English Majors' Perceptions on Factors Influencing the Development of their Oral Fluency

Percepción de los Estudiantes de la Carrera de Inglés acerca de Factores con Incidencia en el Desarrollo de su Fluidez Oral

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Abstract

There are several implications about oral fluency development of the English language that involve communication from a bilingual perspective, which require a further analysis in the field of teaching-learning English as a foreign language in Ecuador. This research project will determine the factors that influence the development of the oral skill and fluency in undergraduate English major students who are in an intermediate level, at Universidad Técnica del Norte. At this aim, a quantitative approach was applied to identify and measure the factors influencing the oral skill development of the English language, and with this to understand positive and negative aspects that influence fluency during the communication process in the target language. In determining and categorizing factors, a descriptive research along with an inductive method were also applied. To this effect, 5th level English majors were surveyed. The results identified influential factors such as the language exposure mainly fostered by teachers, and the role of interaction inside and outside of the classroom. Finally, this study leaves a new question about oral fluency open for a further research work.

Resumen

Existen varias consideraciones acerca del desarrollo de fluidez en la destreza oral del idioma inglés que involucran a la comunicación desde una perspectiva bilingüe, las cuales requieren de un análisis profundo en el campo de la enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés como una lengua extranjera en Ecuador. Este trabajo determinará los factores que tienen influencia en el desarrollo de la destreza oral y la fluidez de los estudiantes de la Carrera de Inglés, quienes están en un nivel intermedio en la Universidad Técnica del Norte. Para este estudio se aplicó un enfoque cuantitativo orientado a identificar y medir los factores que tienen influencia en el desarrollo de la destreza oral del idioma inglés, y con ello entender los aspectos positivos y negativos y su influencia durante el proceso de comunicación en la lengua objeto de estudio. A fin de determinar y categorizar los factores, se aplicó la investigación descriptiva con un método inductivo. Para el efecto, estudiantes de 5to nivel de la carrera de Inglés fueron encuestados. Los resultados evidenciaron factores con influencia tales como la exposición al idioma inglés fomentado principalmente por los profesores, y el rol de la interacción dentro y fuera de las aulas. Finalmente, este estudio deja una nueva interrogante abierta acerca de la fluidez oral para realizar futuras investigaciones.

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1. Introduction

Throughout time, linguists and experts in the field of English language teaching, have been searching for new ways to improve the teaching-learning process of this language around the world, and consequently it has been determined that every context lives a different reality. In a recent analysis conducted by Leong and Masoumeh (2017), emphasis is placed on the fact that humans are programmed to speak before they are predisposed to read and write. Thus, much more time is spent in their oral interaction than in their written production. When it comes to learning another language, the communicative approach seems to be the same; however, it demands diverse interaction contexts that expose the learner to the necessary use of the language, within real situations that promote a meaningful learning (Wang, 2014).

The advances in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have been far-reaching and have had a great impact on its teaching methods in every part of the world. At different educational levels, the teaching-learning of English has shown positive and gradually noticeable changes (Boonkit, 2010). However, one of the greater demands of this knowledge area is a more efficient result in what comes to apprentices' level in academic and social fields. Under these considerations, this study targets English major students from a university located in Ibarra, the capital of the Imbabura province. Even when this university receives students from different parts of Ecuador, it has a high percentage of students coming from the northern part of the country.

Evaluations applied by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education during the last decade to teachers and students of the English area in primary and secondary schools determined a low level of English, therefore, the government implemented trainings and different strategies as scholarships for English teachers to travel to North American universities. Still, this initiative was not entirely fruitful. Based on the evaluations applied in 2017, this low English level reality had not changed in schools (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2017). Hence, it is necessary to generate research projects from the university where the English majors are being trained in order to investigate academic issues that for decades have been of concern to Ecuadorian teachers in this area, and define factors that contribute to change a reality that can be improved in benefit of the students who will be in-service English teachers.

The main objective of this study is to determine the factors that incidence on the development of oral fluency, based on the direct learning receptors- English major students at Universidad Técnica del Norte in Ecuador. Some investigations have been carried out in this field, but none that specifically tackles this topic from the real life situation of English major students in this university where English majors end up with a B2 proficiency level within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is an international standard for describing language ability. It describes language ability on a six-point scale, from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. This English major curriculum encompasses ninth levels; therefore, fifth level students are part of this study who can provide a general view from English majors' intermediate level.

This study attempts to find out the aspects that positively and negatively influence the oral fluency development of the fifth level undergraduate students in the English Major at Universidad Técnica del Norte, who pursue a bachelor's degree. The research results have been enhanced with learners' perception towards this issue and the updated findings from the literature that underlies this study.

1.1. Literature Review

The core language function is to communicate meaningfully, being the speaking skill the first means to convey all kinds of information. This criterion implies that speaking, long before reading or writing, is the first stage when learning a first, when it comes to a second or foreign language (Namaziandost et al., 2019). Specifically referring to the English as Foreign Language (EFL) field, the speaking skill has become a hurdle to overcome by both teachers and students (Bouzar, 2019). For this reason, the EFL teachers have the responsibility to research the factors influencing an effective speaking instruction based on the students' needs, interest, and teaching context, according to Derakhshan et al. (2016) this will gradually help learners speak English fluently. Hence, Castro and Villafuerte (2019), from an Ecuadorian perspective, point out that a continuous professional development of English teachers in Ecuador is a current challenge in the country which requires motivated educators to energize their teaching activities, and thus support the improvement of the EFL teaching-learning process in Ecuador.

> English language learners (ELLs) are the fastest-growing group of students across the nation, not only in large urban districts, but, increasingly, in small urban districts and suburbs. Much is known about how best to educate ELLs from academic research. However, the research-practice gap is wide, and resources and political will are too low for promising practices to be systematically implemented in teacher preparation and development programs. (Tung et al., 2013, p.2)

This increase number of English learners has taken place throughout the world, consequently, the demand for ESL and EFL teachers has become evident during recent years as well. Leib-Sutcher and Desiree-Carver (2019) mention that "over the last several years, headlines across the country broadcasted severe teacher shortages" (p.3), and it is a fact that ESL and EFL learners cause as a consequence of their proliferation. Broughton et al. (2003) state that of the 4,000 to 5,000 living languages, English is the most widely used. Thus, English becomes a lingua franca because its use goes across linguistic and cultural boundaries and brings people closer (Jenkins, Baker & Dewey, 2017). By summarizing all these points, the conclusion is that English language learning is a current need around the world, and to fulfill it English teachers are required to teach effectively, and English learners develop a communicative competence.

1.2. Oral Fluency in EFL

An oral fluency definition is related to proficiency, which implies a high grasp of vocabulary and grammar, and in this regard, Rossiter et al. (2010) describes fluency as a performance event related to flow, continuity, automaticity, or smoothness of speech. Also, De Jong (2018) sees oral fluency as a construct that goes hand in hand with pronunciation, complexity, accuracy, which cannot be seen separately from coherence. In the same line, Zhang (2009) defines oral fluency as an indicator of L2 proficiency, pointing out that it implies the ability to express thoughts easily. Oral fluency is also characterized as a specific feature that determines the learner's ability to speak freely, without unnecessary pausing and with the prosody of speech, syntax and vocabulary range

comparable with those characteristic of the speech of a native speaker (Gorkaltseva et al., 2015).

Oral fluency has become one of the main goal set by English teachers and learners, in other words a goal for every EFL user. To enhance oral fluency is a challenge that must be addressed through building a close connection between theory and practice (Thornbury, 2005). In this regard Bhattacharya (2017) states that using a language is more important than just knowing about it, due to the fact it is not worthy to know a lot about a language that you are not using being hard to acquire for most EFL learners (Karimy & Pishkar, 2017). Therefore, identifying and analyzing working mechanisms that influence fluency is significant for the understanding of speaking complexity. Also, they mention that it is one of the most important qualities of speech which contributes to examiners' intuitive and technical assessment of proficiency of learners' oral performance.

1.3. Factors Influencing the Development of Oral Fluency in EFL

Studies on language proficiency, especially on oral proficiency conducted in the past, are still unclear about the factors that contribute with its development because the factors already identified would differ from young learners to adult learners (Pangket, 2019). Though, the most important factors affecting oral proficiency across levels as it was identified by several studies are vocabulary and grammar (Iwashita, 2010). On the other hand, pronunciation is also a dramatic factor which is present at all the levels. Mantilla and Guevara (2018), in the same line, state that anxiety influences the development of oral fluency in EFL but at a lower percentage in the last levels of their proficiency, due to the fact learners become more active, participative, and autonomous. The teachers' linguistic and methodological profile plays an important role because they have to use correction of mistakes strategies to foster the development of the speaking skill without affecting the students' affective factors.

According to Aicha (2016), the teacher can assume different kinds of roles to motivate the speaking improvement: motivator, corrector, source, and controller, considering the teacher's oral feedback as a form of assessment because motivates learners to produce sentences without hesitation or anxiety, and relies on teachers' advice and correction either in public or private. Based on the idea aforementioned regarding to teacher's role from a positive influence in the classroom, Tuan and Mai (2015) cited in Abugohar et al. (2017) point out the teachers' negative role modelling at using their native language in English classrooms, which makes students think it is okay to use their first language and hinders their full development of oral fluency. Finally, to teach speaking is a challenge because students need to use the new language they are learning, it is advisable to reinforce the learning of functional language and diagnose learners' strengths and weaknesses (Imane, 2016).

1.4. The Role of Error Correction

Sinem (2014) asserts that some EFL teachers have the concern of not disrupting the flow of communication and therefore they avoid providing corrective feedback for spoken errors. Also, he mentions the fact that some other EFL teachers recasts as a good option to correct spoken errors because in this way there is a less threaten for the communicative

flow on one hand, and on the other a preventing fossilization of spoken errors at not receiving immediate attention and feedback.

Abeer and Ajloun (2016), in their deep analysis on the teacher´s error correction strategies point out that:

> When deciding whether an error should be corrected, teacher should have into account many factors such as the type of error (e.g., pronunciation, word choice, sentence structure), if the error s interfere with the meaning of the text, the objectives of the activities, the complexity of the message in relationship to the student's variables such as their attitudes, level of proficiency, and their level of confidence. It is very essential to convey the message that positive oral correction plays an important role in encouraging students' learning and is considered an effective tool for facilitating the process of acquisition and learning language. (p.157)

In this regard, Ebrahimi and Hajmalek (2016) based on the results of their study about corrective feedback and its influence on the anxiety level of students state that at the end, the sources of anxiety were not clearly identified but the learners did not show that a change in the corrective feedback caused a different level of anxiety. They highlight the fact that a change in the error correction strategy can potentially affect the negative attitude of the learners on one side and on the other, the teachers' constant interruption to correct errors can stop or end with the main purpose of the speaking activity. Observing, in this way, the need for error correction but under the criteria that the goal is to develop fluency and language acquisition. If an error is ignored, it can be fossilized and if the correction is done at every stage of communication, it can hinder the development of communicative goals. The challenge here for every teacher is to define when the right time to correct is and how to provide positive and encouraging feedback.

1.5. Students' Perceived Self-efficacy

Mastura, Khatiba and Maarofb (2014) state that oral fluency has to do with speaking at a real-time, and it demands learner's abilities to plan, process and produce the language. They mention it is a difficult task for students attempting to become fluent in the target language, and they also emphasizes a study which revealed that students who are more confident in their speaking ability perform better than those with low efficacy beliefs. Tria (2017) states that "self-efficacy in academic setting is a part of Bandura's theory which defines self-efficacy as individuals' belief about their ability to execute something related to their selves" (p.123). This author mentions that students who have high levels of self-efficacy have a great curiosity, confidence and take learning as a challenge; self-efficacy includes self-control and affects the learning achievement without depending on others because it generates student's independence. In this specific case, a student with high level of self-efficacy will perform confidently and will convey the message with less errors in grammar and pronunciation than a person who does not believe is good enough to produce the language orally.

1.6. Teachers' Incidence on Learner's English Oral Fluency

Qayoom (2018) affirms that students at learning a foreign language are more influenced by teachers unlike any other subject. This author emphasis on the fact that to become a good English teacher it is not necessary to be a native speaker because one of the main requirements is

to possess a language learning experience. Learners can be better understood when their difficulties and mistakes are just associated with a required stage of a learning-teaching process. This is because when an individual has gone through a process can determine and make up the appropriate strategies to achieve the desired goals which in this case is to become proficient in the language. There has been a debate about the influence teachers' fluency in the language has on student´s fluency development.

Karimy and Pishkar (2017) in their study provided a comparison of the effects of teacher's speaking accuracy vs. fluency on EFL learners' oral skill, considering their temporal and linguistic measures. us, as a result EFL students' speaking fluency increased based on the teacher's performance in class. It was proved because those teachers were role models for accuracy and fluency of the students' oral skills. Hence, not only English teachers at different educational levels have the great challenge of being good role models for their students, but also English majors who are in the process of becoming proficient in English and will be sooner or later pre-service and then in-service teachers.

2.   Methods and Materials

The main purpose of this work is to determine the factors that influence on the development of oral fluency in the English language taking into consideration learners' perceptions, so this study employed a quantitative approach. A quantitative approach is applied to gather feedback and insights from a relatively small sample where they express their point of view to be measured and analyzed, in this case English major students of an intermediate level. This approach was also used because there is little information about this topic within this specific context: Ecuadorian English majors. At categorizing and determining factors a descriptive research was applied. Also, an inductive method when individual experiences and theoretical criteria was examined, to support new elements generated while determining the factors influencing the development of oral fluency in the foreign language.

2.1.   Research Technique

Regarding the technique used to collect data and determine accurate results, a survey was elaborated by the authors in consideration to the findings of the literature review, and it was a 12 questions-questionnaire. This was carefully elaborated to facilitate the analysis and data tabulation. To this effect, the rating scale of Likert scale was used as a tool to measure English majors' thoughts and opinions about the oral fluency development in 7 questions. They were 4 balanced domains for students to choose from with a neutral midpoint. The other 4 questions were open-ended questions because the purpose was to collect detailed individual contributions on this issue, and at the end they were incorporated in the analysis and discussion of the findings.

2.2.   Participants

The target population was 26 undergraduate English major students from Universidad Técnica del Norte who were in fifth level, pursuing a bachelor's degree in Teaching English. Due to the fact they have to complete ninth levels, it is an intermediate group that was made up for 14

female students corresponding to the 54%, and 12 male students that is the 46% of the population, having a well-balanced group regarding to gender. All the participants are Ecuadorians, the 97% of the students are mestizos and their native language is Spanish and the 3% is indigenous whose native language is Kichwa, being Spanish their second language. This study was carried out during the semester April – September 2019 and the respondents' age range was from 20 to 23 years old.

2.3.   Procedure

The questionnaire was elaborated prior to its validation and then a pilot test was carried out. Afterwards it was modified in a way that the respondents understand every single question without the existence of difficulties. Consequently, the reliability of the results be more accurate. Then, the online survey was conducted for data collection, which was active for one week within the range of the dates as aforementioned. This had two sections focused on student´s perceptions about the development of oral fluency. The survey encompassed aspects about the language use for instruction, the language used for interaction between teacher-students and students-students inside and outside the classroom, error correction, self-perception about oral fluency, and individual strategies applied to develop oral fluency in the target language. At the end, all the data were collected and analyzed through a content-analysis quantitative method.

3.   Results

Data obtained from the online survey questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively by means of a descriptive approach where a thematic approach connects and integrates the general and specific ideas from the topic and every piece of information is taken holistically. Also, this study was designed to address the following two main questions: 1. What are the factors that incidence on the development of oral fluency of the English language? 2. What are the English learner's perceptions about positive and negative factors influencing on their oral fluency development? Therefore, the analysis focuses on the answers for these two research questions.

The data is given a descriptive analysis. First of all, all the answer under every category are put into the Excel Form and the frequency of the answers is counted, and finally the percentage of those English majors' responses is figured out.

Table 1

English Language as a Means of Instruction

Scale of frequency	Your teachers use English language as a means of instruction	Your teachers use Spanish language as a means of instruction
Always	48.1%	3.7 %
Most of the time	51.9 %	0
Sometimes	0	37%
Rarely	0	48.1%
Never	0	3.7%
Other	0	3,7 to clarify instruction
		3,7 to solve teaching-learning problems

Source: The authors (2019).

This table summarizes two questions where the second corroborates the first in relation to the language used for instruction, as it can be seen the target language is used always and most of the time, being Spanish the last source when there is a need to clarify doubts or to solve academic problems. Wijayatunga (2018) points out a study about English as a means of instruction within a context of a non-English speaking country where can always be challenging for both teachers and students inside and outside of the class. Based on the results of the current study it is observed that teachers from the English majors at Universidad Técnica del Norte face this challenge in a professional way. This requires that teachers manage a high spoken English proficiency "in order to guide a learning ecology that fosters communication and oral interaction" (Xu, 2010, p. 161). Now, on the side of students, the next question has to do with how learners deal with this challenge.

Table 2

Interaction Using the Target Language

Scale of frequency	You interact with your peers in English inside the classroom	You interact with your peers in English outside the classroom	Your teachers interact in English	Your teachers promote student-student interaction in English outside and inside the classroom
Always	22.3 %	0	44.5 %	29.6 %
Most of the time	40.7 %	3.7 %	22.2 %	63%
Sometimes	29.6 %	48.1 %	22.2 %	7.4 %
Rarely	7.4 %	44.5 %	7.4 %	0
Never	0	3.7 %	0	0
Other			3.7 % I do not know	

Source: The authors (2019).

Table 2 shows that student-student interaction is greater inside the classroom than outside of it even though teachers promote this interaction in a high percentage: first being a role model at interacting using the language and secondly thorough academic activities. At referring to the challenge mentioned in the analysis of Table 1, it can be observed that students need to put more effort to use the target language. Herazo (2010) alludes to the great value of student-student interaction for the development of EFL proficiency focused on communicative language focused on the theories of learning that emphasize the social nature of first, second and foreign language acquisition. This author affirms that students can learn from and among themselves if they interact meaningfully. The results show that teachers are effectively contributing and fostering chances for learners to interact, but English majors need to increase their interaction opportunities because they are not just learning a subject; they are learning a language whose essence is communication.

Table 3

Error Correction

Scale of frequency	Your teachers correct your oral English language mistakes
Always	37%
Most of the time	40.7 %
Sometimes	22.3 %
Rarely	0
Never	0
Other	0

Source: The authors (2019).

Table 3 shows that error correction is an essential part of English majors' language performance. At reviewing the strategies students mention in one of the further questions being part of this survey, it evidences learners are willing to receive error correction while speaking because they believe correction of their spoken errors is necessary. Tajeddin and Sadat (2017) consider methods of instruction and feedback play an important role in the acquisition of the language, and they can affect fossilization among language learners. The results show that there is a constant error correction by professors in this university and as Abeer and Ajloun (2016) indicate that an indicator of error correction is when those errors interfere the meaning of the message; however it is highlighted that at the end, the teacher is who decides when to use this effective tool to avoid fossilization and to facilitate the English language oral fluency.

Table 4

Students' Perceived Self-efficacy on English Oral Fluency

Scale	What is your self-efficacy perception on your oral fluency in the English language?
Satisfied	55.6 %
Unsatisfied	37%
Need improvement	7.4 %

Source: The authors (2019).

As it can be observed in Table 4, there are divided opinions on the issue, first, at deeply analyzed the Satisfied percentage which is 55.6% shows that their perceived self-efficacy on their oral fluency is high and Tria (2017) states that these learners have a great sense of curiosity and confidence who become independent learners and take learning English as a challenge. On the other hand, there is a 37% percent of learners who are Unsatisfied, who come along with a small percentage 7.4% of learners who a Need Improvement criterion. These are learners' perceptions that according to Naing et al. (2011), it is noted that at having a positive attitude towards English, it increases the learner's desire to learn the language well on one side, and on the other, they point out that attitude is not the single factor influencing the success of the English language acquisition or fluency development, specifically. Other factors such as motivation play an important role as well and this is undergraduate group of students whose desire and main goal is to graduate, and it can be that those self-efficacy perceptions encourage them to work harder and develop their oral fluency.

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Table 5

Common Difficulties to Develop Oral Fluency

What do you think are the most common difficulties that English learners face while developing their oral fluency?
Not a permanent English language exposure
Application of connectors to link sentences
Not everybody is willing to talk in English all the time
Lack of vocabulary and practice
Ignore the correct pronunciation of some words
Fear to talk due to a lack of self-confidence
English is not used for daily common situations but only for academic purposes
Spanish language interference in pronunciation
Lack of English language interaction outside and inside the classroom
Self-practice habits outside the classroom
Think in Spanish

Source: The authors (2019).

Table 5 evidences the most common unified difficulties listed by the English majors, and they refer to the fact they are learning in an EFL context where their exposure to the target language is limited, and as Bhattacharya (2017), to use the language is not enough you have to use it, not only in class with academic English but outside of it with expressions and English for real life situations. In the same like Karimy and Pishkar (2017) make reference to the fact that to develop oral fluency is even harder for EFL learners, they point out the importance of identifying difficulties and working on possible mechanisms that have an incidence on the oral fluency, which is a complex task. In this question learners refer to the lack of interaction and according to Guevara-Betancourt (2015) interaction have benefits underlying the constructivist theory which ensures the student learn by doing; consequently if students want to become fluent in the language they have to produce it, in a way that his brain get to the point of thinking in the target language without the need of translating. At the same time doubts and hesitations about unknown words and its correct pronunciation will not be an issue either. Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) state that there are previous studies which evidence a positive transfer on second language, and in this specific case English has Latin roots as well as Spanish does; therefore, first language can facilitate the acquisition of the second language.

Table 6

Strategies Used to Develop Oral Fluency outside the Classroom

Which effective strategies have you applied to develop oral fluency in the English language?
Listen to English music and watch videos in English to practice pronunciation
Have the main idea clear and look for vocabulary before speaking
Talk to native speakers
Interact with friends not only about academic topics but about personal things in English
Talk to myself in front of a mirror and practice the correct pronunciation of the words
Use apps to practice speaking
Read and practice orally the new vocabulary learned with friends
Have the habit of speaking in English with classmates outside the classroom
Film videos about myself talking and then look for my mistakes and correct them
Apply the teachers' suggestions when an oral assignment has to be performed

Source: The authors (2019).

In Table 6 the English several aspects are evidenced as important to keep in mind from a teachers' and learners' perspective due to its effectiveness, and they are language exposure, interaction, pronunciation practice, error correction, and fluency development instruction. There are many experts in the EFL teaching and learning, a variety of studies and some research done in this field but coming from EFL learners who consider them as effective, they imply the core findings of this research. Imane (2016) points out that teaching speaking, in other words developing oral fluency, is a challenge beyond this goal it is the learners' need to use the new language in context and not in an isolated way. Finally, Dormer (2013) states that the oral fluency in the language becomes an achievable goal for students when the teacher is the one who promotes it permanently.

4. Discussion

This quantitative study on the English majors' perceptions about factors influencing the development of their oral fluency provides the answer for the first research question which is language exposure that at the same time facilitates the pronunciation practice and builds self-confidence and a sense of self-efficacy. This can be possible at not being afraid of making pronunciation mistakes because learners get used to interacting inside and outside the classroom using the target language, and it is reachable if teachers foster oral fluency in a permanent way.

The answer for the second research question has to do with positive and negative factors, the first negative is the lack of interaction inside, but especially outside the classroom, due to the fact not all the peers are willing to use the target language to reply or to ask questions, and not even to hold an informal conversation where daily common expressions can be shared and learned. Regarding the second negative factor is the language exposure because in an EFL context the learner is surrounded by the native language, aspect that can be overcome by means of the use of different strategies which in most of the cases are part of the language instruction, and at following the tips, steps, and different stages to develop oral fluency in English this obstacle can be turned into something positive.

The positive aspects are the opportunity to get language exposure by means of activities assigned by the teacher or self-study habits such as watching movies where a good pronunciation can be enhanced. Consequently, learners will considerably increase the level of self-efficacy regarding the oral fluency in the language. Also the insights presented in this study about the preferences of students for correction of spoken errors may help teachers to implement more effective instruction, with the premise that the main decisions teachers have to take are about when and how to correct spoken errors in order to prevent fossilization due to the lack of feedback.

This study arose the next research question which is what the causes are why some leaners become more fluent than others even though they have similar educational backgrounds and are exposed to the same language instruction, study habits, and language interaction. This is an issue that needs a deep analysis in a further research work.

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