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Gamification for improving oral communication skills in English as a Foreign Language learners

Gamificación para mejorar las destrezas de comunicación oral en estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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ABSTRACT

This research focused on the use of Gamification to improve oral communication skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student. It was carried out in a private school in El Quinche with 50 students between 13 and 14 years old who belonged to eighth grade EGB. A quasi-experimental method was used; therefore, a pre-test, a post-test, surveys, class observation sheets and a questionnaire were applied. The results showed that the application of gamification provided significant support to improve students' oral communication skills. In addition, interactive games were found to be more effective in improving EFL students' communication skills. As a conclusion, a variety of games provided reinforcement to the development of the four elements pertaining to oral communication such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency.

Descriptors: EFL students; gamification; oral skills; fluency; grammar. (UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

Esta investigación se centró en el uso de la Gamificación para mejorar las habilidades comunicativas orales en el estudiante de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE). La misma se llevó a cabo en un colegio privado de El Quinche con 50 estudiantes entre 13 y 14 años que pertenecían a octavo grado EGB. Se utilizó un método cuasi experimental; por lo tanto, se aplicó un pre - test, un post - test, encuestas, fichas de observación de clases y un cuestionario. Los resultados mostraron que la aplicación de la gamificación proporcionó un apoyo significativo para mejorar las habilidades de comunicación oral de los estudiantes. Además, los juegos interactivos resultaron más eficaces para mejorar las habilidades comunicativas de los estudiantes de ILE. Como conclusión, una variedad de juegos proporcionó refuerzo al desarrollo de los cuatro elementos que pertenecen a la comunicación oral como son: gramática, vocabulario, pronunciación y fluidez.

Descriptores: Estudiantes de ILE; gamificación; habilidades orales; fluidez; gramática. (Tesauro UNESCO).

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INTRODUCTION

Games have been considered as a means of entertainment or pastime; however, they have become a growing trend in education and a powerful tool for students to enhance their learning process. In this way, gamification has contributed to improve the students' language skills in classrooms, since all kinds of games are motivational factors that benefit learning.

In this respect, gamification in English as foreign language, that is, EFL classes, helps students acquire new knowledge and develop speaking skills. (Koivisto & Hamari, 2014) claim that gamification has turned into a solution for the educative field, since it keeps students engaged in the different tasks that they have to accomplish in schools.

In the same line, (Buckley & Doyle, 2016) argue that gamification works as a strategy that motivates the students in their teaching-learning process, which is a big advantage that promotes the development of the students' oral communication, where the students feel comfortable at the moment of applying their knowledge. Therefore, the use of gamification to improve oral communication skills in students of English as a foreign language has gained thrust to transform the learning environment. However, teachers should look for the most convenient games to be applied in the class, considering the objectives, games, and content, among others.

Some students do not find the way to improve their communicative skills; in this way, the lack of creative oral activities has affected the development of a new language. Thus, taking into consideration that technology is involved in the educational field, it is important to evolve it together with games that effectively help students in their learning process; for this reason, gamification may be applied in EFL classroom through the most suitable games for each class. (Zheng & Gardner 2017) affirm that setting different games that contain problem solving strategies boost the students' interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities and allow them to get ready to give solution and overcome any obstacle.

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There are some researchers who have corroborated the effectiveness of applying gamification in the development of communicative skills. (Korkealehto & Siklander, 2018) in their experimental research with 23 EFL students from Finland concluded that gamification enhanced the student's oral communication skills, provoked engagement and provided positive experiences with the learners; by the same token, (Smiderle, Rigo, Marques, de Miranda & Jaques, 2020) presented a study where 48 students from Brazil participated in the research to verify if gamification produced engagement and commitment among students who used games and game elements, the results showed that the experimental group had more success and engagement than the control group. In this regard, (Dicheva, Dichev, Agre & Angelova, 2015) stated that there has been a vast number of studies about gamification related to education. They concluded that students like and enjoy using games in their learning process because they feel more engaged and motivated while they are doing their tasks

Regarding this topic, speaking skill is vital when developing daily activities. It is a productive skill that allows everyone to stay in contact, express ideas and communicate interactively with effectiveness. Additionally, communication is an important element of a rational society, which is able to solve problems because communication takes place everywhere and all the time, so this process is essential in all societies.

In this sense, communicative skills are fundamental in the development of EFL since they allow learners to have a good interaction and improve interpersonal relationships. (Dewi, Kultsum & Armadi, 2016) agree that oral communication is one of the most important skills that students of English as a Foreign Language should improve because good communication will support the improvement of other skills. Furthermore, (Motschnig & Ryback, 2016) state that communicative skills are indispensable to get our goals and leadership; therefore, it must be a competence that should be developed in education. In consequence, the effectiveness of communicative skills is connected to the success of management and organization.

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For that reason, teachers should look for strategies that enable students to progress in their communicative skills. The carrying out of interesting strategies and activities will support the correct development of speaking skills in EFL students. Communicating through speaking will also leverage the improvement of oral skills in a foreign language; in this scene, the more a person can communicate their thoughts accurately, the better the chances of achieving their goal. In addition, (Tuhovsky, 2018) asserted that the majority of people thought that a person had more communicative opportunities when he or she was able to apply more diverse vocabulary in context to follow a conversation, he also stated that learning more vocabulary would improve the communicative skills greatly. Moreover, (Hosni, 2014) stated some factors that affect students in the development of their oral skills, she found some interesting facts that give us a clear idea of some problems that students face to develop their oral skills. She mentioned that students have speaking troubles because of linguistic patterns that are related to the language acquisition, she conveyed that lack of vocabulary and grammar have been impeding the learners' oral productive skills. The use of incorrect grammar affects the developing of their communication since they may confuse tenses that provide inaccurate information. Finally, pronunciation difficulties may also cause less confident students because they could misunderstand each other and would not respond or follow up the conversation. During her observation, she realized that students used their mother tongue to communicate and what is worse, teachers did not look for an efficient strategy to make them improve their new language. Finally, she observed that most of the students were shy and afraid of making mistakes; consequently, they avoided using oral communication. As a conclusion, good communicative skills foster to build up other language skills as well. Here, it is important to notice that a vast knowledge of vocabulary will open new opportunities for teachers and students in different fields, not only in the educative environment.

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There are some factors that affect oral communication, such as: anxiety which is considered as a main affective element that has interfered with the enhancement of a foreign language, so communication anxiety is a problem that learners have to face when developing their oral skills. Another factor is the lack of motivation, which is perhaps one of the most important elements in the process of learning a foreign language; it must be treated by applying positive strategies and preparing a good environment that makes learners feel confident. In this concern, a student who is interested in learning or discovering new things is clearly motivated. In consequence, authors advice to show interest in the students' thoughts, preferences and performance in order to help them overcome their weaknesses and strengthen their good qualities.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recall that there is a strong relationship among grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency that permits learners to enhance their speaking skills. Speaking skill is one of the most important abilities that students need to develop in the learning process. (Harmer, 2015) states that through the application of this skill, students have the opportunity to show how their language learning is developing and, of course they will be able to display their oral production. Additionally, they may apply different elements of the language in context. Consequently, this productive skill will support the improvement of other skills and the students will also be able to interact among one another. For this reason, fluency, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary will be considered in this research because they are key aspects for improving the oral expression.

It is concluded that teaching sounds is a must to develop the learner's pronunciation skills effectively. (Kim, Song, Lockee & Burton, 2018) suggest encouraging students to practice their pronunciation in an autonomous way; also, they recommend using technology to enhance pronunciation properly.

Various contributions define grammar as an essential element of communication. (Marchman & Thal, 2005) explain that grammar is the study of words, their function and

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meaning. In this context, it is indispensable to use correct grammar, since it is the system that allows us to produce sound, structure and good sense of ideas in any language.

To achieve this, gamification is an optimal option to develop fluency, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. (Kim et al., 2018) assert that gamification is an educational approach that supports the improvement of the teaching learning process, due to this approach leverages cognitive and motivational factors. Games have been present in all fields; in this point, the benefits to the educational sector are significant because they contribute to the teaching-learning process and raise learners' motivation to participate in classroom activities. That is why many authors suggest implementing gamification in the school activities in order to help students stimulate and improve their performance. (Kim et al., 2018) agree that the majority of games contain stories that are present in an intrinsic way; they also add that games stories are very similar to other dramas, novels or even movies with the little difference that there are objectives to achieve inside the educational field.

Additionally, there are several types of games to be used in EFL classroom, which are categorized in two main groups; in consequence, board games and interactive games will be included in this study.

Board Games include images and information of publicity. Those cards aim to generate conversational facts about the sponsors. These common and very useful American board games focus on the enhancement of oral communication, since the students have to move the dice in turn and complete the idea according to the information that is required; in this way, they have fun and enhance their communicative skills to oral interaction. Thanks to technology, we can also find the interactive games that are played online, which include dynamic tasks that make people enjoy.

It should be noticed that traditional games have been present in homes and schools with the intention of motivating people and producing relaxation to control stress. So, we may

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affirm that like the traditional ones, the interactive games are adaptable to different environments, since they permit to reinforce knowledge and assess students.

Taken into account all the aforementioned and considering the difficulties that learners generally face in the development of their communicative oral skills, it has been proposed “the use of Gamification to improve oral communicative skills in students of English as a foreign language”. The analysis will be made through different oral activities and the application of gamification in order to reflect about their benefits and consequently, provide a meaningful feedback to enhance the students’ communicative skills. Moreover, this study pretends to answer the following research questions: what is the impact of gamification on pronunciation, grammar, fluency and vocabulary? What are the most practical games to enhance EFL oral skills? And What are students’ perceptions about the use of gamification to improve their EFL oral skills?

The main beneficiaries will be educators and learners who will be able to discriminate between the oral activities that are able to contribute effectively and the ones that do not contribute much to the development of the foreign language. Additionally, the students may take advantage of learning through games and the use of technology as efficient tools for improving their communicative skills.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out in a private high school that is located in El Quinche in Pichincha province. The sample consisted of fifty students who belonged to eight grade EGB, and their ages were between 13 and 14. The students received English classes twice a week, during a period of 40 minutes. It is important to mention that their English level was mostly A2 according to the Common European Framework. Taking into consideration the pandemic situation, they took English classes through Zoom platform. Methodologically, a quasi-experimental method that included quantitative and qualitative approaches was applied. In addition, the tools that supported the present research were

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the following: pre – test, post –test, surveys, class observations sheets and questionnaires for collecting data. Furthermore, a Likert scale was useful to gather information from the students about their perspectives on gamification.

This study was explorative and descriptive and the method was quasi-experimental. Furthermore, some steps were followed: first, theoretical information was collected; second, in order to diagnose students' oral production, a pre - test was applied, which included 4 aspects such as: grammar, pronunciation, fluency and vocabulary. Then twelve classes with different games were developed in order to reinforce topics and verify the effectiveness of gamification. Inside them, three types of games were applied: interactive, board and serious games.

After the twelve classes, a post test with the same questions of the pre - test was applied. The rubric permitted to check, control and corroborate the students' progress in the post – test.

Finally, a survey using the Likert scale was applied to the participants, which contained the parameters: *always, often, sometimes, rarely and never*, with the aim of determining the impact of gamification on pronunciation, grammar, fluency and vocabulary.

Once the information was gathered, it was analyzed to answer the research questions and write the conclusions and recommendation.

Finally, to analyze the collected data, individual recordings during the pre – test and the post – test were used. The recordings helped to keep valid and reliable information from the students who participated in the research. In consequence, both qualitative and quantitative information were meaningful.

RESULTS

This chapter interprets and analyses data collected using the different research tools. In order to present the results, the research questions are presented to answer them.

What is the impact of gamification on pronunciation, grammar, fluency and vocabulary?

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Table 1.

Results of students' pre-test and post – test regarding the impact of gamification on pronunciation, grammar, fluency and vocabulary.

Pre test			Post test		
M= 6,53 / 65,30%			M= 8 / 80.00%		
Grammar	6,96	69,60%	Grammar	8,2	82%
Vocabulary	6,56	65,60%	Vocabulary	8,16	81,60%
Pronunciation	6,3	63%	Pronunciation	7,66	76,60%
Fluency	6,3	63%	Fluency	7,98	79,80%
Standard deviation	1,57		Standard deviation	1,54	
p= 0.03					

Source: Students' evaluation.

To identify the impact of gamification on students' oral communicative skills, 4 elements such as pronunciation, grammar, fluency and vocabulary were analyzed. Table 1 presents the results of the pre-test in which the students obtained 69.60% in grammar, 65,60% in vocabulary, their pronunciation reached 63% and the students' fluency was 63% of effectiveness. In summary, the general percentage of the pre - test was 65,30%. In conclusion, the standard deviation was 1,57.

In the results of the pre-test, students presented mostly problems in pronunciation and fluency. With regards to pronunciation, most of the students pronounced words and phrases wrongly. For example, in some audios they did not consider the possessive sound for father's name. Another example was the mispronunciation of the modal would.

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About fluency, most of the students had problems to respond with naturalness, since they showed too much hesitation and used fillers without reason. For instance, participants stayed quiet for a moment, and other students used “mmm”, “er”, “no”. It is necessary to mention that lack of fluency affected pronunciation development.

With respect to grammar, in the pre-test, most of the students could not respond using adequately possessives adjectives and the present simple. There were phrases such as: “my name is”, when they referred to their father and mother, so the use of the possessive “my” for all of the subjects was constantly misused. Moreover, making mistakes when they had to use third person and giving very short responses was also evidenced. In addition, none of the students were able to answer the correct structure when using the modal would (would +verb). For instance, they did not know what to say after would, as some students just mentioned “nothing, run, mmm”.

Regarding vocabulary, the lack of this element did not allow students to communicate effectively. They were limited to say very basic answers such as “yes”, “no”, and very simple words like names. For instance, when they were asked to talk about their favorite TV program, they just said “Simpson” and when they had to describe a beautiful place, they just mentioned a name such as “Manta”, “Quito”, “Panecillo”, and so on. In this sense, they were not able to give any detail. It is important to recall that developing the oral skills elements is a challenge that teachers and students should overcome. It is necessary to add that looking for the appropriate strategies with constant practice and applying them to EFL students, will support the enhancement of the learners’ oral skills.

On the other hand, after working with twelve different classes using gamification, the post - test shows the following results: Grammar 82%, vocabulary 81,60%; pronunciation 76,60% and fluency 79,80% of effectiveness. In consequence, the average of the post test is 80%, and the standard deviation is 1, 54. It is important to highlight that the students improved their oral communication in 14,7%.

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Regarding grammar, the students already learned to use possessives in context “my father’s name is”, they also corrected the use of modals structures, “I would run”. There were no mistakes related to the verb be; in addition, they improved the use of future tense with will, for instance, the students say “ I will travel to Galapagos”, the use of the second conditional with the appropriate form of the verbs in past was also enhanced.

With respect to vocabulary, this element permitted the learners to improve their responses; thus, in the post- test, the learners also included more complete sentences, such as: “yes I do, “my nickname is....”, “my favorite hero is very interesting”, my favorite place to visit is Manta”. Consequently, they were able to develop their ideas in complete sentences. Pronunciation was also improved by the students, they corrected some mistakes such as: “my “, “swim”, “would”; for that reason, those words that were mispronounced by many students in the pre- test were used rightly in the post- test.

It is pivotal to include that the improvement of the elements mentioned above permitted to enhance the students’ fluency because they were able to provide more information and without much hesitation.

As it is reflected in the table outcomes, the students in the post- test answered the questions with more confidence and did not use fillers, such as “ar, er , mmmm”. Consequently, it is inferred that the use of different games in class to improve the students’ oral communication was successful and the students improved their oral communicative skills.

In relation to the question: Which are the most practical games to enhance EFL oral skills?

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Table 2.
 The most practical games to enhance EFL oral skills.

Aspects	Board games		Serious games		Interactive games	
Grammar	7,75	77,50%	8,17	81,70%	8,80	88%
Vocabulary	8	80%	8,33	83,30%	8,40	84%
Pronunciation	8	80%	7,83	78,30%	8,20	82%
Fluency	7,83	78,30%	8,00	80.00%	8,00	80%
M=	7,90	79%	8,08	80.8%	8,35	83.5%

Source: Students' evaluation.

The games applied in this study were divided into three categories as it follows: Board games, serious games and interactive games. Table 2 indicates that, board games gather 79% of effectiveness, while serious games have 80,8% of effectiveness and interactive games show that they are the most effective ones with 83,5%.

In relation to board games, the students showed more positive response with the elements of vocabulary and pronunciation; it was evident that students did not care much about grammar. Some mistakes were noticed such as “me turn”, “his turn” rather than “her turn”, since they were aware of providing accurate answer to the questions and trying to be successful in the games. The learners did not require much fluency in their answers. In consequence, this kind of games effectively promoted the students' oral production.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that serious games were more accepted than board games and, in this case, grammar, vocabulary and fluency obtained higher score than pronunciation, it was due to the fact that serious games involved more games with content and reinforcement. In this situation, students used present and future simple

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correctly, it means that the application of grammar such as “I will...., It will be”, together with a variety of vocabulary, supported the students’ fluency during the games.

With reference to interactive games, these games had more improvement in the four elements, students developed grammar with an average score of 88%, vocabulary with an average of 84% which is pretty acceptable; in this regard, the category of interactive games supported the application and encouraged students to use a variety of words when playing the games. According to the pronunciation element, the average was very close to the previous element, since the learners had an average of 82%, it means that their pronunciation improved. Finally, fluency also improved and the students demonstrated a great advance in all of the elements of communication.

(Kumar & Lightner, 2007) assert that interactive games are considered as part of an innovative classroom technique because they support the improvement in education and encourage students to concrete their aims. Additionally, (Hur & Suh, 2012) suggest using interactive whiteboards, storytelling and podcasts as powerful strategies for improving gamification and oral communication in schools.

Based on the aforementioned, the students liked and enjoyed playing interactive games, since all of the elements of speaking, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency had a higher score than in the other kind of games. However, as it is evidenced in table 2, board games did not show as much effectiveness as the other game categories.

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Table 3.
Student's perceptions about the use of gamification to improve their EFL oral skills.

ITEMS	Always %	Often%	Sometimes%	Rarely %	Never%
1. The games motivated you to speak in class	0	70	20	10	0
2.You felt comfortable when you were playing games in class	0	80	20	0	0
3. The games supported your oral communication	10	70	20	0	0
4. You enjoy playing games with your classmates	20	20	30	30	0
5. You were scared or nervous during the games	0	40	40	10	10
6. You use online games with different platforms in class	0	0	80	20	0
7.The topics of the games were interesting	80	0	20	0	0
8. You consider to play the games with your family	0	40	60	0	0
9. Your teacher use rewards for the games	100	0	0	0	0

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10. You would like to play more frequently games in class	100	0	0	0	0

Source: Student's perceptions.

Table 3 shows information about the students' perception after applying gamification strategies that promoted the oral communication enhancement in the twelve classes.

According to question number one, 70% of students answered that the games *often* motivated them, 20% of students said *sometimes*, and 10% of them said that *rarely*, while 0% mentioned *always* and *never*. According to this table, it is obvious that not all of the students felt fully motivated with the application of the games; perhaps, some students were shy to share and talk to their classmates and they did not feel pleasant by speaking in class. On the other hand, it was evident that teacher needed to encourage the learners in a more convincing way.

According to question number two, 80% of students responded that they *often* felt comfortable and 20% of them said *sometimes*. One more time, not all of them felt completely comfortable. It means that it is necessary to look for strategies to make the games more enjoyable and agreeable.

Regarding question number three, 10% of the students answered that the games *always* supported their oral communication skills, 70% of them answered *often* and 20% of them said *sometimes*. In this question, just a few of the students said that games always supported their oral communication skills. However, the statistics are encouraging, since any student responded the frequency never or rarely. In this sense, teachers must be creative and take the roles of motivator to support the students' improvement.

With respect to question number four, 20% of students stated that they *always* enjoyed playing games with their classmates, 20% of them said *often*, 30% of them said *sometimes* and 30% of the students answered *rarely*.

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Regarding question number five, 40% of the students answered that they *often* were scared or nervous during the games, 40% of them said *sometimes*, 10% of students said *rarely* and 10% of them said *never*.

About question number six, 80% answered that they *sometimes* used online games with different platforms in class and 20% chose the option *rarely*. There were not answers for always, often and never. It is important to mention that an interactive platform called Kahoot was used to play and improve the students' oral skills. In addition, all of the games took place in a virtual way.

Question number seven shows that 80% of the students *always* considered the games interesting, while 20% of them selected *sometimes*. It was evident that most of the time, the topics were appealing and the students liked them. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that teachers must choose the most adequate and motivational games for improving the students' skills.

Regarding question number eight, 40% of the students *often* considered to play games with their family and 60% of them said *sometimes*. There were some factors that influenced the answers, that is, the students' age and their relationship with their relatives. In addition, some students preferred to play games in their mother tongue. For this reason, it is necessary the teachers' guide and their permanent feedback.

Regarding question number nine, 100% of the learners answered that their teacher *always* used rewards for the games. It is important to recall that rewards are part of extrinsic motivation; therefore, students must be motivated to complete their tasks successfully.

Concerning question number ten, 100% of the students would *always* like to play games in class. As it was evident, gamification brought support and enjoyment to improve the students' oral communicative skills; also, the learners kept interested in using games in their classes.

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CONCLUSIONS

The application of games in EFL classes effectively promoted the students' active participation and their communicative competence improved notoriously, since the scores demonstrated that they had enhanced the four oral aspects: pronunciation, fluency, grammar and vocabulary.

Gamification supported the teaching learning process, since using games in classes resulted beneficial for both teachers and students. Teachers spent meaningful time and also enjoyed monitoring games. In addition, students learnt by playing and felt totally engaged and encouraged.

The use of different games in class contributed to the enhancement of oral skills in EFL students who displayed gratifying outcomes. As it was shown, the students' oral productive skills were improved, since the learners found that using different games turned their classes into a more appealing way of learning.

The application of gamification and more practical games to support EFL skills yielded interesting results, as all three groups of games provided positive, meaningful and effective results in terms of using gamification to improve learners' speaking skills. Additionally, it was evident that despite of being a great influence in classroom activities, students had preferences for interactive games, which average was very close to serious games and board games.

Regarding the students' perceptions about gamification and EFL oral skills, the majority of the learners' answers coincided that the activities applied to enhance and motivate students had a great acceptance, because they focused on using their oral communication in class and outside it.

Finally, students improved grammar and vocabulary; as a result, they proved that gamification made them feel comfortable and encouraged to fulfill their tasks. In addition, the games were effective and fostered collaborative learning, which was a big advantage that stimulated the development of the students' oral communication.

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In summary, games should be carefully designed by teachers and modified if necessary, because they become fundamental tools that can provoke a positive reaction in students. Moreover, teachers should create friendly relationships with the students in order to offer a comfortable environment at the moment of developing oral communication.

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