

**ORAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AT THE COMPLETION
OF COMPULSORY EDUCATION.
LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT AND CONCEPTION
OF GALICIAN COMMUNITY STUDENTS**

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ABSTRACT

The acquisition of an adequate oral communicative competence (OCC) in at least one foreign language constitutes one of the European educational systems' main challenges for this new century. Nevertheless, a widespread worry exists that, despite the relevance given nowadays to the fact of being fluent in more than one European Community language, students don't achieve satisfactory levels of competence in foreign languages at the completion of compulsory education.

Within this scene, a study was carried out in public and private Galician School, both to know the levels of English language oral comprehension and expression achieved by the students of this community at the completion of compulsory education, and to find out possible factors influencing such levels of achievement. So as to collect information on the conception of the oral communicative competence, teaching approaches and extra curricular activities, two *ad hoc* designed achievement-level tests –one for production and another one for comprehension– were used along with two models of questionnaire –one for students and another one for teachers–.

In this chapter we present the main results of this study in what regards both to the level of achievement reached by students in the test according to their profile (sex, age, average marks in foreign language, etc.) and type of schools (ownership, size, and location), and to the conception that teachers and students have about oral communicative competence. On the basis of such

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results, some suggestion are given at the end of the chapter to reduce the great unevenness existing in the levels of OCC at the completion of compulsory education.

RESUMEN

La adquisición de una adecuada competencia comunicativa oral (CCO) en, al menos, una lengua extranjera constituye uno de los retos de los sistemas educativos europeos en este nuevo siglo. Existe, sin embargo, la preocupación general de que a pesar de la relevancia que en la actualidad tiene el dominio de una o más de una segunda lengua comunitaria, el alumnado de enseñanza obligatoria no termina sus estudios con un nivel de competencia oral satisfactorio.

En este contexto, se llevó a cabo un estudio en centros públicos y privados de Galicia con el objetivo de conocer el nivel de logro del alumnado de lengua inglesa al término de la etapa obligatoria en comprensión y expresión oral en dicha lengua, así como indagar en posibles factores que inciden en dicho nivel. En la recogida de datos se utilizaron dos pruebas de logro diseñadas *ad hoc* (una de expresión y otra de comprensión) y dos modelos de cuestionario –uno cubierto por el alumnado y otro por su profesorado de lengua inglesa– en el que se recogía información fundamentalmente sobre su concepción de la competencia comunicativa oral, estilos de enseñanza y actividades extraescolares.

Presentamos los principales resultados de esta investigación relativos tanto al nivel de logro alcanzado por los alumnos en ambas pruebas, en función de su perfil (sexo, edad, calificaciones medias en lengua extranjera, etc.) y del tipo de centro al que pertenecen (titularidad, tamaño, y ubicación), como a la concepción que de la competencia comunicativa oral mantienen alumnos y profesores. El capítulo termina, a la luz de los resultados obtenidos, con algunas sugerencias para reducir la importante desigualdad en la CCO al término de la enseñanza obligatoria.

RÉSUMÉ

L'acquisition d'une compétence communicative orale (CCO) satisfaisante dans au moins une langue étrangère est l'un des défis que les systèmes éducatifs européens ont à relever à l'aube du nouveau siècle. Cependant il est généralement admis que les élèves de l'enseignement obligatoire n'ont pas acquis au terme de leurs études un niveau de compétence suffisant à l'oral, ceci malgré l'importance concédée de nos jours à la connaissance d'une deuxième langue communautaire, voire de plusieurs.

C'est dans ce contexte qu'une étude a été menée dans des établissements publics et privés en Galice, afin d'évaluer le degré de réussite en compréhension et expression orale des élèves de langue anglaise au terme de leur scolarisation obligatoire.

L'étude s'est aussi attachée à cerner les facteurs qui conditionnent l'acquisition de cette compétence. Les données ont été rassemblées à l'aide de deux tests de réussite (l'un visant l'expression et l'autre la compréhension) conçus spécialement à cet effet, et deux modèles de questionnaire, l'un à remplir par les élèves et l'autre par les enseignants en langue anglaise, destinés à recueillir des informations concernant fondamentalement leur conception de la compétence communicative et orale, les styles d'enseignement et les activités extra-scolaire.

Voici les principaux résultats de cette recherche, d'abord quant au degré de réussite atteint par les élèves dans ces deux tests en fonction du profil (sexe, âge, notes moyennes en langue étrangère, etc.) et du type d'établissement dont ils proviennent (domaine public ou privé, taille et emplacement), puis quant à la conception de la compétence communicative et orale chez les élèves et chez les enseignants. Le chapitre termine, à la lueur des résultats obtenus, sur quelques propositions destinées à réduire le déséquilibre important en compétence communicative orale au terme de la scolarisation obligatoire.

Most European curricular designs agree that, at the end of the compulsory secondary education (CSE), students should be qualified enough to fully develop their oral comprehensive and expressive abilities in a foreign language (FL) in everyday situations of social communication. However, huge inequalities in this ability can be currently found among students from different countries. This diversity shows the advantages and disadvantages that, in a near future, European citizens will have in diverse interactions related to the effective use of several languages.

In view of these differences in oral communicative competence (OCC), there is an increasing consensus on the belief that, while the linguistic dimension of languages is taught in school, their real acquisition is produced through sociocultural absorption. That is, the communicative aspect of FLs is differently assessed on the social transactions level and on the scholar processes level. The academic results in FLs not always reveal the useful OCC corresponding to the real goal of these curricular subjects: the development of communicative capabilities by which the challenges of a more and more multilingual and intercultural society can be collaboratively tackle.

The adoption of communicative approaches in FLs teaching has signified, for the scholars, a considerable improvement in their effective acquisition of oral competencies; nonetheless, the level of development accomplished by different students is still very uneven. These differences

lead to thinking that, under this common theoretical framework; there are hidden singular aspects that have to be clarified so as to promote a greater evenness in the capabilities of all the scholars in this communicative dimension.

In this line, the research work carried out from the stance of critical applied linguistics consider that it is not possible to clarify questions related to the acquisition of communicative competence in languages without taking into account several aspects of the human common behaviour. Language is intimately related to everything we do (thinking, measuring, counting, and so on) or everything we are; therefore, its binding to utilitarian processes –as it has often be done in the didactic realm of FLs teaching– has to be taken very cautiously.

When we use a language to establishing a social contact with other people and to implying, therefore, ourselves in a process of meaning negotiation, we are subscribing a guideline or “co-operation principle”, in the terms expounded by Grice (1975) and Gumperz (1982). This behaviour, no doubt, requires for our part being able to move forward in the other person’s domain and, at the same time, allowing the other to go into our domain. From this point of view, personal and social involvement in a communicative activity entails a way of meddling and, at the same time, an exposition to the others. Consequently, communication becomes a non risk-free activity that can be safer if the interlocutors share common knowledge and experiences.

Communication does not generate the same tensions among those belonging to a same social network of meanings that among those belonging to different groups. It is in these differentiated, socially and culturally distant, domains where the “*pragmatic norms of courtesy*” –now well studied by Lakoff (1971, 1973), Leech (1983), Brown and Levinson (1987)– have to be carried to extremes. Certainly, these very difficulties characterise the world of communicative interactions in the complex processes of FLs acquisition.

Under this theoretical frame of reference, one important part of the research in this realm is currently concerned with the task of qualifying the dimension of learning languages distinct from those configuring our ordinary social installation. And this is being done under the initial hypothesis that the appropriation of these other languages, like the acquisition of our own daily life language or languages, is not the result of an *academic teaching* but a *cultural appropriation*.

The last proposals to make suitable the curricular development of FLs in the Spanish educational system agree with the same approach.

The formal education of these languages is increasingly doing more and better-directed efforts to achieve the adequate performance in OCC in FLs demanded by the society. Even so, unlike what is happening in many European countries, the process is longer and more complex than the foreseeable, and some obstacles appear delaying the reach of these achievements, which are persistently claimed by our society.

The investigation of the features of this level of resistance and of the possible obstacles we have to overcome to reach the desired achievements in OCC in FLs at the completion of the CSE has been our concern¹ in the development of an exploratory study about the *Possible causes of the deficient OCC in FLs of Galician students*. This work was carried out during the 2000-2001 academic course in Galician public and private schools under the Public Help for Research Projects Program of the Research and Development General Department of the Xunta de Galicia (regional government).

As shown in the final part of this work, we have also devote our effort to point out some suggestions to improve the quality of the processes of FLs teaching and learning, and to reduce the levels of unevenness existing in the achievement of a desirable OCC at the completion of the CSE. Though these proposals are specially directed to the Galician educational community, as far as the same circumstances are reproduced in a similar way in other educational contexts of our country, the aforementioned suggestions will have the same utility and interest for other educational agents.

1. SPECIFYING ESSENTIAL POINTS OF STUDY

The general opinion about the success in learning FLs at the end of compulsory education is that the level reached by most of the students is unsatisfactory. This agreement is not only found among educational administrations of our country, but among most European ones. The aforementioned poor level is especially significant regarding the achievements in OCC in one or more foreign languages.

Several Spanish research works –including the one carried out by the INCE– have already touched upon the evaluation of achievements

¹ This study was carried out by: J. M. Vez (main researcher), Luisa Armán Lomba, Carmen Fernández Santás, Javier González Porto, Emeterio Guitián y Esther Martínez Piñeiro.

in teaching and learning English² Language, some of these studies have been done from a perspective of comparison between the Spanish and the European educational context.

Under this scenario, we present the key outcomes of our investigation, focused both in the students' English Language achievements at the completion of the CSE and in the factors that are likely to influence those achievements.

The goal of the investigation has its origin in our interest in diagnosing the current state of OCC in English Language of Galician students at the end of secondary education. At the same time, we are concerned with the factors that could be the reason of this supposed unevenness in the development of this competence.

2. HYPOTHESES AND GOALS

Taking into account the contextual circumstances of the study –time limitations, population range and oral comprehension and production analysis peculiarities– we have focused our work in four main issues:

- English students' OCC achievement levels at the completion of the CSE.
- OCC features feasible to be related to the students' level of achievement from the teachers' point of view.
- OCC features that, from the students' point of view, are feasible to be related to their own level of achievement.
- Factors that could have a significant relationship between the students' poor OCC and certain characteristic of their teaching-learning process in FLs.

According to the central objective of the research, the hypotheses that have guided the design of this study are the following:

- a) At the completion of compulsory schooling, Galician students' OCC in English language is poorer than that required by the curricular aims for this area.
- b) This degree of deficiency entails an uneven development of the students' oral abilities.

² The achievements in French language as first foreign language have also been analysed, though the results are not presented in this study.

- c) There is a set of factors in the educational system that influences this unequal development. These factors can be split into two categories: *inner* (those related to curricular activity) and *outer* factors (those related to extra curricular activities).
- d) There is a certain combination of inner and outer factors that results in an acceptable OCC in FLs according to the curricular aims. And there is another certain combination of those factors that results in an inadequate OCC in FLs at the completion of the CSE.

Since not all the results of the study are going to be presented in this work, we are going to answer some specific questions, namely:

- 1) What percentage of students shows a poor OCC in English language at the end of the SCE?
- 2) What student features (age, sex, average qualification in FLs, parents' schooling level, etc.) can be related to their OCC level at the end of the SCE?
- 3) What characteristics of the school (ownership, size and location) influence in the students' OCC level?
- 4) What is CSE students' opinion about OCC in FLs? Does this opinion vary depending upon the students' features or upon the public or private nature of the school?
- 5) What is the opinion of secondary education 4th year teachers about OCC? Does this opinion vary depending upon their background, their experience or/and the teaching approach they take?

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to accomplish the study goals, we opted for an observational methodology. The study was, therefore, carried out in a natural context, that is, without variables manipulation. Two data collection techniques were used: achievement tests to measure the comprehensive and expressive OCC, and questionnaires to be fulfilled by samples of students and teachers. The applied data analysis was mainly descriptive and comparative. In the next sections the data collection instruments and the data producer sample characteristics are described in more detail.

4. INSTRUMENTS

With reference to the understanding proficiency in oral communication of FLs, the DCB document (official curricular design) for CSE in Galicia, establishes precisely:

Understand... oral messages... with appropriateness, autonomy and creativity, using (the foreign language) to communicate and organise the own thoughts and to reflect on the processes implied in the use of the language...

In accordance with that major goal, a test to measure the population achievement levels in this competence was designed. Its main features are shown in the table I:

Table I. Oral Comprehension Test.

Evaluated Goal	To understand part, or the whole of a series of specific data well enough to carry out a "problem solving" type task resorting to cognitive strategies which facilitate the oral understanding in FLs						
Exercise Description	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A diagram showing several itineraries departing from the same starting point is given to the student. The steps of every itinerary are pointed out with graphical clues (icons) and key verbal expressions. 2. The student is given 3 or 4 minutes to get used to the diverse itineraries (keys, starting and ending points, etc.). 3. The student is informed about the nature of the test: S/he will have to decide the arrival point, following a specific itinerary that corresponds to the contents of a recorded listening. 4. The student listens to the content of a message (from a speaker to his friend) recorded in an answering machine. S/he proceeds to discriminate global and specific data from the message in order to identify the right itinerary keys and to decide (checking the number of the box) the final arrival point. 5. A second listening of the message follows in order to give the students the opportunity of correcting or confirming their itinerary. 						
Achievement Level	<p>Depending on the arrival point reached in their understanding of the listening contents, the students get a level of punctuation between 0 and 5.</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Level 0 = No significant</td> <td style="width: 50%;">Level 3 = Intermediate</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Level 1 = Very deficient</td> <td>Level 4 = Close to Higher</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Level 2 = Deficient</td> <td>Level 5 = Higher</td> </tr> </table>	Level 0 = No significant	Level 3 = Intermediate	Level 1 = Very deficient	Level 4 = Close to Higher	Level 2 = Deficient	Level 5 = Higher
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Also taking into account the major goal of the official curricular design for CSE in Galicia, but aiming this time to measure the expressive ability level achieved by the students, another test was designed. The basic characteristics of this test are shown in Table II.

Table II. Brief oral expression test.

Evaluated Goal	With the help of some brief oral support and of a drawing composed of vignettes, students have to be able to narrate, in the foreign language, the content of a story. The essential data of the story have to be adequately structured and communicated.						
Exercise Description	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The student is given an easy to understand visual support, consisting of a nine vignettes comic without any written text. 2. As a brief introductory exercise, the interviewer furnishes the student with a listening in which a native speaker reads the text of the story in a spontaneous and personal way. 3. After the audition, the student is asked to narrate the whole story with his/her own words and from his/her own interpretation –which does not have to be the same as the very listening interpretation– helping himself/herself with the vignettes. 4. Once ready, the student records his/her own oral performance. 						
Achievement Level	<p>According to the punctuations given to the students for their correctness, pronunciation and intonation, fluency, and capability of expressing meanings, they can be qualified with different levels of achievement, namely:</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Level 0 = No significant</td> <td style="width: 50%;">Level 3 = Intermediate</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Level 1 = Very deficient</td> <td>Level 4 = Close to Higher</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Level 2 = Deficient</td> <td>Level 5 = Higher</td> </tr> </table>	Level 0 = No significant	Level 3 = Intermediate	Level 1 = Very deficient	Level 4 = Close to Higher	Level 2 = Deficient	Level 5 = Higher
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Level 2 = Deficient	Level 5 = Higher						

The punctuation of this test was given attending to four dimensions of the oral expression: correctness, pronunciation-intonation, fluency and, last, capability of expressing meanings. These criteria are described in more detail in next paragraphs.

- *Correctness*: It includes Carroll's correctness scale and variety criteria.
 - The first criterion (correctness) is focused on the formal aspects of language; the evaluator will take into account the respect

- of grammatical norms and the likely anomalies, such as lack of concordance, bad use of pronominal system, etc.
- To assess the variety criterion, there will have to be taken into account the person's capability to use an appropriate vocabulary. This capability will be measured considering both the absence and the wrong usage of vocabulary.
 - *Pronunciation-intonation*: this criterion was added though it is not included in Carroll's scale.
 - *Fluency*: it includes the aforementioned scale's length, complexity, velocity and hesitation criteria.
 - Length and complexity: long sentences usage, on the contrary to short sentences usage, will be considered a positive factor by the evaluator. It will also be highly valued that long sentences have certain degree of complexity, such as comparisons.
 - Velocity and hesitation: both aspects will be consider together, so some students will talk quickly but hesitate often and some others will not hesitate because they will talk slowly and take time to think their narration.
 - Hesitation also includes the student self-correction capability, what sometimes happens after doubting in certain expression. This has to be positively considered.
 - *Capability of expressing meanings*: It includes criteria regarding the amount of information, understanding and expression richness.
 - Amount of information: the greater the information transmitted with the same achievement level, the better.
 - Understanding: student capability to let himself/herself be understood. That the student assumes certain risk to express more complex messages would be positively valued.
 - Expression richness: lexical and functional efficient and adequate usage, as well as adequate registries.

Every dimension was given between zero and five points. Since the two last factors are related to the communicative aspects of the discourse, they were weighted by a correction factor of 1.5. Therefore, the final punctuation obtained in this test can range from 0 to 25.

Both instruments were previously assessed by a group of English language specialist teachers, with broad experience at CSE level teaching, who collaborated with the research team.

Two types of questionnaires were used as well; the students completed the first and the teachers the second one; both instruments had

similar global structure and content, though the first one contained a specific block concerning extra-scholar activities and some other students-exclusive items. As it is to hope, the formulation of the items in each instrument was adapted to the type of respondent.

- *Students Questionnaire:*

It was composed of 65 informative and 13 identifying items. Informative items presented a Likert-type scale format, and were to be scored, according basically to the respondent's agreement degree, between 1 and 4 points. They supplied information respecting the students' estimations and opinions about their own ways of thinking and doing, and respecting their difficulties in learning English. These items were presented structured in five blocks, trying to get, respectively, information about:

- The conception that the students have of OCC.
- The didactic methods used by the primary and secondary teaching staff according to the perception of its students.
- The presumably extracurricular activities in foreign languages.
- The degree of OCC development.
- And, last ten items, the possible problems perceived in OCC development.

The identifying questions, allow for the analysis of presumably differences between the students on the basis of several relevant-to-the-study characteristics; such as number of students in the classroom; school type (public or private), size (small, medium or high) and location (rural, urban or semi-urban); etc.

- *Teachers Questionnaire:*

As the students' questionnaire, the teachers' one also contained informative and identifying questions. As already mentioned, informative items, though adapted to the teaching body and except for the extracurricular activities, were arranged in the same blocks as the students' ones. Identifying entries, on the other hand, picked up information about two main topics:

- Socio-professional data: sex, age, years of experience in secondary and primary education, hours devoted to in-service education, etc.
- Professional profile: a set of items by means of which the teachers were asked to defined themselves between different method-

ological approaches according to the proximity to their own foreign languages teaching practice. Out of the four offered approaches –structural, notional-functional, communicative and task based approaches– at most two were to be chosen. Some question regarding the criteria applied to design and develop the didactic programmes and the employed evaluation techniques were included in the questionnaire as well.

This set of items allowed us to classify the teachers in three groups: those showing a high innovation level in FLs teaching; those using the less innovative alternatives and, in the third place, those who cannot be included in any of the two previous groups and that were categorised as “*mixed profile*”.

After some suitable corrections, both the tests and the questionnaires were applied to CSE four-year students and teachers selected from a pilot tryout. This pilot study was carried out with three main objects, namely:

- To check the efficiency of the instructions that had been planned for both tests and to establish appropriate corrections if necessary.
- To check the suitability of the intended data collection organisation, mainly in what to guidelines to be followed by the interviewers regards.
- To calculate the total application time of each test.
- To evaluate to what extend students and teachers accepted and collaborated to participate in the study.

5. POPULATION AND SAMPLE

All four-year SCE Galician students, from public and private schools, that, during the 2000-01 academic course, studied English as a first foreign language, formed the population of study. The previous year population –29,490 English students– provided by the regional government, was taken as a reference.

To stratify the sample and to calculate its size, three criteria regarding the school features were taken into account: size (small, medium or large), ownership (public or private), and geographical location (four possible provinces). The total sample size –191 students– was determined depending on the existing limitations and the own exploratory characteristics of the study, and the sample size of every one of the 24 categories was proportional to its corresponding population.

TABLE III. Students sample distribution for province, ownership and school size.

	<i>Public Schools</i>			<i>Private Schools</i>		
	<i>Small</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Large</i>	<i>Small</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>Large</i>
A Coruña	6	22	26	5	11	6
Lugo	4	8	7	2	3	0
Ourense	9	6	4	2	4	1
Pontevedra	5	21	22	4	10	3
Total	24	57	59	13	28	10

Once randomly selected the students, a total of 43 teachers –30 from public schools and 13 from public schools– were consulted to contrast the information given by the students with the information given by their corresponding teachers. It is important to point out that the teachers sample size was not the expected, since two of them did not fulfilled the questionnaire.

The teachers sample was composed of women for the most part (more than 75%); around 50% was between 31 and 40 years old, being the less numerous those who were more than 51. The table IV shows summarised information about some of the sample’s most relevant professional characteristics:

Table IV. Teacher sample’s characteristics.

Years of Secondary Education Experience	A 50% of the sample it had been teaching in secondary schools for less than ten years. A 5% out of the remaining 50% declared to have more than 21 years of secondary teaching experience.
Hours of In-service Education	A 64% declared to have devoted less than 500 hours to occupational training; a 28% between 500 and 1000 hours, and the remaining 7% more than a thousand hours.
Collaboration Tasks in In-service Education	Only 11 teachers declared to have participated in any activity of this type, most of them as teacher educators.
Number of Students per Classroom	A 61% taught in classrooms with 20 to 30 pupils, while a 23% declared to have more than 30 pupils per classroom.

Taking into account that they were asked to choose the two methodological options they preferred, out of the four possible ones, the two methodological approaches most employed by the teachers in the classrooms were the notional-functional one –pointed out by 28 teachers– and the communicative one –selected by 24 of them–. The consultation results are shown in more detail in the Table V.

Table V. Teaching methodological approaches frequency of use.

<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
No answer	9
Structural	13
Notional-functional	28
Communicative	24
Task-based	12
Total	86

From the analysis of the aforementioned questions about didactic methodology, follows that none of the consulted teachers could be labelled as “innovator”. Of the 43 composing the sample, 16 belonged to the “less-innovator” group and 27 to the “mixed” type.

6. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Both the tests and the questionnaires applications were carried out during April and May of the year 2001, after the schools were informed by the Teaching Inspection and the research team got in touch with the different school headmasters and Departments of Foreign Languages.

After this process, the acquired data were analysed with SPSS 9.0 statistical package. To begin with, graphical and statistical exploratory analyses were applied to the main variables.

In a second phase, nonparametric contrast tests –with a 95% confidence interval– were applied. Such tests, allowed us to know the possible differences, in the oral comprehension and expression achievement levels, between groups that were interesting for the study.

7. RESULTS

We present now those results that respond to the above-mentioned questions. Firstly, the results obtained by all the students in the oral comprehension and expression tests, and in the four dimensions composing this last test, are presented.

Next, the likely influence of the type of school in the levels of achievement and the possible relationship among some students' characteristics and their results in both tests are analysed.

Finally, students' and teachers' OCC conception is analysed according to the responses given to the first part of the questionnaire, in which –as already mentioned– the content of the items was common in both cases.

7.1. *Global*

The results obtained in the achievement level tests show that the students have the oral comprehensive ability more developed than the oral expressive ability. Thus, the group mean and median are, respectively, 3.62 and 5 for the first test and 2.49 and 2 –once re-coded the punctuation to a 0 to 5 scale– for the second one. In Table VI, information about the frequencies and percentages obtained in both tests is shown.

Table VI. Achievement level test punctuation: Frequencies and percentages.

<i>Punctuation</i>	<i>Oral Comprehension</i>			<i>Oral Expression</i>		
	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulated %</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulated %</i>
5	98	51.3	51.3	5	2.6	2.6
4	35	18.3	69.6	22	11.5	14.1
3	7	3.7	73.3	66	34.6	48.7
2	9	4.7	78	68	35.6	84.3
1	23	12	90	26	13.6	97.9
0	19	10	100	4	2.1	100
Total	191	100		191	100	

As it can be noticed in the table, while the percentage of students attaining more than two points in oral comprehension –that is, those

reaching an acceptable level— is higher than 70%, in the oral expression test the percentage is under 50%.

According to the Wilcoxon test for paired samples, the differences in comprehension and expression achievement levels are statistically significant. As a reference, Table VII shows the mean and median for both tests, the value of the calculated statistic and the associated two-sided significance level.

Table VII. Mean and median values (both tests), Z statistic and two-sided significance level.

Mean	Oral Comprehension	3.62
	Oral Expression	2.47
Median	Oral Comprehension	5
	Oral Expression	2
Z		-7.89
Two-sided significance level		0.00

7.2. Oral Expression Dimensions

As stated above, every individual's total qualification for this test is composed of four partial qualifications: correctness, pronunciation-intonation, oral fluency and meaning-generation capability. The results indicate that the dimension in which the participants obtained the lower mean scorings was "correctness", in contrast to "pronunciation-intonation", where they obtained the higher mean values. Wilcoxon test for paired samples ($Z = -7.02$; $p = 0.00$) indicates that the difference between these two scorings is statistically significant. Table VIII shows the group's mean value and standard deviation for each dimension.

Table VIII. Mean, median and standard deviation for the oral expression test's four dimensions.

	<i>Correctness</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Fluency</i>	<i>Meaning Production Capability</i>
Mean	2	2.36	2.09	2.07
Median	2	2	2	2
Standard Deviation	0.97	0.96	1.03	1.12

7.3. *Achievement Levels and School ownership*

The contrast test results (U=2131; p = 0.00) show that, while private school students reached higher punctuation than private school ones in the oral expression test, no significant differences were found between the groups in the oral comprehension assessment. As a reference, the mean and median values of each test according to the centre ownership are shown in Table IX:

Table IX. Mean and median values for both tests according to the school ownership.

<i>School</i>	<i>Oral Comprehension</i>		<i>Oral expression</i>	
	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
N	140	51	140	51
Mean	3.49	3.98	9.77	12.87
Median	4	5	10	13

There were also found differences in the oral expression test (U = 1677; p = 0.00) between students from rural located and urban located schools. Again, there were no significant differences (U = 2976; p = 0.31) in the oral comprehension test. The means and standard deviations obtained in the oral expression test by the students of the three analysed zones are shown in the table X, together with the number of students in each group.

Table X. Mean and standard deviation obtained in the oral expression test according to the school location.

	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban (downtown)</i>	<i>Urban (outlying)</i>
N	107	61	23
Mean	8.97	13.25	11.13
Standard Deviation	4.23	4.74	3.73

Nevertheless, the school size, a characteristic taken into account to stratify the sample, was not a difference producing factor for the trials results, since the Kruskal-Wallis test shows a 0.90 level of probability for the comprehension trial and a 0.26 for the productive one.

7.4. Achievement level and students' profile

- Sex and age

A total of 92 boys and 99 girls participated in the study. The gender was not taken into account to stratify the sample, though the obtained random distribution corresponds to the distribution of the population.

The contrast test does not reveal significant differences between men and women in the final punctuation of both trials, but it does in the "pronunciation-intonation" dimension of the oral expression, in which the women obtained better punctuations. As a reference of the results, the mean obtained by both men and women in the two achievement level tests and in the four oral expression dimensions, together with the contrast statistic and the associated significance level, are presented in Table XI.

Table XI. Mean values obtained by men and women in the achievement level tests and in the assessment of the expression four dimensions. Contrast statistic and significance level values.

		<i>Achievement Level Test</i>		<i>Oral Expression Test Dimensions</i>			
		<i>Comprehension</i>	<i>Expression</i>	<i>Correctness</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i>	<i>Mean Gen.</i>	<i>Fluency</i>
Mean	Men	3.5	10.05	1.87	2.17	2	2.01
	Women	3.74	11.11	2.12	2.54	2.14	2.14
Mann-Whitney's U		4.074,5	4.026	3.093	3.629	4.225	4.254
Two-sided Significance		0.17	0.17	0.07	0.01	0.37	0.41

Concerning age, as shown in Table XII, the fifteen years old students reached higher punctuations in the oral expression tests than the other students. Since the difference is significant ($U = 113$; $p = 0.00$) if we compare with the older-than-sixteen students, this leads us to think that the worst oral expression qualifications are reached by those students who repeated some course during their CSE.

Table XII. Oral Expression Test Results. Mean and standard deviation according to the students' age.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>
15 years old	76	11.55	5
16 years old	68	10.94	4.7
Older than 16	47	8.55	3.6

• Average Qualifications

The average qualification in foreign language obtained by the students during the secondary education was also included in the students' questionnaire. Kruskal Wallis Test showed significant differences among students grouped according to this item. The average qualifications, the number of students belonging to each group and the mean and standard deviation of their corresponding punctuations are presenting in Table XIII for both the comprehension and expression tests.

Table XIII. Mean and standard deviation of the achievement level test results according to the students' average qualifications in foreign language during the secondary education.

<i>Average Qualifications³</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>	<i>Comprehension Test</i>		<i>Expression Test (recoded)</i>	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Good Enough (GE)	96	3.23	1.9	2.13	0.85
Good (G)	33	3.94	1.71	2.61	0.79
Very Good (VG)	40	3.93	1.70	2.73	0.96
Remarkable (R)	18	4.39	1.33	3.78	0.81

It can be observed that, in the oral expression test, those students with the highest average qualification (R) got much better results than the remainder. Nevertheless, the differences were slightly lower in the oral comprehension test.

³ In the Spanish Educational System, qualifications are categorised in five levels. Taking as a reference the maximum qualification (M) the possible categories is: Not Enough (< 50% M), Good Enough (50%M-60%M), Good (60%M-70%M), Very Good (70%M-80%M), Remarkable (80%M-100%M).

According to Mann-Whitney contrast test, while the comparison of the results attained in the oral comprehension test by *R* students and the remainder groups, revealed statistically significant differences only with GE students ($U = 551$; $p = 0.01$), there were found 0.00 significance level differences in the oral expression test in all cases. Besides, in the oral expression test, there were also found differences between E and VG students ($p = 0.00$).

- Parents Academic Level

The distribution of the results obtained by the students in both tests was also analysed according to their parents' academic level, taking into account that, whereas most of them had completed the primary or secondary education (77%), only 17% had got a bachelor's degree.

Those students, whose parents had a bachelor's degree, proved to have obtained significantly better results in the oral expression test than the rest of the students ($p=0.00$ in all cases). The table XIV shows the means and standard deviations attained in the test by the students grouped according to their parents' academic degree.

Table XIV. Means and standard deviations attained in the test by the students grouped according to their parents' academic degree.

<i>Parents' Academic Degree</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Expression Test</i>	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
< Primary	11	9.32	3.76
Primary	75	8.95	4.2
Secondary	70	10.8	4.81
Bachelor's	33	13.95	4.02

- Extra Curricular Activities Development

The students' questionnaire included seven items about the development of extra curricular activities (ECA) related to OCC development. In six out of their seven items, the most repeated answer regarding the frequency of such activities was "never", making it clear that the percentage of four year secondary students that had studied in a foreign country, interchanged with or taken lectures from English speaking people or watched English language movies non translated

to Spanish⁴, was very low. Within the bounds of this general low participation level, the students from private urban schools revealed greater partaking in such activities than those from public rural schools.

Taking the adding up of the responses given to the above mentioned questions, and by recoding the results to values ranging from 1 to 4, a new variable was calculated. Since none student achieved values of this new variable greater than 3, the students were included in the groups "none or very few activities", "some activities", or "enough activities" depending on whether the obtained value was respectively 1, 2, or 3. The mean and standard deviation obtained in the oral expression test by each group is shown in Table XV:

Table XV. Mean and standard deviation of the scorings obtained in the oral expression test according to the frequency of ECA related to OCC.

<i>ECA Frequency</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Expression</i>		<i>Comprehension</i>	
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
None or few	34	8.6	40.03	3.03	2.01
Some	144	10.82	4.54	3.69	1.78
Enough	13	13.3	6.7	4.38	1.33

Comparing the average scoring reached by the different groups in the oral expression and comprehension tests respectively, there were found statistically significant differences ($p = 0.03$, $p = 0.01$) between the group of students that had more often taken part in OCC development reinforcing ECA and the group of those that had never or almost never developed such activities.

7.5. *Students' OCC conception*

With the aim of approaching the students' OCC conception, fourteen items about this subject were included in the questionnaire. The items were assertions to be scored from 1 to 4 according to the student's lower or higher agreement (1: none; 2: low; 3: medium; 4: high)⁵.

⁴ In Spain, foreign movies are, saving exceptions, translated to Spanish language.

⁵ To make them easier the comparisons, students were considered to disagree with a question when choosing 1 or 2 and to agree when choosing 3 or 4.

Most of the students coincided conferring high scores to three important questions: the convenience of starting to learn foreign languages at early ages, the need to provide the schools with adequate technological resources, and the utilisation of the aforementioned resources by foreign languages teachers. The global lower scoring was given to the next assertion: "To us it is easier speaking and understanding French than English, since French is more similar to Galician and Spanish languages".

It was also gathered the students' opinion about some other interesting questions that made it clear their way of thinking and their beliefs about the study of a foreign language and the acquisition of an adequate OCC in that language. From these questions, we would like to emphasize in particular:

- It would be convenient composing groups of students depending on their levels, with the possibility of moving up conforming personal improvement.

While 58% of the sample presented medium (3) or high (4) levels of agreement with this question, the remaining 42% were of the opposite opinion. Since this item, with a mean 2.59, was the second less scored, it is apparent that the percentage of agreement was lower than the one achieved on many other questions.

It is interesting to highlight that there were no significant differences either between public and private school students or between those with the best and the worst average qualifications in English Language.

- There should be no more than twenty students per English language class

More than 75% of the polled students showed medium (3) or high (4) levels of agreement with this assertion.

The number of students in the classrooms where the study was carried out did not seemingly influence in the responses given to this particular item (chi-square = 1.415; $p = 0.49$).

- Both the oral and written aspects of language should have the same weight to decide the students' marks

66% of the students agreed with this question, despite their own marks in foreign language during secondary education or the results they obtained in the tests of our study.

- We don't strive too much to develop our OCC since, when applying to University, you only have to pass a written entrance examination

In this case, the percentage of agreement (3 or 4) was 67%. The contrast test revealed significant differences ($U = 2837$; $p = 0.03$) between private and public school students, showing the former higher levels of agreement than the latter.

- Regarding foreign languages, students should be, at the completion of secondary education, better at oral activities than at reading and writing

70% of the sample agreed with this assertion. As for the previous question, there were significant differences ($U = 2934$; $p = 0.04$) between private and public school students.

Lastly, the students also appraised three possible strategies to reach a good OCC. Namely: practising in small groups as part of the lessons, practising with English speaking people as a non-academic activity, and doing such activities as seeing English movies, listening to English music, etc. The higher valuation was for the second option, with an average scoring of 3.31.

7.6. *Teacher's OCC conception*

The averages of the 16 items to be assessed by the teachers ranged from 2.63 to 3.88 points; correspondingly assigned to the item about the importance of the oral as contrasted with the written, and to the question about the size of the groups in the classrooms. Let's see in more detail the results of the most relevant items.

- Number of students per classroom

Most teachers agreed on considering very important to have no more than twenty pupils per classroom. Both the teachers of groups ranging from 20 to 30 students and those that already taught to less than twenty students gave the maximum scoring (4) to this item. Though the difference with the other groups was not significant, there were, curiously, the teachers of groups with more than 30 members the ones who less importance conferred to this question, assigning it a mean value of 3.78.

- Oral competencies development as contrasted to written

The item stating “The main goal of foreign language teaching at the end of compulsory education, should be the students to better domain the oral than the written communicative competence” attained the lower average scoring (2.63) both in the group of less innovative teachers and in the mixed group. The students had appraised more positively this question, with an average scoring of 2.82.

- Groups of students depending on their levels

A high percentage of English language teachers do not disapprove the grouping of students according to their level of competence. So, 83.8% said to agree with this question, with no significant differences as a result of their innovation degree or their type of school. The average scoring for this item (3.23) was even higher than in the case of the students (2.59).

- Age of starting to learn the oral dimension of a foreign language

The same as the students, the teachers showed a high level of agreement with the sentence “Students have to start learning the oral dimension of a foreign language at around the age of four or five”. Whereas more than 76% of the sample completely agreed with this assertion, only one teacher disagreed.

- Importance of the oral and the written in the evaluation

The teachers also made it clear their agreement to equally consider the oral and written skills to determine the students’ marks –the average scoring for this item was 3.21–. Nevertheless, significant differences ($p = 0.01$) were found between the group of less innovative teachers (mean = 2.81) and the mixed group (mean = 3.44).

- Co-ordination among foreign languages teachers

Only 16% of the sample disagreed with the sentence “The co-ordination among foreign language teachers is important to improve the process of learning”. On the other hand, more than 58% completely agreed with the same assertion.

No significant differences were found considering the innovation degree or the type of school. For this item, the teachers’ average score (3.44) was slightly higher than the students’ (3.07).

- Evaluation and University entrance examination

The teachers were also asked about their level of agreement with the sentence "Secondary education students don't strive too much to develop their OCC since, when applying to University, they only have to pass a written entrance examination". Their average level of agreement with this item was 3.26; higher than the students' scoring (2.92) for the same question. The level of agreement was, as for the student's questionnaire, higher in private than in public schools. To be precise, while none of the teachers belonging to private schools said to disagree with this affirmation, a 30% of the teachers from public schools checked 1 or 2 in the questionnaire.

- The need of continuous learning for English language teachers

Most teachers of the sample had the same opinion about this issue, given that only one of them considered it unnecessary the need of an adequate continuous learning process for English language teachers. Similarly, the great majority deemed it very important to carry out oral improving activities in English language speaking countries. The average scoring for this item was 3.67, with no significant differences because of the age, hours of in-service learning, or other personal and professional characteristics.

- Technological resources

Two assertions about this topic were included in the questionnaire. On the one hand, one of them stated the need of providing the schools with classrooms and technological resources adequate for foreign language teaching; on the other hand, the other sentence stated the importance of the regular utilisation of those resources by the teachers.

Even though both questions were valued highly by all the teachers, with no differences due to their methodological approaches, it is important to underline that the former question received a significant higher ($Z = -2.84$; $p = 0.00$) mean score (3.72) than the latter (3.42).

- OCC improving strategies

Although both teachers and students coincided to consider "communicating with English speaking people" the best of the three proposed strategies to improve students' OCC, the teachers' mean scoring for this question (3.57) was slightly higher than the students' (3.31).

8. CONCLUSIONS

The students of the sample had not reached the expected level of achievement in their oral expression and comprehension abilities when the tests were applied, that is, some months before they had completed the CSE. Besides, it was made clear that their level of development of those two abilities was uneven, since they got higher scores in the oral comprehension test than in the oral expression one.

The analysis of every student's results shows that only 40.3% of them got in both tests a mark higher than or equal to three, that is, around 60% of the sample do not possess a suitable level in the development of their OCC in English language; confirming, therefore, our initial hypothesis.

On the other hand, the distribution of the partial qualifications for the expression test shows that "correctness" is the dimension with the lower average scoring; that is, when speaking in English students have special difficulties to correctly use both grammatical norms and adequate vocabulary. The level is higher in pronunciation, dimension in which girls stand out against boys.

Comparative analyses show that those students from schools with some specific characteristics reached lower levels of achievement. To be precise, students belonging to private schools got better results in oral expression than those belonging to public schools. On the contrary, students from rural schools reached lower average scorings than those from schools located in city centres.

Regarding possible personal characteristics that could have an effect on the OCC achievement levels, it is interesting to highlight that:

- The age –fundamentally an indicative of having repeated one or more years– proved to be a factor that highly influenced the level of achievement, given that –mainly for the oral expression test– the older the students the worse their scores in the test.
- The students with the best average marks in foreign language during the secondary education obtained the best results in the oral expression test.
- The students whose parents had a bachelor's degree got better results in the oral expression test than the remaining students.
- Participating in extra curricular activities that involve the communicative contact with the foreign language, seems to have a positive influence in the development of expressive and comprehensive abilities.

These results seem to indicate that certain factors contribute to an inadequate OCC in foreign languages, mainly to the expressive aspect. That is to say:

- The students of the sample showing more deficiency in OCC were those students from public, in most of the cases rural, schools.
- The students that reached the highest achievement levels in the oral dimension of the OCC had been positively affected by some non-scholar linguistic activity; in this sense, the environment and the family support seem to be a good influence for the students to achieve an adequate OCC.

It was noticed that the English language students keep a quite uniform conception of the OCC, not depending on the type of school or on the student's average qualifications in this language. Specifically, most of the students consider it important:

- To start learning English during primary school to facilitate language assimilation.
- To be less than twenty students per classroom.
- To have technical resources in the school and that these resources are utilized by foreign language teachers.

On the contrary, the students neither consider that, because of the closeness of Galician and French, learning French could be easier than learning English, nor agree to consider it positive to group the students according to their level of competence.

There are no significant differences among teachers in their opinions about the same questions, except for the assertion "it would be positive to equally weighting the oral and the written to decide the students' marks". In this question, the teachers that less upheld the equal evaluation of oral and written competences were also those teachers that used the less innovative methodological approaches.

There are four questions that were highly appreciated by the teachers, with average scorings higher than 3.60 in the four cases. Explicitly:

- the need of updating teachers' oral skills in the own foreign language country,
- the importance of starting to learn the oral dimension of the foreign language at early ages,

- the importance of providing schools with adequate technical resources for the teaching of English as a foreign language, and
- the advantages of teaching to groups of less than twenty students.

The teachers' level of agreement with these questions was higher than the students', specially in what regards to the groups size. It is also remarkable that the teachers were in much more support (mean =3.23) than the students (mean =2.59) of grouping the students according to their levels.

Lastly, the teachers seemed to confer more importance to the fact of having technological resources than to the fact of regularly using those resources to teach English language. Given that, although the scores for the first question were high, they were even higher for the second one.

9. IMPROVING SUGGESTIONS

Attending to the aforementioned results, and in order to improve the quality of the FLs teaching/learning process and to reduce, this way, the levels of inequality currently existing in the OCC at the completion of SCC, we offer the educational community some suggestions:

1. Students, parents, teachers and administrators responsible of education, have to become aware that, more than the technical domain of the new knowledge, the effective appropriation of a foreign language implies personal behavioural changes.
2. To make feasible such behavioural changes, meta-linguistic activity has to be carried out in adequate existential environments and appropriate physical and psychological scenarios.
3. The curricular development in the realm of foreign languages has to be thoroughly revised from beyond merely instructive approaches. From our point of view, these approaches have to take into account, at least, education planning and evaluation, extra curricular activities development and schools technological equipment:
 - a. Planning the meta-linguistic activity in foreign languages in such way that, since primary education to the completion of compulsory secondary education, it is taken into account the learning of two foreign languages with different levels

- of comprehensive and expressive competences according to open and flexible options.
- b. Revising, for all educational cycles and stages, the current foreign language evaluation trends, so that, during the whole processes of teaching and learning, both teachers and parents are conscious of the student progresses. This consciousness would have to allow distinguishing both the oral and written degrees of development, and the respective comprehensive and expressive competences in foreign languages.
 - c. Studying the possibilities that the educational system, the families and the whole society can offer altogether to complement in due form school activities with extra curricular activities related to the realm of foreign languages appropriation.
 - d. Providing schools with adequate facilities so that foreign languages, as already happens with plastic arts, physical training or music, can be gained from experience.
4. The changes in foreign languages curricular approaches that should be introduced in the educational system, demand a simultaneous reconsideration of the models and contents of foreign language teachers' initial and in-service training, in the several professional itineraries linked to teaching both in infant and in primary and,
 5. Secondary schools.

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