LANGUAGE BARRIERS IN ENGLISH LEARNING IN HIGH SCHOOL

BARRERAS LINGÜÍSTICAS EN EL APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS EN LA EDUCACIÓN MEDIA SUPERIOR

BARREIRAS LINGUÍSTICAS NA APRENDIZAGEM DO INGLÊS NO ENSINO SECUNDÁRIO SUPERIOR

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ABSTRACT

English learning in high school education in Mexico faces multiple linguistic barriers that limit the development of students' communicative competencies. This quantitative, descriptive, and exploratory study identifies which language skills present the greatest difficulties for students. A Likert-type questionnaire was administered to 45 students, investigating their perceptions of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. The results show that productive skills, especially speaking, represent the greatest challenges due to factors such as lack of practice, anxiety, and limited feedback. It is concluded that more inclusive and contextualized pedagogical strategies are needed, including the use of mobile language learning applications, to promote balanced development across all four skills, with special emphasis on oral production, in order to strengthen communicative competence at this educational level.

Keywords: English Teaching. Upper Secondary Education. Language Skills. Communicative Competence. Oral Expression. Educational Technology.

RESUMEN

El aprendizaje del inglés en la educación media superior en México enfrenta múltiples barreras lingüísticas que limitan el desarrollo de las competencias comunicativas del estudiantado. Este estudio, de enfoque cuantitativo, descriptivo y exploratorio, identifica las habilidades lingüísticas que presentan mayores dificultades para los estudiantes. Se aplicó un cuestionario tipo Likert a 45 alumnos, indagando sus percepciones sobre la comprensión auditiva, la expresión oral, la lectura y la escritura. Los resultados muestran que las habilidades productivas, especialmente la expresión oral, representan los mayores desafíos debido a factores como la falta de práctica, la ansiedad y la escasa retroalimentación. Se concluye que es necesario implementar estrategias pedagógicas más inclusivas y contextualizadas, incluyendo el uso de aplicaciones móviles de aprendizaje de inglés, que favorezcan el desarrollo equilibrado de las cuatro habilidades, con especial énfasis en la oralidad, para fortalecer la competencia comunicativa en este nivel educativo.

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Palabras clave: Enseñanza del Inglés. Educación Media Superior. Habilidades Lingüísticas. Competencia Comunicativa. Expresión Oral. Tecnología Educativa.

RESUMO

A aprendizagem de inglês no ensino médio superior no México enfrenta múltiplas barreiras linguísticas que limitam o desenvolvimento das habilidades comunicativas dos alunos. Este estudo quantitativo, descritivo e exploratório identifica as habilidades linguísticas que apresentam as maiores dificuldades para os alunos. Um questionário do tipo Likert foi aplicado a 45 alunos, investigando suas percepções de compreensão auditiva, fala, leitura e escrita. Os resultados mostram que as habilidades produtivas, especialmente a fala, representam os maiores desafios devido a fatores como falta de prática, ansiedade e feedback limitado. Conclui-se que é necessário implementar estratégias pedagógicas mais inclusivas e contextualizadas, incluindo o uso de aplicativos móveis de aprendizagem de inglês, que promovam o desenvolvimento equilibrado das quatro habilidades, com ênfase especial na expressão oral, para fortalecer a competência comunicativa neste nível educacional.

Palavras-chave: Ensino de Inglês. Ensino Médio. Habilidades Linguísticas. Competência Comunicativa. Expressão Oral. Tecnologia Educacional.

1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of English in upper secondary education in Mexico is multifaceted, as it represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the education system. English has become a key tool for job placement, access to global knowledge and participation in international academic and professional networks (Pérez-Palafox, Chong-Barreiro, Cáceres-Mesa and Moreno-Tapia 2022). Mexico's geographic proximity to the United States, as well as trade agreements such as the USMCA, have increased the demand for communication skills in English to access better job and educational opportunities (Noriega, Carvajal, Reynoso, & Álvarez 2016).

However, despite the years dedicated to teaching, most functional students do not achieve a command of the language. This problem is related to structural deficiencies in the education system, such as the overcrowding of groups, insufficient teacher training, and the limited availability of adequate teaching resources (Razo 2018). Davies (2020: no page) points out that traditional English teaching often fails to connect with the real needs of students, which limits their motivation and communicative performance.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive reform that includes more effective education policies, continuous teacher training and a pedagogical redesign focused on the development of real communicative skills. This implies, among other actions, prioritizing the use of English in authentic communicative contexts and promoting active and meaningful pedagogical strategies (Loor, Zambrano, & Carpio 2017).

In this sense, it is pertinent to explore innovative solutions that integrate digital resources in the classroom and outside it. The use of mobile technologies for language learning, framed in the Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) approach, offers an accessible and motivating alternative to strengthen oral practice and contribute to overcoming these barriers, which opens a promising avenue for research and improvement of English teaching in Mexico.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Learning the English language represents a considerable challenge for many high school students in Mexico, who face various barriers that affect your progress in developing language skills. These difficulties are linked to linguistic, emotional and contextual factors.

Various studies identify deficiencies in grammar, fluency, pronunciation, and limited vocabulary as the main obstacles, which compromise the student's ability to communicate effectively in English (Pérez-Palafox, Chong-Barreiro, Cáceres-Mesa, & Moreno-Tapia 2022). Added to this are affective factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and demotivation, which inhibit active participation in class and especially affect oral production (Zambrano, Macías Loor, Moreira Aguayo, Vivero Cedeño, & Toala Alarcón 2020). These barriers, both linguistic and emotional, generate insecurity when communicating in English, which reduces their opportunities to exercise oral expression and improve their fluency.

Poor pronunciation is a critical barrier. The lack of practice and adequate feedback affects the production of clear and understandable sounds, reducing the student's confidence when interacting in English (Zambrano, Macías Loor, Moreira Aguayo, Vivero Cedeño, & Toala Alarcón 2020). In addition, students often have limited access to real contexts where they can practice the language outside the classroom, which prevents them from reinforcing what they have learned and limits the development of fluency and spontaneity in conversation (Cedeño 2019).

Shaiboob and Hablaja (2024) showed that many students do not have enough opportunities to exercise their oral production nor do they receive corrections that allow them to identify and improve their mistakes. Therefore, they face difficulties in correctly articulating the sounds of the language, which can affect their confidence in speaking and limit their ability to interact in academic, professional, and social contexts.

On many occasions, students present limited opportunities to practice English outside of the school environment, which significantly limits their development in terms of fluency and conversational skills. Constant exposure to a language is a key factor in its acquisition, and the lack of interaction in real contexts prevents students from reinforcing what they have learned in the classroom. Sofyan, Widyantoro, and Owusu Adoma (2023) pointed out that this lack of practice reduces students' confidence in speaking, as they do not have enough contact with authentic communicative situations that allow them to improve their oral expression and function more naturally in the language.

According to Demneri (2024), students face various obstacles when writing in English, mainly due to grammatical and vocabulary errors, as well as a lack of coherence in the organization of their ideas. In addition, they often forget the specific rules of different types of text, which affects the structure and clarity of their writing. An additional factor

influencing these difficulties is interference from their native language, which impacts word order and sentence construction in English. As a result, writing becomes a more challenging task than speaking, negatively impacting the overall development of their language skills and their ability to communicate effectively in the language.

In this sense, the focus on teaching English tends to prioritize grammar and writing, while oral skills, such as verbal expression and listening comprehension, tend to receive less attention. That is, students have few opportunities to apply the language in practical contexts, which affects their ability to communicate effectively.

The limited oral practice inside and outside the classroom reflects the need to explore innovative strategies that expand the spaces for interaction with the language. The use of mobile applications applied to language learning is emerging as an alternative to provide students with greater opportunities to exercise oral production and thus overcome the linguistic and emotional barriers previously identified, favoring the development of fluency and communicative confidence in English.

1.2 OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The central purpose of this research is to identify which of the four language skills —reading, writing, listening comprehension and oral expression— represent greater difficulties for high school students in learning English as a foreign language. To achieve this objective, a structured questionnaire was designed and applied to know the perception of the students regarding the level of difficulty they experience in each of these skills.

The diagnosis of these perceptions is essential to understand the factors that limit the development of communicative competence. Elements such as lack of practice outside the classroom, anxiety when speaking, the influence of the mother tongue and the methodologies used by teachers have been recognized as recurrent barriers in various studies (Setién, Zulueta, Lavín, Bravo, Manrique, Cobo, Martín, and Margüello 2015); one of the most affected skills due to the lack of meaningful communicative practice and scarce corrective feedback (Zambrano, Macías Loor, Moreira Aguayo, Vivero Cedeño, & Toala Alarcón 2020).

It seeks not only to recognize the areas with the greatest backwardness, but also to provide diagnostic elements to support the design of pedagogical strategies that favor a more balanced and effective learning of the English language.

Based on the results of this diagnosis, it is intended to highlight oral expression as the skill that concentrates the greatest barriers and that, consequently, requires innovative pedagogical interventions. Among the possible alternatives, the integration of technological resources, particularly mobile language learning applications, is considered as a strategy that expands the opportunities for communicative practice and contributes to overcoming the identified limitations.

2 JUSTIFICATION

The strengthening of communication skills in English is essential to achieve a comprehensive education in high school students, since these competencies not only favor learning, but also the ability to analyze, think critically, and actively participate in academic, social, and labor contexts (Mendoza Laz, Morán Aguilar, Mendoza Cedeño, Freire Jáuregui, Quiroz Alonzo and Loor Mendoza 2023). In a globalized world, mastery of a second language such as English allows access to specialized information, international mobility programs, and better job opportunities.

According to Giannini (2024), multilingual education is a key component to achieving inclusive and quality teaching, as it fosters respect for cultural diversity, improves understanding between communities, and strengthens students' cognitive skills. In addition, learning a foreign language has been shown to be related to an improvement in memory, attention, and problem-solving (Cedeño 2019).

From the perspective of communicative competence, Hymes (1972) states that mastery of a language not only implies knowing its grammar, but also knowing how to use it appropriately in different contexts. In this sense, the four linguistic skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing make up an interdependent system that must be developed in a balanced way to achieve effective communication.

Listening comprehension is a receptive skill that allows you to interpret oral language and capture communicative intentions. Abduvakhobova and Erdonova (2023) point out that types of listening such as active, critical, and empathetic play essential roles in effective interaction. On the other hand, oral expression facilitates the verbalization of ideas and the development of confidence in the use of language, especially in educational and social contexts (Fedotova 2023).

On the other hand, speech is a productive skill that allows people to express their thoughts and ideas verbally, playing a fundamental role in interaction and the

development of social relationships (Fedotova 2023). Mastering speaking not only facilitates effective communication, but also strengthens students' confidence to actively participate in conversations and debates. As they practice and improve their ability to express themselves, they develop greater communicative competence, which allows them to argue clearly, exchange ideas and adapt to different conversational contexts, essential aspects both in the academic field and in their daily lives.

Listening and speaking skills are interconnected, as they both form the basis of oral communication and influence each other in the process of learning a language. According to Martínez Paredes, Barriga Fray, Lluguin Merino, and Pazmiño Pavón (2020), based on Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis, comprehensible exposure to spoken language is essential for language acquisition, which highlights the importance of listening in the development of oral expression. In addition, Long's theory of interaction, as mentioned by González Díaz and Asensio Brouard (1996), argues that language is learned through communicative interaction, which reinforces the idea that listening and speaking are interdependent processes that enhance each other in learning English.

Another fundamental skill is reading, being a receptive skill that allows students to interpret and understand written texts, playing a key role in the acquisition of knowledge and in the interpretation of various contexts (Fedotova 2023). The development of this competence contributes significantly to the enrichment of vocabulary, thus strengthening the ability to communicate in the language. As Manurung, Imelda, Sova Puspidalia, Saputra, Fatmawati, and Mardika (2023) mention, improving the reading skills not only expand students' linguistic repertoire, but also enable them to understand grammatical structures and expressions of the language in greater depth. These aspects are essential for effective interaction in academic contexts and in everyday life.

As for writing, Fedotova (2023) defines it as a productive skill that requires the elaboration of texts with the aim of transmitting information or expressing ideas. This competence plays a fundamental role in various areas, especially in the academic and professional spheres, where clarity and coherence in written communication are essential. Through writing, individuals can organize and structure their thoughts, develop strong arguments, and share knowledge effectively. In addition, mastery of this skill contributes to academic success and professional development, as it allows for the preparation of formal documents, reports, and other texts necessary in different contexts.

The balanced development of the four language skills requires not only constant practice, but also the application of effective teaching strategies. In this way, the use of appropriate pedagogical approaches can facilitate language acquisition, allowing students to improve their comprehension and production in an integrated manner. Effective English teaching requires a combination of innovative strategies and practical approaches that fit the diverse needs of students.

Shi (2024) mentions that the use of various materials in English, such as videos, podcasts, and authentic texts, allows students to interact with the language more closely to the real contexts in which it is used, especially favoring the practice of oral expression. This exposure to different accents, slang and forms of expression typical of native speakers contributes to improving oral comprehension and production in authentic situations.

Raskova (2023) points out that the use of interactive mobile applications contributes significantly to student engagement, as they adapt to different learning styles and allow the educational experience to be personalized. By offering instant feedback and making it easier to correct errors, these apps encourage a more active, reinforce autonomous learning and strengthen self-confidence in oral production.

The incorporation of interactive games and activities in these applications, according to Nugraha and Sembiring (2022), promotes greater motivation and makes language learning more dynamic and attractive, allowing students to improve their language skills in a practical and playful way.

However, for these tools to be truly effective, a reconfiguration of traditional pedagogical practices and adequate teacher training in digital skills is necessary (Menéndez Pérez et al., 2024; Raskova, 2023). In this way, teachers can strategically integrate technology into the teaching of oral expression, creating more enriching and relevant learning experiences for students.

This research is justified by the need to understand what are the specific barriers that prevent the adequate development of these skills and, especially, of oral expression, in order to guide the implementation of more effective and contextual methodologies that meet the real needs of students. In this sense, it is pertinent to consider the potential of digital technologies, particularly mobile language learning applications, as complementary support to promote continuous practice, offer immediate feedback and expand spaces for communicative interaction beyond the classroom.

3 HYPOTHESIS

The main objective of this research is to explore which of the four language skills —listening, speaking, reading and writing— represents a greater difficulty for high school students in learning English as a foreign language. From this, the following research question is formulated:

- What is the language skill that presents the greatest difficulties in its development among high school students in learning English as a foreign language?

The formulation of this question arises from the need to identify the main difficulties faced by high school students in learning English as a foreign language. Understand which language skill is most challenging it will allow the development of more effective pedagogical strategies, focused on strengthening the areas of greatest difficulty. In addition, this analysis will contribute to the improvement of didactic approaches and the implementation of methodologies that favor a more balanced and meaningful learning for students. In this process, the integration of digital and technological tools can play a key role in complementing traditional strategies and facilitating a more dynamic and interactive learning environment.

4 METHODOLOGY

This research is framed in a quantitative approach of a descriptive and exploratory type, since it seeks to identify, analyze and describe the perceptions of high school students regarding the difficulties they face in the development of the four linguistic skills in English: listening comprehension, oral expression, reading and writing.

The study has a cross-sectional design, since the information was collected at a single time point. Its objective is to establish relationships between variables without intervening in their development, analyzing the phenomena in their natural context.

The questionnaire was applied to 45 students of Upper Secondary Education. For data collection, a closed questionnaire with a five-point Likert-type scale was used, which facilitated the comparison and analysis of the responses. This method made it possible to obtain quantifiable information on students' perceptions regarding their competencies in the different language skills, identify areas of greater difficulty and provide a solid basis for the study of language barriers in the oral production of English.

The Likert scale, according to Pescaroli, Velazquez, Alcántara Ayala, Galasso, Kostkova, and Alexander (2020), is a key tool in social and educational research, as it

allows latent traits to be measured from ordinal data. By structuring responses into levels of agreement or frequency, it facilitates the quantitative assessment of attitudes and perceptions. In addition, by assigning numerical values to each option, it makes it possible to analyze trends and apply statistical techniques that reinforce the validity and reliability of the results.

5 RESULTS

The results obtained from the questionnaire applied to high school students reveal diverse perceptions about their language skills in English. To the most relevant findings of each of the skills evaluated are presented below.

The majority of students (44.44%) were placed in the neutral category, indicating a mixed perception regarding their ability to understand spoken English. 24.44% agreed with the statement that their listening skills are adequate, while 4.44% strongly disagreed. This suggests that listening comprehension is not perceived as one of the weakest skills, although it also shows an area for improvement.

Figure 1

Listening
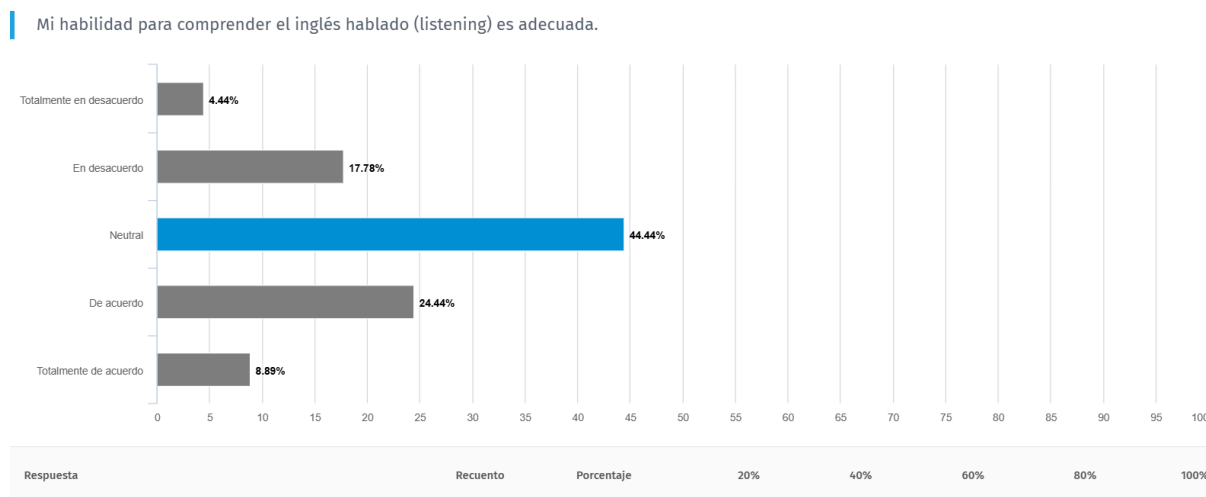
Regarding oral expression, 40% of the students expressed difficulties in expressing themselves, agreeing or totally agreeing with the statement "I have difficulties expressing myself orally in English". Similarly, 27.27% disagreed, while 27.27% were in the neutral category. This indicates that a considerable part of the students perceive challenges when communicating orally in English.

Figure 2

Speaking
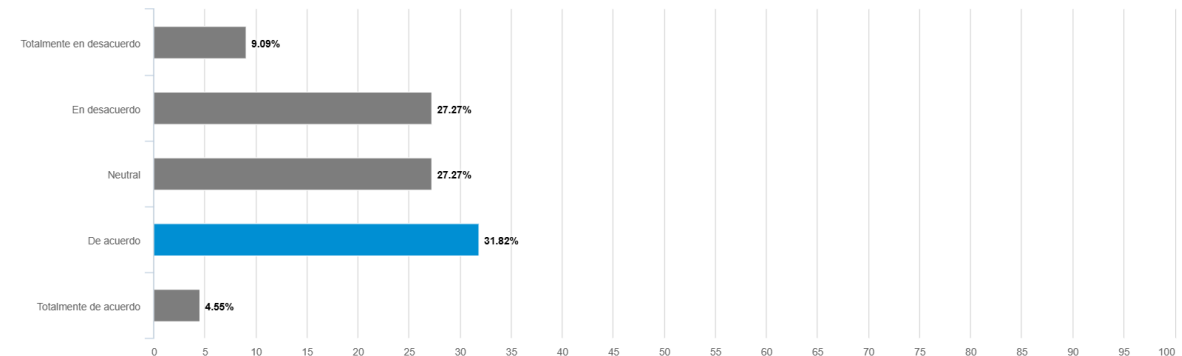
The majority of participants considered their English reading ability to be sufficient, with 44.44% agreeing and 8.89% strongly agreeing. However, there were also 13.33% who disagreed, which shows that a small part of the students could face difficulties when reading texts in English, although in general this skill was perceived as relatively strong.

Figure 3

Reading
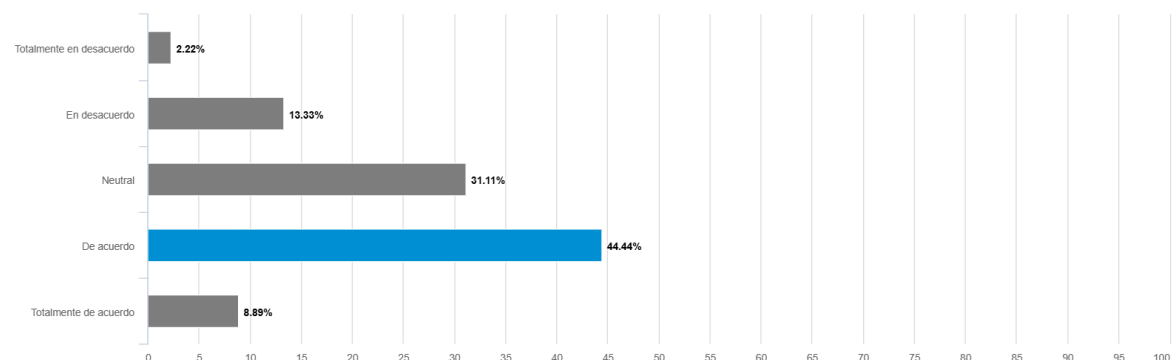
Writing ability was one of the areas that showed the greatest difficulties. 61.36% of the students positioned themselves in the neutral category, which indicates some indecision about their writing competence. 20.45% disagreed with the statement, while 13.64% agreed. Surprisingly, none of the participants were

I totally agree, suggesting that this skill is seen as one of the most challenging.
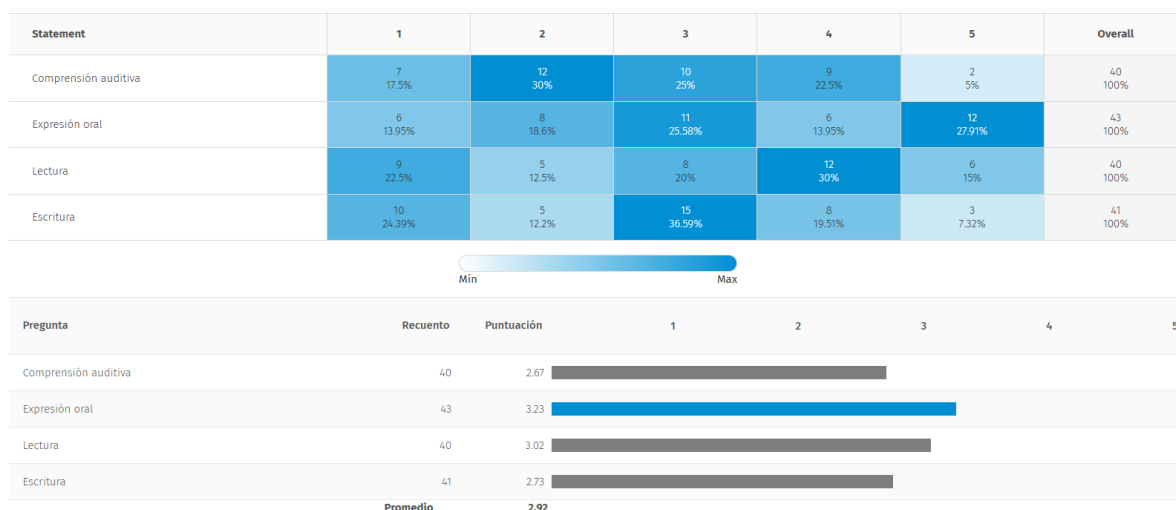
Figure 4

Writing

Tengo problemas para escribir correctamente en inglés.
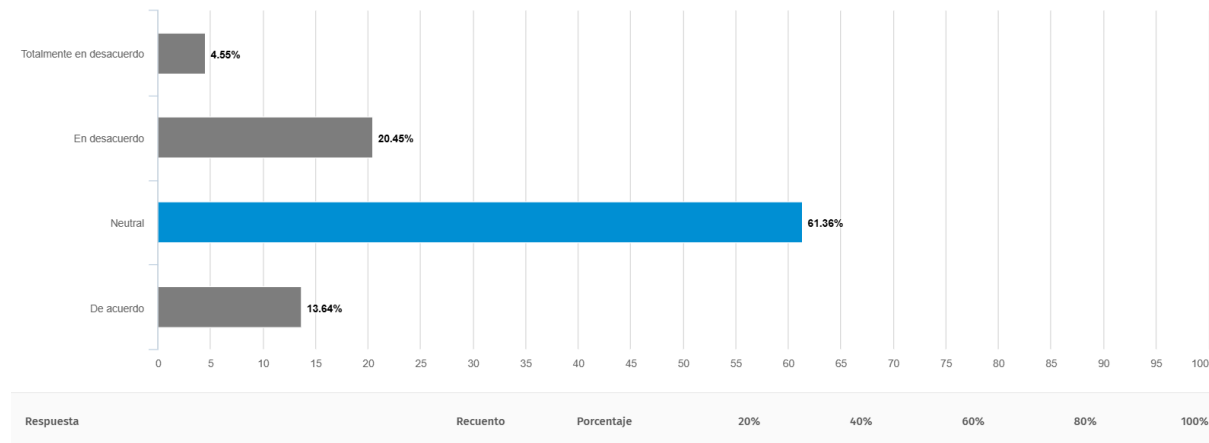
Regarding the least developed skills, the majority of students (24.39%) identified writing as the weakest skill. However, there was also a significant perception of difficulties in oral expression, which was indicated by 27.91% of the students.

Figure 5

Less developed skills

Statement	1	2	3	4	5	Overall
Comprensión auditiva	7 17.5%	12 30%	10 25%	9 22.5%	2 5%	40 100%
Expresión oral	6 13.95%	8 18.6%	11 25.58%	6 13.95%	12 27.91%	43 100%
Lectura	9 22.5%	5 12.5%	8 20%	12 30%	6 15%	40 100%
Escritura	10 24.39%	5 12.2%	15 36.59%	8 19.51%	3 7.32%	41 100%

| | | | Min | | | Max | |

Pregunta	Recuento	Puntuación	1	2	3	4	5
Comprensión auditiva	40	2.67					
Expresión oral	43	3.23					
Lectura	40	3.02					
Escritura	41	2.73					
Promedio		**2.92**					

6 DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the questionnaire applied to high school students offer an overview of their perceptions of English language skills, reflecting both strengths and areas for improvement. These results are consistent with previous research that has identified speaking and writing as two of the most challenging skills for English learners.

According to González Gómez, Morales Vázquez, & Arias Ovando (2022), oral production in a second language is often one of the most difficult areas to master due to the need for fluency, confidence, and the ability to structure ideas quickly. This difficulty may be linked to the lack of communicative practice in real contexts and the anxiety generated by the use of language in spontaneous situations (Derwing & Munro 2009).

As for writing, Goh and Burns (2012) have pointed out that it is often seen as a complex skill due to its dependence on grammar, vocabulary, and textual structure, factors that require constant practice to achieve an adequate level of proficiency.

One of the limitations of the study is the absence of a more in-depth qualitative analysis that allows exploring the reasons behind students' perceptions of their language abilities. A more comprehensive approach that combines surveys with interviews could provide a more detailed understanding of the factors that influence students' self-assessment.

This study offers a broad perspective of students' language skills, covering both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). This comprehensive approach allows for a more complete view of the English language skills of high school students. In addition, the quantitative analysis of the results provides a solid basis for interpreting students' perceptions in a systematic and objective manner.

In this way, the results obtained can be used directly in the design of pedagogical interventions, as they provide a clear vision of the weakest areas, such as oral expression and writing. The inclusion of educational technologies, such as interactive platforms, language learning apps, and automated feedback tools, can offer students opportunities for additional practice, interaction in more realistic contexts, and receive immediate corrections, which favors continuous improvement.

7 CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insight into high school students' perceptions of their English language skills. While listening and reading were perceived more positively, speaking and writing stand out as areas that require attention and improvement.

Incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews could help to explore the underlying causes of difficulties in speaking and writing. In addition, future research could compare students' perceptions with objective assessments of their language skills, providing a more accurate view of the discrepancy between perception and performance.

On a practical level, the findings of this study offer a solid basis for the design of pedagogical interventions aimed at strengthening oral expression and writing, which are seen as the most challenging. It is proposed to explore the integration of mobile English learning applications as complementary tools, as they facilitate autonomous practice, immediate feedback and exposure to authentic communicative contexts. This approach not only expands learning opportunities, but also promotes student motivation and self-confidence.

In this way, the study contributes to the current understanding of students' perceptions and opens paths for the improvement of educational practices in the teaching of English, with a comprehensive focus on communication skills and the strategic use of educational technologies.

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