

Spanish Students' Reflections on the Importance of Written and Spoken Skills in their EFL Classes at High School and at University

Reflexiones de estudiantes españoles acerca de la importancia de las destrezas escritas y orales en sus clases de inglés como lengua extranjera a nivel de instituto y de universidad

YOLANDA JOY CALVO BENZIES
UNIVERSIDAD DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Nowadays, thanks to the introduction of modern approaches to language teaching with an emphasis on communication and a focus on the learner, teachers are expected to help students develop their competences in both receptive and productive skills. However, few studies have been carried out in Spain to verify whether students feel they have enough chances to write and speak in the classroom. This paper aims at describing and comparing the attention that is paid to the different skills at pre-university and university levels. A number of students were asked to answer some questions on the importance that, in their experience, is given to each language area in their EFL classes, assessment system and teaching materials. The results indicate that spoken skills and cultural aspects continue to be undervalued in our country.

Key words: *written skills; oral skills; Spanish EFL students; high school; university*

Hoy en día, gracias a la introducción de técnicas modernas para la enseñanza de idiomas que ponen un énfasis en la comunicación y en el aprendiz, se espera que los profesores ayuden a sus alumnos a desarrollar tanto sus competencias receptivas como productivas. Sin embargo, pocos estudios se han realizado en España para verificar si los estudiantes creen que tienen suficientes oportunidades para escribir y comunicarse oralmente dentro del aula. Este estudio tiene como objetivo principal describir y comparar la atención que se le presta a las diferentes destrezas a nivel universitario y en niveles educativos inferiores. Se les pidió a un número de estudiantes que contestasen a unas preguntas acerca de la importancia que se le da según su experiencia a cada área de la lengua en sus clases de ILE, sistema de evaluación y materiales didácticos. Los resultados indican que las destrezas orales y los aspectos culturales, continúan siendo infravaloradas en nuestro país.

Palabras clave: *destrezas escritas; destrezas orales; estudiantes de ILE, instituto; universidad*

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental recommendations made by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) is that general (foreign) language classes should revolve around the teaching of the four traditional language skills (writing, speaking, listening and reading) and a similar amount of attention should be paid to each of them in the classroom and in the assessment system so as to help students develop both their receptive and their productive oral and written skills at the same time. However, previous research has found that oral skills are often neglected in EFL classrooms in comparison to reading and writing

(Englander, 2010; Hornero, Mur & Plo, 2013; Alonso, 2014). Consequently, it has also been pointed out that many EFL students show higher competences in writing and reading in English than they do when maintaining a conversation with someone (Bartolí, 2005; Chela, 2008). Some of the reasons that are generally adduced to justify this unbalanced situation are the following:

- a) oral tasks are often regarded as time-consuming activities since they are thought to require more time and dedication; nevertheless, Rubio and Schwarzer (2011: 68) point out that “the act of speaking requires less time within a session than other activities (such as writing)”;
- b) aspects such as fluency and accuracy also play an important role when one communicates orally with others (Mora, 2006);
- c) affective factors like motivation and personality may also affect the way students learn how to orally communicate in a foreign language.

This lack of attention to oral skills and, more particularly, to oral production, may seem surprising since out of the four skills mentioned above, the spoken component has long been considered one of the most difficult skills to acquire and develop when learning a foreign language (Aleksandrak, 2011; Rubio & Schwarzer, 2011; Alonso, 2014).

Spain is no exception to this general rule to the extent that Martínez-Asís (2004: xvi) found that many Spanish students tend to complete their Obligatory and Post-Obligatory Secondary Education studies with a low competence in producing and understanding oral language which sometimes makes them feel frustrated and unmotivated:

cuando nuestros alumnos comprueban que tras 6 años de estudio reglado de la lengua inglesa, apenas pueden entender o comunicarse oralmente con hablantes nativos, esta circunstancia les lleva al desánimo y a la desmotivación.

Nevertheless, in the last few years some changes have been introduced in the Spanish educational system for the teaching of foreign languages, some of which were designed to give more prominence to the learning of spoken skills. To begin with, on page number 196 of the Official State Document published by the Spanish government on the 3rd of January, 2015, we can read the following lines:

la lengua castellana o la lengua cooficial sólo se utilizarán como apoyo en el proceso de aprendizaje de la lengua extranjera. Se priorizarán la comprensión y la expresión oral. (BOE (3), 2015: 196 por el que se establece el currículo básico de la Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y del Bachillerato).

In addition, Plo, Hornero and Mur (2014: 56) refer to these other changes in our country:

the widespread adoption of the communicative method of teaching languages, a greater exposure of students to the foreign language – both in and out of the classroom (language academies, summer courses, study stays in other countries, availability of radio and TV in a foreign language, etc.).

To the former we can add the gradual reduction in the number of pupils per class in some EFL lessons or the introduction of CLIL programmes in which the so-called content subjects (like Maths or Science) are taught in a foreign language (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010), in this case in English. Moreover, some high schools and language centres are hiring native English teaching assistants who are responsible specifically for speaking classes.

In spite of all the research conducted up to now on the difficulties teachers face when teaching oral skills and the reasons why these are commonly neglected in classrooms, to the best of my knowledge, there has been little research conducted in the last few years on Spanish EFL students’ opinions on the importance given to each language skill in their EFL classes. The main reason for taking into consideration students’ views is that together with teachers, they are the most important participants in any language classroom (Baker, 2011)

since they are the only ones who really know what goes on in their EFL lessons and how this affects their learning process of the language.

This paper hence intends to be a contribution to this lack of studies in the sense that it aims at interviewing Spanish EFL students on the importance that, in their opinion, is given to oral and written receptive and productive skills in their classes at university as well as in their previous Secondary and Post-Secondary Education EFL lessons. In addition, this study will hopefully be able to verify whether oral skills, and more especially, speaking, continue to be the least emphasised skills in the classroom as previous studies have pointed out by referring, for instance to the fact that the Spanish University Entrance Examination (SUEE) does not include a speaking component in the general EFL test students take (Amengual, 2009, 2010) or whether, on the contrary, the recent changes in the Spanish educational system may be helping EFL classes to move gradually to a more communicative teaching method in which both oral and written skills are equally considered at all levels.

2. METHOD

2.1 Subjects

A total of 38 people volunteered to participate in this study. The subjects were either undergraduates enrolled in the four-year BA in English Language and Literature at the University of Santiago de Compostela (*Grado en Lengua y Literatura Inglesas*) or students who had graduated in the last few years in the former five-year equivalent degree at the same university, that is, English Philology (*Licenciatura en Filología Inglesa*) and were currently enrolled in some postgraduate courses connected with English and English teaching such as the master programme in English Studies at the University of Santiago de Compostela or the *Máster Universitario en Profesorado de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y Bachillerato, Formación Profesional y Enseñanza de Lenguas*, which can be easily compared with the PGCE in the British educational system. More precisely, out of these 38 participants, 19 were undergraduate students and the remaining ones had recently become postgraduates.

Concerning gender, 30 of these volunteers were female and 8 were male and their age ranged from 19 to 24. Since all of the students had completed their Obligatory and Post-Obligatory Secondary Education studies between two and six years before participating in the study, all of them were considered as perfect candidates for reflecting upon several aspects regarding the teaching of spoken and written skills, both at university and pre-university levels.

Finally, concerning the selection of the participants, most of them had given me their email address at the end of a questionnaire they had previously filled out as the main research material used in my doctoral dissertation and the rest of them were former students of mine who offered to take part in the study after I had announced in class that I needed some volunteers.¹

It would be feasible to say that the fact that the subjects had volunteered to participate in this study and not selected at random from a group, could have had a negative effect on the internal validity of this study. Nevertheless, the modules I had taught some of the students were not directly connected to language teaching nor on specifically developing oral or

¹ The current study is therefore part of a larger project, namely, a doctoral dissertation which is devoted to analysing the importance given to pronunciation in different educational stages in Spain according to both students and teachers and to identifying the general importance given to pronunciation in EFL textbooks addressed to Spanish speakers (Calvo, 2016).

written skills; so, even though they were volunteers, they could freely express their opinions regarding the importance given to spoken and written skills without feeling as if they were assessing me in any way as one of their former teachers.

2.2 Research material: design and administration

The research material used in this study was an interview, which was divided into two main parts. In the former, students were asked to reflect upon the importance given to each language area in their EFL classes and teaching materials whereas in the latter, the questions revolved specifically around the attention paid to pronunciation as part of my Doctoral dissertation; hence, the second group of questions have been excluded from this article.

The main reason for using interviews was that they generally provide more reliable data than questionnaires or surveys since they are more personal and direct and are not anonymous. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and Galician so that students' lack of competence in the English language could not affect their empirical answers.

Some of the questions followed a close-ended format and the rest were of an open-ended type. Since most of the items followed a semi-structured format and students were constantly asked to give their opinions on different topics, I decided to allow them to choose to be interviewed face to face or to fill it out in written form and send their answers via email. I did not think that for this particular study, giving their answers orally or in written format would negatively influence the main results nor affect the internal validity.

2.2.1 Questions described

Generally speaking, the questions included in the interview could be classified into four main groups: a) students' self-assessment of their general competences in oral and written skills as well as in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and culture (item number 1); b) the importance that should be given to the different skills and language areas in general EFL classes (item number 2); c) the degree of attention paid to each skill in different educational stages in Spain (items 3-8); and, d) practising spoken and written skills outside the classroom (items 9 and 10). The third group could be further classified into the following topics: c.1) general attention paid to each skill in pre-university and university levels (items 3, 4 and 7); c.2) assessment (item 5); c.3) error-correction (item 6); and c.4) teaching materials used (item 8).

As mentioned above, some of the questions followed a close-ended format in which semantic differential scales from 1 to 10 were used (from *very bad* to *excellent*, with *little/no frequency* to *very frequently* or from *minimum importance* to *maximum importance*). In the rest of the items, the interviewee asked students open-ended questions they had to reflect on and give their opinions afterwards. Moreover, in the former type of items, the interviewees were always asked to justify their answers after having selected different labels from the semantic differential scales used. The specific questions included in the interview can be seen in Appendix 1.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

During the face-to-face interviews, I took notes of the general opinions expressed by the different students in each question. Afterwards, I listened to/read each of them carefully and thoroughly several times and extracted the main ideas.

Tables and figures were created to organise the data collected. In the tables, the most widely-voted options have been highlighted so as to help the reader in the interpretation of the data. The data is quite easy to interpret since the numbers inserted in the tables represent the total number of interviewees who opted for each option or figure. In other tables, there are percentages which represent the percentage of interviewees who chose each option. Since the number of interviewees that participated in this study is quite low, statistical analyses have not been carried out although it would be interesting to do so in future studies on this topic.

Finally, as will be seen in the next section, some explicit comments made by the different interviewees have also been inserted; such comments have been translated into English since it is the main language used in this paper.

4. MAIN RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Students' self-assessment of their competences in oral and written skills

The majority of the students interviewed believe they have a good level of competence in the four basic language skills, as well as in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and culture. As shown in Tables 1 and 2 below, most of them opted for choosing numbers 6-9 on the scale used, i.e, approximately ranging from *good* to *nearly excellent*. Nevertheless, if a more precise analysis is conducted, some differences can be observed:

- 1) they consider they are slightly better at receptive skills (listening and reading) than at productive ones (speaking and writing). Moreover, within the so-called productive skills, they generally consider themselves to be more competent at writing than at speaking;
- 2) out of the four remaining language areas they were surveyed, they claimed they were better at the grammatical and lexical competences of the language rather than at English pronunciation and general cultural knowledge.

Table 1: Interviewees' self-assessment of their competence in different language areas

	VERY BAD EXCELLENT									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Writing	0	0	0	0	0	4	15	14	4	1
Speaking	0	0	0	1	3	5	16	8	3	2
Listening	0	0	0	0	0	6	10	11	10	1
Reading	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	10	18	4
Grammar	0	0	0	0	1	3	4	20	8	2
Vocabulary	0	0	0	0	1	6	14	14	3	0
Pronunciation	0	0	1	1	1	10	12	7	1	5
Culture	0	0	1	1	2	6	15	8	5	0

Table 2: Total number and percentage of interviewees who rated their level of competence in each language area as bad or good

	5 or less = bad level	6 or more = good level
Writing	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Speaking	4 (10.53%)	34 (89.47%)
Listening	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Reading	0 (0%)	38 (100%)

Grammar	1 (2.63%)	37 (97.37%)
Vocabulary	1 (2.63%)	37 (97.37%)
Pronunciation	3 (7.89%)	35 (92.11%)
Culture	4 (10.53%)	34 (89.47%)

The interviewees were afterwards asked to think of the main reasons why they felt they were more competent in certain areas of language than in others. Generally speaking, the reasons they gave can be divided into two main groups:

- 1) the skills they rated as being the least competent in (speaking, pronunciation and culture) were the ones that, according to them are/were the least practised in their specific EFL classes at high school and/or university. Moreover, they mentioned that most of the tasks they were expected to do outside the classroom mainly entailed reading and practising English grammar and some of them felt they had fewer opportunities to practise speaking, pronunciation and cultural aspects outside the classroom even if they strongly wanted to;
- 2) the language areas they feel least competent in are, in their views, the most difficult aspects of English for them to acquire and develop.

Some examples of the answers given by the interviewees in these questions can be found in (1) and (2) below.

(1) Concerning speaking, I suppose it's because at high school they never focused on teaching us how to speak in English; in fact, a lot of my English teachers gave their classes in Spanish. (...) when I started at university, they did pay a little more attention to speaking but, even so, I do not think this is enough; moreover, due to my personality, I am quite shy and I do not normally start to speak if I do not have to (...). And regarding culture, I also think it may be because we were never taught anything about English, American, Irish or whatever culture at primary or secondary education. (...). [Interviewee number 16, face to face version]

(2) More attention was always paid to grammar and writing than to speaking or listening at the secondary and *bachillerato* schools I went to. Therefore, these (...) are the areas I am less competent in. Hardly any attention was paid to pronunciation before I arrived at university. [Interviewee number 38, written version]

4.2 Importance that should be given to the different skills and language areas

As can be seen in Tables 3 and 4, for most of the participants every language area suggested is *highly important* when learning a foreign language and consequently, attention should be paid to receptive and productive skills as well as to other language competences (at a grammatical, lexical, cultural and phonological level). More specifically, the majority of the students rated speaking and listening with the maximum degree of relevance on the scale used; moreover, over 20 of the participants gave a level 9 of importance to writing and reading. In addition, vocabulary and pronunciation were considered as slightly more important than grammatical and cultural aspects for some of the interviewees.

Table 3: Degree of importance interviewees believe each language area should have in general EFL classes

	NOT IMPORTANT VERY IMPORTANT										No answer
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Writing	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	5	22	8	0
Speaking	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	9	27	0
Listening	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	12	21	1
Reading	10	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No answer

	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	21	11	0
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No answer
	0	0	0	0	3	7	5	13	6	4	0
Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No answer
	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	14	12	6	0
Pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No answer
	0	0	0	0	1	3	5	8	12	9	0
Culture	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No answer
	0	0	0	0	7	4	8	9	8	2	0

Table 4: Total number and percentage of interviewees who rated each language area as unimportant or important

	5 or less = unimportant	6 or more = important
Writing	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Speaking	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Listening	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Reading	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Grammar	3 (7.89%)	35 (92.11%)
Vocabulary	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Pronunciation	1 (2.63%)	37 (97.37%)
Culture	7 (18.42%)	31 (81.58%)

4.3 Degree of attention paid to each skill in pre-university and university levels in Spain

4.3.1 General attention paid to each skill in pre-university and university levels

Most of the interviewees believe the degree of attention paid to each language area in general EFL classes in Spain is far from homogeneous (see Tables 5 and 6). More specifically, they feel maximum importance is typically given to grammar; in addition, writing, vocabulary and reading receive quite a lot of attention. In contrast, they mentioned that the spoken component (speaking and pronunciation) and cultural aspects tend to be rather undervalued.

Table 5: Degree of importance interviewees believe each language area has in EFL classes in Spain

	MINIMUM IMPORTANCE..... MAXIMUM IMPORTANCE									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Writing	0	0	0	1	3	1	7	11	7	8
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Speaking	2	0	8	8	8	6	3	2	1	0
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Listening	1	1	1	5	8	7	8	5	2	0
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reading	0	1	0	0	2	7	9	10	6	3
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Grammar	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	5	14	17
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vocabulary	0	0	0	1	2	4	6	14	6	5
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pronunciation	3	6	5	4	9	4	5	1	1	0
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Culture	11	4	4	4	7	4	3	1	0	0
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Table 6: Total number and percentage of interviewees who rated the importance given to each language area in Spanish EFL classes as (close to) minimum or (close to) maximum

	5 or less = minimum importance	6 or more = maximum importance
Writing	4 (10.53%)	34 (89.47%)
Speaking	26 (68.42%)	12 (31.58%)
Listening	16 (42.11%)	22 (57.89%)
Reading	3 (7.89%)	35 (92.11%)
Grammar	1 (2.63%)	37 (97.37%)
Vocabulary	3 (7.89%)	35 (92.11%)
Pronunciation	27 (71.05%)	11 (28.95%)
Culture	30 (78.95%)	8 (21.05%)

After reflecting on the general importance given to the different areas of language in our country, the interviewees were asked to discuss and compare the specific role ascribed to each area in: a) pre-university levels; and, b) at university, establishing comparisons and/or differences across the two educational stages.

As would seem feasible, they once again spoke about clear inequalities in both stages of education; however, nearly 100% of them believe these differences were even more marked in Obligatory and Post-Obligatory Secondary Education since most of the classes only revolved around practising English grammar and few sessions were devoted to developing their lexical, written production and spoken perceptive skills (see Figures 2 and 4). Finally, around four participants rated oral skills and cultural aspects as being highly emphasised in their EFL classes at university level whereas (almost) 100% of them denied being given the chance to develop their spoken skills at high school.

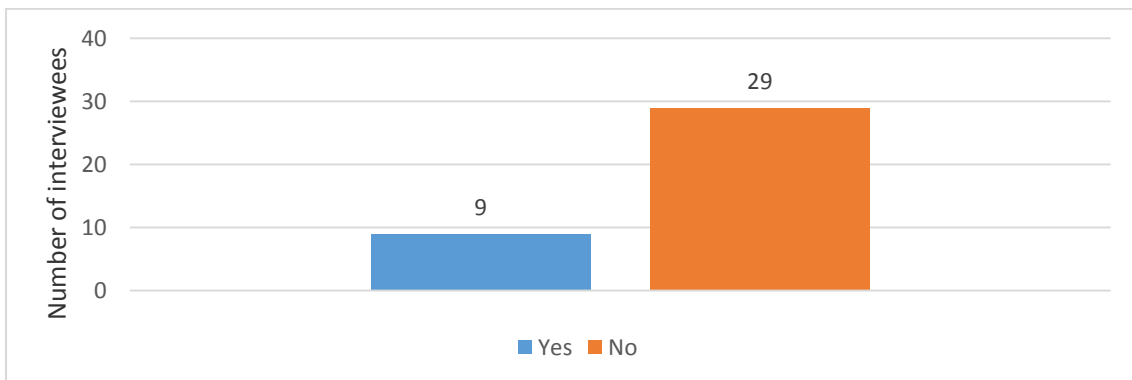


Figure 1: Interviewees’ answers to the item “Is the same amount of importance given to each language area at university level?”

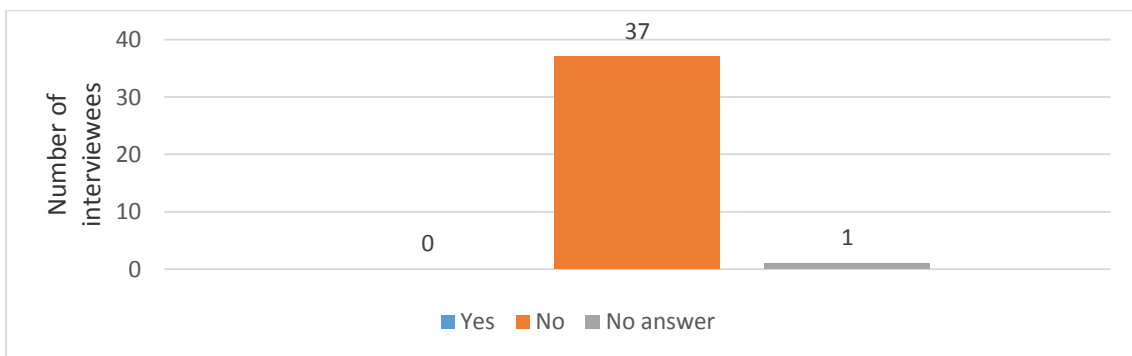


Figure 2: Interviewees’ answers to the item “Is the same amount of importance given to each language area at Secondary and Post-Secondary Education?”

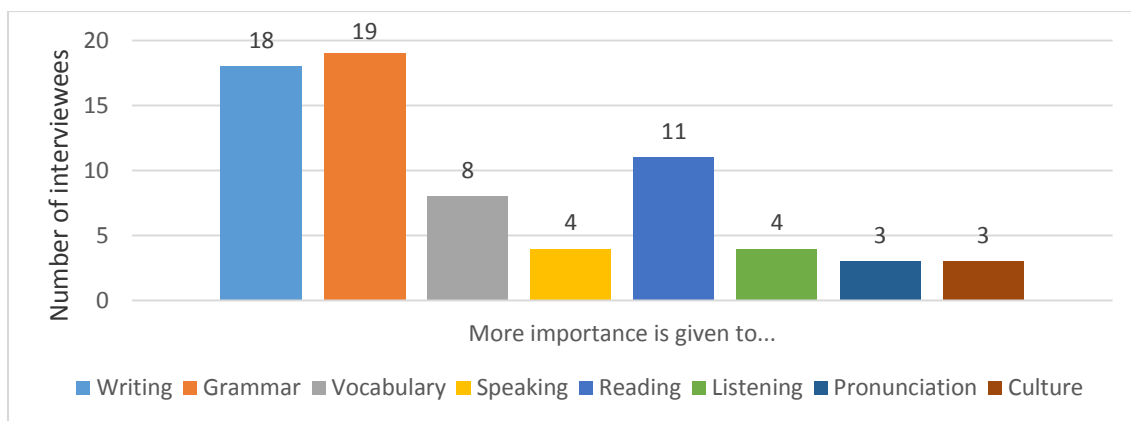


Figure 3: Amount of interviewees who consider that more importance is given to certain language areas at university level

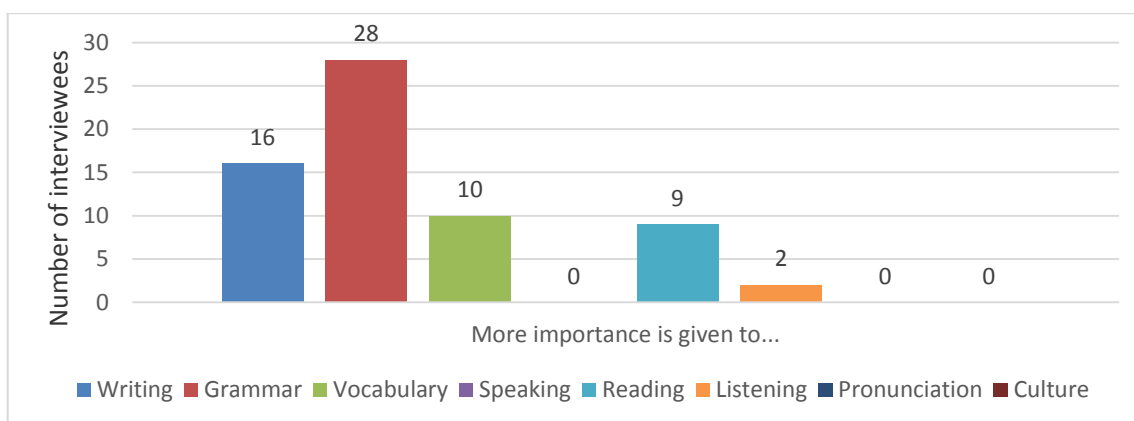


Figure 4: Amount of interviewees who consider that more importance is given to certain language areas at Secondary and Post-Secondary Education

Comment (3) below perfectly summarises the main views of the subjects interviewed in the previous two items described:

(3) I think that in the degree more importance was given to literature, in fact, most of the subjects were literature-based and a lot less of them revolved around the English language as such. (...) writing and grammar were more important because practically all the exams were written-based. (...) we hardly had any listening exams, although I do think we practised this competence because all the teachers spoke in English (...). However, I consider that speaking was undervalued since there was hardly any time for all the students to speak in class and when there was our mistakes were not corrected, not even in the proper EFL subjects we had. We did not receive any type of feedback for our pronunciation either, etc. (...)

In secondary and *bachillerato*, things were even worse since we only focused on reading, grammar tasks, some vocabulary exercises like the typical ones related to false friends and some writings. In all of those years, we never did any listening activities, apart from listening to two or three songs, we never worked on cultural aspects, read aloud nor did any oral exams (...). Moreover, the teachers never spoke in English (...). [Interviewee number 20, written version]

Finally, to obtain further information regarding Spanish university students' opinions on the importance that, according to them, is paid to each language area within their university modules and pre-university studies, the interviewees were afterwards asked to rate the general importance given to each language area according to the following four-option

scale: a) *no attention is paid to X*; b) *little attention is paid to X*; c) *quite a lot of attention is paid to X*; or, d) *too much attention is paid to X*.

In their opinion, *too much attention* is paid to grammar, both at pre-university and university levels. Moreover, they consider that a similar degree of importance is given to writing, vocabulary, reading and listening in both educational stages distinguished (*a lot of attention* for the first three and *little attention* in the case of listening). As would be expected for speaking, pronunciation and culture, due to the findings described in the previous items of the interview, it seems that they receive less attention both at pre-university level and within the BA in English Studies; more particularly, most of the interviewees rated the latter language areas as receiving *little* or *no attention* in the scale used; however, some of the interviewees believe that this inferior role is slightly higher at university than at previous educational stages (especially regarding cultural aspects).

Table 7: Degree of attention paid to each language area at university and pre-university levels according to the interviewees

		No attention is paid to...	Little attention is paid to...	Quite a lot of attention is paid to...	Too much attention is paid to...
Writing	BA	0 (0%)	5 (13.16%)	26 (68.42%)	7 (18.42%)
	High school	0 (0%)	10 (26.32%)	23 (60.53%)	5 (13.16%)
Speaking	BA	2 (5.26%)	18 (47.37%)	18 (47.37%)	0 (0%)
	High school	24 (63.16%)	14 (36.84%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Listening	BA	1 (2.63%)	24 (63.16%)	13 (34.21%)	0 (0%)
	High school	7 (18.42%)	20 (52.63%)	11 (28.95%)	0 (0%)
Reading	BA	2 (5.26%)	7 (18.42%)	24 (63.16%)	5 (13.16%)
	High school	0 (0%)	13 (34.21%)	18 (47.37%)	7 (18.42%)
Grammar	BA	0 (0%)	3 (7.89%)	16 (42.11%)	19 (50%)
	Highschool	0 (0%)	2 (5.26%)	14 (36.84%)	22 (57.89%)
Vocabulary	BA	0 (0%)	11 (28.95%)	26 (68.42%)	1 (2.63%)
	High school	2 (5.26%)	7 (18.42%)	24 (63.16%)	5 (13.16%)
Pronunciation	BA	5 (13.16%)	19 (50%)	13 (34.21%)	1 (2.63%)
	High school	23 (60.53%)	14 (36.84%)	1 (2.63%)	0 (0%)
Culture	BA	1 (2.63%)	18 (47.37%)	16 (42.11%)	3 (7.89%)
	High School	26 (68.42%)	12 (31.58%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)

4.3.2 Assessment

As would seem feasible from the results analysed in the previous section, most of the interviewees stated that there are also marked differences regarding the importance that is/was given to each language area in their final grades or continuous assessment system. Once again, oral skills seem to be clearly undervalued since most of the interviewees acknowledged that in the vast majority of their exams at university, they have to write their answers rather than being given the chance to answer questions orally. In addition, they feel grammar is rated as extremely important by their teachers and grammatical mistakes in their written exams are strongly penalised. On the other hand, as shown in Table 8 and Figure 8, almost all of the subjects denied being frequently tested on pronunciation, speaking, listening or culture.

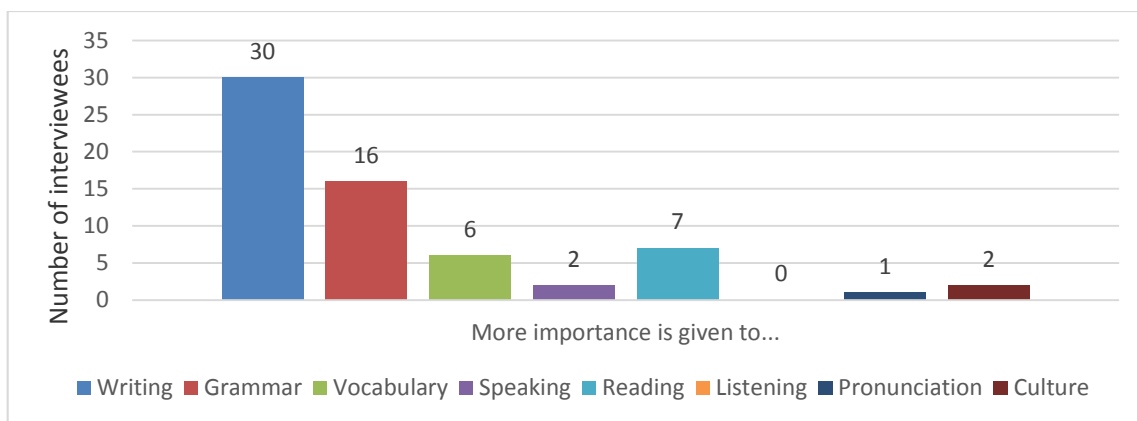


Figure 5: Amount of interviewees who consider that more importance is given to certain language areas in the general assessment system followed at university level

Table 8: Total number and percentage of interviewees who consider that more attention is paid to certain language areas in the general assessment system within their university degree

	Number of people		Number of people
Writing	30 (78.95%)	Culture	2 (5.26%)
Grammar	16 (42.11%)	No answer	1 (2.63%)
Vocabulary	6 (15.79%)	Fluency	1 (2.63%)
Speaking	2 (5.26%)	All of them receive the same importance	1 (2.63%)
Reading	7 (18.42%)	Memorizing	1 (2.63%)
Listening	0 (0%)	More importance to history and literature	1 (2.63%)
Pronunciation	1 (2.63%)	Spelling	2 (5.26%)

When asked about the role of the different skills in the assessment system, interviewee number 20 mentioned the following:

(4) I believe that the skills that were truly assessed were, apart from the proper contents within each subject, writing and grammar since (...) nearly all of the exams or projects were written-based and this did not leave any room for testing the rest of the skills. Moreover, (...) on the occasions in which we did talk, as was the case with oral presentations, our way of speaking was not normally assessed (fluency, pronunciation, intonation, communication strategies...); the only aspect assessed was the actual content of the presentations and (...) the written versions of these oral presentations. [Interviewee number 20, written version]

4.3.3 Error-correction

In similar lines, most of the interviewees believe there are/were also differences in the frequency with which their teachers correct(ed) their mistakes made when speaking, writing, reading or listening to English or their specific grammatical, pronunciation and lexical mistakes. Once again, as can be seen in Tables 9 and 10 and Figure 6 below, the participants believed their grammatical mistakes were the ones most frequently corrected, followed by those concerned with writing, reading and vocabulary. This is not surprising if compared to several of the findings discussed above in the sense that it is feasible that teachers will spend more time correcting mistakes concerning the language areas they most frequently focus on, these areas being mainly writing, reading, grammar and vocabulary according to most of the interviewees.

Table 9: Frequency with which interviewees believe their mistakes related to each language area are corrected

	LITTLE/NO FREQ FREQUENTLY										No answer
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Writing	0	0	0	0	1	2	6	9	12	7	No answer 0
Speaking	1	0	4	5	4	4	13	4	1	0	No answer 1
Listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	No answer 1
Reading	1	1	4	3	5	2	6	6	5	2	No answer 2
Grammar	0	0	0	0	2	2	5	7	12	9	No answer 0
Vocabulary	1	0	2	3	3	3	8	12	4	1	No answer 0
Pronunciation	2	5	4	2	5	6	7	4	0	1	No answer 1

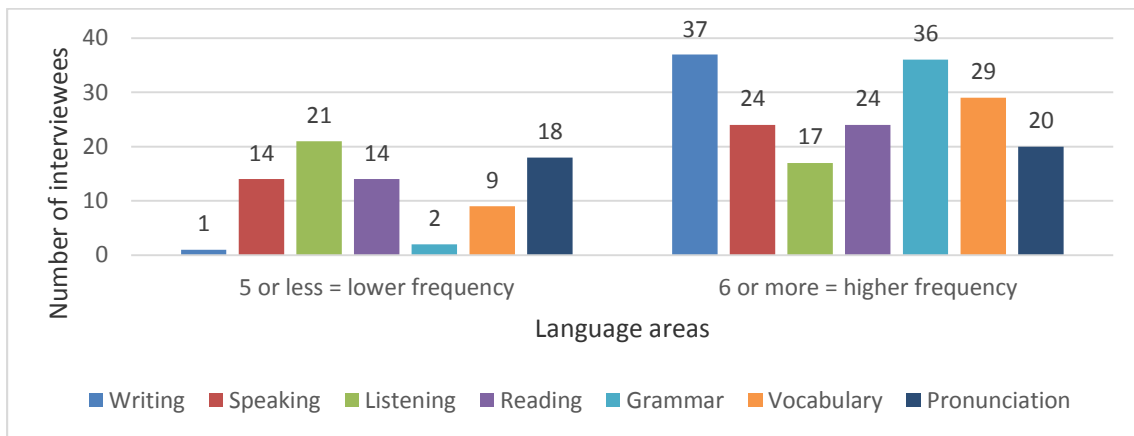


Figure 6: Amount of students who rated the frequency with which their teachers correct their mistakes in each language area as high or low

Table 10: Total number and percentage of interviewees who rated the frequency with which their teachers correct their mistakes in each language area as high or low

	5 or less = lower frequency	6 or more = higher frequency
Writing	1 (2.63%)	37 (97.37%)
Speaking	14 (36.84%)	24 (63.16%)
Listening	21 (55.26%)	17 (44.74%)
Reading	14 (36.84%)	24 (63.16%)
Grammar	2 (5.26%)	36 (94.74%)
Vocabulary	9 (23.68%)	29 (76.32%)
Pronunciation	18 (47.37%)	20 (52.63%)

4.3.4 Teaching materials

For item number 8 in the interview, the students were asked to reflect on the attention that is paid to each language skill in the general EFL textbooks they were using or had previously used in any of their EFL classes at high-school or university (they could think in terms of the number of pages devoted to each language area in each unit, the number of activities, or the presence of each language area in revision sections, for instance). As shown in Table 11, most of the students mentioned that, once again, grammar typically receives most attention in these teaching materials (cf. comment (5)), followed by 17 out of the total 38 interviewees who also rated vocabulary as one of the main language areas emphasised in these teaching materials. Interestingly, 8 participants stated that a similar degree of attention is paid to every

language skill in EFL textbooks but it is then the teacher who selects some tasks and disregards others (see comment (6)).

Table 11: Interviewees' opinions on the emphasis given to the different language areas in EFL textbooks

		Total number of answers given
More importance is given to	Grammar	28 (73.68%)
	Vocabulary	17 (44.74%)
	Reading	11 (28.95%)
	Writing	8 (21.05%)
The same degree of importance is given to each skill		8 (21.05%)
No answer		2 (5.26%)
No (without specifying the most important skills emphasised)		2 (5.26%)

(5) The section devoted to grammar occupies most of the unit. Furthermore, (...) most of the activities focus exclusively on practising grammatical content. The revision exercises at the end of the book or the self-assessment sections tend to omit communicative skills (...). [Interviewee number 18, written version]

(6) (...) textbooks try to pay a similar degree of attention to all of the skills but (...) afterwards, the way in which the teachers use those books determines what skills are going to receive more attention in the end (...). So, (...) the problem is not the course books as such but rather how teachers use these books. [Interviewee number 3, face to face version]

4.4 Practising of spoken and written skills outside the classroom

In this last part of the interview, the students were asked whether they practise English outside the classroom; if this were the case, they were afterwards asked to mention which skills they practise the most outside their EFL lessons. The majority of them affirmed that they try to do activities related to improving their speaking and listening competences because:

- 1) speaking and listening are/were the two skills that receive(d) less attention in their university degree and pre-university courses; and,
- 2) they feel more motivated to practise their speaking and listening abilities outside the classroom since they enjoy watching films and series in English and speaking to native English speakers.

Some of the comments made by the students who focus more on oral skills outside the classroom can be found in (7) and (8) below:

(7) Because I think they are the ones we practise the least here and I think they are some of the most important (skills, *my insertion*). [Interviewee number 5, face to face version]

(8) Because we already do (tasks on, *my insertion*) grammar and culture in the classroom so, I don't know, I suppose it's because it's more fun, more comfortable, more practical to practise pronunciation and speaking at home and with your classmates and friends. [Interviewee number 6, face to face version]

A small group of students affirmed they focused more on written skills since the work and projects they have to do at home related to their different modules at university mainly imply writing and especially reading (due to the list of books and other bibliographical

references they have to read for some literature and language courses in the degree) whereas they have to look for their own opportunities to practise speaking and listening (cf. comment (9) below).

(9) I especially practise what we have to do at home after going to university: projects, reading books, on a few occasions, something oral but mainly written things (...). [Interview number 2, face to face version]

Table 12: Activities interviewees acknowledged carrying out outside their university classes

	Number of students that carry out each activity
Speaking with native or non-native speakers: face to face or via skype	23 (60.53%)
Listening to series, music, films...	34 (89.47%)
Reading books, articles, texts	19 (50%)
Writing	8 (21.05%)
I give private lessons to Spanish people	3 (7.89%)
Studying for the state-exam to get a permanent place as a secondary school teacher	1 (2.63%)

Finally, only 13 of these participants affirmed having attended or being attending private lessons of English, mainly to reinforce the lessons they were taught at high-school and university level. Three of the participants stated that they had attended these lessons so as to prepare for some of the Cambridge exams (PET, KET, CAE, CPE); hence they generally practised all of the main language skills in these classes whereas the remaining learners attended these classes so as to improve their spoken English in particular or to play games and have fun (cf. Table 13).

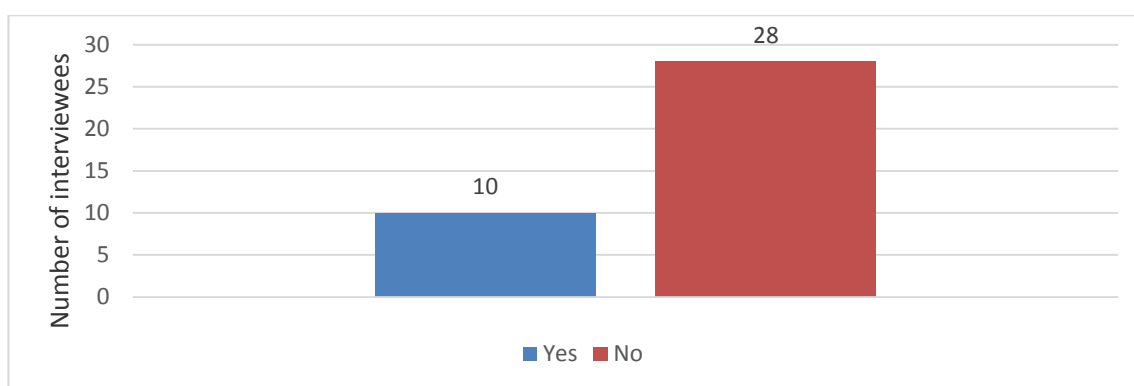


Figure 7: Amount of interviewees that have and have not attended private EFL lessons outside high school or university

Table 13: Reasons why some interviewees attended private EFL lessons outside high school or university

	Number of answers
To prepare Cambridge exams	3 (7.89%)
To reinforce the syllabus	6 (15.79%)
To improve oral skills	3 (7.89%)
To play games	1 (2.63%)

5. CONCLUSIONS, TEACHING IMPLICATIONS AND TOPICS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the study here presented describes and compares the views of only 38 Spanish EFL students on the importance that, according to them is given to each language area in their current and former studies within the Spanish educational system (it should hence be regarded as a pilot study), it can easily be inferred from the findings described that students believe that the amount of input they currently receive in the different language skills in EFL classrooms in this country seems to be quite heterogeneous.

More specifically, the interviewees explicitly mentioned on many occasions that the so-called written skills as well as grammar and vocabulary are the main language areas taught in EFL classes, not only at high school stages but also within their university degree. On the other hand, the subjects' answers to the different interview questions indicate that spoken skills (speaking, listening and pronunciation), together with culture, were/are typically undervalued in all of the educational stages analysed. To exemplify, most of the interviewees mentioned that less attention is paid to spoken skills and to cultural aspects in the teaching materials (textbooks) used in their classes, most of the exams they have to complete are written-based and the activities they most frequently have to do outside their university lessons imply practising written skills by reading books and writing compositions, projects and so on.

In broad terms, it seems that most of the interviewees are not happy with the attention paid to spoken skills nor to cultural aspects in their EFL lessons at pre-university and university levels since they rated every language area as highly relevant when learning a foreign language but they believe that in their actual EFL classes, they are exposed to a lot of tasks in which they have to develop their written skills and their lexical and grammatical competences whereas they rarely have the chance to develop their spoken skills and phonological competences.

The opinions expressed by the different interviewees in some of the questions verify or coincide in many ways with results obtained in previous studies. To begin with, some interviewees pointed out that one of the reasons why they believe their competences at written skills are slightly better than their competences at speaking and listening to the foreign language is because for them oral skills are more difficult to acquire and develop in the foreign language classroom. Many studies have indeed pointed out that the spoken component of a language like English is one of the most difficult skills to acquire – if not the hardest of them all - (cf. section 1) since “it involves a complex process of constructing meaning. This process requires speakers to make decisions about why, how and when to communicate depending on the cultural and social context in which the speaking act occurs” (Martínez-Flor, Usó & Alcón, 2006: 139).

Secondly, according to most of the students interviewed, Spanish students generally tend to have many opportunities to develop their writing and reading skills outside the classroom but few chances to express themselves orally inside or outside the classroom or to listen to others speak in the foreign language. This result is extremely relevant since it verifies some findings obtained in previous research conducted like in the *European Survey on Language Competences* (ESLC) used “to collect information about the foreign language proficiency of students in the last year of lower secondary education (ISCED2) or the second year of upper secondary education (ISCED3)” (European Commission, 2005: 5). The two most interesting results in this European study for the purposes of the present paper were that Spain, together with Estonia, France, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden, is a country in which students seem to have few opportunities for being exposed to and for practising English outside the classroom and one of the countries in which less students have the chance

to travel abroad to practise the foreign language (together with Bulgaria and Greece, which also obtained low figures (see report, 2005: 53-54). Consequently, this lack of opportunities to practise English outside the classroom may also explain why most of the subjects affirmed that their general abilities in speaking, pronunciation and culture were lower than their competence when reading in English or with grammar, for instance.

Another finding worth commenting on here is that, according to the reflections made by the majority of the students interviewed, EFL classes in Spain still follow traditional approaches to the teaching of English. In broad terms, most of the participants believe that grammar is clearly regarded as the main language area in their classes, teaching materials and general assessment system followed, hence resembling old-fashioned approaches to the teaching of foreign languages such as the Grammar Translation Method or the Cognitive Approach in which spoken skills were regarded as unnecessary. Generally speaking, this finding also verifies previous research conducted in the sense that grammar does in fact continue to have an important role in EFL textbooks addressed to Spanish speakers although there are also large sections devoted to other language areas, such as vocabulary, reading, writing and, on some occasions, to spoken skills (Calvo, 2016).

In general terms, both the undergraduate and the post-graduate students interviewed shared many points of view. This may generally indicate that the introduction of the so-called Bologna system in the last few years has not necessarily caused any changes regarding the attention paid to the different language areas at university level. That is, according to the undergraduate interviewees, oral skills are generally undervalued in their classes and assessment system, something that the post-graduate subjects also pointed out on many occasions. Since this study considers the views of under 40 students, empirical comparisons for the answers given by the undergraduate students on the one hand versus the opinions expressed by the postgraduate students in each questions have not been established. However, in a future study it may be interesting to compare the views of quite a high amount of students who are currently enrolled in a university degree in which English is the main language of instruction to the perspectives of former students who graduated in this degree some years ago so as to verify whether the importance given to each skill is gradually changing in any way.

Finally, it is surprising that some of the interviewees believe that the attention paid to spoken skills at high-school is even inferior than the importance that is given to speaking, listening and pronunciation in their modules within the university BA in English Studies they were studying/had completed since undergraduates in this university degree are expected to enter the first year with an acceptable level of both spoken and written skills so as to be able to develop and specialise in other fields within the English language: cultural, literature and historical aspects, phonetics, morphology, syntax, translation and so on.

As mentioned above, this study could be considered as a pilot study in this field; further research is needed to verify whether spoken skills and cultural aspects are in fact neglected in pre-university and university levels. To begin with, a higher number of students needs to be interviewed in order to extract more precise results and the research material would need to be validated with the carrying out of a pilot study to make it more reliable. In connection to this, a statistical analysis could also be carried out so as to add scientific reliability. Moreover, it would also be interesting to take into consideration the opinions of Spanish EFL teachers at these levels of education. Finally, a more empirical study could be conducted to verify these results by actually analysing the amount of attention paid to each language area in EFL classes in Spain. In this study, the researcher would personally observe EFL classes taught by different EFL teachers – for instance, attend the EFL classes devoted to a certain textbook unit or several units. In these sessions the researcher could simply take notes of the

specific activities carried out in the classroom, the explanations given by the teacher, the types of tasks to be completed in exams and so on. Little information would be given to the teachers in order to avoid them from changing their way of teaching, giving more importance to certain skills than they would normally do, etc.

To sum up, it seems that speaking – and hence pronunciation- as well as cultural aspects continue to be undervalued in EFL classes in Spain whereas students have many opportunities of practising their written, grammatical and lexical competences both inside and outside the classroom as well as in the teaching materials addressed to Spanish learners which are currently used in general EFL lessons at Secondary and Post-Secondary Education and at university level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For generous financial support, I am grateful to the following institutions: Galician Ministry of Education (grant I2C 2011-2014, European Regional Development Fund, Autonomous Government of Galicia (Directorate General for Scientific and Technological Promotion, grants CN2011/011 and CN2012/081) and the Spanish Ministry for Science and Innovation (grant FFI2012-31450). These grants are hereby gratefully acknowledged.

REFERENCES

Aleksandrak, M. (2011). Problems and challenges in teaching and learning speaking at advanced level. *Glottodidactica*, 37, 37-48.

Alonso, R. (2014). Teaching speaking: an exploratory study in two academic contexts. *Porta Linguarum*, 22, 145-160. Retrieved from http://www.ugr.es/~portalin/articulos/PL_numero22/10%20%20ROSA%20ALONSO.pdf

Amengual, M. (2009). Does the English test in the Spanish university entrance examination influence the teaching of English? *English Studies*, 90 (5), 582-598. doi: [10.1080/00138380903181031](https://doi.org/10.1080/00138380903181031)

Amengual, M. (2010). Exploring the washback effects of a high-stakes English test on the teaching of English in Spanish upper secondary schools. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 23, 149-170. Retrieved from http://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/17429/1/RAEI_23_09.pdf

Baker, A. (2011). *Pronunciation Pedagogy: Second Language Teacher Cognition and Practice*. PhD dissertation, Georgia State University, USA. Retrieved from http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=alesl_diss

Bartolí, M. (2005). La pronunciación en las clases de lenguas extranjeras. *Phonica*, 1, 1-27. Retrieved from http://www.publicacions.ub.es/revistes/phonica1/PDF/articulo_02.pdf

Calvo, Y.J. (2016). *The Teaching and Learning of English Pronunciation in Spain. An Analysis and Appraisal of Students' and Teachers' Views and Teaching Materials*. PhD

dissertation, Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Retrieved from <http://dspace.usc.es/handle/10347/13862>

Chela, B. (2008). Hacia la optimización de la enseñanza de la pronunciación de un segundo idioma. En R. Monroy y A. Sánchez-Pérez (Eds.), *25 años de Lingüística en España: hitos y retos* (pp. 285-293). Murcia: Editum, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Murcia.

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coyle, D., Hood, P. & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Englander, M. (2010). *The Nature and Nurture of Learners*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse.

European Commission (2005). First European survey on language competences. SurveyLang. European Commission, Education and Training. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/language-survey-final-report_en.pdf

Hornero, A.M., Mur, P. & Plo, R. (2013). Oral skills in the spotlight: EFL in secondary education in a Spanish local context. *Synergy*, 9 (2), 111-124. Retrieved from <http://synergy.ase.ro/issues/2013-vol9-no-2/06-ana-maria-hornero-pilar-mur-duenas-ramon-plooral-skills-in-the-spotlight-efl-in-secondary-education-in-a-spanish-local-context.pdf>

Martínez-Asis, F. (2004). *Estudio de una intervención pedagógica para la enseñanza de la pronunciación inglesa en 4º curso de la ESO*. PhD dissertation, Universidad de Murcia, Spain. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10803/10812>

Martínez-Flor, A., Usó, E. & Alcón, E. (2006). Towards acquiring communicative competence through speaking. In E. Usó & A. Martínez-Flor (Eds.), *Current Trends in the Development and Teaching of the Four Language Skills* (pp. 139-157). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Mora, J. (2006). Age effects on oral fluency developments. In C. Muñoz (Ed.), *Age and the Rate of Foreign Language Learning* (pp. 65-88). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.

Plo, R., Hornero, A.M. & Mur, P. (2014). Implementing the teaching/learning of oral skills in secondary education in Aragón: gauging teachers' attitudes, beliefs and expectations. *International Journal of English Studies*, 14 (1), 55-77. doi: [10.6018/ijes/14/1/175041](https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes/14/1/175041)

Rubio, F. & Schwarzer, D. (2011). Teaching practices in order to promote verbal interaction. Pre-service teachers' reflections: a preliminary survey study. *Brics Journal of Educational Research*, 1 (2), 67-73. Retrieved from <http://bricsjer.com/index.php/brics/article/view/1>

APPENDIX 1

Interview questions described in this paper

1. Firstly, on a 1 to 10 scale in which 10 represent EXCELLENT and 1 VERY BAD, describe your general abilities with each of the following skills regarding English:

	VERY BAD EXCELLENT									
Writing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reading	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Culture	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Could you briefly explain the reason/s why you believe you situation is this one, i.e. why do you consider yourself better at X than Y?

2. In a 1 to 10 scale in which 10 represents VERY IMPORTANT and 1 UNIMPORTANT, how relevant do you think each of the following skills are in the learning of English?

	UNIMPORTANT VERY IMPORTANT									
Writing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reading	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Culture	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3. In the next 1 to 10 scale, where 10 represents MAXIMUM MPORTANCE and 1 MYNIMUM IMPORTANCE, describe the general degree of importance given to each language area in EFL classes in Galicia/Spain

	MINIMUM IMPORTANCE ... MÁXIMUM IMPORTANCE									
Writing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reading	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Culture	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. Taking into account all the skills and areas mentioned before, do you think that the same importance was given to all of them in the degree you did/are doing? And in previous educational stages – obligatory secondary and *bachillerato*? Why?
5. Do you think your abilities in each skill were assessed in the different subjects within your BA? In other words, what skills were/are more important in the exams you took?
6. On a 1 to 10 scale where 0 represents VERY FREQUENTLY and 1 WITH LITTLE OR NO FREQUENCY, describe the frequency with which you consider that your mistakes made in the degree with the following language areas were corrected:

	LITTLE/NO FREQUENCY VERY FREQUENTLY									
Writing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Listening	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Reading	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Grammar	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pronunciation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7. Among the following options (NO ATTENTION IS PAID TO..., LITTLE ATTENTION IS PAID TO..., QUITE A LOT OF ATTENTION IS PAID TO..., TOO MUCH ATTENTION IS PAID TO...), assess the general attention you think is paid to each skill in the BA and previous educational stages:

		No attention is paid to	Little attention is paid to	Quite a lot of attention is paid to	Too much attention is paid to
Writing	BA				
	High school				
Speaking	BA				
	High school				
Listening	BA				
	High school				
Reading	BA				
	High school				
Grammar	BA				
	High school				
Vocabulary	BA				
	High school				
Pronunciation	BA				
	High school				
Culture	BA				
	High School				

8. Do you think that the textbooks or other teaching materials used in the classroom pay the same amount of attention to each skill? You can think in terms of the number of sections, number of pages per skill, amount of activities, review exercises...
9. Do you practise English outside the classroom? What type of activities? What skills do you mainly practise?
10. Did you go/are you going to private English lessons? Why?
- Yes No