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The Use of ICT for the Development of Oral Skills in Spanish
Secondary Education Students

Máster en Profesor de Educación Secundaria Obligatoria y Bachillerato,
Formación Profesional y Enseñanzas de Idiomas

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Abstract

Oral comprehension and oral production have been proven to be the most problematic skills to acquire when learning a foreign language. In addition, within the Spanish formal education system there has been an excess of written activities for many years, resulting in a near-absence of oral communication in the classroom which has turned into students' lower proficiency levels and, therefore, reluctance to practice them¹. This situation is changing, since today's world offers a wide range of methodological resources, among which Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) stand out. They are gaining ground within the Spanish society since most of the linguistic activity is accomplished via technology tools. This, applied to education, turns into the necessity of raising awareness among readers about the significance of including ICT in language teaching and learning—both within formal and informal contexts—which is the aim of this MA dissertation. Throughout this work, resources are thoroughly explained, and activities are proposed in order to provide a guide for language teachers and learners to work on the oral skills.

Keywords: ICT, oral comprehension, oral production, asynchronous interaction, synchronous interaction, production technologies, formal learning, informal learning.

Resumen

Se ha demostrado que la comprensión y la producción oral son las destrezas más problemáticas a la hora de aprender un idioma extranjero. Además, dentro del sistema educativo formal español se ha dado un exceso de tareas escritas durante muchos años, dando lugar a una ausencia de comunicación oral en el aula que se ha traducido en niveles de competencia más bajos en los estudiantes y, por ende, que estos se muestren reticentes a practicarlas². Esta situación está cambiando, ya que el mundo actual ofrece una gran variedad de recursos metodológicos, entre los que destacan las Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación (TIC), las cuales están ganando terreno en la sociedad española, ya que la mayor parte de la actividad lingüística se realiza a través de herramientas tecnológicas. Esto, aplicado a la educación, da lugar a la necesidad de concienciar a los lectores sobre la importancia de incluir las TIC en la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de idiomas, tanto en contextos formales como informales, que es el objetivo de este Trabajo de Fin de Máster. En él se explican detalladamente estos recursos y se proponen actividades con el fin de proporcionar una guía para que los profesores y los estudiantes de idiomas trabajen las destrezas orales.

Palabras clave: TIC, comprensión oral, producción oral, interacción asincrónica, interacción sincrónica, tecnologías de producción, aprendizaje formal, aprendizaje informal.

^{1 2} See: Alcalá, F. D. R., & Lirola, M. M. (2012, pp. 143-149), and Rubio, F. D., & Schwarzer, D. (2011, pp. 67-73).

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1. Introduction

Language is a basic tool of social behavior, and as such it shapes the personality of human beings. For this reason, language teaching is essential for human development within societies. Even though the mother tongue is naturally acquired through interaction with the immediate environment, learning a second language results in a more complex process which requires pedagogical interventions, and the learner's consciousness and linguistic reflection upon the learning process itself. This process involves the development of four basic skills which are necessary to be fully proficient in a language: written comprehension (i.e. reading), written production (i.e. writing), oral comprehension (i.e. listening), and oral production (i.e. speaking). However, traditionally, within the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class, these skills have not received equal attention, and this situation has led to substantial differences in students' outcomes, being speaking and listening the most affected skills. In view of this situation, it becomes apparent that the EFL teaching process must be reevaluated in search of solutions for this inequality among skills.

Therefore, we deem necessary to favor communication in different contexts and using more updated and innovative resources, finding a balance between traditional bias and new trends in education. In this paper we suggest Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as resources which can be exploited both in formal and informal settings (together with blended learning and e-learning) in order to help educators in the teaching process of oral skills, and to boost students' motivation towards the learning process. In fact, there are many authors who have studied the significance of ICT for education and agree on the fact that they "play a key role for the future development of higher education institutions and represent a catalyst for innovation, quality and excellence in this sector" (Pavel et al., 2015, p. 710).

ICT have changed the way in which people communicate in ways that a few decades ago were almost unimaginable. Now, we are citizens in a globalized world where countries are interdependent in technological, economic, political, social, and cultural terms. The Internet development and the appearance of innovative social networks are the main responsible for this revolutionary change that affects many areas of people's lives. However, within the field of education there is still reluctance towards the use of ICT, especially in the EFL subject which is mostly taught following a textbook which has been designed in accordance with the curricula. To this day, it is still a reality finding teachers who remain faithful to textbooks despite many of them are out-of-date or are intended to follow methodologies which have been demonstrated

to be disadvantageous or useless for language teaching. Thus, although many important steps have already been taken towards the integration of technology tools in education, there is still a long way to go.

For this reason, this MA dissertation aims at proving how ICT can contribute to the improvement of oral comprehension and oral production skills of Spanish EFL students of Secondary Education through a presentation of technological tools which are useful both for the teaching and the learning processes of foreign languages. By means of these resources, innovative and engaging activities are designed both in formal and informal contexts, through blended-learning and e-learning, in order to encourage language learners to practice their oral skills in their Secondary Education centers, but also outside them.

1.1. Sections outline

The present paper is organized in six sections. *Section two* presents the rationale behind this project, being the main reason why ICT are proposed as tools for the development of oral comprehension and oral production skills in EFL students of Secondary Education the fact that these skills are the ones receiving the least attention in formal contexts, which results in students' lower proficiency levels compared to the rest of skills (i.e. reading comprehension and written production). As evidence thereof, we take the Evaluation Report on the Bilingual Education Project in Spain, which was developed by the Ministry of Education and the British Council (Dobson, Pérez Murillo and Johnstone, 2010) and provides meaningful clues which bring us close to find solutions to students' problems. On the other hand, we base our choice of ICT as a possible answer to these problems on field research, presenting the work of several authors who prove the positive impact of ICT on students' motivation, as well as on teachers' instruction.

Section three provides the theoretical framework of this work, on the one hand, on the basis of two of the key competences proposed in the *Orden ECD/65/2015, de 21 de enero*, (published in BOE no. 25 on 29th January 2015) that are implicated: the linguistic communication competence and the digital competence. On the other hand, ICT is defined and subsequently related to the other three scenarios that can be considered both within and outside of formal settings: e-learning, informal learning, and blended learning. All of these are

thoroughly defined, described, and analyzed from an educational perspective, evaluating its benefits for both teaching and learning processes.

Section four is dedicated to the contextualization of this work, and it includes different subsections. In the first place (*section 4.1.*), a definition of the oral comprehension skill is given, followed by a description of its benefits for the acquisition of other language skills. Besides, the agents involved in the listening process are also explained in detail. This section contains, in turn, another subsection (*4.1.1.*) devoted to explaining why this skill is regarded as one of the most problematic, and to defining what is actually meant by “listening problems.” Moreover, we adhere to the work of two different authors who study listening problems in depth and propose a classification of typical listening problems students may face when they are learning a foreign language. In the second place (*section 4.2.*), the oral production skill is defined, highlighting its importance in a globalized world where communication is the key and making a brief review of how it had long been disregarded. Then, processes in speech production are described, as well as the skills necessary for an effective oral communication and the four factors required for the development of competent L2 speakers. Again, this section contains a subsection (*4.2.1.*) in which the agents intervening in the speaking process are explained. Besides, we present a classification of speech conditions that serves as a guide for categorizing English learners’ speaking problems. Finally, in the third place (*section 4.3.*), we analyze the inclusion of ICT within the Foreign Language subjects of Castile and Leon Secondary Curricula in order to find out which areas need improvement or revision to achieve better performance outcomes in language learners.

Section five comprises the design of this study, for which three different types of technology tools have been selected: production technologies, synchronous interaction technologies, and asynchronous interaction technologies (as proposed in one of the SpeakApps report of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union for education and training). As a result, this section is divided into three subsections (*5.1.*, *5.2.*, and *5.3.*), each dedicated to describing the three types of tools, giving examples, and emphasizing its benefits. Besides, each of these subsections contain another one (*5.1.1.*, *5.2.1.*, and *5.3.1.*) in which an oral comprehension/production activity is suggested, together with the problems that it can solve or minimize. Finally, *section six* sets forth the conclusions and implications drawn from this paper.

2. Rationale

Nowadays, developing oral skills has become an essential aspect in the learning process of a language, since the ability to communicate is a requisite to achieve success not only in school, but also in a work environment. However, there are many studies and reports showing that this development is, at the same time, one of the greatest problems of EFL students, who are not able to speak fluently in English. In Castile and Leon, the autonomous community under analysis, two bilingual education programs are developed during Pre-school, Primary Education and Secondary Education: bilingual sections—at the autonomous community level—and the MECD-British Council collaboration agreement—at the state level. Thus, for the purposes of this study, it would be advantageous to consider the evaluation of these two programs. Nevertheless, due to the lack of studies analyzing the effectiveness of bilingual sections in Castile and Leon, we will adhere to the Evaluation Report on the Bilingual Education Project in Spain developed by the Ministry of Education and the British Council (Dobson, Pérez Murillo and Johnstone, 2010), which goes deeper into classroom performance, student attainments and the perceptions of students, parents and teachers in the final years of Primary and the first years of Secondary.

The aforementioned Evaluation Report (Dobson et al., 2010) shows that, although the performance of students of Compulsory Secondary Education is positive (p. 47), their perceptions are not so positive: while the majority give the best value to their experience (p. 88) and interest (p. 89) in the Bilingual Education Project, as well as to its usefulness (p. 89), this tendency becomes somewhat diluted when assessing self-confidence and confidence in learning English (p. 90). In addition, these perceptions were studied in more detail in terms of the students' own proficiency as English speakers (p. 103) in the sixth year of Primary (P6) and the second year of Secondary (S2), as *Table 1* below shows:

	VP + P		NP + NaaP	
	P6	S2	P6	S2
Understanding people when they speak fluent English	65,9%	73,3%	10,6%	2,4%
Speaking English	55,1%	52,7%	24,6%	11,5%
Reading material in English, e.g. textbooks, stories, articles	65,4%	82,3%	12,9%	2,4%
Writing in English, e.g. letters, reports, stories	67,1%	69,7%	12,5%	4,9%

Table 1: Self-Rating of Abilities in English (Dobson et al. 2010)

From the analysis of the data reflected in *Table 1*, it can be drawn the conclusion that both students who rate their competence as Very Positive (VP) or Positive (P) and those who rate it as Not Positive (NP) or Not at all Positive (NaaP) feel more competent in the written modalities of the language than in the oral ones. These data support the popular knowledge regarding the teaching of this language in Spain, criticized mainly for focusing its efforts on grammatical contents, leaving aside, to a certain extent, the lexicon/vocabulary, and, almost completely, the practice of producing and understanding oral texts.

It is true that speaking and listening are eminently practical and repetitive skills that require a considerable amount of time. However, the lack of resources should not be a detriment to the quality of EFL teaching, since the audiovisual society in which we live provides teachers with a great amount of technological means to support the acquisition of these practical skills of the spoken language in their students. Moreover, there are plenty of studies supporting the motivation effect of ICT on students, independent of what they are learning. Passey and Rogers, (2004) found that motivation is enhanced most positively in school situations where ICT are used within a framework that considers impact upon learning, teaching, and the management of learning and teaching (p. 68). The findings from their research highlight some important factors supporting the notion that positive motivation arises from the use of ICT and evokes a positive effect upon pupils, teachers, and learning:

- ICT can motivate pupils and staff within a school.
- ICT use needs to have an appropriate pedagogy linked and used with it.
- ICT is seen to improve motivation, makes classroom management easier, makes subject topics visually attractive, but long-term impacts on attainment are not always apparent.
- ICT enables a multi-sensory approach to both teaching and learning, and many children need visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimulation in order to enable learning.
- ICT supports independence of pupil working and pupils feel more in control of their learning when it is used appropriately.
- ICT can be used to extend the teaching day (by enabling pupils to work on tasks outside classrooms and in ways that they could not do without using ICT), and supporting communications between teachers and pupils is motivating for both teachers and pupils.

(p. 69)

As discussed by Yundayani, Kardijan and Herawan (2019), “motivation plays an important role in the success of achieving the learning goals [and] it is related to students’ willingness to put forth effort on the English learning process” (p. 30). However, many EFL

students still have problems in developing their English learning motivation and, for that reason, many scholars have investigated the influence of ICT in the particular case of foreign language teaching and learning, finding that they have a very positive and motivating effect. It is the case of Frydrychova Klimova and Poulova (2014), who study the influence of ICT on foreign language learning, pointing out several conditions which can be fulfilled by using ICT and which have a positive impact on the learning process: “learning becomes more personalized; learning becomes on the one hand more independent, on the other more collaborative and interactive; learning can happen at any place and any time; learning is enriched with more up-to-date materials, which can be tailored according to students’ immediate needs; thanks to multimedia activities, learning becomes more varied and dynamic; learning requires critical thinking; learning becomes more culture conscious” (p. 53). To all this must be added the impact of ICT on the teaching process, which is facilitated by the numerous resources available for teachers (websites for developing language skills, online courses and reference tools, tools allowing for synchronous and asynchronous communication, etc.). Mullama (2010) investigates the benefits and methodological implications of using ICT in language learning, but, unlike the abovementioned authors, she introduces the concept of intrinsic motivation and notes that students need extrinsic tools (i.e. ICT) to increase it:

“Helping students find value in learning through the implementation of various instructional strategies and multiple alternative and authentic forms of assessments, while maintaining high standards of student performance in an environment which encourages students to do their best work by effective, nurturing teachers, will help increase the motivational levels of all students” (p. 38).

Nevertheless, despite this growing evidence about the benefits of integrating ICT in education, some teachers and education centers are reluctant to use it as a resource for their teaching processes. Consulting again the Evaluation Report on the Bilingual Education Project in Spain (Dobson et al., 2010), it can be seen that students seldom use computers for learning and using English and, when they do it, they are out of school (p. 95). In addition, *Table 2* also shows students’ lack of opportunity to speak English with native speakers and visit English speaking countries—problems that could be minimized through the Internet thanks to both synchronous and asynchronous communication.

	VP + P		NP + NaaP	
	P6	S2	P6	S2
Use of computer at school in past six months for learning and using English	32,8%	24,2%	30,2%	28,5%
Use of computer out of school in past six months for learning and using English	36,4%	46,0%	27,6%	17,6%
Opportunity to speak English in past three years in Spain with students whose first language is English	16,6%	14,6%	63,0%	50,9%
Opportunity to visit a country in past three years where English is first language	3,7%	3,6%	86,9%	87,9%

Table 2: Contextual Factors (Dobson et al., 2010)

Therefore, the data collected have the potential to be used to raise awareness of the role of ICT in the EFL teaching and learning processes. There is plenty of evidence supporting the influence of ICT on students' motivation towards the learning of a language and, throughout this paper, it will be examined their influence on the development of oral skills (i.e. speaking and listening)—which have turned out to be the ones students are less competent in (as shown by the Evaluation Report developed by the Ministry of Education and the British Council in 2010).

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper is mainly focused on the linguistic communication competence (CCL, by its Spanish acronym) and the digital competence (CD, by its Spanish acronym), which are two of the seven key competences listed and described in the *Orden ECD/65/2015, de 21 de enero, por la que se describen las relaciones entre las competencias, los contenidos y los criterios de evaluación de la educación primaria, la educación secundaria obligatoria y el bachillerato* (published in BOE no. 25 on 29th January 2015). The CCL is defined as the result of the communicative action within particular social practices, in which the individual acts with other interlocutors and through texts in multiple modalities, formats and supports, and which can involve the use of one or several languages (BOE no. 25, of 29th January 2015). For the purposes of this study, the focus is primarily on its linguistic and pragmatic components: particularly, the phonologic and the orthoepic dimensions, on the one hand, and the sociolinguistic, pragmatic and discursive dimensions, on the other hand. Besides, this competence entails a gateway to knowledge and contact with cultural diversity, acquiring a great relevance in the case of foreign

languages. On the other hand, the CD involves the creative, critical and safe use of information and communication technologies to achieve goals related to work, employability, learning, use of free time, inclusion and participation in society (ibid.). Moreover, this competence contributes to the development of collaborative work and to the increase of motivation and curiosity towards learning.

Therefore, as the main objective of this work is to improve students' oral skills included in the linguistic communication competence through the use of digital tools, four research frameworks have to be taken into account: ICT, e-learning, informal learning, and blended learning—all of them applied to EFL teaching within formal education systems (or as a complement). *Figure 1* below represents the relationship among these types of learning that will be employed for the purposes of this work.

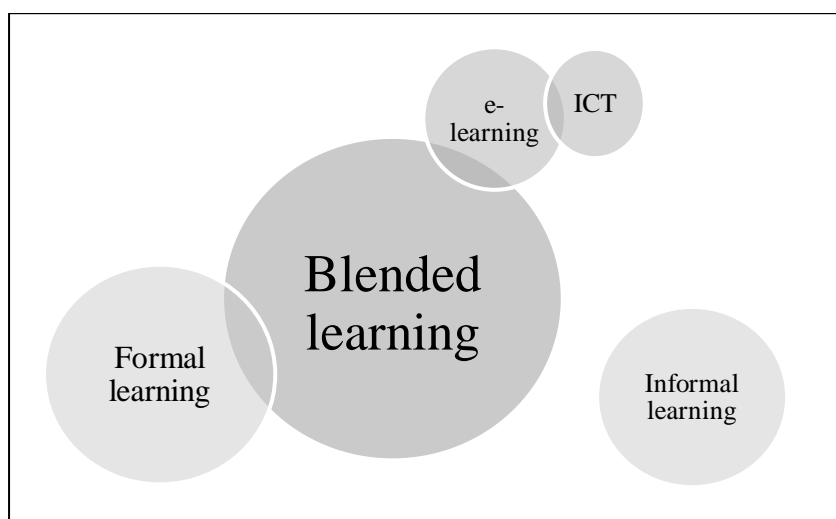


Figure 1: Types of learning

As can be drawn from *Figure 1*, the design of this project will be developed within the context of blended learning—this being a combination of e-learning (and, therefore, ICT) and formal learning, and complemented with informal learning. Even though blended learning appears in the center of the diagram, it should be pointed out that the core is formal learning, since the objectives have been settled taking into account the necessities of Spanish education system and, more specifically, of Castile and Leon. The reason why blended learning is placed in the center is because it encompasses the other three types of learning which will be implemented to a greater or lesser extent.

The integration of ICT in EFL teaching has been widely studied since their appearance and subsequent implementation in education. The UNESCO (UIS, 2009) defines ICT as follows:

“Diverse set of technological tools and resources used to transmit, store, create, share or exchange information. These technological tools include computers, the Internet (websites, blogs and emails), live broadcasting technologies (radio, television and webcasting), recorded broadcasting technologies (podcasting, audio and video players and storage devices) and telephony (fixed or mobile, satellite, visio/video-conferencing, etc.)” (p. 120).

Several authors (see Straková, 2008; Salehi & Salehi, 2012; Yundayani, Kardijan & Herawan, 2019) agree on the idea that they give “more opportunities for communication between peer learners: they can exchange information in real time, they can participate in blog discussions, work in teams on different projects, exchange emails, search for information, etc” (Uluc Isisag, 2012, p. 3). What is more, the internet has become a source of authentic material which brings the culture of the foreign country and the communication with native speakers closer to the students.

Inherently related to ICT is e-learning, which is “the use of electronic media, educational technology and information and communication technologies (ICT) in education” (Pavel, Fruth and Neacsu, 2015, p. 707). As a result of this relationship, the benefits of ICT that have been previously set out (vid. supra: Rationale) are also attached to e-learning, resulting in a positive and stimulating experience both for students and teachers of English language. Besides, Pavel et al. (2015) also show the deep-rooted relation between ICT and both e-learning and blended learning, noting that “the process of education using ICTs can be classified in: e-learning, blended learning and distance learning” (p. 708). Mullama (2010, pp. 41-42), who was previously cited because of her contribution in matters of motivation, lists some of the benefits of using e-learning as a support for classroom teaching:

- Easy access whenever and wherever you wish it.
- Dematerialization (less paper – more trees).
- Enabling us to use modern technologies.
- Individualization (different interests/levels/needs).
- Contacts beyond our university [or secondary school], state, continent (“broadening the horizons”; “real English”, or whatever foreign language for that matter).
- Students have:
 - An overview of topical issues, their context and background
 - Easy access for quickly finding inspiration for (continuing) the conversation
 - Developing the skills for finding the right information, analyze, present and discuss it.
 - Developing the skills for using the e-environment and new technologies.
 - Developing responsibility for the learning process.

- Forming one's own opinion.
- Learning to (dare to) express it.

Furthermore, the inclusion of ICT in language learning can also be regarded from the perspective of informal learning in the sense that ICT allow students to learn on their own, developing a greater level of autonomy or independence. The conceptualization and classification of this type of learning is dimmed by a great deal of confusion and that is the reason why most authors resort to the definition of formal and non-formal learning to explain it (see Schugurensky, 2000; Livingstone 2001; Conlon, 2004). On the one hand, formal education is considered a highly institutionalized system which covers the period from preschool to university and follows a prescribed curriculum given by certified teachers. On the other hand, non-formal education comprises every voluntary educational program taking place outside the formal education system which follows a curriculum and is taught by instructors or facilitators. Thus, informal learning can be regarded as the learning that takes place outside the aforementioned curricula. As Schugurensky (2000) notes, the word “learning” and not “education” is deliberately used in order to stress the fact that there are not educational institutions with certified teachers and prescribed curricula (p. 2). However, he also details that it takes place outside the curricula of educational institutions, but not outside educational institutions. Therefore, informal learning can take place inside formal institutions and this is one of the aspects we are going to take advantage of in this paper, since the activities proposed will complement or reinforce the learning acquired within the formal education system in order to make up for students' lack of competence in oral skills, getting them interested in learning foreign languages and closer to real life and job situations. This coincides with Livingstone's (2001) explanation: “when teachers and mentors take responsibility for instructing others without sustained reference to an intentionally-organized body of knowledge in more incidental and spontaneous learning situations, such as guiding them in acquiring job skills or in community development activities, the form of learning is informal” (p. 2).

As previously mentioned, there is also a considerable confusion over types of learning. Livingstone (2001) develops a taxonomy of learning types and considers two different variables: the knowledge structure and the primary agency (see *Table 3* below).

		Primary agency	
		Learner(s)	Teacher(s)
Knowledge structure	Pre-established	Non-formal education	Formal schooling
		Further education	Elders' teachings

	Situational	Self-directed learning Collective learning	Informal education Informal training
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Table 3: Basic Types of Learning (Livingstone, 2001, p.2)

This author differentiates between pre-established knowledge, which “emphasizes memorable theories and articulated descriptions as cumulative bases for increased understanding” (p. 3), and situational knowledge, which focuses on direct experience. However, it is difficult to understand these types of knowledge as independent of each other because both are constantly interacting. The same happens with the primary agency differentiation, since both learners and teachers tend to work jointly. But, turning to the matter at hand (i.e. informal education), the important aspect which can be drawn from this classification is the figure of the teacher as primary agent within informal education and the figure of the learners as primary agents in collective learning. In the same vein, Conlon (2003), in his review of informal learning, differentiates among informal, formal, incidental and experiential learning; and quotes Cseh, Watkins, and Marsick’s (1998) definition of informal and incidental learning: “learning resulting from natural opportunities for learning that occur in everyday life when the person controls his or her own learning.”

On the other hand, Schugurensky (2000) develops a taxonomy of informal learning but, in this case, he uses two main categories: intentionality and awareness (see *Table 4* below). He considers socialization to be a form of informal learning, which does not suit with Livingstone’s (2001) classification where the equivalent type of learning (i.e. collective) is an independent category and not a subcategory, neither does with Conlon’s (2003), who places incidental learning at the same taxonomic level as informal learning. Given the above classifications, it is clear the evidence that confusion covers up the categorization of informal learning. Nevertheless, this taxonomic difference will not influence the activities proposed to improve the oral competence, which will combine both informal learning and collective learning (or socialization).

Form	Intentionality	Awareness (at the time of learning experience)
Self-directed	Yes	Yes
Incidental	No	Yes
Socialization	No	No

Table 4: Three Forms of Informal Learning (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 3)

Finally, blended learning is presented in this work as a combination of formal learning practices (characterized by the traditional face-to-face learning method) and e-learning, and it is complemented with informal learning. The definition of this term is, as with informal learning, difficult to determine because there exist different terms depending on the percentage of face-to-face learning and online activities (see *Table 5*).

Term	Definition
Web-enhanced	Subjects that make use of a minimal amount of online materials, such as posting a syllabus and course announcements.
Blended	Subjects that utilize some significant online activities in otherwise face-to-face learning, but less than 45 per cent.
Hybrid	Subjects in which online activities replace 45-80 per cent of face-to-face class meetings.
Fully online	Subjects in which 80 per cent or more of learning materials are conducted online.

Table 5: Taxonomy of Terms Related to Blended Learning (Smith and Kurthen, 2007, in Tomlinson and Whittaker, 2003, p. 12)

Thus, taking into account these four terms, the one which better fits the purposes of this project is blended learning because, as discussed by Smith and Kurthen (2007), in blended courses, “the instructor adds, beyond an online syllabus and a few online documents, some significant online learning activities.” And they add: “[it] might have online quizzes or have a few online discussions, which account for a certain limited percentage of the course grade [and] do not replace any of the regular FTF class meetings and account for only a limited percentage of course activities” (p. 457). As for Littlejohn and Pegler (2007), blended learning offers flexibility in time, fosters integration of different spaces, and opens up the range of media resources, resulting in new sorts of activities. Besides, this type of learning focuses on communication and collaboration, two skills that not only improve English learners’ proficiency, but also their oral communication.

4. Contextualization

4.1. Oral comprehension skill

Oral comprehension or listening is an “active, creative, and demanding process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory clues” (Chang, 2012, p. 167) which has

often been considered the key for effective communication. Nevertheless, this has not been always the mainstream, since listening has been overlooked over the years by EFL teachers who thought that the oral comprehension skill will be indirectly acquired while teaching grammar or vocabulary. For this reason, in recent years, many authors have focused their attention on the process of listening and the way teachers should approach its teaching in formal settings (by means of blended learning), and also alternatives to acquire this skill autonomously within informal settings or through e-learning.

Rost (2011) and Hamouda (2013) defined oral comprehension as an interactive process in which listeners are involved in constructing meaning. Besides, this skill has been regarded as beneficial for the acquisition and expansion of other language skills (Hasan, 2000; Hamouda, 2013) because, among other reasons, it provides language learners with input that contributes to the development of their language. As cited in Pourhosein Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), “listeners comprehend the oral input through sound discrimination, previous knowledge, grammatical structures, stress and intonation, and the other linguistic or non-linguistic clues” (p. 124). As a result, cognitive skills such as memory (both working and long-term memory), inference-making and comprehension monitoring are simultaneously involved in oral comprehension, together with knowledge such as background and world knowledge (Kim and Pilcher, 2016). Therefore, the listening skill requires the application of multiple language and communicative skills which, fortunately, are quite malleable and allow teachers to keep students’ needs in mind and design activities accordingly.

As regards the listening process, Field (2004) makes use of the terms “bottom-up” and “top-down” (usually equated to “perceptual” and “contextual,” respectively) to explain it. These terms refer both to information types and to processing directions—being “bottom-up” the building of smaller units into larger (phonemes into syllables, syllables into words, words into phrases, and so on), and “top-down” the process that assists it by different types of contextual knowledge (knowledge of speaker and situation; what has been said so far; world knowledge; pre-formed schemas relating to topic and context; and spreading activation, where the presence of one word triggers the expectation of associated words). In other words, the “bottom-up” is a linear process which ends with the acquisition of knowledge, whereas the “top-down” process is based on listeners’ previous knowledge and, thus, facilitates the “bottom-up” process (by, for instance, avoiding unnecessary information or anticipating information which will probably follow). As noted by Rost (2001), “both bottom-up and top-down processing are assumed to take place at various levels of cognitive organization: phonological, grammatical, lexical and

propositional” (p. 7). For this reason, listening has been described as a parallel processing model of language understanding. Thus, it seems obvious that both processes should be interactively combined in order to achieve satisfactory results in oral comprehension.

4.1.1. Listening problems

As Chang (2012) indicates in his work, listening is often the most difficult language skill area in learning a foreign language, since spoken words exist in real time and need to be processed as heard, without the possibility of controlling the speed or rehearing them, unless they are recorded. This problem is further compounded by teachers who do not consider this skill in their classes or textbooks which only include a limited number of listening activities. According to Hamouda (2013), “EFL learners have serious problems in English listening comprehension due to the fact that universities [or any other educational institution] pay more attention to English grammar, reading and vocabulary” and he adds that, as discussed in the immediately preceding section, “most teachers take it for granted and believe that it will develop naturally within the process of language learning” (p. 114). Ciğerci & Gultekin (2017) also indicate that “despite its critical role in language acquisition and effective communication, listening in educational environments does not get enough emphasis and is generally neglected” (p. 252).

Goh (2000) defines listening difficulties as “real-time processing problems, directly related to cognitive procedures that take place at various stages of comprehension” (p. 56). There are many reasons why students’ listening skill is not successfully developed and several authors have tried to provide a classification of the different types of problems (see Field, 2004; Goh, 2000; Hamouda, 2013; Macháčková, 2009; Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Hamouda (2013) studied the listening comprehension problems encountered by EFL students in depth and classified them (*Table 6*) by categorizing factors causing them (including problems related to the listening text, to tasks and activities, to the listener, to teachers’ methodology, etc.). A more condensed classification—but equally valid, and coinciding in many points with Hamouda’s—is Macháčková’s (2009), who lists ten difficulties during listening: pronunciation, lack of control of a speaker’s speech speed, inability to get things repeated, listeners’ limited word stock, failure to concentrate, interpretation, inability to identify the signals, the language, and lack of visual support. These classifications will be taken into account in order to check which problems can be solved or lessened through the use of ICT.

(1) Problems related to the listening materials.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Limited English vocabulary. 2. Poor grammar. 3. The length of a spoken text. 4. Fatigue that may arise as a result of listening to a long spoken text. 5. Understand every word in the text. 6. Unfamiliar topics. 7. Basic background knowledge. 8. Difficulty of the material.
(2) Basic linguistic problems perceived by learners.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The use of colloquial and slang expressions. 2. The use of reduced forms. 3. The “prosodic features” of the English language. 4. The use of signal words. 5. The use of unknown words. 6. An inferential process. 7. Long and complex sentences.
(3) Listening problems caused by the failure to concentrate.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Focus loss which results from looking for an answer. 2. Focus loss which results from thinking about another question. 3. Focus loss which results from text length. 4. Hear new words.
(4) Listening problems related to psychological characteristics.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anxiety. 2. Lack of interest. 3. The students’ inability of understanding a listening text.
(5) Listening problems related to the listener.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inability in getting a general understanding of the spoken text and predicting what would come next. 2. Inability in recognizing the words they knew because of the way they were pronounced. 3. Inability in recognizing the words they knew in their written form when they hear them in a stream of speech. 4. Memory. 5. Questions. 6. Lack of transcripts.
(6) Listening problems related to the speaker.
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hesitation and pauses. 2. Unclear pronunciation. 3. Variety of accents.

4. Speed of delivery.
5. Lack of visual support.
6. The inability to get things repeated.
7. Lack of pauses.
(7) Problems pertaining to physical settings.
1. Noise.
2. The poor-quality tapes or disks.

Table 6: Hamouda's Classification of Listening Problems (2013)

4.2. Oral production skill

Many authors have studied the oral production or speaking skill, giving rise to several definitions of the term which sometimes coincide, and others complement one another. Siahaan (2008) defines speaking as a productive language skill (p. 95), and Bailey and Savage (1994) indicate that it is an “activity requiring the integration of many subsystems [of language], all these factors combine to make speaking a second or foreign language a formidable task for language learners [...] yet for many people, speaking is seen as the central skill” (pp. 6-7). In any case, one thing is clear: speaking serves as the cover letter for any language learner who has to demonstrate its proficiency in real-life situations, since most of the times people are judged based on their fluency or accuracy speaking the language. However, as happened with the oral comprehension skill, speaking has traditionally been disregarded by language teachers who focused their lessons on the linguistic knowledge, paying little or no attention to language skills such as speaking, which used to be taught as memorization of dialogues or repetition of drills. Fortunately, this tendency has changed in the last years and both listening and speaking are gaining importance and occupying more space in classroom settings.

Bygate (2001, p. 16) considers useful to take into account the nature and the conditions of the speech in order to understand what is involved in developing oral L2 skills and, therefore, refers to Levelt's (1989) proposal of four major processes in speech production: conceptualization, formulation, articulation and self-monitoring. Conceptualization refers to message planning, which relies on the speaker's previous knowledge (about the topic, the speech situation, patterns of discourse, etc.). Formulation is concerned with finding the adequate words and phrases to express the meaning, and it is also related to their sequence and the use of appropriate grammatical markers and sound patterns. The process of articulation involves the motor control of the articulatory organs. Finally, self-monitoring involves language

users' capacity to identify and correct their own mistakes. Yet the problem (which will be further discussed in the next section) is that these processes happen very fast and most of them require automation, which results in learners' difficulty to manage the speech fluently and accurately in real-time processing.

As regards the skills that are required for effective communication, Goh (as cited in Bohlke, 2014) identifies four: phonological, speech function, interactional and extended discourse skills. First, learners have to be able to blend the phonemes of the second or foreign language, using appropriate stress and intonation. Second, they need to achieve specific communicative functions in social and transactional exchanges. Third, in the case of face-to-face exchanges, they have to manage interactions by, for instance, regulating turn taking or negotiating meaning. Finally, they have to demonstrate enough control of conventions for structuring the different spoken text types, since they are expected to produce long and well-structured stretches of language without interruptions. In addition to these skills, the author also points out that the use of conversation management strategies can lead to more effective speaking (p. 123).

Moreover, when it comes to the foundation of competent foreign language speakers, it appears imperative to make reference to four concepts: fluency, accuracy, appropriacy, and authenticity. The first two have given rise to different interpretations and opinions, while the third is all about pragmatics, and the fourth mainly implies the use of authentic materials, tasks, and learning environments. Hedge (2000) defines fluency as “the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or inappropriate slowness, or undue hesitation” (p. 54), whereas accuracy refers to “how correct learners' use of the language system is, including their use of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary” (“Accuracy,” 2020).

4.2.1. Speaking problems

Brown (as cited in Lazaraton, 2001, p. 103), mentions a number of features that make speaking a challenging skill. Firstly, fluent speech contains reduced forms (such as contractions, vowel reduction, and elision) which learners who are not exposed to will retain their rather formal-sounding forms. Secondly, as regards slang and idioms in speech, learners—who do not have facility to use these widespread features of spoken language—are likely to sound bookish. Thirdly, students must also acquire stress, rhythm, and intonation, complicated features for

many English learners. To these features must be added the fact that the act of speaking is almost always accomplished via interaction with at least another speaker, leading to a variety of simultaneous demands: monitoring and understanding the conversational partner(s), thinking one's own contribution, producing the answer, monitoring its effect, and so on. For this reason, English learners tend to get nervous or frustrated when using their second or foreign language in real communicative contexts, since they are not accustomed to spontaneous communication.

One thing is certain: second language speakers' performance depends on the context, as Bohlke (2014) argues: "the conditions under which speaking occurs play a major role in determining the degree of fluency a speaker may be capable of" (p. 123). In this line, Thornbury (2005, pp. 25-26) proposes a classification of speech conditions that foreign language teachers can consider in order to categorize students' speaking problems. In the same way as with the oral comprehension skill, this classification will be considered in order to prove which of the aspects in *Table 7* can be lessened or solved through the use of ICT-based activities.

Cognitive factors	Familiarity with the topic.
	Familiarity with the genre.
	Familiarity with the interlocutors.
	Processing demands.
Affective factors	Feelings toward the topic or participants.
	Self-consciousness.
Performance factors	Mode.
	Degree of collaboration.
	Discourse control.
	Planning time.
	Time pressure.
	Environmental conditions.
The interaction of cognitive, affective, and performance factors with personality.	

Table 7: Speech Conditions (Thornbury, 2005, pp. 25-26)

4.3. Integration of ICT in the English Subject of Secondary Education Curricula

This section is aimed at gathering any aspect related to the use of ICT within Foreign Language subjects of Castile and Leon Secondary Education Curricula, and drawing attention to areas which need, among other things, improvement or updating. As noted in *ORDEN*

EDU/362/2015, de 4 de mayo, por la que se establece el currículo y se regula la implantación, evaluación y desarrollo de la educación secundaria obligatoria en la Comunidad de Castilla y León (published in BOCYL no. 86, on 8th May 2015), nowadays, most of the linguistic activity is carried out through the use of technological media which are included within the curricula as natural resources of both oral and written texts, and which students will have to produce, comprehend and process (p. 32232). For that reason, digital competence is understood as a significant part of communicative competence.

The first reference to ICT in the subject of First Foreign Language points out that the use of new technologies contributes to the teaching and learning of foreign languages because of three different reasons (BOCYL no. 86, on 8th May 2015, p. 32233):

- Permite el acceso a numerosos recursos materiales, visuales, gráficos y sonoros de forma precisa y rápida.
- Permite establecer contacto con otros centros para intercambios comunicativos reales, por correos electrónicos o incluso por video-conferencias.
- Permite, mediante el uso de plataformas, variar el tipo de actividades que se presentan al alumnado.

At the same time, this subject is deemed as contributing to the scientific and digital competences because it facilitates and broadens the access to data, processes, and research techniques—all of this benefitting and leading to a more direct and productive academic exchange of information which collectively fosters the construction of human knowledge.

However, going deeper into the two curricular blocks under analysis (i.e. oral comprehension, and oral production) covering the contents, assessment criteria, and assessable learning standards of all four secondary courses, it is noticeable that little reference is made to ICT. Even though they are considered tools through which linguistic activity is carried out, the reality in most Spanish centers is quite different, since it is well known that English teachers—because of the instruction received and the prescribed curriculum they have to follow—have followed the same teaching methodology for decades (textbook-based lessons where the main objective of the whole academic year is to finish the book and test the students' learning of its contents). Nevertheless, ICT are gaining acceptance among teachers and learners, and it is increasingly present in English classes through motivating and innovative activities. Turning to the presence of ICT within the contents of the secondary education curricula, after a depth analysis, it becomes evident the almost total lack of contents related to ICT, since they are only

mentioned as part of the oral or written common lexicon which students are expected to learn throughout the whole secondary stage:

“Léxico oral de uso común (recepción/producción) relativo a identificación personal; vivienda, hogar y entorno; actividades de la vida diaria; familia y amigos; profesiones; tiempo libre, ocio y deporte; viajes y vacaciones; salud y cuidados físicos; educación y estudio; compras y actividades comerciales; alimentación y restauración; transporte; lengua y comunicación; medio ambiente, clima y entorno natural; y Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación” (BOCYL no. 86, on 8th May 2015, pp. 32234-32256).

What is more, ICT are only indirectly covered both in the oral comprehension and in the oral production blocks by the following criteria: “identificar la información esencial, los puntos principales y los detalles más relevantes en textos orales breves y bien estructurados, transmitidos de viva voz o por medios técnicos...” in the case of oral comprehension and “producir textos breves y comprensibles, tanto en conversación cara a cara como por teléfono u otros medios técnicos...” (ibid.) in the case of oral production, where “medios técnicos” can be understood as any technological tool which allows for oral or written communication.

Finally, the references to ICT in the assessable learning standards are also scarce, limited to the identification of essential information in presentations (with presentation software such as PowerPoint) or television programs, and the participation in conversations via telephone or any other technical resources (BOCYL no. 86, on 8th May 2015, pp. 32233-32255):

- “Distingue, con el apoyo de la imagen, las ideas principales e información relevante en presentaciones sobre temas educativos o de su interés...”
- “Identifica la información esencial de programas de televisión sobre asuntos cotidianos o de su interés [...] cuando las imágenes ayudan a la comprensión.”
- “Hace presentaciones breves y ensayadas, bien estructuradas y con apoyo visual (p.e. PowerPoint), sobre temas de su interés o relacionados con sus estudios...”
- “Participa en conversaciones informales cara a cara o por teléfono u otros medios técnicos...”

In summary, once the First Foreign Language subject curriculum has been carefully examined, it appears necessary the adaptation or renovation of certain aspects which go beyond the use of ICT as methodological resources. The foregoing remarks the out-of-date curriculum—which does not give ICT the importance they have nowadays for language teachers and learners—and the need for a change not only at the curricular level, but also at the educator level, since teachers can also help to integrate ICT in educational centers, reducing the dependency on textbooks, even though this may take them more time and effort. Thus, the

following lines are meant to provide teachers and learners with updated ICT-based activities to improve the oral comprehension and oral production skills inside and outside their classrooms.

5. Design

As previously stated (vid. supra: Theoretical Framework), the context of implementation of ICT in this paper is the Spanish formal education system. Still, the focal point is blended learning, since it is regarded as a combination of e-learning and formal learning, which can be also complemented by informal learning. This blend implies the integration of both physical and online spaces which allows the interaction of teachers and learners in ways that were previously inconceivable. As Yukiko (2009) indicates, “it introduces the possibility of interacting in real time (synchronously) in conjunction with opportunities to collaborate over a period of time (asynchronously)” (p. 200). As a result, there is a wide variety of written and oral dialogue forms which can be explored by students at school, at home, with friends/classmates or with their teachers. For the purposes of this work, the focus is on ICT benefiting oral comprehension and oral production. Thus, the following lines present a series of technology resources which can be used as educational tools and, primarily, help EFL students to overcome the different oral production and comprehension problems (see sections 4.1.1, and 4.2.1). In particular, we adhere to the classification proposed in the SpeakApps report “State-of-the-art report for teachers. A review of tools for speaking” (2011) funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union for education and training, which suggests three categories of technologies depending on the type of practice they promote: production, asynchronous interaction and synchronous interaction (SpeakApps, 2011, p. 4).

5.1. Production technologies

Production technologies are “used for the recording and editing of audio or video files, that can then be used, shared, and mashed up (i.e. re-used to create new media) by other users, within and beyond the boundaries of the physical or virtual classroom via resources sharing and presentation applications” (SpeakApps, 2011, p. 4). Within this production category, there are several subcategories depending on the objectives or necessities. If the aim is to capture and edit sound files, then, the appropriate tool is a recording and editing software such as *Audacity*. On the other hand, if the content is visual, a suitable tool would be any kind of video recording

and editing software, for example, the *Camtasia* screen recorder and video editor. Moreover, when the purpose is to animate and customize videos, there is animation software (*Voki* or *Go Animate*, for example) and, when it comes to share these contents, there are plenty of websites such as *Youtube* or *VoiceThread* (SpeakApps, 2011, pp. 4-5).

It could be said that this type of technology is the alternative for old CDs, VHSs or cassette players, however, the aim is not to talk about the evolution of audio and video materials, but to highlight the advantages that the advances in digital technologies have for the practice of spoken skills. Digital audio and video recording technologies are useful tools both for second language teachers and learners. On the one hand, teachers can use audio editors to record their lectures and upload them to institutional learning management systems such as *Moodle* or other platforms through which they communicate with their students (e.g. blogs, websites, etc.). But this is not the only function of production tools for teachers, they can also create activities in order to practice vocabulary or any other type of content related to the subject, or they can record real conversations for the creation of listening and speaking materials. This way, teachers share authentic content with their students, and they can listen to these materials at home and practice the oral competences of the subject alone or with their classmates and as many times as they want. Thus, there is a huge range of possibilities for teachers to produce audio material, since they can create podcasts containing any kind of contents, from theoretical explanations to authentic conversations. Moreover, the use of video editors is also a useful tool for teachers because they can film themselves giving lectures on the blackboard or whiteboard, so that the students have a visual aid and, thus, the possibility of taking notes or making outlines or diagrams. Besides, as well as with audio files, teachers can film real conversations in which two or more people interact and, thus, produce authentic materials that serve students as examples of good pronunciation, intonation, body language, prosody, and any other aspect of oral production.

On the other hand, this type of tools gives EFL learners the possibility to record themselves speaking, listen to their productions and, thus, become aware of their oral skills. In this sense, it would be a self-monitoring practice, since students have to listen to their own speaking production in order to check their fluency and accuracy. While recording and listening to themselves, they are monitoring their speech production and they are constantly making assessments about it. For this self-assessment, the teacher should give students clear criteria beforehand, such as the self-assessment rating scale proposed by Goh and Burns (2012, p. 273), which helps students reflect on their learning and evaluate their performance according to

different criteria (see *Table 8*). Burns (2016) notes that criteria can be focused “on the demands of the task, the strategies used, dimensions that show improvement or plans for working further on specific vocabulary or grammatical features” (p. 10) and adds that this self-assessment can be carried out individually or in small groups which may reduce students’ anxiety and stress about their performance.

	😊	😐	😞
Did I speak fluently without too many pauses and hesitations?	Comment	Comment	Comment
Did I structure what I said accurately?	Comment	Comment	Comment
Did I use grammar appropriately?	Comment	Comment	Comment
Did I use vocabulary appropriately?	Comment	Comment	Comment
Was I able to use good strategies to keep the interaction going?	Comment	Comment	Comment

Table 8: Example of self-assessment rating scale (Gogh & Burns, 2012, p. 273)

Besides, with production technology for the recording of audio and video files, learners can improve their pronunciation because they can compare theirs to the teacher’s or to the speakers involved in the recorded conversations. Moreover, if they are asked to do an activity or a project in which they will be evaluated in terms of oral performance, they will practice many times before recording themselves and, once they have recorded or filmed their practice, they will review or re-record it as many times as they deem necessary. As a result, students spoken production will get better, since they will not share it with the teacher or with their classmates until they do not consider it is perfect. Finally, to this must be added the fact that students become more confident both in audio and video recording and in real life conversations or classroom presentations.

5.1.1. Activity proposal and problems solved by production technologies

A proposal for a speaking activity using *Audacity* would be the following: the teacher gives the students a list with different topics among which they, individually, have to select the one they are more interested in. Once they have chosen their topic, they have to prepare an

interview, so they are given time to plan and gather information about it. Besides, the fact that in interviews questions need to be prepared beforehand gives the students the advantage of having time to prepare themselves and getting familiar with the topic before they start the recording. Then, when students have the questions ready to be formulated, the teacher asks them to work in pairs: one student is the interviewer and the other is the interviewee (and, once they finish the first interview, they switch roles and start with the second one). Within the formal education system, this activity is carried out in the audiovisual room, so that students have one computer for each pair, although it can also be put into practice at home. On the other hand, this activity is also suitable outside the educational institutions, since English learners on their own can do interviews in the street in case they have the opportunity to travel abroad or to take part in an exchange program (in that case, digital voice recorders are needed). Finally, students have to use the different tools available in *Audacity* to edit their performance and upload it to their learning management system or hand it to their teacher via email.

Moreover, it is advisable for students to practice pronunciation before they carry out this type of activities in order to make themselves more effectively understood. Thus, an extra activity will be the use of *Audacity* to compare their pronunciation to their teacher's: the teacher records a series of utterances and adds periods of silence between them where students will have to repeat them. Besides, students have the possibility of recording their speech at the same time they are listening to their teacher's (in that case, headphones and a microphone are required). With this activity, students can compare their pronunciation by hearing both recordings at the same time, or by taking a look at the waveform representation of the audio.

As can be seen, by means of production technologies, there is a great amount of possibilities to help English learners to overcome speaking problems. The above suggestions are just two examples of activities which can be greatly beneficial for students' improvement of the oral production skill. From the speaking problems previously listed in Table 6 (Thornbury, 2005, pp. 25-26), the ones caused by cognitive factors can be entirely lessened with this type of activities because students are familiar with the topic and the interlocutors, since they are given the choice of working with a topic of their interest (and, what is more, they have time to gather information in advance) and with the partner they want. In the same way, affective factors almost disappear, due to the fact that having positive feelings towards the topic and the participants turns into an easygoing atmosphere. This, in turn, helps students overcoming self-consciousness when speaking a foreign language. Additionally, anxiety caused by performance factors such as discourse control, planning time, time pressure or

environmental conditions is reduced to a minimum. Besides, even though students' personality cannot—and much less does not have to—be changed, its interaction with the abovementioned factors (i.e. cognitive, affective, and performance) can only be eased by planning activities which make them feel more comfortable and, thus, loosen up.

On the other hand, with these activities, students can also improve the oral comprehension skill, which is necessarily involved in oral communication, solving some of the listening problems suggested by Hamouda (2013) and Macháčková (2009) (see *section 4.1.1*). Problems related to materials disappear because the students themselves choose the topic—always under the supervision of the teacher—and seek some background knowledge about it before the activity starts. This way, they can learn vocabulary related to the topic which, then, they introduce in their conversations. As a result, they are not worried about understanding every word in their classmates' speech, fighting problems such as fatigue, and, what is more, the difficulty of the task is lessened because the conversation happens between speakers with a similar skill level. Moreover, unlike conventional textbook listening activities causing students' focus loss (because they are looking for the correct answer or thinking about another question), these activities promote real life conversations in which body language plays a key role and which allow for repetition or reformulation when the listener has not heard or understood a portion of the speech. Finally, in the same way as happened with speaking problems, psychological problems such as students' anxiety or the lack of interest are lessened when they get involved in activities developed via production technologies.

5.2. Synchronous interaction technologies

The category of synchronous interaction includes “technologies that facilitate synchronous interaction via a webcam or an avatar, such as videoconferencing applications and 3D virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life, Open Sim, etc.)” (SpeakApps, 2011, p. 4) and gives the opportunity for multimodal synchronous interactions and for recording the interactions. Thus, within this category there are plenty of audio chat and videoconferencing tools that allow both teachers and students to communicate, collaborate and share information in real time. Even though they have not been designed for the purpose of teaching, there are some free tools that meet the educational needs of second language teachers and learners, such as *Skype* and *Google + Hangout*. In fact, there is a study about the support of synchronous distance language learning (DLE) through the use of videoconferencing that shows that “with the employment of

videoconferencing tools, distance language education can be transformed from asynchronous and non-real time to orally and visually synchronous and real time” (Wang, 2014, p. 108). The use of chats is a tool that can be applied not only to distance language learning, but also to the second language learning both inside the classroom and outside the classroom. In that sense, teachers can collaborate with other schools from different locations so that the students interact with other language learners or with native speakers of the language. This way, students experience a real conversation and, at the same time, meet new people and take interest in their culture. On the other hand, they can group students in the same class and ask them to chat together as part of their homework. In fact, as synchronous tools are versatile ways of interaction, there are plenty of activities that teachers can ask their students to do, such as role-plays, debates, dialogues and conversations or problem-solving tasks, among many others. Therefore, while using chat in language teaching, students are practicing their oral skills and sharing their knowledge with their classmates.

Furthermore, it is important to make a distinction between the different types of educational chat that teachers can bring into their classrooms. Dudeney and Hockly (2007, p. 71) propose four types chat that can be set up with learners: free topic chats, collaborative or task-oriented chats, informative or academic chats, and practice chats. In free topic chats there is no specific topic, learners meet in pairs or small groups to practice the language together and the teacher does not take on the role of moderator. On the other hand, in collaborative, task-oriented chats students are asked to complete a real task or project (which can be done in or out of class) which can be moderated by the teacher or by a learner appointed by the teacher or by the students themselves. As regards informative or academic chats, these are used for the dissemination of information either by the teacher or by the learners. Finally, practice chats usually take place outside the classroom and are intended to practice a specific function of the language or a specific skill. In these last two types, it can also appear the figure of the moderator, which can be personalized in the teacher or in any student and performs different tasks: introducing the chat, distributing the turns of participation, keeping participants on track, providing brief summaries, etc. (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007, p. 71).

Therefore, through the use of educational audio chats and videoconferencing, learners contact with students from other schools of their country or with foreign schools, having a real oral communication and, thus, developing fluency in their second language. In fact, at present,

there is an initiative of the European Commission called *eTwinning*³ which aims at providing teachers—and any other education staff working in a school in one of the European countries involved—a platform to communicate, collaborate, share, and develop projects through the use of ICT. A similar project was developed by Erasmus+ over the past 30 years: *Virtual Exchange*⁴. This program enables European and Southern Mediterranean students to engage in meaningful intercultural experiences online, as part of their formal and non-formal education.

Finally, to all this must be added the fact that this type of practice increases students' motivation, since they are making use of current technology which they can use outside the classroom for entertaining and communicating with their friends. In fact, there are some studies showing that when synchronous interaction is used—in particular, videoconferencing applications—it “plays a major part in the socio-affective dimension of pedagogical communication and in the development of interpersonal relationships.” (Develotte et al., 2010, p. 309).

5.2.1. Activity proposal and problems solved by synchronous interaction technologies

An activity proposal for speaking and listening development employing audio or voice chat (for example, *Skype*, *Google Talk*, or *Webex*) would be as follows: the teacher contacts another EFL class in the same education center—in case there are different groups—or in a different one, and they set a date for the chat lesson. It is advisable to have an introductory phase to let students know each other and get familiar with the chosen software before this session by setting up different encounters in which they can exchange personal information, interests, hobbies, etc. Once learners in both classes feel comfortable with each other and the software, the teacher explains the practice: in pairs, they have to choose a topic from a list provided by the teacher (which has to contain enough topics to avoid repetition among groups and to meet the tastes of most of the students). Then, in groups of four—two students from one class being grouped with the other two students who have selected the same topic in the other class—, they have to hear a podcast on the topic which was previously given by the teacher. In

³ *eTwinning - Homepage*. Etwinning.net. (2020). Retrieved 4 September 2020, from <https://www.etwinning.net/en/pub/index.htm>.

⁴ *About Virtual Exchange | European Youth Portal*. Europa.eu. (2020). Retrieved 4 September 2020, from https://europa.eu/youth/erasmusvirtual/about-virtual-exchange_en.

turns, they tell each other what they have cleared up from the audio material and work on a worksheet about it. As a closing phase, the teachers set a date for another chat session in which learners, in groups, summarize what they have learnt from the previous session, compare their answers to the questionnaire, and exchange ideas and feelings. It is advisable to record the activity so that the teacher can transcribe the conversation in order to analyze the language in subsequent sessions with the students. Another possibility is to give students the recording and let them self-evaluate their oral production. Finally, it should be noted that this activity has been designed to take place in the audiovisual room of the education center, where there is access to one computer for each pair of students, but it would be equally valid as an out-of-class activity, since it is important to get students familiar with voice chat in real life.

As can be seen, this activity has been designed to put into practice both students' listening and speaking skills. The focal point is the speaking skill—so the aim is to prevent cognitive, affective or performance factors from affecting the student's oral production—but, at the same time, by placing the listening material at the beginning of the activity, students perceive the necessity of understanding the topic and getting some background knowledge in order to get familiar with it before they start exchanging ideas with their classmates. Going back to Hamouda's (2013) and Macháčková's (2009) classifications of listening problems, it becomes evident that most of them are minimized by using podcasts which have been created for educational purposes. Thus, there are no problems related to the speaker such as hesitation, unclear pronunciation, or lack of pauses. Besides, problems such as those caused by failure to concentrate almost disappear, since they do not have to look for an answer, but to get a general understanding of the oral text. Basic linguistic problems also get diminished, since this type of materials do not contain, for example, colloquial words or slang, and problems related to psychological characteristics such as anxiety or lack of interest tend to disappear with collaborative work and topics chosen by the students. As regards the oral comprehension of their classmates' production, self-help among peers is an effective tool for understanding each other: they can get things repeated, ask to speak more slowly, and take advantage of body language and signals. Finally, problems pertaining to physical settings—such as noise or poor quality of the materials—definitely do not pose a problem for students, since nowadays synchronous technologies are sufficiently advanced to give technical problems (although it is recommended to check the Internet connection and to try the software out before setting the chat).

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, the aim of these video chat lessons is to prevent students from being affected by the typical cognitive, affective or performance factors that may arise while speaking a foreign language. Well-designed activities developed via synchronous interaction software such as *Skype*, with the presence of a moderator (or clear guidelines for turn-taking), usually eliminate performance problems related to the degree of collaboration, discourse control, planning time or time pressure. Affective factors are systematically reduced from the moment students work with classmates they feel comfortable with and group themselves according to their interests—which, in turn, help them to lose feelings of self-consciousness. Consequently, cognitive factors such as the familiarity with the topic, the genre or the interlocutors are also resolved.

5.3. Asynchronous interaction technologies

Technologies in the category of asynchronous interaction are “applications that can be used for the sharing of individually or collectively produced media files (audio and/or video) and that also offer extensive social networks functionalities such as ranking, liking, commenting, linking, etc.” (SpeakApps, 2010, p. 4). Within this category there are three subcategories: voiceboard, blogs and wikis, and audioblogs and videoblogs. Voiceboards are “oral versions of emails and discussion forums” (SpeakApps, 2010, p. 5) and, as such, teachers and students can record themselves and share voice messages. An interesting system that can be used for educational purposes is *Intervenue*, which allows for the creation of interview questions and the gathering of video responses. In that way, teachers can create a task in which they set up a series of questions that their students will have to answer, and, at the end, they will have the possibility of downloading all the material. This tool is a different way of giving significance to collaborative work and getting the students to realize that group work and collaboration is helpful both for their learning process and for their future as professionals. Besides, in the same way as with oral production technologies, students will be improving their fluency and accuracy because they will have to record themselves and share their productions with their teacher and classmates and, for that reason, as stated above, they will tend to be perfectionist and improve their oral production skill.

In addition, blogs and wikis are useful tools for teachers and students because they give the possibility of uploading the multimedia content that they have created with the aforementioned production technology. There are many blog platforms and wikis, for example,

Wordpress and *Blogger*, or *Wikispaces*. In all of them, users can post “comments, thoughts, analyses, experiences of daily life, interesting links, jokes or any other form of content, to a web page” (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007, p. 90). Regarding blogs, it is important to mention that their nature is varied, since they can contain written text, but also images, audio and video files. Therefore, the difference with synchronous technology is the fact that the communication does not take place in real time. However, they are still serviceable for teachers, who can create tutor blogs as alternatives or complements for institutional learning management systems, and upload summaries of their lessons, resources for students’ projects, tasks, podcasts, etc. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this paper, student blogs are the main center of attention and, more specifically, audioblogs and videoblogs, since students practice their second language while recording podcasts or videocasts where they reflect upon class topics suggested by the teacher or any other personal interest they may have and, thus, improve their speaking skill while using new technologies. Besides, they can post comments in their classmates’ blogs so that they have asynchronous communication among them.

As regards to wikis, the difference is that they are collaborative webpages that can be edited by any user so, in that sense, they are public sites started by one author but continued by other users who can change the information that is already published, delete it or add new information. The rest of characteristics or functions are similar to those of blogs. For that reason, blogs and wikis are presented in the last place, since they are means for sharing the materials which are recorded through the use of production technologies such as *Audacity* or *Camtasia Studio*, and they also give the possibility of including synchronous interaction (since they can contain chats) and asynchronous communication through comments or posts.

5.3.1. Activity proposal and problems solved by asynchronous interaction technologies

Because of their nature, asynchronous interaction technologies have been the most widespread in educational settings since they do not require students and teachers to be simultaneously connected and, in this sense, offer more flexibility and time to reflect, and less time and place constraints. Among the different possibilities that these technologies offer, for the activity here suggested, audioblogs have been chosen as the most appropriate option. Therefore, the proposal for a speaking activity is the following: the teacher asks the students to create their own blogs with a blogging service such as Google’s *Blogger*, and suggests that they

post their first entry including an audio file in which they present themselves (which can be recorded with production technology such as *Audacity* or with their mobile phones). Then, the teacher collects the students' blogs URLs and posts them in the tutor blog so that they are available for the whole class. Once these initial steps are accomplished, the teacher posts in the tutor blog an audio with the instructions of the assignment. Students have to work individually (at home or in the audiovisual room of the education center), record their answers and post them on their student blogs. Afterwards, the teacher evaluates the assignment by listening to the audio files of each student and gives them individual feedback by the same means. Besides, students also have to listen to at least three of their classmates' recordings and post comments in audio format. This way, listening comprehension is also practiced, and the teacher can examine students' listening and speaking skills in order to identify the outcomes of the activity, taking into account both the fluency and the accuracy of students' production, and their capability to get a general understanding of spoken texts and give feedback.

Therefore, asynchronous interaction technologies—and, in particular, audio and video blogs—have been proven equally helpful tools for students to practice their oral comprehension and oral production skills, despite some people may think they are less up-to-date than synchronous interaction technologies. They assist teachers' in instruction within the ESL/EFL class, at the same time, students' oral comprehension and production improves through interaction with their teacher and classmates. As previously noted, these technologies offer students the advantage of learning at anytime and anywhere, so they are useful both in formal and informal settings. Thus, speaking problems related to performance factors such as planning time, time pressure, or environmental conditions are solved. Students may overcome affective factors as well, since working from home allows them to practice their oral productions as many times as they deem necessary before they record themselves and upload the audio files to the audioblogs (which, in turn, has a positive impact on students' accuracy and fluency). Moreover, the very nature of asynchronous interaction technologies reduces the appearance of cognitive factors almost completely because learners have enough time to get familiar with the topic, the genre or the interlocutors before they start interacting. Thus, time to reflect is one of the most highlighted advantages of this type of technologies, due to the fact that it is not necessary to give immediate feedback. And, what is more, processing demands—another cognitive factor affecting students' speaking—should no longer be a problem with this type of technologies.

Similarly, listening problems are also weakened by asynchronous interaction technologies. As with production technologies, listening activities carried out asynchronously

eliminate problems caused by failure to concentrate, such as focus loss because students cannot get things repeated and become overwhelmed by the necessity of getting an instant answer. With this type of interaction, students can control speaker's speech speed by slowing down the streams of language they do not get or repeating the audio in order to have a complete understanding of its content. Again, this contrasts the traditional listening activities found in textbooks, where problems related to psychological characteristics such as anxiety arose when students did not recognize the words they know because of their pronunciation and did not have the chance to pause the audio, listen to it again, or look up in a dictionary. Problems related to the speaker may also be reduced because, as previously mentioned, students have time to reflect and repeat their oral productions until they feel they are acceptable in terms of accuracy or fluency. This way, aspects related to the speaker such as hesitation, unclear pronunciation or lack of pauses do not pose a problem for the listeners, and neither do aspects related to the physical settings such as the noise, since most recording software have editing tools that allow for noise removal or amplification).

6. Conclusions

In this paper, several important issues related to the development of oral skills, the different types of learning and educational settings, and the ICT resources available for educational purposes have been addressed. Different studies demonstrate that oral production and oral comprehension skills were the less developed ones in Spanish Secondary Education Students of EFL. This results in speaking and listening problems, which have been proven to have a negative influence on learners' academic and work life. Therefore, we reach the conclusion that these two skills are essential for a good command of the spoken language and, thus, for the inclusion of EFL speakers into a globalized world where communication is the key for social interaction and development.

This globalization has led to an astoundingly rapid technological development which has resulted in the necessity of integrating ICT in almost every sphere of social life, including education. Thus, this work has given a guide for language teachers and learners to incorporate ICT into the teaching-learning process of oral skills both in formal and informal settings. We have proven that, ICT, if integrated effectively, are beneficial resources to foster EFL learners' motivation towards spoken interaction.

Even though the tools included in the design of this project, initially, were not designed for educational purposes, they have successfully turned out to be creative and motivating approaches to foreign language teaching. Besides, it must be added the fact that this type of tools allows second language learners to practice their speaking skills not only in the classroom, but also outside, with other education centers, and with native speakers, regardless of the time the interaction happens (in real time or pre-recorded). Therefore, production technologies, asynchronous interaction technologies and synchronous interaction technologies constitute a great resource for students, who will become more efficient and communicative people both in the educational environment and in their work environment.

Finally, we hope this work encourages EFL educators and students to introduce ICT in both teaching and learning processes, even though we recognize that the change of the Spanish education system must come from above. We would therefore call on the Spanish government to assume their responsibility and increase investments in I+D+I (Spanish acronym for “investigación, desarrollo e innovación”), since it is one of the countries with lower levels of contribution. Then, those in charge of the design of Spanish education curricula would have means to assume their responsibility and reformulate them according to the reality of the 21st century, where new generations are growing up together with technology and do not conceive a world without it.

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