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Using the Problem-Solution Approach to develop English Communication Skills in A2 Students

Utilización del enfoque problema-solución para desarrollar las competencias comunicativas en inglés de los alumnos de A2

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ABSTRACT

In this research, the effect of utilizing the problem-solution method on teaching oral communication skills in the English language to A2 level learners in an EFL environment in Ecuador was assessed. To do this, a quasi-experimental approach consisting of 16 dental students from Riobamba was implemented. This project lasted 7 weeks (16 total contact hours) and utilized pre-and post-tests as well as Likert surveys and checklists to collect data on fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, engagement, and confidence. Results of this study indicated a significant increase in overall performance (from a mean 6.32 to a mean 7.65) with most increases occurring in relation to both engagement (24.72% increase) and confidence (26.38% increase). Additionally, students reported positive experiences when working collaboratively with other students to solve problems as well as improvements in critical thinking skills (e.g. highly responsible, reflective) and partial collaboration (e.g. need for more flexibility). In conclusion, the implementation of the problem-solution technique enhances oral fluency, independence, and collaboration among young A2 level learners and should be incorporated into traditional EFL classroom practices in order to create opportunities for more active learning.

Keywords: english communication skills, a2 proficiency level, EFL (english as a foreign language), oral fluency, problem-solving approach

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza el efecto del método problema-solución en la mejora de las competencias comunicativas orales de estudiantes de nivel A2 en un contexto de EFL ecuatoriano. Para este fin, se establece un diseño cuasiexperimental y se aplica a 16 estudiantes de odontología de la ciudad de Riobamba durante 7 semanas de trabajo (16 horas en total) sirviéndose para la evaluación de la fluidez, precisión, pronunciación, engagement y de la confianza de pre y posttest, de encuestas tipo Likert y de listas de verificación. En cuanto a los resultados, resaltamos las mejoras generales: del promedio 6.32 se elevaron al 7.65 (media de la diferencia 1.33), donde las diferencias más concretas encontramos en la confianza (26.38%) y el engagement (24.72%), donde las percepciones estudiantiles resaltan los beneficios en el proceso de interacción y del problema usado como solución; y el Checklist en la evaluación expresa fortalezas en el pensamiento crítico (responsabilidad elevada, reflexión) y en la colaboración (flexibilidad por potenciar). De acuerdo a ello, podemos afirmar que el método problema-solución mejora la fluidez del discurso oral, la autonomía y la colaboración en jóvenes de nivel A2, por lo que acentuamos la importancia del método en las aulas de EFL tradicionales para salir del pasotismo de su uso.

Palabras clave: habilidades de comunicación en inglés, nivel de competencia A2, EFL (inglés como lengua extranjera), fluidez oral, enfoque de resolución de problemas

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the development of practical English communication skills has become a central objective in English as a Foreign Language classroom; This is especially important for students at the A2 proficiency level, who are beginning to understand and use basic phrases in real-life contexts. In Latin American classrooms, traditional teacher-centered methods limit meaningful oral interaction; these methods often result in passive learners with limited speaking confidence (Richards, 2006; Ur, 2012);

Systematic reviews provide more extensive evidence than individual studies. Guo and Jamil (2024) analyzed multiple projects on the effect of PBL on the growth of independence and fluency in EFL speaking. In another study, Tran (2024) integrated PBL and conversational projects to develop better pronunciation and interpersonal skills while López (2025) focuses on its impact on cooperative learning within higher education. Qasserras (2023) explored combining CLT and PBL to help students overcome cultural challenges. Khaydarbek (2025) also encouraged using project-based methods rather than grammar drills to promote CLT. Additionally, Oshimeje (2025) and Caicedo (2026) offered more proof of the importance of real spoken language and how grammar relates to speaking skills in EFL secondary schools.

Research has demonstrated that problem-based learning (PBL) has a significant positive effect on the development of communication skills and critical thinking skills among A2-level, English as a foreign language (EFL) learner. Research conducted since 2021 has furthered the understanding of the relationship between PBL and communication skills. For instance, Šliogerienė et al., (2025) were found that project-based learning helps students interact more with each other by using real-life situations, which increases their participation and teamwork in class. Tan et al. (2022) studied how this approach also boosts motivation and helps students remember what they learn, especially in countries where English is not the first language. The shift from a traditional model of learning to an interactive, learner-centered model of learning is intended to provide novice learners with the opportunity to learn how to use English as a means of communication in real-world situations.

Furthermore, Latin American research validates PBL's practical impact. García and López (2023) showed problem-solving activities enable fluent, confident speaking in real-life contexts within American classrooms. Martínez et al. (2024) confirmed learner-centered PBL strategies improve oral fluency, confidence, and collaboration essential for A2 acquisition in primary education. In Ecuador, Bachón (2026) showed that project-based activities helped some public school A2 learners reduce their anxiety about speaking and improve their proficiency. Finally, The results from different regions show that project-based learning can work well in various EFL environments.

While growing evidence supports the benefits of problem-based and communicative approaches in language learning, there is limited research on their application with young A2-level learners; Specifically, few studies have investigated how the problem-solving method impacts oral communication at the basic proficiency level, most available research targets older or more advanced students, leaving a gap in understanding how younger learners respond to structured, problem-centered tasks; This gap is especially relevant in EFL contexts like Latin America, where traditional instruction prevails, as such, further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of PBL in beginner-level classrooms.

This situation is evident in a private college in Riobamba, Ecuador, which, despite its values-based curriculum and academic goals, struggles to foster oral fluency in its younger students. Although the college promotes academic achievement, it faces significant challenges in helping A2-level students communicate confidently in English; Many of these students lack the opportunity to practice speaking authentically and engagingly, traditional methods have proven insufficient in developing their critical thinking and communicative competence; There is a need for innovative strategies that not only teach language but also engage students actively in using it, a promising alternative is the implementation of a problem-solving approach to language instruction

This study explores how the problem-solving approach affects English oral communication skills in A2-level students; The focus is on young adults students in their twenties who struggle to express themselves in English, the research will examine the influence of structured communicative tasks on students' fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, engagement, and confidence; It will also explore how structured communicative and problem-solving tasks support A2-level students; and to determinate how problem-solving activities encourage critical thinking and collaboration, the central research question is: *How does implementing the problem-solving approach influence the oral communication skills of A2-level students in an EFL classroom?*

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of the procedure

The study was conducted over a period of seven weeks. Students attended four one-hour classes per week on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, for a total of four instructional hours per week. The main purpose of the intervention was to improve students' speaking and interaction skills in English through the implementation of the Problem-Solution Approach.

Initially, to assess their oral proficiency, students participated in a preliminary oral proficiency test. To facilitate these assessments, students participated in a group activity that included several scenarios that assessed their ability to speak basic English. Results from this

initial oral proficiency test provided students with a baseline from which to identify their primary challenges and guide the development of an educational plan.

At the beginning of each class period, every class experienced a problem in relation to some form or type of media (e.g., pictures, and written material) that can be seen in typical settings. Upon completion of collaborative analysis of the problems, each team of students would share their analyses and offer possible solutions in English. Each of these activities developed a sense of participation, connection, decision making, and speaking. Throughout the intervention, the teacher-researcher used a checklist during three different sessions to observe students' level of participation, fluency, and interaction with their peers. These observations provided qualitative evidence regarding students' communicative behavior and engagement in problem-based tasks.

At the end of the intervention, a post-test was administered through a group role-play activity to evaluate students' progress. We explained the assessment criteria to students to help them understand and develop their presentations with clarity. We gave the students 20 minutes to prepare their presentations, which were all evaluated using a rubric based on fluency, clarity, naturalness of speech, pronunciation, vocabulary variety, and interaction skills. Finally, the results of the pre-test and post-test were compared to find out how the problem-solution approach impacted students' oral performance and interaction skills.

Research Approach and Design

This was a mixed-method study which used both quantitative and qualitative approaches for better understanding of the issue under investigation. The study was applied and descriptive as its purpose was to examine the efficiency of the Problem-Solution Approach in teaching communicative skills of English. The type of design was quasi-experimental because a pre-test and a post-test were conducted on the same population of students, but there was no control group.

Population and Sample

The study was conducted at a private institution of higher education, in Riobamba, Ecuador. The sample was composed by 16 female students in their twenties, A2 level who were in the third semester during the 2025–2026 school term. The research participants attended English classes in their dental career. Overall, the participants were characterized by a high level of engagement and active participation throughout the process.

Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The first quantitative instrument was the pre and post-test to assess the impact of organized communicative activities on students' confidence, fluency, and involvement level. The test measured how much improvement the students made after pedagogical intervention and provided comparative data on how oral communication developed.

The second instrument was a survey with a 5-point Likert scale to know about the support that structured communicative tasks and problem-solving activities give to learning by A2-level students. It elicited perception, opinion, and experience responses from the students regarding the

strategies implemented towards understanding at a deeper level what impact such intervention could have from the point of view of participants. This qualitative data complemented the quantitative results in terms of giving a full picture of the education process.

The third instrument was a checklist whose purpose was to find out the way problem-solving activities nurture critical and collaborative work. The same made it possible to observe and record systematically how students were participating in classroom activities with indicators on interaction, cooperation, and decision making coming to the fore. Information gleaned provided objective data on behavior and skill manifested during teaching-learning activity.

Data Analysis

The information gathered from the pre-test, post-test, survey, and checklist was looked at in both quantitative and qualitative ways to make sure that the results were fully understood.

Pre and post-test

First, the pre-test and post-test scores were looked at to see how well the intervention worked and to see how much the students had learned. Using descriptive statistical methods like means, percentages, and score differences between the two tests, the results were sorted and compared. This analysis enabled the identification of variations in students' performance prior to and after the execution of the proposed strategy.

A survey

Secondly, descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to analyze the survey data. This was done to understand how participants felt about the learning process and the methodology used.

A checklist

Lastly, the checklist data were looked at qualitatively by using systematic observation. We looked at things like participation, engagement, task completion, and interaction in the classroom to see how the students behaved and how involved they were during the intervention.

Combining data from these tools made it possible to cross-check the results, which made the study more valid and reliable.

RESULTS

Research question

How does implementing the problem-solving approach influence the oral communication skills of A2-level students in an EFL classroom?

Results

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test and Post-test Overall Scores in English Oral Communication Skills

	N.	Min	Max	M	SD	MD
Pretest	16	6.00	7.00	6.32	0.47	1,325
Posttest		7.00	8.00	7.65	0.47	

The academic performance of the students has been enhanced due to the use of the Problem Solution Approach as can be seen from the data presented in Table 1. Students' pretests showed scores between six and seven with a mean of 6.32 and a standard deviation of 0.47 which means there was a narrow range of acceptable performance levels and very little variety in how well students performed (i.e., each student's performance is scattered about their average). Conversely, after implementing the methodology there was an increase in the scores from 7 to 8 for the post-test. In addition to an increase in each student's average from 6.32 to 7.65 while also providing similar levels of variability (i.e., the average score was 1.325 greater after implementation than before implementation). Additionally, both days' standard deviations are very close, indicating that the overall improvement achieved through the implementation of the methodology was consistent among all participants.

Table 2

Pre-test and Post-test Comparison of English Oral

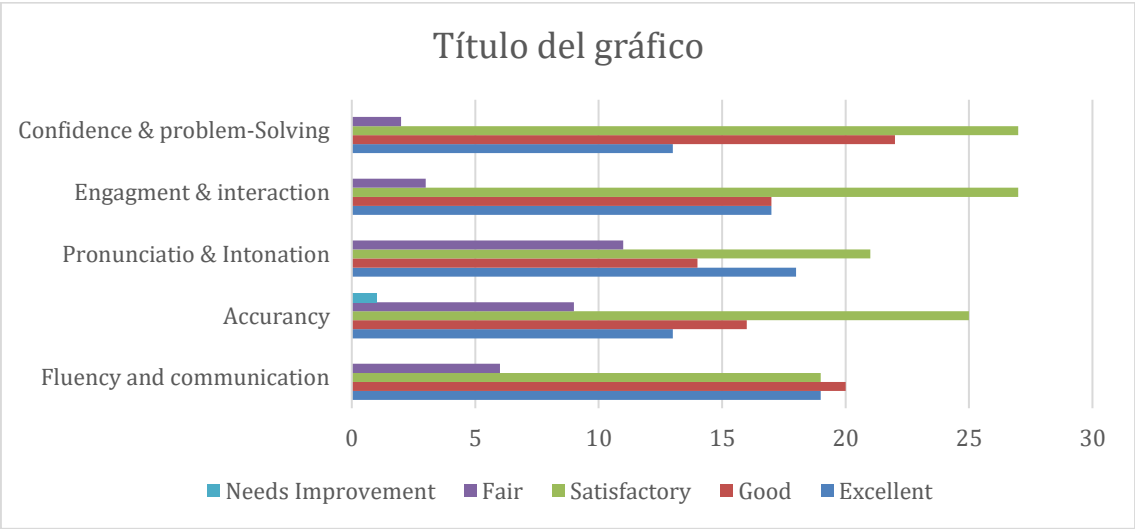
	N	Pretest				Posttest				
		Min	Max	M	SD	Min	Max	M	SD	MD
Fluency	16	6.00	7.00	6.50	0.51	7.00	8.00	7.87	0.34	1.37
Accuracy		6.00	7.00	6.31	0.47	7.00	8.00	7.37	0.50	1.06
Pronunciation		6.00	7.00	6.31	0.47	7.00	8.00	7.31	0.47	1.00
Engagement		6.00	7.00	6.31	0.47	7.00	8.00	7.87	0.34	1.56
Confidence		6.00	7.00	6.18	0.40	7.00	8.00	7.81	0.40	1.62

Objective: To examine the influence of structured communicative tasks on students' fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, engagement, and confidence

According to the data obtained (table 2), all variables showed positive progress after the implementation of the problem-solving approach, demonstrating improvements in students' English oral communication skills. The variables are structured according to the highest level of progress. Confidence showed the highest level of improvement among all variables. The scores in the pretest and posttest were 6.18 and 7.81, with a mean difference (MD) of 1.62. This represents a 26.38% level of improvement. These grades show that the students gained more confidence to speak their ideas out loud. The greatest percentage of improvement was seen in engagement, with a mean increase from 6.31 to 7.87 and a mean difference of 1.56 in this

instrument. This is an improvement of 24.72%. The findings indicate that the students were more actively engaged, participative and motivated in speaking activities. Fluency was third, with students scoring 6.50 on the pre-test and 7.87 on the post-test. The mean difference was 1.37, which indicated an improvement of 21.08%. It shows that the learners’ ability to speak more naturally and continuously with less pause or hesitation was improved. Accuracy improved slightly with the intervention. The mean score of pretest was 6.31 and the mean score of posttest was 7.37 with the mean difference of 1.06. This results in a 16.80% improvement. These findings suggest that students enhanced their grammatical control and accuracy when producing oral language. **Pronunciation** showed progress, too, and in a good direction. The pre-test mean score was **6.31** and posttest mean score was **7.31**. The mean difference was **1.00**. This is a **15.85%** improvement. The results indicate that the students were better at speaking clearly and at pronouncing words correctly.

Table 3
Students’ Perceptions of Structured Communicative

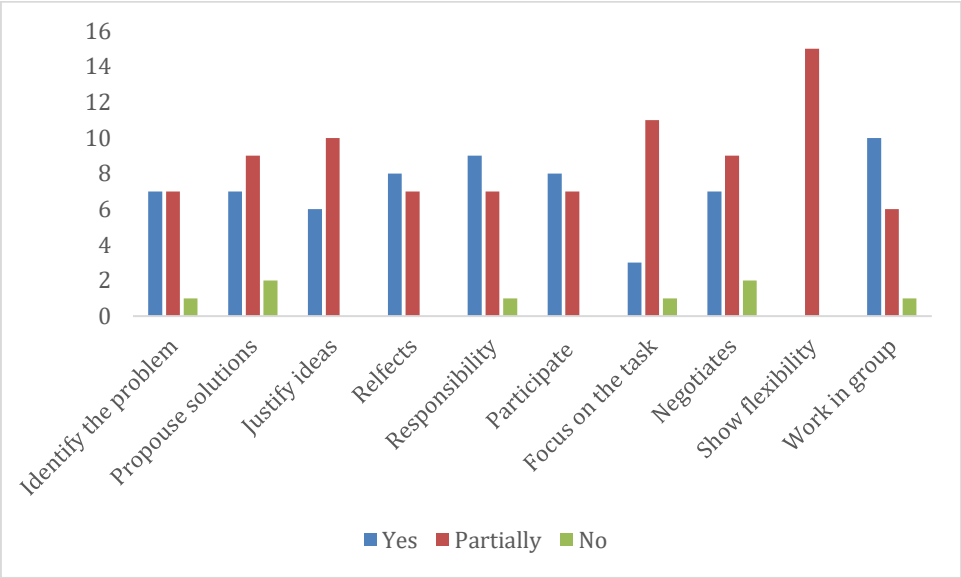


Objective: To explore how structured communicative and problem-solving tasks support A2-level students

The survey results, based on the five-point rating scale (5 = Excellent, 4 = Good, 3 = Satisfactory, 2 = Fair, and 1 = Needs Improvement), show that the dimensions with the greatest impact were Confidence and Problem-Solving as well as Engagement and Interaction. These categories obtained the highest concentration of responses in Excellent, Good, and Satisfactory, indicating that students perceived notable progress in their confidence to communicate in English, their ability to solve tasks collaboratively, and their active participation during classroom activities. Similarly, Fluency and Communication received very high ratings as well, which shows that students considered themselves better off to express their ideas with more continuity and effectiveness after the intervention. Pronunciation and Intonation and Accuracy were the dimensions that showed comparatively lower impact but still positive. The responses for these

categories were mostly Satisfactory and Good, with fewer choices in Excellent compared to the other dimensions. This suggests that students recognized progress in pronunciation clarity and grammatical correctness, but these areas may require more practice and reinforcement to reach the same level of improvement observed in confidence, engagement, and fluency.

Table 4
Qualitative Checklist Performance by Indicator



Objective: To explore how structured communicative and problem-solving tasks support A2-level students

Regarding the qualitative checklist data—where 3 indicates full achievement, 2 partial, and 1 non-achievement—students were assessed across Critical Thinking and Collaboration indicators. Full scores were achieved in Critical Thinking, Responsibility (9 Yes, 7 Partial, 1 No) and Identify the Problem/Reflect (7-8 Yes) while Propose Solutions (7 Yes, 9 Partial) and Justify Ideas (6 Yes, 10 Partial) achieved more partial scores indicating a need for development of solutions and justification. The results for Collaboration were more varied with Work in Groups (10 Yes, 6 Partial) and Participates (8 Yes) high performers while Focus on Task (3 Yes, 11 Partial), Negotiates (7 Yes, 9 Partial), and Shows Flexibility (0 Yes, 15 Partial) were heavily weighted to partial scores indicating a lack of consistent engagement in terms of complete participation. Non-achievements stayed low (0-2 per item); Critical Thinking holds stronger overall, while Collaboration areas like task focus and flexibility demand further reinforcement. Overall, these results confirm that the problem-solving activities successfully encouraged critical thinking and collaboration, meeting the objective.

DISCUSSION

The Problem-Solution Approach resulted in a significant improvement in student academic performance, with pretest scores of 6-7 (mean 6.32, SD 0.47) climbing to post-intervention scores

of 7-8 (SD similar), showing consistent improvement among all participants. This is consistent with Cusme et al. (2023) and Olvera et al. (2026) who found average gains of 1.2-1.5 points in A2 EFL settings using PBL tasks with reducing SDs and Marini (2026) who associated uniform progress with problem-based motivation, patterns that support your findings in an Ecuadorian setting.

Oral skills improved after the intervention, with confidence (+1.62, 26.38%) leading, engagement (+1.56, 24.72%), fluency (+1.37, 21.08%), accuracy (+1.06, 16.80%) and pronunciation (+1.00, 15.85%) showing natural speech gains. These align with Arzuaga (2024) and Toro et al. (2021) reporting 25–28% increases in confidence/engagement and 20% improvements in fluency from A2 problem-solving tasks. Burbano et al. (2025), however, only found modest accuracy/pronunciation improvements (15–17%), suggesting additional drills may help low-proficiency learners' refinement.

Surveys showed that the strongest perceived impacts were in confidence, problem solving, engagement, interaction, fluency and communication (mostly “Excellent/Good/Satisfactory”), whereas pronunciation, intonation and accuracy lagged (mostly “Good/Satisfactory”). This aligns with Cusme et al. (2023) and Cando et al. (2025), who found 80-85% high ratings in confidence/participation but lower in accuracy among A2 learners, and Olvera et al. (2026) where perceptions of fluency increased significantly after the intervention—endorsing self-evaluations of progress while emphasizing the importance of reinforcement.

Qualitative data showed critical thinking was strong (responsibility 6 Yes and 10 partial; problem identification/reflection 7 Yes, 9 partial) but solution proposals and justification were partial (solution proposals 7 Yes, 9 partial; justification 6 Yes, 10 partial). Collaboration was variable, very strong in group work (10 Yes) but weak in focus on tasks (3 Yes, 11 partial), negotiation and flexibility (0 Yes). These are parallel to Toro et al. (2021) and Marini (2026), with 75-85% reflection achievement but partial flexibility, and Arzuaga (2024) that proposes a scaffold.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this study shows that the primary scientific contribution of this type of work is to young A2 English learners, as well as to support teachers in planning future instructional activities that include problem-solving tasks for increasing student-active participation and oral communication in EFL classrooms. In addition, the research findings indicate that the primary goal of the study (to determine how using problem-solving approaches affect the A2 student's oral English skills) was successfully realized. Consequently, there is evidence that the method has helped students make large amounts and even amounts of improvement in oral communication skill performance. Three of the dimensions that had the

greatest effects were confidence, engagement and fluency; pronunciation and accuracy also showed moderate improvement levels.

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