

*Supporting English Speaking Practice Through Targeted Academic Tutoring
Sessions Among 8th-, 9th-, and 10th-Grade Students*

*Apoyo a la práctica de la expresión oral en inglés mediante sesiones de tutoría
académica focalizada para estudiantes de octavo, noveno y décimo grado*

*Supporto alla pratica dell'espressione orale in inglese attraverso sessioni di
tutoraggio accademico mirato rivolte agli studenti dell'8^a, 9^a e 10^a classe*

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Artículo de investigación

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of targeted tutoring on the development of English-speaking skills among Ecuadorian students enrolled in 8th, 9th, and 10th grades. A pre-experimental research design without a control group was implemented with 566 participants who attended two one-hour tutoring sessions per week over a ten-month intervention period. Speaking performance was assessed through pre-test and post-test evaluations that measured four dimensions: fluency, pronunciation, content, and clarity. The intervention incorporated communicative, collaborative, and game-based activities designed to provide meaningful opportunities for oral language practice. The findings revealed positive gains across all assessed dimensions. Fluency showed the greatest improvement, followed by pronunciation, content, and clarity. The results suggest that targeted tutoring can serve as an effective complementary strategy for enhancing students' speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where opportunities for authentic oral communication are limited.

Keywords: Targeted tutoring, speaking skills, EFL learners, English language learning.

Resumen

Este estudio examinó el impacto de las tutorías focalizadas en el desarrollo de las habilidades de expresión oral en inglés de estudiantes ecuatorianos de octavo, noveno y décimo año de educación básica. Se implementó un diseño preexperimental sin grupo de control con la participación de 566 estudiantes que asistieron a dos sesiones semanales de tutoría de una hora durante un período de intervención de diez meses. El desempeño oral se evaluó mediante pruebas de pretest y postest que midieron cuatro dimensiones: fluidez, pronunciación, contenido y claridad. La intervención incorporó actividades comunicativas, colaborativas y basadas en juegos diseñadas para proporcionar oportunidades significativas de práctica oral. Los resultados evidenciaron mejoras en todas las dimensiones evaluadas. La fluidez presentó el mayor incremento, seguida de la pronunciación, el contenido y la claridad. Los hallazgos sugieren que las tutorías focalizadas pueden constituir una estrategia complementaria efectiva para fortalecer las habilidades de speaking en contextos de inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL), donde las oportunidades de comunicación oral auténtica suelen ser limitadas.

Riassunto

Questo studio ha esaminato l'impatto del tutoraggio mirato sullo sviluppo delle competenze di produzione orale in inglese tra studenti ecuadoriani dell'ottavo, nono e decimo anno di istruzione di base. È stato utilizzato un disegno pre-sperimentale senza gruppo di controllo con la partecipazione di 566 studenti che hanno frequentato due sessioni settimanali di tutoraggio della durata di un'ora per un periodo di dieci mesi. Le competenze orali sono state valutate attraverso un pre-test e un post-test che hanno misurato quattro dimensioni: fluidità, pronuncia, contenuto e chiarezza. L'intervento ha incluso attività comunicative, collaborative e

basate sul gioco, progettate per offrire opportunità significative di pratica linguistica orale. I risultati hanno evidenziato miglioramenti in tutte le dimensioni valutate. La fluidità ha registrato il maggiore incremento, seguita da pronuncia, contenuto e chiarezza. I risultati suggeriscono che il tutoraggio mirato possa rappresentare una strategia complementare efficace per migliorare le competenze orali degli studenti nei contesti di Inglese come Lingua Straniera (EFL), dove le opportunità di comunicazione autentica sono spesso limitate.

Parole chiave: Tutoraggio mirato, abilità orali, studenti EFL, apprendimento dell'inglese.

Introduction

In today's globalized landscape, proficiency in English has become an essential tool for personal, academic, and professional growth, as it facilitates access to higher education, career mobility, and international networking opportunities (Crystal, 2003; Karimboyeva, 2026). Recognizing this reality, Ecuador's national curriculum incorporates English from early childhood education with the ultimate goal of preparing students to achieve an intermediate B1 level upon high school graduation (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador [MINEDUC], 2016). Despite these curricular goals, the country has historically faced major challenges in achieving solid linguistic competence, particularly in oral communication.

Global benchmarks highlight this gap. The EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) places Ecuador in the low proficiency band (EF Education First, 2025). This indicator underscores the urgent need to strengthen English teaching and learning in schools, with a specific focus on developing communicative speaking skills.

For decades, systemic hurdles have hindered progress, including the heavy reliance on traditional teaching methods, a scarcity of proper didactic resources, and insufficient teacher training (Oroz et al., 2021). Furthermore, student motivation remains a recurring barrier (dos Santos et al., 2020). Many students view English as irrelevant to their immediate contexts (Rosado & Vaca-Cárdenas, 2023) or feel forced to study it simply because it is a mandatory school subject (Tamayo & Cajas, 2020), which dampens their engagement. Limited classroom exposure to real communicative practice further restricts oral proficiency development.

Within the Ecuadorian educational system, several structural obstacles restrict the development of students' oral communication competencies in English (Guerrero & Moreira). This includes limited instructional time, insufficient speaking-focused activities, inadequate teacher training, and scarce opportunities for authentic language use (Alvarez et al., 2024). Policy shifts have exacerbated these limitations. Ministerial regulations assign English instruction heavily to regular classroom teachers who may lack specialized linguistic and pedagogical training, compounded by a restricted number of weekly academic hours allocated for language development (Ministerio de Educación, 2022; Astudillo & Zavala, 2021).

Studies focusing on basic education students in Ecuador reveal that learners consistently struggle to initiate conversations, express thoughts spontaneously, or respond to questions in English due to a lack of speaking practice and low intrinsic motivation (Pérez, 2021). If this deficit persists, students will face continuous barriers in higher education and competitive job markets where English fluency acts as a critical predictor of success (Martirosyan et al., 2015; Richards, 2015).

Targeted tutoring: Importance and benefits

Targeted tutoring has emerged as one of the most effective educational interventions for improving students' learning outcomes and addressing academic gaps. It is defined as intensive, personalized instruction delivered individually or in small groups (Kraft et al., 2021). Therefore, targeted tutoring aims to meet students' specific learning needs while providing continuous support aligned with classroom instruction. Research has consistently demonstrated that tutoring interventions produce substantial positive effects on student achievement across different grade levels and subject areas (Nickow et al., 2024).

According to Robinson et al, (2024), high-impact tutoring is particularly effective because it provides personalized instruction, immediate feedback, and targeted support tailored to students' individual learning needs. Furthermore, tutoring programs have been identified as among the most effective school-based interventions for improving academic performance and addressing learning loss (Nickow et al., 2020; Karft & Grace, 2024).

Another important benefit of targeted tutoring is the development of meaningful relationships between tutors and learners (White et al., 2023). Research suggests that students benefit not only from additional academic instruction but also from the consistent support, encouragement, and individualized attention provided by tutors (Robinson et al., 2026). Maintaining the same tutor throughout the intervention has been associated with higher levels of engagement, motivation, and continuity in the learning process.

Within language learning contexts, targeted tutoring offers students increased opportunities to engage in meaningful communication and receive individualized feedback (Pica, 1994). Through guided interaction and regular speaking practice, learners can strengthen essential oral communication skills, including fluency, pronunciation, comprehensibility, and the organization of ideas (Nation & Newton, 2009; Kang et al., 2024). These benefits are relevant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, where opportunities for authentic oral communication are often limited. Thus, when implemented systematically and supported by trained tutors, structured instructional activities, and ongoing assessment, tutoring programs can significantly contribute to improved educational outcomes (Nickow et al., 2024; Robinson et al., 2024).

After reviewing the previous studies, the following question emerges:

To what extent do targeted tutoring sessions help improve students' speaking skills?

To address the research question, this study was organized into distinct sections. First, the methodology is described, including the research design and participant characteristics. Next, the results are presented to illustrate changes in speaking performance between the pre-test and post-test. This is followed by a discussion of the pedagogical implications of the findings. Finally, the article concludes by outlining the main conclusions derived from the study.

Methodology

Research Design

This study aimed to examine how, and to what extent targeted tutoring focused on supporting the enhancement of speaking skills improves including fluency, pronunciation, content, and clarity. This research implemented a pre-experimental case study without a control group, which allowed to examine the changes observed in participants throughout the implementation of the intervention. The instruments used in this work were applied to the same group of participants.

Sampling approach

The study involved 566 students enrolled in 8th, 9th, and 10th grades who were learning English as a compulsory subject in educational institutions from different regions in Ecuador. Of the total sample, 56.54% identified as female (n=320) and 43.46% (n=246) identified as male.

In addition, 40 pre-service English teachers enrolled in the 7th and 9th semesters of their teacher education program served as support tutors for the English teachers working in the educational institutions attended by the student participants. However, it is important to note that the present paper focuses exclusively on the results obtained from the student participants.

Furthermore, the study followed a non-probability sampling design, as participants were selected based on the specific objectives of the tutoring intervention and their availability to participate in this research. This sampling approach was appropriate because the tutoring activities targeted educational contexts and involved participants who met the established inclusion criteria.

Instrumentation

To assess participants' progress throughout the study, two standardized instruments were employed: a pre-test and a post-test. The pre-test served as a diagnostic measure to determine participants' baseline English language proficiency and their prior knowledge of the target content. The instrument assessed four key dimensions of speaking competence (*See Table 1*).

Table 1. Dimensions Assessed during pretest and post test

Dimension	Description
Fluency	Ability to communicate ideas smoothly and continuously.
Pronunciation	Accuracy and intelligibility of spoken English.
Content	Relevance, organization, and development of ideas.
Clarity	Ability to express ideas in a clear and understandable manner.

Each dimension was designed to be scored on a scale ranging from 0 to 3, where 0 indicated no oral interaction or speaking performance and 3 represented a high level of achievement.

For the intervention, game-based activities, including traditional games, role-playing exercises, and collaborative speaking tasks were designed. For the post-test, the same test instrument and evaluation criteria were planned to be used to measure participants' progress and identify changes in their speaking performance.

To ensure the quality of the pre-test and post-test, it underwent a process of expert validation. A panel of external specialists in English language teaching and assessment reviewed the instrument to evaluate its content validity, clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the target population. Their recommendations contributed to refining the instrument and ensuring its suitability for assessing the linguistic competencies addressed in the study.

Ethical considerations

This research followed ethical considerations of transparency and volunteering. Obtaining informed consent from parents and legal guardians was prioritized. In the informed consent document, the study's objectives were detailed, and participants' (students') identities were kept confidential. This was essential to guarantee their protection, meet the protocols before the intervention, and collect the data.

Data collection and analysis

This study was conducted as part of a 10-month educational intervention project. Prior to implementation, the assessment instruments underwent a validation process, informed consent was obtained from participants and their legal guardians, and authorization was granted by the educational institutions following the presentation and socialization of the project. The study was subsequently implemented in three stages.

First stage: Pre-test

The initial assessment was administered to establish participants' baseline speaking proficiency in English. To foster engagement and encourage active participation, the assessment was conducted through an interactive speaking activity known as Concentric Circles. In this activity, participants formed two concentric circles facing one another and engaged in brief conversations aimed at exchanging ideas, practicing vocabulary, and developing oral fluency.

Participants were provided with a set of speaking prompts and questions from which they could select according to their level of comfort and confidence, thereby facilitating meaningful communication. Throughout the activity, pre-service teachers monitored participants' interactions and evaluated their performance using the pre-test instrument that assessed the four dimensions: fluency, pronunciation, content, and clarity.

Second stage: Intervention

Following the pre-test, participants engaged in a 10-month intervention designed to strengthen their English-speaking skills. During this period, pre-service English teachers implemented a variety of communicative, interactive, and game-based activities, including traditional games, role-playing exercises, collaborative speaking tasks, and problem-solving activities.

These instructional strategies were designed to provide meaningful opportunities for oral language practice, increase participants' engagement, and foster confidence in using English in authentic communicative situations. Participants attended two one-hour tutoring sessions per week, during which they actively practiced speaking skills in a supportive and student-centered learning environment.

Third stage: Post-test

At the conclusion of the intervention, participants completed a post-test using the same assessment instrument and evaluation criteria employed during the pre-test phase. The use of equivalent assessment procedures ensured the comparability of results and enabled the measurement of changes in participants' speaking performance across the four assessed dimensions. The post-test results were subsequently compared with the pre-test findings to determine the impact of the targeted tutoring program on participants' oral English proficiency.

Data Analysis

Data collected with the instruments designed for this study were organized and analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were calculated to summarize participants' performance in each speaking dimension. Comparative analyses were conducted to examine differences between pre-test and post-test scores and to identify patterns of improvement in participants' oral English proficiency.

Results

Findings from the pre-test and post-test (*see Table 2*) unveiled substantial changes in participants' speaking language skills.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Speaking Performance: Pre- and Post-Intervention

Speaking Dimension	Score Range	Pre-test Mean (M)	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean (M)	Post-test SD	Mean Change (ΔM)
Fluency	0–3	1.31	0.76	1.79	0.79	+0.48
Pronunciation	0–3	1.49	0.7	1.85	0.74	+0.36
Content	0–3	1.45	0.72	1.73	0.77	+0.28
Clarity	0–3	1.47	0.74	1.71	0.8	+0.24
Overall Score	0–12	5.72	2.88	7.08	3.25	+1.36

Note. $N = 566$.

Descriptive statistics were calculated to evaluate student performance across the four evaluated sub-skills: Fluency, Pronunciation, Content, and Clarity. As presented in Table 1, the total cohort ($N=566$) demonstrated an overall improvement from the pre-test ($M=5.72, SD=2.88$) to the post-test ($M=7.08, SD=3.25$), reflecting an average score increase of 1.36 points.

Positive score shifts were observed across every sub-dimension following the intervention. The highest average gain occurred in Fluency ($\Delta M=+0.48$), increasing from a pre-test mean of 1.31 to a post-test mean of 1.79. This was followed by Pronunciation ($\Delta M=+0.36$), Content ($\Delta M=+0.28$), and Clarity ($\Delta M=+0.24$), indicating consistent progress across all measured oral communication components.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that targeted tutoring can positively contribute to the development of students' English-speaking skills. Improvements were observed across all evaluated dimensions, including fluency, pronunciation, content, and clarity, indicating that the intervention supported participants' oral language development. The overall increase in students' speaking performance between the pre-test and post-test suggests that providing structured and continuous opportunities for oral interaction may help learners strengthen their communicative competence.

The greatest improvement was observed in fluency, which may be attributed to the frequent speaking opportunities provided throughout the intervention. During the tutoring sessions, students participated in communicative and game-based activities that encouraged them to express their ideas and interact with peers in meaningful contexts. This finding is consistent with Pica's (1994) assertion that interaction plays a central role in second language acquisition by creating opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and practice language use. Similarly, Nation and Newton (2009) argued that regular speaking practice contributes significantly to the development of fluency and communicative confidence.

Improvements in pronunciation also support previous research highlighting the benefits of individualized feedback in language learning. According to Robinson et al. (2024), effective

tutoring environments provide immediate feedback and personalized support tailored to students' needs. Throughout this intervention, tutors were able to monitor students' oral production closely and provide guidance during communicative tasks. This aligns with Kang et al. (2024), who emphasized that continuous feedback could contribute to the improvement of pronunciation and overall speaking proficiency.

The positive gains recorded in content and clarity further suggest that participants developed greater ability to organize and communicate their ideas effectively in English. These findings are particularly relevant in EFL contexts, where students often face limited opportunities to use the language in authentic communicative situations. Previous studies conducted in Ecuador have identified insufficient speaking practice as one of the primary barriers to oral language development (Pérez, 2021; Guerrero & Moreira, 2025). The results of the present study indicate that targeted tutoring may help address this challenge by providing additional spaces where students can engage in meaningful oral interaction beyond the regular classroom environment.

The findings also reinforce the growing body of evidence supporting tutoring as a high-impact educational intervention. Nickow et al. (2024) reported that tutoring programs consistently produce positive academic outcomes across different educational contexts, while Robinson et al. (2024) emphasized the value of structured, relationship-based tutoring models. The improvements observed in this study suggest that these benefits may extend to foreign language learning, particularly when tutoring sessions are designed around communicative activities and implemented over an extended period of time.

Despite these encouraging findings, some limitations should be acknowledged. The study employed a pre-experimental design without a control group, which limits the ability to attribute observed improvements exclusively to the intervention. Additionally, participants were selected through non-probability sampling, which may restrict the generalizability of the results to other educational settings. Future research could incorporate experimental or quasi-experimental designs and evaluate the long-term effects of tutoring interventions on language proficiency.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that targeted tutoring can contribute positively to the development of English-speaking skills among EFL learners. Following the intervention, participants demonstrated improvements in all assessed dimensions, including fluency, pronunciation, content, and clarity. These results suggest that providing students with structured opportunities for speaking practice, meaningful interaction, and individualized support can enhance their oral communication performance.

Furthermore, the study highlights the potential of tutoring as a complementary instructional strategy for addressing the limited opportunities for oral language practice often

found in EFL contexts. By creating additional spaces for communicative interaction, the intervention supported students in strengthening their speaking abilities and achieving measurable gains between the pre-test and post-test assessments.

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