

Reducing speaking anxiety thanks to the implementation of audio journal activities

Reducción de la ansiedad al hablar gracias a la implementación de actividades de diario de audio

¹Cinthy Vanesa Ushiña Chamba

²Maritza Jacqueline Villacis Lizano

¹Autor de correspondencia: vane15sita@hotmail.com

¹Universidad Tecnológica Indoamérica.
Ecuador.

vane15sita@hotmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6074-3996>

²Universidad Tecnológica Indoamérica.
Ecuador.

maritzavillacis@uti.edu.ec

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5935-707X>

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Abstract

For many adolescent EFL learners, the thought of speaking English aloud triggers a constellation of physical and emotional responses that have little to do with what they actually know and everything to do with how exposed they feel. This qualitative case study explored how an eight-week audio journal intervention shaped the speaking anxiety of nineteen B1-level eighth-grade students at Unidad Educativa Atenas in Ambato, Ecuador. Drawing on Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, Bandura's self-efficacy theory, and Horwitz et al.'s framework of foreign language anxiety, the researcher analyzed 152 audio journal recordings and post-intervention interviews through reflexive thematic analysis. Four interrelated sources of speaking anxiety emerged from the data: fear of peer evaluation, linguistic self-doubt, evaluative classroom pressure, and a persistent lack of authentic oral production opportunities. The audio journal addressed all four by removing the social audience and corrective grading, building gradual mastery experiences, and inviting genuine metacognitive self-reflection. Over the eight weeks, students reported fewer physical and mental anxiety symptoms, a growing willingness to speak, and a clearer sense of their own progress. These findings suggest that audio journals, when used as a regular, non-evaluative, content-focused weekly practice, offer a theoretically grounded and practically accessible path toward stronger speaking self-efficacy in secondary EFL classrooms in Ecuador.

Resumen

Para muchos adolescentes que aprenden inglés como lengua extranjera, la idea de hablar en voz alta desencadena una serie de respuestas físicas y emocionales que tienen poco que ver con lo que realmente saben y mucho con lo expuestos que se sienten. Este estudio de caso cualitativo exploró cómo una intervención de diario de audio de ocho semanas influyó en la ansiedad al hablar de diecinueve estudiantes de octavo año con nivel B1 en la Unidad Educativa Atenas de Ambato, Ecuador. Apoyado en la hipótesis del filtro afectivo de Krashen, la teoría de la autoeficacia de Bandura y el marco de la ansiedad ante el idioma extranjero de Horwitz et al., el estudio analizó 152 grabaciones de diario de audio y entrevistas posteriores a la intervención mediante un análisis temático reflexivo. Del análisis emergieron cuatro fuentes interrelacionadas de ansiedad al hablar:

miedo a la evaluación de los pares, inseguridad lingüística, presión evaluativa en el aula y una persistente falta de oportunidades de producción oral auténtica. El diario de audio atendió a las cuatro al eliminar la audiencia social y la calificación correctiva, al construir experiencias graduales de dominio e invitar a una autorreflexión metacognitiva genuina. A lo largo de las ocho semanas, los estudiantes reportaron menos síntomas físicos y mentales de ansiedad, una mayor disposición a hablar y una mayor conciencia de su propio progreso. Estos hallazgos sugieren que los diarios de audio, cuando se emplean como práctica semanal regular, no evaluativa y centrada en los contenidos, ofrecen un camino teóricamente fundamentado y prácticamente accesible hacia una mayor autoeficacia oral en las aulas de inglés de secundaria en Ecuador.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking is the most unique and challenging of the four macro-skills in foreign language learning and is usually recognized as one of the most mentally and emotionally taxing activities that learners face during language acquisition. According to Horwitz and Cope's (1986) theory, foreign language anxiety (FLA) is a complex and multifaceted construct that includes test anxiety, communication anxiety, and fear of receiving a poor grade, which negatively impacts learners' ability to acquire and use a foreign language. It is associated with emotional, cognitive, and performance-related challenges in language learning. These symptoms can all appear with significant intensity in EFL classroom settings. As a result, students may receive lower grades and experience poor academic performance, as they may avoid situations involving oral assessment (Juríková, 2025).

Students with high FLA scores often refrain from participating in class activities, limiting their ability to practice and progress in the language. Anxiety causes motivation levels to go down, which can lead students to lose interest in learning and participating in English classes. One of the adverse effects of speech-related anxiety includes its effect on students' academic performance, especially for foreign language learners, as speech-related symptoms can interfere with the clearer articulation of a student's thoughts and ideas, resulting in misunderstandings and frustration (Alsalooli & Al-Tale', 2022). The amount and depth of empirical research on the effect of anxiety on oral production is substantial. A recent meta-analysis by Teimouri, Goetze, and Plonsky (2019) that reviewed over 90 studies found that anxiety is detrimental to linguistic performance, with oral expression being the most adversely affected skill. According to Dewaele (2013), this anxiety erodes fluency and communicative confidence across diverse educational contexts. This reaction is not merely a solitary state; it is brought about by a multitude of factors in the classroom. Young (1991), for example, pointed out links among interpersonal dynamics with the instructor, the learner's beliefs, and assessment dynamics, creating an environment that can be emotionally overwhelming. What's most worrying is that initial discomfort may become a silent trap. As MacIntyre (2017) describes, anxious students tend to avoid participation, which, in turn, limits their opportunities to practice, stunts their progress, and ultimately reinforces their original fear, locking them into a difficult-to-break cycle of behaviors.

FLA is a significant issue in South America, including in Ecuador, and hampers both students and teachers. English is studied as a foreign language in Ecuador, and the national syllabus is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The Ministry of Education states that students should achieve progressive levels of communicative competence in the English language within the context of the basic education program, however there is evidence to support the notion of a huge chasm between what students can understand and say (Ministerio de Educacion del Ecuador, 2016). More research shows that affective factors — especially fear of speaking — greatly affect a student's participation in oral output, even when their linguistic competence would allow them to do so (British Council & Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2015).

Nineteen eighth-grade B1 students at the Atenas Educational Unit, a private school in Ambato, Tungurahua, who have been educated only in English since early schooling, provide as an example of this disparity: they do well on written assignments, reading evaluations, and grammatical examinations, but they have oral nervousness. Cooperative learning, which allocates evaluation pressure (Long & Porter, 1985); drama and role-play, which offer a protective fictional identity (Kao & O'Brien, 2001); task-based instruction, which emphasizes meaning over correctness (Ellis, 2003); and low-stakes speaking practice, which reframes error as progress, are some pedagogical strategies to address this. All of these strategies work together to release the learner's voice.

Of the low-pressure practices reviewed in the literature, journal- or diary-based activities have received special attention because they provide students with a private space — free from competition and assessment — for language practice and personal expression. Specifically, the use of written journal entries as reflections in communicative language teaching has been well researched and repeatedly found effective in fostering learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and emotional engagement with the target language (Nunan, 1989; Ur, 1996; Winer, 1992). Journals are among the most studied tools for language acquisition because people who maintain a journal in a foreign language tend to show increased fluency and comfort in writing, suggesting that the same can be achieved orally.

Investigators focused on diary-type tasks as individual language practice (not for evaluation). It is well established that written diaries provide students with autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and positive emotional engagement (Nunan, 1989; Ur, 1996; Winer, 1992). Research indicates that using audio-based dialog journals may enhance spoken English skills for foreign language learners. They serve cognitive, linguistic, pedagogical, psychological, and social functions, providing opportunities to practice language in a rich setting free of the traditional classroom. Patients can hear their own voices in sound recordings, prompting deeper introspection into their emotions or thoughts. Verbal communication may feel more natural and less formal than writing, facilitating easier patient openness (Jain & Kala, 2014).

As such, when we discuss audio diaries, which are periodic, self-directed recordings in which students use the target language in a structured or open-ended manner, created independently outside the classroom, they represent an empirical approach that has, by and large, yet to be fully explored. When students are not under the pressure of facing an audience, and even less so their teacher, there is less pressure to express themselves. The literature about these audio diaries in the domain of English as a foreign language has proven the effectiveness of oral skills and student self-confidence (Yoon, 2012); however, few studies have reported the influence of speaking anxiety as an empirically measurable affective variable in the setting of secondary education, and evidence within Latin American contexts is limited in the literature.

Using a qualitative case study design, this study aims to examine whether and how audio diaries affect students' perceptions of anxiety when speaking English as a foreign language. Because this qualitative and interpretive methodology is adopted, the central research question guiding this study is: How do audio diaries influence speaking anxiety among eighth-grade English language learners at the Atenas Educational Unit in Ambato, Ecuador? To better elucidate the study and clarify the study criteria, the following questions need to be asked: (i) Throughout the course of the eight-week intervention, what patterns of enhanced oral production and affective disposition can be observed in the students' audio diary recordings? and (ii) Before and after completing the audio diary exercises, how do students explain and interpret what they have experienced with speaking anxiety?

In theory, this research contributes to our knowledge of a relatively unexplored theme in Ecuadorian secondary schooling – self-reflection journals – by conducting a qualitative investigation of anxiety experienced when speaking English as a foreign language. In practical terms, it is intended to generate useful information for teachers struggling with oral anxiety in the classroom. The study connects the theory of linguistic anxiety to the practical realities of English teaching in Ecuador through student voices and recordings.

Speaking Anxiety in the EFL Classroom: Theoretical Foundations

The section begins by addressing something human: why does a student who understands the words freeze when asked to speak? This is more than a linguistic puzzle; this is an event grounded by the collision of cognition, emotion, and social identity. Knowing why a teenager who knows the words can't pronounce them, why someone who reads English fluently finds it difficult to speak, or why a student freezes in the middle of a sentence is not just difficulty with language. Above all, they are genuinely human experiences that emerge at the point of social, emotional, and cognitive identities. This study's theoretical framework is centered around four related components that contribute to clarifying the connection and promoting the use of daily audio as an affective approach in language learning: (1) the theory of anxiety regarding foreign languages as a specific psychological construct. FLA theory; (2) Krashen's theory of the affective filter and its implications for oral communication-the Affective Filter Hypothesis; (3) Bandura's theory of self-efficacy and its connection to speaking confidence-self-efficacy theory; and (4) educational literature on the use of audio diary activities in situations such as foreign languages- audio journal literature.

Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA): Conceptualization and Dimensions

Origin and Multifaceted Nature of the Construct

FLA is a psychological and emotional barrier that inhibits a learner's acquisition and use of a foreign language. It manifests tension, apprehension, and fear, which interfere with cognitive thinking, academic achievement, and communication. This complex understanding of FLA advises against treating speaking anxiety as a single, consistent symptom, thereby rendering it immediately applicable to the current study. Rather than being a generalized fear of the language itself, it suggests that the eighth-grade participants may experience anxiety as a layered combination of self-image, identity, and skill-specific apprehension. This distinction influenced the design of the audio journal's reflective questions, which probe each of these layers independently.

FLA results from a site-specific and situated experience that is qualitatively different from that of other types of academic or social anxiety. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986)

define speaking as a means of self-exposure, presenting a partial self to an audience. It is a conglomerate of different identities, thoughts, and feelings that reveal the complex nature of language learning. Many studies have elaborated on this. Cheng (2004) and Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999) confirmed the idea's multifaceted quality by distinguishing various forms of writing and reading. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) observed that the level of anxiety is the highest in the speaking segment. In line with Şimşek and Dörnyei (2017), anxiety is related to the learner's self-image; that is, the "anxious self" appears when the experience of language limitations meets with the ideal self, who is a fluent speaker. More recently, Oxford (2017), drawing on positive psychology, has proposed that understanding this affective dimension is the first step in a potential educational project to help students reimagine their nervous behavior. Together, these methods allow us to view FLA as a very human reaction that integrates cognitive, emotional, and identity-related aspects, and as requiring a pedagogy sensitive to the emotional component of learning, rather than as a personal weakness.

Factors That Trigger Anxiety When Speaking in the EFL Classroom

The main factors that cause speaking anxiety in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners include Social Pressure, which means worrying about peer and teacher evaluations can increase speaking anxiety; Fear of Mistakes: fear of making grammatical or pronunciation errors can inhibit active participation in class; Lack of Practice due to the scarcity of opportunities to practice the language in a safe environment can contribute to insecurity when speaking. Low self-esteem and a negative perception of their language skills can affect students' confidence; Cultural Context, specifically the cultural differences and social norms, can create discomfort when interacting in a foreign language; High Expectations, which means pressure to achieve high standards of proficiency, can cause stress and anxiety (Juríková, 2025); Phonetic Challenges where Students may become anxious and frustrated due to the complex nature of the target language's sounds, particularly those that are lacking from their home tongue (Baran-Łucarz & Lee, 2021). These factors interact and can vary among students, affecting their willingness and ability to communicate in the foreign language.

According to Young (1991) and Zheng & Cheng (2018), the entire relational framework that defines the learning environment – including the way the instructor reacts to errors, the rules regulating participation, the importance assigned to oral assessments, and the implicit structures that determine whose voice is heard and which is ignored – is what causes anxiety in the classroom. Performance during tests can be affected as a result of anxiety's interference with cognitive functions like encoding, storing, and retrieving information. FLA includes general and skills anxiety, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Learners may suffer from debilitating anxiety: forgetfulness, isolation, self-avoidance, and, perhaps, physical problems of anxiety, such as palpitations, trembling, or sweating, which frequently distract learners from their schoolwork and exams (Borisova et al., 2024). Anxiety about learning a foreign language may pose a significant barrier, affecting students' classroom experience and their willingness to continue learning it.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982)

The psychological mechanism of the filter and its relationship to acquisition

The main design principle of the audio journal is theoretically justified by Krashen's model: if a high affective filter hinders linguistic input from reaching more complex processing, then an activity that reduces anxiety by eliminating the audience, the grade, and the time pressure

should, in theory, lower that filter and create more favorable conditions for spoken language development. The first research question of the project, which concerns patterns of change throughout eight weeks of recordings, is eventually intended to test this idea empirically.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis (AFH), proposed by Stephen Krashen, posits that emotional factors such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence significantly influence second language acquisition (SLA). A high affective filter, caused by negative emotions like anxiety or low self-esteem, can block language input from being effectively processed, while a low affective filter facilitates language learning. Krashen (1982) proposed the Affective Filter Hypothesis as a component of the Monitor Model of second language acquisition. He suggested that motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence can serve as psychological filters that limit learners' access to the subconscious acquisition device, and confidence serves as a filter that either helps or inhibits learning a foreign language (Bao & Yusop, 2025). However, the filter is not just an external hindrance. When activated (for example, due to apprehension, frustration, or reflexive emotional avoidance), the information is still perceived at the level of intake but remains inaccessible to the deep levels of processing required for permanent acquisition. According to Krashen, reducing classroom tension is a structural necessity for learning to occur rather than a mere benefit. The results of a high affective filter are especially evident in oral production.

This makes the learning environment essential: a classroom that offers emotional support, recognizes mistakes as a necessary part of the process, and fosters confidence not only enhances student well-being but also becomes a requirement for language acquisition to take place successfully. It is important to note that Krashen's affective filter hypothesis has been subject to valid criticism. According to Mitchell and Myles (2004), important questions remain unanswered, such as how to identify the precise filter that would be prevented. What distinguishes an activated filter from a disabled one? These are significant observations: the hypothesis is more of a method than a mechanism. However, it retains a practical value for teachers. There is evidence of an inappropriately activated filter rather than competency limitations. However, the exact mechanism is unclear; the pedagogical implication is clear: creating emotionally secure environments and offering regular opportunities for students to practice confidently.

Self-efficacy and Confidence in Speaking (Bandura, 1997)

Sources of Self-Efficacy

Bandura's notion of self-efficacy, defined as a student's confidence in their ability to perform the specific actions required to achieve an objective, provides a useful framework for understanding confidence in speaking English as a foreign language. Self-efficacy is domain-specific and task-dependent, in contrast to global self-concept or trait-based self-esteem. For example, a student may have high self-efficacy in written literacy but low self-efficacy in oral production, not because she lacks linguistic competence but because she has not yet acquired sufficient active mastery experiences in the speaking domain.

According to Bandura (1997), there are the following types of self-efficacy. The most significant and persistent basis for changing one's beliefs is mastery experiences, which are direct, lived experiences of effectively completing tasks. Though their effects are relatively short-term (simulated events, such as seeing peers with similar linguistic profiles who are successful), social influence (encouragement from teachers or peers), and physiological and affective states (interpreting anxiety-associated bodily signals, such as trembling or rapid heart rate) also play a role. Based on Bandura's theoretical framework, the research has shown

that students' hesitation to participate in oral tasks is more related to strongly held opinions about their own limitations as speakers than to deficiencies in their linguistic knowledge. These assumptions have been shaped and reinforced by repeated evaluative experiences in which mistakes are treated as failures rather than as essential elements of learning. Furthermore, self-efficacy does not develop independently of metacognitive awareness.

The Relationship Between Self-Efficacy and Self-Regulation (Zimmerman, 2000)

According to Zimmerman (2000), self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, that is, the capacity to monitor, assess, and strategically adjust one's performance in the direction of the goal, are closely related. For language learners, self-regulation can occur when they notice which parts are problematic for them, what has improved, what they need to work on, and, most importantly, what type of practice they need to do to turn that short-term self-assurance into long-term verbal proficiency.

This relationship between self-efficacy and self-regulation underpins the third question in each audio diary entry, which asks students to consider how their attitudes toward speaking English have changed. The intervention was created to actively foster the self-regulatory awareness that Zimmerman describes as essential for long-term competence development in addition to passively reducing anxiety by encouraging this type of metacognitive monitoring.

The Audio Journal as a Pedagogical Tool

From the Tradition of the Written Journal to the Oral Journal (Progoff, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978)

The audio journal was designed to serve as more than just a tool for data collection; akin to Progoff's guided journals and Vygotsky's notion of mediated cognitive development, it was created to provide students with a structured yet psychologically safe environment in which speaking itself becomes an act of self-discovery rather than a mere accomplishment. This is made clear by placing the audio journal within this longer humanistic and sociocultural tradition.

The use of journals in language education is a matter of humanistic and sociocultural sensibilities. From a humanistic perspective, journal writing is what Carl Rogers (1969) called "psychological safety": a space where learners can express their feelings without fear of criticism; error is knowledge, not failure. This framing is very much in line with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, and it is no coincidence that learner journals became increasingly popular in the 1980s with the rise of affective language teaching. Progoff's (1975) intensive journal approach was a therapeutic practice that provided an early model for guided, prompt-based reflective writing, which has since become so prevalent in language learning.

The journal, in sociocultural terms, is what Vygotsky (1978) described as a mediating tool: it enables the learner to develop new cognitive and communicative capabilities beyond those of unmediated interaction. Writing language takes conscious thought: the writer needs to explain what the speaker leaves implicit, organize what the speaker leaves associate, and find words for what tone and gesture convey. This effort, rather than being a limitation, is what Vygotsky attributed to inner speech - the internal dialogue through which thought and language meet. This is borne out by research showing that learners who keep journals in the target language are more aware of and more in control of their language development (Burton

& Carroll, 2001; Dantas-Whitney, 2002). The journal is not only a record of what the learner knows; it is also the instrument through which she comes to know it.

Types and functions of audio diaries (McGrath, 1992; Ho, 2003; Brown et al., 1996)

Among McGrath's typologies, the current intervention is most similar to the audiotape journal model, which emphasizes fluency-building and non-evaluative instructor feedback rather than remedial assessment. The particular protocol choices outlined in the Methodology section, such as the decision to exclusively offer content-focused feedback and to withhold grades at every stage of the intervention, are rationalized by this typological foundation. As a foreign language, audio dialog journals have been shown to enhance English-speaking skills and to facilitate English practice outside the classroom.

The natural offspring of the written journal practice was the audio journal, a self-directed voice recording of students responding to an English challenge daily, made autonomously and unconnected to in-class assessment. In response to the lack of opportunities for real-world oral practice outside of the classroom, Ho (2003) developed the audiotaped dialogue diary for Taiwan (university students), an EFL environment. The journal tradition naturally gave rise to the audio journal. When Ho (2003) introduced recorded dialogue diaries for Taiwanese EFL students, he found that weekly recordings of the teacher's spoken remarks could encourage continued English-speaking outside the classroom, something that was not feasible in traditional conversations. Brown et al. (1996) identified five benefits: producing long talk; organizing ideas in English; practicing oral thinking; integrating private journaling with classroom confidence; and enabling individualized teacher feedback.

As a result, in accordance with new findings, using audio diaries greatly helps students learning ESL improve their communication abilities (Siyli & Kafes, 2012). According to Dantas-Whitney (2002), reflective audiotaped journals helped ESL students connect course challenges to their own experiences by providing a private space. This suggests that the audio journal is not only a tool for managing anxiety but also a space where real, experimental language use can take place. The learner is thinking aloud rather than accomplishing a task when she speaks into a recorder in her own domain.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodological Design

The eight essential methodological elements and their alignment are summarized in the following table:

Component	Description
1. Research approach	Interpretive-constructivist (Creswell & Poth, 2018)
2. Research design	Qualitative case study (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995)
3. Research methodology	Reflexive thematic analysis – RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021)
4. Key informants	19 eighth-grade B1 EFL students, ages 12-14, Unidad Educativa Atenas, Ambato, Ecuador
5. Relevant information	152 audio journal recordings (8 × 19) + 19 post-intervention semi-structured interviews

6. Data collection methods	(a) Weekly audio journal: 3 fixed reflective questions, recorded via mobile, submitted digitally (b) Individual semi-structured interview in Spanish, conducted after Week 8
7. Data analysis techniques	Six-stage RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021); member-checking for credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
8. Intervention	Eight-week audio journal protocol; non-evaluated; content-only teacher feedback (see Table 1)

Research Approach and Design

Since speaking anxiety is a subjective, context-dependent affective experience that quantitative instruments like the FLCAS (Horwitz et al., 1986) can measure in intensity but cannot explain in meaning, an interpretive–constructivist approach was chosen. As opposed to only confirming the existence of anxiety, this study aimed to understand how nineteen teenagers perceive and comprehend it when speaking English. A qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) was therefore the most appropriate choice, allowing the researcher to analyze the phenomena within its real-world academic context: the eighth-grade EFL classroom at Unidad Educativa Atenas, a private school in Ambato, Tungurahua Province, Ecuador. The entire group of nineteen B1-level students (ages 12–14) who took part in the eight-week intervention serves as the case's boundary. Purposive selection was used because the group is an accessible and representative example of the Ecuadorian secondary EFL learners whose speaking anxiety this study examines.

Data Collection

Two complementary data sources were produced. Initially, eight weekly audio journals totaling 152 were supplied by all 19 participants, responding to three preset prompts: (1) feelings today and why; (2) an intriguing, humorous, or difficult occurrence this week; and (3) current feelings regarding speaking English and whether they have changed. The affective filter is lowered by questions 1-2, which elicit genuine speech on well-known subjects (Krashen, 1982); prompt 3 allows for metacognitive self-monitoring of affective change over time. Weekly recordings were uploaded to the class platform; in the early weeks, there was no minimum duration demand. Teachers simply provided content-focused feedback, such as acknowledging, noting fluency, and asking follow-up questions; grades were not assigned. Second, to allow for unrestricted affective expression, each participant performed a semi-structured interview in Spanish, their main language, following Week 8. Every interview was transcribed verbatim after being audio-recorded, with informed consent.

The following six steps of reflexive thematic analysis were applied to all 152 journal and 19 interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021): (1) familiarization; (2) initial coding; (3) topic development; (4) theme review; (5) theme definition/naming; and (6) composing the analytic narrative. Because of its inductive flexibility and compatibility with intricate personal narrative data, RTA was selected. A description of the four developing themes was presented to a subgroup of participants for verification to increase trust (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher's English translation of each Spanish passage is enclosed in square brackets; participant names are pseudonyms.

Intervention: Eight-Week Audio Journal Protocol

The technique was based on Ellis's (2003) task-based principles, Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, and Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis. The audio journal was created to

progressively reduce the emotive filter, develop mastery experiences, and promote metacognitive self-reflection over the course of eight weeks by removing the social audience, evaluative pressure, and time restrictions associated with oral assignments in the classroom.

Table 1

Audio journal intervention timeline

Week	Thematic focus	Expected length	Teacher feedback
1-2	Introduction: daily routines, personal feelings, likes, and dislikes	1-2 minutes	Encouraging, content-focused
3-4	Personal experiences: a memorable event, a challenge overcome	2-3 minutes	Noting fluency gains, asking follow-up
5-6	Opinions and preferences: favorite activities, future plans	2-4 minutes	Highlighting vocabulary growth
7-8	Reflection: speaking in English – changes, feelings, progress	2-4 minutes	Affirming growth, open-ended response

Based on the lesson planning: All participants are adolescents (ages 12-14); prior to the study, verbal agreement from all students, along with informed consent from legal guardians, was obtained. Withdrawal had no academic implications, and participation was completely voluntary.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the audio journal transcripts and the nineteen post-intervention interviews identified four interrelated themes that together described in a single narrative how speaking anxiety manifests in this group of learners, and that the audio journal intervention began, over the course of eight weeks, to restructure their relationship to oral production in the context of English. These four themes include: (1) fear of social judgment, which serves as the main cause of speaking anxiety; (2) linguistic self-doubt and a mismatch of receptive and productive competence; (3) an evaluative classroom that creates an anxiety-triggering context; and (4) the lack of opportunities for authentic and low-pressure oral practice. Each theme is described below, along with representative quotes from participants identified by pseudonym and data source. All Spanish-language extracts taken from interviews and journals are supplemented by the researcher's English translation in square brackets.

Within the dataset, this theme was the most frequently detected cause of speaking fear. In the Week 1 journal entries of 16 out of 19 participants (84%), embodied fear language – such as trembling, breathlessness, cognitive blanking, and the urge to withdraw – appeared. This was independently confirmed in 14 of 19 post-intervention interviews, in which students recalled social exposure as their primary emotional experience when required to speak English. This pattern's stability across both data sets and all ability subgroups within the cohort suggests that fear of social evaluation is a structurally shared reaction to the classroom's communication atmosphere rather than an individual psychological characteristic.

The instantaneous and physical nature of this anxiety is demonstrated by the following Week 1 entries: "Cuando tengo que hablar en inglés, siento... no sé... como si todo el mundo estuviera mirando mis errores. No puedo pensar. Solo quiero parar."

[When I have to speak in English, I feel... I don't know... like everyone is looking at my mistakes. I can't think. I just want to stop.] (Valeria, Week 1, Q3)

"Trato de hablar pero al escoger las palabras dudo y hago muchas pausas y veo a mi profesor que me mira y empiezo a temblar y ya no puedo respirar y se me nubla todo."

[I try to speak, but as I choose my words, I hesitate and make many pauses. I see my teacher looking at me, and I start to tremble, and I can't breathe anymore, and everything goes blank.] (Santiago, Week 1, Q3)

The paralysis they describe — the cognitive short circuit that arrives just in time for someone to experience social exposure — is strikingly consistent among many participants. It also reflects a similar phenomenology of public speaking anxiety, making visible the physical and cognitive symptoms that MacIntyre (2017) and Juríková (2025) have noted as being indicative of high-FLA episodes in adolescents.

The fear of being ridiculed by peers, in particular, resonated repeatedly. For some students, this fear functioned as an anticipatory social threat that made avoidance feel not just preferable, but rational for its own sake:

“No quiero cometer errores y que mis compañeros se burlen; prefiero no participar.”

[I don't want to make mistakes and have my classmates laugh at me; I'd rather not participate.] (Ximena, Week 1, Q3)

“Me cuesta concentrarme al hablar porque mis compañeros me están viendo y muchos se ríen, y ya no me concentro y no sé lo que digo.”

[I find it hard to concentrate when speaking because my classmates are watching me and many of them laugh, and then I can't concentrate and I don't know what I'm saying.] (Sofía, Week 1, Q3)

Overall, in these reports, these accounts disclose that Horwitz et al. (1986) proposed the fear of negative evaluation part of FLA works, in this cohort, in a particularly intense manner in the peer over in the teacher dimension, a tendency in line with the results of Juríková (2025), who found that peer judgment is frequently the most threatening aspect of social evaluation in adolescent learners. The repeated deployment of embodied language — trembling, not breathing, blanking, wanting to withdraw — indicates that speaking anxiety is not only a cognitive appraisal but is also a physiological and somatic event that, in effect, negates the learner's current verbal competence.

Theme 2: Linguistic Self-Doubt and Receptive-Productive Gap

Linguistic self-doubt and the affective filter complement each other, as seen by the receptive-productive gap discussed under Theme 2. According to Krashen (1982), the learner's awareness of perceived or actual linguistic barriers activates the filter; in this case, that awareness, especially regarding pronunciation and vocabulary, seems to have prevented students from accessing language they otherwise could have understood receptively. This is consistent with MacIntyre's (2017) description of a self-reinforcing loop in which students avoid speaking situations due to fear resulting from perceived linguistic insecurity, which in turn maintains and intensifies that same sense of discomfort. In an effort to break this cycle, the audio journal's progressive mastery experiences — based on Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory — allow students to accrue small, low-risk successes over an eight-week period rather than confronting their productive gap in a single high-pressure performance. Emilio's account captures this gap with remarkable precision:

“Sé que puedo hablar un poco inglés, pero cuando no puedo formar frases o olvido vocabulario por estar mal, no puedo hablar. No tengo ningún problema con la comprensión auditiva.”

[I know I can speak a little English, but when I can't form sentences or I forget vocabulary because I'm not well, I can't speak. I don't have any problem with listening comprehension.] (Emilio, Week 1, Q3)

“No tengo suficiente vocabulario, eso dificulta hablar inglés.”

[I don't have enough vocabulary, that makes it hard to speak English.] (Camila, Week 1, Q3)

“Mi pronunciación no es muy buena y me da vergüenza con algunas palabras, y por eso me cuesta hablar.”

[My pronunciation is not very good and I feel ashamed about some words, and that's why I find it hard to speak.] (Mateo, Week 1, Q3)

“Intento usar la gramática y me confunde e intento aplicarla, pero como explican la clase en inglés no sé qué realmente significa y no sé cómo usarlo.”

[I try to use grammar, and it confuses me, and I try to apply it, but since they explain the class in English, I don't really know what it means, and I don't know how to use it.] (Andrés, Week 1, Q3)

These self-reported receptive-productive asymmetries align with the FLA literature, which consistently identifies speech production as the skill most affected by anxiety (Teimouri et al., 2019). The second, more potent form of linguistic self-doubt that appears is pronunciation: the recognition of phonological difficulty is compounded by the social shame it triggers – a conjunction of linguistic and evaluative anxiety that leads to a reinforcing loop of avoidance. These narratives demonstrate how cognitive, verbal, and emotive elements interact. The emotive filter is activated by the learner's awareness of her perceived or real linguistic limitations (Krashen, 1982). In this case, the affective filter reinforces the limitations by blocking the learner's access to the available language. In a similar vein, MacIntyre (2017) describes how this phenomena is self-reinforcing, whereby the anxiety resulting from perceived linguistic insecurity makes the person avoid circumstances that call for language use, which in turn creates more linguistic insecurity.

Theme 3 confirms Young's (1991) claim that the classroom itself acts as an anxiety-inducing system: students were more worried about the task's evaluative implications than its linguistic demands. This distinction is challenging for outside observers to discern because the resulting hesitation and reduced fluency can be mistaken for a limitation in language proficiency rather than a reaction to assessment pressure. The audio journal promptly addressed this evaluative pressure by eliminating grades and corrective comments, transforming oral practice from a graded performance into what students described as a low-stakes, private act of expression.

“Me da mucho miedo hablar en público así sea de algo que me agrada, y cuando lo hago en inglés es más porque sé que es por una nota y tengo miedo de fallar.”

[I'm very afraid of speaking in public, even if it's about something I like, and when I do it in English, it's worse because I know it's for a grade and I'm scared of failing.] (Sebastián, Week 1, Q3)

“Me preocupa no hacerlo bien y sacar mala nota y cuando lo pienso no me concentro y hablo mal.”

[I worry about not doing it well and getting a bad grade, and when I think about it, I can't concentrate and I speak badly.] (Daniela, Week 1, Q3)

The Methodology section's description of the structural limitations of EFL instruction – large class sizes, textbook-based assignments, and little time for individual speaking – is demonstrated in Theme 4. The audio journal's open-ended, personally relevant prompts addressed students' qualitative disconnection from authentic communication and their quantitative lack of speaking opportunities. Ellis (2003) argues that this distinction is crucial for lowering performance anxiety because it concentrates attention on the social purpose of language rather than its formal correctness.

“Usualmente no hay mucho tiempo para hablar en inglés, porque somos bastantes y solo decimos frases que vemos en el libro, pero no las usamos en alguna cosa real, y cuando intentamos conversar o dar una opinión me cuesta hablar y me paraliza.”

[Usually, there is not much time to speak in English, because there are many of us and we only say phrases we see in the book, but we don't use them for anything real, and when we try to have a conversation or give an opinion, I find it hard to speak and I freeze.] (Lucía, Week 1, Q3)

The change seen in 10 of the 13 participants who identified this theme is captured in miniature by this within-participant contrast: immobilized when asked to apply textbook terms to feeling compelled to speak about personal experience. The main reason the audio journal felt less stressful than spoken assignments in the classroom, according to their Week 5–8 entries, was because of its open-ended, personally relevant format. Students' own distinction between "frases del libro" and anything "real" highlights a qualitative aspect of practice that frequency alone cannot address; this is discussed further in the Discussion section.

Table 2
Findings

Theme	Participants (of 19)	Journal weeks	Interviews	Change evidence
1. Fear of social judgment	16 / 19 (84%)	Weeks 1–8	14 / 19 confirmed	Change observed starting in Week 4
2. Linguistic self-doubt	15 / 19 (79%)	Weeks 1–2 peak	9 / 19 persisting	Acute distress decreased by Week 7–8
3. Evaluative classroom pressure	11 / 19 (58%)	Weeks 1–2	11 / 19 retrospective	8 / 11 corrected error by Weeks 7 and 8
4. Lack of authentic practice	13 / 19 (68%)	Week 1 + Week 6	13 / 19 named	10 / 13 changed to speaking with motivation

Based on interviews

The distinction they make between frases del libro and algo "real" emphasizes a qualitative aspect of the issue that is just as important as its quantitative one: students don't just speak enough; when they do, it's in a register and for purposes so disconnected from authentic communication that the activity doesn't foster confidence or fluency. The audio diary simultaneously addresses the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this deficit by enabling students to speak about their own lives, emotions, and experiences outside of the classroom and without an assessing audience.

DISCUSSION

Speaking anxiety among these eighth-grade EFL learners in Ecuador is a systemically produced response to four interrelated underlying conditions – social exposure, linguistic insecurity, evaluative pressure, and the lack of authentic speaking practice – rather than an individual characteristic, according to the study's four themes. Overall, the results address the study's main research question by indicating that the audio journal addressed all four conditions concurrently and led to significant changes in participants' affective relationship to speaking English when used as a regular, non-evaluative, personally relevant practice. The commentary that follows places each of these findings in the context of the literature, contrasts them with earlier research on speaking anxiety and audio journaling, and highlights the issues this study has addressed and those it has not.

For 16 of 19 participants, peer judgment was the primary cause of speaking anxiety, thereby extending Horwitz et al.'s (1986) FLA model by demonstrating that peer evaluation –

rather than teacher evaluation – was the most important factor for teenagers. This trend was also observed in Juríková (2025) and MacIntyre's (2017) avoidance-cycle framework. Findings from Yoon (2012) and Wu (2007) were confirmed in a younger Latin American population by the Week 4 shift toward increased fluency without a peer audience. This indicates that the underlying mechanism – reduced social exposure lowering the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) – is effective across age groups and cultural contexts.

Participants made a distinct distinction between receptive and productive ability, supporting the findings of Teimouri et al. (2019) that speaking is disproportionately impacted by anxiety independent of actual competency. For 12 out of 19 participants, pronunciation-related shame was particularly severe, which is according to Baranucarz and Lee's (2021) compound-experience model. Dantas-Whitney's (2002) reframing effect is consistent with the Week-7 pattern of speaking despite errors rather than withdrawing, but the current study clarifies the mechanism: the change came from weekly successful task completion without evaluation, a gradual mastery process in keeping with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, rather than time alone.

Young (1991) and Zheng and Cheng (2018) confirmed that evaluative anxiety was anticipatory, caused by grades rather than language itself. The current study adds qualitative evidence from an Ecuadorian secondary context that was not included in those earlier works. In the context of pedagogy, this means separating oral practice from formal evaluation. The fourth theme, "lack of authentic practice," is similar to Siyli and Kafes (2012) and Ho (2003). Ellis's (2003) theory that genuine purpose shifts focus from form to meaning is demonstrated by the within-participant contrast between Lucía's Week 1 paralysis and Week 6 driven self-expression. The value of this study lies in qualitatively explaining the transition through participant narratives rather than test results, in contrast to previous quantitative investigations.

The limitations of the study indicate three specific recommendations for future research: (1) a full-academic-year longitudinal follow-up, with and without continued journaling, to identify whether affective gains continue, decline, or correlate with independent oral proficiency ratings; (2) mixed-methods comparative designs that triangulate qualitative data with pre/post FLCAS scores (Horwitz et al., 1986) and include comparison groups (video, podcast, or AI-based practice) to determine which audio-journal features drive the shifts.

The study leaves four key limitations unresolved: first, whether affective gains persist beyond Week 8 or depend on continued low-stakes practice remains unknown without follow-up. Second, reduced anxiety was documented only through self-report, not through measurable gains in accuracy, fluency, or complexity. Third, without a comparison group, the observed shifts cannot be attributed specifically to the audio journal rather than to a novelty effect. Finally, the sample – 19 participants at one private school in Ambato – limits generalizability to public schools, other CEFR levels, or different Ecuadorian provinces.

CONCLUSIONS

Speaking anxiety's multiple causes among these eighth-grade EFL students, speaking anxiety is a multi-causal and socially rooted phenomenon that results from four congruent determinants: linguistic apprehension (perceived inadequacy of vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar), social fear (fear of peer judgment), evaluative peer pressure (academic consequences of oral performance), and structural limitations (restricted opportunities for authentic, non-graded oral practice). Speaking nervousness is not a sign of weakness or lack of confidence for the nineteen B1 eighth graders at Unidad Educativa Atenas. It's a totally

logical response to the circumstances people find themselves in, and those circumstances have a shape. The worry comes from four interrelated factors that are all related to the way their English sessions are organized:

- 1) Fear of obtaining negative feedback from others.
- 2) That continuous sense that "I understand more than I can say" – the discrepancy between what they can comprehend and what they can immediately generate.
- 3) Stress in the classroom due to oral competence grades.
- 4) An ongoing lack of authentic, stress-free opportunities to simply communicate—the kind where mistakes are not penalized, and no one is marking you.

These complaints weren't unusual. When we looked at what students told us on their own, the results were unexpected: 84% mentioned peer judgment, 79% mentioned the understanding-speaking gap, 58% mentioned graded speaking assignments, and 68% mentioned the lack of safe speaking practice. These four themes were evident in both the interviews conducted after the intervention and the private audio journals that we listened to.

This is the main point: the study's goal was to identify the factors that contribute to speaking fear in this situation, and the solution is obvious. It's not mainly about "anxious learners" who require individual attention. It has to do with a system. That nervousness is caused by the way oral English is taught and evaluated. We can't simply focus on students' attitudes or give them relaxation techniques if we want to actually lower them. The structural circumstances that first make speaking feel so dangerous must be rectified.

The impact of the audio journal, in which three elements of its design specifically addressed the four structural causes of worry that characterized the course over eight weeks and 152 recordings. First, the key social stimulus was abolished by removing the live peer audience; students expressed satisfaction at not being "on stage," and starting in Week 4, their fluency significantly improved. Second, the kind of low-stakes practice that produces what Bandura (1997) dubbed mastery experiences was established by weekly, non-evaluated, personally relevant activities; by Week 7, students were speaking through their mistakes rather than remaining mute. Third, the evaluative dread that Young (1991) identified as a structural driver of classroom anxiety was eliminated by fully separating speaking from grading; eight out of eleven participants said that the lack of a grade completely altered their connection to errors. When combined, these three strategies did more than simply reduce anxiety. Each one directly addressed sub-question (i) by making an intentional design decision that targeted a specific cause. It was a built-in consequence, not an accident.

The aspect related to students' comments and their implications for practice. Students did not generally give the audio journal credit or give imprecise credit. In the post-intervention interviews, students identified three key features that distinguished the diary from their usual classroom speaking assignments: the absence of classmates observing and assessing them, the flexibility to discuss personal experiences rather than textbook content, and the confidence that there would be no grades. These categories came straight from the students and offer a clear response to sub-question (ii); they weren't forced by the researcher.

The conclusion is evident: those circumstances led to the journal's accomplishment, not the other way around. It works as planned if it is consistent, not evaluated, and focused on personal content. The very type of assessment pressure that the entire design was intended to eliminate is reinstated - the instant grading, peer presentation, or correction is included. The logic is thrown down. This points to something beneficial to EFL instructors and curriculum designers in Ecuador and other secondary Latin American contexts. Audio diaries are a practical, theoretically supported instrument for weekly oral practice, not simply an aesthetic concept. But rather than being dressed up as another speaking exam, they must be regarded as a low-pressure, reflective area.

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