

Determining Factors of the Academic Performance on 'Listening' of Spanish Students of EFL. Results from the ESLC¹

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ABSTRACT: The European Survey on Language Competences (ESLC), the first survey of its kind carried out in the world, was designed 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) in European participating countries. Spain's participation in the ESLC has provided comprehensive data about the teaching and learning of foreign languages in our country and a means to compare data with other Adjudicated Entities. The information collected will be highly valuable to improve our students' language proficiency. By means of the analysis of the ESLC database, we have tried to corroborate the hypothesis that target language exposure and use in non-formal contexts leads to better results in 'listening'. Data from the ESLC show that the students from countries with the best results in listening are often exposed to English outside school, within the context of language-friendly living environments, while those with poorer results -as it is the case of Spanish students- have very little contact with this language and few opportunities for a meaningful and interactive social use. By investigating language learning results in 'listening', we are now in better conditions to suggest that the notion of 'input' can be replaced by the more ecological notion of 'affordance', which refers to the relationship between properties of the environment and the active learner.

Keywords: Language proficiency, Listening, Language-friendly living environments, Spanish EFL learners, ESLC.

Factores que determinan los resultados académicos en 'comprensión oral' del alumnado español de Inglés como lengua extranjera. Resultados del EECL

RESUMEN: El Estudio Europeo de Competencia Lingüística (EECL), la primera macroencuesta de este tipo que se hizo en el mundo, fue diseñada pensando en obtener información sobre el dominio en lenguas extranjeras del alumnado en su último año

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de educación secundaria obligatoria (4º de ESO) o en el segundo del bachillerato (2º de Bachillerato) en los países europeos que configuraron la muestra. La participación de España en el EECL nos permite disponer de datos completos sobre la enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en nuestro país y, al tiempo, nos facilita un análisis comparativo con los resultados de otros socios europeos que han colaborado en el estudio. La información obtenida tendrá un gran valor a la hora de mejorar la competencia en idiomas de nuestro alumnado. Mediante el análisis de las bases de datos del EECL, hemos pretendido corroborar la hipótesis de que la exposición a la lengua extranjera y su uso en contextos no formales conduce a mejores resultados en la actividad de 'comprensión oral'. Los datos del EECL evidencian cómo el alumnado de los países que obtienen mejores resultados en comprensión oral tiene mayor grado de exposición al inglés fuera del ámbito escolar, en contextos lingüísticos amables, mientras que aquellos que obtienen peores resultados -como es el caso del alumnado español- tienen muy poco contacto con esta lengua y pocas ocasiones para usarla socialmente de forma significativa e interactiva. La investigación de los resultados competenciales en 'comprensión oral' nos sitúa en una mejor posición a la hora de sugerir que el concepto de 'input' puede ser substituido por la noción más ecológica de 'facilitadores de interacción con el entorno', que hace referencia a las relaciones entre las propiedades del ambiente y el aprendiz inmerso.

Palabras Clave: Competencia lingüística, Comprensión oral, Ambientes lingüísticos amables, Alumnado español de inglés como lengua extranjera, EECL.

1. INTRODUCTION

The specialist scientific literature in the field of foreign languages collects, throughout the 20th century, the intense debates about the benefits and disadvantages that stem from the development of curriculum design and a teaching methodology in the classroom which is more oriented towards the communicative dimension of language and less focused on its grammatical system. In this way, the attention with regards to the success or failure in the acquisition of good competence in a language has been limited, in the past century, to the activities carried out in the classrooms of the education system, and to what happens in its formal context.

But the beginning of the 21st century, illuminated by the publication of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (hereafter CEFRL) (Instituto Cervantes, 2002) marks a paradigm shift in this trend. The concept of 'student' is now complemented by that of 'user' of the language (or languages), and what begins to be of interest is not only what the student knows about the language but also what he/she can do as a user of it. In this way we move away from a paradigm focused exclusively on the student, the teacher, the classroom and the foreign language curriculum and we enter a new paradigmatic stage characterised by also meeting the general and communicative competences of the language users (see Chapter 5 of the CEFRL). This look at the student-individual as a user with bilingual or multilingual competences opens a horizon of new factors of research in the field of foreign language learning that gravitate towards languages as a form of existential behavior.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE HYPOTHESIS

As the formal contexts of the European education systems gain ground in the effective implementation of more and better shared methodological guidelines (approaches for tasks and projects, integrated learning of content and foreign languages, early and sustainable initiation, linguistic immersion and submersion programs, etc.), and as the traditional differences between conceptions and practices of curriculum development in foreign languages begin to narrow (Eurydice, 2001, 2005), the question that now arises is:

Why, with more common and convergent formal educational practices, are there still differences in the results of language learning between our European students?

Which is why much of the research on school achievement in foreign languages is starting to ask whether the time has come to direct our investigations towards what happens outside the classroom space and to analyse, in an experiential setting, the differences of achievement of students with better and worse competence results.

The arrival, in the scientific field of foreign language learning, of the results of reports and macrostudies carried out on a European level, which are more focused on what good language learners do outside school rather than on what they study and know, has led the researchers in this field to direct their expectations towards the environmental settings of the use of foreign language beyond the classroom setting. Evidence from the *European Survey on Language Competences* (hereafter ESLC), the subject of this article, also allow us to verify whether the best achievements of competences in oral comprehension of foreign languages of European students are directly related to activities of exposure and oral use that the students carry out 'outside' the classrooms: in extracurricular activities, through ICT, at home, through access to audiovisual products in original-version, in communicative interactions with speakers other than classmates, visits to other countries, etc. Factors which are drawn from some of the questions from the contextual survey filled out by students from the sample group and which, in part, are labeled in the ESLC under the index of «*Language-Friendly Living Environment*».

In short, our contribution here aims to verify the hypothesis that environmental exposure and use of the foreign language (specifically, English as the first foreign language of the students in the sample) in non-formal contexts, with an involvement of the individuals in experiential behaviour activities in situations of language immersion or submersion, entails performance results in oral comprehension higher than those of other individuals who do not participate in this type of activities in the same way.

3. BACKGROUND

We detail here some of the results of reports and macrostudies which have a bearing on the evaluation of achievements in English oral comprehension of the Spanish students through the promotion of contact with the foreign language in non-formal contexts.

Within the framework of the Special Eurobarometer 243 (64.3), *Europeans and their languages* (2006), 28.694 citizens of EU Member states were asked about their experiences of and views on multilingualism. As for the everyday situation of following foreign programmes or films in their original version the data of this Eurobarometer show that in countries where

subtitles are commonly used the vast majority of those polled prefer to watch foreign films and programmes in the original language. This is how 94% of Swedish and Danish and 93% of Finnish respondents answered. The Spanish, together with the French, Germans and Czechs, are among those who reject, with the highest average percentage (73%), the option of following foreign programmes and films in their original version with the help of subtitles. The study suggests that the use of subtitles can encourage and facilitate language learning.

For its part, the report entitled *The assessment of pupils' skills in English in eight European countries* (Bonnet, 2003), commissioned by The European Network of Policy Makers for the Evaluation of Education System, reaches similar conclusions². In relation to the content of the questionnaire which refers to environmental contact with English, Spanish students, who make up a sample of 2,950 individuals, are those who least practice English outside the classroom when talking with their families, listening to the radio, watching TV shows or movies in this language, or reading magazines, newspapers or books in English, and when travelling abroad. The report points out a great difference in terms of the English proficiency of their parents in relation to the other participants of the study in other countries: 49% of Spanish students said that their parents do not speak any English at all, 21% said that they speak it badly and only 13% said that they speak it well or very well. The percentages are much higher in the responses of students from other countries. This is something that corresponds to the evaluation carried out in the contribution of Sara de la Rica and Ainara Gonzalez (2012: 21) to the INEE Report when they assert that «*the English language knowledge of parents in Sweden, measured as the percentage of those who speak quite a lot or a lot of English, is much higher than in Spain*». The study supervised by Bonnet concludes by evaluating that the environmental context in English is very low throughout the Spanish state, followed only by France which ranks last. But the achievements of the sample of Spanish students are quite high, above average, in terms of linguistic and grammatical knowledge.

Also in relation to environmental contact, and specifically to the value of subtitling, the data provided by a recent study commissioned by the European Commission (2011): *Study on the use of subtitling*,³ are of special interest. The data shows that oral mastery of English is much higher in countries with a tradition of original version with subtitles as opposed to those with a culture of dubbing, as is the case of Spain. In terms of preference between dubbed or subtitled original versions, a correlation can be seen between the age factor and the number of languages spoken: the younger the individuals (range 12-18 and 18-25) and the more languages mastered, the more pronounced is the preference for subtitling as opposed to dubbing. In the Spanish student population aged 12-18 years, positive attitudes towards original version with subtitles are far greater than among other older groups. In this population range, most students are in favor of the subtitled original version of audiovisual

² The study involved 12,000 students from eight European countries (Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Sweden) who were in the final year of compulsory secondary education, and with an average age of 16 years.

³ Research conducted by the French group Media Consulting Group under the direction of Hayssam Safar (Centre for Media Studies and Research, University of Mons in Belgium) in 33 participating European countries.

products and, furthermore, they understand that this type of context significantly improves foreign language learning. The majority state that they would not change the audio channel on their remote-control if movies or documentaries in the original version with subtitles were offered on TV.

Elaborating on the relationship of subtitling on television with good performance in English, the empirical study titled *TV or not TV. Subtitling and English Skills*⁴ identifies a very positive effect in favour of the subtitled original version, and against dubbing, which corresponds approximately to an average of between four and twenty years of studying English in the school context. Through the use of regression analysis techniques and the use of 'Ordinary Least Squares' (OLS), they question the fact that most of the variables that have traditionally been considered important in assessing the quality of performance competence in English for an individual, like, for example, the number of years that students have studied English in the school system, stop being relevant⁵ compared to the affinity between English and the native language of the individual and, very significantly, in relation to the prevalent supply system of audiovisual products in that country. With their results, the authors come to the empirical evidence that, *ceteris paribus*, the quality of English is better in those countries where television offers products in subtitled original version and, furthermore, students from these countries benefit more from English classes in the formal school system.

Finally, we should take into account the interest shown by the European Commission in the creation of language living environments (at work, in the home, during leisure time...), designed to be welcoming for linguistic interactions between citizens of different languages: the so-called «*Language-Friendly Living Environments*».⁶ Policies for the promotion of language learning carried out at the request of the European Commission seek to add value to the informal exposure of European students to direct contact with native speakers in the contexts of their natural use of the languages. And, aware of the difficulties in generalizing this form of exposure to the language in contextual uses, the promoters of these policies are turning their attention to the mass media and consumption of audiovisual products with a special emphasis on the use of subtitles in movies and other audiovisual products offered on television which, as indicated by the research already mentioned, help to improve language learning. In this sense, it can be concluded that the Internet and entertainment programmes can have a positive influence on the improvement of foreign language proficiency of our students given that not only do they provide exposure to and reinforce the pragmatic dimension of the context, but also that they allow the use of the language by way of MSN, chats, blogs, video calls, online games, etc.

⁴ This study used samples in the 32 OECD member countries and those European countries that do not have English as their official language. See: Rupérez, Bris, and Banal-Estañol (2010).

⁵ Sara de la Rica and Ainara Gonzalez reach a similar conclusion in their aforementioned study when comparing performance results in English between Spain and Sweden.

⁶ Referring to the construction of language-friendly environments in which different languages can be heard and seen, where speakers of all languages feel welcome and where contexts and situations that foster language learning are encouraged (European Commission, 2003: 12; European Commission, 2008: 18).

4. BASIC DATA LISTED THE ESLC REPORT

As we know, of the three levels of competence which the ESLC is looking at, orality is limited to the activity of ‘comprehension’ since ‘oral expression’ tests, left to a later date, are not included in the commission of this study.⁷ As reflected in the results concerning the levels of achievement in all three proficiency measurements, there are very marked differences between those referring to the first and second foreign languages of the individuals. The comparison between participating entities also proves that the gap between ‘high’ and ‘low’ achievements on the scale of the CEFRL is closely related to the type of linguistic-communicative activity in question (reading comprehension, written expression, oral comprehension).

In general, the analysis of the language test results reveals that in the second language lower levels are obtained than in the first. However, students from Spain diverge from this pattern and show better results for all three competences in French (second foreign language) than in English (first foreign language), as reflected by the comparison between countries (INEE, 2012a).

The lower results obtained by Spanish students, compared with those of other participating entities, are concentrated in its English ‘*listening competence*’, ranking second to last followed by France which comes bottom. Finding possible causes that affect the most negative value of the language competence of Spanish students thus becomes our priority considering the hypothesis mentioned at the beginning that, in the Spanish context of exposure to English, the circumstances are different than those that in other countries lead to better results in the activity of listening.

5. THE DIMENSIONS OF OUR STUDY

Being that the first foreign language -English in the case of Spanish students- poses greater difficulties to obtaining satisfactory achievements in the listening activity (between B1 and B2) at the end of compulsory schooling, we limit our investigation to the following variables: English (countries with ‘English’ as a first foreign language) and oral comprehension (‘listening’). On the other hand, in order to achieve more uniformity in the comparative analyses, we limit the field of study to participating entities that have implemented the tests and questionnaires in ISCED level 2 (the majority of the 16 groups which make up the ESCL sample) which is equivalent to the final year of Compulsory Secondary Education. In order to do this we have used only the main sample, excluding the data from the ACs (Autonomic Communities) that enlarged the sample.

6. STUDY SAMPLE

Starting with these characteristics, the sample was composed of a total of 11 entities out of the 16 initially participating in the ESCL. The Flemish-speaking Belgian community and the German-speaking community, as well as England, were excluded on account of

⁷ This is how it was stated at the time by the European Commission with regard to the time factor in the implementation of the Indicator, as described in its paper “The European Indicator of Language Competence”(COM (2005) 596 final).

having French as their first foreign language, and the French-speaking Belgian community and Bulgaria were also excluded since in those cases the students that had participated were from school level corresponding to ISCED 3 (Non-compulsory Secondary Education). Moreover, given that, as just noted, our focus is on the activity of listening, we did not take into account for this sample selection any students who had not completed this type of competence test.

Thus our initial sample is composed of 11.363 individuals, all studying at a similar academic level, with English as the first foreign language, and participating in the ‘listening test’. This starting sample was set based on the sample weights, allowing us to adjust the representation of the sample and the estimation of the parameters thus avoiding bias (Asparouhov, 2006) (see Table 1 of the Appendix). This weighting can be interpreted as a measure of the number of people in the population represented by each individual (Pérez Cañizares et al., 2004).

As shown in Table 1, we have a balanced sample in terms of the percentage of men and women, and with an average age of between 14 and 15 years, the expected age based on the level of selected studies, but with differences in the number of academic years that the students have been studying the English language -based on the data provided by the student- since, as we can see, in Spain the average is nine years as opposed to four years in France.

Table 1. Principal characteristics of the sample.

Country	Percentage of women	Average age of students	Average No. of years studying English
Estonia	52,9	15,36	7,03
Greece	51,4	14,30	5,96
Spain	50,6	15,60	9,20
France	51,6	14,41	4,22
Croatia	51,4	14,11	6,90
Malta	47,7	15,21	9,17
Netherlands	52,3	15,23	4,95
Poland	50,3	15,31	7,46
Portugal	52,5	14,6	6,01
Sweden	50,3	15,25	6,53
Slovenia	48,7	14,17	6,18

7. EXPLANATORY VARIABLES

Based on what was shown above, we selected a set of questions from the student questionnaire relating to contact and use with/of the foreign language (in this case English) in a non-formal environment, ie: in situations outside not only the curricular context but also of the school itself, and relating mainly to activities carried out in the family and social environments. In this way we take four indices as independent variables, generated from

four of the questions from the consultation instrument, which were considered in the *ESCL Final Report* given their relevance for investigating the dimension called «*Learning of the language in informal contexts*», as well as an item relating to the dimension «*Possibilities of cultural contact*» (SurveyLang, 2012a).

Table 2. Selected indices and items.

INDEX	LABEL QUESTION NO. OF ITEMS	SCALE OF THE ITEMS	SCALE OF THE INDEX AND CALCULATIONS	CONTENT
LEARNING THE LANGUAGE IN NON-FORMAL CONTEXTS				
PARENTAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE	Parental knowledge Question 28 2 items	- 0 to 3 - 0 = nothing - 3 = a lot	Average in both items	The student gives his/her opinion regarding the knowledge that his/her mother and father have of English.
CONTACT WITH ENGLISH IN THE EXTRACURRICULAR ENVIRONMENT	Contact English Question 29 7 items	- 0 = no - 1 = yes	Add together the affirmative answers in the 7 items	- In this question we want to know if the student has or not (yes or no) <i>contact</i> with English outside the classroom, in diverse situations: email, with friends or family members who speak English, with tourists through the Internet, or during their holidays.
USE OF ENGLISH IN THE EXTRACURRICULAR ENVIRONMENT	Use of English Question 30 6 items	- 0 to 4 - 0 = never - 4 = several times a week	Average in the 6 items	- In this question we want to know if the student <i>uses</i> English outside school in similar situations to those of question 29, indicating the frequency of times, from never to several times a week.
CONTACT WITH ENGLISH THROUGH THE COMMUNICATION MEDIA	Media Question 31 9 items	- 0 to 4 - 0 = never - 4 = several times a week	Average in the 9 items	- In this question we want to know with what frequency the student has some contact with English: listening to songs, watching movies in English, subtitled or not, watching programmes in

Table 2. Selected indices and items (Cont.).

INDEX	LABEL QUESTION NO. OF ITEMS	SCALE OF THE ITEMS	SCALE OF THE INDEX AND CALCULATIONS	CONTENT
LEARNING THE LANGUAGE IN NON-FORMAL CONTEXTS				
				English, using computer games in English, reading in English or visiting websites.
CULTURAL EXCHANGES				
TRAVEL TO AN ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRY	Trips Item 45.3	- 0 to 3 - 0 = never - 3 = three times or more		- Number of times that the student travelled with the family to an English-speaking country in the last 3 years.
"ESCS" INDEX				
SOCIOECONOMIC AND CULTURAL STATUS	ESCS		Continuous. Between - 6 and + 4 points	- Calculated from 3 indices: Household possessions, occupations of the

While in the first of these dimensions the *ESCL Final Report* includes other indices, we have selected those whose own content focuses on the contact and use of the foreign language referred to. Table 2 displays these indices and items indicating the scale of the reference question in the questionnaire of context and the calculation of the index.

As reflected in Table 2, the ESCS index (economic, social and cultural status) was also considered, having been calculated previously from the other three indices covering: household possessions, occupations of the parents and academic studies of the parents (SurveyLang, 2012b).

8. CRITERION VARIABLE

Our interest is in assessing which part of the students' oral proficiency can be explained by the predictive variables mentioned above. As is already the case in the PISA studies and others which follow similar methodological guidelines, each student is assigned five 'plausible values' for each of the skills for which he/she is evaluated. The plausible values are not actual scores obtained for these. Each one responds to a limited number of items of a specific competence, from which their responses are considered within the total of the items that make up the full test of that skill.

In order to do this, a single score is not predicted, but rather an a posteriori distribution of values with their associated probabilities is generated from which five values (*plausible values*) are randomly drawn (Martínez Arias, 2006: 118-119). Using these values allows

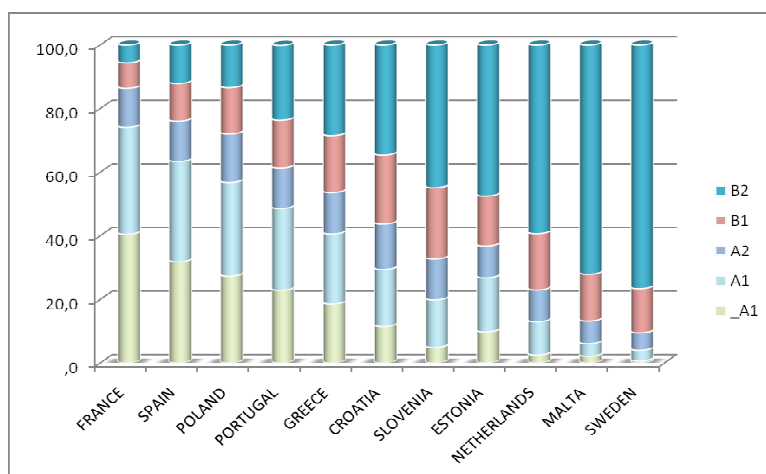
the calculation of the standard errors in complex sample designs, as it is the case in this study (Wu, 2005).

9. DATA ANALYSIS

In response to our goal, focused on assessing the extent to which the oral comprehension of students from the participating countries can be explained by the use and contact with the English language in the non-formal environment, we conducted a hierarchical-type multiple regression analysis for all of the eleven countries of the study, first introducing the variable «*socioeconomic and cultural status*» before the explanatory variables presented in Table 2. First of all, descriptive analyses of the variables and correlational analysis between the different explanatory variables and between them and the competence in listening were carried out, both globally and by country. To perform these analyses we used the statistics package SPSS version 17 and for the calculation of the associated standard errors we used Replicates module -version 7.21- using the Jackknife method. The population statistics were estimated using each of the five plausible values, the obtained population statistic being the average of the five statistics.

10. RESULTS

The performance in the activity of listening in English in all the eleven countries analysed, if we consider the average percentages obtained in each of the expected levels of the CEFRL, is very modest: 28.3% do not reach the minimum level of A1. This level is achieved by 27.5%. At levels A2 and B1 we find 12.4% and 12.2% respectively, and 19.6% reach the highest-rated level - B2. Therefore, it can be said that, as a whole, only 32% of



Graph 1. Oral comprehension in English: Percentage by country in European competence levels.

students reach or exceed a B1 level in oral comprehension of English, when this language is studied as a first foreign language.

The detailed results by country allow us to find out the position occupied by each within the whole set that we have analysed. Graph 1 shows the significant discrepancies between them. France and Spain come out on top in the percentage of students with -A1 and A1 levels over 60%. Poland borders on 57% at these levels. At the other extreme Malta and Sweden have more than 70% of their students in the highest level B2, followed by the Netherlands with 60%. These results confirm those obtained in the other previous international studies which we have already seen above.

If we look at the averages of each of the eleven countries selected in our study in the five explanatory variables, Malta and Sweden obtain the highest in three of them: knowledge of English of the parents, use of English through the communication media, and frequency of travel to English-speaking countries (see Table 3).

In the case of Spain, the «Parental knowledge of the foreign language» is below that of all eleven countries except Poland, thus confirming the results of the study. The assessment of pupils' skills in English in eight European Countries, which we have referred to in the background section. Spain gets an average of 0.92 - on a scale of 0 (nothing) to 3 (very much) - in this item of the questionnaire, as opposed to Malta and Sweden which both get over two points. The relevance of this index is explained in more detail in the study of De la Rica and González (2012).

Table 3. Averages and standard errors by country in the explanatory variables of study.

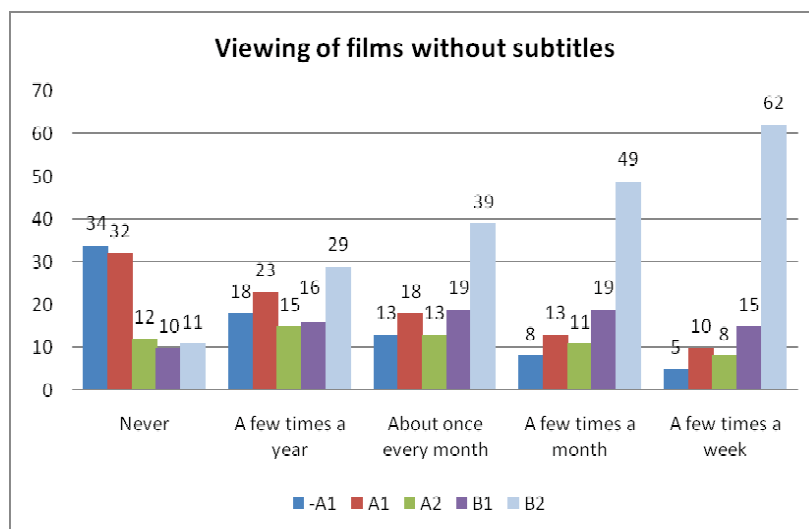
SCALE	PARENTAL KNOWLEDGE		CONTACT WITH ENGLISH		USE OF ENGLISH		CONTACT COMMUNICATION MEDIA		TRAVELLING	
	\bar{x}	SE	\bar{x}	SE	\bar{x}	SE	\bar{x}	SE	\bar{x}	SE
	0 to 3 0 = nothing 3 = a lot		From 0 to 7 0 = no in the 7 items 7 = yes in the 7 items		0 to 4 0 = never 4 = several times a week		0 to 4 0 = never 4 = several times a week		0 to 3 0 = never 3 = three times or more	
FRANCE	1,43	0,05	1,54	0,08	0,89	0,08	1,32	0,15	0,81	0,19
SPAIN	0,92	0,22	1,76	0,08	0,96	0,06	1,45	0,15	0,57	0,21
POLAND	0,9	0,44	2,12	0,4	0,95	0,17	1,79	0,12	0,56	0,13
PORTUGAL	1,16	0,16	2,37	0,12	1,39	0,12	2,37	0,05	0,56	0,13
GREECE	1,43	0,34	3,09	0,27	1,51	0,14	2,35	0,09	0,68	0,09
CROATIA	1,45	0,13	3,17	0,28	1,34	0,04	2,39	0,03	0,51	0,17
SLOVENIA	1,65	0,04	3,04	0,14	1,35	0,03	2,57	0,03	0,69	0,03
STONIA	1,25	0,23	3,0	0,09	1,68	0,08	2,53	0,33	0,89	0,13
NETHERLANDS	1,83	0,18	2,4	0,11	1,05	0,13	2,34	0,06	0,94	0,07
MALTA	2,17	0,43	4,5	0,69	2,35	0,63	2,93	0,07	1,29	0,56
SWEDEN	2,13	0,1	2,78	0,08	1,52	0,03	2,63	0,06	1,47	0,12

In reference to «*Contact with English through the communication media*», France obtained the lowest average (1.3) followed by Spain (1.4) and Poland (1.8). The rest of the countries get over two points of average on a scale of 0 (never) to 4 (several times a week). This index, composed of nine items, includes four relating to the viewing of programmes and movies in English 'with' or 'without' subtitles, which, because of their special interest in this study, we have also analysed separately. In all cases, the lowest averages belong to Spain and France which, except in the case of films with subtitles, do not achieve one point in the scale (from 0 -never, to 4 -several times a week). This means that, on average, students in both countries watch movies without subtitles or TV shows 'with' or 'without' subtitles less than «several times a year» - activities which are much more day-to-day for other European students.

In the indices relating to «*Contact and use of English in extracurricular contexts*», Malta achieves the highest score in both, well above the rest of the countries. This result is to be expected in view of the historical and cultural situation of Malta owing to the legacy of British influence and the process of anglicisation by the British authorities until its independence in 1964.

Graph 2 shows us the frequency with which the students grouped according to their CEFR level, watch movies in English 'without' subtitles. As can be seen, 34% of the total of those who never engage in this activity got an -A1 in listening, 32% an A1, 12% an A2, and 10% and 11% attained a B1 and B2 respectively. At the other extreme, among those who watch movies 'without' subtitles several times a week 62% have level B2 and only 5% have an -A1. The graph shows us how the percentage with the highest level in listening also increases to the extent that we find a greater frequency of movie viewing, going from 11% to 62%, while those that have the lowest level decreases from 34% to 5%.

Graph 2. Frequency, expressed in percentages, with which students watch movies without subtitles based on their CEFR level.



Regarding the «Travel frequency to an English speaking country», again Sweden and Malta are at the top, the only countries from which the average students have traveled at least once with their family in the last three years. The average for the other countries is between 0 (never) and 1 (once in the past three years), which shows that making this type of trip in the family environment of the students isn't habitual.

The correlations obtained between each of these indices and the performance in listening are significant in all cases (significance level of 0.01) and of a moderate value (see Table 2 in Appendix). The «*Contact with English through the communication media*» is the one with the highest (0.53). If we stop again at those specific items making up this index, the viewing of films (item 31.2) and of other programs in English 'without' subtitles (item 31.4) obtains a correlation of 0.44, the highest of the items that make up this index. The parental knowledge of the English language and the contact and use of English in environmental situations have lower values of 0.36, 0.34 and 0.35 respectively.

It is the frequency of trips with the family to English-speaking countries which offers a lower correlation with performance of listening (0.23) although, as already pointed out, it is significant. Certainly the question posed in the student questionnaire only provides information about the number of trips and not about the duration or type of stay; questions which can clearly condition the contact with the language of the country visited. In the case of Spain the correlation is somewhat higher, reaching 0.38.

Regression analysis was carried out for all the eleven countries in our study with four of the five explanatory variables: «*Parental knowledge*», «*Contact with English through the communication media*», «*Travel to English-speaking countries*» and «*Contact with English in extracurricular contexts*», to which we have added the socioeconomic and cultural status, given the expected explanatory weight that it can have when considering activities which are mainly carried out in the family context. In order to assess the potential impact we have used a hierarchical type regression analysis in which this has been the first variable in the model, allowing us to know in advance the explanatory capacity it has on the activity of listening.

The «*Use of English in extracurricular contexts*» has not been included because of its collinearity.⁸ This variable presents a high correlation with the 'use of English in the environment' (0.65), which is something to be expected, furthermore, because, as we have already noted, both questions refer to the same situations, in one case asking about the «exposure» itself and in another about the «*frequency of use*» of English. At the same time, it seems reasonable to think that performance in oral comprehension of the language can improve in situations of simple exposure to English, through a rich and contextualized input, without necessarily resorting to a productive use of language on the part of the individual.

Table 4 presents the overall results of the hierarchical regression analysis. As can be seen, all five predictors explained 34.5% of the variance in listening, a percentage of that 12% depending on the socioeconomic and cultural status of the family, and the remaining 22.3% on the environmental exposure and use of the language.

⁸ The test of the Factor of Inflation of Variance (FIV) confirms the collinearity of this index, giving a value of 2.1 which is higher than those found in the case of the remaining explanatory variables.

Table 4. Overall results of the hierarchical regression analysis: variable predictors, R, R², F, level of associated significance and sample size⁹.

PREDICTOR VARIABLES INTRODUCED IN THE MODEL	R	R SQUARED	F ASSOCIATED	SIGNIFICATION	N CASES	N WEIGHTED CASES
ESCS	0,350	0,122	264129,3	0,000	10999	1841736
ESCS, COMMUNICATION MEDIA	0,575	0,331	468319,5	0,000	10999	1841736
ESCS, COMMUNICATION MEDIA, PARENTAL STUDIES	0,587	0,345	331574,6	0,000	10999	1841736
ESCS, COMMUNICATION MEDIA, PARENTAL STUDIES AND CONTACT WITH ENGLISH	0,588	0,345	249440,7	0,000	10999	1841736
ESCS, COMMUNICATION MEDIA, PARENTAL STUDIES AND CONTACT WITH ENGLISH AND TRAVEL	0,588	0,345	199588,1	0,000	10999	1841736

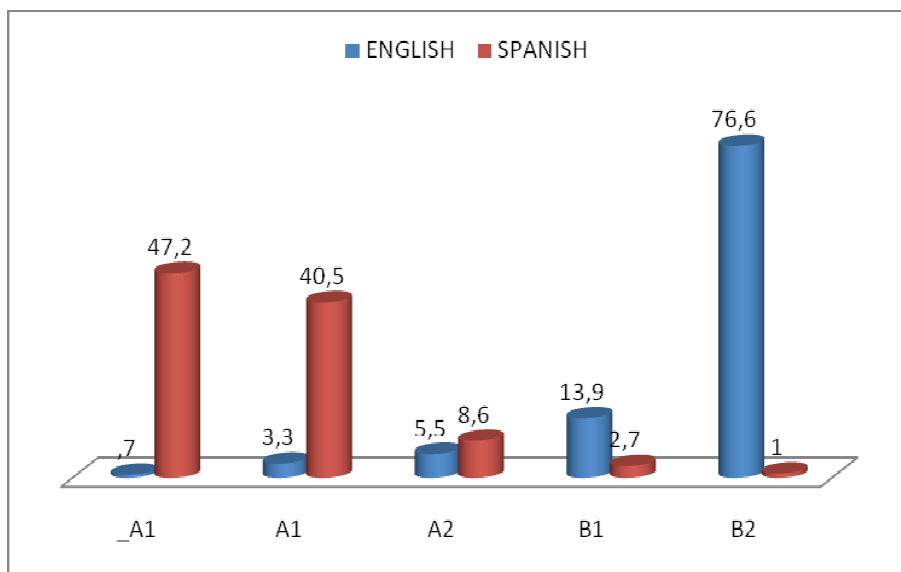
If we analyze the role of the variables of interest for this study, the one which has greater explanatory weight is the contact with English through the communication media, 21%, with an associated beta value of 0.43 (see table 2 in the Appendix). Furthermore, this index shows a partial correlation of 0.49, well above those obtained by the other indices.

The parental knowledge of the English language gives 1.4% more. The remaining variables, ie «*Travel with the family to English-speaking countries*» and «*Contact in extracurricular situations*», even when they present a significant Beta, with values of 0.005 and 0.025, have no explanatory power because, as we see, the value of the coefficient of determination is maintained at 0.345. And to this it must be added that, in addition, the associated partial correlations are minimal, namely 0.008 and 0.032 respectively, which led us to reject both indices in order to obtain a more sensible model.

To come straight to the point, the results show that contact with English through activities such as listening to songs or watching TV and movies in that language is the index relating to «*Environmental exposure and use*» that best explains the performance in the oral comprehension of the students. Even so, it is worth to note the fact that Sweden, with a great majority of their students (76,6%) in the highest level B2 with respect to 'listening' in

⁹ Countries included in our study: France, Spain, Poland, Portugal, Greece, Croatia, Slovenia, Estonia, the Netherlands, Malta and Sweden.

the first foreign language evaluated (English), gets only a minimum percentage (1%) in the same B2 level when it comes to terms with the second foreign language evaluated (Spanish). Being the case that the Spanish language is not part of the environmental language landscape of Sweden in the same way that it is English, our hypothesis in this study becomes fully reinforced (see graph 3).



Graph 3. Oral comprehension in English (1st foreign language) and Spanish (2nd foreign language). Swedish percentages.

11. CONSIDERATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

As we have already seen, the overall performance for all of the eleven countries that have been analysed in our research work is very modest: only 32% reaches a level B (12.2% a B1 and 19.6% a B2) in listening skills. The set of indicators we have linked to contact with the English language in contextual activities outside the classroom setting, in non-formal situations, present significant correlations with performance in ‘listening’, although, evidently, it is the contact with English through the communication media that gets a higher degree of correlation (0.53).

The results obtained in the comparison between countries call into question, quite significantly, the ability of Spanish students to understand English orally: a wide majority, reaching 63.4% of the students assessed, is between the -A1 and A1 levels, that is to say well below the reference level of the CEFRL which they are supposed to have reached by the end of the studies during the period of their compulsory schooling. A level of competence in

this language activity which places us as a group in the penultimate position in the ranking of countries, where France would come bottom and Sweden and Malta at the top.

At the same time, the data reveal that students from countries that lead the ranking of top results in '*listening*' have a high exposure to English in environmental situations outside the school setting, just as the Spanish and French, with the lowest '*listening*' results, have very limited contact with this language in the same type of environmental situations. All of this points to a clear confirmation of our initial hypothesis: that environmental exposure and use of a foreign language in non-formal contexts, with involvement of individuals in experiential behaviour activities in situations of language immersion or submersion, yields performance results in listening which are significantly higher than those of other individuals who do not participate in this type of activities in the same way.

With the ability of a country to «*generate linguistically welcoming environments, where different languages can be heard and seen*» being so relevant to the improvement of language learning, in the sense that the European Commission referred to some time ago (as we have already pointed out), and with the contribution of audiovisual products in the mass communication media being so significant, as our results show, the question is:

What options do we have within reach of our possibilities, without an unaffordable increase in spending, and without causing inconvenient disruptions within the education system and the curriculum development in the area of foreign languages in their schools, in order to improve performance in the oral comprehension of Spanish students?

First of all, the fact should be taken into consideration that, as obvious as it may seem, is not, however, sufficiently socially accepted: somebody who does not understand, or understands little, either doesn't speak or speaks very little. The widespread belief that languages are learned at school or in specialised centers through good study discipline does not have sufficient empirical evidence. That which is learned through studying and that which is acquired by environmental immersion or submersion are not comparable dimensions. Understanding orally sometimes in the classroom has very little to do with activating our neurocognitive disposition to transform an incomprehensible, heterogeneous, undefined and unstructured input into a meaningful communicative event. In the oral use of a language, one really learns to understand through understanding; even those languages which are very distant from that already acquired, as long as we adopt the role of '*immersed experienter*': the linguistic input, supported by nonverbal contextual elements, activates previous cultural experiences that lead us to comprehensively build and integrate a model for an inclusive communicative situation. However extensive the curriculum development of English as a foreign language, and however high the quality of teaching at the centres and of the teacher training, the empirical evidence is getting closer and closer to the point of convergence of our conclusion: oral comprehension improves greatly with environmental exposure to the language in '*friendly contexts*'.

If the data reflect the fact that students from countries that watch and hear audiovisual products on television in original version (with or without subtitles) have better oral comprehension of English, and those who only see and hear these products in the dubbed version have a very low level, there can be little doubt about the influence that the way a

country offers audiovisual products has in relation to improving the understanding of the foreign language. If English is the priority foreign language in Spain and if the market mainly offers its best-selling audiovisual products to young people in this same language, there can be little doubt that the option of the original version, with the technological advances brought about by DTTV, is an ideal medium to promote immersion environments in English, with more advantages than the other alternatives, which promote oral comprehension and complement the limitations that the development of this skill raise within the education system. In short, the following question should be answered:

What does the distribution of cinematographic and audiovisual content in original version actually contribute to the improvement of the oral comprehension of a foreign language?

The possibilities of the school system, already fairly saturated with curricular content and with precious little time for extracurricular activities, limit the options that students have to experience the gradual appropriation of foreign languages independently in an effective intercultural context. This situation is also transferable to the adult world. Access to audiovisual content in original version turns out to be, in this sense, an essential complement for promoting the creation of an open space for civic culture where a more socially cohesive citizen profile is able to prosper and which shares a concept of communication that better meets the comprehensive, diversifying and sociocultural aspects which should be part of the metacommunicative conscience of those who aspire to be competent and educated European citizens.

12. CONCLUSIONS

Language is a form of cultural appropriation. And, as research from the neurosciences tells us, the basis of this appropriation is necessarily *comprehensive* at first, in order to later become *expressive*. During the early stages of the study of a second or third language, both in the case of children and adults, the right hemisphere tends to be more involved in the processes of verbal communication due to the fact that everyone who starts in the appropriation of a new language tries to compensate for their lack of expressive language competence in that language through the use of pragmatic inferences. This explains why a greater bilateral activation of some structures of the hippocampus can be observed when subjects with moderate proficiency are exposed to narrations in that language. The narrative structure, in that sense, is that which best meets cognitive activation processes. If we provide that structure with an inclusive audiovisual medium, which enriches the linguistic and cultural context where the meanings are negotiated, we will be recreating the model of a situation where the recipient of the content in original version is asked to 'activate', 'build' and 'integrate', by way of comprehension, a cognitive representation of the event in question. For these three processes of understanding to be effective, the '*immersed experienter*' needs only (as a child, teenager or adult) to have opportunities of access to material of great linguistic and cultural value, as offered by cinematographic and audiovisual content in its original version.

Even so, it is worth taking into account the cultural resistance that we Spanish have in willingly accepting the original version as opposed to dubbing (data contrasted by

Eurobarometer 243, mentioned above). Changing our social, cultural and industrial habits in this area represents a social transformation of the first order, which will only be possible by adopting an inavoidably wide-reaching temporal and generational perspective. Hence our proposal to understand, and to make others understand, the close link which exists between good oral comprehension of a foreign language and the environmental exposure to high impact audiovisual media products such as television in original version. This form of raising awareness, taking into account an exogenous cultural resistance, would mean focusing urgently on those sectors which have not yet formed consolidated habits of audiovisual consumption, such as children and teenagers, through three areas of action: school centres, the family and the television medium itself. In this regard, we propose the use of proactive and transverse measures, along with the gradual introduction and modulation of, for example, a school programme of extracurricular activities related to movies or educational documentaries in the original version with subtitles (with guidelines for teaching use) and also that in the home the audio channel of the DTTV be received in original version by default, unlike the present situation where movies and foreign series (of which a very high percentage are in English) are broadcast in dubbed mode.

Finally, it's worth clarifying that the school teaching of a foreign language principally activates explicit acquisition mechanisms. This type of learning is particularly effective in teenagers and adults, with well-developed cognitive abilities. But this is not the only type of learning that can happen in relation to a foreign language. The data that we have analysed in our work takes ample notice as to how the '*incidental learning*' (ie, learning that occurs without the individual having an explicit intention to learn), also has a significant influence on the learning of English as a foreign language (Muñoz, 1999). It is worth, therefore, giving credence to this '*incidental learning*' and promoting it in the three areas of action indicated. We are now in better conditions to suggest that the notion of '*input*' can be replaced by the more ecological notion of '*affordance*', which refers to the relationship between properties of the environment and the active learner. As Leo van Lier (2000: 252) has put it:

In terms of learning, language emerges out of semiotic activity. The context is not just there to provide input (linguistic models or objects) to a passive recipient. The environment provides a 'semiotic budget' (analogous to the energy budget of an ecosystem) within which the active learner engages in meaning-making activities together with others, who may be more, equally, or less competent in linguistic terms. The semiotic budget does not refer to the amount of 'input' available, nor the amount of input that is enhanced for comprehension, but to the opportunities for meaningful action that the situation affords.

That the Spanish students occupy a very low position in English oral comprehension is bad news. If we don't manage to improve extracurricular conditions for the environmental exposure to the language in '*friendly contexts*' in the mid-term would be terrible news. Perhaps we should have in mind the probability that we learn foreign languages like animals 'learn' the forest and plants 'learn' the soil: through an ecological interaction with our environment.

12. REFERENCES

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Unweighted and weighted sample by country.

COUNTRY	PARTICIPATING SAMPLE		WEIGHTED SAMPLE LISTENING		WEIGHTED SAMPLE SQ	
	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.	Freq.	Perc.
ESTONIA	1.100	9,7	13.431	0,7	9.047	0,7
GREECE	1.042	9,2	88.720	4,6	58.543	4,6
SPAIN	1.123	9,9	372.871	19,5	245.679	19,3
FRANCE	1.001	8,8	716.138	37,5	479.680	37,7
CROATIA	1.084	9,5	45.003	2,4	29.590	2,3
MALTA	783	6,9	5.314	0,3	3.591	0,3
NETHERLANDS	946	8,3	15.396	8,0	103.034	8,1
POLAND	1.169	10,3	305.915	16,0	201.613	15,9
PORTUGAL	1.051	9,2	93.016	4,9	62.457	4,9
SWEDEN	1.011	8,9	99.035	5,2	66.935	5,3
SLOVENIA	1.053	9,3	17.375	0,9	11.634	0,9
TOTAL:	11.363	100	1.910.216	100	1.271.802	100

Table 2. Average correlation, level of signification and associated standard error between the explanatory variables and the plausible values in oral comprehension.

INDEX	R ORAL COMPREHENSION	LEVEL OF SIGNIFICATION	STANDARD ERROR	N	N WEIGHTED
Travel	0,233	0,000	0,042	11.168	1874475
Parental knowledge	0,359	0,000	0,495	11.262	1892945
Contact with English in an extracurricular context	0,337	0,000	0,104	11.333	1905364
Use of English in an extracurricular context	0,353	0,000	0,144	11.332	1905267
Use of communication media	0,528	0,000	0,019	11.327	1905117

Table 3. Results of the regression analysis: Coefficients B, associated ES, Coefficients Beta ad level of signification.

VARIABLES	NON-STANDARDISED COEFFICIENT		TYPIFIED COEFICIENTE	T	LEVEL OF SIGNIFICATION
	B	ES	Beta		
Constant	-0,927	0,64	--	-442,7	0,000
ESCS	0,236	0,14		260,3	0,000
English through communication media	0,650	0,11	0,428	600	0,000
Parental knowledge of English	0,206	0,70	0,136	188,4	0,000
Contact with English	0,018	0,11	0,025	33,8	0,000
Travel to English-speaking countries	0,006	0,24	0,005	7,3	0,000