Abstract

This study explored the relation between the level of self-confidence and the development of the oral skill. The data was obtained through questionnaires applied to ninety-nine EFL students enrolled in a teaching English language program. Results reveal that there is no correlation between the level of the oral skill and the level of self-confidence. However, the study helped to identify significant affective factors that have positive impact in the achievement of this important skill.

Key words
Self-confidence, language learning, oral skill and EFL students

Resumen

Este estudio explora la relación entre el nivel de auto-confianza y el desarrollo de la habilidad oral. La información fue obtenida a través de cuestionarios que se aplicaron a noventa y nueve estudiantes del idioma Inglés como lengua extranjera de una Licenciatura en la Enseñanza del Inglés. Los resultados de este estudio revelan que no existe una correlación entre el nivel de la habilidad oral y el nivel de autoconfianza que posee cada uno de los participantes. Sin embargo, este estudio nos permite identificar importantes factores afectivos que tienes un impacto positivo en el desarrollo de esta portante habilidad.

Palabras clave
Auto-confianza, aprendizaje de lenguas, habilidad oral, estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

I. Introduction

Currently, the majority of language programs orient their courses in gaining competence in the target language to communicate effectively. This involves to master the four main skills: speaking, writing,
listening, and reading. Within the four main skills in the process of learning English, the speaking skill has become the most useful and important. It is because speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing and receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997).

Studies such as the one carried out by Aleksandrzak (2011) show that most EFL learners face problems in the development of the speaking skill and it is due by many reasons and factors such as motivation, attitude, self-esteem, anxiety, self-confidence, risk taking, empathy, among others. One of those factors that is of great significance is self-confidence because researchers have found correlations between the level of self-confidence and the level of the oral skill. Several studies have demonstrated that self-confidence influences students’ behavior and create feelings which are associated to the security and willingness to communicate in English, thus, it represents an important affective factor. Additionally, the perceptions of how well students feel in trying out the spoken language can either be beneficial in the success of gaining speaking skill easily or obstruct the students’ advancement in spoken English and even can tent to lead into failure. Therefore, this research emphasized in self-confidence and its effect in the development of the speaking skill.

To conduct this research, it was important to establish the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** What is the relationship between self-confidence and oral language skill?
- **RQ2:** What is the level of students’ self-confidence when they succeed in speaking English?
- **RQ3:** What are the most relevant self-confidence factors that affect student’s performance in their oral production?
- **RQ4:** What are the strategies that foster self-confidence?

The purpose of this research was to determine the possible connection between self-confidence and the oral language skill. Additionally, this research attempts to explore the role of self-confidence and the development of this interactive skill.

### II. Theoretical framework

**Language learning and the oral skills**

Language learning is a complex and dynamic process (Young 1999). It means that there is a variation of agents that emerge in the use of language as well as different transitions due to the fact that language learning is not a linear process. Learning is seen as a process in which a person “acquires or gets of a subject or a skill by study, experience, or instruction (Brown, 2000 p.7). In addition, this scholar points out that learning a language means to: get a language, retain information or skill, storage systems and cognitive organization, involve practice and it is a change in behavior.

Learning a language involves both deliberate and incidental learning, and these both involve the conditions of repetition, retrieval (recall), varied meetings and varied use, using visuals, and deliberate attention (Nation, 2014). This author also highlights that learning a language can be classified in the following categories:

1. learning from meaning-focused input (listening and reading)
2. learning from meaning-focused output (speaking and writing)
3. language-focused learning (studying pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar)
4. fluency development (getting good at using what you already know).

As stated before the oral skill is a vital part of the English learning process. Gordillo (2011) has defined oral skill as the capacity of expressing oneself verbally for communicating, based on the linguistic
rules of a language. According to him this skill is divided into two complementary skills: listening (the receptive skill) and speaking (the productive skill); both of them are produced within a communication act, in which the speaker and listener communicate among themselves, not individually.

In addition, Cohen (1990) divides the communicative process, followed by a EFL learner into two groups: planning an utterance and executing the utterance.

Planning an utterance involves: select elements, such as linguistic knowledge, discourse knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge and content knowledge. When all the elements mentioned previously are put in agreement with the subject, number, gender or tense, the speaker has mastered the correct pronunciation of the utterances and is communicating ideas.

Executing the utterance requires to pay attention to the rate of pronunciation, and the number and length of pauses, to be cautious of making speech errors and to replace or rephrase some of the words mentioned before.

**Factors that affect the language learning**

As mention before to communicate in a foreign language is a challenging task and to success on it students need to have a total commitment, total involvement, total physical intellectual and emotional responses (Brown, 2000, p.1)

Snow (cited in Robinson, 2005) proposes an interactionist approach to interindividual differences, namely the relevant aspects of the person and the situation in which the correlations between cognitive variables and outcomes are examined in relation to informational and processing requirements of different contexts of exposure. Researchers such as Olivares-Cuhat (2010) has attempted to classify these interindividual variables into three categories: a) cognitive factors (language aptitude, learning strategies); b) affective factors (attitudes, motivation, anxiety); c) metacognitive factors; d) demographic factors.

Regarding to affective domain is a set of factors that affect language learning. Among the most important are self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, self-confidence, anxiety and motivation. They are factors that serve in some way to have success in language learning but they also form a meaningful element in building students’ behaviour.

**Self-confidence**

Self-confidence is defined as: “The belief that a person has especially in the ability to produce results, accomplish goals or perform tasks completely” (Dornyei 2001, p.56). Similarly, Bénabou and Tirole (2001) conceive this concept as the believing in oneself as a key to personal success. These scholars emphasize that self—confidence is valuable because it improves the individual’s motivation to undertake projects and persevere in the pursuit of his goals, in spite of the setbacks and temptations that periodically test his willpower.

Based on the previous definitions it can be said that all human beings can establish goals to achieve things that they want to arrange or improve; however, putting these ideas into practice is not easy. Nonetheless, people with confidence see the problems as challenges shaped in tasks and, as result, they develop a deeper interest in overcoming the barriers and also to strengthen their commitment to finish the task. On the other hand, people with a lack of confidence avoid challenging tasks, and close their mind believing that difficult situations are beyond their capabilities focusing just on personal
As mentioned in the previous paragraph, self-confidence is connected with motivation, for this reason this affective element is relevant in the language learning process. Brown (2001) says that “at the heart of all learning is a learner’s belief in his ability to accomplish a task” (p.62). In addition, it is believed that a student who is persuaded by someone who holds high self-confidence, has much more opportunities to increase in his or her confidence, since, generally confident people inspire others by becoming a model to follow.

III. Methodology

The overall research methodology that frames this work is quantitative research. It was used in order to explain a particular phenomenon and reach a clearer and expanded understanding of the research problem. The research method was phenomenology since it aims to explore the relation between self-confidence and the development of the speaking skill.

This study was carried out in the Faculty of Language at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. The participants were ELT students and future English language teachers. At the moment of the study the participants were enrolled in a target (English) language III course. These students were B1 according to the he Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The age of the students ranges from 18 to 30 years old and they were selected because of their English level.

To conduct this research, two instruments for students were used. They were a test and a questionnaire whose purpose was to collect specific data such as students’ perceptions and attitudes toward certain activities and tasks in order to obtain useful information to measure their self-confidence level.

The test consisted of 25 statements in which the students had to underline the options that best relates to their feelings and attitudes toward some activities. The test used was validated with the help of teachers in charge of the thesis subject, thus this survey was redesign twice with the purpose of obtaining the most relevant information.

The test was written in Spanish so that students had more opportunities to understand the items contained in the test. The test was asked to provide general information such as age, genre, years of studying English, and target language marks. All the statements of the test provided very useful information about students’ self-confidence. All statements in this test provide outstanding data that permit to measure student’s self-confidence.

The questionnaire looked that the participants provided information and perceptions about feelings in relation between activities and self-confidence improvement in speaking skill.

IV. Findings

Successful language learners and self-confidence

The results obtained from the test revealed that there is not a correlation between self-confidence and the achievement of students related to the oral skill. This is seen in the fact that students with high level of self-confidence seem to have either lower and higher grades in the English subject. However, the grade does not always match the students’ language level or proficiency, this could be because speaking is a complex skill, and much of the time professors use test and exams to measure the students’ oral performance. It is necessary to highlight that in order to have an objective evaluation, it is crucial for
teachers to take into account other factors such as the students’ ability to adapt their speech under different circumstances or contexts, besides considering other important aspects such as accuracy, coherence, and fluency.

**Students with high self-confidence**

As mentioned above, a test was used to measure the students’ self-confidence. The total number of participants was 99 students, 43 were men and 56 women, the results obtained were remarkable. From the 99 just 8 men which represent 19% of the participants have high-self-confidence, additionally 4 women with high self-confidence which represent 7% of the participants were found, considering that only few students with high self-confidence were discovered. It is possible to deduce that it does exist a serious problem with students’ self-confidence and it may be because of several reasons. For example: maybe professors do not provide the students with enough confidence to interact in oral manner, it might be that some of the students are shy or get nervous when they have to speak in front of the class or maybe the activities do not promote the development of the oral skill.

**Students with average self-confidence**

There are not quite differences between women and men in relation to acceptable level of self-confidence. From 43 male students tested 29 of them have enough self-confidence, moreover 33 female students from 56 show enough self-confidence. Although the difference is very little, it is probable that in spite of the fact that every student faces different internal and external factors which affect the development of oral production, it might be that women react in a better manner to the issues because the acceptance for society that this mayor is studied by women rather than men.

**Students with low and too low self-confidence**

The results demonstrate that there is a number of students with low and too low self-confidence. Thus, 5 male students and 19 female students have low self-confidence, furthermore 1 male student was found with too low self-confidence, adding together the amounts give 25 students total of 99 which represents about a quarter part of the participants. This fact should be considered significant and worrying for all who are concerned to teaching English since self-confidence is vital for the students’ oral performance and academic development in general.

**Factors that affect students’ speaking skill**

There are different factors that were identified as having a high impact in the oral production such as the atmosphere of the class, the students’ motivation, the teaching and learning activities that are organized in the classroom, the didactic materials, among others. The results clearly show the effect that interesting and dynamic classes have, it is evident to see that stimulating and energetic classes affect in a positive way the students’ motivation, then it allows raising their wish to speak in English.

In addition, it has been shown that students do not consider too relevant team working; however, just really few students think that team working never permit them to improve the language. This can be interpreted that although not all the students agree, most of them consider that team working has in a way an effect in the students’ proficiency. Also, it was explained if students have interest to participate when the topics are related to culture and identity in which they belong, the outcomes also reveal that most of the students answered sometimes which means that students do not consider really important this element. However, it has been observed that their interest and participation is higher when the topics related to culture and identity in which they belong are addressed. All of these factors related
to culture, affection and socialization have a significant impact into the process of language learning especially in the speaking skill.

**The correlation between self-confidence and the level of the oral skill**

Once analyzed the factors that affect the students' self-confidence and speaking skill, it is time to see the correlation between the level of student's self-confidence and the success achieved in English shown by the students' final grades. It is important to explain that from 99 participants who were tested to measure the self-confidence, the results were divided in three categories: students' age, years of studying English, and genre.

The results show that from the 99 participants only 12 students between 18-22 years-old have been studying English during 4 years or more. As a matter of fact, that learners have studied English at least 4 years, it was expected that the majority of the students have had high final score in the target language course; however, the results show the contrary.

The previous fact demonstrates the inconsistency existing between the grades that professors give as final assessment and the level of English. It is because the fact that students with 4 years of studying English is enough to have a proper level of English and obtain high final grade. However, it is emphasized that many professors regard other factors to assign students a score, those elements might be also important but it was noticed that the majority of the time, they do not really measure the level of English, especially the speaking skill.

**Interesting activities as motivation to practice the oral skill**

The activities applied into the classroom have a significant impact on students' self-confidence level, when activities are boring, tedious or monotonous students miss the interest to the class, so this fact causes the students' motivation decrease. Since motivation and self-confidence are related, dynamic and interactive activities are considered important to raise high self-confidence.

**Negative experience in language learning and self-confidence**

The negative experiences in the classroom have a significant impact in the students' self-confidence level. Many students who face negative experiences misplace the interest and security to participate, therefore the paper of the professors plays an extremely important role. Thus, in this study, a set of inquiries to be informed about the students' point of view toward some events presented in the classroom were posed.

**Positive experience in language learning and self confidence**

It is well known that there is a high correlation between self-confidence and positive experiences, when students do things that they like, and they are around friendly people there is more probability that students increase their self-confidence. That is why it is paramount to know how positive experiences influence in students' self-confidence. The explanation is illustrated in the following sections.

**V. Conclusions**

It is important to mention that positive correlation was not found between the level of self-confidence and final grades; however, it seems that students considered really significant affective factors to develop at least stable self-confidence level which as the results show it has positive effects to archive
the oral skill.

The results also reveal that one of the most relevant factors that affect students in their oral production is motivation. The majority of the students, as it was illustrated in the results above, considered that dynamic and interesting classes raise the students' motivation. Another factor was socialization which is related to culture and learning styles, thus to know the participants' perceptions about this factor, there was a research question referred to team working. Although the results were varied, many students considered team working very important to develop or improve students' English level.

It was also found that the factors described affect students positively in developing their speaking skill, since sufficient students have interest to participate when topics are linked to culture and identity in which they belong, also a high number of professors considered that team working raise their students' English improvement. On the other hand, the majority of students feel motivated through dynamic and interesting classes.

Moreover, related to the correlation between self-confidence and the oral skill, the results show that there is an important link since the positive and negative experiences lived by students into the classroom have important effects.

Related to strategies that foster self-confidence, many strategies were found, for instance, students considered that not speaking Spanish in the class creates the necessity to communicate in English. Another aspect that influences the development of the speaking skill has to do with the environment in the class, since if it is conducted in a pleasant atmosphere, it fosters self-confidence in the target language. On the other hand, interesting and dynamic teaching and learning activities motivate and enhance the students' self-confidence and oral performance. Additionally, those kind of activities allow students to feel relax and provide confidence to practice English. These are some examples of practical strategies that can be applied into the language classroom.

Finally, to answer to the last research question which asks how negative or positive experiences in language learning are related to self-confidence, according to the results gathered, it was found that the experiences in language learning are connected to self-confidence and vice versa.

On the other hand, the results show that students feel willing to speak in English and to take risks when the professors are not irritated by students' mistakes; they correct them and invite students to practice more. One another example is related to friendly and helpful teachers, the results show that most of the students feel secure when the professor is friendly, helpful and motivates to learn. All these experiences lived in language learning have to do with self-confidence so being aware of these elements are important in the language success and especially in developing speaking skills.

**Implications for the research**

Students need to be aware that language learning is a process and they should see speaking skill as a challenge rather than a difficulty. In the learning process, students may have difficulties; however, knowing their learning styles and looking for strategies, will help to overcome the obstacles, also students should collaborate in all the activities applied into the class since all of them have a learning purpose. Additionally, students should not forget that even the professor is an important piece into the learning process, they have the responsibility to collaborate, and students should know that they have the power to monitor their own behavior, their motivation, their learning, and self-confidence.

It is suggested that teachers know that their personality has a significant effect in the way of performing
the class, rude words and inappropriate gestures can influence in the level of students’ self-confidence. On the other hand, activities, strategies and techniques used by professors have a big impact in students’ achievements. Finally, professors should be careful and analytic to implement speaking activities based on the students’ needs, as well as to provide an atmosphere of trust to raise students’ self-confidence to speak in English.

Limitations of the study

In general, this research project has collected significant information to answer the research questions set in the design of the study, however it was not possible to obtain enough information to establish which is the accurate relationship between self-confidence and language learning. In addition, regarding the instruments it is considerable to think that some other instruments could be administered with the purpose to obtain deeper information.

Suggestions for further research

Being the last stage of this study some other topics are suggested for further research, one of them has to do with expanding more information related to self confidence in language students and the development of other language skills. Another study could be developed with the use of different research instruments to gather other type of data and analysis and even an experimental research can be applied. On the other hand, based on this study, another research can be carried out oriented to the assessment and evaluation of the speaking skill.

References


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