

# SPANISH SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ORAL COMPETENCE IN EFL: SELF-ASSESSMENT, TEACHER ASSESSMENT AND TASKS<sup>1</sup>

**PILAR MUR-DUEÑAS**

**RAMÓN PLO**

**ANA HORNERO**

Universidad de Zaragoza

pmur@unizar.es

plo@unizar.es

ahornero@unizar.es

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## 1. Introduction

The European Union can be considered a multilingual area where English remains the most widely spoken L2 language for international communication. According to the report “Europeans and their languages” (2012: 19), 38% of EU citizens state that they have “sufficient skills in English to have a conversation”. Regarding the methods Europeans have used to reach that level of competence, a large majority of respondents (46%) name language lessons at school, and in Secondary Education in particular, as the most effective way of learning a foreign language (ibid.: 106). This positive global outcome, however, does not reflect a clearly uneven distribution of those levels of competence across Europe. The results of recent surveys focused on individual countries (EF EPI 2012, EECL 2012) describe the overall proficiency in English in Spain as “moderate” and rank it as one of the lowest in the European Union. Regarding specific skills, the perceived level of competence is particularly low in spoken English (Vez and Martínez Piñeiro 2004) despite increasing efforts on the part of the Spanish academic authorities to introduce the study of English at earlier ages.

There have been previous studies on the learning and acquisition of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in general, and of oral skills in particular, carried out in

Spain. Most of them, however, come from bilingual regions, such as Galicia (e.g. Palacios 1995, 2002), the Basque Country (e.g. Cenoz 2009; García Mayo et al. 2005) and Catalonia (e.g. Tragant and Muñoz 2000; Muñoz 2003). As a consequence, these studies focus on multilingualism and the acquisition of English as a third language in their contexts of education.

Our study focuses on the monolingual northern region of Aragón and the overall purpose is to analyse the current linguistic needs of Spanish students of English as a Foreign Language in Secondary Education (1<sup>st</sup> year of *ESO*<sup>2</sup>—thirteen-year-old students—, 4<sup>th</sup> year of *ESO*—sixteen-year-old students— and 2<sup>nd</sup> year of *Bachillerato*, the year leading up to university entrance—eighteen year old students), as well as the pedagogical and training needs of the teachers of English responsible for imparting these courses.

In this paper we seek to find an answer to the following questions, regarding the assessment of oral skills in Secondary Education in our particular context:

- Does the students' (perceived) competence in oral skills in EFL improve throughout the six-year period of instruction?
- Is the students' perception of their own competence in line with that of their teachers?
- Can any differences in competence and perceived competence be discerned taking into account the type of school (big city vs. town, private vs. public, non-bilingual vs. bilingual)?
- Do teachers' methods of assessment influence the students' (perceived) competence in oral skills?
- What are students' and teachers' views on the inclusion of an oral component in the University Entrance Examination English test?

The following sections seek to give an answer to these questions. Section 2 will illustrate the method followed and will show the participants involved and the research instruments employed. Then a discussion of the results obtained will follow, together with the conclusions and teaching and learning implications and proposals for improvement.

## 2. Method

In this section we describe the sample of schools selected, the number of students and teachers who participated, and the survey on which this research is based. It was distributed with the help of some coordinators in the schools. Only those results referring to oral skills and their assessment by teachers and students will be the focus of the present paper.

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### 2.1. Participants

A total of 15 Secondary Schools participated in the study. As the Table below indicates, a total of 2,010 students answered our survey and 63 of their teachers of English completed a parallel survey. The schools selected covered the following different categories:

Type of school: State-run/State-subsidised/Private

Location: 3 provinces in Aragón (Zaragoza/Huesca/Teruel)

Area: Urban/Rural

Methodological approach: Bilingual (CLIL)/Non-bilingual (EFL)<sup>3</sup>

	Province	Area	Type of school	Methodological approach	No. of teachers	No. of students
IES <sup>4</sup> Pedro de Luna (I) <sup>5</sup>	Zaragoza	Urban	State-run	Bilingual	8	127
IES Pedro de Luna (II)	Zaragoza	Urban	State-run	Non-bilingual	—	176
IES Miralbueno	Zaragoza	Urban	State-run	Non-bilingual	5	66
IES Tiempos Modernos <sup>6</sup>	Zaragoza	Urban	State-run	Bilingual/ Multilingual	2	74
Colegio <sup>7</sup> Santa María del Pilar	Zaragoza	Urban	State-subsidised	Non-bilingual	5	264
Colegio La Salle-Gran Vía	Zaragoza	Urban	State-subsidised	Non-bilingual	4	192
Colegio Británico de Aragón	Zaragoza	Urban	Private	Bilingual	2	75
Liceo Europa	Zaragoza	Urban	Private	Non-bilingual	2	115
IES Emilio Jimeno	Zaragoza (Calatayud)	Rural	State-run	Non-bilingual	6	204
Colegio Salesianos Laviaga Castillo	Zaragoza (La Almunia)	Rural	State-subsidised	Non-bilingual	2	40
IES Lucas Mallada	Huesca	Urban	State-run	Non-bilingual	5	107
IES La Litéra	Huesca (Tamarite)	Rural	State-run	Non-bilingual	3	90
IES Santa Emerenciana	Teruel	Urban	State-run	Non-bilingual	6	134
IES Segundo de Chomón	Teruel	Urban	State-run	Non-bilingual	6	187
Colegio Las Viñas	Teruel	Urban	State-subsidised	Non-bilingual	4	99
IES Salvador Victoria	Teruel (Monreal del Campo)	Rural	State-run	Non-bilingual	3	60
<b>TOTAL: 15</b>	<b>Zaragoza (9) Huesca (2) Teruel (4)</b>	<b>Urban (10) Rural (5)</b>	<b>State-run (9) State-subsidised (4) Private (2)</b>	<b>Multi/ Bilingual (3) Non-bilingual (12)</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>2,010</b>

TABLE 1: Secondary Schools participating in the study.

The sample in the survey was unevenly distributed geographically. More schools from Zaragoza, the capital, were selected as a reflection of the uneven demographic distribution in Aragón, with 50% of the total population of the region living in Zaragoza, the capital city.

All in all, as indicated in Table 1, 2,010 students and 63 teachers answered the questionnaire. The number of responding students at each of the educational levels was distributed as follows:

1 <sup>st</sup> year <i>ESO SS</i>	4 <sup>th</sup> year <i>ESO SS</i>	2 <sup>nd</sup> year <i>Bachillerato SS</i>	Total
737	593	680	2,010

TABLE 2: Number of students participating in the study.

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A high percentage of 1st year *ESO* students (70.3 %) were 12 years old at the time of answering the questionnaire in February 2012; some of them had already turned 13 or had repeated a previous year (23.7%) and a small percentage were 14 years old (4.76%). The number of boys was slightly above the number of girls (53.94% vs. 46.06%). Most of the 4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO* students (63.5%) were 15 years old at the time of answering the questionnaire; some of them had already turned 16 or had repeated a previous year (27.6%) and a small percentage were 17 or older (8.6%). The number of girls was slightly above the number of boys (52.0% vs. 48.0%). Finally, the 2<sup>nd</sup> year *Bachillerato* students answering the questionnaire were mainly (69.6%) 17 years old; 20.1% were 18 years old and 8.8% were older students. As in the previous level, girls outnumber boys (56.3% vs 43.7%).

A third of the teachers who answered the questionnaire were aged between 36 and 45, whereas another third was aged between 46 and 55. Most of them worked at state-run Secondary Schools (69.8%); the rest had a contract either in state-subsidised (23.8%) or private schools (6.3%). More female (76.7%) than male (23.3%) teachers answered our questionnaire. A high percentage (63.3%) had a consolidated teaching experience of more than 11 years.

## 2.2. Research instruments and procedure

Two different questionnaires —one addressed to students and another addressed to teachers— were designed and piloted before being finally distributed online through *Survey Monkey Plus* during the first week of February 2012.

The questionnaires for the three groups of students contained 25 questions and asked basically the same questions, except for two or three, which were adjusted to the particular level of the students. The questionnaire for the teachers contained 27 questions and some of the questions mirrored those directed to the students, so that comparisons could be made between students' and teachers' perceptions and views.

The focus in this paper was on the questions related to the assessment of oral skills, both in the students' and the teachers' survey (See Appendix).

### 3. Results and discussion

In this section we discuss the results obtained from the survey answered by students, which are then compared to the teachers' answers in parallel questions. Moreover, we look at differences in the three levels, throughout the Secondary Education, as well as differences in the answers provided by students and teachers in the various types of school in the sample. First, we report on the findings regarding the students' perceived competence in their oral skills and their achieved grade, which are compared to their teachers' views on their competence. Second, we focus on data obtained from students and teachers on the ways, methods and tasks employed to assess oral skills in their classes.

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#### 3.1. Students' competence in oral skills: general results

The following figure summarises the students' answers to question 2: Do you consider yourself able to communicate in English? It seems that there is a slight improvement in their self-assessment of oral communication competence from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year compulsory Secondary Education (*ESO*), as the percentage of those students who consider they can communicate in EFL "very well" and especially "adequately" increases and the number of students who consider they communicate "poorly" falls slightly. However, as can be seen from the figure, their self-reported competence in communicating orally in English drops in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of their post-compulsory Secondary Education (*Bachillerato*).

This may be the effect of the aims pursued during the two *Bachillerato* years, namely, to prepare students for the University Entrance Examination, which does not include the assessment of oral skills. Students' answers may reveal a negative washback effect in EFL (Amengual Pizarro 2009, 2010), that is, that teaching and learning are greatly affected by testing methods (Hughes 1989; Alderson and Wall 1993).

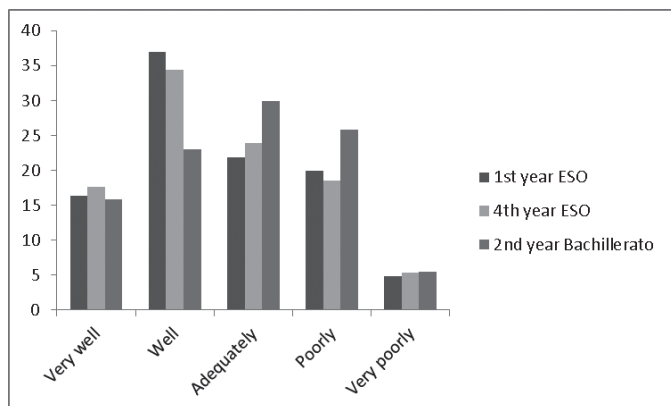


FIGURE 1: Students' self-perceived oral communication competence throughout Secondary Education.

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Similar findings were obtained from students' answers when asked how competent they were at giving an oral presentation in English (Figure 2). Students feel less able in the last year of their Secondary Education. Again, possible lack of practice in class may explain these results, as the focus is rather on written skills (reading comprehension and written production) and grammar instruction and practice (Use of English). Here a factor to be taken into account is that in the compulsory Secondary Education stage four (50-minute) periods are devoted to EFL, whereas in the post-compulsory stage they are reduced to three. This may diminish the amount of time teachers can devote to the practice of oral skills in general and to oral presentations in particular.

A high percentage of students passed their end-of-year English assessment (Figure 3); 82.7% of 1<sup>st</sup> year *ESO* students, and 84.2% of 4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO* students got a grade between 50 and 100. This percentage is lower for the final year of Secondary School students, 70.2%. As can be seen in the figure, at this stage there are fewer high marks (70 and above) and more low marks. It seems then that, as their level of English increases, students find it harder to obtain good marks. It is interesting to note that 30% of the 4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO* students who answered the survey indicated that they did not feel well enough prepared to start the non-compulsory *Bachillerato* stage. This percentage significantly diminishes if only the answers from students at state-subsidised and private schools are considered (15%) and significantly increases if only the answers from students at state-run schools are considered (42%). Differences according to the type of school are further discussed in the next subsection 3.2.

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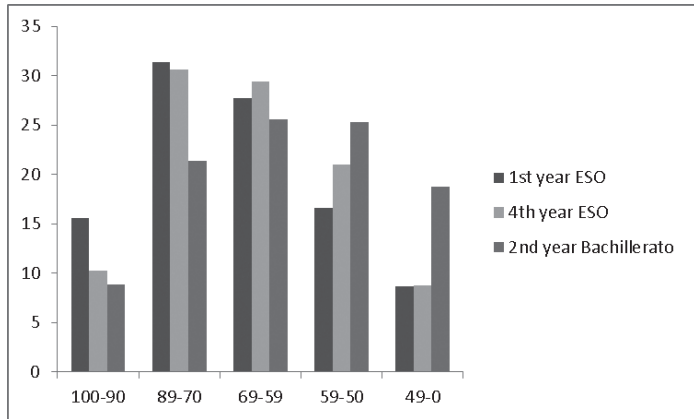


FIGURE 2. Students' self-perceived competence to give an oral presentation throughout Secondary Education (0-49 = low performance; 50-59 = fair performance; 59-69 = good performance; 70-89 = very good performance; 90-100 = excellent performance).

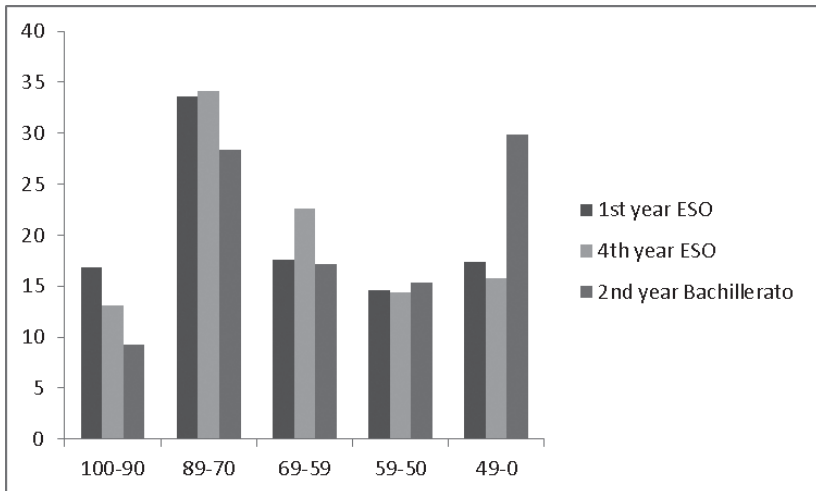


FIGURE 3: Students' grade in their last English assessment.

The students' answers regarding their assessment and self-assessment were compared to the teachers' views on their students' achieved competence and level. Following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL), at the end of the four compulsory years in Secondary Education, Spanish students should achieve an A2 level, and at the end of the last two post-compulsory years they should achieve a B1 level.

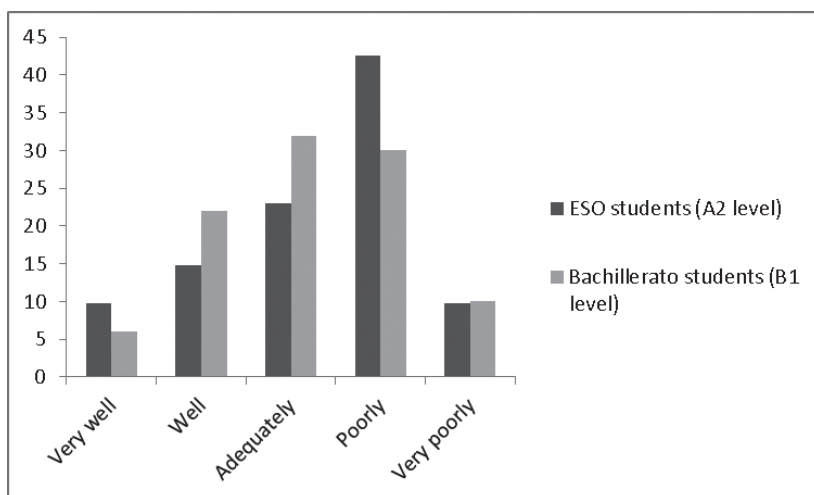


FIGURE 4: Teachers' views on the extent to which students achieve the required level in oral communication in English.

In general teachers do not seem to be positive regarding the level of English reached by their students, as both at the end of the compulsory stage (*ESO*) and at the end of the post-compulsory stage (*Bachillerato*) a high percentage of their answers indicate that their students' competence is poor. This is especially so in the first stage. This result is not in line with the generally acceptable grades obtained by students reported in Figure 3. Although students may pass the exams, their teachers still think that a high percentage of them do not achieve the level that they should. This may point to the need to reconsider the type of assessment used, so that students' marks will reflect their competence in terms of the CEFRL.

Teachers were further asked to assess specific aspects of their students' oral skills, namely, comprehension, use of vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, grammatical



accuracy and interaction. In the two first levels (1<sup>st</sup> year *ESO* and 4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO*) teachers indicate that fluency and pronunciation<sup>8</sup> are the two aspects with which their students have greatest difficulties. According to their teachers, the students have some problems with interaction and grammatical accuracy<sup>9</sup> and fewer problems with understanding and vocabulary. The results are rather different for the final level (2<sup>nd</sup> year *Bachillerato*). Teachers indicate that the main problem is fluency, and also to a lower degree, interaction. It seems that the students' pronunciation improves and that they have fewer problems with it as well as with related aspects.

All in all, in the teachers' view, student competence in oral skills improves throughout the students' Secondary Education, but the students' perception is not the same. A high percentage of *Bachillerato* students feel that they communicate in English "poorly" or "very poorly" (Figure 1) and that they are not able to give an oral presentation adequately (Figure 2). Also, the percentage of students who fail is higher than in previous years (Figure 3). The students may feel that it gets more difficult as the level increases (from A2 to B1), making them feel less able to speak and communicate in English. The teachers, in turn, argue that they have crowded classes, few teaching hours and scarce resources to focus on oral skills in their lessons, even though they consider them important.

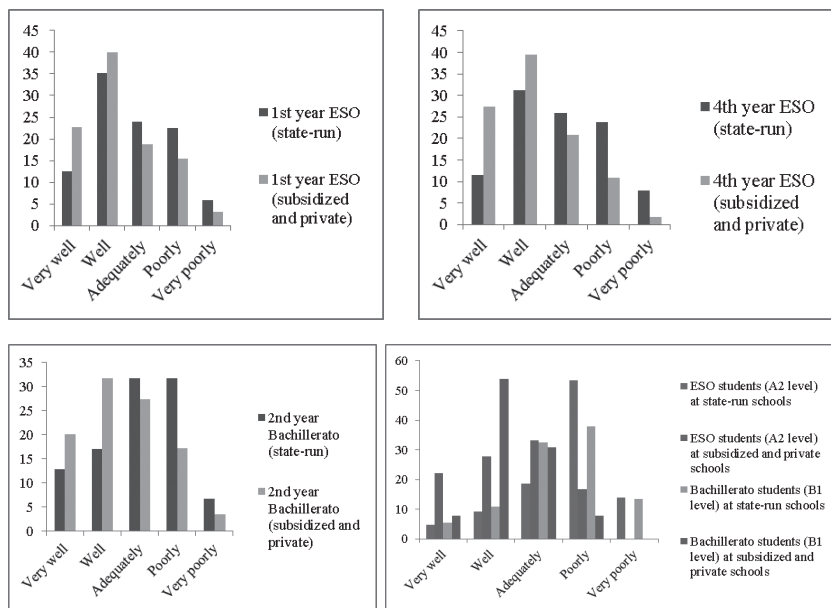
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### 3.2. Student competence in oral skills: school variables

As indicated in the introduction, we were also interested in looking at the possible different answers depending on the type of school involved. Important differences arise when answers from students and teachers at state-run schools are compared to answers from students and teachers at state-subsidised and private schools, as can be seen in the following figures. The first three figures refer to students' answers (1<sup>st</sup> year *ESO*, 4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO* and 2<sup>nd</sup> year *Bachillerato*), whereas the fourth one refers to teachers' answers in the different schools regarding the compulsory and the non-compulsory stages of education.

The percentage of students who self-report communicating "very well" and "well" in English as well as the percentage of teachers who report their students as attaining the established level at each educational stage is far higher in the state-subsidised and private schools than in state-run schools. In a similar vein, in the former the percentages for "poor" or "very poor" competence in oral skills are far lower than in the latter.

In line with the previous answers, more students report having failed this subject in the state-run schools than in the subsidised and private ones in the three educational stages (Figures 6). Also, the percentages of higher marks (70 and above) are systematically higher in the case of the subsidised and private schools.

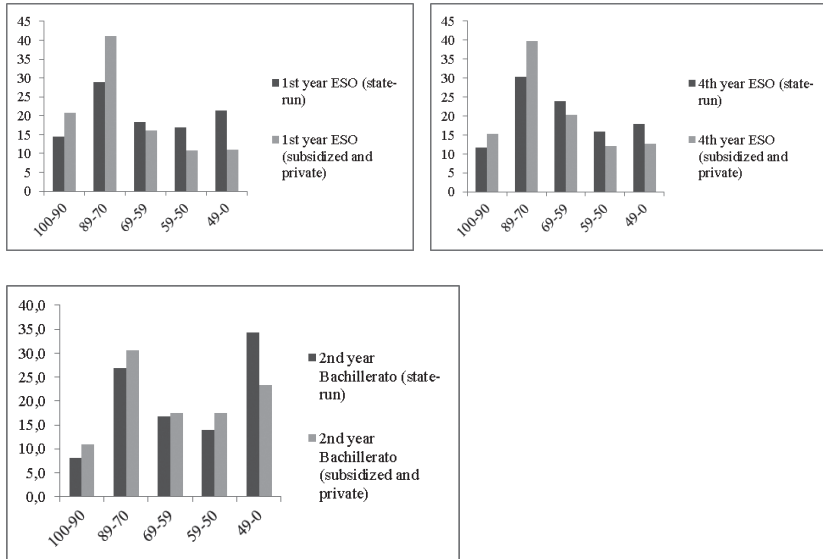


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FIGURES 5: Comparison of students' and teachers' answers from different types of schools regarding student competence in oral skills.

Different factors could explain these results. Classes in state-subsidised and private schools tend to be more homogeneous, and students attending them are generally from stable socio-economic backgrounds. This would promote a better learning environment which makes for better academic performance in EFL in general and in their oral competence in English in particular. In line with European reports (2012: 105), those students who place themselves high on the social ladder show a stronger tendency to have used various methods of learning the language. Thus, as the students' answers to question 5 (see Appendix) show, a higher number of those at subsidised and private schools report having travelled abroad and used the language to meet and communicate with speakers from other countries. Whereas the percentage of students attending English lessons at Official Language Schools (*Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas*) and at private schools and receiving one-to-one lessons is similar in both types of schools, the percentage of students who respond that they have learnt English by travelling and meeting people (32.2%) and by participating in summer camps (23.1%) is significantly higher in subsidized and private schools than in state-run schools (18.9% and 12.0%, respectively).

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FIGURES 6: Comparison of students' answers from different types of schools regarding their last grade in English.

Differences according to other school variables were also looked into, namely, schools in the cities vs. schools in smaller towns and villages as well as bilingual vs. non-bilingual schools. In spite of the influence of socio-demographic factors found in the results of similar surveys at a European level (2012: 105), no remarkable differences were found in our study in relation to the first of these variables. That is, students self-report similar competence levels throughout their Secondary Education, in bigger and smaller areas alike; they also reach on average similar grades and the teachers' views on their achieved levels do not differ greatly.

When answers from students and teachers at bilingual vs. non-bilingual schools are compared, differences are apparent in the self-reported competences of students across the three Secondary Education levels. Students attending bilingual schools reported to a greater extent that they could successfully communicate orally with others and make an oral presentation. In line with the results presented in section 3.1 self-reported competences are lower in both types of schools in the post-compulsory Secondary Education stage, *Bachillerato*. However, when analysing their reported grades and the teachers' perceptions on the extent to which their

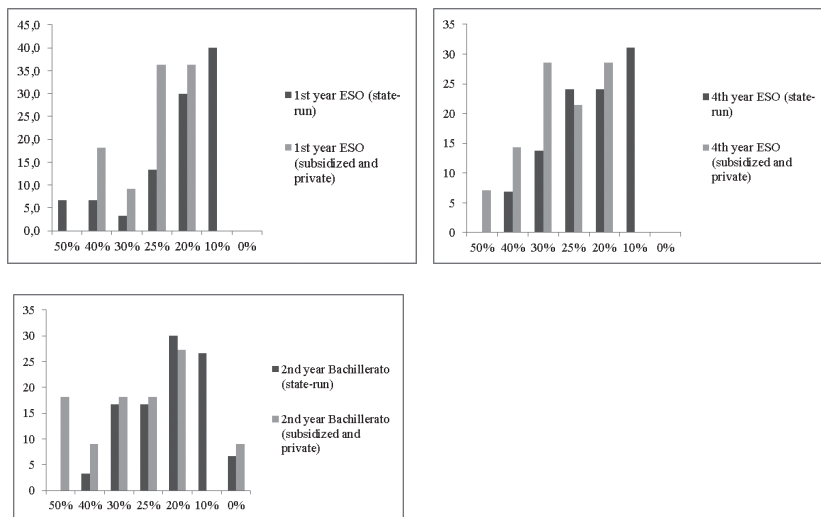
students reach the set level in 4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO* (A2) and 2<sup>nd</sup> year *Bachillerato* (B1), answers were not too different and in certain cases those from non-bilingual students and teachers were more satisfactory.

### 3.3. Assessment of oral skills: methods and tasks

One of the research questions referred to the extent to which the assessment methods reportedly used by the teachers in their English lessons, especially regarding oral skills, could influence the perceived self-competence of students. In order to answer this research question, the students' replies in each school were correlated with those of their teachers regarding their assessment methods.

Overall, it seems that the higher the final grade as reported in the teachers' assessment of oral skills, the better the students' self-perceived competences. This is especially the case of students attending subsidised and private schools, in which —as can be seen in Figures 7— almost no teacher assigns less than 20% of the final mark to the oral skills and quite a few assign them more than 25% of the final mark. The tendency is somehow the reverse in state schools. It is also interesting to see that teachers assign lower percentages to the assessment of oral skills at the *Bachillerato* stage, possibly, as pointed out above, due to the washback effect of not including the assessment of oral skills in the University Entrance Examination English test.

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FIGURES 7: Percentage of the final grade assigned to oral skills by teachers in each of the educational stages.

Regarding the specific oral assessment tasks, teachers' reported practices are rather uniform and no particularities can be discerned in terms of types of schools or stages of educational process. Most teachers report their oral tests as consisting of talking about an image or topic and/or having a conversation with the examiners; doing a role play with a classmate is also a common option as well as a combination of these three tasks.

The final point regarding the assessment of oral skills in Secondary Education to be presented in this paper is related to the students' and teachers' perspective on the advisability of including an oral exercise in the English test within the University Entrance Examination. Only post-compulsory Secondary Education (*Bachillerato*) students and teachers were asked this question. More than half the students in the sample (52.3%) are against including an oral part in such a test; 34.5% are in favour of it and the remaining 12.3% say that it depends. Their concerns are mainly that not enough emphasis can be given to oral skills in class, so students recurrently say that they would be in favour if they were better prepared for it in class throughout their secondary (and even primary) education and the oral skills were sufficiently developed. Many of them think that it could be optional, so that only those who do have a good level of oral English could take it and have an advantage over the rest. Students are also concerned about how it is to be carried out, where and by whom: that is, what activities are proposed, the logistics of it and whether it is done individually or in pairs in a competitive situation.

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The percentage of students who indicate that are in favour of an oral test in the University Entrance examination is higher in the case of subsidised and private schools than in the case of state-run schools. Students in favour of such a test may feel better prepared for it (in line with the results shown in section 3.1) and may, therefore, consider that it is a good option and that it would also benefit them. No differences have been found when the answers by students at bilingual and non-bilingual schools are compared.

Overall, answers by teachers differ from those of students, as 62.9% consider that there should be an oral part in the English test within the University Entrance Examination and only 11.3% report that they are against it. Percentages in favour of such a test in bilingual schools (75.0%) and especially in subsidised or private schools (88.9%) are above average. This is in line with the students' answers and again their teachers may feel that their students are well prepared and could obtain a good result.

Students and teachers were further asked about what percentage of the final mark the oral part should represent and what were the most appropriate task(s) to be set. Students' answers to the former question are diverse ranging from 0% (16.4%) to 50% (10.3%), the most common answers being either 20% (19.7%) or 10%

(19.2%). More answers in favour of higher percentages for that oral test come from students at subsidised or private schools, whereas more answers in favour of lower percentages come from students at state-run schools.

The majority of teachers marked as most appropriate 25% of the final mark (23.4%) for the oral exercise, but answers ranged from 0% (10.6%) to 50% (10.6%), so there does not seem to be much agreement on this and again teachers at subsidised or private schools, and to a lesser extent, teachers at bilingual schools, wanted it to carry greater weight than teachers at state-run schools. This may be explained by taking into account different students in different schools. As indicated in section 3.2., students at subsidized and private schools report having travelled abroad and used the language to meet and communicate with speakers from other countries to a greater extent than students attending state-run schools. This may lead their teachers to conclude that their results will be satisfactory in such a competitive exam.

The task most frequently chosen by the students for that test was talking about a given picture or topic for a few minutes (53.9%), followed by conversing with the examiners (29.5%); listening comprehension of an audio file or video were only chosen by around 20%, which contrasts with the teachers' answers: half of them consider that listening comprehension should be included in the test, together with talking for a few minutes on a topic or picture (the most frequent student option).

In the light of the findings from the survey, we strongly believe that students should be encouraged to do extensive listening practice outside the classroom. Their freedom to choose from different sources (podcasts, CDs, radio broadcasts, TV programmes, films, etc.) following their teacher's guidance, would surely increase their motivation and would get them used to the authentic L2 sounds. Together with this, there is probably a need to work in the area of self-esteem when teaching an L2, in general, and in the area of oral skills, in particular. It has been proved that students learn best when they learn in a stimulating environment. Therefore, language classes could very well develop the five areas relevant to self-esteem (Security, Identity, Competence, Belonging and Purpose) *pari passu* with the teachers' work on the students' language skills (Arnold 2011: 16).

## Conclusions

Overall, this paper has sought to look into the oral skills of Secondary Education EFL students in the Spanish region of Aragón, based on their own and their teachers' answers to a detailed questionnaire designed and implemented at the

beginning of 2012. More specifically, we intended to: (i) gain a deeper insight into the students' self-perceived and achieved competence as well as their teachers' perception of their competence, (ii) explore any significant differences across the six-year Secondary Education period, and across diverse schools (urban vs. rural, bilingual vs. non-bilingual and state-run vs. state-subsidised and private), and (iii) discover the extent to which assessment methods (including the presence of an oral part in the English test of the University Entrance Examination) could have an influence on students' (perceived) oral competences.

Students report a slight improvement in their oral skills from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> year of the compulsory Secondary Education stage (*ESO*), but this is not sustained in the final post-compulsory stage (*Bachillerato*), when they report poorer performance in oral communication competence and when they also get lower final marks in the subject. The students' own perceptions are not in line with those of their teachers, who in general believe their students make constant progress throughout their Secondary Education. It is interesting to note, however, that despite the teachers' views and despite the overall general good marks achieved by students in the subject, teachers feel their students do not reach the level required by the CEFRL: A2 at the end of the compulsory stage (*ESO*) and B1 at the end of the post-compulsory stage (*Bachillerato*). Acknowledging the fact that speaking is the most difficult language skill to assess reliably it may be concluded that a different teaching-learning process, and especially different methods of assessment need to be implemented to ensure that students' academic results are in line with the official target and reflect their actual competence. There may be a need for teachers to develop clear and more homogeneous assessment plans, by defining the kind of speaking which is going to be tested in a given context, by developing tasks and rating criteria for the test and by telling their students in advance what they are going to be tested on (Luoma 2004). These plans may also entail introducing continuous and informal assessment (Harris and McCann 1994) by means of portfolios, projects, conferences, planned and systematic observation, etc. (Hedge 2000; McKay 2006). There may be an overreliance of teachers on testing, which may not give accurate information about the competence level of students; greater focus on assessment understood as "the general process of monitoring or keeping track of the learners' progress" (Hedge 2000: 376) may be needed, that is, formative, rather than summative assessment (Harmer 2007). There are examples of such good practices in some Secondary Schools in the region (Hornero 2011, 2013), but they seem to be the exception rather than the norm.

Major differences have been found in reported and achieved oral competence in EFL between students attending state-run schools and students attending state-

subsidised and private schools and also in the respective teachers' views on the extent to which their students achieve the required level in one or other type of school. No remarkable differences were found when other variables (rural vs. urban, bilingual vs. non-bilingual or location) were taken into account. At state-subsidised and private schools groups of students may be more homogeneous and a more relaxed classroom atmosphere may be created, which enhances learning and academic performance. Also, students attending these schools have greater opportunities to use the language outside the classroom as they more often travel abroad, go to summer camps, etc, which may have an incidence on their overall level of English and their competence in oral skills.

According to our results there seems to be a clear washback effect of the English exercise in the Spanish University Entrance Examination, which does not include the testing of oral skills, in line with the findings of Amengual Pizarro (2009, 2010). As a result, these skills seem not to be practiced enough in the final years of Secondary Education in the EFL classroom and students report a generally poor overall competence in them. Thus, the format of the University Entrance Examination conditions EFL lessons at post-compulsory Secondary Education level. This washback effect is reinforced, since it was seen how in those schools in which teachers reportedly gave more weight to the testing of oral skills, students felt more competent in orally communicating with others. After all, training to develop good exam skills may in itself be a stronger motivation when the tasks carried out in and/or outside the classroom offer them a clear sense of purpose. Training students in strategies for test types is positive as long as other activities are also included in their lessons, so that monotony, boredom or even tension do not take over. Thus, there seems to be a symbiosis between assessing and teaching and learning.

More than half the teachers who answered the questionnaire (and particularly those at state-subsidised and private schools) are in favour of introducing an oral exercise in the English test of the University Entrance Examination; teachers are surely aware of the importance of improving their students' oral communicative competence but feel they have to prepare them well for such an examination, which leads students to focus just on the type of activities it traditionally includes (rephrasing or transformation exercises, reading comprehension questions and writing a composition). Students (especially those attending state schools) are generally more reluctant than teachers to introduce an oral exercise in the English test of the University Entrance Examination, and a high percentage seem to be aware of and worried about its design or planning, operationalization or construction, and administration (Harris and McCann 1994; Bachman and Palmer 1996; McKay 2006).



Although the results of this piece of research need to be taken with caution, as the sample was restricted to a particular Spanish region, they may be taken into account by policy makers when making future informed decisions based on quantitative data. Barring other cultural and behavioural factors, the results may help to determine why only 48% of respondents in Spain think that English can be effectively learnt at school as opposed to more than 90% of respondents in Slovenia, Malta, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. The findings reported highlight a great diversity in assessment plans across different schools in the same region and it may be necessary to put forward and enforce more homogeneous guidelines and standards, especially in relation to oral skills. Among these, we believe that the University Entrance Exam should contain an oral test, given the strong influence of its tasks on the teaching and learning of EFL, especially in the non-compulsory Secondary Education stage, despite the administrative and practical difficulties it may entail.

Overall, the results of our research reveal a strong need to plan the assessment together with methods of practising oral skills in the EFL classroom. Such joint planning would enable students progressively to be at ease and feel more competent and confident in order to successfully communicate in the target language, which should be the overall aim in the teaching and learning of foreign languages according to current official curricula. This means that more time should be devoted to the practice of listening, speaking and interacting, trying to reproduce in the classroom authentic contexts of communication. It would also be desirable to reduce the number of students in class to get more student talk and provide more opportunities for practice. Finally, as is the case in many schools, the use of the language should also be encouraged outside the classroom, through various extracurricular activities, such as writing school journals and magazines, performing theatre plays, participating in exchanges or other programmes, such as eTwinning, among others. All these actions will hopefully lead Spanish EFL learners to improve their ranking in Europe with respect to their overall proficiency in English.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. This research has been carried out within the frameworks of the Projects “Generic integrity in academic and professional communication: analysis of the genres and their correlation to discursive practices and disciplinary culture of different professional communities” (FFI 2009-09792), “English as a lingua franca across specialised discourses: a critical genre analysis of alternative spaces of linguistic and cultural production” (FFI2012-37346), and *Proyecto de Cooperación entre Departamentos Universitarios (UZ) y Departamentos de Institutos de Educación Secundaria* (Diputación General de Aragón) (245-188)

<sup>2</sup>. The acronym *ESO* stands for *Educación Secundaria Obligatoria*, which covers six years, the first four being compulsory and the last two only necessary for students who intend to study at University.

<sup>3</sup>. No private Secondary Schools exist either in Huesca or in Teruel.

<sup>4</sup>. *IES* stands for *Instituto de Educación Secundaria* (State Secondary School).

<sup>5</sup>. We found that one of the Secondary Schools, IES Pedro de Luna, ran both bilingual and non-bilingual (*normalizado*) programmes separately and so we thought it would be interesting to keep these two

categories apart. Students in *Bilingüe* have five hours of English per week and follow the MEC-British Council syllabus. *Normalizado* means regular *ESO* (three hours of English per week in 1st and 3rd year and four in 2nd and 4th; everything else through Spanish).

<sup>6</sup>. “Multilingual” schools run a sort of integrated approach to language teaching whereby alternating languages are used as a means of instruction in specific subjects and in consecutive years. For practical purposes, they have been categorized as “bilingual” in our study.

<sup>7</sup>. *Colegio* refers to a private or state-subsidized school, ranging from infant school to university entrance.

<sup>8</sup>. It is worth pointing out here that comprehensibility goes beyond pronunciation accuracy, as it includes intonation, stress, speed and rhythm, which, in combination, may more readily determine comprehensibility of speech than the accuracy of individual sounds (Luoma 2004: 11).

<sup>9</sup>. There is some truth, however, in the fact that teachers tend to “focus narrowly on the development of grammatically accurate speech”, which may conflict with the student’s wish to interact and be understood, in line with the tenets of the Communicative Approach (Luoma 2004: ix).

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## Appendix:

### Questions in the survey specifically related to this study

#### Student questions (originally in Spanish):

Q1 — How well do you feel you are able to communicate orally in English?

- Very well
- Well
- Adequately
- Poorly
- Very poorly

Q2 — What was your grade in the last assessment of English:

- A (100-90)
- B (89-70)
- C (69-59)
- D (59-50)
- E (49-0)

Q3 — Where did you learn to speak English? You may tick more than one option:

- At primary school and high school
- At a private school or academy
- Private tuition
- Travelling and meeting people
- Summer camps
- Listening to songs and watching TV
- Surfing the net

Q4 — Self-assess your competence to give an oral presentation. Which grade would you award yourself?

Specific question for 4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO* students:

Q5 — Do you think that your level of English at the end of the compulsory Secondary Education is adequate to start the post-compulsory stage (*Bachillerato*)?

Specific questions for 2<sup>nd</sup> year *Bachillerato* (final year) students:

Q6 — Do you think the University Entrance Examination should include an oral part in the EFL test?

- Yes
- No
- It depends (justify your answer)

Q7 — If an oral task was to be included in the University Entrance Examination, what type of test do you consider would be most adequate? (You can tick more than one option)

- Listening and understanding an audio file
- Listening and understanding a video
- Talking for a few minutes about a given image
- Having a conversation with the examiners

- Doing a role play with a classmate
- A combination of some of the above options
- Others (specify)

Q8 — What percentage of the final mark in the English University Entrance Examination should be given to the oral part?

- 50%
- 40%
- 30%
- 20%
- 10%
- 0%
- Another percentage (specify)

**Teachers' questions (originally in Spanish):**

Q1 — How well do you think your students are able to communicate in English according to the level established at the end of the compulsory Secondary Education stage (*ESO*), A2, and at the end of the post-compulsory Secondary Education stage (*Bachillerato*), B1?

Very well    Well    Adequately    Poorly    Very poorly

- ESO* (A2 Writing)
- ESO* (A2 Oral)
- Bachillerato* (B1) Writing
- Bachillerato* (B1) Oral

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Q2 — As regards oral skills, assess your students' competence for each of the following aspects:

1 <sup>st</sup> year <i>ESO</i> students	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very poor
Comprehension				
Use of vocabulary				
Pronunciation				
Fluency				
Grammatical accuracy				
Interaction				
4 <sup>th</sup> year <i>ESO</i> students	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very poor
Comprehension				
Use of vocabulary				
Pronunciation				
Fluency				
Grammatical accuracy				
Interaction				
2 <sup>nd</sup> year <i>Bachillerato</i> students	Very Good	Good	Poor	Very poor
Comprehension				
Use of vocabulary				
Pronunciation				
Fluency				
Grammatical accuracy				
Interaction				

Q3 — Do you think the University Entrance Examination should include an oral part in the EFL test?

Yes

No

It depends (justify your answer)

Q4 — What percentage of the global mark corresponds to the oral skills in your current assessment procedure? What percentage of the final mark in the English University Entrance Examination should be given to the oral part?

1<sup>st</sup> year *ESO*      4<sup>th</sup> year *ESO*      2<sup>nd</sup> year *Bachillerato*

50%

40%

30%

20%

10%

0%

University Entrance Examination

50%

40%

30%

20%

10%

0%

Q5 — What type of test do you use to assess the students' oral skills in the compulsory Secondary Education stage (*ESO*), and in the post-compulsory Secondary Education stage (*Bachillerato*)?

If an oral test were to be included in the University Entrance Examination (UEE), what type of task do you consider would be most adequate? (You can tick more than one option)

*ESO*      *Bachillerato*      *UEE*

Listening to and understanding an audio file

Listening to and understanding a video

Talking for a few minutes about a given picture or topic

Having a conversation with the examiners

Doing a role play with a classmate

A combination of some of the above options

Others (specify)

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