

## **Favoring 7th Graders' Performance in Oral Assessment Tasks in the English Class**

Edier A. Gallego, Jairo Castrillón, Marisol Giraldo, y Lina M. Gómez

Trabajo de Grado II – LEI25

Facultad de Educación y Humanidades, Universidad Católica Luis Amigó Colombia

Mg. Erika M. Restrepo

Noviembre, 2020

### **Abstract**

This was a qualitative exploratory study aimed at describing how a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade class faced oral assessments in the English class. Data collection instruments included a diagnostic oral assessment task, three questionnaires, class observations and a research journal. They allowed to generate information about participants' emotions and practices before and during oral assessments in the English, as well as their perceptions of the phenomena. Results revealed that students' negative emotions can interfere in their performance when facing oral assessment tasks. Therefore, the teacher implemented different strategies in order to cope with these negative emotions to favor students' performance.

**Keywords:** *oral assessment, oral tasks, strategies, oral performance, emotions*

### **Resumen**

Este estudio exploratorio cualitativo tuvo como propósito describir cómo una clase de séptimo grado enfrenta las evaluaciones orales en la clase de inglés. Se implementaron diferentes instrumentos de recolección de datos: Un diagnóstico de evaluación oral, tres cuestionarios, observaciones de clase y un diario de investigación. Estos permitieron recoger información sobre las emociones y prácticas de los participantes antes y durante las evaluaciones orales en inglés. Los resultados revelaron que las emociones negativas de los estudiantes pueden interferir en su desempeño cuando enfrentan tareas de evaluación oral; por lo que la docente decidió implementar diferentes estrategias para hacer frente a este fenómeno y favorecer el desempeño de los estudiantes en las tareas orales en la clase de inglés.

**Palabras clave:** *evaluación oral, tareas orales, estrategias, desempeño oral, emociones*

## Introduction

Available literature in the field allows us to conclude that oral tasks are really important in language assessment since they can help evidence the acquisition of oral skills and the aspects to be improved throughout the learning process. Even so, this can be also the most complex task to perform since there are negative emotions related to oral assessment in the English class that can interfere with students' performance.

Negative emotions have been present in every moment of our lives, moreover when we are learning a second language. Students feel worried, insecure, restless, etc., and this becomes an obstacle to assimilate or produce another language. Throughout the years, many things have been said about how students feel concerning this issue. Some other theories propose interesting strategies in order to lower the negative effects on the students' performance that can be applied in the English class. According to Rubio (2004), one of the actions a teacher should apply inside the classroom is to change the attitude towards what is taught, and it is necessary to promote a positive environment in which students can feel relaxed and confident. Furthermore, they can help to minimize the negative emotions in the students when facing oral assessment tasks. That way, teachers can contribute to improve results.

Due to the importance of oral assessments and their effects on students, it was important to explore what a teacher and students from 7th grade at a private school in Medellín were doing in order to cope with this phenomenon in the English class. The research question that guided this study was: How does a seventh-grade class face English oral assessment tasks at a private school in Medellín?

## Literature review

### **The importance of oral tasks in language assessment**

Many studies have shown that oral tasks are really important in language assessment. They are a practical way to identify learners' progress in developing their language ability. According to the communicative purpose, they can allow teachers to elicit students' responses while using the language in an authentic way.

### **Influence of students' emotions and reactions on their performance in oral assessment tasks**

Inside the classroom, teachers find different emotions that emerge when learners attain an oral assessment task in the target language; for instance, anxiety.. Similarly, other emotions can motivate students' reactions when facing oral assessment tasks which can lead to an unexpected performance. Examples of some reactions are aggression and manipulation of the group. They act as a defense mechanism (Ehrman, 1996). In the *evasion* behavior, students avoid communication with the other person. They try to be late or not to arrive to the classroom and they simulate not to understand what the task is about. In the *aggression* behavior, students feel angry since they do not understand what the teacher is asking them, or they feel it is a competition between classmates or teachers, they feel negativism and blame the language so it becomes a barrier to learn. Finally, through *group manipulation* they try to make alliances with other classmates to support and protect themselves in order to avoid attaining the task.

Negative emotions and reactions from students' in oral assessment tasks has been an issue of great concern for many authors in the field. Research related to it has been published with the purpose of promoting a really special awareness among teachers regarding their assessment practices. It has been found that oral assessment tasks that encourage these feelings are the ones that demand students to produce as a result of a task that will have a grade. The majority of the

students feel really affected when they have to attain these oral assessment tasks, especially when they are asked to do it in English. Most of the time, they are not confident and this emotion leads them to feel they are in danger and in a high vulnerability when facing these types of assessments.

When the students have to face oral production, these emotions appear to discomfort their well-being. Many authors conclude that the cause of failure in students is closely linked to the way they affect the learner's cognitive ability. This, in turn, can cause many students to lose their interest in learning the target language. It is clear that as being an assessment, the students make a big effort to perform and obtain a passing grade, but then, they will lose every relationship with the language. Their interest will be affected by the fear to repeat the same emotion when speaking.

### **Strategies proposed in previous studies to reduce negative emotions in oral tasks**

Research in the field expresses the necessity of generating new strategies, alternatives, and adequate answers that strengthen learners' confidence when performing oral assessment tasks. In a study conducted by Sanchez (1982), the authors suggest teachers to pay attention to the kind of tasks they propose since this can have an effect on students' performance. The researchers suggest the implementation of dialogues and short plays in which they simulate daily life and familiar situations for students.

Furthermore, Willis' (1996) study suggests the implementation of oral communicative tasks related to learners' necessities and interests. According to the author, providing students with different opportunities to use the English language by means of the application of meaningful tasks they can feel more motivated to perform.

Preparing students to face oral tasks focusing on understanding, organizing and processing information could be another useful strategy to lower negative emotions according to Tobías

(1994). As expressed by MacIntyre and Gardner (1994), students should be sent the message that making mistakes is normal and it does not have to be a limitation to develop oral assessment tasks.

## **The study**

### **Context and participants**

This exploratory research was held in a private school located in Medellín, specifically in San Cristobal. Its classrooms are composed by around 25 students between boys and girls. There is only one English teacher for primary schoolers, and one for high school. In spite of not being a bilingual school, people there have stressed the importance of learning a second language and they have made efforts so that the students have an intensive schedule that allows them to develop both skills and subskills in English. Nowadays, the students attend 3 hours of English lessons a week. As they are small groups, the teachers can identify both strengths and aspects to be improved in each student individually.

Participants were a group of five students in 7th grade, with ages between 12 and 13 years old, and their English teacher who has been working with teenagers since 2017. She is currently in her last semester of Bachelor in English. Throughout her experience, she has had the opportunity to apply different kinds of assessment such as written or oral ones inside the classroom, so that all the students can show their abilities and understanding of the topics held in class. It has been an important part in her career since it has allowed her to propose changes and actions to promote meaningful learning. These students were selected conveniently since their performance in oral assessment tasks had been negatively affected by the variety of emotions and reactions it caused to them.

### **Data collection and analysis**

For the purpose of this exploratory research, different instruments for data collection were used: a diagnostic oral assessment task, three questionnaires, class observations and a research journal. In the first place, students developed an activity related to family members and descriptions in order to identify different reactions when facing oral tasks, which was held in the first class; secondly, students were asked to answer one of the questionnaires for the researchers to know students' perceptions towards oral assessment tasks in the English class. The other one was answered by the teacher in charge of the class; this instrument was intended to identify the actions implemented by her inside the classroom in order to favor students' performance in oral assessment tasks. The class observation was continuous. It was used in order to recognize the different emotions and reactions present when the students were facing oral assessment tasks. The research journal was an important tool throughout the process. It allowed us to keep a record of what was observed and reflected in the different lessons where oral assessment tasks took place. The third questionnaire was answered in the last session. It was intended to know what were the perceptions for both teacher and students at the end of the research process.

The method used to analyze the data was content analysis taking into account the steps suggested by Saldaña (2009). It was a manual process in which different codes and categories were established to each journal entry in order to compare them. Some of the codes found were: the teacher as a guide, students' lack of confidence in oral assessments in the English class, teacher actions to reduce negative emotions in oral assessments in the English class, Students' actions to face oral assessments in the English class. The corresponding revision and data triangulation were made.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Students' emotions and perspectives in oral assessment in the English class**

The emotions that could be perceived throughout the research were those of nervousness, fear to speak in public and insecurity, which showed a close relationship with the reactions of the students when facing oral assessment tasks in the English class. For instance, this became evident when students expressed through the applied questionnaire things like “*algunas veces me siento nerviosa por lo de la pronunciación y también me siento bloqueada*”, “*profe yo participo pero no sé si está buena*”.

Moreover, in the diagnosis activity one of the students hesitated and laughed a lot. Sometimes a long period of silence took part in the session. Another student expressed she felt nervousness as she did not know if what she was saying was correct or incorrect concerning pronunciation and grammatical structure. One of them was constantly manipulating different objects and got distracted. Although most negative emotions were revealed, in one of the sessions one of the participants confessed being confident and comfortable with the thing he wanted to express.

Another reaction perceived during the classes was that the students did not have the initiative to deal with oral assessment tasks in English. They preferred to be quiet and to evade their turn by using excuses such as: “*el internet no está funcionando*” or “*el micrófono no funciona*”.

Currently, some theories have gained relevance that note the importance of emotions in cognitive and psychosocial development (e.g. Garner 1993). According to García and Fernández (2012), negative emotions are affective factors that negatively affect the learning process.

It was found that several studies coincide with the approach of the emotions that students present at the time of performing oral tasks in English; therefore, some authors point out the importance and influence of emotions on the academic performance of students.



### **Students' negative reactions associated with oral assessment in the English class**

It was found that students' negative emotions let them to have different reactions to avoid production at the time of facing oral assessment tasks. It was evidenced a close relationship between this result and the students' opinion when they affirmed: "no participo porque no los puedo escuchar". Sometimes students asked for translation since they did not understand the instructions or the questions asked. The access to the internet was also a very common excuse at the time of participating.

This finding establishes a close relationship with the ideas proposed by Furlan (2010) who states that "students' negative emotions can produce negative reactions towards oral tasks and produce evasive behaviors". According to this affirmation, it can be said that, throughout the process these kinds of reactions are common when facing oral assessment tasks since the students are exposed to certain situations such as stress that do not allow them to have an appropriate response towards oral assessment tasks in English.

### **Teacher's strategies to help students face oral assessments in the English class**

The teacher implemented different actions in order to improve learners' performance in oral assessments. First, she implemented cooperative and non-competitive work with the aim of involving her students in oral activities so that there would be interaction and support between them and thus achieve a better performance.

The second strategy was focused on motivation with positive reinforcement, which was carried out through a reading with the students, therefore the teacher pointed out how a word was better heard in its pronunciation, leading the student not to be pressured, avoiding negative emotions in students. The teacher then motivated the students by telling them that making

mistakes is part of the learning process and positive expressions were used such as: very good, how does this word sound better: this or that way? well done, excellent, you did better.

The third strategy was implemented through a video activity that was presented to the students with the purpose of providing individual feedback and that they could freely express what they understood from the video. This activity was done individually in order to generate positive reactions in them related to the correction of errors during the activity carried out.

As it could be observed, the teacher started being a guide for the students in order to achieve the goals proposed for each oral task by giving support and strengthening the students' skills and personal characteristics. The strategies applied were so important in order to evidence the reactions and results to favor the students' performance. The teacher took the student's role to present the activities so that they could be understandable for them.

As an example of the things mentioned before, in the diagnosis activity the teacher gave the students the opportunity to mention the strategies they wanted the teacher to implement to improve their performance in oral tasks in English. Moreover, in the observation the students received feedback concerning pronunciation and the different ways to express what they wanted to say.

According to Rubio (2004), one action the teacher can take is to improve his/her attitude towards what he/she teaches and to create a positive classroom environment with the use of techniques at the sociological and psychological levels that inspire feelings of relaxation and tranquility. In addition, the teacher can modify his internal dialogue or those emotions that may affect students' disposition towards the task and their results towards learning.

Students can successfully accomplish if they are treated with respect. It helps to override feelings of insecurity, and creates an environment of cooperation rather than competition. If

students are not pressed to speak before they feel like they are able to, and non-threatening error correction practices are implemented during lessons helps they can have a minimum level of stress when they have to use English to communicate orally with their classmates or with the teacher, they feel motivated to learn and they are able to express their ideas in the foreign language.

### **Similarities and differences between students' and teachers' perceptions towards the strategies applied**

Finding suggested that negative reactions continued being present in spite of the strategies used by the teacher. On the other hand, students expressed a positive perception related to the oral assessment tasks.

As mentioned in different studies, it is essential to contribute to the good performance of students in oral tasks in English. The strategies implemented can help students, making a difference in the development and application of oral tasks; however, despite the strategies implemented, no change was observed in students' performance in oral assessment tasks in English. After implementing them, they still experienced fear when speaking in public, stuttering and nervousness, etc. The interviewed teacher mentioned: *“Al momento de la presentación los estudiantes hacen un esfuerzo por cumplir; pero continúan las reacciones negativas frente a las tareas orales en Inglés, sienten temor, presentan diferentes señales de estrés, se les ve inseguros y tienen signos de bloquearse al hablar, esto en consecuencia, el desempeño que presentan al momento de la tarea oral”*. On the other hand, the students had a positive perception of oral tasks in English, arguing the following: *“muy bien porque la profesora nos ayudaba con la palabra que necesitábamos y aprendíamos mucho más”* and *“ya uno se sentía en más confianza”*. Regarding the students' perception of the usefulness of the strategies was beneficial since they mentioned that

it had helped them; for example, in pronunciation and learning unknown words: “me ayudó a pronunciar palabras nuevas y ver palabras que desconocía”.

After the use of the strategies in order to improve performance in oral tasks in English, the perceptions given by the teacher and the students were totally opposite. While the teacher did not perceive any improvement or positive reaction, the students felt they had an advance in their process. They felt safe and comfortable after implementing them, although the positive transformation was not evident in the students and immediate progress was not perceived by the teacher.

### **Conclusions**

It can be concluded that negative emotions can interfere with students' performance when facing oral assessment tasks. Teachers and students should establish a dialogue around the challenges of oral assessment in the English class. This work shows that by implementing motivation with positive reinforcement in students, they can generate a positive emotional response, improving their performance in oral tasks in English and therefore, the teacher can be involved in the learning process as a guide and facilitator and not as a negative actor in the same process. This allowed the students to get involved in the process in a more participatory way in their learning process, and a positive environment was generated in which they could freely interact with each other and with the teacher as well.

It is necessary for teachers to implement new strategies to cope with these negative emotions and reactions towards oral assessment in the English class, so that the student can feel comfortable and motivated at the moment of the oral production in English. The positive expressions used by her encouraged them to minimize the negative reactions that may appear. It also allowed them to see the errors as part of the learning process and that this was not a situation

that necessarily generated panic. On the contrary, it was an opportunity to get confidence. On her part, the teacher plays an important role in motivating and promoting that confidence to her students.

This work contributes first of all to the identification of the impact oral assessment generates in students. It also focused on the use of new practices the teacher can use inside the classroom in order to implement oral assessment in a safe and confident environment.

### References

- Amengual-Pizarro, M. (2018). Foreign language classroom anxiety among English for Specific purposes (ESP) students. *International Journal of English Studies*, 18(2), 145-159.  
<https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes/2018/2/323311>
- Arias, C., Maturana, L., & Restrepo, M. (2012). Evaluación de los aprendizajes en lenguas extranjeras: hacia prácticas justas y democráticas. *Lenguaje*, 40 (1), 99-126.
- Barbar, K., & Sadek, M. (2017). Foreign language anxiety in oral tests: the case study of second year students of English at the university of Tizi Ouzou. *El-Tawassol: Langues et Littératures*, 23(52), 327-336.
- Cordero, D., & Morales, Y. (2016). Strategies to reduce anxiety during oral activities in English learners. *Revista de Lenguas Modernas*, 25, 253-274.
- Falero, F. (2016). La ansiedad ante las destrezas orales en la clase de español lengua extranjera: una propuesta blended-learning con sino-hablantes. *Revista de lingüística y lenguas aplicadas*, 11, 19-33.
- Furlan, L. (2006). Ansiedad ante los exámenes. ¿Qué se evalúa y cómo? *Evaluar*, 6, 32-51.

- García-Sampedro, M. (2012). La comunicación oral en inglés en la educación obligatoria: El patrimonio cultural como contexto experiencial [Tesis doctoral, Universidad de Oviedo].  
[file:///C:/Users/restr/Downloads/TD\\_MartaGarciaSampedro%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/restr/Downloads/TD_MartaGarciaSampedro%20(3).pdf)
- Goñi, E. (2019). La ansiedad lingüística ante el aprendizaje de inglés en los grados universitarios del Magisterio. Estrategias para lograr aulas emocionalmente seguras. Estudio de caso en un contexto universitario español. [Tesis doctoral, Universidad de Zaragoza].  
<https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/79390/files/TESIS-2019-114.pdf>
- Martin, S., & Álvarez, I. (2017). Students' feedback beliefs and anxiety in online foreign language oral tasks. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 14(18), 1-15.
- Nash, G., Crimmins, G., & Oprescu, F. (2016). If first-year students are afraid of public speaking assessments what can teachers do to alleviate such anxiety? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41(4), 586-600.
- Ramirez, S., & Artunduaga, M. Authentic Tasks to Foster Oral Production Among English as a Foreign Language Learners. *HOW*, 25(1), 51-68.
- Rubio, F. (2004). *La Ansiedad en el aprendizaje de Idiomas*. Publicaciones de la Universidad de Huelva.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.
- Sánchez, A. (1982). La enseñanza del Inglés y las cuatro destrezas: escuchar, hablar, leer y escribir. *Revista de Bachillerato*, 23, 91- 94.
- Tobías, S. (1994). Interest, prior knowledge, and learning. *Review of educational research*, 64(1), 37-54.