Potenciando las habilidades orales de los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera a través de WordWall como recurso educativo digital

Empowering EFL students' speaking skills through WordWall as a digital educational resource

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Resumen

El presente estudio explora cómo potenciar las habilidades orales de los estudiantes mediante el uso de WordWall, un recurso didáctico digital en un entorno de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los elementos interactivos y los componentes de juego de Wordwall brindan oportunidades para involucrar a los estudiantes en la práctica oral. Dos grupos de estudiantes del Centro de Idiomas y la Carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros (PINE) de la Universidad Nacional de Educación participaron en este estudio de investigación-acción implementando juegos de WordWall. El estudio se desarrolló en cuatro fases donde se enfatizó el análisis de los patrones de compromiso de los estudiantes y las ventajas y limitaciones de las funcionalidades de WordWall. Los hallazgos mostraron que las actividades clave al usar WordWall en el plan de estudios de EFL brindan pautas excepcionales y perspicaces sobre cómo aprovechar al máximo WordWall para desarrollar oportunidades de práctica oral para los estudiantes de EFL, así como una mejor comprensión sobre cómo motivar y ayudar a los estudiantes a convertirse en oradores más competentes.

Palabras clave: EFL, habilidad oral, recurso digital, WordWall

Abstract

This study examines how students' speaking skills can be strengthened by using WordWall as a digital teaching tool in an EFL environment. The interactive elements and gamification components of WordWall provide the opportunity to encourage students to speak. Two groups of students from the Language Center and the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages (PINE) program at the National College of Education participated in this action research study using WordWall games. The study was conducted in four phases in which student engagement and the benefits and limitations of WordWall features were analyzed. The results showed that the key activities in using WordWall in the EFL curriculum provide exceptional, insightful guidelines on how to make the best use of WordWall to develop speaking activities for EFL students, as well as a better understanding of how to motivate students and help them become more competent speakers.

Keywords: digital resource, EFL, speaking skill, WordWall

Introduction

A key component of language learning, especially when English is studied as a foreign language (EFL), is the improvement of speaking ability. Successful language interactions are facilitated by effective oral communication which also boosts students' confidence and fluency in the target language. The use of digital learning materials has recently offered creative approaches to include and empower students in their language learning process.

Empowering EFL students' speaking skills in EFL settings represents a challenge for teachers, not only because students feel unwilling to talk in class, but also because the activities and resources used with students need to create an appropriate environment for learning. Selecting suitable resources in the classroom could make a significant difference between successful learners and learners who struggle with speaking skills. For this study, two EFL classes were observed: students from the Language Center and students from PINE at the National University of Education. Both are heterogeneous groups that belong to a B1 level class. The first group in the Language Center received classes virtually and come from different majors. The second group attends regular face-to-face lessons and belongs to PINE major.

As the researchers observed their interactions, the participants of both groups lacked enthusiasm when they had to interact with each other in simple speaking activities, for instance, asking and answering questions, describing pictures, or when they had to collaborate in groups performing more complex tasks. Students seemed to execute the activities doing the minimum effort and most of the time completed the activities before the time finished. Usually, students remained quiet rather than interacting with others. It was seen that there were always the same students who responded to the teachers' questions and the same who asked teacher. The limited motivation of both groups prevented them from using the language in real context activities. Additionally, students limited themselves from learning and receiving feedback since there was not much production. In this sense, researchers found that WordWall is an online resource that has the potential for improving students' speaking ability. This platform helps to develop a lively and engaging learning environment and inspires students to participate actively in different communicative tasks and team work. A variety of educational activities and materials are available on the interactive platform, WordWall, including vocabulary games, tests and interactive exercises.

This research paper aims to explore how the implementation of WordWall games in an EFL setting could stimulate students' speaking skills in an EFL setting and attempts to identify the most suitable interactive activities and gamification components inside WordWall. Therefore, the analysis of these features helps us to determine useful insights regarding the efficiency of WordWall as a tool for enhancing speaking ability.

The authors conducted an action research study where two representative groups of EFL students from UNAE were selected to participate. The current work explored the four phases of an action research study in both groups. The initial phase consisted of two stages, planning to explore and exploring. For the analyzing and reflecting stage, a pre-assessment task was implemented to identify the students' initial speaking skills as a baseline for a starting point. Students were observed during one period of sixty minutes while students performed speaking activities as usual. This observation was crucial in this stage since the researchers recognized action points. Following this process, the teachers reflected on their teaching practice as well as their students' progress. As a result of this, in the planning and implementation phases, the researchers created new objectives, and highlighted areas for growth to make the learning process easier. Consequently, WordWall, with its gamification elements and interactive capabilities, was

introduced to the class. Concerning this phase, two lessons of sixty minutes for each group were created and implemented. A number of WordWall games were put into practice and included guessing games, vocabulary games, discussions, and interactive quizzes. To guarantee consistency of the study, observations and reflections were obtained from the two phases of this action research study. This allowed the researchers to keep improving their teaching practice and try different alternatives inside WordWall in order to motivate students' speaking practice. The final reflections obtained from the observations allowed the researchers to obtain main conclusions.

The findings determined whether WordWall was successful in encouraging students to improve their speaking ability. WordWall used in an EFL setting, and its advantages, drawbacks and potential areas for development were documented. The significance of this action research study is the outlining suggestions for incorporating WordWall into EFL classes to improve speaking skills for EFL learners. Similarly, by highlighting the benefits of including online tools like WordWall in the EFL curriculum, the researcher's findings can benefit the area of language instruction since there are not many investigations related to the topic in the Ecuadorian context. The study provides guidance to educators on how to utilize technology-enhanced speaking activities effectively, thereby raising the standard of language instruction and expanding students' language learning opportunities.

Theoretical framework

Language learning and speaking skills

Learning a foreign language requires the development of various skills. However, the importance of developing the speaking skill in learning English as a foreign language can never be sufficiently emphasized. The speaking skill is crucial for effective English communication, as these allow students to express themselves fluently and accurately, understand others and participate in social, academic, and professional contexts (Boonkit, 2010). Hence, it is vital to examine the significance of developing speaking skills when learning English as a foreign language.

Technology-assisted learning

Bahari (2022) states that technology-assisted learning gives students self-control tools (such as game-style learning, situational learning, interactive learning, collaborative learning, etc.) that let them tailor their learning to fit their cognitive styles for perception, processing, problem-solving, and memorization. It helps to self-manage the learning processes and gives students the freedom to choose their own objectives, adapt to their nonlinear dynamic motivational factors, and take advantage of global learning without time or place restrictions. Similarly, in Bahari's work, it is mentioned that the use of tech-tools encourages the reduction of learning anxiety and cognitive load. Gamification, the inclusion of game components like points, levels, and badges in instructional designs and activities promotes learning, improves L2 learners' motivation to study. Finally, the use of labeling or scripting as a tool provides feedback to partners and boosts critical thinking among learners (Bahri, 2022)

Digital resources and gamification role in learning a new language

According to Patil (2008), teachers should prioritize on raising students' confidence through appropriate assignments, materials, effective teaching strategies, and appropriate syllabus design to reduce anxiety and improve speaking abilities. Anxiety may have a speaking-inhibiting effect, making it difficult for students to engage in oral activities that may be beneficial for their learning and competence, or positively affect how well students demonstrate previously acquired skills (Cook, 2006). In this sense, teachers have to understand their students' communicative barriers in order to design creative and inspiring activities that encourage the development of speaking skills. According to Unesco (2013) the use of digital resources has had a significant impact on the teaching-learning process and quality education. Nowadays, the field of teaching and improving English learning have both benefited greatly from technology-based tools since they make learning much more enjoyable and engaging (Nisha, 2020). In this regards, game-based learning enhances English learning because it increases student interest and engagement, provides feedback, and creates engaging web-based learning experiences.

As Ushioda (as cited in Stockwell 2013) mentions, it is useful to conceptually differentiate two types of motivation that may affect why language learners use a certain technological tool in language acquisition. First, an innate interest in the technology, which results in learning about its advantages for language acquisition and increasing motivation to study languages; (b) a strong motivation to learn languages, which sparks interest in a specific technology that can support and enhance this process.

WordWall features as a teaching tool

WordWall is suitable for EFL classroom instruction and learning because of its immediate feedback and entertaining features (Mazelin *et al.*, 2022). WordWall offers a variety of game templates to improve students' experiences and attention, increasing class participation and enabling passive students to fully understand lessons. Hasram *et al.* (2021) claim that WordWall can improve students' learning experiences and keep them engaged since it allows teachers to design a variety of mini games that can be played in the classroom. According to research, gamification increases student motivation in ELT through points, leaderboards, and incentives, encouraging active learning and language production (Wulantari *et al.*, 2023). Gil-Quintana and Prieto-Jurado (2019) highlight that competition stimulates the overcoming of challenges, while fun creates a positive and attractive environment for learning. Additionally, gamification promotes quality of learning, and boosts creativity (Cancino & Ibarra, 2023)

Pedagogical approaches of WordWall

Regarding the approaches and instructional techniques that may be used with WordWall to strengthen students' oral communication skills in an EFL environment, teachers must consider their emotions and attitudes. This in in line with the abilities of the professional profile demanded by the digital era and the epistemological underpinnings of pedagogical models in Ecuadorian higher education (UNAE, 2015). Research indicates that students' emotions have an impact on how they learn since students who are less anxious, more confident, and driven are more likely to show a stronger desire to speak in the EFL classroom (Matute *et al.*, 2022).

Challenges associated with using digital tools

There are potential risks associated with using WordWall or other digital tools in a classroom, such as accessibility, equity, and effective integration. According to Sanz-Benito *et al.* (2023) the objective of digital inclusion is to enhance teaching and learning by enabling participation from all students. However, there are no established implementation requirements in academic guidelines or specialized frameworks. Furthermore, teachers must be trained in the use of new digital resources to support language learning and enable students to apply their newly gained skills efficiently (Vásquez y Rodas, 2022).

Materials and methods

To carry out this work, the researchers conducted a qualitative study since data was collected through observations in an action research study. There were two representative groups of EFL students observed from the career of Pedagogy in National and foreign Languages (PINE) and the Language center at UNAE university were selected to participate. As Qi Xu (as cited in Burns 2015) states, an action research approach is a self-reflective and systematic approach to inquiry about the teaching practice, with the goal of identifying difficulties faced by participants and performing additional study to bring about significant changes in practice.

To gather qualitative data and provide insights on how WordWall is used as a digital resource, a field observation sheet was designed. Subsequently, each class was observed by two EFL teacher-researchers who closely monitored students' interaction while they performed speaking activities. The observed data was later subjected to a reflective process where the data collected was reviewed and analyzed, later shared with the teacher in charge of adjusting and improving their own practice.

Participants

The study involved two different groups of 20 participants each from two heterogenous B1-level classes from the National University of Education. The first group was from the Language Center, where classes were conducted virtually, and students were from different careers, fulfilling their English requirements. In contrast, the second group was from PINE who received regular face-to-face classes.

Intervention

The research was conducted in real-world settings and was centered around the notion that involved teachers and students' performance while doing undertaking speaking activities, engaging in exploring their classroom situations and improving their practices based on their findings.

This approach encompasses a process of planning to explore (observation sheet design), exploring (observation), analyzing and reflecting, and planning and implementing. In this sense, the steps were implemented in both groups where it was analyzed with a deeper and greater understanding of the potential benefits of the interactive features and gamification of WordWall on empowering students speaking skills. Here is a breakdown of this process:

Figure 1. Action research phases
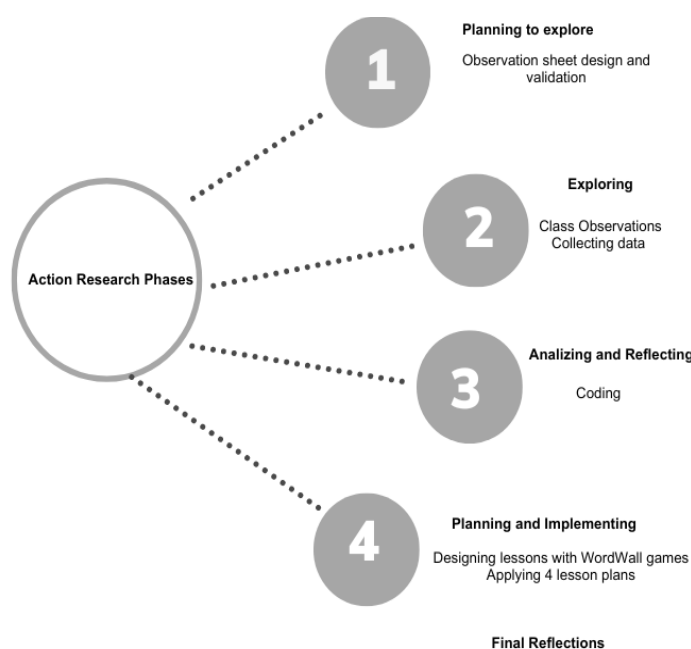
Source: *own elaboration*

Phase 1 and 2: planning to explore and exploring

Firstly, the EFL research teachers involved in the study held discussions and identified various problems they had observed in their current teaching practices. After several formal and informal meetings, the researchers determined that the limited use of activities to develop speaking skills prevented students from having interactions and communicating in class effectively.

A range of technological tools was identified and after careful consideration and positive results observed in other groups, WordWall was chosen as the most suitable digital resource to enhance students' speaking abilities. One observation sheet was designed and validated by a third expert in technology. It contained several parameters: name of the game used in WordWall, main purpose of the game, in which stage of the lesson the game was used, students' reaction, acceptance and behavior, how long the activity lasted, how the teacher reacted to unanticipated situations and final observation and comments.

An action plan was developed to guide the research process in the implementation of WordWall and consequently students were monitored for one sixty-minute interval while engaging in speaking exercises in their normal classes. The researchers implemented two peer-observation sessions each to collect data since it was important at this phase to identify areas that needed improvement in terms of how the students participated in the activities.

Phase 3 and 4: analyzing and reflecting & planning and implementing

During the third phase, the researchers analyzed the data collected from observing the two groups and reflected on how to improve the students' speaking skills based on the findings that were preventing students from speaking participation.

Table 1. Data Coding

Categories	Codes	Examples
Students' feelings	Motivation	Boredom when sitting in groups and finishing the activity earlier than expected when interacting. Performance in breakout rooms was low, students remained silent. No interaction with more than four groups.
	Anxiety	Students looked anxious in both groups when they had to speak individually. Students did not ask questions to clarify knowledge
Subject Knowledge	Lack of content knowledge	Students lacked vocabulary and basic grammar structures in context when they had to maintain conversations or describe photos.
	Code switching	Both groups mixed English and Spanish when interacting
	Fluency vs accuracy	There were long pauses when they had to express their point of view or describe images.
Students' speaking skill	Attention Span	The attention for listening to the teacher instructions or their classmates' responses was limited. Some students seemed to be lost in the breakout rooms. In the face-to-face classes, the students were not sure about the tasks.
	Lack of practice	Students were not used to picture description or class, discussion groups, reporting, problem-solving with collaborative work. Poor communication skills and difficulties expressing thoughts and ideas clearly.

Source: own elaboration

After determining the main action points shown on Table 1, each teacher created two lesson plans focusing on the speaking skill and incorporated the use of WordWall. These lesson plans were shared, discussed, and refined based on formal discussions among the teachers. Finally, the fourth phase was put into action. Two teachers took turns leading lessons that concentrated on oral production skills, utilizing WordWall as a technological tool to empower the students. Qualitative data was collected through two classroom observations and teachers' reflections on students' performance using an observation sheet as an instrument. The peer-teacher closely observed and took notes on how the other teacher conducted the entire lesson using WordWall. The two observing teachers compared their notes and engaged in discussions about their observations and opportunities for better and different implementations of WordWall in future lessons.

Results and discussion

Despite the significance of speaking skills in language learning, it was concluded that at the beginning of this study both groups from the Language Center and the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Language Major (PINE) faced challenges in improving their speaking skills in the B1 English level. The students have encountered difficulties which might be to a lack of practice

opportunities, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, negative feelings, lack of vocabulary and grammar structures and interactive learning materials for practice.

During the exploring phase, a notable remark was made regarding the students' speaking skills and willingness to participate in both groups. It was observed that the students were not developing the language as desired, becoming a problem when they were asked to participate in class. Additionally, grammar and vocabulary were the main subjects covered in traditional teaching techniques, leaving little time for useful speaking practice and interaction. It was identified that students performed grammar and vocabulary tasks well, however, when they interacted, they tended to use Spanish mostly. Additionally, some students remained silent and their participation in class was minimal even when the teachers asked questions and tried to motivate them to speak. The students' low motivation in speaking was shown in their limited participation. It is important to notice that these challenges were found in both groups independently of the teaching mode since group 1 attended virtual classes while group 2 attended face-to-face classes. Research suggests that anxiety can make it harder for students to engage in oral activities because it inhibits their ability to talk (Patil, 2008).

Once the analysis and reflections were carried out, it was found that adopting cutting-edge tools that technology provides is necessary to boost students' interest and participation during speaking activities. The use of digital tools has had a tremendous impact on education (Unesco, 2013), especially English language learning, making it more interesting and entertaining. Moreover, according to Ushioda (as cited in Stockwell 2013) technology-induced motivation is linked to the different reasons why students would want to learn a language, which in part reflects the significance of language learning in their lives. Game-based learning improves English proficiency by stimulating students' interest (Nisha, 2020). In this sense, WordWall has proven to be the right tool to improve students' motivation during the speaking activities.

During the planning and implementing phase two more lessons were observed, this time, the teachers used different features of WordWall. With the objective of reviewing previous topics, the students were divided into two groups and participated in a contest. This task was presented through the balloon pop game. It consisted of reading the description lying on a virtual train at high speed while students chose the correct option hanging from a balloon. The students discussed and agreed on an answer before the time finished. They looked motivated and tried to complete the activity as fast as possible. Balloon pop enhanced the development of teamwork abilities. Students refreshed the previous content faster since they were interacting with other classmates and helped the quieter students feel more confident. However, some students tended to dominate the game and were more outgoing than others. This could prevent quieter students from getting involved in the lesson and not showing their progress.

To introduce vocabulary relevant to the upcoming speaking activity, the Random Wheel game was used to see which question came up. The teacher was required to spin the wheel. This game kept students focused and eager to participate. The Airplane game was used during the controlled-practice stage. It was developed individually, and students were engaged. However, this game required much more concentration and less interaction. Both activities allowed students to monitor their own progress by tracking their scores and promoted participation when the teacher provided feedback.

In the Match up game, there was genuine interaction since it was developed in pairs. The students were more concentrated and there was a higher use of the target language in as much as they were motivated to get a reward after completing the task.

Similarly, an interactive quiz was administered as a final informal evaluation in WordWall. The students read the description and matched the main concepts which appeared in the box game while they worked in pairs. They were asked to discuss their responses, which encouraged their conversation in English. This type of game appeared to lower anxiety levels since the students were not afraid of making mistakes when using the target language.

After observing and reflecting on the replanned lessons, the games from WordWall appear to support the fact that gamification boosts student motivation to speak in English by using points and rewards (Wulantari *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, it is noted that WordWall games might well be used at any stage in the lesson, and they can be adapted to the lesson objective and students' interests.

Regarding the previous findings, Bahari (2022) emphasizes that the use of technology allows students to manage their own learning processes. At the same time, game-style learning can help reduce students' anxiety since the use of game elements like points, levels, and badges can boost motivation and engagement among students. The present research underscored the innovative potential of technology in speaking skills

Conclusion

Selecting suitable resources could make a significant difference in students who struggle with speaking. This research has highlighted valuable insights and evidence in the use of WordWall for the empowerment of students' speaking skills, which offers a lively and engaging atmosphere that encourages active involvement and teamwork and inspires students to participate actively in different communicative tasks by expanding students' language learning opportunities.

Also, this study emphasizes the importance of peer collaboration on improving teaching practices through cooperative efforts, with the goal of implementing instructional interventions, while improving teaching skills. Efforts should be made to implement in EFL settings to promote the use of technology where meaningful opportunities for students to use the English language.

The incorporation of WordWall within traditional classroom environments as a digital educational resource enhances students' self-confidence by reducing anxiety, which in turn empowers students speaking skills. Therefore, the implementation of WordWall activities in different EFL settings could effectively influence the development of students' speaking skills since gamification increases students' motivation through points, leaderboards, and incentives, encouraging active learning and language production.

Consequently, in today's technology-driven society, more research is needed to explore and analyze the effectiveness of WordWall regarding individual differences among students in diverse learning and teaching contexts such as online teaching, blended teaching, flipped classrooms and others. Furthermore, researching the relationship between emotions and learning in the EFL context through the implementation of WordWall could contribute to valuable information, displaying the impact on how students learn when they are less anxious and more confident while showing a stronger desire to participate and speak during classes.

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