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**Enhancing Oral English Proficiency in Ecuadorian Secondary Education:
Comparative Practices from the Netherlands, Portugal, and Argentina**

**Mejorar la competencia Oral del inglés en la educación ecuatoriana: prácticas
comparativas de los Países Bajos, Portugal, y Argentina**

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Abstract

This study analyzes the factors affecting the development of oral fluency among Ecuadorian secondary school students as well as identifies effective instructional practices and policies through comparative analysis with Argentina, the Netherlands, and Portugal. The mixed method was implemented to collect more data by combining quantitative information from a survey applied to high school English teachers, the qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews and the analysis of official documents of the curricular and teacher development policies of the selected countries. The quantitative results indicated insufficient opportunities to specialized professional development in speaking pedagogy, scarce of English curriculum training, assessment with dominant bias towards grammar, a lack of application of communicative activities, and oral assessment rubrics. While qualitative data provided a detailed explanation of these issues, highlighting a disconnect between curricular autonomy and classroom realities, generic professional development, assessment-oriented practices, insufficient institutional support, and the absence of specialized supervision. Consequently, comparative document analysis showed that high-performing systems maintain coherence among teacher competency standards, specialized ongoing professional development, communicative assessment, and structured pedagogical support. Finally, the study concludes that Ecuador's challenges come from systemic misalignment rather than a lack of curricular vision or teacher dedication. Evidence-based recommendations are proposed to enhance the development of oral fluency through assessment reform, specialized teacher training, creation of support networks, and digital repositories.

Keywords: Oral English fluency; International comparison of EFL teaching practices; Teaching English in Secondary Education; English curriculum training; Teacher training



Resumen

Este estudio analiza los factores que afectan el desarrollo de la fluidez oral en estudiantes ecuatorianos de secundaria e identifica prácticas y políticas educativas efectivas mediante un análisis comparativo con Argentina, Países Bajos y Portugal. Se aplicó el método mixto para combinar datos cuantitativos de una encuesta aplicada a docentes de inglés de secundaria, perspectivas cualitativas de entrevistas semiestructuradas y un análisis documental de las políticas curriculares y de formación docente de los países seleccionados. Los hallazgos cuantitativos revelaron un acceso limitado a formación especializada en instrucción oral, falta de formación curricular en inglés, una cultura de evaluación predominantemente orientada a la gramática, escasa implementación de actividades comunicativas auténticas y uso mínimo de rúbricas de evaluación oral. Mientras la información cualitativa provee explicación detallada de estos problemas, resaltando la desconexión entre la autonomía curricular y la realidad del aula, la capacitación profesional genérica, la práctica del aula determinada por la orientación de la evaluación, insuficiente apoyo institucional y la ausencia de supervisión especializada. Consecuentemente, la revisión comparativa de los documentos reveló que los sistemas de alto rendimiento sostienen la alineación entre los estándares de competencia docente, la constante capacitación profesional especializada, la evaluación comunicativa y el respaldo pedagógico institucionalizado. Finalmente, el estudio concluye que los desafíos de Ecuador provienen de una desalineación sistémica, más que de una falta de visión curricular o dedicación docente. Se proponen recomendaciones basadas en evidencia para mejorar el desarrollo de la fluidez oral mediante la reforma de la evaluación, capacitación docente especializada, creación de redes de apoyo y repositorios digitales.

Palabras clave: Fluidez oral en inglés; Comparación internacional de prácticas de enseñanza del EFL; Enseñanza de inglés en secundaria; Formación en el currículo de inglés; Capacitación docente.



Introduction

In an era defined by global interconnectivity, English proficiency has transcended its status as a mere academic subject to become a fundamental competency for economic participation, academic advancement, and cross-cultural dialogue (Darvin & Norton, 2015). The Council of Europe (2018) emphasizes that oral interaction and fluency are central dimensions of communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. Aware of this, Ecuador has implemented English language instruction in the national curriculum with the aim of preparing Ecuadorian high school students for successful participation in a globalized and democratic 21st-century society (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016). However, despite institutional efforts and curricular reforms over the past decade, optimal levels of proficiency have not been achieved, placing Ecuador in the lower ranges of international standards, according to recent reports from the English Proficiency Index (EPI) (Education First, 2025).

In the Ecuadorian context, English is a mandatory component of the national secondary education curriculum, with a communicative approach aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which sets the B1 level as the target for graduation (Ministry of Education of Ecuador, 2016). However, local research has shown that high school graduates do not achieve the curricular objective of English as a foreign language and do not reach the pre-intermediate B1 level in oral communication (Guevara et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Sevy-Bailoon et al. (2020) identified multiple pedagogical, policy, and infrastructure factors that hinder this achievement, contributing to the low national results.

Existing research reveals that the poor oral fluency of secondary school students in Ecuador is due to interconnected pedagogical, curricular and socio-contextual elements. According to Guerrero & Moreira (2025), the focus on grammar reduces opportunities for oral practice in the classroom, resulting in a deficient oral fluency and difficulties with spontaneous conversations. Additionally, Alvarez et al. (2024) indicated that teachers identified overcrowded classrooms, reduced class time and materials with few speaking activities as the main obstacles to conducting continuous speaking activities. Likewise, Villalva et al. (2025) indicated that outdated teaching practices and a lack of technological resources significantly restrict the development of communicative competence in English.



While Ecuador still faces these difficulties, other nations have demonstrated remarkable success due to their educational policies and systems. The Netherlands and Portugal have achieved high levels of English proficiency among their youth despite being non-English speaking European countries; they rank 1st and 6th respectively in the EF EPI indices (Educational First, 2025). Their success is often attributed to good educational policies, early exposure to the language, the presence of English in the media, and teacher training programs (Alkan & Kartal, 2018; Michel et al., 2021).

On the other hand, in the regional context, Argentina ranks 1st in Latin America and 26th internationally in the EF EPI (Education First, 2025). Argentina presents an economic, sociolinguistic, and cultural context more similar to that of Ecuador, and its strengths in EFL teaching include innovative uses of technology, task-based learning projects, and specific training policies to enhance teachers' oral skills (British Council, 2025).

Despite the availability of international and regional benchmarks, there is a lack of comparative studies that systematically analyze the factors limiting oral fluency in English in Ecuadorian secondary education, contrasting them with effective pedagogical practices and policies from both high-performing European systems and comparable Latin American contexts. Addressing this deficiency is crucial for developing context-specific improvements, rather than simply adopting externally developed models without any analysis.

Based on this contextual evidence, this study is guided by the following research question: What factors limit the development of oral fluency in English among Ecuadorian secondary school students, and which effective pedagogical practices and policies can be identified by comparing Ecuador with Argentina, the Netherlands, and Portugal? This question will be answered through a comparative study that will: (a) identify teachers' perceptions of the obstacles through a structured survey; (b) explore teachers' practices and challenges through semi-structured interviews; (c) conduct a comparative document analysis of the curricular and policy frameworks in the three countries; and (d) formulate evidence-based recommendations for the Ecuadorian secondary education system.



Methodology

This study was conducted using a mixed-methods design, with triangulation of collected data, integrating quantitative, qualitative, and documentary statistical analysis to efficiently analyze the factors limiting oral fluency in English in Ecuadorian secondary schools, since this methodology allowed for the identification of convergences and divergences between reported classroom practices, teacher perceptions, and institutional guidelines.

Participants

22 English teachers from secondary schools in Ecuador participated in the quantitative survey. The teachers were from both public and private institutions and had varying levels of English proficiency. Their participation was voluntary, and their identities were protected.

Table.1

Professional Profile of the Participants

Fields	Category	n	%
Teaching Experience	0-4 years	4	18.2
	5- 10 years	10	45.4
	>11 years	8	36.4
Institution Type	Public	14	63.6
	Private	8	36.4
English Proficiency (CEFR)	B1	8	36.4
	B2	11	50.0
	C1	3	13.6

Note. The percentages were determined based on the total number of participants (22).

Additionally, five secondary school English teachers participated in the semi-structured interview to collect qualitative data. These teachers have more than 16 years of experience and have served as English department coordinators in their institutions. Finally, for the comparative documentary analysis, curriculum guidelines and educational policy documents from the Netherlands (#1),



Portugal (#6), and Argentina (#1 regionally, #26 internationally) were selected due to their high ranking and performance in the EF English Proficiency Index.

Instruments

A structured teacher survey was designed as the instrument to collect quantitative information, and it was applied online. Also, this consisted of questions focused on the teacher's professional training, oral teaching practices in the classroom, assessment methods, and perceived barriers to the development of oral fluency. Their questions were closed-ended with categorical responses such as yes/no, frequency scales, and multiple-choice questions to perform a descriptive analysis rather than a statistical inferential one. In addition, it should be informed that its content was validated by aligning it with the study's research objectives.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and questions were asked to complement and explore in greater depth the quantitative findings. Guided questions were developed for the interviews, focusing on oral skills teaching practices, oral skills assessment, perceived institutional limitations, as well as their reflections on curriculum implementation. The interviews were recorded and conducted in Spanish to ensure clarity and depth of response, and were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

With respect to documentary analysis, this was based on an exhaustive and in-depth review of official curriculum frameworks, teacher training guidelines, and policy documents related to EFL teaching in Ecuador, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Argentina to identify curricular policies on oral competence, assessment standards, instruction time, and teacher preparation. Using descriptive and comparative functions to identify effective practices and structural differences across the various educational systems.

Data analysis

The quantitative information obtained from the survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated to describe response patterns, and the results were presented in graphs and tables for better understanding.



With respect to the data obtained from interviews, these were critically analyzed using the six-phase framework of Braun & Clarke (2006), which consist of data familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme revision, theme definition and reporting. All themes were inductively derived and aligned with the study's research goals. Meanwhile, the document-based information was examined through comparative content analysis, centered on curricular emphasis, evaluation practices, instructional time, and teacher preparation requirements associated with oral proficiency in English.

Finally, triangulation was carried out by contrasting the quantitative evidence with the teacher's qualitative narrative and the documentary evidence. This allowed for the identification of consistent patterns and providing contextual explanations of the factors that affect the development of oral fluency.

Results

The findings are structured to first present a complete descriptive analysis of the quantitative survey data, followed by the qualitative thematic analysis, and culminating in a comparative documentary analysis.

Quantitative findings

Survey data from 22 Ecuadorian secondary school English teachers were analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequencies, and percentages.

Concerning teacher training and curricular preparation for oral competence, half of the teachers 50% reported a B2 level on the CEFR scale, followed by B1 36.4% and C1 13.6%. This proficiency distribution coexists in a context of scarce pedagogical training. The survey data indicate that 72.7% of respondents had not received specific instruction on oral competence teaching in the last five years, as shown in Table 2. Furthermore, 90.9% indicated they had not received training on the current Prioritized English Curriculum.

Table 2.

Teacher Training and Curricular Preparation

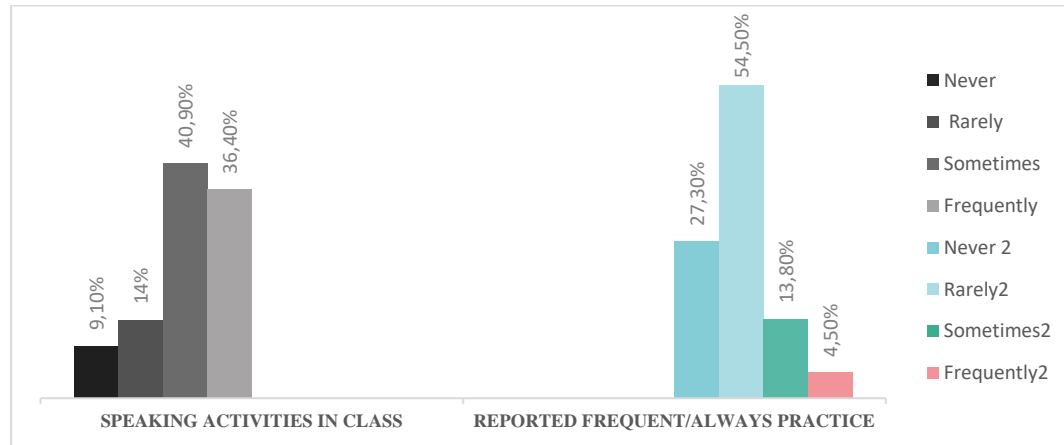
Variable	Category	n	%
Recent Training in Teaching Speaking (last 5 years)	Yes	6	27.3
	No	16	72.7
Training on Prioritized English Curriculum 2025	Yes	2	9.1
	No	20	90.9

Sorce: own elaboration (2026).

About the Frequency of Oral activities, 77.3% of teachers reported that they include speaking activities in every class or in most classes. However, the use of authentic communicative tasks (role-plays, pair work, interviews, and fluency-based tasks) was significantly less frequent, with 54.5% reporting they rarely used them, thus emerging an inconsistent pattern.

Figure 1.

Frequency of oral activities vs real application of communicative tasks.



Note. Bars show the contrast between the frequency of oral activities reported by the teacher’s vs the real application of communicative tasks also reported in the survey, own elaboration (2026).

Additionally, 95.5% of teachers strongly agreed that the national curriculum does not facilitate the development of oral fluency, while only 4.5% indicated that it does support it.

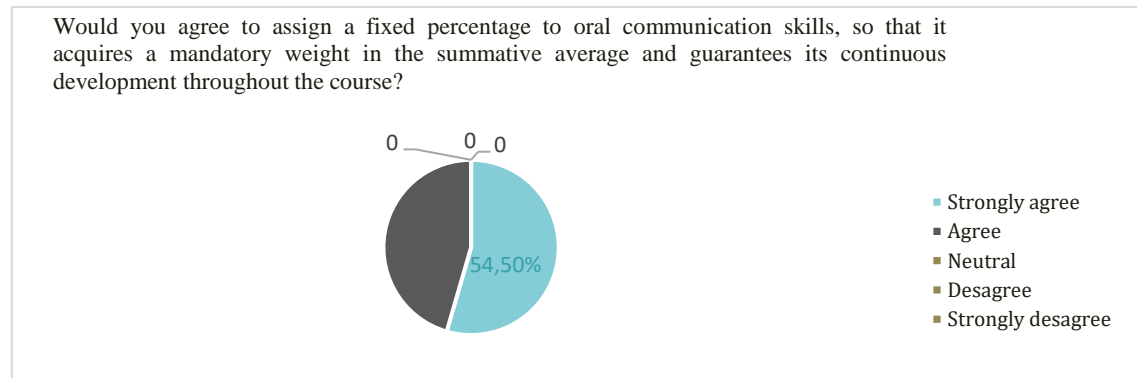
Regarding oral assessment practices, 81% of teachers agree/strongly agree that grammatical accuracy is prioritized over oral competence in institutional exams. Consequently, only 13%

indicated that they always use formal rubrics to assess speaking proficiency, and 76.8% reported that they rarely or never conduct oral exams based on the CEFR.

In addition, all of the teachers surveyed (100%) agree/strongly agree that a permanent percentage should be designated to oral communication skills in the summative assessment so that it acquires importance in the classroom.

Figure 2.

Responses regarding the fixed summative grading suggestion.



Source: own elaboration (2026).

About use of technology, only 27.3% of teachers indicated that they use technological tools, such as apps and audio recordings, with frequency, while 50% stated they used these tools rarely or never. This finding aligns with teachers' perceptions of access; 53% highlighted that their students have "little" or "very little" access to technology that could support the development of oral fluency.

Table 3.

Summary of Key Quantitative Descriptive Statistics

Domain	Key Metric	Result (n=22)
Teacher Proficiency	Self-assessed at B2 Level	50.0%
Recent Training	No specific speaking pedagogy training (last 5 yrs)	72.7%
Curriculum Training	No training on Prioritized English Curriculum 2025	90.9%
Classroom Practice	Frequently includes speaking activities in class	77.3%
Authentic Tasks	Rarely/Never uses authentic communicative tasks	81.8%
Assessment Focus	Believes exams prioritize grammar	81.8%
Fluency Assessment	Rarely/Never uses speaking fluency rubrics	86.4%
Technology Use	Rarely/Never uses tech for speaking	50.0%

Note. Percentages are based on survey responses from 22 secondary English teachers.



Qualitative Insights: Thematic analysis of systemic barriers

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of interviews with five experienced coordinators provided explanatory depth to the survey statistics, generating four principal themes that elucidate the systemic nature of the constraints.

Theme 1: Reality of curricular autonomy (theory vs. practice). All of participants mentioned being aware that the Ecuadorian curriculum provides autonomy to adapt content, but they also admitted difficulties in implementing it. They indicated that large classrooms, limited time, pressure to complete the textbook, and a the lack of collaborative planning periods relegate autonomy to mere theory. *Autonomy is stipulated in the curriculum, but insufficient time, inadequate curriculum training, and scarcity of resources hinder adaptation*, emphasized one coordinator.

Theme 2: Assessment with tendency in grammar. It was consistently mentioned that the priority given to grammar in exams determines classroom practice. One participant mentioned, *Most of us don't do oral assessments because they are difficult to conduct with 37 students, and the systema does not consider it mandatory in the final summative grade.* This reality desmotivates the teaching of oral skills.

Theme 3: Inadequate in-service training. Educators indicated receiving inadequated specialized training in the English area, preventing them from acquire pedagogical knowledge to implement the curriculum's communicative objectives. *We receive training on general curriculum for all subjects, and no one teaches us how to specifically use the English curriculum, which leads us to cut and paste skills without the appropriate interpretation, disaggregation or gradation*, explained an interviewee.

Theme 4: Lack of institutional support systems. It was highlighted the scarcity of technological resources and authentic materials. The coordinators also emphasized the lack of advisors to guide curriculum adaptation and mentor oral fluency instruction. Furthermore, educators pointed out the need for a district-level specialist to provide them with technical and pedagogical support. One coordinator remarked, *We dont have district-level English supervisor to oversee and monitor proper pedagogy for teaching speaking and provide formative input to teachers.*

**Table 4.***Connecting quantitative findings to qualitative explanations*

Quantitative patterns (survey)	Qualitative description (Interview themes)	Unified Interpretation
81.8% of teachers stated that exams prioritize grammar	Theme 2. Assessment with tendency in grammar.	Educators declare aligning classroom teaching with assessment demands that give grammatical relevance , not curricular aspirations.
72.7% reported no recent training in speaking pedagogy	Theme 3. Inadequate in-service training.	The scarcity of specialized training reduces the implementation of oral fluency-centered methodologies.
81.8% very low use of authentic speaking tasks	Themes 1 and 3. Reality of curricular autonomy & Inadequate in-service training.	Curricular autonomy becomes ineffective due to lack of specific training in the design and application of communicative tasks, limited hours, and the need for collaborative planning.
27.3% reported frequent use of technology for speaking activities	Theme 4. Lack of intuitional support systems	Opportunities for interactive oral practice are limited due to scarcity of technological resources.

Source: own elaboration (2026).

Comparative Documentary Analysis: Policy coherence in benchmark systems

Analysis of policy frameworks from Argentina, the Netherlands, and Portugal reveals a model of systemic coherence centered on oral proficiency. These systems are characterized by the alignment of high teacher standards, specialized Continuous Professional Development (CPD), communicative curricula, and aligned communicative assessment, and networks of expert support such as Argentina's on-site supervisors, Portugal's APPI, and Dutch *Expertisepunt* centers (British Council, 2025; APPI, 2024; OECD, 2025). In contrast, Ecuador's policy framework, although it formally grants autonomy, lacks essential enabling components required in practice, resulting in a well-documented gap between policy and implementation.

**Table 5.***Policy Framework for Oral English Competence Development.*

Field	Ecuador	The Netherlands	Portugal	Argentina
Curriculum & Autonomy	Focus on CLT. Autonomy granted (Ministerio de Educación, 2024), but unsupported by time, training or resources.	Focus on CLIL, CLT and TBL. Supported autonomy via SLO learning strands, expertise centers, and CEFR benchmarks (SLO, 2024)	Focus on CLT and TBL. Structured autonomy via the Curricular Autonomy and Flexibility (AFC) project (OECD, 2018).	Guided and supervised autonomy according to provincial designs (Ley 26.206, 2006), emphasis on TBL and CLIL.
Teacher Qualification & CPD	It does not mention. B1-B2 more common. Generalized CPD, non specialized.	C1-C2 certified for TTO. Mandatory CPD via Masterplan ERK on methodology and CEFR implementation (OECD,2025).	C1 certified. Annual CPD by APPI. Training on AFC application and IAVE support (APPI, 2024).	C1 certified. CPD managed by Escuela de Maestros in CABA, ISEP in Córdoba and the INFoD (British Council, 2025).
Assessment of speaking	It does not mention. Low weight or absent for oral skills. Exams with high grammatical bias.	High weight in annual exam. Continuous, formative, and summative aligned with CEFR, and formal rubrics (Eurydice, 2023)	Based-criteria. Systematic and continuous oral assessment with significant weight.	Continuous, formative, and evaluative oral assessment
Institutional support	It does not mention. Absence of pedagogical supervision and lack of materials	subsidies plan (<i>Basisvaardigheden</i>). Expert centers such as Expertisepunt (OECD,2025).	Institutional support through IAVE and the national digital repository of resources.	Provincial supervisors for mentoring and pedagogical support networks (British Council, 2025).

Note. Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO), Autonomia e Flexibilidade Curricular (AFC), Associação Portuguesa de Professores de Inglês (APPI), Instituto de Avaliação Educativa (IAVE).



Discussion

The convergent evidence reveals a fragmented educational system that, despite good intentions, contrasts sharply with the integrated policy ecosystems of high-performing benchmarks.

On the one hand, the quantitative data show us teachers with an intermediate linguistic proficiency (B1-B2), who rarely applying authentic communicative tasks (81.8 %), and assessments focus on fluency (81.4%), who at the same time confess to perceiving a grammar-centric exam system (81.8%). This deviation occurs despite the fact that the curriculum is focused on communicative competence and grants autonomy. On the other hand, the (Theme 1) *Reality of curricular autonomy*, generated by qualitative data of interview, allows us to understand this situation in depth. Although teachers have autonomy to make adaptations, they face difficulties in carrying them out due overcrowded classroom, teaching time reduced to 3 hours per week, and the lack of time for collaborative planning. Leading the teachers to opt for textbook-based instruction and a grammatical approach due to the absence of support to execute autonomy.

This tendency is explained in *Assessment with tendency in grammar* (Theme 2). It is analyzed that teachers align their classroom instruction with what is measured and valued. In this scenario, the teaching of communicative competence move to second place due the priority given to grammatical precision in formal exams. This create a vicious cycle where exams dictate practice, practice provoking poor oral skills, results that justify preferring a focus on grammar. The discrepancy between assessment and practice is the most significant limitation identified.

Two systemic deficiencies make it difficult to break this cycle. First, *Inadequate in-service training* (Theme 3) fails to bridge the gaps between classroom practices and policy. The system doesn't provide mechanisms to develop the necessary skills 72.7% of teachers do not have recent training in speaking pedagogy and 90.9% untraining on Prioritized Curriculum 2025. Second, *Lack of institutional support systems* (Theme 4), in terms of material resources (technology) and human support (specialist mentorship), it leaves isolated teachers and unable to innovate or obtain the tools and formative input required for communicative language teaching.



With respect to the information derived from the comparative documentary analysis (Table 5), it is shown how the Netherlands, Portugal, and Argentina have achieved excellent results through policy coherence:

1. **High standards with specialized CPD:** Proficiency at the C1+ level is mandatory for teachers and is continuously developed through subject-specific, required training programs, such as the Dutch Masterplan ERK and the Portuguese APPI courses.
2. **Aligned assessment :** In the selected countries, communicative competence is assessed in a formative, continuous and systematic way using CEFR-aligned rubrics to guarantee that the evaluations reflect the curricular objectives. And in the Netherlands oral assessment has a significant weight in the annual exams.
3. **Supported curricular flexibility:** Different institutionalized programs support and promote autonomy through specialized guides such as the Autonomia e Flexibilidade Curricular AFC in Portugal, the SLO learning strands from the Netherlands, and provincial supervisors in Argentina.
4. **Specific institutional support:** The countries analyzed have systematic resources and expert networks to improve teaching-learning such as IAVE in Portugal and Expertisepunt in the Netherlands.

By contrast, although Ecuador's system offers autonomy, it doesn't provide the support structures necessary to achieve it. The three reference countries reveal to us that this is not a single policy but about creating a coherent system where standards, training, curriculum, assessment, and support are all mutually aligned.



Conclusions

This study concludes that the progress of oral English fluency in Ecuadorian secondary schools is severely limited by a fragmented educational system where curricular objectives, assessment priorities, teacher training, and institutional support is disalignment. Comparisons with Argentina, the Netherlands, and Portugal reveal that successful oral proficiency is achieved through a solid system that fosters and aligns coordinated policies related to teacher preparation, robust assessment structures, and adaptable curricular designs.

Therefore, to improve oral English proficiency in secondary schools in Ecuador, the following recommendations are made:

- a. **Implement high-impact assessment reform:** Institute a mandatory minimum weighting of 25% for oral proficiency in the national student evaluation system for grades 8th-10th, and 30% in grades 1st-3th (upper high school), given that the curriculum is based on the Communicative Approach. Concurrently, develop and disseminate CEFR-aligned national oral assessment rubrics to provide a clear standard for what constitutes communicative competence, and thus achieve improvements.
- b. **Establish a specialized CPD program:** Implement a mandatory, multi-year Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program for in-service teachers to replace generic workshop. Designed collaboratively with universities and aligned with international models such as APPI in Portugal or escuela de maestros in Argentina. The main modules should prioritize formative oral assessment, communicative task development, and technology to foster oral production.
- c. **Turn on autonomy and increase class time:** Concrete measures to activate curricular flexibility: a) Guarantee English departments weekly time for collaborative planning, and b) Develop and finance a national network of Senior English Teachers-Mentors to provide continuous coaching, demonstration lessons, and guidance for curricular adaptation. In addition, promote a gradual increase in weekly English instructional time to a minimum of five hours.
- d. **Implement an institutional support system:** It is proposed to create a national program that allows secondary institutions have a) access to a digital repository with adaptable materials,



and communicative teaching resources, b) high-speed internet, and c) audio recording equipment to help with instructional feedback on speaking, and portfolio assessment.

Future studies should: (1) Conduct action research initiatives to test and evaluate the impact of the proposed oral assessment weighting influences on teaching practices and learner performance; (2) Design and measure the efficacy of a model specialized CPD program for Ecuadorian EFL teachers; (3) Explore the cost-benefit analysis and feasible implementation for creating a national network of language labs and digital resource repositories.

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Nota:

El artículo no es producto de una publicación anterior.