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THE ROLE OF PHONETIC INSTRUCTION IN ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS
FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A STUDY BASED ON CAMBRIDGE FCE
EXAM RESULTS

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RESUMEN

Hoy en día, estudiar inglés como lengua extranjera es esencial para comunicarse con hablantes nativos. Es obligatorio reforzar las habilidades del idioma inglés. Sin embargo, hablar es una de las habilidades más difíciles al aprender el idioma porque los estudiantes de L2 deben aumentar su pronunciación para comunicarse con precisión. Al aprender el idioma a través de la fonética, los estudiantes pueden lograr una pronunciación clara. Por lo tanto, el presente artículo tiene como objetivo evaluar la influencia de la instrucción fonética en las calificaciones de la prueba de habla de estudiantes de secundaria en el examen FCE de Cambridge. Para este propósito, este diseño de investigación fue cuasiexperimental, es decir, hubo dos grupos para analizar y comparar. Los datos obtenidos se examinaron a través de un programa de IBM llamado Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Nos permitió verificar la hipótesis alternativa o rechazar la hipótesis nula. El método estadístico utilizado en esta investigación fue la prueba T. Un análisis detallado de los efectos de la instrucción fonética en las habilidades de habla reveló que esta instrucción no solo mejoró la claridad de la pronunciación, sino que también mejoró la comprensión auditiva y la fluidez, contribuyendo a la competencia comunicativa general.

PALABRAS CLAVES

inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), habilidades lingüísticas, expresión oral, instrucción fonética, examen FCE de Cambridge.

ABSTRACT

Today, studying English as a foreign language is essential for communicating with native speakers. It is compulsory to reinforce English language skills. However, speaking is one of the most difficult skills when learning the language because L2 learners must increase their pronunciation to communicate accurately. By learning the language through phonetics, learners can achieve clear pronunciation. Thus, the present article is aimed to evaluate the influence of phonetic instruction on high school students' speaking test scores in the Cambridge FCE exam. For this purpose, this research design was quasi experimental, meaning there were two groups to be analyzed and compared. The data obtained was examined through an IBM program named Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). It allowed us to verify the alternative hypothesis or reject the null hypothesis. The statistical method used in this research was the T-test. A detailed analysis of the effects of phonetic instruction on speaking skills revealed that this instruction not only improved pronunciation clarity but also enhanced listening comprehension and fluency, contributing to overall communicative competence.

KEYWORDS

English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Language Skills, Speaking, Phonetic Instruction, The Cambridge FCE Exam.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN (OBJETIVO DEL ARTÍCULO)

The English language has become one of the key global languages, essential for communication and success in our interconnected world (Fernández-Agüero & Chancay- Cedeño, 2019). Since the early 20th century, learning foreign languages has been important for personal growth, cultural understanding, and global cooperation. As a result, mastering English has become a crucial part of both, personal and professional development. Teaching and learning English as a foreign or second language has evolved by drawing from various humanistic disciplines, including psychology, sociolinguistics, and neurolinguistics (Mujiono & Herawati, 2021). This has enriched our theoretical and methodological knowledge of language education. Numerous studies and research efforts have focused on developing the four main language skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. According to Sharma (2021), the four language skills are interlaced when learning a language. Mastering speaking, listening, writing, and reading is essential to communicate ideas and information. They are divided into productive and receptive skills. For instance, there's a close relationship between speaking and listening skills. Oral communication is crucial because it demands precise pronunciation to avoid misunderstandings and requires careful listening to understand our conversation partners. Therefore, phonetic instruction is vital for language teaching and learning a foreign language (Durukan; Gokgoz-Kurt, 2024). Tarez and Almanzar (2020) spotlight that Spanish speakers may face various difficulties, due to their phonological organs are not adapted to English articulation, so it poses a challenge for those who start studying the language. Fossilization takes place, meaning that these errors must be corrected by the teacher. Some of the major problems concerning phonetics are regularly related to pronunciation and accent. Since English has sounds that do not exist in Spanish, speakers may mispronounce them or place stress incorrectly, leading to misunderstandings. Listening comprehension is another problem due to the variety of regional accents and dialects in English, as well as the speed at which native speakers often talk, for non-English-speakers conversations in this foreign language are challenging. Understanding English sounds is fundamental for interaction, the interlocutor can identify them when listening. Thus, the study of phonetics is essential to improving speaking and listening skills. The students with phonetics instruction are established as speakers who can provide a clear message to all people without struggling or hesitating. (Nurhayati, 2018). Despite the recognized benefits of phonetic training, students often face challenges in achieving high scores on standardized speaking tests when they lack such instruction. Issues such as poor production, unclear speech, and limited oral practice highlight



the necessity for targeted phonetic education. The speaking faculty plays an important role in communication, specifically for learners preparing for the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) exam. This study aims to compare the speaking test results of students who received phonetic instruction with those who did not. By identifying specific areas of pronunciation improvement through phonetic teaching, this research seeks to provide empirical evidence on the efficacy of phonetics in enhancing speaking skills among high school students.

1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

General Objective:

- to evaluate the impact of phonetic instruction on high school students' speaking test scores in the Cambridge FCE exam.

Specific Objectives:

- to compare speaking test scores between students who received phonetic instruction and those who did not.
- to analyze the effects of phonetic instruction on pronunciation clarity, fluency, and understanding in English speech.

2. MARCO TEÓRICO

The evolution of the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language has been substantial. Initially, it was heavily influenced by traditional methods. However, with the advent of various psychological and pedagogical theories, the emphasis began to shift in line with the dominant paradigms of the time. For instance, behaviorism focused on the "stimulus and response" model (Skinner, 1957), while the communicative approach underscored the importance of developing communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). Constructivism advocated for learning through social interaction and real world experiences, positing that knowledge is constructed collaboratively through these social encounters (Vygotsky, 1978). The study of language encompasses several linguistic levels, each crucial for achieving fluency in both spoken and written communication. From Rousseau's theory of the linguistic sign, which explores the relationship between meaning and signifier, to contemporary research in pragmatics, linguists have developed frameworks to enhance our understanding and use of language (Vo & Moore, 2024). Phonetic and phonological elements, such as articulation, accent, and intonation, although consisting of the smallest units devoid of intrinsic meaning, are essential for interpreting the meanings of words and comprehending the nuances of spoken messages (Wong et al., 2020). All these linguistic aspects concerning phonetics, phonology, lexicology, semantics, and syntax are parts of the language-learning process. Contemporary understandings of language now encompass broader and more complex dimensions, including culture, context, and identity. Consequently, studying a foreign language involves a range of competencies beyond mere linguistic elements, incorporating sociolinguistic, cultural, discursive, and strategic aspects that reflect the evolution of pedagogical theories (Aghabarari & Rahimi, 2020). Language didactics has thus evolved from a prescriptive approach to one that is interactive and student-centered. This shift has led to the development of numerous methods designed to foster active student engagement in the learning process, with a strong focus on the four core language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. All language skills are important, but speaking and listening are skills students need to use and develop in social life. Effective communication requires analyzing and understanding what the other person is saying to respond appropriately.

Therefore, it's important to balance precision, comprehension, fluency, and metacognitive strategies in these processes as part of mastering English. Accurate articulation of sounds helps to avoid misunderstandings (Xurramova, 2023). By understanding English sounds, listeners can better identify and interpret them, making the study of phonetics crucial for enhancing both speaking and listening skills (Snezhko et al., 2023). Phonetics instruction is indispensable in language education, especially for enhancing speaking skills among students preparing for standardized exams like the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE). Phonetics, which involves the study of speech sounds and their production, underpins accurate pronunciation and effective communication (Dandee; Pornwiriyaakit, 2022). This foundational knowledge enables educators to develop targeted teaching strategies to improve phonological awareness and oral proficiency. Similarly, the FCE exam evaluates candidates' English oral production with emphasis on precise pronunciation and effective communication (Saville; Hargreaves, 1999). The interaction hypothesis is a theory that emphasizes the importance of face-to-face communication, linking phonetics instruction with communicative skills, and facilitating language acquisition (Jiang et al., 2023). Precise phonetic production improves learners' ability to engage effectively in conversations and negotiate meaning in real-life situations. This theory underscores the significance of phonetic accuracy in achieving communicative fluency, a key component assessed in speaking tests like the FCE. Tsui et al. (2020) complement this perspective by highlighting the significance of comprehensible input in language learning. Phonetics instruction ensures that learners receive clear and understandable speech input that accelerates the acquisition of pronunciation and intonation patterns, it is crucial for succeeding in speaking assessments like the FCE exam. Empirical studies underline the transformative impact of systematic phonetics instruction on learners' speaking proficiency. For instance, Moore and Cuevas (2022) demonstrate that targeted phonetics training is correlated with measurable improvements in students' pronunciation accuracy and fluency during speaking tests. Consequently, integrating phonetics into language curricula is necessary, though it requires strategic planning and curriculum design. Educators must adopt inclusive practices addressed to diverse learner needs, ensuring equitable access to phonetic resources and support (Mompean & Fouz-González, 2021). Effective phonetics instruction, not only enhances students' phonetic awareness but also, boosts their confidence in oral communication, comprehensively preparing them for language proficiency exams. Nagle et al. (2023) further support the role of phonetics in language

learning, suggesting that explicit instruction in phonetic principles enhances students' ability to articulate sounds accurately and comprehend spoken language effectively. According to Jiang et al. (2023) incorporating phonetic activities into classroom practice improves students' phonological processing skills, thereby enhancing their overall speaking proficiency. Phonetics instruction emphasizes its critical role in developing speaking skills and enhancing communicative competence among language learners, particularly those preparing for standardized assessments. Educators can effectively promote phonetic proficiency and facilitate meaningful language acquisition experiences by integrating theoretical insights with practical applications and innovative methodologies.

3. METODOLOGÍA

This study investigates phonetic instruction's impact on high school students' speaking test scores in the Cambridge FCE exam. The methodological design rigorously assesses how targeted phonetic training can enhance pronunciation, intonation, and speaking fluency. Using a quasi-experimental design, this research seeks to provide clear, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of phonetic instruction in improving speaking skills. The study includes detailed descriptions of the study's design, sample selection, data collection, analysis methods, and limitations to ensure the transparency and reliability of the results, facilitating a thorough understanding and potential replication of the study. This research adopts a positivist paradigm, aiming to objectively measure and analyze the impact of phonetic instruction on students' speaking test scores using quantitative data. The positivist approach is appropriate because it seeks to identify and quantify relationships between variables through empirical evidence and statistical analysis. Additionally, applying standardized tests and variables improves the accuracy of results, providing a thorough understanding of the optimistic effects of phonetic instruction. The research implements a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test and post-test comparison between two groups of high school students: one that received phonetic instruction and one that did not. This design allows the assessment of the impact of phonetic instruction by comparing the performance of both groups before and after the intervention. The quasi-experimental design contrasts groups with different conditions or treatments to find cause- and -consequences connections. This design provides statistical findings because of quantitative data. (Galang, 2022) To carry out this study, the population is drawn from a private institution in Cuenca, where students are enrolled in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) program. The sample consists of 20 high school students preparing for the Cambridge FCE exam. The experimental group includes 10 students who received phonetic instruction, while the control group, also comprising 10 students, did not received phonetic instruction. At the moment of the exam the participants were aged between 17 to 18, with 14 female and 6 male students. Each group composed of 7 females and 3 males and predominantly comes from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds.

3.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CAMBRIDGE FCE SPEAKING EXAM.

According to Cambridge (2023), the Cambridge FCE exam assesses multiple skills, but this study primarily focuses on the speaking component. The speaking test evaluates candidates across four key areas: Grammar and Vocabulary: This assesses the candidate's control over grammatical structures and vocabulary usage. For Band 5, students should show good control of both simple and complex grammatical forms and use a range of appropriate vocabulary. Band 3 indicates good control of simple forms and a range of vocabulary for familiar topics. Lower bands reflect decreasing control and range. Discourse Management: Effective discourse management involves producing extended language stretches with minimal hesitation and using cohesive devices to structure ideas. Band 5 requires extended contributions with clear organization, while lower bands show increasing hesitation and less effective organization. Pronunciation: Pronunciation is judged on intelligibility, appropriate intonation, accurate sentence and word stress, and clear articulation of individual sounds. Band 5 demands clear articulation and appropriate intonation with minimal errors, whereas lower bands reflect increasing issues with intelligibility and pronunciation. Interactive Communication: This evaluates how well candidates maintain and develop interactions. Band 5 speakers initiate and respond appropriately, linking contributions effectively and negotiating outcomes, while lower bands show less effective interaction management.

4. ANÁLISIS DE RESULTADOS Y DISCUSIONES

To collect the data, the assessments received by both groups during the Cambridge FCE speaking test were taken into account. The experimental group received the phonetic instruction period during the CLIL program. This allowed for a comparison of speaking scores before and after phonetic instruction. The speaking test is specifically analyzed to measure improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and interactive communication, aligned with the provided rubric.

4.1 RESULTS OF THE GROUP 1 WITHOUT PHONETIC INSTRUCTION

The first group, consisting of 10 students preparing for the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) exam, did not receive any phonetic instruction. These students were selected based on their initial English proficiency levels and matched with the second group to ensure comparability. Their results in the FCE test is indicated in the following table:

Table 1: Scores of students in the first speaking test.

CANDIDATE	SPEAKING SCORE
A	174
B	172
C	167
D	164
E	164
F	173
G	168
H	172
I	165
J	163
AVERAGE	168,2

Source: Prepared by the authors

These results show a moderate level of speaking proficiency, with scores ranging from 163 to 174, and an average speaking test score of 168,2 (Table 1). Consequently, the scores have some variability which supports setting a baseline to contrast the effectiveness of phonetic instruction in future tasks that require oral production.

4.2 RESULTS OF GROUP 2 WITH PHONETIC INSTRUCTION

The second group, consisting of 10 participants who also matched the first group, in terms of initial proficiency and demographic characteristics, received phonetic instruction. The phonetic instruction aimed to enhance pronunciation clarity and overall speaking performance. It was designed to address several key aspects of pronunciation and speaking skills:

- phonemic awareness: instruction included teaching the sounds of English phonemes, focusing on individual articulation sounds and their correct usage in speech;
- pronunciation accuracy: activities aimed at improving the accuracy of vowel and consonant sounds;
- intonation and stress patterns: emphasis was placed on natural intonation and stress patterns to enhance fluency and comprehensibility in speech. The instruction was integrated into speaking practice

sessions, where students applied phonetic principles in simulated speaking scenarios and received feedback on their performance. This approach was addressed to provide students with the necessary tools to improve their speaking scores by enhancing their ability to produce and perceive accurate English pronunciation. The results of this group after phonetic instruction, as measured by their speaking test scores, were as follows:

Table 2: Scores of students in the second speaking test.

CANDIDATE	SPEAKING SCORE
1	190
2	174
3	190
4	181
5	181
6	177
7	175
8	175
9	174
10	174
AVERAGE	179,1

Source: Prepared by the authors

The data shows the speaking test scores from the second group of 10 students who mastered phonetic instruction. This group evidences an improvement in scores, ranging from 174 to 190, with an average score of 179,1. Thus, it indicates a positive impact of the phonetic instruction.

4.3 COMPARISON OF RESULTS

By comparing the results of both groups, there is a clear difference in the speaking test scores. The average scores for the group with phonetic instruction were significantly higher than those without. Students included in the control group had gotten results under 180 points (Table 3). Most of the learners of the experimental group scored more than 170. Therefore, the difference between these scores ranges from 9 to 17. The difference shown in Table 3 emphasizes that learners could improve their speaking skills by teaching phonetics to the second group. For this reason, it can be deduced that phonetic instruction had a plausible impact on students' speaking abilities.

Table 3: The table shows students' scores and the difference between them.

2022		2024		Difference
Candidate	Speaking Results	Candidate	Speaking results	
A	174	1	190	16
F	173	3	190	17
B	172	4	181	9
H	172	5	181	9
G	168	6	177	9
C	167	7	175	8
I	165	8	175	10
D	164	2	174	10
E	164	9	174	10
J	163	10	174	11
AVERAGE	168,2		179,1	10,9

Source: Prepared by the authors

4.3.1 Specific comparisons When we take a closer look at the several aspects of pronunciation and speaking skills, we can observe concerning:

- pronunciation clarity: that the second group, which received phonetic instruction, demonstrated improved pronunciation clarity, as evidenced by their higher speaking test scores. This is consistent with the aims of the phonetic instruction, which targeted the accuracy of phoneme production and stress patterns;
- fluency: improved fluency was observed in the speaking performances of the second group. This improvement aligns with the phonetic instruction's focus on reducing hesitation and improving the flow of speech;
- listening comprehension: phonetic instruction also had a positive effect on listening comprehension. As students learned to produce and recognize the sounds of English more accurately, they became better at understanding spoken English. This improvement in listening comprehension was reflected in their ability to respond more effectively during speaking tasks.

4.4 HYPOTHESIS TESTING After the teaching-learning process where the phonetic training was put into practice, the students took the Cambridge CFE exam, and their scores received in speaking skills were the data used to corroborate the hypothesis. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS v. 27) was used; this software provides accurate statistical analysis. To confirm the hypothesis, it was necessary to state it and analyze the sample data to determine if it was plausible to accept or reject. To assess whether phonetic instruction significantly influenced students' speaking test scores, we applied a t-test for independent samples. The hypotheses were as follows: H1: Phonetic instruction influences high school students' speaking test scores in the Cambridge FCE exam. H0: Phonetic instruction does not influence high

school students' speaking test scores in the Cambridge FCE exam. 4.4.1 T-Test results The t-test reveals the significant difference between the two groups. The standard significance level (p).

Figure 1: T-test 1
Statistics for a sample

	N	Media	Desv. Desviación	Desv. Error promedio
Score1	10	168,20	4,211	1,332
Score2	10	179,10	6,332	2,002
Candidate	10	5,50	3,028	,957

Source: Prepared by the authors

Figure 2: T-test 2
Test for a sample
Test value = 0

	t	gl	Sig. (bilateral)	Mean difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
					Lower	Upper
Score1	126,308	9	,000	168,200	165,19	171,21
Score2	89,438	9	,000	179,100	174,57	183,63
Candidate	5,745	9	,000	5,500	3,33	7,67

Source: Prepared by the authors

Figure 2 establishes that the null hypothesis must be rejected while the alternative hypothesis is accepted.

Therefore, it can be observed that there is a notable difference between the results before and after teaching phonetics to improve speaking skills in learners.

4.5 ANALYSIS OF RESULTS The analysis reveals that phonetic instruction taught to the experiment group significantly impacted pronunciation clarity and fluency in English speech. Students who received phonetic training demonstrated clear and measurable improvements in their ability to produce accurate speech, as evidenced by their higher scores on the speaking component of the Cambridge FCE exam. This improvement underscores the effectiveness of phonetic instruction and validates the hypothesis that such training can enhance speaking proficiency.

5. CONCLUSIÓN

The next conclusions could be defined after a detailed evaluation whether phonetic instruction had impact on high school students' speaking test scores in the Cambridge FCE exam:

The results demonstrated that phonetic instruction impacts high school students' speaking test scores in the Cambridge FCE exam. Speaking test scores can be compared between students who received phonetic instructions and those who did not. Thus, it was observed an improvement in the speaking skills of those who received the instruction. Group 1 has got an average of 168,2 and the total average of group was 179,1. It can be evidenced a great change after phonetic instruction on high school students'. The authentication of the alternative hypothesis through the T-test established significant differences among both groups considering their phonetic instruction level. Definitely, phonetic instruction impacted students' pronunciation, clarity, fluency, and listening comprehension. Because the value obtained in the Ttest was 0,000 which means that null hypothesis is rejected while alternative hypothesis is accepted.

A detailed analysis of the effects of phonetic instruction on speaking skills revealed that this instruction not only improved pronunciation clarity but also enhanced listening comprehension and fluency, contributing to overall communicative competence. Teaching phonetics played an important role on students' speaking skills, it was evidenced on the high results of group 2. That is why it can be deduced that students did no have troubles as Group 1. The advantages for students who received phonetic training highlight that this practice is crucial for improving speaking and listening skills, especially in standardized assessment contexts. The study underscores the importance of incorporating phonetic instruction into language teaching programs.

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CERTIFICATE OF PUBLICATION

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As an expression of the truth, we hereby sign this declaration.



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