

What's Harder: Reading, Writing, Listening or Speaking?: Ecuadorian Students' Perceptions of the Four Macro-Skills

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to better understand the relationship between Ecuadorian university students' high school English learning experiences and their emotions regarding the four macro-skills. This built on previous studies about affect in second language learning. The main study methods employed were surveys with short answer sections, analysing the trends using t-tests, graphic representation and means, as well as coding non-empirical responses. The study found a weak relationship between students' high school experiences and their perceptions for speaking and writing, and a very weak relationship for listening and reading. Findings provide an important contribution to work on EFL in Latin American tertiary contexts, as well as adding to the discussion of affect in second language learning. The study presents a meditation upon the role of emotion in learning that would be valuable for all EFL and second language professionals.

Keywords: Affect, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), ESL, Ecuador, Latin America

RESUMEN

¿Qué es más difícil: leer, escribir, escuchar o hablar?: Percepciones de estudiantes ecuatorianos acerca de las cuatro destrezas macro del Inglés

Este estudio busca entender mejor la relación entre universitarios ecuatorianos, sus experiencias de aprendizaje del idioma Inglés en la educación secundaria y su sentir hacia las cuatro macro-destrezas. Este se fundamenta en estudios previos acerca del aprendizaje de una segunda lengua. Los principales métodos usados fueron entrevistas con respuestas cortas, análisis de tendencias usando t-tests, representación gráfica de la media, así como también codificando las respuestas no empíricas. El estudio encontró poca relación entre las experiencias de la educación secundaria de los estudiantes y sus percepciones para la destreza de hablar y escribir, y una muy escasa relación para la escuchar y leer. Los resultados proveen una contribución importante para el trabajo en EFL Latino América y sus contextos de educación superior, así como también se añade a la discusión del aprendizaje de un segundo idioma. El estudio presenta una mediación desde el rol de la emoción en el aprendizaje que sería valorado por todos los profesionales de un segundo idioma en este caso Inglés EFL.

Introducción

One of the challenges for students facing international English language tests is having skills that are developed to different extents. Some students find reading easier, whilst others find conversational language more accessible. An analysis of literature sought to find out information about students strengths and weaknesses in terms of macro-skills, as a basis for a hypothesis about which skills would be the most challenging for learners. This study will look at the relationship between students' secondary level experiences and their current confidence levels in the four macro-skills.

Affect and Language Learning

Affect is inadvertently discussed in many trends that are oftentimes based on pseudoscience, rather than upon solid empirical research. However, it is widely accepted in the field of psychology and neuroscience that previous experiences shape affect, that is to say students' emotional responses to stimuli. This was one of the key contributions of behaviourists like Watson who looked at the development of fear reactions in children (Watson & Rayner, 1920) and Pavlov (1927) who studied the conditional reflexes of dogs. These studies

have stood the test of time and influenced our understandings of human behaviour and motivation in multiple disciplines. Affect gives us a basis for recognising a relationship between an environmental stimulus and a reaction.

Affect has been shown to be an important influencer of student success in second language learning. In the field of second language education, affect has been linked to effort, attention and motivation (Schumann, 1998, p. 8), as well as participation (Garrett & Young, 2009). Schumann (1998) also notes the relationship between negative affect and avoidance behaviour (p. 8). These studies show the connection between participation and achievement and conditioned responses for second language learning. These theoretical understandings demonstrate how better understanding students' perceptions surrounding second language learning permit us to make early interventions to promote student attendance, increase their motivation and help to keep them engaged in learning.

It is important to note contextual factors that impact students' feelings in foreign language learning. Bailey (1983) notes the impact of group dynamics and perceived "public failure" as well as competition through comparison on anxiety levels (p. 73-75). Garrett and Young (2009)

reinforce this, claiming that self-comparison is one of the most influential factors in the language learning experience (218-219). This reinforces what many of us may have experienced first hand in learning a concept, where a proficiency pecking order develops within the classroom. As teachers, we can help mould this pecking order, to some extent, through collaborative activities, encouraging students to set goals based on their individual areas of growth and creating a positive classroom climate (Buskist & Saville, 2001; Nuthall, 2007). An interesting gap in Bailey (1983) and Garrett and Young's (2009) studies is their focus on qualitative methods and small sample sizes, instead of assessing this for a larger group of students or using quantitative methods, like those generally employed in psychological research.

This study will use the quantitative method as the basis of the study and elaborate upon these findings with qualitative focus groups and interviews.

The Context

Many current studies at the Universidad Técnica del Norte are looking at the roles of anxiety and differentiation in learning, however, a deep understanding of the relationship between students' prior educational experiences and their implications for teaching is yet to be developed. This study hopes to fill this gap in our knowledge of students' EFL backgrounds and what impact these have on students' feelings in the different macro-skills.

Studies by international agencies have shown that the level of English by Ecuadorian test-takers has been relatively low in relation to other countries. A study by the British Council (2015) found that in 2014, the average academic and general training IELTS scores in Ecuador were 6.5 and 6.1, respectively. This compared to an average TOEFL score of 80 in 2013 (British Council, 2015). These roughly correlate to a CEFR level of B2/C1. What is more interesting for this study is students'

auto-assessment of their reading, writing and speaking skills. Listening was not included in this section of the report. This analysis showed that one of the weakest perceived skills amongst the population studied was speaking, consistent with the hypothesis that this area could be seen as challenging for native Spanish speakers with almost double the amount of students grading themselves poorly in speaking than reading (British Council, p. 36). Similarly, an EF report found that Ecuador had a low level of English, comparable with other countries in Latin America (EF, 2014, p. 22). It ranked 35 out of 63 countries studied (p. 8). This will be an interesting reference point to compare with students' feelings around each of the skills and their life experiences.

Additionally, many Ecuadorian English courses use a grammar heavy approach to language teaching with little communicative focus. A 1966 cross country comparison of Latin America found that Ecuador dedicated the smallest amount of time to English over the entire plan of studies compared to other countries (Gomes de Matos & Wigdorsky, 1966, p. 30). It is important to note that individual differences as well as deficiencies in primary and secondary language teaching result in a large degree of variability and challenges at a university level (Coleman, 1962). In the classes I have given so far in Ecuador, students have been more familiar with standard U.S. accents as opposed to being exposed to varying accents from different parts of the English-speaking world.

Due to the reasons outlined above, it is predicted that students may find reading to be the most accessible skill. Another important consideration is the historical emphasis on the receptive skill of reading (Gomes de Matos & Wigdorsky, 1966, p. 28; Coleman, 1962). Students may also be more comfortable with this capability as it generally does not put them in a socially embarrassing situation, unlike speaking. Developmental stage is an im-

portant consideration given that students at the institute are young adults, who often experience social role redefinitions and consequently feel social pressures more deeply than older adults (Eccles et al., 1993; Whittle, Liu, Batin, Harrison, & Davey, 2016). It is important to note that student hesitation to engage in conversation isn't isolated to Latin America. This problem has been investigated in other non-English speaking countries, like in Spain where one study reported that 70% of students did not speak English in class (Seguro Alonso, 2013, p. 33) and in Bangladesh (Huq, 2014) where recommendations were provided to include more spontaneous tasks (p. 70). The historical and ongoing weaknesses in speaking and listening combined with social pressures that students may feel in accordance with their developmental stage helps predict that these skills may be perceived as more challenging than reading and writing.

This paper aims to address the lack of information about Northern Ecuadorian university students affect surrounding reading, writing, listening and speaking competencies, relating this to their schooling experiences.

Method

La Universidad Técnica del Norte is a university in the north of Ecuador. The Academic Language Centre is a faculty aimed to promote student proficiency in English, regardless of their major. Students need to achieve a B1 level in order to graduate. Students are from various surrounding areas in the north of Ecuador, such as Imbabura, Carchi, Pichincha and Cotapaxi, with some students coming from coastal states like Esmeraldas. The 319 students who participated in this study were enrolled in English courses in the Academic Language Center (CAI) at La Universidad Técnica del Norte. These courses are heterogeneous in terms of student capacities, backgrounds and gender. The entire investigation was carried out in

Spanish to promote clarity for linguistically homogeneous research participants.

This study took a mixed methods approach, using a survey to gain an overview of perspectives as well as interviews to gain a deeper insight into student's individual experiences. The surveys were printed on paper, taking into account time needed to complete the forms and that students did not have access to laptops. Answers were anonymous. Interviewees were selected on a voluntary basis, without monetary compensation. The study was short-term, with surveys conducted over the academic periods from October 2016 to March 2017.

In the survey, students were asked questions about their feelings and secondary school experiences with the four macro-skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking). This was measured using a 5-point likert scale where participants could report the extent to which they agreed with the statement. This ranged from strongly disagree (1), highly agree (5). The questions were written in Spanish. In the perceptions section, students responded to the statements: I feel good speaking in English, I feel good writing in English, I feel good listening to various accents (from England, the USA, etc.) in English, and I feel good reading various types of texts in English. For the secondary school experiences section students responded to the statements: in secondary school, we spoke in English; in secondary school, we wrote in English; in secondary school, we listened to various accents (from England, USA, etc.) in English; and in secondary school, we read various types of texts in English. Students were given a space to give more information about their answers.

The empirical results were entered into a spreadsheet and mapped onto a chart, whereby the relationship between the factors was analysed. A t-test was then applied to give a deeper understanding of the findings. The short answer responses were written in a text document and coded for the key themes: reading, writing,

speaking and listening, as well as other salient, recurring codes.

Focus groups were used as another approach to add breadth to the students' responses and answer questions that arose from the research. In the focus groups, students responded to 6 questions about affect and teacher adaptations. These were: What factors do you feel influence your feelings when you go to speak, write, read or listen to English? Do you think that emotion is important in English class? What can the teacher do to make you feel comfortable speaking, listening, reading or writing in English? What can the teacher do to help you improve your English? What is the connection between learning in secondary school and your current capacities?

Findings

Due to the size of the population sampled in the survey, the confidence interval for these findings was 95%. That is to say that the results should be conclusive within a 5% about or 5% below those stated, for the population studied.

Table 1

Average scores

	Students feelings	Secondary School Experiences
Speaking	3.128	2.678
Writing	3.165	2.898
Listening	2.800	2.196
Reading	3.251	2.519

Comparing students' experiences in secondary school, listening was the least practiced skill. This was, similarly the skill that students felt the least confident with. Alternately, students on average practiced writing more than other skills. Despite this, this skill was not the skill that students felt most confident with on average, coming second to reading. The following four sections will look at findings on each of the macro-skills – speaking, writing, listening and reading, respectively.

Speaking

A pair-samples t-test was used to check the relationship between secondary schooling experiences in speaking with students perceptions, $t(316)=8.0587$, $p < 0.0001$, a significant difference was found (SF = 3.13, SE = 2.68). The difference between the two means is 0.450 and the 95% confidence interval of this difference between the two means is -0.559 and -0.340. We can thus reject the null hypothesis and say that there is some relationship between students' feelings and their secondary schooling experiences for speaking.

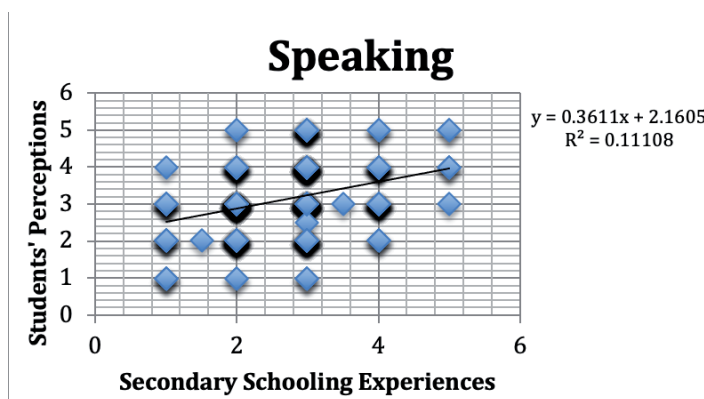


Figure 1.
Prepared by the author

These quantitative measures were triangulated with an optional short answer section. Two students mentioned preferring speaking to writing (P7; P13). Another student attributed their difficulty in speaking to lack of practice (P4). Pronunciation was complicated for some students (P14; P22). Additionally, a student mentioned thinking of complicated sentences as a hindrance to speaking (P20). Several students noted feeling more confident speaking in English in small groups of well known people than in larger groups or with people that they didn't know very well (P25; P27; P32; P34).

In secondary school, a student said that they did not frequently practice speaking in English (P1), whilst another claimed to never have practiced speaking

English in high school (P20). Although most students did not reply to this short answer section, it is possible to see a wide range of student experiences due to students' academic level and emotional relationship to speaking.

Writing

A pair-samples t-test was used to check the relationship between secondary schooling experiences in writing with students perceptions, $t(314) = 5.1268$, $p < 0.0001$, a significant difference was found (SF = 3.17, SE = 2.90). The difference between the two means is 0.27 and the 95% confidence interval is from 0.16 to 0.37. We can thus reject the null hypothesis and say that there is some relationship between students' feelings and their secondary schooling experiences for writing.

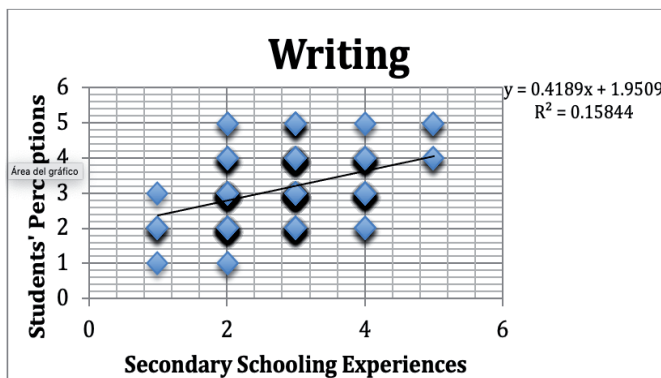


Figure 2.
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In the short answer section, one student mentioned preferring speaking to reading (P13). While some other participants stated that both writing and speaking were challenging for them due to grammar (P26; P20). Another stated that writing was a complicated skill for them (P7). One student said that they feel confident writing in the book (P25). Meanwhile, a student felt more comfortable writing to people who were close to them (P27). At the same time, a student found writing and reading to be easier than listening (P35). According to one student,

learning to speak should precede learning to write (P45). No students reported explicitly on writing in school, with some saying that their high school teachers used grammar as the focus of their instruction (P6; P11).

Listening

A pair-samples t-test was used to check the relationship between secondary schooling experiences in listening with students perceptions, $t(316) = 8.8707$, $p < 0.0001$, a significant difference was found (SF = 2.8, SE = 2.196). The difference between the two means is 0.604 and the 95% confidence interval is from 0.470 to 0.738. We can thus reject the null hypothesis and say that there is some relationship between students' feelings and their secondary schooling experiences for listening.

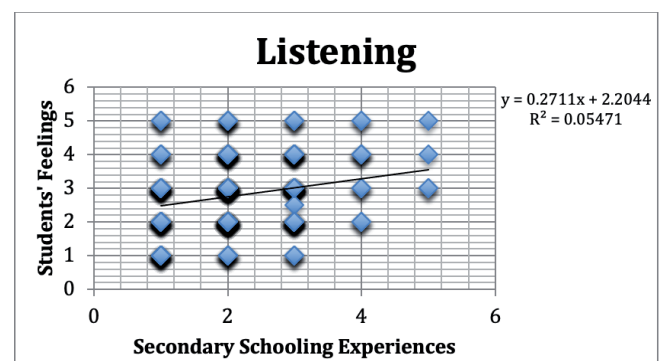


Figure 3.
Prepared by the author

One of the most salient themes on listening was students' difficulty to understand different pronunciation, according to accents (P14; P16; P10; P22; P52). Other students mentioned that native speakers speak very quickly and cut off words (P10). A student stated that understanding fluent English was complicated for them, with a couple noting lack of practice as a reason behind this (P4). In terms of secondary schooling experiences, two students said that they only listened to the teacher without any other audio input or diversity of accents (P20; P52).

Reading

A pair-samples t-test was used to check the relationship between secondary schooling experiences in reading with students' perceptions, $t(314) = 11.7198$, $p < 0.0001$, a significant difference was found ($SF = 3.251$, $SE = 2.519$). The difference between the two means is 0.732 and the 95% confidence interval is from 0.609 to 0.855. We can thus reject the null hypothesis and say that there is some relationship between students' feelings and their secondary schooling experiences for reading.

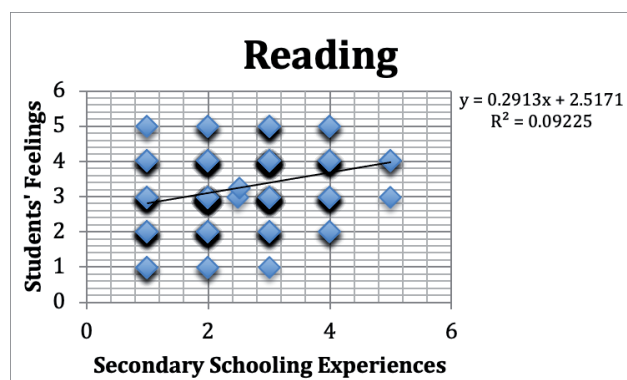


Figure 4.

Prepared by the author

A student mentioned that reading was more accessible to them than listening (P35), which seemed to agree with the overall findings. Other students stated that reading books, rather than short texts, would be a good didactic tool to promote the skill (P47; P48). A fifth level student stated that their reading skills have developed noticeably since they were in high school (P51). Three students mentioned reading, stating that in secondary school the teachers used to make them read short readings that were in the text, focusing more on grammar (P6, P46; P47).

General findings

Overall, students' perceptions were found to be correlated with their secondary experiences. Students' positive affect in the different macro-skills averaged out

to be greater than would be expected purely based on their secondary experiences of English learning. Another important comment by students was the relegation of English to a lower position in secondary schooling (P7; P10; P45) or the level of instruction being quite low (P4; P23; P36; P52).

Focus groups

Students said that knowledge, relationships, trust, fear of making mistakes and dynamic classes all influence their emotions when speaking, writing, reading or listening in English. They stated that positive emotion helped them learn and feel comfortable asking questions if they didn't understand. Alternatively, they stated that if other students made fun of them or seemed to know more than them this impacted negatively on their feelings around engaging in learning. Recommendations that they made to teachers were to create interactive lessons, use music and laughter to support positive affect. Participants did not see a strong impact of secondary school learning and their current capacities, except for becoming accustomed to disinterest. However, they conceded that if they had known more at the end of high school this would have helped them in English classes.

Discussion

All of the four macro-skills studied were found to have a positive correlation between secondary schooling experiences and students' perceptions of each of the skills. A weak correlation was found between students' perceptions and secondary schooling experiences in speaking and writing. Meanwhile, a very weak correlation was found between secondary schooling experiences and students' affect in listening and reading skills. Upon analysing students' short responses, it was possible to state that their lack of familiarity with listening in high school may have led to a

diverse range of feelings at university.

The study supported the British Council's (2015) report, which found that speaking was seen as one of the most challenging skills out of reading, writing and speaking (p. 36). This finding was replicated in the study, with speaking having a mean score of 3.128, followed by writing, which had 3.165 and reading with 3.251. It is important to note that the difference in students' confidence in speaking was not greatly different to their feelings around writing. A gap in the British Council's study was students' auto-assessment of their listening skills, which came in last with a mean score of 2.800 (see table 1). This new finding adds new insight into what is perceived to be challenging for students and how we can better support student academic and affective growth.

Several student comments supported the Gomes de Matos & Wigdorsky's (1966, p. 28) and Coleman's (1962) which showed secondary school teachers' focus on grammar (P6; P11), reading and writing over listening and speaking. This has practical implications for pre-service teacher training and professional development. Unfortunately, many students also commented on the lack of consideration of English as an important subject (P7; P10; P45) or the level of instruction being quite low (P4; P23; P36; P52).

As teachers we must understand that while prior achievement is one of the strongest influencers of student attainment (Hattie, 2009), effort, attention, motivation (Schumann, 1998) and participation (Garrett & Young, 2009). At the same time, students' prior schooling is not the be all and end all of learning. Prior experiences encompass students' personal lives, friendships, opportunities and many other factors. These form a melting pot inside each student whereby they develop not just a factual internal representation of a language, but a multi-dimensional one that includes a gamut of feelings. Representation in hand, students come into the classroom ready to take on the world or geared

up in defence. Most of all, we cannot underestimate the value of interpersonal relationships to help students open up and develop not just as language students, but as lifelong learners (Delors, 1996).

Why is this study important?

This study used a mixed-method approach, to provide a larger sample size than other studies on the theme of affect in second language learning (Bailey, 1983; Garrett & Young, 2009). This addressed the limitations of previous studies and enabled a more comprehensive analysis of how secondary school experiences impact upon university students in the local context. In doing so, it adds an important piece to our understanding of the relationship between prior experiences and student affect in adult education.

Additionally, being fluent in Spanish enabled the research to be conducted in a way that permitted more faithful results on the part of participants. This added strength to the research results in a manner which would have been much more laborious for monolingual investigators.

Limitations

In researching this topic, there were few studies that described the target population. Two of these studies were published more than 50 years ago (Gomes de Matos & Wigdorsky, 1966; Coleman, 1962). This limitation made it complicated to formulate a comprehensive hypothesis based on updated information. At the same time, this study seeks to fill this gap by providing more information of Ecuadorian EFL students.

Analysing the survey questions in retrospect, some of the macro-skills were measured with a slightly different focus than others. The speaking and reading skills read: I feel good speaking in English and I feel good writing in English. Alternatively, the listening prompt asked: I feel good listening to different accents (from

England, the USA etc.) in English, and the reading statement stated: I feel good reading different types of texts in English. The prior experience topic read similarly: in secondary school we spoke / wrote / listened to various accents (from England, the USA etc.) / read different types of texts in English. This slightly different emphasis may have slanted students responses in the sense that they may have read texts in English in high school, but not a diverse range of texts, or listened to English in school but not a broad range of accents. At the same time, students may have spoken or written, but not in communicative ways. Based on the design of the survey, these limitations may have changed student responses and should be considered for future studies.

Conclusions

One of the most important aspects of any teaching is recognising the different dimensions of the classroom. In order to teach, we need to understand not just test scores, but also the affective dimension, which are central to learning. Students' prior experiences form the basis for their neurological, physiological reactions to new information. Overcoming students' fears and providing a safe, positive space for learning is the first step in increasing engagement, promoting student retention and creating a life-long love of learning.

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