

Psychological, pedagogical, and contextual determinants of oral english proficiency among Ecuadorian secondary efl students***Determinantes psicológicos, pedagógicos y contextuales de la competencia oral en inglés en estudiantes ecuatorianos de educación secundaria en contextos de inglés como lengua extranjera***

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Abstract

English oral proficiency is one of the most complex competencies to cultivate in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, particularly within educational systems that offer limited opportunities for genuine communication. Although numerous studies have identified foreign language anxiety, pedagogical practices, and language exposure as factors linked to oral performance, there is still insufficient evidence regarding the interplay of these determinants among secondary school students in Ecuador. The aim of this research was to examine the psychological, pedagogical, and contextual elements influencing the English oral proficiency of first-year high school students at the Alfonso Quiñónez George Educational Unit in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. A qualitative, descriptive approach was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observation, and focus groups as primary data collection techniques. The data underwent thematic analysis and methodological triangulation to strengthen the reliability of the findings. The results indicated that anxiety associated with using English is the primary obstacle to oral communication, while pedagogical practices focused on grammar instruction and limited exposure to the language outside the academic setting restrict opportunities for communicative interaction. Empirical evidence demonstrated that these elements operate interdependently, creating an environment that shapes the development of oral proficiency.

Keywords: English oral proficiency; foreign language anxiety; pedagogical practices; English language exposure; secondary education.

Resumen

La habilidad oral en inglés representa una de las competencias más complejas de cultivar en entornos donde el idioma se aprende como lengua extranjera (EFL), particularmente en sistemas educativos que proporcionan oportunidades restringidas para una comunicación genuina. A pesar de que múltiples investigaciones han identificado la ansiedad ante una lengua foránea, las prácticas pedagógicas y la exposición al idioma como factores vinculados al rendimiento oral, aún se dispone de evidencia insuficiente sobre la interacción de estos determinantes en estudiantes de nivel secundario en Ecuador. La finalidad de esta investigación fue examinar los elementos psicológicos, pedagógicos y contextuales que inciden en la competencia oral en inglés de los estudiantes de primer año de bachillerato de la Unidad Educativa Alfonso Quiñónez George, ubicada en Esmeraldas, Ecuador. Se empleó un método cualitativo de alcance descriptivo, fundamentado en entrevistas semiestructuradas, observación no participativa en el aula y grupos focales como técnicas primordiales para la recopilación de datos. Los datos fueron sometidos a análisis temático y triangulación metodológica con el objetivo de robustecer la fiabilidad de los descubrimientos. Los hallazgos indicaron que la ansiedad asociada con la utilización del inglés constituye el principal obstáculo para la comunicación oral, mientras que las prácticas pedagógicas enfocadas en la instrucción gramatical y la limitada exposición al idioma fuera del entorno académico limitan las oportunidades de interacción comunicativa. La incorporación de pruebas empíricas evidenció que estos elementos operan de forma interdependiente, estableciendo un ambiente que condiciona el desarrollo de la competencia oral.

Palabras clave: competencia oral en inglés; ansiedad ante una lengua extranjera; prácticas pedagógicas; exposición al idioma inglés; educación secundaria.

Introduction

English has become the primary language of academic communication, knowledge production, technological innovation, and intercultural contact due to the internationalization of education, scientific research, and the global job market. Therefore, in the twenty-first century, English proficiency has changed from being seen as an extra language skill to a strategic competency that facilitates access to higher education, scientific dissemination, international collaboration, and professional mobility (Crystal, 2003; Council of Europe, 2020; Rose & Galloway, 2019). Globalization has gradually changed language policies in a variety of educational systems by establishing English as a crucial tool for engagement in knowledge-based society and more interconnected economy (Galloway & Numajiri, 2020; Macaro et al., 2018). As a result, the focus of educational reforms around the world has steadily switched from the acquisition of grammatical information to the development of communicative competence, supporting students' capacity to use English successfully in real-world academic, social, and professional contexts.

Because oral English proficiency allows learners to express ideas, negotiate meaning, solve problems collaboratively, and actively participate in real-life communicative situations, it has become one of the primary indicators of successful second language acquisition within this communicative paradigm. Speaking necessitates the simultaneous integration of lexical knowledge, grammatical accuracy, pronunciation, listening comprehension, discourse organization, pragmatic competence, and strategic communication during real-time interaction, in contrast to receptive language skills (Nation, 2013; Burns & Richards, 2012). Oral communication is one of the most cognitively taxing language skills due to its multifaceted nature, which necessitates quick processing of linguistic information and speech adaptation to constantly shifting communicative contexts (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Tavakoli & Wright, 2020). Oral proficiency can therefore be viewed as the dynamic ability to speak meaningfully, confidently, and appropriately in a variety of communicative circumstances rather than just the production of grammatically correct words.

One of the biggest obstacles to teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) is the development of oral communicative ability, despite decades of methodological innovation in ELT. Several studies consistently show that students with adequate grammatical knowledge often face significant challenges when it comes to engaging in spontaneous oral interactions, carrying on fluent conversations, or confidently expressing ideas during class activities (Han et al., 2020; Fauzi et al., 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2022). These results imply that successful oral communication results from the combination of several psychological, pedagogical, and

contextual factors that affect learners' willingness and capacity to speak rather than being only explained by language proficiency.

Oral language development is increasingly seen in contemporary perspectives on second language acquisition as a multifaceted educational phenomena brought about by the ongoing interaction of cognitive, affective, instructional, and environmental elements. Modern theoretical models stress that learners' communicative behavior is shaped by the dynamic interplay of affective variables, classroom experiences, teaching practices, and opportunities for authentic language use, rather than viewing speaking performance as the direct result of linguistic knowledge alone (Mercer & Gregersen, 2020; Teimouri et al., 2019; Botes et al., 2022). Oral communicative competence develops in complex educational environments where psychological factors, instructional choices, and contextual possibilities mutually impact one another throughout the learning process, according to this ecological concept of language acquisition.

From a theoretical standpoint, the current study utilizes complimentary frameworks from the Willingness to Communicate model (MacIntyre et al., 1998), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997), and Second Language Acquisition. Together, these viewpoints imply that learners' attitudes, emotional experiences, learning contexts, and chances to interact meaningfully with the target language all influence oral communication in addition to linguistic proficiency. As a result, speaking ability should be seen as a multifaceted concept where communicative performance is shaped by the dynamic interaction of psychological, educational, and contextual factors.

Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) is one of the psychological factors that has been studied the most in relation to oral English performance. FLCA is still regarded as one of the best indicators of students' oral performance. It was first conceptualized by Horwitz et al. (1986) as a situation-specific construct marked by communication apprehension, fear of unfavorable judgment, and test anxiety. According to recent empirical research, language anxiety is a dynamic emotional reaction influenced by peer relationships, classroom interactions, teacher support, instructional strategies, and prior communicative experiences rather than a stable personality trait (Botes et al., 2022; Dewaele & Li, 2021). As a result, emotional elements should be evaluated in the context of larger educational settings where classroom dynamics and pedagogical choices have a significant impact on students' communication willingness.

The importance of anxiety in the development of oral language is further supported by recent meta-analyses. Elevated anxiety levels consistently predict lower speaking achievement, reduced classroom involvement, diminished communicative confidence, and weaker oral performance across a variety of educational environments, according to Botes et al. (2022), who

collected evidence from several empirical investigations. In a similar vein, Teimouri et al. (2019) showed that a significant amount of the variability seen in second language performance can be attributed to affective variables. Instead of functioning on its own, foreign language anxiety interacts with motivation, self-efficacy, perceived communicative ability, and classroom experiences to create intricate patterns that either support or impede students' oral language growth during the course of their education.

A second essential factor that explains variations in oral English proficiency is pedagogical factors. In order to promote communicative competence, modern communicative language training places a strong emphasis on task-based learning, real engagement, collaborative learning, and meaningful negotiation of meaning (Richards, 2022; Ellis, 2020). Fluency, confidence, strategic competence, and spontaneous oral engagement are all strengthened by student-centered pedagogies, which enable students to actively construct knowledge through communicative activities that mimic real-life scenarios. On the other hand, even while students have sufficient grammatical understanding, learning environments that emphasize teacher-centered explanations, repetitious writing assignments, or grammar translation sometimes limit their opportunity to engage in real-world conversational communication.

Current educational research also acknowledges that instructors' ability to create psychologically safe learning environments is just as important to pedagogical performance as their choice of instructional strategies. According to Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) and Derakhshan et al. (2022), teachers that normalize mistakes as part of language acquisition, encourage risk-taking, offer constructive feedback, and cultivate supportive peer interaction enable students to participate more actively in speaking activities. Therefore, integrating communicative approaches with emotionally supportive classroom settings that can boost students' self-assurance and readiness to interact is a key component of effective language training.

One of the main contextual predictors of oral language development has also been identified as exposure to English outside of formal classroom instruction. Learners can now engage with English in contexts that go well beyond traditional classroom instruction thanks to digital technologies, streaming platforms, online communities, educational applications, social media, virtual exchanges, and artificial intelligence, which have significantly increased opportunities for authentic language exposure (Godwin-Jones, 2021; Reinders & Benson, 2017). In comparison to students whose exposure is limited to formal classroom instruction, students who regularly interact with authentic English-language input typically exhibit a wider vocabulary, better pronunciation accuracy, stronger listening comprehension, increased communicative confidence, and higher levels of oral fluency.

Disparities in language learning possibilities have persisted despite the growth of technological tools. Socioeconomic circumstances, technology access, institutional infrastructure, curriculum implementation, and educational policies continue to influence the amount and quality of English language exposure available to learners, according to research done in Latin American educational contexts (British Council, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). As a result, many public secondary school students continue to rely heavily on classroom instruction, which restricts opportunities for real-world communication and strengthens psychological barriers related to oral language output.

The understanding of oral English language development has significantly improved due to the expanding amount of research, but significant theoretical, contextual, and methodological issues still need to be addressed. Previous research has offered important insights into how learners' communicative performance is impacted by foreign language anxiety, teaching strategies, exposure to the English language, and speaking self-efficacy. Nevertheless, these factors have mostly been studied as stand-alone predictors, leading to disjointed explanations that fall short of capturing the intricate interactions between psychological, pedagogical, and environmental elements that together influence oral English proficiency. As a result, our understanding of how these factors interact in real-world classroom settings is still inadequate, especially in secondary school when students' communicative identities and language-learning beliefs are still developing.

The educational environments in which earlier studies have been carried out represent a second restriction. Fewer studies have looked at teenagers enrolled in secondary schools, whereas the majority of empirical research has concentrated on university students engaged in English language programs. This disparity is especially important because secondary school is a crucial period in language development when students solidify their communicative skills, form opinions about their language proficiency, and create motivational patterns that often last into higher education and the workplace (Butler, 2020; Sato & Loewen, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the factors that influence oral English proficiency during adolescence in order to create timely educational interventions that can enhance communicative outcomes prior to students entering higher education.

There is also a significant disparity in the regional distribution of the evidence that is currently available. The majority of recent studies on oral English proficiency have been carried out in Asian and Middle Eastern nations, such as China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Iran, Turkey, and the Philippines (Liu & Shi, 2023; Carciller et al., 2025; Tania et al., 2025). The international literature on English language learning has been greatly enhanced by these studies, but their conclusions cannot be directly applied to Latin American educational systems due to significant

differences in curriculum implementation, teacher preparation, socioeconomic conditions, technological infrastructure, and opportunities for exposure to real English. As a result, there is still a dearth of empirical data that explains the factors influencing spoken English competency in Latin American secondary school, which limits the creation of pedagogical recommendations that are responsive to context.

Beyond regional restrictions, methodological problems still limit what is currently known. Through extensive surveys and correlational analyses, quantitative studies have effectively found statistical correlations between psychological, pedagogical, and environmental variables. These methods, however, frequently offer little understanding of the classroom processes that give rise to these kinds of interactions. On the other hand, qualitative research provides detailed accounts of students' experiences and classroom interactions, but it usually lacks the analytical integration necessary to explain how various factors come together to affect oral communication performance. The necessity for research that may produce comprehensive explanations that acknowledge the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of oral language development is highlighted by this methodological fragmentation.

These restrictions become especially pertinent in the context of Ecuadorian education. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has guided Ecuador's curriculum reforms over the past ten years, with a focus on communicative language instruction and the gradual development of productive language skills, especially speaking (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016; Council of Europe, 2020). Numerous surveys and classroom experiences show that students attending public secondary schools still have significant challenges when it comes to confidently participating in oral communication activities, despite these regulatory measures. Learners' speech growth is nevertheless hampered by a lack of opportunities for real-world contact, ongoing communicative anxiety, inconsistent teaching methods, and unequal access to English outside of the classroom. These enduring difficulties imply that curriculum changes by themselves are inadequate unless the educational circumstances influencing oral communication are well understood.

From a theoretical standpoint, these unsolved problems highlight the need to go beyond reductionist methods that see spoken English proficiency as the result of discrete variables. Oral communication competence, on the other hand, should be viewed as a dynamic educational phenomenon that arises from the ongoing interaction of learners' personal ideas about their communicative abilities, contextual possibilities, instructional contexts, and emotional experiences. Such an integrative viewpoint is in line with modern ecological approaches to second

language acquisition, which stress that language acquisition is not the product of discrete causative elements but rather of several interrelated systems working concurrently.

Examining how psychological, pedagogical, and contextual factors interact to affect oral English ability among Ecuadorian secondary EFL students, the current study fills in these theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps. This study takes a qualitative descriptive approach rather than concentrating on discrete variables in order to comprehend learners' experiences, perspectives, and classroom realities using a variety of qualitative evidence sources. The study intends to produce context-sensitive knowledge that can guide classroom practice, curriculum implementation, teacher professional development, and future research on oral English learning in public secondary education by looking at these factors as interrelated aspects of the language-learning process.

In light of these factors, the goal of this study is to investigate the environmental, pedagogical, and psychological factors that affect oral English competency in first-year secondary EFL students at Alfonso Quiñónez George High School in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. The study specifically aims to determine the classroom environments that support or impede speaking growth while understanding how students perceive the impact of foreign language anxiety, instructional strategies, and opportunities for English language exposure on their oral communication. The research attempts to provide empirical evidence that supports more inclusive, learner-centered, and contextually responsive approaches to communicative English language teaching within Ecuadorian public secondary education through a thorough qualitative analysis of teachers' and students' experiences.

Materials and Methods

In order to investigate the psychological, pedagogical, and environmental factors impacting spoken English proficiency among Ecuadorian secondary students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), this study used a qualitative descriptive research approach. Because the study aimed to comprehend participants' experiences, perspectives, and interpretations on the elements that support or impede oral communication in real-world educational settings, a qualitative technique was deemed appropriate. The research sought to produce a comprehensive knowledge of how emotional, instructional, and environmental factors influence kids' spoken language development rather than evaluating them quantitatively.

The interpretivist paradigm, which holds that educational phenomena are socially produced through people's experiences, interactions, and meanings, served as the foundation for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to this viewpoint, an

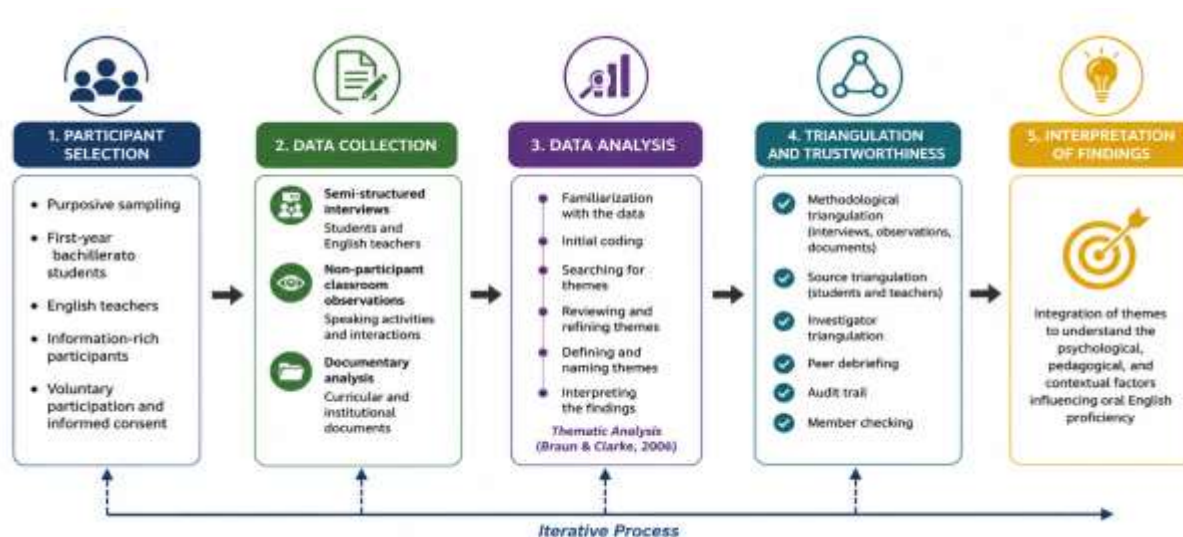
analysis of learners' subjective experiences, classroom interactions, and the educational environments in which communication takes place is necessary to properly comprehend spoken English proficiency. As a result, the study concentrated on comprehending the opportunities and difficulties related to oral communicative skill development in a public secondary school as seen by both instructors and students.

Because it enables researchers to create thorough and contextually grounded accounts of educational processes while staying close to participants' viewpoints, a qualitative descriptive approach was used (Sandelowski, 2000). This method works especially well for educational research that seeks to find links, patterns, and meanings that arise from spontaneously occurring classroom experiences without imposing preconceived explanatory theories. Such a design makes it easier to investigate the intricate relationships between psychological elements, teaching strategies, and environmental factors that affect students' readiness and capacity for oral communication in the context of learning English.

To have a thorough grasp of the phenomenon being studied, information was gathered from a variety of qualitative sources. In-depth descriptions of participants' opinions and experiences of oral communication, classroom procedures, language anxiety, and chances for English use were obtained through semi-structured interviews with students and English teachers. The researcher was able to record naturally occurring teaching methods, teacher-student relationships, and students' involvement in speaking exercises by combining these interviews with non-participant classroom observations. Contextual information about English language instruction in the participating school was also provided by documentary analysis of institutional and curriculum resources.

The study used methodological triangulation, combining data from interviews, classroom observations, and documentary analysis, to increase the validity and reliability of the results. The discovery of recurrent themes, the comparison of participant perspectives with observed classroom practices, and the creation of a more thorough interpretation of the elements impacting spoken English competency were made possible by the convergence of different sources of qualitative evidence. The methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed in the thematic analysis of the data, including familiarization with the data, systematic coding, identification of emerging themes, review and refinement of thematic categories, and interpretation of findings in relation to the research objectives and the body of existing literature.

Figure 1, which shows the sequential steps of participant selection, qualitative data collection, thematic analysis, triangulation, and interpretation of findings, summarizes the overall methodological approach used in this study.

Figure 1. Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Research Design

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The research was carried out at Alfonso Quiñónez George High School, a public secondary institution situated in Esmeraldas, on Ecuador's northwestern coast. The institution adheres to the regulations set forth by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education and executes the national curriculum for English as a Foreign Language (EFL), which aligns with the communicative principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In this curricular framework, English is mandated as a compulsory subject during secondary education, aimed at enhancing learners' communicative competence and facilitating their effective participation in both academic and real-world communication contexts (Council of Europe, 2020; Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016).

Similar to most public educational institutions in Ecuador, the school accommodates students from varied socioeconomic origins and encounters multiple contextual constraints that affect the instruction and acquisition of English. The national curriculum prioritizes communicative language teaching and the enhancement of productive language skills, especially speaking; however, classroom instruction is often hindered by restricted instructional hours, diverse levels of language proficiency, inadequate technological resources, and diminished opportunities for genuine communication outside the classroom. These environmental factors frequently limit students' opportunities for significant oral contact and may impede the advancement of communicative ability.

The study concentrated on first-year bachillerato students, a phase in which learners are anticipated to solidify the communicative abilities obtained throughout obligatory basic education while advancing toward the English competence standards outlined in the national curriculum. At

this stage, oral communication gains significance as students must engage in collaborative learning activities, classroom debates, presentations, and other communicative tasks that necessitate enhanced confidence and spontaneous language creation. Preliminary observations during the study's initial stages indicated that numerous students exhibited reluctance to engage in oral activities, encountered challenges in articulating ideas in English, and often depended on their native language during classroom interactions.

The attributes of Alfonso Quiñónez George High School render it a suitable educational environment for investigating the psychological, pedagogical, and contextual elements related to oral English competency. The institution embodies numerous characteristics typically observed in Ecuadorian public secondary schools, where English instruction is influenced by curriculum mandates, institutional resources, pedagogical techniques, and students' possibilities for language exposure. Thus, the results of this study may offer insights pertinent not only to the participating institution but also to analogous EFL educational situations across Ecuador.

The subjects of this study were chosen from the cohort of first-year bachillerato students registered at Alfonso Quiñónez George High School during the relevant academic term. In alignment with the qualitative focus of the original study design, a purposive sampling technique was utilized to choose participants capable of offering substantial and pertinent insights into the phenomenon being studied. This sampling method allowed for the selection of persons with firsthand experience in English language acquisition and classroom engagement, therefore enabling a comprehensive investigation of the factors affecting oral English proficiency. The study encompassed around 30 first-year bachillerato students, who served as the principal source of information concerning their experiences, perceptions, and obstacles associated with oral communication in English. The participants consisted of learners who had received English instruction within the national educational framework and shared comparable curricular settings, enabling the study to investigate common patterns related to the development of oral communicative competence.

Alongside the student participants, two English language instructors were incorporated due to their active engagement in the educational process. Their involvement offered supplementary insights on classroom practices, communicative activities, instructional strategies, and the pedagogical obstacles related to enhancing oral English proficiency in secondary education. Involving both students and teachers allowed the study to analyze the phenomena from many perspectives, thereby enhancing the overall comprehension of the educational situation. Participant selection was informed by qualitative inquiry principles, emphasizing the depth, richness, and relevance of the material rather than statistical representativeness. The

involvement of students and teachers with firsthand experience in English language instruction enhanced the validity of the findings by facilitating the triangulation of viewpoints among various educational stakeholders. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Participants Included in the Study

Participant Group		Number	Sampling Strategy	Research Contribution
First-year students	EFL	30	Purposive sampling	Explore perceptions and classroom experiences regarding oral English proficiency
English teachers		2	Criterion-based purposive sampling	Provide pedagogical perspectives on communicative teaching practices

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Three complementary qualitative methods were used to gather data in order to gain a thorough understanding of the psychological, pedagogical, and contextual elements affecting students' oral English proficiency: semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and documentary analysis. By promoting methodological triangulation and enabling the collecting of rich and varied sources of information, the combination of these tools improved the findings' credibility, depth, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each tool addressed a distinct aspect of the study's goals and offered complementary perspectives on the experiences of students, instructional strategies, and the institutional setting in which English language acquisition took place.

Semi-structured interviews with English language instructors and first-year bachillerato students served as the main tool. Because semi-structured interviews allow participants to express their experiences, opinions, and ideas in their own words while guaranteeing that all subjects pertinent to the study's goals are methodically examined, they were chosen (Kallio et al., 2016). The main analytical categories found in the literature review—foreign language anxiety, teaching methods, exposure to the English language, and perceived oral communication competence—were used to structure the interview protocol. Participants were prompted by open-ended questions to consider the elements that helped or hampered their spoken involvement in English classes, the teaching methods used by instructors, and the possibilities for practicing spoken English both within and outside of the classroom.

A non-participant classroom observation guide was used as the second tool to record teaching and learning activities that naturally occurred during routine English classes. Direct evidence of instructional processes that could not be obtained from participant self-reports alone was obtained through classroom observation. Teacher-student interactions, communicative activities, oral participation possibilities, feedback given during speaking tasks, learners'

motivation to communicate, classroom dynamics, and the use of English as the language of instruction were all given special consideration. By taking on a non-participant role, the researcher observed real-world teaching methods with the least amount of disruption to the classroom's regular operations.

In order to situate classroom behaviors within the institutional and curricular framework, documentary analysis was used as the third tool. The Ecuadorian Ministry of Education's English curriculum, institutional planning documents, lesson plans, instructional materials, and assessment criteria utilized by the participating instructors were among the documents evaluated. By offering proof of the pedagogical goals, curriculum requirements, and institutional circumstances that influenced English language instruction at the research site, documentary analysis supplemented the data gathered from interviews and classroom observations.

By combining participant lived experiences, firsthand classroom observations, and documentation evidence, these three qualitative tools allowed for a complementary examination of the phenomenon. By enabling the comparison and validation of data from several sources, this triangulation technique enhanced the study's credibility and helped to provide a more thorough understanding of the variables affecting oral English proficiency among Ecuadorian secondary EFL students. The features of the data gathering tools used in the study are compiled in Table 2.

Table 2. Data Collection Instruments

Instrument	Participants Sources	Purpose	Main Information Collected
Semi-structured interviews	First-year bachillerato students and English teachers	To explore participants' perceptions, experiences, and beliefs regarding oral English proficiency	Foreign language anxiety, teaching practices, English language exposure, perceived communicative competence, barriers and opportunities for oral communication
Non-participant classroom observation	English language classes	To document authentic classroom interaction and instructional practices	Teacher–student interaction, communicative activities, oral participation, classroom dynamics, teacher feedback, willingness to communicate
Documentary analysis	Curriculum documents, lesson plans, institutional documents, teaching materials	To contextualize instructional practices within the institutional and curricular framework	Curriculum objectives, communicative teaching strategies, instructional planning, assessment procedures, institutional context

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The analytical framework was developed to guide the systematic examination of the qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and focus group discussions. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study sought to identify and interpret the psychological, pedagogical, and contextual factors associated with oral English proficiency through an iterative process of coding and thematic analysis. Consequently, the analytical framework was organized around the principal research constructs identified in the literature review and aligned with the objectives of the study.

Although the investigation adopted a qualitative descriptive design, the analytical categories were established deductively from the theoretical framework to facilitate the organization, comparison, and interpretation of the qualitative evidence. Throughout the analysis, these categories served as an initial coding structure while remaining sufficiently flexible to allow the emergence of additional themes whenever participants' narratives or classroom observations revealed relevant aspects beyond the predefined framework. This combination of theory-driven and data-driven analysis strengthened the credibility of the findings by balancing conceptual consistency with openness to participants' lived experiences.

To ensure methodological coherence, each analytical construct was examined through multiple sources of evidence. Semi-structured interviews provided participants' individual perspectives, classroom observations documented naturally occurring teaching and learning practices, and focus group discussions explored collective experiences and shared perceptions regarding oral English learning. The triangulation of these sources allowed each construct to be examined from complementary viewpoints, thereby increasing the depth and trustworthiness of the interpretation.

Table 3. Alignment Between Research Constructs and Data Collection Instruments

Research Construct	Semi-Structured Interviews	Classroom Observation	Focus Discussions	Group
Foreign Language Anxiety	✓	✓	✓	
Teaching Practices	✓	✓	✓	
English Language Exposure	✓	✓	✓	
Oral English Proficiency	✓	✓	✓	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The analytical categories that guided the coding and interpretation of the qualitative evidence are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Analytical Framework Used for Thematic Analysis

Analytical Category	Operational Focus	Primary Sources of Evidence

Foreign Language Anxiety	Emotional responses associated with speaking English, communication apprehension, fear of making mistakes, and avoidance of oral participation	Interviews, classroom observations, focus groups
Teaching Practices	Instructional strategies, communicative activities, teacher feedback, classroom interaction, and opportunities for oral participation	Interviews, classroom observations
English Language Exposure	Opportunities to use or encounter English inside and outside the classroom, including authentic communicative situations	Interviews, focus groups
Oral English Proficiency	Students' perceived communicative performance, participation, fluency, confidence, and observable oral interaction	Interviews, classroom observations, focus groups

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Data collection was conducted in multiple successive phases subsequent to the approval obtained from the educational institution and in accordance with the ethical standards of educational research. Before initiating fieldwork, the study's objectives were communicated to school administrators, English language instructors, and participating students. Participation was optional, and confidentiality was assured during the research procedure. The initial phase entailed initiating communication with the institution and organizing the timetable for classroom observations and interviews. Upon securing institutional consent, participants were chosen using purposive sampling based on the inclusion criteria outlined in the research design.

The second stage involved executing non-participant observations in the classroom during standard English lessons. The researcher documented genuine classroom practices, identified interaction patterns between teachers and students, and recorded instances of oral communication, learner participation, and instructional strategies without disrupting the classroom's natural dynamics. Subsequent to the observation phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with the chosen students and English language instructors. The interviews offered comprehensive descriptions of participants' experiences, perceptions, and viewpoints concerning the elements affecting spoken English proficiency. The adaptability of the interview style facilitated the organic emergence of new topics while ensuring coherence with the study's aims.

The concluding phase of data collection entailed conducting focus group talks with chosen students. These sessions prompted participants to collaboratively contemplate their learning experiences and examine the psychological, pedagogical, and environmental elements influencing their oral communication in English. The interaction among participants produced

supplementary evidence that enhanced the information gathered from interviews and classroom observations. Following the conclusion of the fieldwork, all gathered data was methodically categorized, transcribed, and readied for qualitative analysis. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and focus group recordings were meticulously examined to guarantee the correctness and comprehensiveness of the dataset prior to commencing the coding and thematic analysis procedure.

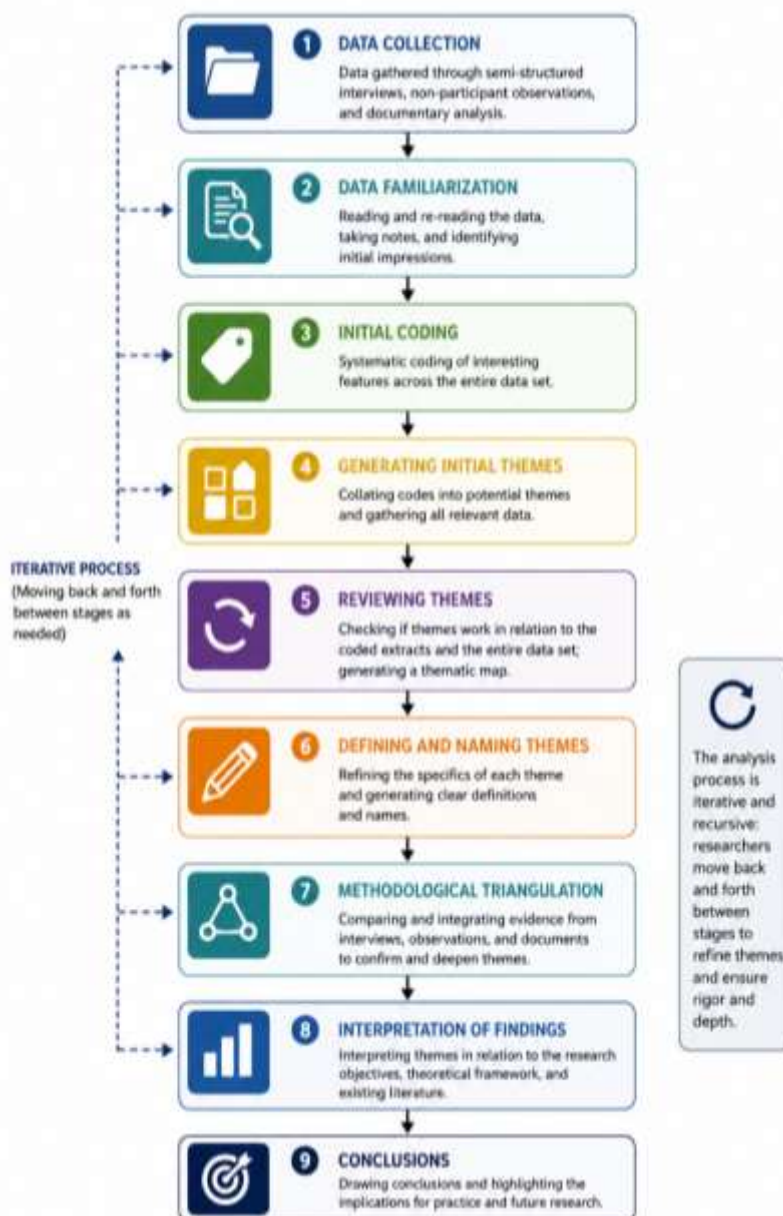
The data analysis employed a qualitative theme approach aligned with the study's descriptive characteristics and research aims. This analytical approach was chosen as it enables researchers to discern, categorize, and interpret recurring thematic patterns across various qualitative sources, thereby enhancing the understanding of the factors affecting oral English proficiency in the educational setting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis commenced with the organization and familiarization of the gathered data. Audio recordings from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, and classroom observation records were analyzed alongside field notes collected during the data gathering procedure. This preliminary phase facilitated the iterative examination of the data to acquire a comprehensive grasp of participants' experiences and to discern initial concepts pertinent to the research aims. Coding and theme development were conducted iteratively, moving continuously between the data, the emerging codes, and the theoretical framework until conceptual saturation was achieved. This recursive process ensured that the themes accurately reflected participants' experiences while maintaining consistency with the study's research objectives.

Subsequent to data familiarization, a first coding step was executed. Significant chunks of information were methodically analyzed and designated descriptive codes that reflect participants' perspectives, experiences, classroom practices, emotional responses, and environmental factors related to oral English communication. The coding procedure was inductive, informed by the analytical categories defined in the study framework, enabling the emergence of new themes when the data presented evidence that exceeded initial conceptual anticipations. The third stage involved categorizing similar codes into broader classifications via an iterative comparison procedure. Codes with conceptual commonalities were amalgamated into initial themes that represent the primary psychological, pedagogical, and contextual elements affecting students' oral English performance. The initial themes were systematically improved by juxtaposing material gathered from interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions to guarantee internal consistency and conceptual clarity.

The concluding phase entailed the analysis and synthesis of the emerging ideas. Each category was analyzed about the study aims and compared with the theoretical framework

outlined in the introduction. This interpretative technique enabled the identification of linkages among several criteria constraining oral English competency, while offering a logical explanation of the occurrence within the framework of Ecuadorian secondary EFL education. The triangulation of data from three sources enhanced the trustworthiness of the findings by corroborating consistent patterns and diminishing the likelihood that the interpretation relied just on a single instrument or participant group. Figure 2 encapsulates the thematic analysis process employed in the study.

Figure 2. Stages of the Thematic Analysis



Source: Adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006).

Trustworthiness

To improve the methodological rigor of the study, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were applied throughout the research process. These criteria establish a suitable framework for guaranteeing quality in qualitative research by highlighting the transparency, consistency, and reliability of the analytical processes. Credibility was enhanced by methodological triangulation by juxtaposing evidence gathered from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions. The amalgamation of information from various contributors and data sources enabled the recognition of persistent patterns and enhanced the overall comprehension of the subject being studied.

The transferability was examined through a comprehensive description of the educational context, participant attributes, and study methodologies. While qualitative findings are not meant for statistical generalization, the contextual information provided allows readers to assess the relevance of the results to educational environments with analogous traits. Dependability was ensured by the methodical documenting of every phase of the study process, encompassing participant selection, data collection methods, coding choices, and thematic evolution. The preservation of a clear audit trail enhanced the transparency and consistency of the methodological approaches employed during the study.

Confirmability was enhanced by basing the interpretation of the findings on participants' narratives and observational evidence instead than researchers' subjective assumptions. The triangulation of many data sources and the methodical comparison of emergent themes mitigated subjective bias and enhanced the neutrality of the analytical process. Throughout the research process, reflexive notes were maintained to document methodological decisions, emerging interpretations, and potential researcher assumptions. This practice enhanced transparency and minimized the influence of personal bias during data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The research was executed in compliance with globally acknowledged ethical standards for educational studies involving human subjects. Before data collection, permission was secured from the authorities at Alfonso Quiñónez George High School, and the aims, methods, and extent of the study were explicitly communicated to all participants. Participation in the study was completely optional. Students and teachers were notified of their right to refuse participation or withdraw from the research at any point without adverse repercussions. Informed consent was secured before to conducting interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions,

ensuring participants comprehended the research's goal and the intended use of the gathered data.

Confidentiality and anonymity were preserved throughout the inquiry. Personal identifiers were eliminated from interview transcripts, observation records, and focus group data to safeguard participants' identities. The gathered information was utilized solely for academic reasons and securely secured to avert inappropriate access. The study consistently upheld the ethical standards of respect for others, beneficence, and integrity at all stages of the research. The researcher aimed to mitigate any potential pain related to participation while ensuring that the findings were reported with accuracy, objectivity, and responsibility, so retaining the authenticity of participants' viewpoints and experiences.

Results

Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety emerged as one of the most salient psychological themes influencing students' oral English proficiency. Across interviews, classroom observations, and documentary evidence, participants consistently described speaking English as an emotionally demanding experience characterized by fear of making mistakes, concern about negative evaluation, and low confidence during oral interaction. Rather than representing isolated emotional reactions, these feelings appeared to shape students' classroom behavior, reducing their willingness to communicate and limiting opportunities to develop oral communicative competence.

Semi-structured interviews revealed that many students perceived oral participation as one of the most stressful aspects of English learning. Several participants explained that speaking in front of classmates generated feelings of nervousness because they anticipated criticism related to grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary use. One student expressed this concern by stating:

"I feel nervous when I have to speak English because I am afraid of making mistakes."
(Student 3)

Similar perceptions emerged repeatedly throughout the interviews. Students frequently associated oral participation with embarrassment rather than with opportunities for learning, indicating that communication anxiety often discouraged voluntary participation during classroom activities. Some participants acknowledged that they preferred remaining silent even when they knew the correct answer, fearing that linguistic inaccuracies would expose them to negative evaluation from peers or teachers.

These perceptions were consistent with evidence gathered during classroom observations. During communicative activities, several students hesitated before responding to teachers' questions, avoided eye contact when invited to participate, or produced only brief responses before returning to Spanish. In group activities, researchers observed that a small number of confident learners tended to dominate oral interaction, whereas less confident students adopted passive roles and rarely initiated communication in English. Such behavioral patterns suggested that anxiety extended beyond individual emotions and became visible in students' communicative practices within the classroom.

Documentary analysis further supported these observations. Although institutional planning documents emphasized the development of communicative competence through active participation and student-centered learning, classroom implementation revealed that many learners experienced emotional barriers that limited their engagement with these communicative objectives. This contrast suggests that achieving curricular expectations requires not only appropriate instructional planning but also learning environments capable of reducing anxiety and encouraging risk-taking during oral communication.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that foreign language anxiety functioned as a significant psychological barrier affecting students' oral English development. Anxiety reduced learners' willingness to communicate, restricted classroom participation, and limited opportunities for meaningful spoken interaction, thereby influencing the gradual development of communicative competence. Rather than being an individual characteristic, participants' experiences suggest that anxiety emerged through the interaction between personal beliefs, classroom dynamics, and previous communicative experiences.

Table 5. Emergent Themes Related to Foreign Language Anxiety

Theme	Representative Evidence	Source Evidence	of Interpretation
Fear of making mistakes	Students expressed concern about grammatical and pronunciation errors during oral activities.	Interviews; Classroom observations	Fear of linguistic inaccuracies discouraged voluntary participation.
Low communicative confidence	Learners reported feeling insecure when speaking English before classmates.	Interviews	Limited confidence reduced willingness to communicate.
Speaking anxiety	Hesitation, brief responses, avoidance of eye contact, and frequent use of Spanish during oral interaction.	Classroom observations	Anxiety influenced observable communicative behavior.

Reduced classroom participation	Students silence or preferred minimal responses during speaking activities.	Interviews; Classroom observations	Limited participation restricted opportunities to practice oral English.
Misalignment between curriculum and practice	Institutional documents emphasized communicative competence, whereas classroom participation remained limited by emotional barriers.	Documentary analysis	Emotional factors constrained the implementation of communicative teaching objectives.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Teaching Practices

One important pedagogical aspect affecting students' chances to become proficient in oral English is teaching methods. The institutional curriculum encouraged conversational language teaching, but classroom implementation remained mostly teacher-centered and focused on grammatical education, according to an analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and documentation data. Learners' chances to engage in meaningful oral interactions and gain confidence in spoken communication seemed to be limited by this instructional perspective.

Students frequently stated that vocabulary exercises, written assignments, and grammar explanations took up the majority of English classes. Speaking exercises were sometimes included in classroom education, but participants thought they were rare and usually restricted to brief answers rather than lengthy conversations. One participant clarified:

We finish grammar exercises most of the time. We hardly ever get the chance to communicate in English in class. (Student 7)

A similar experience was reported by another student:

"We don't have many conversations in English, but we typically write answers in our notebooks." (Student 15)

Teachers were aware of these restrictions and the difficulties in putting communicative approaches into practice. Large class sizes, a wide range of language skill, a lack of teaching time, and students' reluctance to participate verbally were found to be the main barriers to setting up interactive speaking activities during the interviews. One educator said:

"Students need more opportunities to communicate, but creating communicative activities on a regular basis is challenging due to time constraints and classroom conditions." (Teacher 1)

These opinions aligned with observations made in the classroom. Grammar explanations were followed by individual written assignments and quick teacher-led questioning in the majority of courses. There weren't many chances for cooperative projects, role-playing, debates, problem-solving exercises, or pair work. When speaking exercises were used, pupils were typically forced

to generate single words or brief sentences instead of participating in prolonged conversations. Additionally, students had less opportunities to start conversations, negotiate meaning, or engage in spontaneous interactions with their peers because the teacher dominated classroom discourse.

This teaching approach was found to be at odds with the goals set forth in the national English curriculum, according to documentary analysis. Learner-centered instruction, communicative language education, and the gradual development of productive language abilities through real-world communicative scenarios were all highlighted in curriculum texts. Lesson preparation templates also promoted meaningful language use, oral communication, and group learning. However, observations made in the classroom indicated that daily instructional practice only partially represented these pedagogical concepts.

The accumulation of data indicates that instructional strategies had a significant impact on students' oral English development by determining the amount and caliber of spoken engagement chances. Despite teachers' obvious dedication to helping students learn, classroom instruction continued to be primarily focused on linguistic accuracy rather than communicative skills. As a result, learners had very little chances to engage in meaningful conversation that would help them build fluency, communicative confidence, and spontaneous oral production.

Table 6. Emergent Themes Related to Teaching Practices

Theme	Representative Evidence	Source of Evidence	Interpretation
Predominance of grammar-oriented instruction	Lessons emphasized grammar explanations, vocabulary practice, and written exercises.	Classroom observations; Documentary analysis	Instruction prioritized linguistic accuracy over communicative interaction.
Limited communicative activities	Students reported few opportunities for pair work, discussions, or collaborative speaking tasks.	Interviews; Classroom observations	Restricted opportunities reduced authentic oral language practice.
Teacher-centered classroom interaction	Classroom discourse was primarily directed by the teacher.	Classroom observations	Limited student autonomy reduced spontaneous communication.
Institutional support for communicative teaching	Curriculum documents promoted communicative competence and	Documentary analysis	A gap existed between curricular expectations and classroom implementation.

	learner-centered instruction.			
Pedagogical constraints	Teachers identified limited instructional time, heterogeneous proficiency levels, and students' anxiety as barriers to communicative teaching.	Interviews	Structural and contextual factors influenced instructional decision-making.	

Source: Prepared by the authors.

The evidence indicates that instructional practices not only determined how English was taught but also shaped students' communicative experiences within the classroom. While institutional policies advocated communicative language teaching, the predominance of grammar-oriented instruction, together with contextual constraints, reduced learners' opportunities to participate actively in oral communication. As a result, pedagogical practices emerged as a critical factor influencing the development of oral English proficiency.

English Language Exposure

One significant contextual element affecting pupils' oral English competence has been identified as English language exposure. Participants had extremely few opportunities to utilize English outside of formal classroom instruction, according to the study of interviews, classroom observations, and documented data. As a result, English lessons served as the primary—and frequently the sole—setting in which students engaged with the target language. This limited exposure seemed to have an impact on learners' confidence and willingness to engage in oral communication in addition to their language development.

Data from interviews regularly demonstrated that pupils hardly ever encountered circumstances in their daily lives that required them to use English. The majority of participants stated that they had few opportunity to use the language outside of school and that English was rarely spoken in their families or communities. While some students occasionally utilized social media, viewed films, or listened to music in English, these activities were mostly passive and lacked genuine communication. As one person clarified:

"No one speaks English at home, so I only practice it in class." (Student 10)

Another pupil shared a similar opinion:

"I usually forget what we learned in class because I don't have anyone to practice with after school." (18-year-old student)

These reports imply that when possibilities for ongoing language usage were virtually nonexistent, students felt that classroom teaching was insufficient for fostering communicative confidence.

These conclusions were supported by observations made in the classroom. Even though teachers encouraged pupils to utilize English during certain activities, once teacher supervision diminished, classmate exchanges often switched to Spanish. When posing queries, planning group projects, or debating assignments in class, students frequently spoke their native tongue. As a result, rather than developing into a natural mode of communication within the classroom, actual oral engagement in English remained relatively brief and was typically limited to scripted educational activities.

Additional contextual evidence was obtained through documentary analysis. The national English curriculum promotes the integration of real-world communicative experiences that go beyond textbook-based training and places a strong emphasis on ongoing exposure to meaningful language input. Similarly, in order to increase students' exposure to English, institutional planning documents encouraged the use of technology-supported learning, collaborative projects, and multimedia resources. However, participant interviews and classroom observations revealed that these opportunities were only partially realized, mostly because of the lack of real English-speaking contexts in the local context and resource limitations.

The accumulation of data suggests that oral language development was significantly hampered by a lack of exposure to the English language. Due to their reliance on classroom instruction, students had less opportunities to build fluency, strengthen communicative confidence through repeated language usage, improve pronunciation, and consolidate knowledge. Additionally, the lack of real-world communication opportunities seemed to exacerbate the psychological obstacles mentioned in the preceding section, especially students' unwillingness to engage in oral activities and their fear of speaking.

Table 7. Emergent Themes Related to English Language Exposure

Theme	Representative Evidence	Source of Evidence	Interpretation
Limited opportunities for English use outside school	Students reported that English was rarely used beyond classroom instruction.	Interviews	Learning depended almost exclusively on formal instruction.
Dependence on classroom exposure	English lessons represented the principal source of contact with the language.	Interviews; Classroom observations	Limited exposure reduced opportunities for continuous language development.

Predominant use of Spanish during peer interaction	Students frequently returned to their first language during collaborative activities.	Classroom observations	Authentic oral practice remained restricted to teacher-directed tasks.
Limited implementation of authentic learning opportunities	Curriculum documents encouraged meaningful exposure through technology and communicative activities.	Documentary analysis	Institutional intentions were only partially reflected in classroom practice.
Reduced communicative confidence	Students perceived that insufficient exposure negatively affected their fluency and willingness to speak English.	Interviews; Classroom observations	Limited exposure reinforced both linguistic and psychological barriers.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Integrated Findings

The results show that oral English ability was influenced by both classroom instruction and the larger learning environment, as students had few opportunities to use the language in real-world contexts. Learners became more reliant on the classroom as their only setting for practicing spoken English as a result of the lack of consistent exposure outside of formal instruction, which seemed to limit communicative development. Therefore, increasing opportunities for meaningful language exposure may be a crucial tactic for improving Ecuadorian secondary EFL learners' oral communicative skills.

Students' oral English proficiency was influenced by the dynamic interaction of psychological, pedagogical, and contextual factors rather than by the influence of a single determinant, according to the integration of data from semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and documentary analysis. The theme analysis showed that students' motivation to speak, classroom involvement, and possibilities to build oral communicative competence were all impacted by the intimate connections between foreign language anxiety, instructional strategies, and English language exposure.

Anxiety related to foreign languages has been identified as a pervasive psychological disorder that affected students' oral communication participation. Students commonly exhibited avoidance behaviors during class activities because they constantly linked speaking English to feelings of embarrassment, negative appraisal, and fear of making mistakes. Observations in the classroom verified that these emotional reactions were mirrored in low involvement, reluctance to respond, and a preference for speaking Spanish with peers. These results imply that worry

decreased the frequency and caliber of oral language practice in addition to having an impact on students' mental health.

The second significant element of this relationship was pedagogical techniques. Grammar accuracy and written exercises continued to be the main focus of classroom instruction, despite teachers realizing the value of communicative language instruction and institutional documents supporting learner-centered approaches. As a result, there were very few opportunities for genuine oral communication, which reduced students' capacity to practice speaking for extended periods of time in order to improve their communicative fluency. The results shows that contextual factors, such as a lack of teaching time, a range of skill levels, and students' unwillingness to participate orally, have an impact on instructional decisions in addition to teachers' methodological preferences.

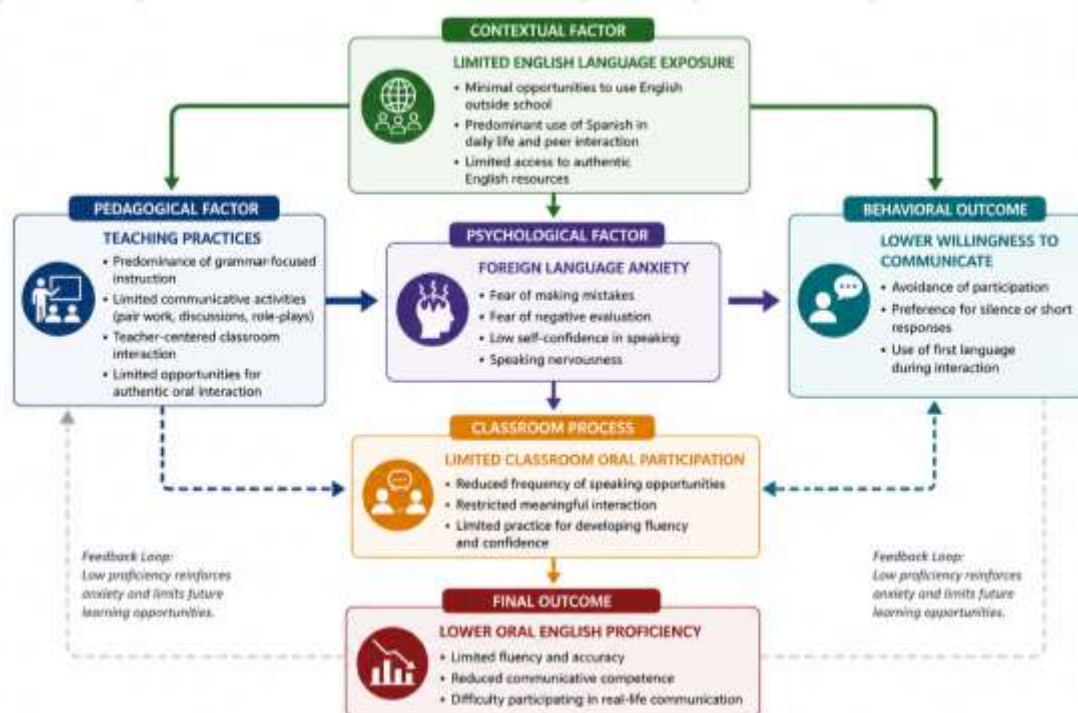
The analysis also showed that the psychological and pedagogical issues found throughout the study were compounded by little exposure to English outside of the classroom. Students stated that their main exposure to the target language was from English classes, and they had few opportunity to converse in English outside of the classroom. Because of this limited exposure, students were less familiar with real-world communication scenarios and had less opportunity to practice vocabulary, pronunciation, and spontaneous oral production on a regular basis. As a result, students were less confident when they participated in speaking exercises in class, which exacerbated their oral participation anxiety.

The incorporation of these themes implies that rather than acting as independent variables, the factors found in this study served as mutually reinforcing elements. Students who had little exposure to English were less confident when speaking, which made them more vulnerable to anxiety related to learning a foreign language. High levels of anxiety prevented students from participating fully in class, and teacher-centered teaching strategies offered comparatively few chances to get past these emotional obstacles through meaningful communication. Despite frequent attendance at English language lessons, this cyclical association helped to maintain low levels of oral English ability.

On the other hand, the results also suggest that advancements in one area could have a favorable impact on the others. Expanding students' exposure to English outside of formal classroom settings, encouraging learner-centered instructional strategies, and providing more opportunities for authentic communicative practice may all help students become more confident communicators, feel less nervous when speaking, and participate more in oral activities. According to this viewpoint, improving oral English competency should be viewed as a

multifaceted educational process that calls for coordinated environmental, psychological, and pedagogical interventions.

The integrated model that emerged from the three qualitative data sources is summarized in Figure 3, which also shows the correlations found through the thematic analysis.



Source: Prepared by the authors.

The integrated research shows that spoken English proficiency grows within a complex educational environment where contextual learning situations, instructional strategies, and psychological dispositions constantly interact. Results emphasize the significance of implementing holistic educational techniques that concurrently address emotional barriers, develop communicative pedagogy, and increase learners' exposure to meaningful English language experiences rather than considering these elements independently. The discussion that follows has an empirical basis thanks to this integrated perspective.

Discussion

This study examined how psychological, pedagogical, and contextual factors interact to shape oral English proficiency among Ecuadorian secondary EFL students. The findings indicate that oral communication cannot be explained by isolated variables but rather by the dynamic interaction of learners' emotional experiences, classroom practices, and opportunities for authentic language use. Evidence from interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and documentary analysis suggests that foreign language anxiety, teacher-centered instruction, and

limited exposure to English mutually reinforce one another, creating a learning environment that restricts students' willingness to communicate and, consequently, their oral language development. This interpretation supports ecological perspectives on second language acquisition, which view communicative competence as the product of continuous interactions between learners and their educational contexts rather than as the outcome of individual linguistic abilities alone (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; van Lier, 2020).

Foreign language anxiety emerged as the most influential psychological barrier to oral communication. Rather than representing a stable learner characteristic, anxiety appeared to develop through repeated classroom experiences in which speaking English was associated with fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation. Similar findings have been reported by MacIntyre et al. (2020) and Dewaele and Li (2021), who argue that language anxiety is largely shaped by classroom interaction and the emotional climate created during language learning. In the present study, students' reluctance to participate orally and the hesitation observed during speaking activities suggest that anxiety limited opportunities for meaningful communicative practice, reinforcing a cycle in which reduced participation further weakened learners' confidence and willingness to communicate.

These psychological barriers were closely associated with the pedagogical practices observed throughout the study. Although the institutional curriculum promotes communicative language teaching, classroom instruction remained predominantly focused on grammar explanations, vocabulary development, and written exercises, while opportunities for sustained oral interaction were comparatively limited. This discrepancy reflects a challenge widely documented in EFL contexts, where communicative objectives frequently coexist with teacher-centered instructional practices constrained by limited instructional time, heterogeneous proficiency levels, and institutional demands (Richards, 2022; Derakhshan et al., 2023). Rather than questioning teachers' professional competence, these findings highlight the structural conditions that influence instructional decision-making and restrict the systematic implementation of communicative methodologies.

The study also underscores the importance of English language exposure beyond the classroom. Participants reported that formal lessons constituted their principal source of contact with English, whereas opportunities for authentic communication outside school were scarce. This limited exposure appeared to reduce communicative confidence and spontaneous language use, supporting previous research demonstrating that sustained interaction with authentic input and meaningful communicative experiences is essential for developing oral fluency (Saito & Plonsky, 2021; Teng, 2023). Moreover, restricted exposure intensified the psychological barriers identified

in this study, as learners with fewer opportunities to use English were more likely to experience anxiety during classroom speaking activities.

Taken together, these findings indicate that foreign language anxiety, instructional practices, and English language exposure should not be interpreted as independent determinants of oral proficiency. Instead, they constitute an interconnected system in which each factor influences and reinforces the others. Limited exposure reduces communicative confidence, heightened anxiety discourages classroom participation, and teacher-centered instruction provides fewer opportunities to overcome these barriers through meaningful interaction. This reciprocal relationship supports ecological approaches to language learning by demonstrating that oral proficiency develops through the continuous interaction of psychological, pedagogical, and contextual conditions rather than through the acquisition of linguistic knowledge alone.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that improving oral English proficiency in Ecuadorian secondary education requires interventions that address these dimensions simultaneously. Creating emotionally supportive classrooms, expanding opportunities for communicative interaction, and increasing students' exposure to English through digital resources, project-based learning, extracurricular activities, and authentic communicative experiences may strengthen learners' confidence and willingness to communicate. These strategies align with current educational policies promoting communicative competence while offering practical alternatives for narrowing the gap between curricular objectives and classroom implementation.

Although the study was conducted within a single public secondary institution, the triangulation of interviews, classroom observations, and documentary analysis provides a robust understanding of the factors influencing oral English proficiency in this context. The findings contribute to the growing body of research on English language teaching in Latin America by demonstrating that communicative development is best understood through the interaction of psychological, pedagogical, and contextual processes. Future studies should examine these relationships across different educational settings and employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to explore how these factors evolve over time and influence learners' communicative development.

Conclusions

In this study, first-year bachillerato students at Alfonso Quiñónez George High School in Esmeraldas, Ecuador, were assessed for their oral English ability in relation to psychological, pedagogical, and environmental aspects. The results show that spoken English competency is

shaped by the interaction of emotional, instructional, and environmental variables rather than by a single determinant, based on data from semi-structured interviews, non-participant classroom observations, and documentary analysis. This qualitative viewpoint offers a contextualized comprehension of the difficulties influencing students' spoken English communication.

The results show that a significant obstacle to oral communication is anxiety related to other languages. Students' reluctance to engage in speaking exercises was hampered by poor communicative confidence, fear of making mistakes, and unfavorable evaluations, which decreased their chances to improve their oral competence. However, despite the goals outlined in the national curriculum, communicative language teaching was limited by teacher-centered teaching methods and few opportunities for real-world communication. Students' limited exposure to English outside of the classroom further exacerbated these difficulties, underscoring the significance of real-world language use for building communicative confidence and fluency.

When considered collectively, the results show that environmental, educational, and psychological elements function as a cohesive system. Just as communicative approaches are unlikely to reach their full potential without increased exposure to English in and outside of the classroom, reducing language anxiety alone is insufficient if students continue to have little opportunities for meaningful contact. Therefore, enhancing oral English proficiency necessitates all-encompassing educational approaches that concurrently promote learner-centered instruction, supportive learning environments, and real-world communication experiences.

Practically speaking, the study emphasizes the necessity of enhancing communicative language instruction through classroom strategies that encourage student engagement, group projects, constructive criticism, and the pedagogical use of errors as teaching opportunities. Similarly, schools should increase students' exposure to English through extracurricular activities, online resources, discussion groups, and other programs that promote meaningful language use outside of the classroom.

By offering qualitative data from a public secondary school setting that is still underrepresented in international research, this study adds to the body of knowledge on English language instruction in Ecuador. Teachers, school administrators, and legislators looking to improve oral English instruction in comparable environments can benefit greatly from the findings, even though they are context-specific and cannot be applied to all educational settings. Future studies should compare public and private schools, look at these connections in a variety of educational contexts, and investigate the long-term effects of communicative teaching strategies meant to lower language anxiety and boost exposure to real languages.

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