing a dialogic relationship. In such settings, verbal competence includes other equally useful skills, such as considering interlocutors and understanding the humanistic relationship involved in speech (San Lucas-Marcillo et al., 2021).

Communicating accurately and confidently in English should be one of the main aspirations of any student today. For Latin Americans, developing this skill can be critical in securing opportunities for better jobs or furthering their academic education. In addition, a comprehensive understanding of what this language represents can strengthen young people’s axiological structure by internalizing its humanistic and cultural components.

1.7. Speaking skills at CEFR level A2

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (MECD, 2002) has identified six main levels of language proficiency. Each level has its definition and the skills that learners must have to be proficient in each skill. The CEFR states in its oral assessment scale that an A2 learner can communicate in a very limited and basic way in the spoken form of the language. He/she can talk about daily routines, give personal information, introduce his/her family, and

express common utterances without hesitation.

According to the CEFR (MECD, 2002), users need to demonstrate some of the oral sub-competences listed below to be able to communicate at level A2:

a. Vocabulary range: Uses basic sentence patterns with memorized phrases, groups of a few words, and formulas to communicate limited information in everyday situations.

b. Accuracy: Uses some simple structures correctly but still makes frequent basic errors.

c. Fluency: Can make himself/herself understood in very short utterances, although pauses, false starts, and rephrasing are very noticeable.

d. Interaction: He/she can respond to simple questions and instructions, which can indicate that he/she is being followed, but he/she rarely understands enough to carry on a conversation independently.

e. Coherence: You can link groups of words using simple connectors such as “and, but, and because”.

By observing and analyzing this list of sub-competences suggested by this body, the comprehensiveness of developing oral competencies in English is better understood. The description, as well as being exhaustive, represents a guide for students and teachers to evaluate and assess themselves when contrasting what they can do and what each sub-skill means as a mechanism for communicative interaction.

1.8. Oral skills from the perspective of the KEY test

The KEY or KET test is an interactional test that assesses a language user's proficiency at the A2 level. All the parameters for testing the level of language proficiency have been created based on the CEFR. If learners want to obtain certification, they must be tested in three areas of language: grammar and vocabulary, communicative interaction, and pronunciation. Each of these sub-skills is assessed out of 5 points. In addition, you will receive a mark out

of 5 from another examiner and a total of 20 will be weighted to give a final mark out of 25. In this context, the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (2014), identifies the following communicative skills for candidates:

a. Grammar and vocabulary: This refers to the ability to use vocabulary, structure, and paraphrasing strategies to convey meaning. At this level, candidates are expected to have limited linguistic resources, and what is assessed is their success in using these limited resources to communicate a message rather than comprehensiveness and accuracy.

b. Pronunciation: This refers to the intelligibility of the candidate's speech. First-language interference is expected and will not be penalized if it does not affect communication.

c. Interactive communication refers to the ability to interact with the examiner and the other candidate appropriately and with a reasonable degree of fluency. Hesitations as the candidate searches for language are to be expected and will not be penalized as long as they do not try the listener's patience. Candidates should also demonstrate the ability to ask for repetition or clarification.

Once these sub-skills have been assessed, candidates' results are matched to the Cambridge English Scale, a tool that measures students' English level in a band.

1.9. Communicative language teaching: Some relevant approaches

Usquiano (2017), states that most educators believe that they teach their students through a communicative approach, or at least that they have the word 'communication' in mind when they teach. However, the explanations vary when asked about some basic concepts of the communicative method. Therefore, they stress the idea that teachers need to master the basic concepts of this approach and define activities that support the development of this method if they want to influence the development of speaking skills.

a. The communicative approach

This terminology is partly new to scholars. Only in the 1970s was the concept given some value by the humanistic method. However, it is one of the most important in recent teaching pedagogy, and some linguists consider it to be the origin of other prominent approaches. Halima (2013), explains that the communicative approach evolved from a critique of audio-oral and audio-visual methodologies for language teaching. Its basic aim is to establish communication, considering the needs of the learner, which determine the skills the learner wishes to develop.

López (2018), highlights the approach's characteristics, alluding to the need to include the linguistic itself with the elements of the social context, that is, the extra-linguistic, which also influences communicative acts. Chandia (2015), emphasizes the recognition of linguistic and interlinguistic factors when it comes to the communicative approach's characteristics. He also mentions "prior reading experience, interlinguistic effects caused by the contact between two codes L1 and L2, and limited linguistic knowledge of the target language" (p. 30).

According to Rico, Ramírez & Montiel (2016), this approach is ideal for developing foreign language speaking skills because it can foster interaction regardless of the subject matter and contexts in which it takes place. In this sense, the approach emphasizes the strengthening of communicative competence, defined as the ability to produce language in a situational and socially acceptable way; in other words, it is the ability to know what to say, how to speak, to whom, when, in what way and about what.

Seen in this way, the communicative approach can be an interesting way of developing oral competencies in English. It organizes dynamics of social knowledge, which overcomes the confinement of the teaching-learning process, to improve the stereotyped image of English as an academic subject, which, for those being trained,

represents more a space for boredom than for acquiring communicative skills in a language that, in the future, can add potential and opportunities for them.

b. Task-based learning

This approach has become a favourite among foreign language teachers. Some of them consider it to be the strongest form of Communicative Language Teaching, and there is a broad consensus that this method should be taught to learners in the modern age, not only because of the use of language in a meaningful context but also because of the study of language use in a deductive way.

Among the reflections that dwell on the analysis of this perspective is Ellis (2005), who considers that a task-based communicative approach to teaching must have four basic elements: The focus of activities will be on meaning, there will be an information gap, learners must refer to their interlanguage, and communicative output.

In elaborating the elements and relevance of the approach and building on what this author has pointed out, its practice can be described as follows: activities should focus on meaning rather than form; learners can extend and recycle knowledge by using linguistic aspects and non-verbal structures; information should be missing in each task so that learners find the solution to this problem by consensus; learners should produce language by carrying out tasks set by the teacher and; by trying to remember words and phrases that learners have received as input, and create new expressions to increase their L2 background.

In short, task-based learning is one of the most enriching approaches to communicative language teaching because it is based on simple, relevant processes that students can quickly understand. Teachers also find this approach a convenient strategy for monitoring the development of communicative competence as different tasks are assimilated and mastered.

1.10. Communicative activities

According to Moss & Ross-Feldman (2003), communicative activities allow learners to interact with each other and develop skills such as listening to and interpreting what others say and expressing opinions about these ideas. For this reason, even when students practice their writing or reading skills, the activities must lead to actual communication at some point in the lesson.

According to these authors, for the teacher's communicative activities to be effective, three actions must be considered: minimize conversations with the teacher, provide the learner with some literacy skills and clear instructions before the task, and make the activities fun so that learners feel more comfortable talking if they are interested in the task and the topic.

Richards (2006), considered that activities need to focus on fluency and accuracy to improve learners' oral performance and, in that sense, considers among the most relevant activities related to lack of information: In this type of activity, there is always a problem to solve; and Jigsaw activities: This type of activity is based on the principle of information gap diligence.

However, when considering the different activities that can be carried out, it should be borne in mind that young people are, by nature, very innovative. Teachers should take advantage of this quality to contribute to a multidimensional education based essentially on the ability to communicate and approach others assertively. The sequence of activities can develop oral skills in the foreign language and the mother tongue.

2. Methodology

In terms of its methodological orientation, this study can be classified as mixed. It focuses on a concrete reality that can serve as a reference when analysing similar circumstances in other empirical contexts. It is based on a field design, using some data collection tools that include both qualitative

and quantitative elements. In general terms, it is possible to speak of a general methodological plan in several phases, briefly described below.

2.1. The study context

High Challenge Language Institute was created in 2015 in Riobamba, Ecuador. The institution was created with the aim of helping young people to obtain an international certification in English. That year, the first group took the Starters Cambridge Test and passed with excellent results. In 2017, two new groups of students came to the institution asking for help to pass the exams. In 2018, the new students and the first group who passed the Starters exam took the Cambridge English Flyers and Cambridge English KET exams. In 2019, the centre was recognized as an official Cambridge Language Centre Preparation Centre.

High Challenge Language Institute offers two English language programs: The General English Course and the Cambridge Exam Preparation Course. The first is for people who want to learn English and have no previous knowledge of the language and for students who have studied English at other language schools based on the CEFR and want to continue learning at High Challenge. The second is only for students who already have an international level of English based on the CEFR and want to be prepared after taking an international Cambridge English test.

2.2. Description of the participants in the study

Given the overall aim of the research, it was decided to work with teachers and students at the High Challenge Language Institute. The institute has two full-time teachers, the academic coordinator, and the site administrator. In addition, four part-time teachers and 48 students are studying in the various programs offered by the institute.

Below is the profile of the participants

according to their membership in these two selected and divided into two groups as shown populations. Of the 48 students, 27 were in Table 1.

Table 1
Profile of the students participating in the study

Characteristic	Group 1	Group 2
Age	Students are between 13 and 17 years of age	Students are between 17 and 18 years of age
Level	All of them have completed the YLE program at the A2 level of the High Challenge	Two of them have completed the A2 level at university, one of them has completed the A2 level at Charlotte's English School and the rest are students who have completed the A2 level at ESPOCH
Sex	5 men and 8 women	9 women and 5 men
Education level	They are all high school students. They study at the language center in the afternoons	Twelve of them are high school students and two of them are university students

Source: Own elaboration, 2024.

Regarding the faculty members, time professors employed at the institution, collaboration was undertaken with the two full- and their profiles are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2
Profile of the participating teachers in the study

Teachers Group 1	Teachers Group 2
The teacher within this group serves as the principal author of this research. Currently pursuing a master's degree in English through FUNIBER. He has worked as both an English instructor and translator for the past five years.	The teacher responsible for this group holds a Bachelor's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. She has worked for thirty years as an English instructor, and possesses extensive experience in implementing task-based learning methodologies.

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

The sampling method employed was non-probabilistic, as the assessment of outcomes derived from criteria applied to the entire population. Acquiring this comprehensive data from primary sources posed no significant challenge, given that all students who underwent testing continue their studies at the institution, of which the principal investigator is also a member.

2.3. Research type, techniques, and instruments of information collection

In relation to the type of research, as previously mentioned, it constitutes the

outcome of a descriptive study with a field design, given that certain data were directly collected from the specific group of participants employing surveys and observation techniques. Furthermore, the totality of the research was conducted at the High Challenge Language Institute in Riobamba, Ecuador, specifically referenced as the empirical reality under study.

The primary research instruments used for data collection, diagnosis, application, and evaluation were tests, formal observation, and surveys. Tests served primarily as instruments for diagnosing the oral competence of the students included in the research. Pre- and post-tests were administered to compare results and evaluate the degree of improvement, whereas

formal observation was conducted during classes.

Regarding the surveys, the teachers working at High Challenge initially administered a questionnaire aimed at exploring the strengths and weaknesses of the students. A second survey was conducted by the students themselves midway through the preparatory course to self-assess after three months of practicing English through communicative activities. Finally, the researchers administered a survey concerning the performance and results achieved by the students in the international English A2 examination.

3. Results and discussion

This section of the article presents, in

a synthesized manner, some of the findings generated by the research. It should be noted in this regard, that only those findings directly relevant to the objective of the article developed here are addressed. When evaluating students in the KEY examination, five oral sub-skills are taken into account. Therefore, in the case of the 27 participating students, the teachers attempted to apply the same assessment scheme and methodology.

The first sub-skill assessed, whose results are displayed in Table 3, was the range of grammar and vocabulary. In this section, evaluators observed that despite the majority of students being at level A2, some of them require reinforcement in this area. This aligns with what was stated by Vega, Labrada & Torres (2015), that the development of vocabulary is enhanced as communicative competencies are reinforced.

Table 3
Test - Grammar and vocabulary score range

CEFR level / Cambridge English Scale / KEY Scale	Number of students	Percentage
Low Level A1 / 0 - 100 / KEY 0 - 1	1	4%
Level A1 / 100 - 119 / KEY 1 - 2	7	26%
Level A2 / 120 - 150 / KEY 3 - 5	19	70%

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

The second oral sub-skill assessed was accuracy, as defined by Lackman (2010), which refers to the oral ability demonstrated when a student is able to speak using specific vocabulary and pronouncing words

accurately. The results obtained in this section were similar to those of the grammar and vocabulary section. Students struggle to use words accurately in all contexts, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4
Test – Accuracy results

CEFR level / Cambridge English Scale / KEY Scale	Number of students	Percentage
Low Level A1 / 0 - 100 / KEY 0 - 1	2	7%
Level A1 / 100 - 119 / KEY 1 - 2	7	26%
Level A2 / 120 - 150 / KEY 3 - 5	18	67%

Source: Researchers' own work, 2024

Regarding the assessment of the third oral sub-skill, students exhibit a high speaking rate for their level, with few pauses or hesitations; moreover, they express

their thoughts and feelings in a natural and spontaneous manner. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Test - Fluency results

CEFR level / Cambridge English Scale / KEY Scale	Number of students	Percentage
Low Level A1 / 0 - 100 / KEY 0 - 1	0	0%
Level A1 / 100 - 119 / KEY 1 - 2	5	15%
Level A2 / 120 - 150 / KEY 3 - 5	22	85%

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

In Table 6, the results of the fourth assessed oral sub-skill, interaction, are presented. This was the section in which the students performed the best. They have no

difficulty in asking and answering questions; furthermore, they are not afraid to involve the other person in the conversation and accept their opinions.

Table 6
Percentage test results - Interaction

CEFR level / Cambridge English Scale / KEY Scale	Number of students	Percentage
Low Level A1 / 0 - 100 / KEY 0 - 1	0	0%
Level A1 / 100 - 119 / KEY 1 - 2	1	4 %
Level A2 / 120 - 150 / KEY 3 - 5	26	96 %

Source: Researchers' own work, 2024

The final assessed oral sub-skill is coherence, referring to the ability to link groups of words with simple connectors (Lackman, 2010). As shown in Table 7, students also achieved good results in this section. They

were able to express their feelings and opinions clearly; only a few of them struggled to integrate grammatical structures and vocabulary to construct coherent sentences.

Table 7
Coherence results

CEFR level / Cambridge English Scale / KEY Scale	Number of students	Percentage
Low Level A1 / 0 - 100 / CLAVE 0 - 1	0	0%
Level A1 / 100 - 119 / CLAVE 1 - 2	6	22%
Level A2 / 120 - 150 / CLAVE 3 - 5	21	78%

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

Finally, a teacher assessed the overall performance of each student with an overall grade, focusing on the five oral sub-skills, demonstrating that the majority of the students

have a good possibility of passing the KEY exam despite some sub-skills that need improvement. The results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8
Overall score in oral expression

CEFR level / Cambridge English Scale / KEY Scale	Number of students	Percentage
Low Level A1 / 0 - 100 / CLAVE 0 - 1	1	4%
Level A1 / 100 - 119 / CLAVE 1 - 2	5	18%
Level A2 / 120 - 150 / CLAVE 3 - 5	21	78%

Source: Own elaboration, 2024

On the other hand, regarding the results of the survey administered to the teachers to assess their perspective on students' oral competencies and linguistic needs, those reveal that teachers believe students need to practice their oral skills before the exam. The specific sub-skills that communicative activities should focus on are grammar and vocabulary range, accuracy, and coherence when expressing opinions.

If the main aspects to have real communicative activities proposed by Richards (2006) are related, all teachers believe that communicative activities will help students achieve communication, produce language that may not be predictable, and attempt to link language use to context. This supposes an advantage, as during the A2 exam, students will be presented with questions based on unfamiliar images.

It cannot be asserted that these three aspects of communicative fluency should be considered in all types of oral practice. However, what can be affirmed, according to the perspective of the teachers, is that these are the sub-skills that students most need to practice in specific contexts such as the "High Challenge" Language Institute in Riobamba, Ecuador.

Conclusions

The implementation of communicative

activities to develop oral competence in a second language emerges as not only a feasible option but also a necessary one, as demonstrated throughout this text. The majority of the students who participated in the research expressed that engaging in such activities contributes to enhancing their oral expression skills, while also finding them enjoyable and motivating.

Overall, the observation of the teachers corroborates the intentionality of the students of the High Challenge Language Institute in Riobamba, Ecuador, to continue learning English in a communicative manner. They believe that by using tasks that are meaningful, they can learn more about the language. This may serve as a significant empirical reference for promoting similar actions in other contexts where the teaching and learning process is disseminated in a language that tends towards universalization.

Regarding the specific case focused on in this study, it is possible to affirm with a high degree of certainty that the correct implementation of communicative activities helps students in the A2 level preparatory course according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to achieve better results and performance in the oral expression section of the international Cambridge KEY exam. This achievement can serve as motivation for their more significant long-term goal, which is professional certification in a second language.

In fact, the implementation of communicative and meaningful activities can also be extended to other skills such as writing and use of English. In written expression, for example, the possibilities for implementation are nearly identical since the parameters assessed in the international exam are similar to those in oral skill. Additionally, both skills are more subjective, and a grading scale will be required for almost all international certifications to ensure exam validity and reliability.

Among the contributions of this study, two convictions can be highlighted: First, the success of students in developing oral competencies and performing well in the international KEY exam is the outcome of collaborative efforts between learners and educators who undertake these tasks holistically. Second, by addressing this issue from a qualitative perspective, a path is proposed that is necessary for understanding the phenomenon of languages, which must be considered an integral part of culture and its humanistic dimensions.

Regarding the limitations encountered in the development of the research, particularly in the qualitative aspect, there is a challenge when implementing information collection techniques as the principal researcher is part of the studied context, thus it requires caution regarding the interference of preconceptions or biases. Additionally, a significant inconvenience arose in terms of the time required for implementing information collection techniques, as it was necessary to align the opportunities presented by the context with the availability of the authors and students.

In conclusion, activities such as those analyzed in this study can be applied in the future in language institutes to achieve better results in the oral expression section of the international Exam Key exam. Simultaneously, it can serve as a basis for researchers who intend to implement them in candidate preparation programs for exams such as the TOEFL, IELTS, or other more advanced Cambridge certifications.

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