

ORAL SKILLS IN THE SPOTLIGHT: EFL IN SECONDARY EDUCATION IN A SPANISH LOCAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Evidence of the weak competence of Spanish students in oral skills in English has been provided by a number of surveys at national and European level. The students involved had several years of EFL instruction at school behind them. This paper looks into students' and teachers' views on the teaching and learning of oral skills in Spanish secondary education. For that purpose a questionnaire was administered to a representative sample of teachers and students in secondary schools in the region of Aragón (Spain). The analysis will allow us to highlight aspects that need to be improved to raise students' oral communicative competence in English.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), oral skills, Spanish Secondary Education, teaching methodologies, regional survey

1. Introduction

Recent surveys, like the European Survey on Language Competences⁴, which provide data on foreign language competence and knowledge conducive to good practice in language learning, place Spanish secondary education students' linguistic competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) among the weakest in the European Union. According to that survey, 75% of the Spanish 15-year old students reach an A2 level of the CEFRL in listening skills in English, which places Spain in the weakest position within the 16 participating educational systems. After several years of EFL instruction (from 7 to 10 or even more) the outcome is still rather weak, and the facts revealed are even harsher when the achieved competence of oral skills is considered. Moreover, long-standing policies of bilingual teaching from primary school onwards, which have proved to be successful for many students within our frame of reference, are now, apparently, up for reconsideration.

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⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/languages/eslc/docs/en/final-report-escl_en.pdf

Apart from isolated cases of interesting analyses carried out in different regions in Spain,⁵ there are not many comparable studies focused on the main recipients of language learning policies in secondary education, students and teachers of English.

The purpose of this paper is to make a profile of secondary school students in Aragon (Spain) who study English as a foreign language, in order to gain an insight into the method and procedures currently at work in their EFL learning process – paying special attention to oral skills. In particular, we set out to explore the type of activities more frequently done in and outside the classroom and the role played by ICTs. The analysis will allow us to highlight aspects that need to be improved with a view to raising their communicative competence in English.

2. Research design and participants

Two questionnaires were designed and piloted before being distributed online through *Survey Monkey Plus* in February 2012. One of them addressed students 1st year *ESO*⁶ –thirteen years old–, 4th year *ESO* –sixteen years old– and 2nd year post-compulsory Secondary Education students (*BAC*) eighteen years old– and the other addressed their teachers. A total sample of 15 schools participated in the study. The secondary schools selected covered the following different categories:

1. Type of school: State-run / State-subsidised and private
2. Location of school: Urban / Rural
3. Methodological approach: Bilingual (CLIL) / Non-bilingual (EFL)

Table 1. Total number of participants surveyed.

	1 st year <i>ESO</i> SS	4 th year <i>ESO</i> SS	2 nd year <i>BAC</i> SS	Teachers	TOTAL sample
1. State-run schools	457	360	404	44	
Subsidised and private schools	278	231	274	19	
2. Urban schools	570	475	568	49	
Rural schools	165	116	110	14	
3. Bilingual schools	118	113	45	12	
Non-bil. schools	617	478	633	51	
Total	735	591	678	63	2,067

⁵ See the evaluation reports on the situation of English language in Catalonia. For instance: “La situació de la llengua anglesa al batxillerat a Catalunya 2000-2004.” *Informes d’avaluació* 7 (2005).

⁶ The acronym *ESO* (Educación Secundaria Obligatoria) stands for Compulsory Secondary Education.

The questionnaires for the three tiers of students consisted of 25 questions, all of which were the same, except for two or three, which focused on their particular academic year. The questionnaire for the teachers contained 27 questions and some of them mirrored those the students were asked, so that comparisons could be established between students' and teachers' views.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The students' profile

The survey aimed to offer a snapshot of foreign language training among secondary school students in Aragon. Information was gathered concerning their age, the inclusion of one or more foreign languages in their studies and their future plans regarding education. They were also asked about any places other than school where they sought to complete their language training, as well as their perceived level of competence in English.

1st year ESO students

A total of 735 1st year ESO students answered the questionnaire. A great percentage of them (70.3 %) were 12 years old at the time of answering the questionnaire in February 2012; some of them had already turned 13 or had had to repeat a previous year (23.7 %) and a small percentage were 14 years old (4.76 %). The number of boys was slightly above the number of girls (53.94 % vs. 46.06 %).

The majority of them answered that they had already studied English for 9 or 10 years (57%). Most students learn a second foreign language (87.4 %), French being by far the most common one (70.6 %), followed by German (10.3 %). Other languages studied by a few students are Romanian, Chinese, Portuguese, Arabic, Catalan, Bulgarian, Polish, and Valencian. The percentage of students studying a second foreign language is higher in urban (90.4 %) than in rural schools (77.0 %), in bilingual (99.1 %) than in non-bilingual schools (85.2 %) and in state-subsidised or private (92.1 %) than in state-run schools (84.5 %).

4th year ESO students

The total number of 4th year ESO students who answered the questionnaire is 591. A great percentage of them (63.5 %) were 15 years old at the time of answering the questionnaire; some of them had already turned 16 or had had to repeat a previous year (27.6 %) and a small percentage were 17 or older (8.6 %). The number of girls was slightly above the number of boys (52.0 % vs. 48.0 %).

The great majority of them (82.5 %) had studied English for 10 or more years. The number of students learning a second foreign language (61.7 %) is lower than in 1st year ESO. The percentage of students studying a second foreign language is higher in urban (64.3 %) than in rural schools (51.3 %) and in state-subsidised or private

(77.0 %) than in state-run (52.0 %). It is similar in schools from the three provinces and in bilingual and non-bilingual schools (63.4 % vs. 61.3 %).

As for their future prospects, most of them intend to carry on studying at the post-compulsory stage of secondary education (83.2%), few of them intend to do vocational training (9.2 %), and very few plan to leave their studies (2 %). The percentage of students who will continue with their Secondary Education is higher in urban than in rural schools (86.9 % vs. 66.4 %), and in state-subsidised and private schools than in state-run ones (96.5 % vs. 74.4 %).

2nd year BAC students

A total number of 678 students answered the questionnaire. Most of them (69.6 %) were 17 years old at the time of answering the questionnaire; 20.1 % were 18 years old and 8.8 % were older students. A high percentage (84.2 %) had studied English for 10 or more years.

The great majority of students intend to carry on studying at university (82.7 %). The percentage of students learning a second foreign language decreases steadily as they proceed through Secondary Education: only 36.2 % of 2nd year BAC students continue to learn a second foreign language. This may be because students devote more time to preparing the University Entrance Examination, which does not contain an L3 exam.

About half of the students believe their competence in English is similar to that of their classmates; only fewer believe their competence in English is better than that of their classmates; and still fewer percentage believe their level to be worse. These results show that, from the point of view of the students at least, classes are fairly homogeneous.

However, their actual performance as indicated by the grade obtained shows that there is variation in their achievement. Their results are, nevertheless, fairly consistent throughout their secondary education, as shown in the following table, B being the most common grade obtained, followed by C, D, A and E, which indicates that the number of students that do not achieve the minimum required is very low.

Table 2. Students' overall competence in English across Secondary Education

	1st year ESO students	4th year ESO students	2nd year BAC students
A (100-90)	11.9%	6.9%	8.7%
B (89-70)	42.5%	40.5%	37.5%
C (69-60)	26.4%	30.0%	28.7%
D (59-50)	11.2%	17.5%	18.2%
E (49 - <)	8.1%	5.1%	6.8%

3.2. Activities in the classroom

One of the purposes of this survey was to obtain information on the extent to which activities done in class actually develop students' oral skills and communicative competence and are, therefore, reflected in the results obtained by Secondary Education students.

When asked how much time their teachers devote in class to the different activities, the students' answers were similar, regardless of their academic year. Despite the policies and official curriculum, which encourage a communicative approach to EFL, it seems to be the case that grammar and vocabulary are still given most attention in the classroom. Doing the exercises set by the textbook also keeps students busy. Other activities which, according to students, are given less class time are translation, group activities and work on the computer.

Table 3. Time⁷ devoted to particular skills and language work in the classroom according to students.

Skills	(quite) a lot of time	(very) little time
Listening	55.5 %	44.5 %
Speaking	66.4 %	33.6 %
Reading	66.5 %	33.5 %
Writing	70 %	30 %
Grammar and Vocabulary	86 %	14 %
Translation	51 %	49 %
Individual work	63.2 %	36.8 %
Groupwork	32.5 %	67.5 %
Completing the textbook	75.2 %	24.8 %
Work on the computer	11.7 %	88.3 %
Preparing exams	67.8 %	32.2 %

Speaking activities are given less time in class as the student progresses through secondary school. Similarly, the perception of the students is that less time is devoted to listening comprehension activities as they advance through the educational system.

We also crossed students' answers with the type of school attended. At every level of secondary education, in schools in small towns and bigger towns alike, in state and private/state-subsidised schools, students' answers coincide in indicating that a good part of the class time is devoted to grammar and vocabulary. Moreover,

⁷ Students were asked how much time they devoted in /outside the classroom to the various skills and activities. The answers given fell within the categories "a lot of time", "quite a lot of time", "little time" and "very little time". The authors have grouped the answers into two, as Tables 3 and 4 show. Some of the questions mirrored those asked to the teachers, so that comparisons could be made between students' and teachers' perceptions.

listening and speaking practice does not occupy much classroom time in any of these types of school, at any of the three levels. Following the same general tendency, no remarkable differences are observed in the time devoted to different activities in class when bilingual and non bilingual schools are compared. However, it is worth noting that speaking skills are already practised fairly often in class in 1st year *ESO* in every type of school, but by 4th year they experience a noticeable drop in the classroom time. They recover attention only in bilingual schools in 2nd year *BAC*.

Student perceptions were then compared with those provided by their teachers.

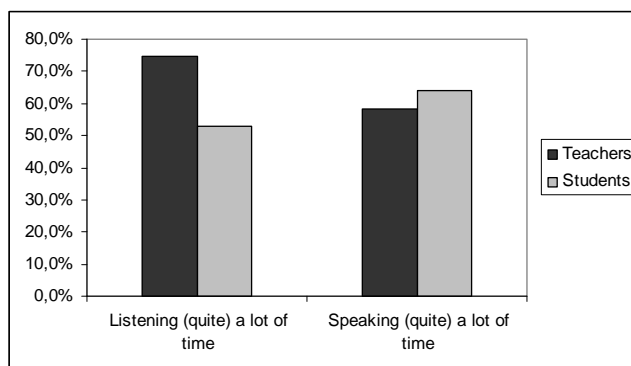


Figure 1. Teachers' and students' answers on the time devoted to oral activities in the EFL classroom

There is agreement between students' and teachers' answers in the perceived time devoted to some activities. First, grammar and vocabulary are given most class time. Second, completing the textbook is also one of the most frequently practised activities. Third, computer tasks are relegated to final position in classroom activities. There is not clear agreement, however, as to the time devoted to practising oral skills by means of listening or speaking activities in the classroom: according to the teachers listening comprehension is frequently practised, whereas it less frequent according to students' answers.

In the light of the students' perceptions, there would seem to be a need to insist on the practice of listening and speaking during classroom time. Listening should be frequently practised in class, as it gives students the chance to be exposed to voices other than their teacher's. Moreover, by hearing real talking and a variety of accents, students can improve their pronunciation, intonation and rhythm patterns, and their overall communicative competence. Listening exercises can be exploited in a number of ways; specific tasks may be set such as detailed comprehension, the interpretation of the text, the recognition of words in connected speech, or language analysis, etc. (cf. Nunan 1999; Brown 2001; Morley 2001; Field 2013). Providing students with content and/or language support before they listen to a particular text

–giving them some background knowledge to better understand it– has proved to be very useful in improving the listeners’ proficiency (cf. Nunan 1999; Hedge 2000; Field 2002; Ching-Shyang Chang and Read 2006; Harmer 2007). Moreover, practising ‘live’ listening can be very motivating for learners, as long as they get involved in a variety of sub-skills leading to completing a given task. As is the case with film clips watching, students are exposed not only to somebody else’s voice, but to all kinds of paralinguistic behaviours; moreover, they can learn to match intonation patterns with facial expressions or gestures, which may promote their sociolinguistic competence. Subtitles provide valuable help in the EFL classroom in the understanding and interpretation of the audio tracks (Field 2000; Díaz-Cintas and Fernández Cruz 2008; Ghia 2012; Talaván 2013). The level of competence in a foreign language like English is directly affected by the policies regarding dubbing and subtitling adopted in each European country:

In countries that have a tradition of subtitling, the majority of survey respondents stated that their language level (particularly in English) is close to that of their mother tongue, i.e. level 4 or 5 on a scale of 5, whereas in the countries with a dubbing tradition, the majority of respondents said they did not exceed level 3 on a scale of 5 (Media Consulting Group, 2011:26)

Authentic materials provided by audiovisual texts usually contain updated sociocultural information and boost the students’ motivation, since they are exposed to contexts and situations that may affect them in and outside the classroom. They can help to enlarge the learners’ vocabulary, learn oral expressions, get familiarized with body language and the social behaviours of a foreign culture. All these are good reasons for the use of these materials in and outside the classroom.

3.3. Activities outside the classroom

The secondary students’ answers, regardless of their level, reveal that they devote most of their English language study time outside the classroom to grammar and vocabulary, the preparation of exams, individual work and writing. There is, therefore, partial insistence on some of the activities which are seen as a priority in class (notably grammar and vocabulary, and writing). Other activities, in turn, tend to be oriented to homework, such as individual work, completing the workbook and focusing on the preparation of exams. Working in groups and doing computer tasks come last, as in the case of activities done inside the EFL classroom.

The students’ answers reveal that irrespective of their level and of the type of school they attend, not much time is devoted to listening outside the classroom. Listening should also be encouraged as an activity outside the classroom, given the low attention paid to this skill within the classroom. In order to get more exposure

to the foreign language, students can make their own choices about what they feel like listening to, which no doubt will increase their motivational power (Harmer 2007). To get the most out of the activity, the teacher may have his/her students perform a series of agreed tasks, which will give them grounded reasons to listen attentively. Also, listening to songs and watching videos could be encouraged as a way of practising pronunciation or of extracting meaning.

Table 4. Time devoted to particular skills and language work outside the classroom according to students.

Skills	(quite) a lot of time	(very) little time
Listening	35.5 %	64.5 %
Reading	51.4 %	48.6 %
Writing	64 %	36 %
Grammar and Vocabulary	70.5 %	29.5 %
Translation	50.1 %	49.9 %
Individual work	68.5 %	37.5 %
Groupwork	16.7 %	83.3 %
Completing the textbook	64.7 %	35.3 %
Work on the computer	20.7 %	79.3 %
Preparing exams	68.5 %	31.5 %

The use of audiovisual materials is to be fostered outside the classroom: they are highly motivating and effective. The L2 level of the learner will condition the choice of subtitles; thus, interlinguistic subtitles work as a support in the comprehension of the text, giving reassurance to students at elementary and pre-intermediate levels. Intralinguistic subtitles, in turn, will support the listening comprehension exercise and help in the lexical development at intermediate and advanced levels.

Likewise, getting students involved in project group work outside the classroom would be valuable, as it can promote the integration of various skills. For instance, discussions would require speaking to one another, researching would require listening, reading to gather information and the handing in of a report. Furthermore, if students' individual work outside the classroom is done under guidance, the learners will apply learning strategies and foster their own autonomy in the practice and acquisition of EFL.

As Figure 2 shows, when the students' perceptions were compared with those provided by their teachers it was evident that their views differ considerably as to the time devoted to the practice of listening skills outside the classroom. But, contrarily to what was observed in the previous question (activities in class), listening comprehension is according to teachers rarely practised, whereas the students' answers reveal that they devote more time to this than their teachers think.

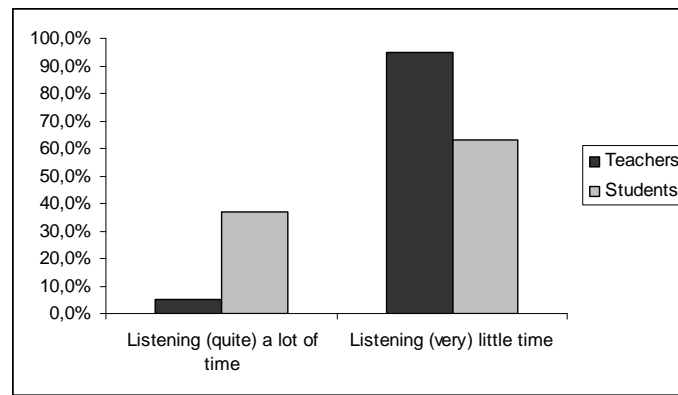


Figure 2. Teachers' and students' answers on the time devoted to listening activities outside the EFL classroom

For both parties grammar and vocabulary, writing and individual work are given priority as work outside the classroom. Moreover, teachers seem to give reading a greater weight than students do and the latter report devoting more time to the preparation of exams and to translation than teachers claim they do.

3.4. The use of the English language as a medium of instruction in the classroom

There are interesting variations in the responses given to particular aspects of this matter. In general terms, we can say that the higher the level of competence the more insistent the requirement that only the foreign language should be used in the classroom. This is particularly the case when we refer to Student Talking Time: there exists an increasing majority of respondents who think that only the use of English should be accepted.

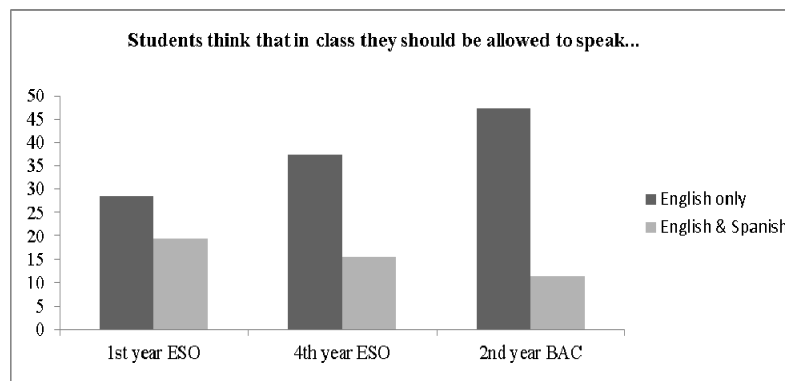


Figure 3. Preferred language(s) used by students in the classroom

A large majority of respondents, however, support the use of both English and Spanish in the class by the teacher (more than twice as many as those who think that only English should be used) (Figure 4). This question explicitly tries to elicit information about a widespread practice, which is to repeat the same information in the native language to ensure that all students understand it. Even though it has been consistently described as detrimental, students (who are otherwise willing to use the foreign language in class) seem to agree with this routine.

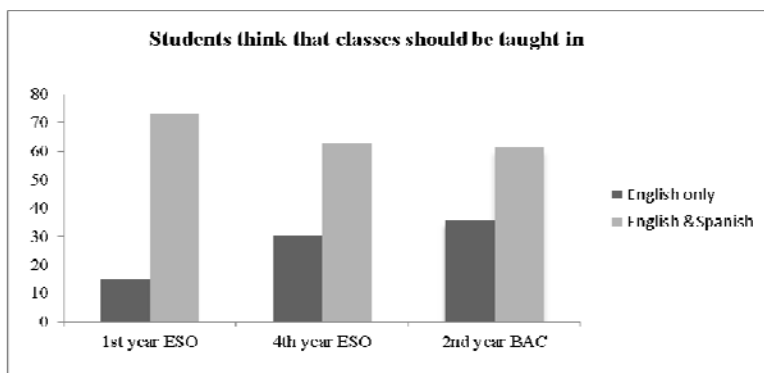


Figure 4. Preferred language(s) of tuition according to students

These differences lead us to think that students associate the use of English as a “vehicular language” for the completion of exercises and for more communicative tasks carried out by both teachers and students. On the other hand, they would approve of the use of Spanish in those sections of the teacher’s talking time given over to certain activities, such as the teaching of grammar and theoretical matters in general, especially at the lower levels.

3.5. The role played by ICTs in the EFL teaching/learning process

Regarding the use of Information and Communication Technology, students consider TV series, You Tube clips or films in the original version as the most useful tools for learning English. This result (59.6%) might seem strange in a country where dubbing films is still a common practice but the immediate availability of recent episodes or programs through the Internet as well as their popularity among youngsters make up for the extra effort students have to make. Even so, watching these (undubbed) programs with subtitles is slightly more popular than watching them without subtitles.

The use of computers or tablets (33.4%) –though mostly outside the classroom– as well as specific internet resources (web pages and online labs) devoted to the teaching of English (27%) are increasingly popular activities among Spanish secondary EFL students.

On the other hand, a large number of students place the traditional language course in CD format as the least popular ICT tool for learning languages. The use of Interactive WhiteBoards –though twice as common in state schools as in subsidised/private schools–, is also described as very rare. This trend increases in the percentage of 2nd year *BAC* students who say they never use it.

Overall, the use of ICTs is still uncommon in the classroom in spite of a wealth of possibilities and resources, as well as its motivational factor for students who are “digital natives”. In our survey, the students’ perception is confirmed by the teachers’ view that the time devoted in class to work with the computer is “very little” (83.9 %). The most common reasons alluded to by teachers for not using them to a greater extent is that computers and other ICTs are time-consuming, sometimes unreliable and that they are not familiarized with their use.

In our opinion, the use of technologies should be fostered –both in and, especially, outside the classroom– to increase the total exposure time of students to the foreign language. In some teaching contexts, this combination of technology and face-to-face learning has been carefully implemented through blended learning programs which, as long as the quality of teaching on-line and the level of interaction are maintained, result in improvements in the rate of learning (Ginns and Ellis 2007; Bonk and Graham 2006).

4. Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to carry out an analysis of the results obtained through a survey in Spanish secondary schools on the students’ development of their oral skills, from their own and their teachers’ perceptions. This paper forms part of a wider project which focuses on the teaching, learning and assessment of oral skills in the English classroom at secondary school level in the Spanish region of Aragon. The data gathered can be used to gauge the effect that current teaching procedures may have on the level of oral communicative competence reached by secondary students.

One of our aims was to learn about the type of activities in and outside the EFL classroom. We found that all students, irrespective of their level and the type of school, agreed that they devote most of their class time to grammar and vocabulary, using the textbook and writing. Moreover, their answers reveal that speaking activities are given less time in class as they progress from one class to another. They agree, too, that less time is devoted to listening comprehension activities as they move up a class and that computer tasks are given least time of all in the classroom activities. This may be due to the pressure of preparing for the University Entrance Examination, where the English test does not contain any testing of oral skills, all of which produces a negative so-called ‘washback effect’ (Alderson and Wall 1993; Amengual Pizarro 2009, 2010).

Contrary to what was expected *a priori*, no remarkable differences were found in the answers of students attending bilingual, non-bilingual, state, state-subsidised and private schools with regard to the time devoted to different oral activities done in class.

There were significant differences, however, between the students' answers and those of their teachers' regarding the teaching and learning of oral skills in class, especially in relation to listening comprehension exercises. Whereas in the teachers' views listening comprehension is frequently practised, students believe that not much attention is paid to it. In the students' view, speaking is given less attention in class than teachers report, the difference being much more striking when it comes to listening exercises.

We firmly believe that a greater and regular practice of listening comprehension in class would improve the students' competence in their oral communication. For this reason students should have greater exposure to 'comprehensible input' (Krashen 1985). This exposure needs to be accompanied by opportunities to use language communicatively; that is, activities aimed at fostering students' output (Swain 2005). Our suggestions are in line with Nation and Newton's (2009) idea that listening and speaking activities focused on form and aimed at improving students' pronunciation, intonation and rhythm patterns need to be combined with activities focused on meaning and aimed at encouraging students' interactional skills and fluency development.

Outside the classroom, too, the focus seems to be, according to both students and their teachers, on grammar and vocabulary as well as on writing. Other activities that are usually done outside the classroom are workbook exercises and preparation of exams, which entail individual work. Hardly any time, reportedly, is devoted to groupwork and computer tasks. We, therefore, believe that the use of computers and ICTs in general should be clearly promoted not only inside the classroom but also outside it. Using these aids, students may reach a higher and necessary degree of autonomy, as some authors report (Benson and Voller, 1997), since ICT tools promote self-access and self-study, catering for the students' different needs as well as particular learning styles; in this way, students not only increase their total exposure time but take further responsibility for their own learning.

With this study, we have gained a deeper insight into the current situation regarding the teaching and learning of oral skills in EFL secondary schools in Aragon. It is hoped that some of the proposals suggested, based on our local results, might be extrapolated and considered with a view to improving the overall performance and, in particular, the oral communicative competence of students of English in general.

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