

## **Diagnosis of the use of English as a foreign language as an instrumental competence in university students from Cuenca- Ecuador**

### **Diagnóstico del uso de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera como competencia instrumental en estudiantes universitarios de Cuenca-Ecuador**

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Fechas de recepción: 05-OCT-2023 aceptación: 08-DIC-2023 publicación: 15-DIC-2023



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## Resumen

Este proyecto de investigación tiene como objetivo diagnosticar el uso del inglés como lengua extranjera como competencia instrumental entre los estudiantes universitarios de Cuenca, Ecuador y reconocer su importancia para las oportunidades internacionales. El proyecto se enfoca en evaluar la efectividad de los programas de idioma inglés y las estrategias de enseñanza dirigidas a desarrollar habilidades lingüísticas entre los estudiantes. El estudio de campo no experimental, que incluye análisis cualitativo y cuantitativo, recogerá datos de estudiantes y docentes de la Universidad Católica de Cuenca, y entre los resultados esperados se encuentra una comprensión más profunda del desarrollo del lenguaje. Mejoras pedagógicas y sugiriendo estrategias específicas para mejorar las habilidades lingüísticas. Este proyecto de investigación contribuye a la mejora de la enseñanza del idioma inglés en Cuenca, preparando a los estudiantes para el éxito en un mundo globalizado y multicultural.

**Palabras clave:** Inglés como Lengua Extranjera; Competencia instrumental; estudiantes universitarios, habilidades lingüísticas

## Abstract

This research project aims to diagnose the use of English as a foreign language as an instrumental competence among university students in Cuenca, Ecuador, and to recognize its importance for international opportunities. The project evaluates the effectiveness of English language programs and teaching strategies to develop language skills among students. The non-experimental field study, which includes qualitative and quantitative analysis, will collect data from students and teachers at the Catholic University of Cuenca, and among the expected results is a deeper understanding of language development, pedagogical improvements, and suggesting specific strategies to improve language skills. This research project aims to improve English language teaching in Cuenca and prepare students for success in a globalized and multicultural world.

**Keywords:** English as a foreign language; Instrumental competence; University students; Language skills; Improvement of English teaching.



## Introduction

The Tuning project is an initiative launched by more than 135 European educational institutions to improve learning conditions, focusing on student mobility and development. One of its main objectives is to contribute to developing an easily comparable and understandable career, starting with the goals set by a career itself. Thus, the starting point of the projects is to seek a standard reference with an emphasis on competencies and skills. Competencies in higher education are addressed in instrumental, interpersonal, and systemic areas that should be developed by university students throughout their careers in a transversal and independent manner, separate from the skills that correspond to the specific objectives of the career and subject, as well as applicable practical skills. Among the instrumental competencies is mastering a foreign language such as English.

In the context of the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, there has been an increasing demand for English language skills by companies and a greater awareness of the importance of acquiring competencies in this language to access international educational and employment opportunities. However, there is a persistent concern regarding the level of English language development among university students in the city.

The problem statement lies in the need to evaluate and understand the current state of English language development as an instrumental competence among university students in Cuenca. Despite English being taught as part of the curriculum in many educational institutions, there are concerns about the effectiveness of programs and teaching strategies used to promote the development of English language competencies among university students. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the following question: What is the perception of university students in Cuenca regarding their mastery of English as an instrumental competence?

Research and analysis of this question is expected to obtain a clear and comprehensive overview of English language development as an instrumental competence among university students in Cuenca. This will facilitate the identification of areas for improvement, proposals, recommendations, and pedagogical strategies to promote more effective development of English as an instrumental competence in this context. This will improve the quality of education and prepare university students in Cuenca to face the challenges and demands of a globalized and multicultural world.

### *Literature Review*

Mastering English as a foreign language has become essential in today's globalized world. In Cuenca, Ecuador, employers have a growing demand for English language skills and an increased awareness of the importance of acquiring competencies in this language to access international educational and employment opportunities. Therefore, conducting research focused on developing English language competencies among university students in Cuenca is justified.

First and foremost, it is crucial to examine and analyze the level of English language competency among university students in Cuenca. Through the implementation of an

empirical study, the student's English language proficiency can be assessed, identifying specific strengths and weaknesses in different areas such as listening comprehension, written expression, grammar, and vocabulary. These findings will provide valuable insights into this population's current English language competency development and serve as a starting point for designing improvement strategies.

Furthermore, researching to investigate the main difficulties and challenges faced by university students in Cuenca when learning English as a foreign language is justified. By understanding these challenges, educators and educational policymakers can develop more effective approaches and strategies to address the specific needs of students and enhance their English language learning process.

Another relevant aspect is examining the pedagogical practices employed in educational institutions in Cuenca to develop English language competencies among university students. A comprehensive review of existing literature on methodologies, approaches, and resources used in teaching English as a foreign language can be conducted, analyzing how they are applied in the local context. This research will help identify best practices and recommendations to optimize the English language teaching and learning process in Cuenca's universities.

Lastly, it is justified to propose concrete strategies and recommendations to improve the development of English language competencies among university students in Cuenca. These recommendations can address aspects such as selecting suitable teaching materials, designing interactive and communicative activities, incorporating technology in the classroom, and promoting opportunities for practical and real-world use of English in academic and extracurricular settings.

It will be appropriate to say that by analyzing the use of English as a foreign language as an instrumental competence, according to the perception of university students and teachers, for the proposal of pedagogical elements that improve the teaching and learning process through the accomplishment of the study the perception of university students in Cuenca regarding the usefulness and relevance of English in their academic education and future career and by examining the opinion of teachers regarding the level of development of English as an instrumental competence among university students in Cuenca. Moreover, to determine pedagogical elements that benefit the improvement of teaching and learning processes of English as an instrumental competence in university educational institutions in Cuenca, Ecuador.

Developing English language competencies is a relevant and increasingly important topic in the current global context. English language competencies refer to the skills and knowledge necessary to communicate in English in various oral and written contexts effectively. These competencies encompass listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Developing English language competencies involves acquiring the ability to understand, interact, and express oneself appropriately and effectively in diverse communicative situations (Espinoza & Olivares, 2023). This referential theoretical

framework aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the critical components related to developing English language competencies.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in developing language competencies. According to this theory, language learning is a social process through meaningful interactions with more competent individuals, such as teachers, peers, or native speakers. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept suggests that learners can achieve higher levels of language proficiency with the guidance and support of a knowledgeable other (Vygotsky, 1978).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): CLT is an influential pedagogical approach focusing on communication and language use in real-life contexts. It promotes integrating the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and emphasizes the importance of meaningful interaction. In CLT classrooms, learners engage in authentic communicative tasks and activities that reflect real-world language use. This approach fosters the development of English language competencies by providing opportunities for practice and promoting fluency and accuracy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Listening comprehension is understanding spoken English in various contexts and genres. It involves perceiving and interpreting meaning from oral discourse, identifying main ideas, supporting details, and implicit information. Effective listening comprehension requires the application of cognitive processes such as attention, perception, inference, and prediction (Vandergrift, 2007).

Speaking refers to the ability to express oneself orally in English. It involves producing coherent and cohesive utterances, using appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Developing speaking skills requires the integration of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-pragmatic competencies and the ability to engage in interactive communication, negotiate meaning, and adapt language use to different contexts (Bygate, 2000).

Reading involves the interpretation and comprehension of written texts in English. It requires extracting information, understanding main ideas, inferring meaning, and evaluating the overall message. Effective reading comprehension relies on various cognitive processes, including word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic and textual analysis, and background knowledge activation (Grabe, 2009).

Writing encompasses the production of coherent and cohesive texts in English. It involves organizing ideas, using appropriate vocabulary and grammar, effectively conveying information, and expressing opinions. Developing writing skills requires the application of strategic processes, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing, and the ability to adapt writing style and register to different purposes and audiences (Hyland, 2003).

To promote the development of English language competencies, learners should receive ample language input through exposure to authentic materials, such as books, articles, videos, and podcasts. Engaging in regular practice and producing language output through activities such as conversation, discussions, presentations, and writing exercises also contribute to language competency development (Thornbury, 2005).

Authentic Materials and Contexts: Using authentic resources in English language instruction enhances language competencies. Authentic materials, such as real-life texts, multimedia resources, and genuine documents, provide learners with exposure to natural language use and facilitate the development of comprehension and expression skills in authentic contexts (Peacock, 1997).

Frequent and specific feedback from teachers, as well as interaction with native or proficient English speakers, play a crucial role in language competency development. Constructive feedback helps learners identify areas for improvement and supports refining language skills. Interaction with proficient speakers provides opportunities for real-life communication, enhancing fluency and accuracy (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

Assessing English language competencies is essential for measuring learners' progress and evaluating the effectiveness of language instruction. Assessments should be valid, reliable, and fair, aligning with established objectives and standards. They can include oral and written comprehension tests and oral and written expression. Assessments should also evaluate language use in authentic contexts, such as engaging in conversations, delivering presentations, or writing for specific purposes and audiences (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

This referential theoretical framework provides an overview of the critical components of developing English language competencies. It highlights the theoretical foundations, such as sociocultural theory and communicative language teaching, that underpin language learning. The framework explores the components of English language competencies, including listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as strategies for their development, such as language input and output, authentic materials and contexts, and feedback and interaction. Lastly, the framework emphasizes the importance of valid and reliable assessment methods to accurately measure learners' language competencies. Understanding and applying these components and strategies can enhance the effectiveness of English language instruction and facilitate the development of learners' language competencies.

### ***The Need for English Language Competencies***

#### *Growing Demand for English Language Skills*

In the city of Cuenca, there has been an increasing demand for English language skills by companies and organizations. As the world becomes more interconnected, businesses are expanding their operations globally, and proficiency in English has become a valuable asset. Companies seek employees who can effectively communicate with international clients, participate in global projects, and collaborate with diverse teams.

Furthermore, access to international educational and employment opportunities often requires a particular English language proficiency level. Many universities and institutions abroad require applicants to demonstrate English language competency through standardized tests such as the TOEFL or IELTS. By acquiring English language competencies, university

students in Cuenca can enhance their chances of studying abroad, pursuing international internships, and securing global job opportunities.

### *Benefits of English Language Competencies*

English language competencies open doors to a wide range of opportunities. They enable individuals to engage with a global audience, access a wealth of knowledge and resources available in English, and participate in international academic and professional networks. Proficiency in English empowers university students to communicate effectively in various settings, including academic conferences, research collaborations, and job interviews.

Moreover, English language competencies contribute to personal growth and cultural enrichment. They allow individuals to connect with people from different backgrounds, understand diverse perspectives, and appreciate different cultures. By developing English language competencies, university students in Cuenca can become global citizens who can contribute meaningfully to a multicultural and interconnected world.

### *Challenges in English Language Development*

#### *Effectiveness of English Language Programs*

Despite English being taught as part of the curriculum in many educational institutions in Cuenca, there are concerns about the effectiveness of programs and teaching strategies used to promote the development of English language competencies among university students. It is crucial to evaluate the current state of English language development as an instrumental proficiency and identify areas for improvement.

#### *Specific Challenges Faced by University Students*

University students in Cuenca face specific challenges in learning English as a foreign language. These challenges include limited exposure to authentic English language materials and contexts, insufficient practice opportunities, lack of confidence in using English, and limited access to resources and support outside the classroom. Understanding and addressing these challenges is crucial to creating a conducive learning environment for English language development.

### *Improving English Language Teaching*

#### *Evaluation of English Language Competencies*

To improve English language teaching in Cuenca, it is essential to evaluate the English language competencies of university students. This can be done through comprehensive assessments that measure listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills. By

identifying strengths and weaknesses, educators can tailor their teaching approaches and strategies to meet the specific needs of students.

#### *Enhancing Language Input and Output*

Language input and output are crucial for the development of English language competencies. University students should be exposed to authentic English language materials and contexts, such as books, articles, videos, and podcasts. Engaging in regular practice and producing language output through activities like group discussions, presentations, and writing exercises can also contribute to language competency development.

#### *Incorporating Authentic Materials and Contexts*

The use of authentic resources in English language instruction enhances language competencies. Authentic materials, including real-life texts, multimedia resources, and genuine documents, provide learners with exposure to natural language use and facilitate the development of comprehension and expression skills in real contexts. Incorporating authentic materials and contexts into English language teaching can make the learning experience more engaging, relevant, and effective.

#### *Providing Constructive Feedback and Interaction*

Frequent and specific teacher feedback and interaction with proficient English speakers are crucial in language competency development. Constructive feedback helps learners identify areas for improvement and supports refining language skills. Interaction with proficient speakers provides opportunities for real-life communication, enhancing fluency and accuracy. Therefore, educators must provide timely and constructive feedback and create opportunities for meaningful interaction in the English language classroom.

## **Materials and methods**

The research employed a non-experimental field study approach with a mixed-methods framework to investigate dependent and independent variables. The qualitative analysis included an initial literature-based review, providing profound insights into the research environment and validating the study's integrity. Additionally, a quantitative analysis was conducted through information collection and statistical analysis.

Various research methods were utilized to address the study's subject comprehensively. The historical-logical method traced the phenomenon's trajectory throughout its history, offering relevant context. The analytical-synthetic method dissected the subject into parts for individual analysis before integrating them for a comprehensive understanding. The inductive-deductive method derived general conclusions from specific observations, while the descriptive-explanatory method furnished detailed information to support the



investigation. Lastly, the systemic approach allowed for analyzing the subject as an interconnected system of elements and processes.

Data collection techniques involved surveys and structured questionnaires within the studied institution. This methodological amalgamation ensured a robust and exhaustive approach to the investigated phenomenon. The study adopted a mixed-methods design to address dependent and independent variables in a non-experimental field setting. The qualitative and quantitative analyses enriched the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The research sample comprised 92 participants, including 61 university students and 31 English teachers. Student selection involved non-probability convenience sampling, targeting first-year students from various University Católica de Cuenca faculties. Students aged 18 to 22 constituted 65% women and 35% men. For teachers, intentional non-probability sampling was applied, including instructors with over five years of experience teaching English at the university level in Cuenca. Among surveyed teachers, 60% were women, and 40% were men, aged between 30 and 55. All participants belonged to the realm of teaching English as a foreign language. This sample size and composition facilitated the collection of representative perspectives from students and teachers regarding English proficiency development in the university context of Cuenca.

The results obtained from diverse research methods and data collection techniques contribute to knowledge in the study area and provide a solid foundation for future research and practical applications. Considerations regarding the research design, methods, and ethical aspects ensure a comprehensive and rigorous scientific approach.

## Results

In the analysis of the sample results, a survey was conducted involving 92 participants, comprised of 31 teachers and 61 students, all in the English language teaching field. Concerning the interpretation of the results, it focused on the central questions described below.

### *Students Perceptions*

**Table 1:** Students' perception of EFL's importance for your personal and professional life

### Tablas de Frecuencias

Frecuencias para Grammar Complexity

Grammar Complexity	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Easy	8	12.121	13.115	13.115
Moderately Difficult	36	54.545	59.016	72.131
Difficult	10	15.152	16.393	88.525
Very Difficult	7	10.606	11.475	100.000
Ausente	5	7.576		
Total	66	100.000		

Frecuencias para Pronunciation and Phonetics

Pronunciation and Phonetics	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Easy	9	13.636	14.754	14.754
Moderately Difficult	26	39.394	42.623	57.377
Difficult	20	30.303	32.787	90.164
Very Difficult	6	9.091	9.836	100.000
Ausente	5	7.576		
Total	66	100.000		

Frecuencias para Speaking Fluency

Speaking Fluency	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Easy	10	15.152	16.393	16.393
Moderately Difficult	21	31.818	34.426	50.820
Difficult	22	33.333	36.066	86.885
Very Difficult	8	12.121	13.115	100.000
Ausente	5	7.576		
Total	66	100.000		

Source: Survey applied to students and teachers

The analysis of the surveys conducted with university students reveals that the main difficulty they face in comprehending and learning English lies in Speaking Fluency, with a percentage of 33.33%. For 54.55% of the students surveyed, Grammar Complexity is perceived as Moderately Difficult; additionally, pronunciation and phonetics are considered Moderately Difficult, with a percentage of 39.39%. This information suggests that university students face significant challenges in their learning process.

**Table 2:** EFL instrumental competencies importance



### Tablas de Frecuencias

Frecuencias para Properly use of information and communication technologies as tools

Properly use of information and communication technologies as tools	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Strongly Disagree	5	7.576	8.197	8.197
Disagree	3	4.545	4.918	13.115
Agree	24	36.364	39.344	52.459
Strongly Agree	29	43.939	47.541	100.000
Ausente	5	7.576		
Total	66	100.000		

Frecuencias para Problem-Solving skills

Problem-Solving skills	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Strongly Disagree	4	6.061	6.557	6.557
Disagree	6	9.091	9.836	16.393
Agree	28	42.424	45.902	62.295
Strongly Agree	23	34.848	37.705	100.000
Ausente	5	7.576		
Total	66	100.000		

Frecuencias para Autonomous learning skills

Autonomous learning skills	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Strongly Disagree	4	6.061	6.557	6.557
Disagree	5	7.576	8.197	14.754
Agree	29	43.939	47.541	62.295
Strongly Agree	23	34.848	37.705	100.000
Ausente	5	7.576		
Total	66	100.000		

Source: Survey applied to students and teachers

The surveys conducted with university students indicate that the importance of instrumental competencies in teaching English as a foreign language stands out with a Strongly Agree, reaching 43.94% in the category "Adequate use of information and communication technologies as tools." Likewise, 42.42% of students show agreement (Agree) in problem-solving skills, while 43.94% prefer autonomous learning skills.

A comparative analysis of the information provided shows specific significant patterns and contrasts. First, regarding difficulties in learning the English language, the main difficulty identified by university students is Speaking fluency, with 33.33%. On the other hand, Grammar Complexity and pronunciation/phonetics are also identified as moderately challenging, with percentages of 54.55% and 39.39%, respectively. These findings suggest a diverse set of linguistic challenges that students face in their learning process.

In relation to instrumental competencies, the results indicate a valuation of these skills among university students. It is remarkable that 43.94% show strong agreement (Strongly Agree) regarding the "Adequate use of information and communication technologies as tools." In addition, 42.42% express agreement (Agree) in problem-solving skills, while 43.94% prefer autonomous learning skills. These data suggest that students recognize the importance of instrumental competencies in teaching English as a foreign language.

Consequently, the comparative analysis highlights the diversity of linguistic challenges students face while underlining the importance attributed to instrumental competencies in learning the English language. These findings can be critical to inform more effective pedagogical strategies and teaching programs.

### **TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS**

**Table 2:** Teachers' perception of difficulties when teaching English as a Foreign Language

#### **Tablas de Frecuencias**

Frecuencias para Grammar Complexity

Grammar Complexity	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Easy	6	19.355	19.355	19.355
Moderately Difficult	10	32.258	32.258	51.613
Difficult	11	35.484	35.484	87.097
Very Difficult	4	12.903	12.903	100.000
Ausente	0	0.000		
Total	31	100.000		

Frecuencias para Pronunciation and Phonetics

Pronunciation and Phonetics	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Easy	2	6.452	6.452	6.452
Moderately Difficult	13	41.935	41.935	48.387
Difficult	10	32.258	32.258	80.645
Very Difficult	6	19.355	19.355	100.000
Ausente	0	0.000		
Total	31	100.000		

Frecuencias para Speaking Fluency

Speaking Fluency	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Easy	2	6.452	6.452	6.452
Moderately Difficult	13	41.935	41.935	48.387
Difficult	11	35.484	35.484	83.871
Very Difficult	5	16.129	16.129	100.000
Ausente	0	0.000		
Total	31	100.000		

Source: Survey applied to students and teachers



The analysis of the surveys conducted with university professors indicates that the main difficulty they face when teaching the English language focuses on Speaking Fluency and Grammar Complexity, with a percentage of 35.48%. Likewise, 41.92% of professors consider the teaching of Pronunciation and Phonetics to be Moderately Difficult.

**Table 2:** Teachers' perception of EFL instrumental competencies elements to be improved

**Tablas de Frecuencias**

Frecuencias para Use of Educational Technologies

Use of Educational Technologies	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Somewhat Important	3	9.677	9.677	9.677
Important	10	32.258	32.258	41.935
Very Important	18	58.065	58.065	100.000
Ausente	0	0.000		
Total	31	100.000		

Frecuencias para Promotion of Critical Thinking Skills

Promotion of Critical Thinking Skills	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Not Important	1	3.226	3.226	3.226
Somewhat Important	1	3.226	3.226	6.452
Important	7	22.581	22.581	29.032
Very Important	22	70.968	70.968	100.000
Ausente	0	0.000		
Total	31	100.000		

Frecuencias para Promotion of Research and Independent Work

Promotion of Research and Independent Work	Frecuencia	Porcentaje	Porcentaje Válido	Porcentaje Acumulado
Somewhat Important	1	3.226	3.226	3.226
Important	15	48.387	48.387	51.613
Very Important	15	48.387	48.387	100.000
Ausente	0	0.000		
Total	31	100.000		

Source: Survey applied to students and teachers

The surveys conducted with university professors underline the relevance of instrumental competencies in teaching English as a foreign language. It is highlighted that implementing the Promotion of Critical Thinking Skills is considered very important by 70.97%, while the Use of Educational Technologies is perceived as very important today by 58.07%. Likewise, professors express that the Promotion of Research and Independent Work is highly important, reaching 48.39%, since they believe this allows students to acquire enhanced skills and focus on strengthening their knowledge.

In the comparative analysis of the surveys conducted with university professors, two fundamental aspects stand out regarding the difficulties and priorities in teaching the English language.

Regarding difficulties, professors indicate that the main complication in teaching English lies in Speaking Fluency and Grammar Complexity, representing 35.48%. Additionally, a considerable percentage of 41.92% find teaching Pronunciation and Phonetics Moderately Difficult. These findings indicate the importance of addressing these specific aspects to improve teaching quality and student comprehension of the language.

On the other hand, concerning instrumental competencies, professors have a high awareness of their importance. Implementing the Promotion of Critical Thinking Skills is considered very important by 70.97%, highlighting the need to encourage critical thinking among students. Additionally, the Use of Educational Technologies is perceived as very important today, with 58.07%, indicating the recognition of technology as a valuable tool in the teaching process. Finally, the Promotion of Research and Independent Work is also significantly valued, reaching 48.39%, reflecting the importance of developing research and autonomous learning skills.

Together, these results suggest the need to address the specific difficulties in teaching English while underlining the importance of strengthening instrumental competencies to improve educational quality and prepare students more effectively for language learning challenges.

It should be noted that among university students and professors surveyed on English language teaching, common challenges and points of convergence are identified. Students face difficulties in Speaking Fluency, Grammar Complexity, and Pronunciation/Phonetics, while professors recognize these areas as main obstacles. Both groups value instrumental competencies, highlighting the importance of technology use, critical thinking skills, and autonomy in learning. The alignment between students' and professors' perceptions suggests the need to address specific difficulties and strengthen instrumental competencies to improve educational quality in English language teaching. These results will inform more effective pedagogical strategies and programs.

## Discussion

The present study's findings reveal several vital insights regarding the use of English as an instrumental competence among university students in Cuenca, Ecuador.

Firstly, students' main challenges in learning English are speaking fluency, grammatical complexity, and pronunciation/phonetics. This aligns with previous research pointing out

these areas as the most difficult in mastering a foreign language (Richards, 2015; Ortega, 2013). The pedagogical implications point to the need to focus English teaching on the specific development of these linguistic skills.

Students and teachers also value the importance of instrumental competencies in English teaching. Educational technology, critical thinking, and autonomous learning are highlighted as key aspects to improve the quality of education in this field, consistent with contemporary approaches to generic competencies in higher education (González & Wagenaar, 2008; Rauhvargers, 2013). Integrating the development of these competencies transversally across English teaching programs is required.

Moreover, an alignment is evidenced between students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the difficulties and priorities in English teaching. This enables the identification of everyday needs to design effective pedagogical strategies (Van der Wende, 2015). The joint participation of students and teachers in initiatives such as the Tuning Project can contribute to this educational improvement process (González-Monteagudo & Yot, 2017).

This research provides detailed insight into the current state of English as an instrumental competence among university students in Cuenca. The findings have practical implications for guiding actions that enhance linguistic skills and generic competencies, involving students and teachers in the process. Further studies must delve deeper into specific methodologies and strategies for effectively teaching English as a foreign language in this educational context.

## Conclusions

English as a foreign language is an instrumental proficiency essential for university students in Cuenca, Ecuador. Developing English language competencies opens doors to international opportunities and contributes to personal growth, cultural enrichment, and global citizenship. However, challenges in English language development need to be addressed, such as the effectiveness of English language programs and the specific challenges faced by university students. By evaluating English language competencies and implementing strategies to enhance language input and output, incorporate authentic materials and contexts, and provide constructive feedback and interaction, English language teaching can be improved to meet the needs of university students in Cuenca. The findings of this study highlight the need for educational institutions to implement teacher training focused on developing effective pedagogical strategies to improve speaking skills and oral fluency, as well as to reinforce the teaching of English grammar and phonetics. Teachers are recommended to complement in-class English lessons with multimedia resources, oral interactions, and frequent feedback to students to promote active and communicative language learning. Educational authorities must increase resources dedicated to extracurricular programs, conversation clubs, international exchanges, and access to updated teaching materials to expand students' exposure to English. Higher education institutions and government entities must design policies, incentives, and programs that comprehensively enhance the mastery of English as a critical instrumental competence among university students nationwide. Further specific research is required on effective pedagogical strategies for teaching English as a foreign

language in the context of Ecuadorian universities. The development of solid competencies in English must be a priority in the country's higher education, given its importance for students' academic and professional performance in a globalized world.

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**Conflicto de intereses:**

Los autores declaran que no existe conflicto de interés posible.

**Financiamiento:**

No existió asistencia financiera de partes externas al presente artículo.

**Agradecimiento:**

N/A

**Note:**

El artículo no es producto de una publicación anterior.