Methodological strategies to strengthen communication skills in English in tourism context

Estrategias metodológicas para fortalecer la destreza comunicativa en inglés en contexto turístico

[1]Lorena Elizabeth Casanova Imbaquingo
[2]Ricardo Santiago Hernández Domínguez

[1]lcasanova@institutocotacachi.edu.ec

[2]shernandez@institutocotacachi.edu.ec

[1]https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4423-4274

[2]https://orcid.org/0009-0003-2498-6695

[1][2]Instituto Superior Universitario Cotacachi. Tecnología Superior en Gestión de Operaciones Turísticas. Cotacachi, Imbabura, Ecuador

Abstract

The study focuses on the low communicative performance in English of the students in the Higher Technology in Turism career of the Instituto Superior Universitario Cotacachi. The aim is to evaluate this skill and propose effective methodological strategies. To do this, a descriptive and exploratory design has been used, applying techniques such as direct observation, interviews and knowledge tests. The results revealed that many students do not achieve the necessary skills for the tourism sector, evidencing the need to review current methodologies. It is concluded that it is crucial to adopt a more dynamic and personalized approach in teaching, together with the continuous training of teaching staff and the integration of authentic activities. It is recommended to implement digital platforms and collaborative projects to improve oral practice and promote purposeful learning.

Keywords: communicative competence; methodological strategies; teacher training.

Resumen

El estudio se centra en el bajo desempeño comunicativo en inglés de los estudiantes de la Tecnología Superior en Gestión de Operaciones Turísticas del Instituto Superior Universitario Cotacachi. Se busca evaluar esta destreza y proponer estrategias metodológicas efectivas. Para ello, se utilizó un diseño descriptivo y exploratorio, aplicando técnicas como la observación directa, entrevistas y test de conocimiento. Los resultados revelaron que muchos estudiantes no alcanzan las competencias necesarias para el sector turístico, evidenciando la necesidad de revisar las metodologías actuales. Se concluye que es crucial adoptar un enfoque más dinámico y personalizado en la enseñanza, junto con la capacitación continua del personal docente y la integración de actividades auténticas. Se recomienda implementar plataformas digitales y proyectos colaborativos para mejorar la práctica oral y fomentar un aprendizaje significativo.

Palabras clave: competencia comunicativa; estrategias metodológicas; formación docente.

Introduction

Research problem.

English proficiency has been consolidated as an essential competence in the global tourism field, where effective and fluent communication is essential for interaction with international visitors and professional performance (Herrera and Muñoz, 2019). In Ecuador, the tourism sector has experienced significant growth, increasing the demand for professionals trained to communicate competently in English (Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador, 2023). However, at the Instituto Superior Universitario Cotacachi, students of the Higher Technology in Tourism Career present notable deficiencies in communicative skills in English, affecting their labor competitiveness and limiting their ability to express themselves in this language.

Despite the fact that English is an essential part of the curriculum and is recognized as an indispensable tool in the professional practice of tourism, the communicative performance of students is unsatisfactory, especially in oral expression. The results of recent evaluations reveal that most students do not reach the expected level of proficiency, showing difficulties in fluency, pronunciation and adequate use of vocabulary not only impacts their academic performance, but also reduces their job opportunities, directly affecting the competitiveness of the local tourism destination.

The problem starts in the ineffectiveness of the methodological strategies employed in teaching English, which focus predominantly on grammar and vocabulary, without fostering the development of communicative competencies in real contexts (Pérez, 2023). Moreover, traditional English teaching in this educational context lacks innovative methodologies that are integrated.

Background

Bibliographical revision

The development of communicative competencies in English has been a persistent challenge in foreign language teaching, especially in contexts where the language is not used on a daily basis (Alvarez, 2021). Several studies have pointed out that one of the main obstacles to learning English is the lack of opportunities to practice the language in real situations, which affects students' fluency and confidence when communicating (Roa, 2021). In the tourism area, where interaction with native and international speakers is constant, these limitations become significant barriers to professional performance (Ministry of Tourism of Ecuador).

In Ecuador, the teaching of English in higher education institutions has traditionally focused on grammatical and vocabulary aspects, using repetitive and mechanical teaching methods that do not encourage communicative interaction or the practical application of the language (Pérez, 2023). This situation has led to unsatisfactory results in the development of communicative competencies, particularly in oral expression, limiting students' ability to communicate in real work situations.

Various innovative methodological approaches have been explored to improve English language learning. Project-Based Learning (PBL) has been shown to be effective by allowing students to work on meaningful and contextualized tasks, promoting practical language use in real situations (Zhao et al., 2023). Gamification and the use of digital platforms have also shown positive results by providing dynamic and personalized learning that encourages autonomous language practice (Li et al., 2023). However, their application in the context of Higher Technology in Tourism Career remains limited and requires adaptation to the specific needs of the tourism sector.

Theory

The research is based on Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism, which emphasizes the importance of social interaction in the learning process. From this perspective, language is a fundamental tool for cognitive and social development, and its acquisition occurs through interaction with others in meaningful contexts. In this context, the development of communicative competencies in English requires an interactive and contextualized approach, where students actively participate in authentic communicative situations relevant to their professional area.

In the same way, it is considering the meaningful learning proposed by Ausubel (1968), which holds that knowledge is acquired effectively when it is related to previous experiences. In the context of English language teaching, this implies designing activities that are relevant and contextualized for students, applying the language in authentic and meaningful situations in the tourism environment. This approach promotes knowledge retention and facilitates the transfer of language skills to real-life contexts.

Finally, the research is supported by Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence, which postulates that learning a language involves not only grammatical knowledge, but also the ability to use it appropriately in different social contexts. This theory emphasizes the importance of integrating linguistic, pragmatic and sociocultural components, promoting a functional and contextualized use of English.

Objectives

The general objective of this research is to design and implement innovative methodological strategies to strengthen the communicative skills in English of the students of the Higher Technology in Tourism Career of the Instituto Superior Universitario Cotacachi, promoting meaningful and contextualized learning, aligned with the needs of the tourism sector. To achieve this purpose, we propose to identify the methodological strategies currently used in the teaching of English in this context, evaluate the communicative performance of students with emphasis on oral expression skills and design a proposal for innovative methodological strategies that integrate the use of digital platforms, recreational activities and project-based le

Research question

How do innovative methodological strategies influence the strengthening of English communication skills of students of the Higher Technology in Tourism Career at the Instituto Superior Universitario Cotacachi?

Method

Research classification.

This research used a mixed approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon studied (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). From the quantitative approach, structured questionnaires will be applied to assess students' English communicative performance, allowing the quantification of variables and statistical analysis. Complementarily, the qualitative approach explored in depth the perceptions and experiences of teachers and students through semi-structured interviews and participatory observations.

The methodological design was descriptive and exploratory, since it characterized the current state of the methodological strategies employed and explored pedagogical innovations adapted to the tourism context of the Higher Technology in Tourism Career of the Instituto Superior Universitario Cotacachi. The research was field and cross-sectional, collecting data in the natural environment of the students in a single academic period to get an initial diagnosis and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed methodological strategies.

Techniques and instruments

Structured questionnaires were used to assess communicative performance in English, with Likert scale items to measure students' perceptions. Content validity was ensured through expert review and reliability was verified with Cronbach's alpha. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to explore their experiences and perceptions regarding English learning, using a thematic script that allowed flexibility in the exploration of relevant topics.

Participatory observation was applied to record the methodological strategies used in the classroom and the communicative interactions in English. A structured observation form was used, guaranteeing inter-observer reliability through previous training and data coding. Likewise, an oral evaluation rubric was used to measure students' communicative performance in English such as content, fluency, communicative strategies, pronunciation and vocabulary use.

Data collection and analysis

The research procedure was structured in three stages aligned with the established objectives:

- Identification of Methodological Strategies:

Direct observation was used in English classes, recording the strategies applied by teachers using a structured observation form. The contents of the virtual classrooms were also reviewed using a checklist to identify patterns and trends in the observed methodologies. This analysis allowed us to understand the educational context and detect opportunities for improvement.

- Evaluation of Communicative Performance in English:

A structured oral assessment was administered using an assessment rubric that measured five dimensions: content, fluency, communicative strategies, pronunciation, and vocabulary use, with a maximum score of 10 points. This assessment provided quantitative data on the students' level of communicative competence.

- **Proposal of Methodological Strategies:**

New methodological strategies were formulated based on the findings of the previous phases and a SWOT analysis, ensuring their relevance and alignment with the identified educational needs. These strategies were designed to improve students' communicative performance in English.

Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a mixed approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure a comprehensive interpretation of the results. Classroom observations were analyzed using a thematic approach, identifying effective pedagogical strategies and areas for improvement in the educational process. The results of the oral evaluation rubric were tabulated and analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies and standard deviation), presented in tables and graphs for a clear and understandable visualization of the students' performance in the different dimensions evaluated.

Results and discussions

Results

Analysis of the methodological strategies used to learn English.

The use of methodological strategies in teaching English in tourism career (TSGOT) presents significant limitations that hinder the development of students' oral communicative competence. Although recognized as valuable tools, their implementation has revealed several weaknesses.

El role play se destaca como una técnica útil para simular situaciones reales del ámbito turístico. Sin embargo, su efectividad se ve comprometida por la falta de variación en los escenarios y un enfoque excesivo en la memorización de diálogos, lo que restringe la capacidad de los estudiantes para improvisar y adaptarse a contextos comunicativos cambiantes (Álvarez, 2020; Torres, 2021).

Role play stands out as a useful technique to simulate real situations in the tourism area. However, its effectiveness is compromised by a lack of variation in scenarios and an excessive focus on memorizing dialogues, which restricts students' ability to improvise and adapt to changing communicative contexts (Álvarez, 2020; Torres, 2021).

In the case of practical exercises, while they aim to improve fluency through repetition, most focus on mechanical exercises that lack an authentic communicative context. This lack of variety not only limits student motivation but also hinders the internalization of language use in real situations (Rivas, 2019; García, 2021).

Photo description allows students to practice descriptions but tends to focus on superficial aspects and does not encourage the use of specialized vocabulary or the creation of complex discourse, which is essential in the tourism field (Martínez, 2022). The lack of detailed feedback in this activity further limits its effectiveness.

Finally, dramatization seeks to facilitate deeper immersion, but its application is often superficial, lacking a clear focus on developing complex communicative skills. The scarce feedback prevents learning from mistakes and identifying opportunities for improvement (Vásquez, 2021).

In summary, despite its pedagogical value, current methodological strategies in TSGOT exhibit shortcomings that affect the development of oral communicative competence. It is essential to diversify these strategies, improve their implementation, and adapt their use to the needs of the tourism context to advance students' oral skills.

Regarding the use of virtual tools, the University of Richmond platform offers interactive resources but lacks critical functionalities, such as the ability to record audio, which limits the practice of oral production and affects the development of essential skills (Pérez, 2023). Additionally, the generated reports do not adequately reflect individual progress, hindering personalized feedback (López, 2022). Incorporating improvements in these areas is crucial to maximize the platform's potential for English learning.

Evaluation of English Communication Skills in Fourth-Level Students of TSGOT

This analysis focuses on the evaluation of the English communicative skill of a group of 15 students, considering five key dimensions: response content, fluency, communicative strategies, pronunciation, and vocabulary use. Each of these dimensions was evaluated using a scale that began at 0 (total absence of performance), through 0.5 (very limited performance), 1 (poor performance), 1.5 (partially adequate performance) to 2 (acceptable performance). The maximum total score achievable was 10 points, obtained by summing the scores assigned to each dimension. Consequently, the range of final scores fluctuated between 5 (minimum) and 10 (maximum), reflecting each student's overall performance in the evaluation.

Table 1.
Resultados evaluación

Estudiantes	Content or Response	Fluency	Communicative Strategies	Pronunciation	Vocabulary Use	Total
1	1	1	1	1	1	5
2	1	1	1	1	1	5
3	2	1	2	2	2	9
4	1	1	2	1	1	6
5	1	1	1	1	1	5
6	1	1	1	1	1	5
7	2	1	1	2	1	7
8	2	1	1	1	1	6
9	1	1	1	1	1	5
10	1	1	1	1	1	5
11	1	1	1	1	1	5
12	1	1	1	1	1	5
13	1	2	2	2	2	9
14	1	1	1	1	1	5
15	1	1	1	1	1	5

Own elaboration.

Evaluation Results

Of the 15 students evaluated, 10 (66.67%) achieved the minimum score of 5, indicating unsatisfactory performance in all analyzed dimensions. This finding suggests that a significant portion of the group exhibits deficiencies in the communicative competencies necessary for effective interaction in English, underscoring the urgent need to implement more effective pedagogical strategies that address the identified weaknesses in language learning.

On the other hand, two students (13.33%) achieved a total score of 9, indicating a significantly higher level of communicative competence. These students demonstrate adequate skills in fundamental areas such as fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary use, allowing them to interact in English more effectively and confidently. The difference in performance suggests the presence of individual factors that may be positively influencing their learning process.

A detailed examination of each dimension reveals that the average score in Fluency was 1.07, indicating that most students struggle to articulate their thoughts coherently and fluently. This limitation is also reflected in the Pronunciation scores, which showed a similar average of 1.07, suggesting that a considerable number of students struggle to produce sounds and words understandably. Both difficulties are critical, as fluency and pronunciation are essential elements of effective communication in any language.

Additionally, the dimension of Communicative Strategies showed an average of 1.13, indicating inadequate use of communicative strategies, such as asking questions and adapting language to specific contexts. Insufficiency in the use of these strategies is fundamental, as the ability to apply effective communicative approaches is essential for developing solid communicative competencies, especially in professional and academic environments.

Regarding response content and vocabulary use, both dimensions presented averages of 1.07. These results suggest that students not only have difficulties expressing their ideas clearly and coherently but also face significant limitations in their lexical repertoire, restricting their ability to communicate precisely and effectively in English. The lack of adequate vocabulary may limit students' capacity to actively participate in relevant conversations and communicative situations in the tourism context.

The evaluation of communicative skills in English reveals a concerning picture, characterized by a high percentage of students with poor performance in the assessed dimensions. Although some students have demonstrated more advanced competencies, the majority face substantial challenges in critical areas such as fluency, pronunciation, and vocabulary use. This scenario demands a thorough review and strengthening of the pedagogical strategies implemented in English teaching. It is imperative to design and implement more effective methodologies that address the specific needs of students, thereby ensuring an improvement in their communicative competence and adequate preparation to face the challenges posed by the professional environment in the tourism sector.

SWOT Analysis

Table 2.
Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, and Threats

Strengths	Weaknesses
· Available teaching resources: access to materials in English, including books and digital platforms.	· Limited time for oral practice: restricted schedules that limit English practice.
· Qualified teachers: instructors with specialized training in modern teaching methodologies.	· Limited resources: lack of updated materials that hinder dynamic teaching.
· Student interest: intrinsic motivation to learn English, influenced by its global relevance.	· Resistance to change: reluctance from some teachers to adopt new methodologies.
· Supportive environment: a favorable educational setting that encourages language learning.	· Inequality in student levels: differences in competency that complicate homogeneous teaching.
Opportunities	Threats

· Technology and digital resources: using applications and online platforms to enrich teaching.	· Competition with other subjects: difficulty balancing time among different subjects.
· External collaborations: partnerships with educational institutions that offer additional resources. · External factors: socioeconomic influences and lack of family support that impact learning.	· Changes in educational policies: reforms that affect the focus on English teaching.

Own elaboration.

Below is the cross-analysis of variables resulting from the SWOT analysis.

Table 3.
Cross Analysis of Variables

Variables	Weaknesses	Opportunities
Teaching resources	Limited resources and lack of updates.	Technology and digital resources available.
Qualified teachers	Resistance to change in methodologies.	Innovative teaching methods in trend.
Student interest	Limited time for oral practice.	Collaborations with external institutions that promote learning.
Supportive environment	Inequality in student levels.	Availability of digital tools to personalize learning.
Early failure demotivation	Low performance in fluency and pronunciation.	External collaborations to enrich the curriculum.

Own elaboration.

Proposed methodological strategies

The integration of interactive digital platforms is presented as an innovative and essential approach to revitalize English learning. Tools such as mobile applications and online platforms allow students to practice the language autonomously and in a fun way, accessing resources that adapt to their individual learning styles. Additionally, these technologies offer instant feedback and personalized activities, increasing student motivation and engagement, resulting in more effective learning (Li *et al.,* 2023). For example, platforms like Duolingo and Babbel use games to practice vocabulary and grammar, turning the learning process into an interactive experience. In the context of the Instituto Superior Tecnológico Cotacachi, a program could be implemented that combines the use of these platforms with the traditional classroom, promoting the practice of oral skills through online interactions and class activities.

Continuous training of teaching staff is a fundamental pillar to guarantee the effectiveness of teaching strategies in the classroom. Providing regular training on innovative methodologies and educational technologies enhances the quality of teaching, directly impacting student learning (López *et al.*, 2022). Training workshops and professional development sessions should focus on current trends in language teaching, addressing both theoretical and practical aspects. These trainings may include the use of digital tools, strategies to encourage conversation, and formative assessment techniques. Thus, a cycle of continuous improvement in English teaching would be generated, where teachers feel more confident and competent, which translates into a richer and more meaningful learning experience for students.

Language exchanges, both in-person and virtual, offer an excellent opportunity for students to practice English in real, culturally significant contexts. By interacting with native speakers, students not only improve their fluency and listening comprehension, but also gain a deeper understanding of the cultural variations of the language. To implement this strategy, agreements could be established with educational institutions abroad or create virtual exchange programs that connect students with native speakers through videoconferences. These immersive experiences not only strengthen language skills, but also foster cultural openness and empathy, preparing students to function in an increasingly globalized tourism environment.

Project Based Learning (PBL) is a pedagogical methodology that has proven to be effective in promoting meaningful learning and the practical application of knowledge. In the context of learning English, PBL allows students to work on projects that require the use of the language to solve real problems or develop creative proposals, which motivates them to learn more actively (Zhao *et al.,* 2023). . Projects related to the creation of tourist itineraries in English could be designed, where students research and present their proposals to their classmates. This methodology not only improves linguistic competence, but also develops critical skills, such as collaboration, effective communication and problem solving, essential in the tourism field.

Forming collaborative work groups is another powerful strategy to promote interaction and social learning among students. Working as a team allows them to practice their English in a natural and contextualized way, developing interpersonal and communication skills (Fernández et al., 2022). Group activities can be implemented that involve simulations of tourist situations, oral presentations and debates on relevant topics. By fostering a collaborative environment, you create a culture of support and peer learning, where students are motivated to contribute and learn from each other.

Continuous evaluation of student progress is essential for the effectiveness of any pedagogical strategy. Implementing a monitoring system allows you to identify areas for improvement and adjust methodologies according to the needs of the classroom (González, 2022). At the Institute, periodic oral evaluations could be carried out, as well as satisfaction surveys to obtain feedback on the learning experience. This information is invaluable for making adjustments to educational planning, ensuring that the strategies used are relevant and effective. Flexibility in teaching, based on concrete data, allows us to address weaknesses and take advantage of opportunities for learning.

Creating an educational environment that celebrates students' achievements and efforts is crucial to maintaining motivation and engagement in learning English. A positive and supportive environment helps counteract the demotivation that can arise from early failures, fostering a proactive attitude towards learning (Pérez, 2023). A recognition system that values individual and group progress, celebrating milestones such as improved fluency or active participation in class would be an excellent option. This approach not only increases students' self-esteem, but also promotes a sense of community and belonging.

The design of differentiated activities is essential to meet the diverse needs and levels of competence of students in learning English. This strategy guarantees that all students, regardless of their initial level, can participate and benefit from the educational process, promoting inclusion and equitable learning (Martínez *et al.,* 2023). In this sense, adapted materials and activities can be prepared, ensuring that the tasks are challenging and accessible to everyone. For example, different levels of difficulty can be offered in oral tasks, allowing each student to progress at their own pace.

Finally, the incorporation of cultural elements in the teaching of English enriches learning and makes it more relevant and attractive for students. The use of music, film and literature not only stimulates interest in the language, but also facilitates a deeper understanding of the cultural contexts that surround the language (Cruz *et al.,* 2022). Thus, activities can be organized that integrate these elements, such as film screenings followed by debates or analysis of song lyrics. The activities not only encourage the practice of the language, but also promote empathy and cultural openness, essential skills in the tourism field.

Discussion.

The results of this research highlight the urgency of optimizing methodological strategies in teaching English within the context of Higher Technology in Tourism Career. Although various research highlights the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches such as project-based learning (PBL) and the integration of digital platforms, the implementation of these strategies has revealed limitations that compromise the development of oral communicative competence in students (Li *et al.,* 2023; López *et al.,* 2022).

A key finding of the research is that the use of strategies such as role play lacks the variability necessary to maintain interest and effectiveness of learning. As pointed out by Rincón (2023), role play is effective when it allows students to face real communicative situations; However, in its current application, there is an excessive emphasis on memorizing dialogues, which limits improvisation and adaptation to unexpected contexts. This limitation is in line with the statement of Zhao *et al.* (2023), who maintain that language learning should foster not only fluency, but also the capacity for authentic interaction.

The findings indicate that continuous training of teaching staff is essential to improve the quality of teaching and, therefore, student learning. Previous research highlights the importance of keeping teachers updated on innovative educational methodologies and technologies (González, 2022; Pérez, 2023). This involves not only offering regular workshops on teaching strategies, but also fostering an environment where teachers feel empowered to experiment and adjust their pedagogical approaches according to the needs of their students.

The implications for higher education are vast. The findings suggest that a comprehensive approach is needed that considers both the development of language skills and the creation of a positive learning environment that celebrates student achievements (Cruz *et al.,* 2022; Fernández *et al.,* 2022). This motivating environment not only combats demotivation, but also promotes a sense of community and belonging among students, which is crucial to their academic success.

In the tourism area, language skills are becoming increasingly essential due to the growing globalization and cultural diversity of the sector. The implementation of linguistic exchanges and the integration of cultural elements in English teaching can prepare students to face the challenges of a constantly evolving labor market (Martínez *et al.,* 2023). As the literature highlights, language exchanges allow students to practice in authentic contexts and develop a richer understanding of cultural language variations (López, 2022).

Conclusion

The analysis of the communicative performance in English of the students of the Higher Technology in Tourism Career reveals that, although some individuals have adequate skills, the majority show a level of competence that is considered insufficient to face the challenges of the tourism sector. This situation highlights the urgent need to review and improve the methodological strategies used in language teaching, to guarantee that students develop the communication skills necessary for their future professional career.

The pedagogical methodologies currently used do not satisfy the specific demands of the tourism sector, which demands professionals capable of communicating effectively in English in various situations. The homogeneity and lack of innovation in teaching techniques have limited the potential of students to acquire relevant skills, which puts their preparation for the labor market at risk. It is essential to adopt a more diverse and contextualized approach that aligns with the realities of the professional environment.

Individual factors such as students' intrinsic motivation and their personal context are determining factors in the English learning process. This evidence suggests that a more personalized approach to language teaching should be considered, taking into account the particularities of each student. In this way, educational interventions can be designed that truly respond to the needs and aspirations of future professionals in the tourism field.

The implementation of authentic resources and the creation of dynamic learning environments, which include activities such as simulations, collaborative projects and practices in real situations, will strengthen the English communication skills of Tourism career students. This strategy will not only improve their academic performance, but will also effectively prepare them to face the challenges of the competitive job market in the tourism sector.

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