



Práctica de expresión oral basada en juegos para estudiantes de nivel A1 de primaria: Un estudio exploratorio

Game-Based Speaking Practice for A1 Primary Learners: An Exploratory Study

Campoverde López Johnny Segundo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0108-4755>

johnny.campoverdel@ug.edu.ec

Universidad de Guayaquil

Ecuador – Guayaquil

Bonilla Tenesaca Josué Reinaldo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6748-2345>

josue.bonillat@ug.edu.ec

Universidad de Guayaquil

Ecuador - Guayaquil

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*Corresponding author

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RESUMEN

Las tareas de expresión oral basadas en juegos pueden ofrecer a los estudiantes principiantes oportunidades repetidas y con un propósito claro para usar el inglés dentro de un entorno de aula favorable. Este estudio de aula, de método mixto, examinó un programa de seis semanas para estudiantes de sexto grado con un nivel aproximado A1 del MCER en un contexto de escuela pública ecuatoriana. Cuarenta estudiantes completaron una encuesta inicial; el programa instructivo comprendió 12 sesiones de 40 minutos organizadas en seis unidades temáticas. Las actividades incluyeron Simon Says, Guess Who, descripción rápida de imágenes, dar direcciones, juego de roles y repetición oral controlada. Los puntajes agregados de expresión oral aumentaron de $M = 6.77$ ($DE = 1.03$; rango = 5.67-7.95) antes de la instrucción a $M = 8.96$ ($DE = 1.76$; rango = 7.98-9.94) después, una ganancia media descriptiva de 2.19 puntos. Los resúmenes por criterio indicaron ganancias en pronunciación (+0.51), vocabulario (+0.75) y fluidez (+0.20), mientras que la gramática cambió mínimamente (-0.06). Las respuestas de referencia mostraron que 28 de 40 estudiantes no habían usado previamente actividades interactivas para practicar inglés hablado. Los hallazgos son prometedores, pero deben permanecer descriptivos porque el número de participantes difirió entre los registros del estudio, no se dispuso de puntajes individuales ni de resultados específicos por grupo, un resumen de criterio fue matemáticamente inconsistente y no fue posible reconstruir un análisis confiable entre grupos. El programa ofrece, por tanto, evidencia de viabilidad más que prueba de efectividad. Una evaluación más rigurosa debería usar una muestra analítica claramente definida, tareas orales paralelas, calificación doble ciega y datos completos a nivel de participante.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje basado en juegos, destrezas de expresión oral, estudiantes de nivel A1, aprendices jóvenes, práctica comunicativa



ABSTRACT

Game-based speaking tasks can provide beginning language learners with repeated, purposeful opportunities to use English in a supportive classroom environment. This mixed-methods classroom study examined a six-week program for sixth-grade learners working around CEFR A1 in an Ecuadorian public-school context. Forty students completed a baseline survey; the instructional program comprised 12 meetings of 40 minutes organized into six thematic units. Activities included Simon Says, Guess Who, rapid picture description, direction-giving, role-play, and controlled oral repetition. Aggregate speaking scores increased from $M = 6.77$ ($SD = 1.03$; range = 5.67-7.95) before instruction to $M = 8.96$ ($SD = 1.76$; range = 7.98-9.94) afterward, a descriptive mean gain of 2.19 points. Criterion summaries indicated gains in pronunciation (+0.51), vocabulary (+0.75), and fluency (+0.20), while grammar changed minimally (-0.06). Baseline responses showed that 28 of 40 learners had not previously used interactive activities to practise spoken English. The findings are promising but must remain descriptive because participant counts differed across study records, individual scores and group-specific outcomes were unavailable, one criterion summary was mathematically inconsistent, and no reliable between-group analysis could be reconstructed. The program therefore provides feasibility evidence rather than proof of effectiveness. More rigorous evaluation should use a clearly defined analytic sample, parallel speaking tasks, blinded double rating, and complete participant-level data.

Keywords: game-based learning, speaking skills, A1 learners, young learners, communicative practice

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is often the most visible sign of second-language ability, yet it is also one of the most demanding skills for beginning learners. Oral production requires rapid access to vocabulary and grammatical patterns, intelligible pronunciation, attention to an interlocutor, and decisions about what to say next. Unlike many written tasks, conversation usually offers little time to plan or revise. These pressures can be especially strong for primary learners who possess only a small English repertoire and may hesitate because they fear public error.

At CEFR A1, learners can use simple expressions about personal details and immediate needs and can interact when communication is supported by repetition, rephrasing, and a cooperative interlocutor (Council of Europe, 2020). These descriptors imply modest but meaningful instructional goals: asking and answering familiar questions, describing people or routines with short phrases, understanding simple directions, and sustaining a brief exchange. Classroom practice should therefore provide



repeated opportunities to connect language forms with recognizable communicative purposes.

Communicative language teaching places purposeful language use at the center of instruction. Pair and group tasks increase the number of learners who can speak at the same time and allow language to be used for exchanging information, solving a problem, or reaching an outcome (Richards, 2006). For young learners, however, communicative work must be carefully structured. A task that is too open may produce silence, extensive first-language use, or participation by only the most confident students. Accessible models, visual support, clear roles, and limited language targets can make interaction manageable.

Games offer one way to organize this supported interaction. A game establishes a goal, rules, feedback, and an uncertain outcome, while a language-learning game makes communication necessary for progress. Guessing a person, following a command, identifying a picture, or directing a partner creates a reason to listen and respond. The pedagogical value does not come from entertainment alone; it depends on whether the game requires learners to notice, retrieve, and use the target language. Game-based learning should also be distinguished from gamification, which adds elements such as points, badges, or leaderboards to an activity that is not itself a game (Deterding et al., 2011).

Theoretical models of game-based learning emphasize the interaction among challenge, response, feedback, and repeated engagement (Garris et al., 2002; Plass et al., 2015). These features may benefit beginning speakers. Repetition can occur without every turn feeling identical, immediate feedback can connect a response with its communicative effect, and collaborative play can distribute attention across a shared objective. At the same time, poorly designed competition can increase anxiety or reward speed rather than accurate and meaningful language use. The teacher must therefore regulate difficulty, participation, and feedback.

Evidence across educational settings suggests that gamified and game-based interventions can support learning, but average effects vary by design and outcome. Sailer and Homner's (2020) meta-analysis found small positive effects of gamification on cognitive, motivational, and behavioral outcomes, with substantial heterogeneity. In second-language research, Dixon et al. (2022) reported positive average gains for digital game-based language learning but also highlighted differences among games, measures,



and study designs. These syntheses caution against treating the presence of a game as a sufficient explanation for improvement.

Speaking development requires more than motivation. Learners need comprehensible input, chances to retrieve language, meaningful output, and feedback that helps them repair communication. Nation and Newton (2009) recommend balancing meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. A classroom game can contribute to more than one strand, but each activity should have a clear priority. Simon Says may strengthen comprehension and formulaic response; Guess Who may prompt descriptive questions; direction-giving may require accurate imperatives and spatial language; repeated role-play may support smoother delivery.

Young-learner tasks also benefit from visible and concrete content. Pictures, movements, maps, familiar people, emotions, and daily routines reduce the conceptual burden of deciding what to discuss. Official A1 Movers materials similarly use pictures, short questions, descriptions, and supported interaction to elicit age-appropriate spoken language (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024). Classroom tasks inspired by these formats can be useful, but locally designed activities and rubrics should not be interpreted as official examination scores without appropriate standardization.

Assessment is a central concern in small classroom studies. A speaking score is influenced not only by learner ability but also by task difficulty, preparation time, partner behavior, rating criteria, and rater severity. If the pretest and posttest use different demands or are not rated consistently, apparent change may partly reflect the assessment process. Analytic criteria can identify areas such as pronunciation, vocabulary, fluency, grammar, and interaction, but each criterion must be clearly defined and scored reliably. Aggregate means cannot substitute for participant-level evidence when the objective is to test effectiveness.

Action research can nevertheless provide valuable evidence about feasibility. It allows teachers to examine whether activities can be implemented in a real timetable, whether learners participate, which language demands persist, and how materials should be adapted. Its strength lies in disciplined reflection within context. Its limitation is that classroom decisions, additional practice time, teacher expectations, and incomplete comparison conditions may prevent causal conclusions. Transparent reporting is therefore more important than presenting every classroom improvement as an experimental effect.



The present study examined a six-week sequence of game-based speaking activities for sixth-grade learners working around CEFR A1. It combined communicative language teaching, movement, visual prompts, pair work, controlled repetition, and teacher feedback across familiar topics. The objective was to describe changes in aggregate speaking performance and selected speaking criteria after the program, document learners' prior exposure to interactive speaking activities, and identify methodological conditions that should guide future evaluation.

METHODS

Design

The study used a classroom action-research design with quantitative pretest-posttest summaries and descriptive evidence from a baseline questionnaire and classroom observation. The project was described as quasi-experimental because intervention and comparison groups were planned. However, the available outcome record did not provide separate pretest and posttest statistics for those groups. The analysis was therefore treated as an exploratory cohort-level evaluation rather than a controlled effectiveness study.

The quantitative objective was restricted to describing reported aggregate change. No inferential test, standardized effect size, or confidence interval was calculated because individual scores, an unambiguous analytic sample size, and the covariance between paired measurements were unavailable. This decision prevents false precision and preserves the distinction between observed cohort summaries and a treatment effect.

Context and participants

The study took place in a public primary school in Ecuador. The survey population consisted of 40 sixth-grade students, including 16 boys and 24 girls, whose English proficiency was described as approximately CEFR A1. Participation was voluntary, and parental permission was obtained. Assessment sheets were anonymized during scoring to reduce identity-related bias.

The participant record was not fully consistent across sections. One description allocated 17 learners to an intervention group and 18 to a comparison group, accounting for 35 students; another referred to a randomly selected 10-student scoring subset; a later implementation description referred to 42 students. Because no participant-level file linked these counts to the aggregate outcome table, the exact pretest-posttest sample could not be established. Table 1 separates confirmed information from unresolved reporting.



Table 1

Study evidence and analytic status

Element	Documented information	Status in the present analysis
Baseline survey	40 sixth-grade learners; 16 boys and 24 girls	Retained as N = 40 descriptive evidence
English level	Approximately CEFR A1; self-reports also collected	Treated as contextual, not an official certification
Planned groups	17 intervention and 18 comparison learners	Not compared because group-specific outcomes were unavailable
Additional scoring reference	A randomly selected subset of 10 learners	Could not be linked to the outcome summary
Intervention	12 meetings across six weeks; 40 minutes per meeting	Retained as the most internally consistent dosage
Outcome data	Aggregate pretest and posttest ranges, means, and SDs	Analyzed descriptively; no inferential statistics

Note. Conflicting participant counts prevented reconstruction of a valid comparison-group analysis.

Instructional program

The program lasted six weeks and was organized as six thematic units delivered through 12 meetings of approximately 40 minutes, for about eight hours of additional practice. Each unit connected a familiar communicative purpose with a game or game-like task. Lessons followed a presentation-practice-production sequence: the teacher introduced target language and a model, learners completed guided practice, and pairs or groups used the language to reach an oral outcome.

Instruction combined visual prompts, movement, short dialogues, pair work, role-play, repetition, and formative feedback. The teacher acted as model and facilitator during preparation, then monitored participation and noted difficulties during production. Feedback prioritized comprehensibility, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, grammar, and successful completion of the communicative purpose. Materials included picture cards, maps, board resources, worksheets, and classroom technology when available.



Table 2

Six-week game-based speaking sequence

Week	Communicative focus	Game or task	Expected oral performance
1	Introducing oneself	Simon Says with personal-information prompts	Produce short personal descriptions and formulaic exchanges
2	Introducing and describing people	Guess Who	Ask and answer questions to identify a person
3	Physical appearance	Rapid picture description	Retrieve descriptive vocabulary under limited time
4	Feelings and emotions	Think Fast and supported guessing	Name and describe emotions using visual cues
5	Directions and instructions	Map-based direction game	Give and follow short commands and directions
6	Daily routines	Talk Like a Parrot and role-play	Describe routine actions with smoother delivery

Note. Each thematic unit was distributed across two 40-minute meetings. Activity names were retained as classroom labels; the pedagogical focus was structured language use.

Instruments

A baseline questionnaire gathered demographic information, self-perceived English level, and prior experience with interactive activities for spoken English. Only the two variables directly relevant to the pedagogical question - perceived level and prior game-based practice - were retained for the article. Sensitive demographic questions that did not contribute to the research objective were excluded from analysis.

The initial speaking assessment included picture-based questions, a paired question-and-answer task, and reading aloud. The final assessment again used pictures and paired interaction, including role-play and direction-giving. These activities were broadly aligned with familiar A1 communication, but the available record did not demonstrate formal equivalence between test forms. The tasks should therefore be understood as classroom assessments rather than standardized Cambridge examinations.

Speaking performance was summarized on a classroom rubric with a stated maximum of four points per criterion. The outcome table named Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Fluency, Communication, and Grammar. A separate rubric example used Fluency, Pronunciation, Oral Grammar, Coherence, and Communication, showing that



criterion labels were not fully stable. This construct inconsistency was considered when interpreting criterion-level results.

Data analysis and integrity checks

Aggregate values were transcribed from the final results tables. Mean change was calculated as posttest mean minus pretest mean. Relative change was calculated only as a descriptive ratio of the mean difference to the pretest mean. Each criterion summary was screened to determine whether the reported mean fell within its stated minimum and maximum and whether the scale maximum was respected.

The general score table was selected as the principal outcome because it presented a complete set of range, mean, and dispersion values. Alternative summaries elsewhere reported slightly different posttest values. Those alternatives were not averaged. At criterion level, the reported Communication pretest mean of 3.53 exceeded its stated maximum of 3 and was therefore excluded from substantive interpretation. Vocabulary change was recalculated as 0.75 rather than the smaller difference stated in the narrative. These decisions were made before drafting conclusions.

Ethical considerations

Parents received information about the study and provided permission for participation. Learners were invited to participate voluntarily, and assessment materials did not require names during the initial scoring process. The present article reports only aggregated, anonymized information and omits personal, institutional, geographic, and contact identifiers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Baseline profile

Self-reported proficiency was concentrated at the lower end of the response options. Nineteen of 40 learners identified as beginners, 12 selected basic, and nine selected intermediate. These responses are perceptions rather than calibrated CEFR classifications, but they indicate substantial variation within a cohort generally described as A1.

Prior exposure to interactive speaking practice was limited. Twelve learners reported having used interactive activities to improve spoken English, whereas 28 reported that they had not. The novelty of the program may therefore have contributed to engagement.



Novelty can increase attention in the short term, but it should not be confused with durable language learning.

Table 3

Baseline responses relevant to the intervention

Variable	Response	n	%
Self-perceived English level	Beginner	19	47.5
Self-perceived English level	Basic	12	30.0
Self-perceived English level	Intermediate	9	22.5
Prior interactive speaking practice	Yes	12	30.0
Prior interactive speaking practice	No	28	70.0

Note. N = 40. Percentages were recalculated from frequencies and sum to 100% within each variable.

Aggregate speaking outcomes

The reported general speaking mean increased from 6.77 before the program to 8.96 afterward, a gain of 2.19 points. Relative to the pretest mean, this represents a descriptive increase of 32.3%. The minimum increased from 5.67 to 7.98, and the maximum increased from 7.95 to 9.94. Thus, the entire reported score range shifted upward.

Dispersion did not decrease at the total-score level. The standard deviation rose from 1.03 to 1.76, an increase of 0.73. This pattern suggests that posttest performance was more heterogeneous, although the absence of individual data prevents determining whether some learners benefited more than others or whether the change reflects scoring conditions. The larger posttest SD contradicts a general claim of increasingly uniform performance.

Table 4

Reported general speaking scores before and after the program

Occasion	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	Mean change
Pretest	5.67	7.95	6.77	1.03	-
Posttest	7.98	9.94	8.96	1.76	+2.19

Note. The exact analytic n was not recoverable. The values are descriptive cohort summaries and do not establish a controlled effect.

Speaking criteria

Pronunciation increased from 2.54 to 3.05, and vocabulary increased from 2.55 to 3.30. These were the clearest criterion-level changes that passed the basic range check.



The vocabulary difference of 0.75 was larger than the value stated in the accompanying narrative and was recalculated directly from the table. The pattern is plausible because the activities repeatedly required retrieval of personal, descriptive, emotional, routine, and direction-related words while offering spoken models and repetition.

Fluency increased more modestly, from 3.10 to 3.30. Short games can increase speaking turns and reduce hesitation through rehearsal, but six weeks may be insufficient for broad gains in automaticity. Some activities also emphasized controlled response or imitation rather than extended spontaneous production. A future program should track speaking time, response length, pausing, and repair to distinguish participation from fluency development.

Grammar changed from 3.56 to 3.50, a decrease of 0.06, while its reported SD increased from 0.07 to 0.76. The near-ceiling pretest mean left little room for improvement and is difficult to reconcile with the cohort's beginning proficiency. This may reflect an overly lenient rubric, a transcription problem, criterion drift, or a stronger focus on meaning than form. Grammar should therefore not be interpreted as evidence either for or against the program.

Communication was not interpreted because the pretest mean exceeded the reported maximum. When a summary is mathematically impossible, narrative claims based on that value cannot be verified. Retaining the error as an explicit validity flag is more defensible than silently correcting it without access to the underlying scores.

Table 5

Criterion-level summaries and validity screening

Criterion	Pre M (SD)	Post M (SD)	Change	Interpretive status
Pronunciation	2.54 (0.92)	3.05 (0.76)	+0.51	Plausible aggregate increase
Vocabulary	2.55 (0.77)	3.30 (0.74)	+0.75	Plausible; difference recalculated
Fluency	3.10 (0.96)	3.30 (0.74)	+0.20	Plausible small increase
Grammar	3.56 (0.07)	3.50 (0.76)	-0.06	Range-valid but potentially affected by ceiling or scoring instability
Communication	3.53 (0.99)	3.30 (0.73)	Not used	Invalid: pretest mean exceeded stated maximum of 3

Note. Criteria were reported on a stated 0-4 scale. Screening checks internal arithmetic only; it does not establish score reliability or validity.



Interpretation

The upward shift in the aggregate speaking range and mean is compatible with educational benefit from the six-week program. The intervention supplied about eight hours of structured oral practice in a context where most learners reported no previous experience with interactive speaking activities. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the sequence was feasible and that performance after implementation was higher on the reported classroom measure. It is not reasonable to conclude that games alone caused the difference.

Vocabulary showed the largest credible criterion gain. This aligns with the structure of the activities: each week activated a bounded lexical field and required learners to retrieve words to identify a person, describe an image, name an emotion, give a direction, or report a routine. Repeated retrieval within a meaningful goal can strengthen access to productive vocabulary. Yet the assessment record does not show whether learners transferred these words to an unfamiliar topic or retained them after the program.

Pronunciation also improved descriptively. Simon Says, modeled questions, choral or individual repetition, and the Talk Like a Parrot activity provided frequent auditory models and immediate opportunities to imitate. Such practice may improve intelligibility when feedback targets a limited set of sounds, stress patterns, or formulaic expressions. Future reports should define pronunciation descriptors more precisely and distinguish intelligibility from accent conformity.

The smaller fluency change is pedagogically informative. Games can create willingness to speak, but willingness is not identical to fluent performance. Fluency development requires sustained meaning-focused output, repeated performance of the same or parallel task, and decreasing reliance on teacher prompts. Pair rotations, timed retelling, and repeated direction-giving with new maps could preserve the playful structure while increasing the length and independence of oral turns.

The grammar pattern illustrates the tension between communication and formal accuracy. A meaning-focused activity may encourage learners to take turns and complete a task even when grammatical control remains unstable. This is not necessarily a failure, particularly at A1, but it means that communicative practice should be followed by brief language-focused reflection. Teachers can select one recurring form, display anonymized examples, and allow learners to repeat the task with a clearer grammatical target.

The program's classroom design reflected useful principles of communicative teaching. Learners had roles, information to exchange, visible outcomes, and familiar



content. The movement from model to guided practice and pair production also reduced the risk of placing beginners into unsupported conversation. This structure is consistent with Richards' (2006) distinction among mechanical, meaningful, and communicative practice and with the need to adapt communicative tasks to local constraints (Butler, 2011; Littlewood, 2007).

Game design nevertheless requires equity safeguards. Fast-response activities may privilege confident learners, and competitive formats may allow a few students to dominate. In a large class, participation should be distributed through pairs, rotating roles, private rehearsal, visual language banks, and rules that reward complete communication rather than speed alone. Cooperative goals can also reduce the social cost of error while preserving challenge.

The baseline survey should be interpreted narrowly. Self-perceived proficiency is not equivalent to a standardized level, and prior experience with games does not measure frequency, quality, or duration. Still, the finding that 70% reported no prior interactive speaking practice helps explain why the activities may have felt engaging. A stronger study would measure enjoyment, anxiety, willingness to communicate, and perceived competence with validated scales at more than one time point.

The most important analytical limitation is the absence of a reconstructable counterfactual. Although two groups were described, the final results were not separated by group. A single pretest-posttest increase may reflect instruction, ordinary classroom learning, familiarity with the task, maturation, additional contact time, rater differences, or combinations of these factors. Group-specific outcomes and equivalent instructional time are necessary before attributing improvement to the game-based component.

Assessment consistency is another major limitation. The pretest and posttest included related but not clearly parallel tasks, criterion labels varied across rubric descriptions, rater training and interrater agreement were not reported, and one summary was impossible. The slightly different total values reported in separate sections also indicate version-control problems. Future work should predefine the scoring protocol, maintain one locked dataset, and derive all tables automatically from participant-level records.

A stronger evaluation could use two intact classes assigned to game-based and active-comparison conditions, with both receiving the same instructional time and target language. Parallel picture-description and interaction tasks should be counterbalanced across occasions. Recordings should be anonymized, randomized, and independently



scored by at least two trained raters. Reporting agreement, attrition, missing data, and a delayed transfer task would make the evidence substantially more credible.

Despite these limitations, the sequence is practical for primary classrooms. It does not require expensive technology: picture cards, a simple map, role cards, and a timer can support most activities. The essential design decision is to make English necessary for the game outcome. A short model, protected rehearsal, equitable turns, focused feedback, and one repeated performance can convert an enjoyable activity into structured speaking practice.

CONCLUSIONS

A six-week program of game-based communicative practice was followed by higher aggregate speaking scores among sixth-grade learners working around CEFR A1. The reported mean increased from 6.77 to 8.96, while credible criterion summaries showed the largest gains in vocabulary and pronunciation and a smaller gain in fluency. The program also addressed a context in which most learners reported no previous use of interactive activities for spoken English.

The results support feasibility, not causal effectiveness. The exact outcome sample could not be established, comparison-group scores were unavailable, individual observations were not reported, test forms were not demonstrably equivalent, rubric labels varied, and one criterion summary was mathematically inconsistent. The increase in total-score dispersion further suggests that learners may not have responded uniformly.

For classroom practice, games should be selected for the language they require rather than for entertainment alone. Visual support, modeling, pair roles, rehearsal, equal participation, and focused feedback can help beginning learners use short descriptions, questions, directions, and routine expressions. Meaning-focused play should be paired with brief attention to recurring pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar needs.

Future research should define one analytic sample, preserve participant-level data, compare equally timed conditions, use parallel tasks, record oral performances, blind and double-score the recordings, and include delayed transfer. Under those conditions, the six-unit sequence could be tested as a replicable approach for expanding meaningful speaking opportunities in primary EFL classrooms.



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