# Oral Competence in English at the end of Primary Education

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**ABSTRACT:** Oral communicative competence includes a wide semantic field since the oral expression is a way of expression for the thought and it provides feedback and develops by means of the linguistic function (Vygotski, 1992; Piaget, 1983a, 1983b; Pinker, 2003). English communicative competence is based on the use of the language as a tool of communication, both oral and written, of representation, of interpretation and of reality comprehension. This investigation aims to analyse the oral communicative competence in English of students who have finished the stage of Primary Education. It also tries to know if the center where students study, the students' gender, the attitude towards the English language and attendance to private lessons increase the oral communicative competence. The sample was intentional and stratified (rural-urban, ordinary-bilingual).It is composed by 265 students and the instrument is a questionnaire provided with reliability and validity. The results show high levels of competence, higher than expected, and with light differences that favor the girls and the urban bilingual schools in the acquisition of the oral communicative competence in English.
**Keywords:** oral competence in English, urban schools, rural schools, bilingual schools, Primary Education.

**La competencia oral en lengua inglesa al finalizar la Educación Primaria**

**RESUMEN:** La competencia en comunicación oral abarca un amplio campo semántico ya que la expresión oral es un medio de expresión para el pensamiento y éste, a su vez, se retroalimenta y desarrolla mediante la función lingüística (Vygotski, 1992; Piaget, 1983a, 1983b; Pinker, 2003). La competencia en comunicación lingüística en inglés se sustancia en el uso del lenguaje como herramienta de comunicación, tanto oral como escrita, de representación, de interpretación y de comprensión de la realidad. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo conocer la competencia en comunicación lingüística de forma oral en lengua inglesa de los escolares al terminar la etapa de Educación Primaria. También intenta conocer si el centro donde se estudia, el género del estudiante, la actitud hacia el inglés y el recibir apoyo extraescolar incrementan esa competencia oral. La muestra fue intencional y estratificada (rurales-urbanos, ordinarios-bilingües) compuesta por 265 escolares y el instrumento ha sido el cuestionario dotado de fiabilidad y validez. Los resultados muestran niveles de competencia altos, superiores a los esperados y con ligeras diferencias que favorecen a las chicas y a los centros urbanos bilingües en la adquisición de la competencia oral en inglés.
**Palabras clave:** competencia oral en inglés, centros urbanos, centros rurales, centros bilingües, Educación Primaria.

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND JUSTIFICATION

The term competence has been associated with similar terms such as skill or capacity, features that a person possesses and can or cannot be used at a given time. The concept of competence registers in a wide semantic field, which provokes relations of dependence both in its definition and in its application, with other similar concepts. A competent person can have certain skills or can acquire them by instruction or learning. There is, nevertheless, a difference between skill and competence, since the competence relates to behaviours observed (Stoof, Marten, Go Merrienboer and Bastiens, 2002) and the competence with actions. Words like skill, capacity and action are used like synonymous of competence, whereas knowledge, skill and attitude are part of the competence. Westera (2001:6) defines competence as "higher order cognitive skills and behaviours that represent the ability to cope with complex, unpredictable situations". So, competence includes other processes such as metacognition and the strategic thought and presupposes an intention and conscious use of both. To reach competences implies being an expert apprentice and lifelong learning, to adapt to a world in continuous change (Ramos and Luque, 2010). The OCDE Program Definition and Selection of Competencias (DeSeCo) alludes to the achievement of a high degree of integration between the capacities and the extent of social aims that an individual has when pointing out that the competence is more than knowledge and skills. It also includes the skill of facing complex demands, relying on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context (OECD, 2003). Noguera (2004) and Fernandez-Salinero (2006) offer a definition of competence in linguistic terms, indicating the combination of attributes that concerns diverse orders of the person related with: "a) the knowledge, aptitudes and technical skills (to know); b) the methodological ways of proceeding in an activity (to be able to do); c) the guidelines and individual and collective forms of behaviour (to be able to be); d) the forms of organization and interaction (to be able to be)" (Fernandez-Salinero, 2006: 141). In Spain, like in the rest of the European countries, competences are included in the regulation and so, the Organic Law of Education of 2006 (LOE) and the Organic Law for the Improvement of the Educational Quality of 2013 (LOMCE) include them in his preamble and text. Perrenoud (2012) indicates that the fascination for the competencies and their incorporation in the educational systems is not only due to the influence of the economic and European institutions, but they have also been adapted to the global character, and every time much more demanding of the society we live in, the technologies, the ways of life and of work (Perrenoud, 2012:39). We have gone through a review of the term competence to extract, based on Corominas (2006), some common characteristics of the concept competence: it is related to the action, it gets up-to-date in the action, it is linked to a context, it integrates different elements, it facilitates the effective resolution of different situations and it is teachable. In this article, the competence is understood as a conscious and reflexive use of knowledge, skills and attitudes for the resolution of a certain problem with capacity of adjustment to the different conditions and capable of being used in different areas or situations.

## 2. Linguistic Communicative Competence

The oral expression turns into a way of expression for the thought and at the same time, it feeds back and develops by means of the linguistic function (Vygotski, 1992; Piaget, 1983a, 1983b; Pinker, 2003). "Speaking is having something to say and to be able to say it; to find the words, to construct the phrases well, to give them their own expression. Then, it is when the communication is easy, always considering as everything what is said, how it is said and to whom it is said" (Aymerich, 1971:61). For Sapir, the language is purely human and it is a not instinctive method of communication of ideas, emotions and desires, by means of symbols produced voluntarily (Sapir, 1921). Chomsky defines the language as a set of phrases, each of them with a finite duration and constructed from a finite number of elements (Chomsky, 1957). Nowadays, the language is considered to be a way of communication in which two or more participants interact. The linguistic communicative competence refers to the use of language as an oral and written instrument of communication, of representation, interpretation and comprehension of the reality, of construction and communication of the knowledge and of organization and auto regulation of the thought, the emotions and the behaviour. We emphasize that the orality and its education have strong resistances on students. Zuccherini (1992) indicates some of the reasons from the school resistance to the spoken language as the difficulties of permanency, of reflection, of uniformity, produce major weariness and distraction. Other authors (Díaz, 2006:23) indicate problems in the acquisition of the oral competence because of the evolutionary dimension of the language and of the generality of the competence.

At educational level, in order to acquire the oral competence would be necessary a continued practice of the oral expression, from the infancy up to the conclusion of the studies, adapted to the age of the pupil (Canes, 2000; Lopez Valero and Encabo, 2001; Palou and Bosch, 2005, Quiles, 2006). The school must develop in the pupil this capacity and evaluate it (Murillo, Martínez-Garrido e Hidalgo, 2014), since the current society demands with many frequency interactions that need the oral expression in public.

Although educationally there has been more effort to develop the written competence, nowadays it is been more considered the communicative approach and the orality (Quiles, 2006). Though, as Monfort (1995) indicates that it is not very sure nevertheless that this change has overcome the simple abstract level of the definition of objectives in the practices of the different educational levels. Some authors like Canale and Swain (1980) specify that the communicative competence is integrated by four competencies: linguistics, sociolinguistics, strategic and discursive. In our case we focus on the oral part that includes, mainly the four mentioned competencies.

To sum up, the basic competence in linguistic communication involves a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are interrelated and rely on the communicative act. The knowledge is absolutely necessary for the reflection on the functioning of the language and its procedure of use. The knowledge is classified on linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic knowledge of the language. The skills are the necessary abilities to listen and to understand the different speeches, as well as to formulate the ideas across the oral language. They are included inside the skills, the necessary strategies to regulate the communicative exchange, the skills to read

and to understand texts, as well as to write diverse types of texts with varied intentions. The attitudes favor the listening, the contrast of different opinions and the respect towards the opinions of others. In turn, they also favor the interest for the intercultural communication (Documento Currículo y Competencias Básicas, Ministerio de Educación, 2006).

## 3. Communication in a Foreign Language

On the other hand, the linguistic communicative competence in English has also been the object of a theoretical review that we synthesize in the following lines based on Nikleva and Curtain Perez's works (2014). According to Perez Esteve (2008:43) "to be competent in linguistic communication means to possess the necessary resources to take part, by means of the language, in the different spheres of the social life". Two outstanding authors in the teaching of English were Chomsky (1965) and Hymes (1971): the first one as a reference in linguistic competence and the second one based on the communicative competence.

The Council of Europe with the creation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment (2002) for the unification of directives in the learning and education of the languages proposes orientations by means of linguistic guidelines to achieve the communication in the teaching-learning process of a language. The document specifies, in a general way, the principal capacities of the communication in the mother tongue. It is based on the skill to understand, to express and to interpret thoughts, feelings and facts of oral and written forms (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in a wide range of social contexts (personal and professional life, leisure and education), in agreement with the desires or needs of each person. It is an illustrative document and it has turned into an international reference for all the professionals related to the education of foreign languages providing "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2002:1). It also refers to the learning and use of foreign languages are constructed on the general and communicative competences of the language of the individuals and that they facilitate to them the development of multilingual and multicultural competencies (Comisión Europea, 2004). The Document describes in an integrated form what the students of languages have to learn to do in order to use a language to communicate, as well as the knowledge and skills that they have to develop to be able to act in an effective way. The approach of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Consejo de Europa, 2002:9) is based on an "action-oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as social agents". In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages the acquisition of a language is contextualised with specific aims of communication and with the pretension to give response to the needs that from an intercultural Europe are needed to learn in the classrooms beyond linguistic contents. It contains three levels: proficient user, independent user and basic user, depending on their communicative development, being the first one of total domain, the second one of a correct use and the third one of a beginning use.

The aim of the Spanish educational system referred to the learning of a foreign language in Primary Education is very practical, since it aims the student to be able to communicate in the above mentioned language.

This is well described as a principal of the Spanish educational system in the Organic Law of Education: "the training for the communication in one or more foreign languages" (LOE, cap. I, art. I) and in the current Organic Law for the Improvement of the Educational Quality: "to achieve that the students unroll fluently at least in one foreign language" (LOMCE, Preámbulo XII). It is divided into knowledge (discursive, oral, writings, uses), skills (expression, argumentation, adjustment, verbalization, conversation) and attitudes (listening, contrast, confidence, interpretation, comprehension and relation). "The framework is formed by one of the most important contributions for the Didactics of the Languages-Cultures, especially for the school contexts, where it cannot be considered to be a foreign element to the set of the components of the curriculum of languages". (García Doval et al., 2004:78). Following these recommendations and components, a study of detection of the level of oral competence of the Spanish pupils when they finish the stage of Primary Education has been carried out.

## 4. Methodology

Tejedor (1999) indicates that the most used methodology inside the investigation in education, is of descriptive type. Whereas Creswell (2002) understands the descriptive studies of investigation as the ones in which the investigator applies a certain instrument to a representative sample of the population in order to study certain attitudes, behaviors or characteristics of it. This is the motive why we have selected this methodology. This study of investigation is also based on the non-experimental methodology (Latorre, y Arnal, 2005) and to be more specific, it is an ex-post fact investigation (Bisquerra, 1989; Arnal, Del Rincón and Latorre, 1992; Buendía, Colás and Hernández, 1998; Latorre et al., 2005) prospective type (Colás, Buendía and Pina, 2009) since the independent variables cannot be manipulated but analyzed to determine in what degree they influence the dependent variables. The methodology of our study is therefore descriptive and interpretive.

The general aim of the study is to analyse the level of achievement in oral communicative competence in English acquired by the students at the end of the Primary Education of León's Province. The specific aims would be four: to establish the level of expression and oral interaction in English of the students of sixth course of Primary Education in León's Province; to know if differences exist in the level acquired in linguistic communicative competence in English between ordinary and bilingual schools; to determine differences in the level of achievement of the linguistic communicative competence in English between male pupils and female pupils and to establish if the pupils who dedicate more time to the revision and study of the English language will obtain better results in the acquisition of the linguistic communicative competence.

In relation to the sample of this investigation, the population are the pupils of sixth course of Primary Education of all the public centers (131 centers) of León's Province. Inside the

dilemma between non-probability sample or intentional sample, it has been chosen the second one following a strategical criteria where the individuals are related to the characteristics of the investigation and provide very relevant information for the aim of our study (Hernández Pina, Maquilón Sanchez and Cuesta Sáez de Tejada, 2008). This way we manage to represent the different typology that we wanted to analyse (non probability-intentional sample) including the different zones that are part of León's province (representative geographical sample). We emphasize that in León's city there are 18 schools of which 12 have bilingual education, one has the linguistic section and only five are ordinary schools. The present study took into account the number of public schools object of analysis and this way, it was carried out in six schools of the capital of the province and one in Bembibre, as representative of the region called *El Bierzo*; two schools of the region called *Maragatería* and five of the area called *Ribera*. The zone of Riaño's mountains with 15.956 inhabitants is represented by three schools; Laciana's Valley and the south of the province by other two schools. Sahagún with 7.057 inhabitants, is represented by a public school. The region Esla-Campos, in the south-east of the province with 26.391 inhabitants, is represented by a school.

The withdrawal of information was personal: we talked to the heads of the schools and the English teachers of sixth course of Primary Education to ask for their collaboration in the study and to know their availability to form part of the investigation. The sample remained constituted as it continues: public urban schools: two ordinary schools and five bilingual schools; public rural schools: eleven ordinary schools and 5 bilingual schools. To emphasize that there are 19 public bilingual schools for 18 of ordinary teaching. With regard to the evaluated pupils the sample remained composed by a total of 265 individuals with ages between 11 and 13 years old, being the average of these pupils 11.54 years and its mode 11 (128 individuals). According to gender, it is observed that there is an equitable distribution between male pupils and female pupils, though lightly superior for the female pupils. The 45.3% are boys (N = 120 individuals) and the 54.7% are girls (N = 145 individuals).

The instrument was a test of evaluation named COBAIO (Basic Competence in Oral English), to analyse the oral competence in English. It consists of a questionnaire with the information of context of the students in which descriptive information is gathered, fundamentally about their personal information, their family, their dedication to the study of the subject, and also concerning the attitude towards the subject and the teacher, and of a test for the evaluation of the oral expression and interaction that adjusts to the contents gathered in the legal text. To evaluate the speaking skills the tasks that were applied were *"Personal questions"* and *"John's typical day"* respectively, designed to evaluate the oral production in the last course of Primary Education. This test besides evaluating the skill of *oral expression and oral interaction* of the linguistic communicative competence in English, connects with the curriculum of Primary Education, concretely with the Block of content 1: *listening, talking and conversing*, of the area of Foreign Language. The task has been designed bearing in mind the interests of the pupils and the reality, that is to say, their environment, with the aim to check the capacities and skills of the pupil and to value their degree of acquisition of the oral competence. Every test was realized individually and it consists of two parts: phase of interaction, in which a dialogue takes place about school between the examiner and the pupil; and phase of production, where was applied the task *"John's typical day"* designed to evaluate the oral production.

*Table 1. Expression and oral interaction: dimensions, indicators and marks*

| Personal Questions | Marks | Indicators | Dimensions |
|---|---|---|---|
| What time do you start school? | 0-4 | Interaction | Communicative skills |
| How do you go to school? | 0-4 | Organization and coherence | |
| What's your favourite subject? | | | |
| What sports do you play at school? | 0-4 | Rhythm, entonation and pronunciation | Verbal skills |
| Tell me about your best friend at school. | | | |
| John's typical day | 0-4 | Fluency | |
| Continue the description of John's typical day. | 0-4 | Grammar | Use of language |

The validity of the instrument was done by the criteria of five experts by three indicators: appropriateness, relevancy and uniqueness. The questionnaire went through three reviews before the definite version with the mentioned criteria. The reliability across Cronbach's alfa showed that with 49 elements was 0.735. The scale was administered by the investigators who gathered also aspects as the familiar environment, the dedication or the support to the study, the attitude towards the English subject and the results of the oral expression and oral interaction. Undoubtedly, the essence of the learning of any language is the aptitude to be able to communicate using it. In the final part, the capacity of the pupil to express correctly and with a minimal coherence in English is evaluated, as well as that of being able to maintain a short conversation on a familiar topic for the pupil, in this case about school.

# 5. Results

## 5.1. General data of the sample

We analyze the sample takin into account the ages, the gender, the geographical origin (rural or urban), and the previous programs (ordinary or bilingual schools). This way we have that the 41.4% of the total of the sample of 11 years old are boys (N=53 students), whereas the other 58.6% are girls (N=75 students). The male pupils who compose the group of 12

years old represent 47% (N=55 students) and the female pupils 53 % (N=62 students). The group of 13 years old is composed by 53% of boys (N=10 students and 47% of girls (N=9 students). If we take into account the type of school (rural or urban) of the participants we have a very equitable distribution 55.5% that comes from a public urban center (N=147 students) and 44.5% that belongs to a public rural school (N=118 students). Likewise, the study has been carried out in public schools of ordinary and bilingual education. The sample of our study is divided, consequently, in four strata: public urban ordinary schools (12%), public urban bilingual schools (43%), rural ordinary schools (31%) and rural bilingual schools (14%). That in all the centers of bilingual education visited, 10 centers with a total of 150 pupils, the subjects dealed by the students in all the cases are Science and Arts.

**5.2. Global results of the oral expression and oral interaction**

An increasing scale of values has been designed from 0 to 5 to evaluate the level of achievement in oral expression and oral interaction and to classify the different levels of achievement reached by the students of sixth grade of Primary Education under oral expression and oral interaction in English.

*Table 2. Oral expression and oral interaction: level of achievement*

| Level of achievement | Marks | Code |
|---|---|---|
| Non-significant | 0 | 0 |
| Very deficient | 1-4 | 1 |
| Deficient | 5-9 | 2 |
| Intermediate | 10-14 | 3 |
| Good | 15-19 | 4 |
| Excellent | 20-24 | 5 |

The results register that the pupils show a very positive level of oral expression and oral interaction placing practically the totality of the sample in positive results (N=43 students; 93%). Only 7% is in low levels (N=3 students), being non-existent the values in the levels very deficient or non-significant. By gender, the number of female pupils is higher to the number of male pupils, this way in the excellent level the female pupils register 30.4% (N=14 students) and the male pupils 21.7% (N=10 students). The public bilingual centers stand out in the excellent level with 21.7% followed by the students of public rural bilingual centers (N=8 students). The highest percentage places in the intermediate level with 24% (N=11 students) of students enrolled in schools in public rural ordinary centers. The highest percentage in the excellent level is occupied by the pupils of public urban bilingual centers, being the totality of the sample of this type of center the one that is registered in the above mentioned level (N=10 students; 100%).

## 6. Conclusions

The results obtained in our empirical study do not correspond with the generalised belief by different studies realised by the Council of Europe and the Department of Education and Science that hold that Spain continues being in Europa's tail in terms of learning a foreign language. The obtained information relative to the oral competence in English aims that the levels of achievement of students of the province of León are over the intermediate level. This way, more than half of the sample (52.2%) reaches the highest level, excellent level.

Differences exist in the level acquired in linguistic communicative competence in English language between ordinary and bilingual centers. We coincide with Genesee (1987) that the benefits of the bilingual education do not manage to obtain until the pupils of bilingual educations reach the sixth grade, moment in which his capacities of transfer and their cognitive skills develop already with fullness. It is in the oral expression and oral interaction where the most important differences are obtained. Since 90% of the pupils who study in bilingual centers obtain a punctuation of 5 (excellent level) and level 4 (good level) that of 1% remaining. Only 23% of the pupils of ordinary centers obtains the level 5 (excellent level), being practically the half of the sample (46.2%) in the level 3 (intermediate level). According to the answers of the interviewed teachers more importance is granted to the communication and to the interaction in the bilingual education (Coyle et al., 2010). In our study, a positive impact is revealed in speaking and conversing.

Differences exist in the level of achievement of the linguistic communicative competence in English between male pupils and female pupils since girls obtain better results that boys. In the same line Burstall (1975) demonstrates that women show an attitude more favorable attitude than men before the language it puts and achieve better results inside the academic context. Finally, in the levels good and excellent the percentage of male pupils is 68.4% and that of female pupils is 70.4%. Consequently differences exist in the level of achievement of the linguistic communicative competence between male pupils and female pupils, coinciding with Lahuerta Martínez (2014).

Obviously, the pupils who dedicate more time to the revision and study of the English subject obtain better results in the acquisition of the linguistic communicative competence in oral expression and oral interaction. Pupils who dedicate enough and a little time to the study of the English subject (39%) got the highest percentages in the excellent level. Surprisingly, the assistance to English particular classes does not influence the results of the students' linguistic communicative competence in English, unlike the belief extended that private lessons guarantee improvement in English.

According to pupils' behaviour aspects, the results show the existence of a positive relation between the behaviour variable and the level of achievement in the evaluated competence. The emotion is defined as an essential component of the cognition in diverse studies on the acquisition of languages and it is also considered that emotion and cognition cannot separate (Arnold, 2000). The approaches are different according to the variety of the affective dimension. IT can influence both personal factors and individual differences (Rodríguez Perez, 2014). Some authors emphasize, between the different affective variables, the attitude that the pupils show towards the knowledge of the new language (Gardner and Lambert, 1972), others emphasize the importance in the learning process of the pupils' emotional conditions (Oxford and Shearin, 1994). In this study, the attitude towards the English subject and towards the teacher are positve attitudes, as well as the study of the

language coinciding with Pavón Vázquez's study; Prieto Molina and Avila Lopez (2015). In oral expression and oral interaction the percentage of major competition corresponds to the pupils who like the subject and the teacher a lot placed in the excellent level.

As for the linguistic skill, the achievements obtained in this test place over what is expected, since more than the half of the sample (52,2%) reaches a level 5 (level of excellent achievement). It is necessary to add that none of the sample obtains level either 0 (non-significant level) nor level 1 (very deficient level). The pupils' average of the sample reaches a 4.1 value. This one is a high value that allows to affirm that the pupils of the sample, in a high percentage, dominate this linguistic skill. On the other hand, the distribution of partial qualifications (interaction, organization and coherence, rhythm, intonation and pronunciation, fluency, grammar and vocabulary) indicate that the pupils reach the highest average in the cognitive subdimension that includes the rhythm, the intonation and the pronunciation followed of organization and coherence. The results improve lightly in the subdimensions of fluency and interaction.

As discussion we indicate the confirmation of positive aspects as the attitude towards the language and the level acquired in all kinds of studied schools, as well as the positive influence of the bilingualism in the learning of the English language, besides a good global general competence detected. Aspects confirmed also are the best competence of the pupils and the preeminence of the public urban schools. Contrary to the awaited result, attending private lessons once or twice per week does not improve the oral competence.

Though the sample is wide, we consider that extended the national study might change in someone of the conclusions, but globally one might answer the study with results very similar to the obtained ones.

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