# Teaching spoken English in Spain: classroom practices and teachers' perceptions

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## Abstract

**Aim.** This article presents the results obtained in a qualitative research related to classroom practices and perceptions of teachers of English as a foreign language in Spain. The aim of this study is to present examples of good teaching practices, including the types of resources, materials and assessment used in spoken English teaching.

**Methods.** A qualitative investigation that used ethnographic (non-participant) observation in primary and secondary English classes was implemented in thirty-two schools. Additionally, twenty semi-structured interviews with primary and secondary teachers were conducted.

**Results and conclusion.** The results show significant differences between both applied methods Non-participant observation indicates that spoken communication in English is not practised sufficiently. However, based on interview results, teachers do apply appropriate language learning strategies that could allow them to successfully teach speaking skills in their students.

The results imply that in Spain, there are still many teachers and educational institutions that follow the Grammar Translation Method and other traditional methodologies, which still focus primarily on writing skills. However, several examples of good practices and inspiring methodological and motivational strategies have been found throughout this research, which might be considered as a precedent for those that focus on writing approaches.

**Cognitive value.** This article displays an original research supported by University of Oviedo, through which, the reader can approach to the teaching of spoken English in Spain by means of some teachers´ perceptions and examples of good practices.

**Key words:** teaching, spoken English, English as a foreign language, compulsory education

## Introduction

The importance of teaching spoken English in education has been changing throughout history. In general terms, it could be said that the "golden age" of speaking skills occurred in ancient Greece and Rome when rhetoric possessed a relevant role. Much later, during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the influence of Latin teaching models was decisive and, thus, oral communication skills remained relegated to schools and universities for centuries. As a result, written language and grammatical forms became the fundamental linguistic skills taught (García-Sampedro, 2019); this way of teaching is known as the Grammar-Translation Method. Exceptional contributions to this method were made by authors such as Comenius (17th c.), who demanded a connection between languages, the natural environment and affective factors during the learning processes with the aim of encouraging reflection (Puren, 1988).

In the 20th century, the Direct Method arose to respond to the need to speak a foreign language in order to travel or migrate to other countries. Subsequently, from 1950s onwards, different methods such as the Audio-Lingual Method (García-Sampedro, 2019), prevailing in the Anglo-Saxon sphere, and the Audiovisual Structural-Global Method in particular, popular in the Francophone scope, became occupied with correcting pronunciation, although using different perspectives and approaches. Finally, teaching spoken language had a new opportunity with the convergent development of Pragmatics, Communicative Approaches and Cognitive Psychology, together with the dissemination of materials for teaching planning (Canale & Swain, 1980; Font, 1998; García-Sampedro, 2019; Johnson, 1996; Larsen-Freeman, 2001; Littlewood, 1992; Richard & Rodgers, 2014; Sánchez, 2009). However, the attention to form continued to prevail over the teaching of spoken language communication (Richard & Rodgers, 2014; Sánchez, 2009).

Nowadays, there is a resurgence of interest in factors that enable effective spoken communication, both in the mother tongue (Diop, 2016; Vilà & Castellà, 2014, 2015), and in second or foreign languages (Goh & Burns, 2012; Hughes, 2010; Iñesta & Iglesias, 2021; Quan, 2018). European policies on language education recognise the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and promote language learning, as seen with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment, thereafter CEFR, in 2001 (Council of Europe, 2001). The development of multilingual and multicultural communicative competence has become the referential objective of the European curricula. Regarding the methodological guidelines, CEFR indicates an Action-Oriented Approach, so that contextualised language social practices are the reference for the design and implementation of teaching-learning tasks and activities.

The Spanish Organic Law 8/2013, December 9th, for the improvement of educational quality, LOMCE (Gobierno de España, 2013), which modifies Organic Law 2/2006, May 3rd, on Education, LOE (Gobierno de España, 2006), strongly supports the aforementioned objective and recognises the European

objectives related to multilingualism, although it relies on the educational administrations of each Autonomous Community to specify the regulations. The command of the second, or even the third foreign language has become a priority in education, as a consequence of the globalisation process in which citizens participate – although this is still a major shortcoming of the Spanish educational system. The law firmly supports multilingualism, redoubling efforts to ensure students' fluency in at least one foreign language. Comprehension and production skills levels are designed to support employability and achieve professional ambitions. Consequently, this law is firmly committed to the curricular incorporation of a second foreign language (Gobierno de España, 2013).

Accordingly, the competence approach, consistent with the European educational principles, should be incorporated into the language teaching-learning processes. Spoken skills, essential for solving tasks, acquire special relevance in this framework. Nevertheless, it has not been accomplished yet, as indicated by external evaluations, such as those of Diagnosis by Consejería de Educación, Principado de Asturias from 2012-2018, or international reports on the command of foreign languages (Bonnet, 2002; Cambridge Monitor, 2017; Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2012). To sum up, there is still a great deal of work to be done in Spain to improve students' communicative competence during compulsory basic education (primary and secondary).

It is well known that spoken language teaching, either in mother or foreign tongues, is very complex (García-Sampedro, 2019; Thornbury, 2012). There are affective factors, such as motivation or anxiety, the management of which is difficult (García-Sampedro, 2020; Goh & Burns, 2012). In relation to the teaching of the students' first language, María José Del Río and Marta Grácia (1996) highlight the need to focus on presentations, debates and narrations; in fact, these are currently being integrated into classroom practices. On the other hand, despite the fact that conversation is a natural way of interacting with others, and teachers are becoming more aware of it, there is a whole range of registers and styles of speaking that are not taught at school, where grammar and writing take precedence (Vilà & Castellà, 2014, 2015). In this sense, the auditory culture should not be overlooked because it is essential for the development of language, as the main instrument of access to knowledge and relationship with others (Rodero, 2008).

Similarly, in the case of foreign language teaching, its importance is understood, but it seems that not enough work is being done in this area (Hughes, 2010; Hughes & Reed, 2016). In general, language teachers know that oral production is one of the most important communication skills, but they are not always aware of how oral language activities can contribute to the student's personal success in other areas of study. Furthermore, one must remember that in order to become a competent speaker in a second language, the speaker needs to acquire a wide variety of skills, as well as cultural and social knowledge, in addition to the basic linguistic and pragmatic elements (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and fluency) (Goh & Burns, 2012; Hughes & Reed,

2016). There is no doubt that oral production is a difficult skill to teach, and the one that requires the most attention. As a consequence, the need to deepen the teaching and learning processes is justified.

Considering this prevailing context, the present study was designed with the aim of analysing English as a foreign language via teaching practices in primary and secondary education stages, in order to identify both methodological strategies (management, motivation, teaching and assessment) and resources that could constitute useful examples of good practices with oral communication skills.

## Methods

This research has followed a qualitative paradigm (Rapley, 2004), applying both non-participant observation (Banks, 2010; Flick, 2012) and semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2011) with the entire study completed in five academic years (2014-2019).

### Non-participant observation
*Sample*
A total of thirty-two state, private and subsidised-private schools comprised the sample for the non-participant observation. In selecting schools, it was taken into account whether these schools could host faculty students during their internships for the Degree in Primary Teacher and for the Master's Degree in Teacher Training for Compulsory Secondary Education, Baccalaureate and Vocational Training, to facilitate researchers visits to schools (as students' tutors).

Then, the headmasters of the schools were contacted by telephone and, once their consent was obtained, the teaching staff were informed via email about the research purpose, procedure, voluntary participation and anonymity. None of the teachers selected for the study refused to participate.

*Instrument*
The instrument applied to develop non-participant observation was the field notebook (Angrosino, 2012). Direct observation annotations were arranged chronologically and some interpretative notes, with personal comments about the observed facts, were included (Banks, 2010; Flick, 2012; Grinell, 1997). These annotations were completed with photographs, audio and video recordings (using a mobile phone or a tablet). At the same time, a research journal was utilised to complete the information. Finally, register sheets were filled in with school information visits.

Later on, the collected data was analysed Georgio Rodríguez, Javier Gil, and Eduardo García (1996). To classify this information, some of the general descriptors from the European Portfolio for Future Language Teachers (Newby et al., 2007) were taken as reference and the following categories were applied:

Context, Teaching, Methodology, Resources and materials, and Evaluation. This self-assessment document is an instrument for the analysis of teaching practices from a competence perspective.

**Interviews**

Regarding the design of the semi-structured interviews, in order to pilot the relevance of questions and incorporate the necessary modifications, the first version was applied to two informants. The following categories were finally chosen: professional experience; teaching experience abroad; language skills; classroom organisation and grouping; listening and speaking activities, and speaking assessment.

*Sample*

The sample was made up of twenty teachers: ten from primary education and ten from compulsory secondary education. The criterion applied during the selection of the interviewees was their involvement in English teaching innovation projects.

*Instrument*

The instruments used to collect interview data were the audio recordings and their subsequent transcriptions. The interviewees were contacted by phone, and with their agreement, were sent an informed consent letter by mail together with the interview core questions. This letter explained the voluntary participation, anonymity and purpose of the study. All teachers invited kindly agreed to participate. The interviews were recorded with a tablet and took place wherever the teachers decided. Additionally, six previously established categories (Kvale, 2010) were used for the data analysis: teacher profile, methodology, materials and resources, and assessment (oral production). With the aim of maintaining anonymity, several alphanumeric codes were assigned to participants (PP1, PP2…, for Primary Teachers, and PS1, PS2…, for Secondary Teachers).

## Results

The study results are presented following the aforementioned categories.

**Non-participant observation results**
*Context*

The classroom context is a fundamental element in the teaching-learning process. Most of the time, classroom characteristics determined not only the methodology but also the type of activities developed therein. In the primary schools visited, most of the classrooms were organised in static rows, lacking any extra free space for spoken language activities. As a consequence, students had to remain seated in their usual places, as in other school subjects, which

resulted in minimal visual and auditory contact. However, four of the schools owned large classrooms, organised into corners, as in early childhood education, with a specific place to develop speaking activities such as storytelling, conversation, games or songs.

Practically the same occurred in the secondary classrooms. Most of them were full of desks lacking space to modify the layout. Only in two of the thirty-two schools visited were teachers used to reorganising classrooms according to their needs. Therefore, it could be said that educational institutions lack commitment regarding classroom space, which, in turn, has very negative consequences for the implementation of activities that promote oral discourse, such as, the English language.

In relation to outdoor school spaces, only six schools implemented English language activities outside, such as the class walk (Freinet, 1969), cultural visits or growing vegetables or trees in the garden as a part of a Natural Science subject.

### Teaching

Classroom space also determines the type of students' groupings. It was observed how seating arrangements can respond to teachers' and institutions' educational philosophies. For example, when desks were arranged in individual rows of students (which we found in sixteen schools), it presumably indicates that the methodology used is not focused on spoken discourse, as this way of seating does not facilitate interaction and communication. In this sense, some teachers' reluctance to implement communicative activities of a spoken nature is due to the organisational, implementation and management difficulties they present.

Circle or U-shaped seatings (which we only found in two schools) responded to conversational methodologies that promote interaction and spoken discourse. In addition, groups of four students were adopted in twelve of the schools visited, which followed Project-Based Learning or Task-Based Learning methodologies that prioritise teamwork and interaction. Most of the schools visited chose a static type of grouping, regardless of the implemented activities. Nevertheless, there were also some teachers who adapted their groupings according to the activity.

### Methodology

The majority of the schools mainly focused their methodologies on the use of textbooks, written tests and homework. In these instances, teachers tend to forget, or minimise oral production practices, paying more attention to the development of writing skills.

Schools with conversation assistants (foreign university students with a certified English language expertise level), however, promote and hold in high regard second language speaking skills. A few teachers actively encouraged dialogue approaches in English classrooms (five teachers: four of primary and one of secondary). These teachers were passionate about the importance

of the speaking skills approach and also involved in projects and initiatives to promote this. Exchanges with other countries were quite common in the schools visited, especially in secondary schools, both public and private, although there were also some similar experiences in public primary schools. These exchanges develop students' motivation, enjoyment and interest in improving speaking skills.

### Resources and materials

The resources and materials utilised were diverse and in most cases, imposed by foreign language departments or by headmasters. Textbooks were used in all but one of the primary schools and in all the secondary schools. The way these textbooks are used varied widely. In fourteen of the primary schools, textbooks were the main resource and teachers followed them to the letter. In the rest of the schools, the use of the textbook was combined alongside projects, tasks and other materials, which influenced classroom methodologies and management enormously.

Regarding information and communication technologies (ICT), the use of computers or interactive whiteboards was widespread. However, in most cases, this usage was mainly geared towards the development of mechanical activities and rarely for the promotion of spoken language or creative activities. In nine of the schools (three secondary and six primary), the use of ICT aimed to promote autonomous learning and student research, or to support the agreements and exchanges with other schools.

### Assessment

It has been observed that the type of assessment is directly related to the methodology used. Traditional methodologies generally based on the use of textbooks and the implementation of rote learning opt for summative assessment in which failure accounting is often applied as a marking criterion. On the contrary, when active methodologies such as Task-Based Learning, Project--Based Learning, Cooperative Learning, or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) are applied, significant learning and formative assessment are usually promoted. These methods pay more attention to the learning process than to the results. In these student-centred contexts, different types of evaluation are used (self-evaluation and co-evaluation) as well as other assessment tools (rubrics, targets, portfolios, observation notebooks or diaries).

### Motivation

It has been observed that where classroom layouts are organised in corners, for students to move freely, meaningful and innovative activities are implemented and the desire for learning and motivation are improved. The same happens when participatory methodologies or attractive resources and materials are used, since they all enhance speaking skills interaction and motivation. In schools where students are seated in rows, routines and mechanical activities prevail (correcting homework, completing grammar exercises, etc.).

Therefore, students' spoken language practice is limited to reading texts aloud. However, the use of games and songs as resources, the implementation of projects or tasks, or the use of ICT in a creative and autonomous way, witnesses greater motivation among students. In fact, only in eleven schools out of thirty--two could a motivating learning environment be found, which in turn aligned with highly involved and motivated teaching staff.

### Interview results

*Teachers' profile*

The teachers interviewed presented from eight to forty years of professional experience. The lowest certified English level was B2, whereas C1 was the average. All the teaching staff, with the exception of an American teacher, carried out teacher training placements of a linguistic and cultural nature during their pre-service years and/or during their service. Most of these internships took place in the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, the United States or Malta.

*Methodology*

Regarding classroom language, all but one of the primary school teachers stated that English is spoken in the classroom at least 90% of the time. They assured that their objective is to use the foreign language 100% of the time, but they are aware that this is difficult to achieve, especially when explaining new concepts, solving classroom conflicts or facing students' emotional needs. Everyone, including the American teacher, agreed that English is not used exclusively in the classroom: "I always try to speak in English, but sometimes it is impossible to do it if I want the children to understand me" (PP4). "From time to time, I have to use Spanish ... but I try to do it as little as possible" (PP9). This fact can be interpreted as an evolution in the way of approaching teaching subjects in English. As these teachers explained, sometimes, and especially in the infant stage or in the first two years of primary school, it is necessary to use the mother tongue to be able to solve complicated situations.

The secondary school teachers who teach English in bilingual groups agreed that the level of understanding is much higher in the bilingual groups than in the non-bilingual groups. In fact, students address teachers in English most of the time. However, in non-bilingual groups, some students present comprehension difficulties, especially in the 1st and 2nd years of ESO: "I seldom speak in my mother tongue in class. If you have a child with difficulties, obviously you have to dedicate the necessary time to explain content in Spanish, although it is not very common" (PS3).

Regarding classroom physical organisation, primary teachers agreed in modifying the seating depending on the activities. Several teachers point out that student ratio is a strong influence when deciding which dynamic and layout are the most appropriate, since the lower the number of students, the easier it is to group them and work: "The most influential factor when teaching is the number of students you have in the classroom" (PP1).

Other teachers note the importance of showing students how to reorganise the classroom: "I teach children how to modify the structure of the class" (PP2).

The secondary school teachers also use different types of grouping to practice spoken language activities, depending on the subject objectives and group characteristics: "Speaking skills activities are developed in pairs and/or in groups. Sometimes individually, because it is necessary to go deeper" (PS10).

Another teacher comments how the classroom is split into two groups of 12-15 students, as favoured by the Education Council, to facilitate spoken interaction. Therefore, teachers are able to develop many more oral production activities with better results: "It is not the same having 15 students compared to 30. The difference is enormous" (PP7).

Another teacher explains that, thanks to the Bilingual Programme, the Council of Education had provided schools with conversation assistants who became very valuable when practising speaking skills.

### Motivational strategies

Primary school teachers use various resources and strategies to improve students' motivation in the English classroom. Some of them implement daily assemblies as a way to understand students' needs and preferences. Others consider it essential to adapt the materials, hence improving students' motivation. Some use storytelling, games and songs as a motivational strategy, especially in lower grades: "My way of motivating them is movement" (PP3).

Amidst these testimonies is a teacher from a private school who follows the pedagogical dynamics of Summerhill:

> We do not motivate children. Children have their own motivations and we only try to accompany them in their learning process. The teaching team seeks to respect children's rhythm and interests. There are no classes, there are no objectives, we are accompanying them as their needs or their interest arise. Foreign languages are not a necessity for children in Spain. We think that it is not necessary to learn English at schools (PP6).

Secondary school teachers share their interest in motivating students to learn foreign languages. They believe that a teacher's state of mind heavily affects interaction with students. One teacher highlights a tendency to over--direct tasks, without considering students' motivation and involvement, both of which increase when students feel they are allowed to make decisions. Another teacher suggests that what motivates students most are visual resources:

> I use many motivational strategies, but fundamentally, I should not say this, but I am like a clown in my classes (…) I sing, dance, make gestures, etc. (…) We have to speak in English and there are many students who feel blocked (PS1).
> It is bringing the outside into the classroom (…) videos, news (…) I think that this is what motivates them most (PS2).

Some attention was paid to the teachers' motivation as well. Teachers say they feel very motivated seeing students' progress, especially in terms of communicating. Their professional vocation is also reaffirmed by watching their students grow older and become informed citizens. However, another teacher explained that it is easy to lose motivation when considering educational management factors, continuous changes of educational laws, or minimal institutional and social support. On the other hand, another teacher bases his motivation on the freedom he enjoys at work.

The secondary school teachers all agree they feel very motivated and enjoy their work immensely: "I believe that working with young people day by day makes you feel younger" (PS3).

### Language skills

All primary school teachers agree that the most important language skills are oral skills, both speaking and listening. Depending on the levels they taught, one develops more one or the other. In the upper grades of primary, writing skills are worked on more than in the lower grades, although teachers insist that oral communication is more essential than written. They give relatively little importance to the reading skills and use them, above all, as an input source and as a resource for other activities: "We sing all the time, during routines, games or instructions. I invent many of them and adapt them to my needs. Rather than talking, we could say that I sing to them" (PP2).

The secondary school teachers interviewed agree with those of primary school in considering speaking skills the priority, alongside written production and comprehension. A teacher who carries out very innovative activities using ICT explains that he focuses first on oral language and then resumes the same content in writing: "They have to know how to write minimally. So we practise speaking exercises first and then, we practice writing" (PS2).

The typical oral texts that students produce in secondary school are debates, presentations, dialogues or interviews.

### Assessment (speaking)

When performing speaking activities, all teachers provide feedback to students, but they do not interrupt them to give their feedback. In elementary school, speaking skills are assessed through daily observation, classroom interaction and presentations. In secondary school, spoken language skills are assessed through presentations, which are sometimes recorded on video or audio. Assessment criteria vary from one school to another: "What I never do is interrupt students when they are speaking (...) I try to take notes of their mistakes and I give them feedback individually" (PS10).

Oral language skills assessment should be compulsory. Some teachers assert that if speaking skills were assessed in the university entrance exams, foreign language teaching at schools would be different.

## Conclusion

One could conclude that there is still a long way to go to improve spoken English language skills in Spain. In the schools where non-participant observation was conducted, a large number of teachers continued to use methodologies that prioritise written skills and hardly ever include oral production activities. Most classrooms were not large enough to carry out motivating and meaningful interactive spoken language activities; bearing in mind the classroom organisation and groupings, it was almost impossible to implement effective oral communication activities since seating was organised in rows. This layout supports orthodox methodologies that rely mainly on textbooks as fundamental resources and grammar exercises.

The large numbers of students in primary and secondary classrooms do not help to improve this situation and, accordingly, active or engaging interaction among teachers and students becomes rather difficult. Regarding the use of ICT, it would appear that computers did not help improve this situation, since they were used only as a support for textbook activities, or simply for listening or repetition activities. As a consequence, oral language interaction was of little to no benefit in these contexts, leading to students' disinterest and teachers' demotivation.

In contrast, there was a clear differentiation with the interview results that were completely different. This probably happened because the teachers interviewed had been selected for their involvement in innovation projects related to oral communication in the English language. They admitted feeling highly motivated, and subsequently, their students were strongly encouraged, too. At the same time, they believed that students' linguistic competence had improved greatly in previous years thanks to the increased number of English-taught lessons per week, especially in the Bilingual Programmes; the conversation assistants support; the implementation of international language exchanges; and the participation in collaborative educational projects with other schools.

Furthermore, the teachers interviewed insisted that both the Communicative Approach and the Action-Oriented Approach should be adopted, as stated in the Spanish curriculum. Likewise, teachers should favour active dynamics such as Task-Based Learning and Project-Based Learning; create and use new resources to reinforce oral production; integrate technologies in the classroom, including mobile devices, in a creative and responsible way; promote language exchanges with other foreign schools; and, lastly, promote national and international participation in language projects. Additionally, other strategies such as teaching/learning outside the school context, watching and listening to television, radio or Internet in English, and reading magazines, newspapers or books should be encouraged.

The methodology should be active and participatory, guided by the teacher but focused on students. Students' continuous intervention must be encouraged, not only to increase oral language practice but also to reinforce motivation and self-confidence. Methods such as Task-Based Learning or Project-

-Based Learning should be adopted since they favour the interaction among students, with English as the vehicle of communication throughout the entire process. Additionally, decision-making should be allowed among students, with students' selecting topics and themes. The students' mother tongue or other known languages should be reference points for making comparisons and reflections. Speaking skills assessments should be promoted and the types of assessment should be diversified (self-assessment, peer-assessment).

Resources, especially textbooks, should not be considered as the main option; rather, the use of ICT for presentations and project work should be given a priority in order to promote students' creativity, independence and motivation.

Teaching support should be considered essential and the presence of conversation assistants should be compulsory as it supports the development of students' communication skills and interest in the subject, as well as improves students' motivation.

Classroom space should be appropriate to the implemented methodologies: ideally, these should be wide, ample spaces and classrooms that favour oral production and interaction. Students must learn to group in different ways depending on the activity.

Outdoor school spaces should be used to promote oral communication activities in English, in particular, class walks, games, storytelling, etc. Language exchanges with other schools and language immersions in English-speaking countries are essential for the development of oral skills in English, both for teachers and students.

In conclusion, these findings coincide with contributions from other authors in this field. Thus, for example, Duego Uribe, José Gutiérrez and Daniel Madrid (2008) attribute students' low performance in English language tests (in Andalusia and Murcia regions) to the fact that the use of English is limited to academic contexts, and, as a consequence, interaction with English language native speakers is rather unusual outside thereof. Jose Manuel Vez, Esther Martínez Piñeiro and Alfonso Lorenzo (2013) indicate some of the causes of the disappointing results for the Spanish students in international evaluations. On the one hand, television and film products are not shown in their original versions and their modification would require a social, cultural and industrial change of great magnitude. On the other hand, the students' limited exposure to the English language in contexts outside the school environment remains the same.

Additionally, the results of the interviews match with previous studies (e.g. Goh, 2014; Goh & Burns, 2012; Vilà & Castellà, 2014, 2015) on the complexity of teaching oral communication and the difficulties faced by teachers in the classroom when promoting speaking skills.

Consequently, it could be said that there is an imperious necessity to adapt English teaching to the 21st century social, educational and cultural requirements and to promote oral communication skills above all. Finally, this research contribution highlights some organisational, methodological and motivational strategies which could be fundamental to improve and innovate daily

practices and inspire English teachers to better their professional performance, regardless of their context.

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