

The Relationship Between Listening Proficiency and Speaking Improvement in Higher Education: Considerations in Assessing Speaking and Listening

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Abstract: This study examines the outcomes of having recourse to listening skills as support to improve oral skills in English language teaching. In this context, data from 120 students at a specific higher education institution was analyzed; 60 of whom were provided with totally listening-focused instruction and activities, while a separate group of 60 students receiving normal institutional English teaching. A comparative analysis of pre- and post-test rubric labels and scores indicated a close link between listening proficiency and a slight improvement in functional and interactive oral sub-skills. The results of this study have implications for defining the foundations of future research in English teaching methodologies and strategies, and the second language assessment process for speaking and listening skills.

Keywords: Listening instruction, speaking improvements, listening and speaking connection, English teaching, ESL, EFL, linguistics

Introduction

Nowadays, higher education institutions seem to support the acquisition of high-level knowledge and skills in their programs through the adoption of multiple frameworks to understand the world. AIEP Institute—the institution studied hereafter—adopted a kind of paradigm denominated *Competency-Based Model* or CBET. This framework fits into the institution's guidelines for the provision of academic instruction.

The Institute's English courses, as a logical consequence, propose that students be immersed in a completely communicative English paradigm focusing on the development of productive skills—particularly speaking. Nevertheless, the Institution's large classes in some professional programs, and mostly written assessment procedures, have an influence on the development of oral skills in both English teaching and its assessment procedures.

Regarding the fact that the Institute needs to improve this communicative skill in terms of teaching practice and measurement, the efforts of this investigation have been centered on searching for the best ways to align English training at the Institution with its assessment process, and considering its competency-based model.

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Some important authors such as Brillhart (1965), Clark et al. (1967), Feyten (1991), Rost (1994), Buck (2001), Gilbert (2008), and Bozorgian (2012) provide certain proposed alternatives in the absence of English Speaking practice and assessment. These optional proposals indicate that Listening is key when direct/semi-direct tests or Speaking performance tests cannot be administered for practical reasons, improving many oral sub-skills.

Prior academic arguments give the idea that training large groups of students in Listening would improve their oral skills without requiring significant oral practice. By doing this, it would be possible to improve oral skills in contexts where the number of students in classrooms is excessively high. Hence, this investigation is expected to show how influential the development of aural skills is on Speaking improvement in order to propose alternative testing instruments and English teaching strategies.

This research is based on a mixed methods approach and, certainly, some problems may arise due to this research methodology. Nevertheless, specific academic methods applied to similar investigations were used to support the entire process of this research in order to minimize problems.

Problem Statement

As it has been observed in the last few years, Chilean higher education institutions are apparently giving enormous importance to teaching English language in their professional programs by focusing on their own educational models. That is the case of the Institute in this study, where a model of Competences has been adopted. Surely, this implies measurement procedures and the teaching process for English courses should be instructed under significant oral and written performance. However, this first skill has not apparently taken place.

Productive-skill activities and testing instruments are considered to be time-consuming for teachers in terms of preparation and scoring, the tests must be standardized in all of the Institute's branches throughout Chile, and there are too many large classes in some academic programs. This is mainly why teaching and assessing Speaking in tests and classes has yet to be really taken into consideration, and why this investigation was proposed in order to establish a possible solution to resolve this issue.

Research Purpose

General Objective

The aim of this research is to determine the efficacy of using intensive Listening-based instruction in order to improve oral skills in students learning English as a second language. The goal is to find alternatives to develop oral skills in contexts where some external constraint prevents oral practice and measurement in real classes.

Specific Objectives

Certain subsidiary questions will be helpful in focusing this investigation; moreover, they will help to decide what methodological considerations may be implemented in this research. Thus, these questions are the following:

- What are the necessary Listening features or considerations that need to be taken into account for developing oral skills in English learners at the Institute?

- How do we relate aural features developed in classes to the Institute's English teaching process?

Theoretical Framework

The Nature of Speaking

As a first step to proceed with this research, it is necessary to understand that oral proficiency is a priority in English second language learners in higher education. This is mainly because professional academic programs or career goals claim that English oral development is an integral part of a second language syllabus (Pan & Pan, 2011). However, there are certain factors to take into consideration in terms of English instructors' impressions as to how well someone can perform in oral language skills, what main aspects have to be considered for teaching oral language, and how oral testing instruments can be prepared (Luoma, 2004).

Oral Second Language Acquisition

Spoken language. Oral production is composed of several characteristics that people perceive from language sounds. In other words, when someone uses language sounds, individuals create meaningful and interactive communication, whether individuals are native or non-native speakers, their home region, etc. (Luoma, 2004). Hence, oral language can be structured in terms of micro and macro skills.

Micro skills refers to "producing the smaller chunks of language such as phonemes, morphemes, words, collocations, and phrasal units" (Brown, 2004, p.142), whereas *macro skills* are associated with larger elements in oral production, such as *speech stream*: fluency, discourse, style, register, pitch, pronunciation, tone, etc. (Luoma, 2004); along with *linguistic* and *non-linguistic aspects* such as cohesion, nonverbal communication, postures, gestures, etc. (Brown, 2004).

Spoken grammar. As a norm, English language learners are tested considering their spoken performance, from simple structures to some more complex speeches. However, the fact is that, in speech, students perform short stretches of oral language depending on their levels (Brown, 2004). In other words, as Luoma (2004) points out, "oral idea units developed in language performance have to be elaborated and considered much simpler than writing; therefore, grammar in Speaking is understood in terms of short phrases and clauses connected with coordinating conjunctions and pauses" (p. 12).

Spoken words. As it has been previously mentioned, one of the first things that teachers have to know is that speaking performance can be considered from the point of view of the use of language and grammar, as well as the use of words that are expressed in the simplest or most complex ways. Hence, learners will intend to use generic words rather than specific ones, along with fixed phrases, fillers, and hesitation markers (Luoma, 2004).

Strategies for Creating Time to Produce Oral Language

Some important academics such as Nattinger and DeCarrico (Leech, 2002), Peters (1977), and Bolinger (1976) referred to one of the strategies that speakers use to create time to speak as *lexicalized sentences*. These are fixed expressions like idioms with semantic opacity and structural invariability (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; as cited in Leech, 2002). Their main function is to be a formulaic chunk of speech—*What a nice... , What a horrible... , I never thought that... , I thought that...*—which participates in the process of fluent reception and production of

oral acts (Peters, 1977). Another strategy is associated with *Fillers* or *Disfluences*. Barr and Seyfeddinipur (2010) mentioned that in a real discourse, speakers cannot be as fluent as thought, so therefore the act of repeating words (*the the car*), prolonging vowels (*wheeeeen*), and using fillers (*uh* or *um*) are actually beneficial in comprehension (Brennan & Schober, 2001). A last strategy to be considered is so-called *Hesitation Markers*. Hasselgren (2002) made references to these markers as “*small words*” such as *well* or *I mean*. They do not essentially contribute to the message itself, but they allow the speaker to “obtain time” in conversational strategies.

Slips and Errors in Speaking

According to Fromkin (1973), slips and errors can be considered as units of linguistic performance and an important part of production of speech. These units can be substituted, omitted, transposed, or added into speech, thus giving oral interaction a more meaningful sense. However, assessors have to be conscious that slips are just a lack of knowledge and even learners are aware of them.

The Nature of Elicitation of Oral Performance in the Classroom

Although speaking is composed of various sub-skills in accordance with linguistic considerations, the fact that these characteristics may be elicited in testable speaking tasks obliged test designers to simulate specific contexts, content, formats, and tasks in oral testing procedures.

Context. According to Luoma (2004), this refers to everything in a speaking situation, except that it is produced at a particular moment. Therefore, it includes concrete aspects of the situation, such as *where the talk or speech takes place*, and cognitive and experiential aspects, or *language use*.

Content. In any proposed oral testing process, the assessment procedures should reflect teaching (Mendelssohn, 1989). Hence, the content of oral testing procedures should include most of the elements previously taught in classes and useful and relevant content with which students will be able to reflect their knowledge of language in a real context (Slager, 1978). In short, teachers must assess students’ oral abilities in the target language or sufficiently close to the interlanguage context (Pan & Pan, 2011).

Formats. Oral language proficiency can be tested through three types of assessment instruments (Qian, 2009). These include direct, indirect, and semi-direct testing.

O’Loughlin (2001) related this indirect approach to pre-communicative eras due to the fact this method presents problems with test validity, and its main focus is on assessing the abilities that comprise the skill but not directly.

Another type of oral testing method is direct testing which, according to Luoma (1994), requires that the test-taker perform oral tasks that demonstrate their oral language proficiency. This kind of test format provides a high range of validity and reliability. Nowadays, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is understood to be similar to a face-to-face oral assessment.

The other format of testing method is known as SOPI (Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview), or a tape-mediated oral proficiency assessment. This method was created by Clark and Li (1986); and it does not require on-site examiners because the test-taker’s performance can be sent to a different location to be rated. It is efficient and cost-effective because it is delivered in language laboratories on a large scale—for large classes.

Tasks: Basic types of Speaking. According to Brown (2004), oral production can be placed in a special taxonomy, and from that point it is possible to determine the tasks to be designed in an oral testing process. This taxonomy is as follows:

- *Imitative*: This is a type of speaking performance focused on the phonetic level of oral production through words, phrases or sentences, but not “the test-taker’s ability to understand or convey meaning or participate in interactive conversation” (Brown, 2004, p. 141), such as *Repetitions* and *Reading Aloud activities*.
- *Intensive*: This refers to short chunks of oral language design demonstrating mastery in prosodic elements such as rhythm, stress, intonation, etc. The interaction with an interlocutor is minimal as in the case of *Dialogue Completion*.
- *Responsive*: This type includes interaction through short conversations, short talks, and simple requests and comments such as *Questions and Answers* and *Paraphrasing*. However, these interactions are at a limited level.
- *Interactive*: This is similar to responsive procedure, but there is an emphasis on the length and complexity of the interaction and assorted participants, such as *Role-play*. This type of interaction can be divided into *transactional*, exchanging information; and *interpersonal*, for the purpose of maintaining social relationships.
- *Extensive*: This type is comprised of speeches, oral presentations, storytelling, long conversations, and oral reports. The use of language is produced as in *monologues*.

The Nature of Rating Scales for Assessing Speaking in the Classroom

According to Pan and Pan, (2011) there are two approaches centered on measuring oral performance, but both of them have certain advantages and disadvantages. One of them is known as *Holistic Scoring* and the other is called *Analytic Scoring*.

Underhill (1987), Luoma (2004), and Pan and Pan (2011) stated that holistic scoring combines an overall impression of an examinee’s ability into a single score, emphasizing the fact that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The scoring is rapid and accurate based on the experience of assessors.

Regarding analytic scales, Omaggio (1986) mentioned that these scales provide specific aspects in each component of communicative competence --fluency, pronunciation, or intended features to be covered in speaking assessment. However, some authors, such as Pan and Pan (2011), Jones (1996), and Hughes (1989) stated that, although this type of scale is very accurate to assess a student’s language proficiency and centers on important characteristic of the skill, all of the band descriptors are sufficient to test language proficiency.

To sum up, the choice between holistic or analytic scales will depend on the purpose of the test, the number of students in the classroom, the scoring circumstances, and institutional constraints. Therefore, given these aspects, teachers will have to select one or another.

ESL and EFL Context in the Development of Oral Skills

It is widely known that the process by which people attain another language in addition to their mother tongue or first language is called second language acquisition (Thornton, 2010). Under these circumstances, there are two big contexts where second language may be acquired. One of them involves learners who are acquiring English in an environment in which English is not the native language (Longcope, 2010), whereas the other context is related to learners whose mother tongue is not English, but they are acquiring English in a native English-Speaking country

or place where this is the language is most frequently spoken (Longscope, 2010). Thus, on the basis of this reasoning, the English field denominates the former consideration as EFL or English as a Foreign Language, and the latter as ESL or English as a Second Language.

ESL Students: Oral Language in the Classroom

Fellowes (2006) indicated that, when considering oral language in ESL learners, it is important to focus learning on comprehensive understanding of oral messages and the connection with the environment. Therefore, the type of instruction given to ESL learners has an emphasis on interaction, conversation, and language use rather than on learning about language composition rules (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). In other words, context is not something that is greatly assessed, but rather how learners perform tasks in terms of an interactional point of view. According to Curtain and Dahlberg (2004), there are suitable activities that are appropriate for ESL learners:

- Oral interviews
- Picture description
- Role-play
- Show and tell
- Small group cooperative tasks

EFL Students: Oral Language in the Classroom

For EFL students, the learning process is based more on accuracy rather than placing emphasis on the communicational point of view (Brown, 2004). Therefore, it must be understood that there is a correlation between second language contact and acquisition. In other words, as non-native English speakers, EFL learners are more dependent on the amount of contact they have with English language (Longcope, 2010). In terms of contact with English language, EFL learners are faced by a lack of English contact, input, and output. Longcope (2010) stated that EFL learners have approximately three times less English contact than ESL learners; therefore, EFL learners possess a second language environment that is limited, and this situation creates problems with understanding interlocutors asking for continuous repetition and recall in oral performance. According to Brown (2004), there are activities that are appropriate for EFL learners:

- Minimal pair oral recognition
- Imitative oral tasks (phonemes, words, phrases, and sentences)
- Dialogue completion
- Picture description
- Role-play

It can be said that, because ESL learners receive more second language contact over a continuous period, they receive more comprehensible input and also elicit more comprehensible input. ESL learners, moreover, produce more comprehensible output focused on communication than EFL learners. Longcope (2010) mentioned that this happens mainly because EFL learners have little in-class interaction and they reformulate messages instead of understanding them. Also, EFL learners have few chances to produce oral messages in their context.

From the above explanations of how speaking is developed in the classroom and in different language contexts, it is clear that communication between people occurs because we

are capable of using a variety of language skills such as Listening, Speaking, Writing, and Reading in context. However, production of comprehensible input in oral form implies that teachers will have to be able to design a range of activities to learn a second language by using Listening skills. They do so by mastering the aforementioned language skill through two different perspectives known as *segregated-skill instruction* and *integrated-skill instruction* (Oxford, 2001). Therefore, as a result of teaching oral performance in the classroom, English teaching will show great interest in aural skills as individual or complementary abilities for oral improvement (Richards, 2008).

The Nature of Listening

Listening comprehension is often seen as a passive activity or skill because it is developed internally or, rather, it is a cognitive process that does not produce observable results. However, some authors such as Vandergrift (2004), Mendelssohn (1989), and Richards (2008) have stated that Listening is an active process that requires an assorted range of activities, such as discrimination between sounds, understanding words and grammar, interpreting intonation and other rules in phonetics, and retaining information to be interpreted in context later. In other words, this skill needs to be studied in relation to how the language comprehension system works—the Listening process—and how language is used to convey meaning—Listening comprehension (Buck, 2001).

Listening Through Second Language Acquisition

As it has been observed from the previous sections, language skills possess linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics that facilitate understanding, so how do learners process aural input from spoken language?

Listening as a skill.

Spoken discourse. According to some academics such as Richards (2008), Brown (2004), and Buck (2001), on the one hand, Listening is a cognitive, instantaneous, and linear activity that processes aural information. However, on the other hand, spoken discourse has certain special characteristics, such as being delivered in coordinated clauses avoiding subordination, spoken texts are contextualized before starting a conversation, and there is a tendency to use connectors that help understand a spoken text without repeating certain pieces of conversation (Richards, 2008). Buck (2001) clearly referred to two forms of understanding spoken discourse.

Bottom-up processing facilitates understanding and interpreting sounds from the smallest to the largest linguistic units or is a decoding process (Rost, 1994; 2002). Thus, the learner may decode sounds from the simplest form—a phoneme—to an oral discourse. In short, it can be said that this mode goes through a phonetic level, then a syntactic level, followed by a semantic level, and finally literal understanding.

The normal activities conducted by teachers that focus on the aforementioned points are *dictation, close Listening, multiple-choice questions after text, recognition, and processing of input*. However, Buck (2001) argued that this view is not always linear. In other words, “it is quite possible to understand the meaning of a word before decoding the sound” (p. 2). He explained that it is not necessary to hear all the information to understand a message and this is usually because we have some background knowledge.

Top-down “processing refers to how learners use the knowledge they already possess to make sense of the information to which they listen” (Vandergrift, 2004, p. 4). In relation to this process to understand oral input, Buck (2001) pointed out that learners and teachers should not underestimate acoustic input. This is because listening comprehension is the consequence of the interpretation of linguistic knowledge, context, and general world knowledge.

Richards (2008) referred to this process as something that goes from meaning to language, but there are some particular features in top-down processing, such as “activation of schemata”. This means that the speaker and listener share understanding about similar topics, by interpreting information, but not necessarily by knowing all the words spoken.

Spoken language. It has been previously mentioned that there are certain specific characteristics in spoken language, and Richards (2008) emphasized that it is necessary to understand all of them. He stated that there are three main characteristics of spoken language, which are that it is *encoded in the form of sounds, there are no chances of repeats, and it takes place in real time*. Nevertheless, there are other characteristics that need particular attention, as in the case of any attempt to understand a listening process or to test listening (Buck, 2001).

Phonological modification and spoken language comprehension. It is widely known that people need to learn the sounds of their native language to understand spoken language. However, those sounds are taught in isolation creating a problem when they have to be interpreted in normal speech. According to Buck (2001), “listeners need to know how the sound system works in order to be able to process natural speech in real time” (p. 34). Taking into consideration this previous statement, Roach (2001) states there are certain phonological modifications when people speak rapidly and these variations are included in specific features such as *Assimilation, Elision, and Intrusion*.

Accent and spoken language comprehension. Buck (2001) pointed out that a very important factor in listening comprehension is the type of accent that the second language speaker has. He stated: “*an unfamiliar accent can make comprehension almost impossible for listeners*” (p. 35). This is mainly because all languages have variations in accent because of geographical, cultural, or familiarity aspects.

Prosodic features and spoken language comprehension. As most of people know, spoken language is mainly centered on conveying meaning in the form of oral messages that our brain processes in the form of sounds. However, spoken language is not a linear sequence of sounds. According to Leena (2008), the naturalness of spoken language depends on certain characteristics that give speech melodic and rhythmic properties based mainly on prosodic elements. As regards this idea, second language teachers know that all languages have different ways of putting emphasis on pieces of message; therefore, the way of speaking information in an utterance is called *Pitch* (Gilbert, 2008). However, when modulation of pitch is controlled, it refers to *intonation* (Leena, 2008). Finally, when sound units such as word or sentences are shortened or lengthened in accordance with rhythmic patterns, it refers to *Stress* (Buck, 2001).

It can be deduced that learning prosody helps to understand syllables, words, sentences, and spoken discourse that make spoken language more intelligible, more comprehensible for processing, and easier to interpret in terms of different groups of sounds.

Hesitation and spoken language comprehension. Blau (1990) emphasized that certain filled pauses, or *fillers*, and unfilled pauses, or *silence*, are the most useful hesitation markers in processing group of sounds in spoken language.

Although it is important to know how to use hesitation markers—Speaking—and also how to interpret them at the same time—Listening—it is important to remember that sounds are acoustic signals, so the listener has to have some kind of knowledge to understand them, whereas silence or pauses are simply instances of no acoustic sounds.

Compensatory skills and spoken language comprehension. Listeners use linguistic knowledge to understand spoken language; nevertheless, there is always a gap in the second language learner's listening comprehension. Therefore, listeners will intend to understand the acoustic message by using visual information, general background knowledge, common sense, and non-verbal cues (Buck, 2001).

Buck (2001) mentioned at least three forms that non-verbal communication can adopt, such as compulsory movements or actions in certain social situations, such as shaking hands; body movements indicating the speaker's mood; and gestures or facial expressions, such as nodding the head to say "yes". In other words, spoken language can be complemented with non-verbal or compensatory skills that help support the speaker's acoustic messages.

Listening conveying meaning. As it has been mentioned at the very beginning of this section on listening, Listening has to be studied in terms of Listening composition and how meaning is conveyed to understand aural signs in spoken discourse, spoken language, or just simple sounds.

According to Ter Berge and Van Hezewijk (1999), the types of memory that are used to internalize an aural message and these are known as *declarative* and *procedural knowledge*.

Squire and Knowlton (1995) proposed that the former is related to a kind of guidance for physical activities and partially cognitive skills, and its presence is detected solely by means of performance—*how things are done*. The latter type is associated with storage of facts and events that is retained in the brain to evaluate the truth and falsity in propositions. In other words, declarative knowledge is to know that some phenomena exist.

Buck (2001) connected both kinds of memories, declaring that language knowledge—recognition of sounds—is just declarative knowledge, but identifying them in context is procedural knowledge. Therefore, listeners will first understand individual sounds in words, then secondly understand and process idea units, and finally understand a longer discourse. In short, we have to understand that if students do not have the knowledge of the sounds, they will not understand any piece of aural information, not even in context.

Apart from those two kinds of memories, Richards (2008) referred to the context of communication to internalize an aural message. That is, when you greet someone you know that there are many forms of doing so, but only one of them is necessary in certain contexts. Languages are also dependent on pragmatic aspects such as what is said and in what context that thing is said. Finally, there is a cognitive environment in which not all information is said literally, as in the case of metaphors.

In summary, learners' listening comprehension depends on their background knowledge or the schemata learned during their experience with a second language, and then how this is elicited from their memory using two different types of knowledge, and later how both procedural and declarative knowledge support their interpretation of meaning in terms of sounds, spoken words, sentences, and discourse. Finally, there is a contextual process that helps reinforce their inferences in terms of meaning.

The Nature of Conducting Listening Tasks

As it has been seen, the fact of determining what aural features and how to elicit them through skill performance will imply various different considerations. The first step is to establish the objectives of the intended aural tasks with some specific approaches related to language testing. Lado (1961) proposed that language is a set of separate bits or elements. Considering this idea, known as *discrete-point*, activities in classes have to be focused on isolated elements since listening comprehension is the recognition of sounds to reach a complex aural message. Oller (1979) claimed that skill tasks have to be considered in terms of a whole process rather than in parts. In other words, Listening would be tested in term of usage (proficiency) and not solely language knowledge (competence). Finally, Carroll (1972) proposed that tasks should be focused on the idea of underlying language as a purpose of communication, but always considering aspects of the situation, participants, context, and purpose. Regarding these three approaches, listening tasks constructs can be determined in terms of *a competence-based Listening construct, task-based Listening construct or interactive Listening construct* (Brindley, 1998; Chapelle, 1998).

Designing and Redesigning Listening Comprehension Tasks

As stated, all processes related to developing skill tasks follow clear steps and Listening is no exception. At this stage, all theoretical aspects to design listening tasks or testing already have been determined. Therefore, it is essential to understand that listening comprehension is composed of two complex processes; the way acoustic signals are acquired and the form in which these acoustic sounds convey meaning. This focus helps understand that the theoretical construct in listening comprehension may be distinct from the potential assessment objective.

There are many forms of activities that may be attributed to four types of Listening. However, the focus will be on the activities most frequently studied or used in listening tasks for practice in classrooms and in test procedures.

- *Intensive Listening* is mainly focused on the recognition of phonological and morphological elements of language. In other words, this classification is very closely associated with phonemic discrimination tasks—*minimal pairs*.
- *Responsive Listening* is centered on questions and selection of answers. The objective is to ask a question to the students, who are provided with four possible answer. Here, interactivity is very slight and there is use of Reading skills such as *Question and Answer* (Buck, 2001).
- *Selective Listening* is where students hear pieces of aural information for a limited time and they have to answer with certain specific information (Brown, 2004). This is most closely related to the integrative Listening task approach.
- *Extensive Listening* is similar to Selective Listening, but the difference is that Extensive Listening does not necessarily require memory, association, and storage or recall aspects (Brown, 2004). In short, the related activities are more communicative and more open-ended. Some typical examples are *Dictation of different lengths, Spoken and multiple-choice comprehension items, Spoken messages and authentic questions on details, Paraphrasing, and Retelling*. These kinds of activities can be associated with a discrete and integrative approach. However, new tendencies involve mixing Listening with Speaking or Writing—in the responses—and these activities are known as *Interactive Tasks* (Brown, 2004).

Even though there is a large range of tasks to be used in Listening comprehension tasks, these activities need defined training under specific strategies to elicit information from our declarative and procedural knowledge.

Buck (2001; as cited in Richards, 2008) recognized two strategies, namely *Cognitive* and *Metacognitive Strategies*. The former refers to the activation of mental activities to comprehend and store input to work on immediately or long-term for later retrieval. The latter strategy is associated with conscious and unconscious mental processes that are required to execute certain functions in the activation and management of our cognitive strategies.

Integrated Skills in Second Language Acquisition

It is widely known that language cannot be used in isolation. In other words, learning and teaching a second language means being trained, performing, and being assessed in terms of all factors included in negotiating meaning by all linguistic and non-linguistic means at one's disposal (Hinkel, 2010). From this point, many definitions have been coined to explain the phenomenon of mixing skills, but Oxford (2001) used one of the most simplistic and understandable descriptions, stating that an integrated-skill approach, unlike a segregated approach. He exposes the use of language skills in normal communication, and challenges learners to interact with a second language as it naturally occurs.

Buck (2001), Brown (2004), and Hinkel (2010) pointed out that the integration of skills implies the incorporation of the skills that share the same language medium. That is, Speaking provides sounds to be expressed, whereas Listening requires sounds to understand messages. There are certainly some variables, but the idea is to focus on the stated proposal. These authors also mentioned that the typical instructional paradigm provides the idea that receptive skills provide input and the productive model produces the input. In other words, there is a type of reinforcement that is useful in terms of improvement in some features of the secondary skill.

Integrated Skills in the Classroom Context

Unquestionably, all approaches are thought to be applied in context. That is, there is a reflection on what skills have to be related to. However, reflecting this point of view in instructional materials, textbooks, and assessments means that certain features must be considered. Hinkel (2010) proposed two essential teaching and learning objectives related to using approach:

- Focus on needed language features and use them in the same context or situations that are provided in the real world.
- Focus on thematic, cohesive elements of discourse or communications rather than elements of the chosen integrated skills.

Despite the fact that these two considerations are in line with real language context and performing practice, the complexity of integrating them in one single skill, and then extending that practice to other skills but retaining the same objectives, is extremely demanding for teachers. Therefore, integrated instruction will require well-prepared teachers and adoption of specific instruction models.

Cots (1996) proposed that in order to integrate two skills into practice, teachers would have to take the following three premises into consideration: (i) communicative competence, that is, language performance involves knowing the structures but considering to what extent it is psychologically feasible to use them; (ii) context, language variation, and real data. In other words,

language performance implies different functions, registers, and objectives depending on the context; and (iii) negotiations of intentions and interpretation, meaning that language performance is not simply the transfer of messages, but is negotiation of meaning to fulfill a goal. Fixing with prior consideration, Nunan (2004) introduced the concept of the task-based approach as an opportunity for learners to comprehend, use, internalize, perform, and interact in a target language involving classroom activities. These tasks are characterized by being focused on conveying meaning through communicative situations framed within real or natural language performance. The task is the use of language in the world beyond the classroom, emphasizing communication through interaction in the target language context. The tasks have to be done with authentic material and paying attention to the second language learner's interaction with their environment.

Integrating Listening and Speaking Skills

As it has been previously observed, integrating skills is intended to allow English language learners to perform better in a communicative competence paradigm. Moreover, it is widely understood that people can connect any language skills, but it is recommendable to mix those that share the same channel of communication, such as Reading–Writing and Listening–Speaking (Brown, 2004). Nevertheless, teachers may wonder to what extent there is improvement by integrating one skill (the primary skill) with another skill (the supporting skill), or how influential a supporting skill may be considered for improving the primary skill.

For this research purpose, some academics like Osada (1994) have argued that “Speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what being said is comprehended by another person” (p. 55).

Listening and Speaking in Improving Oral Skills

Feyten (1991) worked on an experiment and found that Listening ability and foreign language acquisition are highly interconnected and that this usually occurs because Listening plays an active role in “strategy development”. Noblitt (1995) stated that language learning starts from Listening and Reading (declarative knowledge); therefore, students have to be involved in that knowledge so that they can start producing language and adapting spoken language. In other words, aural comprehension supports spoken ability. Bozorgian (2012) conducted research in which she represented the relationship between Listening and other skills in an International English Language Testing System (IELTS). In her initial investigation, she draws special attention to the fact that developing Listening in the classroom produces a significant improvement in other skills. Based on her results, she states that Listening is the basic foundation of language acquisition, and that there is a strong correlation between audio skills with a different language system. It is important to point out that, despite the close relationship between oral/aural skills in nature, in this study Reading was most strongly related to Listening. Therefore, it could be said that Listening is clearly connected to development of Speaking.

Listening in Improving Oral Skills

Dupuy (1999) corroborated that Krashen's approach in relation to Input Hypothesis was possible (see Krashen, 1985). Dupuy reported improvements in second language learners' fluency, vocabulary, and confidence after one to five minutes of training with aural texts, but with an emphasis on meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output (see Nation & Newton, 2009 for more details). Nation and Newton (2009) carried out the same investigations, exposing students to aural training in every class, but as they focused on meaning-focused input and output,

they also centered on language-focused learning too, that is, training specific language features through communicative approaches. In this research, second language learners showed improvements in pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency in short messages. Other research conducted by Pavlenko (2010) was associated with improving Speaking through Listening. This investigation covered individuals that were in two groups of 25 elementary EFL students. One group was trained in a normal English class and they were exposed to integrated Listening and Speaking, but with the emphasis on Listening. The results were that students built up a kind of awareness of the interworking of language systems at various levels and established more fluent and productive speech. Pavlenko also pointed out that development of oral/aural skills is best achieved through a communicative-language approach. By doing so, second language learners were equipped with appropriate techniques with the priority on Listening as the link to improve Speaking.

Methodological Framework

In the preceding sections, all of the essential theoretical and practical points to define this investigation were stated. Nevertheless, it is necessary to answer to the specific objectives stated at the beginning of this research; thus, these queries must be answered through a *Pragmatic Paradigm* will be used for *Mixed Methods Research*. This is mainly because this research is intended to seek a workable solution to a stated question (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2010).

Sampling

As this research is based on corroborating how influential aural skills are for improving oral skills considering a limited Speaking performance environment, the Bellavista branch and its Health courses were chosen. The reason of this election is because both branch and courses has a large number of individuals to be studied. The next step is to form two courses of 60 participants, totaling 120 students and 3 teachers only. Teachers were chosen in accordance with their performance in the corresponding school. The parameters by which individuals were assigned to two groups (control and experimental ones) are the following:

- *Low proficiency English students*: These are the students who received a final score of between 4.0 and 5.4 on the previous English course—English I.
- *High proficiency English students*: These are the students who received a final score of between 5.5 and 7.0 on the previous English course—English I.

It is important to explain that the range of marks in the Chilean education system is from 1.0 to 7.0. Also, it is essential to mention that each course will be provided with 30 students with low proficiency and high proficiency to maintain a more homogenous group of people for both courses.

Data Sources

This research is centered on ascertaining the efficacy of using Listening instruction to improve oral skills. Therefore, for teachers, Semi-structured interview types were used because there is not previous information as to what interviewees do not know (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in connection with the purpose of this interview. Once all qualitative data from teachers' experiences is collected, the theoretical part of this research and the qualitative data are going to be related to design standard oral testing instruments. These testing instruments will be prepared in ways that help understand, by analyzing them, how influential aural skills are for oral skills.

Results and Discussion

Results and Discussion of Interview Data

Data collection techniques in this research are based on interviews and pre- and post-tests. Once the interviews were conducted with three English teachers from the Institute, the tape recordings were transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed. During the first stage of interview analysis, the transcribed data are inserted into a matrix that is divided into different categories and subcategories, such as *Methodology* (class development, motivation and participation, and resources) and *Assessment* (design and testing purpose).

From interview results, one of the most important points is that the Institute's English teachers understand that the institution has a model based on a communicative perspective. They also comprehend the relationship between Speaking and Listening as complementary skills, methodologies to train them in large groups, criteria to be applied to Speaking or Listening testing instruments, and possible exercises to be used as items in tasks or tests. However, although the English teachers possess knowledge about English teaching methodology and assessment, this area is a little weak in terms of linguistic competences. That is, the Institute's English teachers know how Listening and Speaking are given in terms of use and assessment in classroom, but they are unaware of certain aspects to perform and test an aural or oral message at its different levels of production. The English teachers tend to participate in the English learning process individually, and relying on materials that are effective in other educational contexts, but this does not mean that they will necessarily work properly in the Institute's context.

Results and Discussion of Pre- and Post-Test Data

After the Institute's English students sat for oral pre- and post-tests, an analysis of final pre- and post-test grades was carried out using statistical central tendency and dispersion measurements.

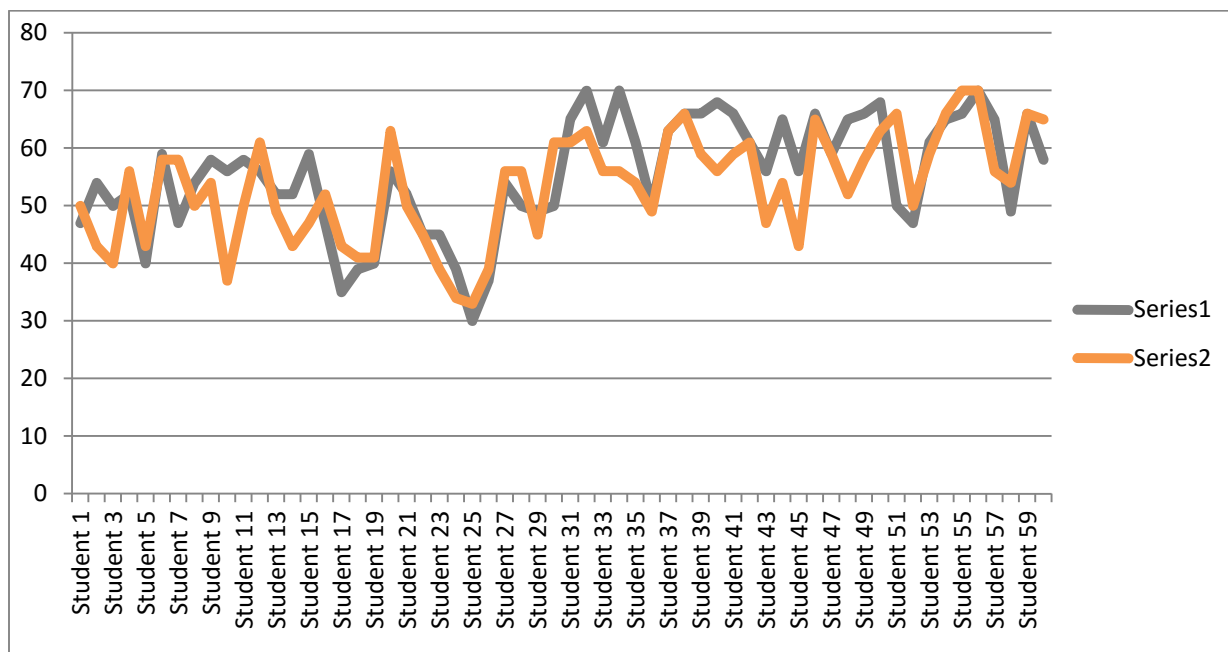
Table 1. Mean and progress percentages for oral testing

	Control Group			Experimental Group		
	Before	After	Progress	Before	After	Progress
Mean	55	53	-3%	54	58	9%
Max	70	70	32%	70	70	51%
Min	30	33	-34%	30	39	-15%
High performance	62	59	-5%	60	63	5%
Low performance	49	48	-1%	48	53	12%

For the control group, the *mean* shows negative progress of two points between the pre (before) and post (after) tests. This means that in a group of 60 students, their first grade results were closer to 5.5 than 7.0—the top grade for performance—while their last results were closer to 5.3 than 7.0.

For the experimental group, the *mean* shows a positive statistical advance of 9% (4 points of positive progress) between the pre (before) and post (after) tests. The value of this percentage indicates significant progress of four points in oral language performance. This means that in a group of 60 students, their first grades were closer to 5.4 than 7.0, while their last results were closer to 5.8 than 7.0.

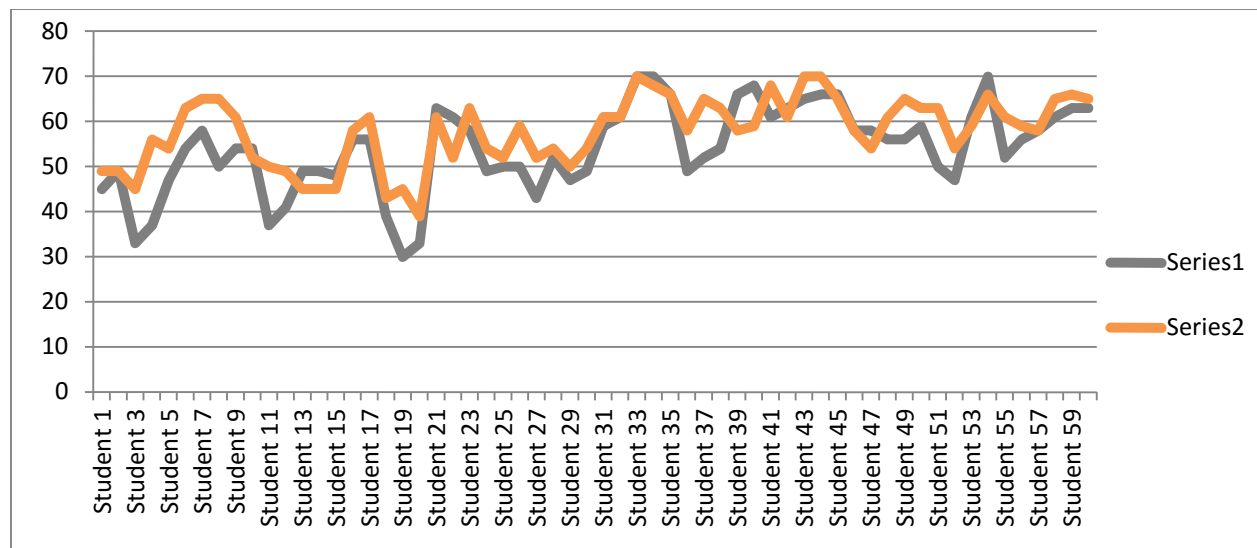
In a more detailed analysis of the *mean* of both groups, it can be inferred that the Institute’s English students produced lower oral performance results because of some possible variables. Meanwhile, for the experimental group there was significant progress that is shown by the increased mean between the first and the final oral test. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of aural skills has an influence on oral skills. However, the aspects of speaking that are influenced by Listening training are going to be necessary studied.



Note: Series 1 corresponds to the results taken from pre-tests in the control group, while Series 2 represents the results of post-tests in the same group.

Figure 1. Grade variation in pre- and post-tests (control group).

Analyzing these series shows that the English students in the control group displayed some fluctuations from student 1 to student 29 at first; that is, their grades displayed normal increases and decreases, while towards the end of the trend line, students exhibited just a few drops in grades. Therefore, it may be said that the control group showed a normal behavioral tendency. However, during the subsequent period towards the end, the students showed large variations in the grades from student 1 to student 29, and significant drops in the rest of the trend line. We can therefore say that this graph represents a normal behavioral pattern in a typical English oral assessment process.



Note: Series 1 corresponds to the results taken from pre-tests in the experimental group, while Series 2 represents the results of post-tests in the same group.

Figure 2. Grade variation in pre- and post-tests (experimental group).

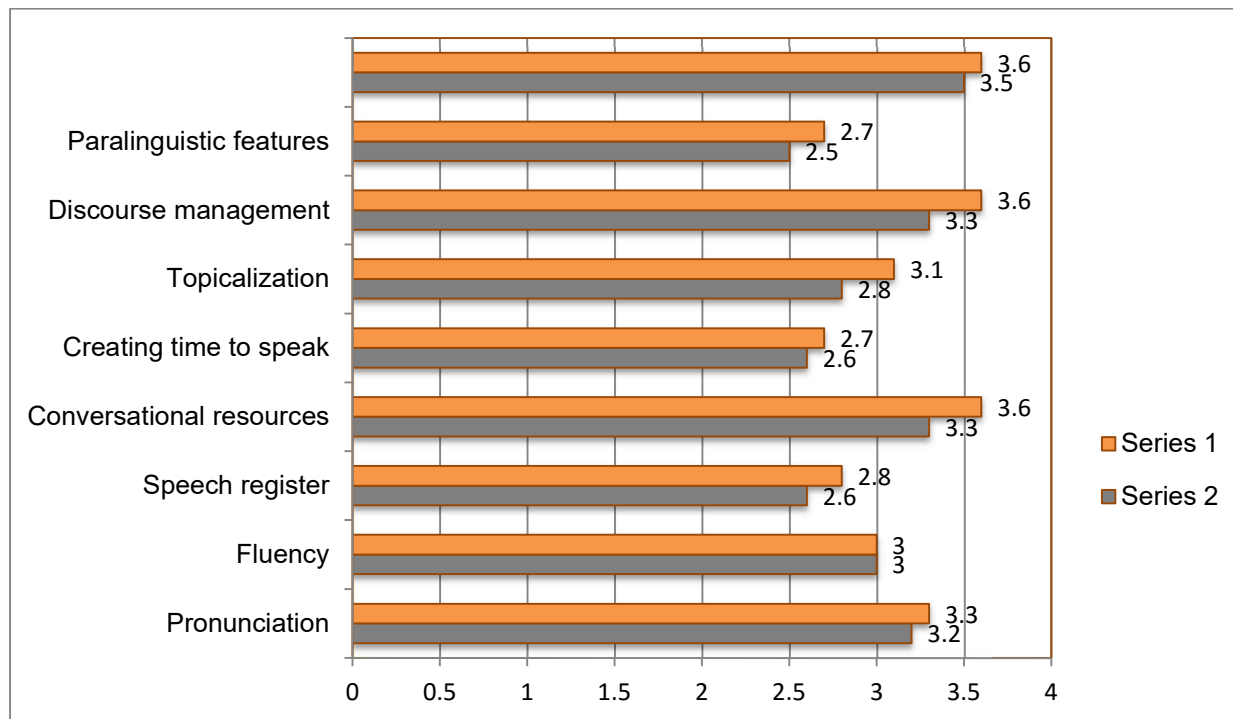
As we can see in Series 1, students performed as the control group did. However, Series 2 shows a more linear trend. Therefore, it can be stated that using Listening to support aural skills worked properly, maintaining consistent distribution of low- and high- performance students in oral skills.

As it has been observed from the table and two graphs above, aural skills are very useful to support or improve oral skills, and even a mixture of these skills made possible improvements in English students’ oral performances. Therefore, Listening does influence Speaking. However, if it not certainly known whether aural skills are valuable just in terms of supporting oral skills or auditory skills allow improvements in Speaking.

Table 2. Mean for oral criteria in each oral skill level for pre- and post-tests (control group)

	Function			Interaction			Communication			
Pre-tests	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Fluency	Speech register	Conversational resources	Creating time to speak	Topicalization	Discourse management	Paralinguistic features	Attitudinal features
	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	5
Post-tests	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Fluency	Speech register	Conversational resources	Creating time to speak	Topicalization	Discourse management	Paralinguistic features	Attitudinal features
	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	2	3	5

In Table 2, it is possible to see that English students in the control group produced the expected oral performance in accordance with the Institute’s requirements. Therefore, it can be said that the English students experience some difficulties in *Fluency*, *Conversational resources*, and *Discourse management*. Nevertheless, in a more detailed analysis used by the Institute, it is possible to provide a better understanding of the oral criteria in which the English students produced low oral performance in a normal class.



Note: Series 1 corresponds to the results taken from pretests in the control group, while Series 2 represents the results of post-tests in the same group.

Figure 3. Comparative analysis of oral criteria in pre- and post-tests (control group).

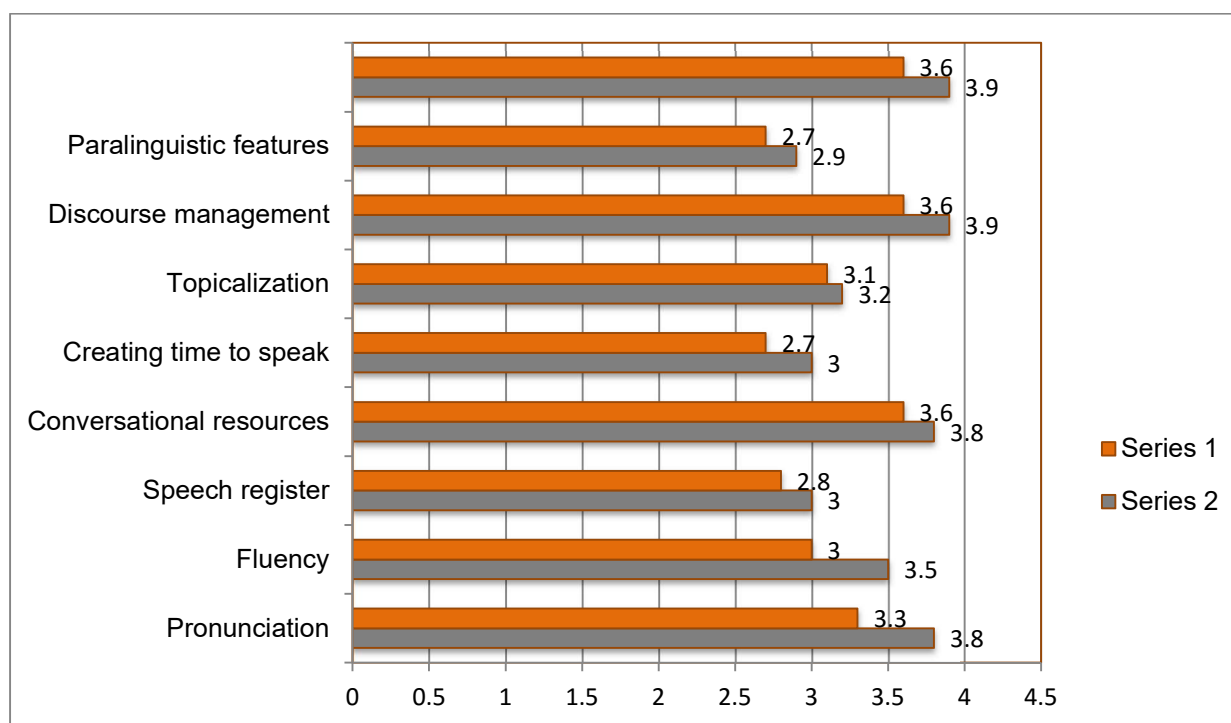
As it is displayed in Figure 3, criteria with scores lower than 3.0 points are not meeting the Institute’s Oral English requirements; criteria with scores of 3.0 to 3.5 points are satisfactorily meeting the Oral English requirements, and criteria with scores of 3.6 to 4.0 points are fully meeting the Oral English requirements. Therefore, it is possible to say the following:

Table 3. Achievement points related to the Institute’s requirements in oral rubrics (Control Group)

Not achieved (2.9 points and below)	Satisfactorily achieved (3.0 to 3.4 points)	Totally achieved (3.5 to 4.0 points)
Fluency Conversational Resources Discourse Management Creating time to speak	Vocabulary Pronunciation Speech Register Topicalization Creating time to speak	Paralinguistic Features

Table 4. Mean oral criteria in each oral skill level for pre- and post-tests (experimental group)

	Function			Interaction			Communication			
Pre-tests	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Fluency	Speech register	Conversational resources	Creating time to speak	Topicalization	Discourse management	Paralinguistic features	Attitudinal features
	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	5
Post-tests	Vocabulary	Pronunciation	Fluency	Speech register	Conversational resources	Creating time to speak	Topicalization	Discourse management	Paralinguistic features	Attitudinal features
	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	6



Note: Series 1 corresponds to the results taken from pre-tests in the experimental group, while Series 2 represents the results of post-tests in the same group.

Figure 4. Comparative analysis of oral criteria in pre- and post-tests (experimental group).

Similarly as it was done in the control group, a more detailed analysis of oral level was conducted. From this specific analysis, it was founded that all criteria for oral performance showed advances.

Table 5. *Achievement points related to the Institute's requirements in oral rubrics (experimental group)*

Not achieved (2.9 points and below)	Satisfactorily achieved (3.0 to 3.4 points)	Totally achieved (3.5 to 4.0 points)
Discourse Management	Fluency Conversational Resources Creating time to speak	Vocabulary Pronunciation Speech Register Topicalization Paralinguistic Features

To conclude this section on results and discussion, it was possible to notice that aural skills influenced oral skills in the Institute's English students and the criteria that were improved with Listening exercises could be divided into three categories: highly influenced, somewhat influenced, and slightly influenced. The oral criteria that are most influenced by the use of aural skills are *vocabulary*, *pronunciation*, *speech register*, *topicalization*, and *paralinguistic features*, while oral criteria that are somewhat influenced are *fluency*, *conversational resources*, and *creating time to speak*, and finally, the oral criterion least influenced is *discourse management*, even though there was a slight improvement.

Conclusions

In previous sections, different theoretical approaches, principles, and practical aspects of aural and oral skill interactions were outlined to answer this investigation research question. Firstly, both Speaking and Listening were studied separately to discuss and affirm practical and conceptual foundations about the forms in which these skills are developed and performed in the context of the classroom. Secondly, Speaking and Listening were intertwined to appreciate how these skills work together in the process of second language acquisition and what benefits there may be to integrating them.

The main objective of this project was to determine the efficacy of using aural skills to influence oral skills. This work is also focused on finding out which oral skills are most affected by aural skills in order to relate our findings to a specific institutional assessment process.

A full range of arguments was developed in an extensive and detailed theoretical framework, along with a structured and defined methodological background. This stage involved an experimental procedure constituted by two groups of students from a specific institution and academic program, as well as English teachers from the same academic program. The principal concern about experimenting with two groups of students was to obtain a significant sample of oral performances from large English classrooms and to demonstrate the effects of using aural skills to support Speaking in contexts where it is almost absent. Moreover, teachers' experiences were recorded in the format of interviews.

The first group of data collected for our investigation was obtained from teachers. These outcomes were essential to determine that Listening is actually linked to Speaking as a complementary skill. However, how oral skills are related to aural skills is not an issue that is well understood by the English teachers. They also stated that the recommended methodology to teach active skills in English to large groups is by splitting students into groups.

In terms of criteria to be applied to Speaking or Listening skills in activities or testing processes in an academic context, the English teachers explained that, for aural and oral skills,

teachers need exercises or items that elicit communication and interaction no matter what skill is being trained or practiced. On the other hand, it can be pointed out that although the Institute's English teachers are very familiar with assessing students and activities in classes, they are not fully aware of the stages involved in a testing process and the related components, nor do they have extensive understanding of how to work on each testing stage in second language acquisition. In short, the Institute's English teachers are more focused on students producing language. Nevertheless, they do not have clear procedures for the selection of tasks and they do not provide enough evidence about which aspects of Speaking are related to Listening practice.

The second group of data was collected from students' performances in pre- and post-tests of oral skills. These results empirically showed that aural skills are closely connected to oral skills, but not at different stage of language performance. This was mainly tested through an analysis table and two graphs on variations between a control group and an experimental group for which data was collected.

As part of the research conclusions, it can be stated that the oral criteria that are most influenced by the use of aural skills are *Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Speech Register, Topicalization, and Paralinguistic Features*, while oral criteria that are somewhat influenced are *fluency, conversational resources, and creating time to speak*, and finally, the oral criterion least influenced is *discourse management*, even though there was a slight improvement in a context where there is significant practice of aural skills.

To summarize all findings obtained from this research, it can be said that useful and beneficial information for the field of English language teaching and particularly in the area of assessment were obtained. Certainly, this investigation is helping English teachers continue discovering, investigating, and applying more and better methodologies and considerations in a variety of fields, such as English acquisition, second language assessment, class development, and the English learning process.

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