Speaking strategies used and preferred by emerging bilinguals in schools of Manta from efl teachers' perspective

Estrategias de habla utilizadas y preferidas por los bilingües emergentes en las escuelas de Manta desde la perspectiva de los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera

Abraham Intriago Palacios
e1313591867@live.uleam.edu.ec
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4644-5067
Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí
Manta – Ecuador

Johanna Bello
Johanna.bello@uleam.edu.ec
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0882-1060
Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí
Manta – Ecuador

Éder Intriago Palacios
Intriago@ksu.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9433-7186
Kansas State University
Manhattan – Kansas, USA

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Johanna.bello@uleam.edu.ec
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Manta – Ecuador

Éder Intriago Palacios
Intriago@ksu.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9433-7186
Kansas State University
Manhattan – Kansas, USA

Abstract

Learning a foreign language is immediately associated with using the language orally as this is the most observable evidence of competence. However, this aspect of language competence is one the most difficult to develop in contexts where the language is not readily available for practice outside the classroom (EFL contexts). The advent of computers, cellular phones coupled with multimedia capabilities and the Internet have allowed that practicing this skill outside of the classroom be more abundant. Although in certain countries this technological combination has worked successfully and learners have reached better levels of proficiency, a great segment of the population in Latin America remains with levels of proficiency in the last rankings according to Education First (EF EPI, 2024). The study that follows explored how EFL teachers from Manta in Ecuador described their views of best practices for improving speaking, and what challenges exist that may explain the low proficiency observed in international tests. Thematic analysis of teacher interviews revealed two key themes related to instructional practices: the value of interaction and play, and the use of technology and group work. The analysis also identified significant challenges, including low student self-confidence, lack of independent practice, limited resources, and large class sizes.

Keywords: speaking, EFL learners, Manta, English

Resumen

Aprender un idioma extranjero se asocia inmediatamente con el uso oral del idioma, ya que esta es la

evidencia de competencia más observable. Sin embargo, este aspecto de la competencia lingüística es uno de los más difíciles de desarrollar en contextos donde el idioma no está fácilmente disponible para practicar fuera del aula (contextos EFL). El advenimiento de las computadoras, los teléfonos celulares junto con las capacidades multimedia e internet han permitido que la práctica de esta habilidad fuera del aula sea más abundante. Aunque en ciertos países esta combinación tecnológica ha funcionado con éxito y los estudiantes han alcanzado mejores niveles de competencia, un gran segmento de la población en América Latina permanece con niveles de competencia en los últimos puestos según Education First (EF EPI, 2024). El estudio que se presenta a continuación buscó explorar cómo los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) de una ciudad costera Manta describen sus puntos de vista sobre las mejores prácticas para mejorar el habla, y qué desafíos existen que podrían explicar los bajos indicadores internacionales. Las ricas descripciones proporcionadas por los participantes permitieron al autor llegar a temas principales relacionados con las perspectivas sobre una instrucción que valora la interacción y el juego, y estrategias didácticas concretas que promueven la práctica utilizando tecnología y trabajo en grupo. Por otro lado, estos profesores expresaron que la falta de autoconfianza y la escasa práctica independiente, junto con los recursos limitados y las aulas grandes, siguen siendo obstáculos importantes para lograr entornos de aprendizaje deseables.

Palabras clave: habla, aprendientes EFL, Manta, inglés

INTRODUCTION

English has achieved a prominent status as a global language, widely acknowledged for its importance across numerous domains (Crystal, 2010; Harvey, 2016; Voxy, 2024). Its role in facilitating global communication is paramount, serving as a common medium for individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds in diverse areas of human interaction. In all areas of human interaction, English proficiency offers a distinct advantage, making individuals with fluency highly sought after for roles requiring international collaboration (Cong-Lem, 2025). Being able to speak English also promotes innovation by enabling effective communication and the sharing of ideas among diverse teams located around the world (Voxy, 2024).

The importance of speaking English has been recognized by most countries. In consonance with this, Ministries of Education have acted to make their curricula more aligned with this. Many nations have integrated English language instruction as a core component of their educational systems, often starting at the primary school level to ensure early proficiency (Kirkpatrick, 2010). This strategic emphasis reflects the understanding that English serves as a door to global opportunities in education, business, science, and technology. For instance, countries in Asia, such as Singapore and the Philippines, have adopted bilingual education models where English is used alongside national languages to prepare students for participation in the global economy (Sun & Rong, 2021). Similarly, in Europe, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has standardized English language teaching to enhance mobility and employability across member states (Council of Europe, 2020).

In Ecuador, English language teaching has undergone significant changes in the last decade. Previously, English was considered an optional subject, with each institution having the freedom to define its inclusion and hourly load. As of 2014, with the issuance of Ministerial Agreement No. 0052-14, which established guidelines for the systematic teaching of English in the public education system, the formal inclusion of English in the curriculum was achieved, with a 5-hour per week load starting from the eighth year of basic education. This measure aimed to raise students' language proficiency level through specialized training for teachers in this field.

The higher education sector has also been impacted, requiring students to achieve a B2 English level as a graduation requirement, which has implied a transformation in teaching methodologies (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2017). These reforms are part of a broader transformation of the pedagogical model, oriented towards participatory and comprehension-centered education; however, significant challenges persist. The level of English proficiency in Ecuador remains low compared to countries like Malaysia, a situation attributed to weaknesses in the public education system and high levels of school dropout in Latin America (Angellis, 2022).

This article seeks to add to the existing literature on English language teaching in Ecuador. It specifically reports on the specific efforts of ecuadorian local teachers to teach the speaking skill given its relevance in a globalized world. The article is exploratory and descriptive, emphasizing how four local EFL teachers from a city in Manta view what works in teaching speaking, their preferred instructional strategies and what barriers they face on a daily basis.

METHODOLOGY

Sampling Procedure

After obtaining approval for this project from the research committee at University of Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabi, the recruitment of participants began. To secure an information-rich sample, the author used purposeful snowball sampling, also known as network sampling (Patton, 2015). Social networks

such as Facebook and LinkedIn were used to approach various candidates that aligned with the criteria selected. To verify that participants self-identified with the inclusion criteria (i.e., were from Manta, had 2 or more years of teaching experience, were licensed teachers, and self identified as EFL teachers) brief screenings with prospective participants were carried out. The four participants who were included in the sample expressed that they had extensive formal training or continuing education in teaching English Face to face and in online settings. Individuals who were not included in the study either possessed only a bachelor's degree or had only experience in one level of education. The participants were informed of the nature and procedures of the research and provided their consent to take part in the project before I began conducting the interviews.

Participants

Four EFL teachers were recruited, and they volunteered to be interviewed for the study. The pseudonyms used for these participants are Carmen, Alejandro, Pedro and María. All four teachers self-identified as Ecuadorian currently living and teaching in Manta. Table 1 provides demographic details about their experience and academic preparation.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Participants

Participant	School Setting	Education Degree Level	Experience
Carmen	Public School	Doctoral	20 years
Alejandro	Public School	Master	5 years
Pedro	Public School	Master	10 years
María	Public School	Master	4 years

Data Collection Instruments

This study used semi-structured interviews as the main instrument to collect the data. Interviews are frequently used for collecting qualitative data due to their ability to capture rich, nuanced, and context-specific insights directly from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The semi-structured interview consisted of ten questions that served as the basis for generating the required dialog and gaining trust with the participants. Examples of the questions used during the interview are: in your experience, what specific speaking strategies do you observe EFL students frequently employing in the EFL classroom?; Which speaking strategies seem to be most effective for EFL students in gaining confidence and fluency in English?; Are there any specific strategies that EFL students express a preference for using in the EFL classroom? If so, what are they?

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom and lasted 30 to 45 minutes each. Each participant had a first longer interview where all major questions were asked. Follow-up interviews were conducted to complement the data, and to inquire about details that were surfacing as the researcher conducted the analysis of the first interview.

Analysis

The analysis of the responses provided by the participants was done using thematic analysis according to the guidelines and suggestions provided by Braun and Clarke (2022). Various rounds of coding were performed which allowed for categories to be created and themes to be generated as a result. These themes are presented in the next discussion section.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking is a crucial skill for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), enabling them to communicate effectively in real-life situations and participate actively in an increasingly interconnected world. However, speaking can also be one of the most challenging aspects of language learning (Kehing & Yunus, 2021) often causing anxiety and hindering fluency. To address this challenge, researchers have explored various speaking strategies that EFL learners can employ to improve their oral communication skills.

Defining Speaking Strategies

Speaking strategies are conscious techniques or behaviors that learners use to overcome difficulties and achieve communicative goals in oral interaction. Effective oral communication requires the ability to employ the language in social contexts that incorporate not just verbal communication but also paralinguistic components of speech including pitch, stress, and intonation. Nonlinguistic components like gestures, body language, and emotions are also useful for direct message delivery in the absence of supplementary speech (Amiruddin et al., 2023).

Speaking in a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammar and vocabulary. Learners should acquire the skills through interaction with each other (Shumin, 2010). Three categories of speech components are accuracy, fluency, and comprehensibility (Amiruddin et al., 2023). Accuracy refers to the ability to pronounce a word correctly. Fluency refers to the ability to speak smoothly and continuously without hesitation. Comprehensibility refers to the ability to be understood by others.

Challenges in EFL Speaking

EFL learners often face various challenges in developing their speaking skills. These challenges can be both linguistic and non-linguistic in nature. Some common challenges include:

Shyness and Fear of Mistakes: Many learners feel hesitant to speak due to shyness or fear of making mistakes in front of others. This can lead to avoidance of speaking situations and hinder fluency development.

Limited Opportunities for Practice: EFL learners may have limited opportunities to practice speaking English outside the classroom, especially if they live in non-English speaking environments. This lack of practice can affect their fluency and confidence.

Lack of Confidence: Some learners lack confidence in their ability to speak English accurately and fluently. This can stem from previous negative experiences, low self-esteem, or a perceived lack of progress.

Influence of Anxiety: Anxiety related to speaking English can significantly affect performance. Learners may experience physical symptoms such as nervousness, sweating, or trembling, which can further hinder their fluency and accuracy.

Teacher Perceptions and Practices

Research indicates that teachers generally perceive authentic practice and reflective strategies as beneficial for developing students' speaking skills. A study by Faiz (2023) found that teachers who used authentic materials and tasks in their classrooms reported increased student motivation, engagement, and language proficiency. Another study by Farrell and Macapinlac (2021) found that teachers who incorporated reflective practices into their teaching observed improvements in students' self-awareness, critical thinking skills, and language development.

Teachers also recognize the importance of understanding the cultural and linguistic factors that can affect students' speaking performance. They strive to create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks and expressing themselves in English. Teachers may use a variety of strategies to address these challenges, such as providing clear instructions and feedback, offering opportunities for practice in different contexts, and encouraging peer support and collaboration.

While speaking strategies have been widely researched in the world, the focus on specific regions, particularly Latin America, presents a different picture (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). There is a growing recognition within Latin America of the high importance of speaking English in various areas and disciplines. Many countries in the region have developed national strategies and implemented programs aimed at expanding access to English learning opportunities. Data from language learning platforms indicates a strong individual interest in studying English across Latin American countries (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). This growing interest and the efforts being made by governments and individuals suggest an increasing awareness of the benefits associated with speaking English in the Latin American context.

Within Latin America, Ecuador presents a particularly noteworthy case regarding English language proficiency and the corresponding research landscape (Macías & Villafuerte, 2020). Reports consistently indicate low levels of English proficiency among Ecuadorians (Orosz et al., 2021). Ecuador has often been ranked low in global English proficiency indices, sometimes even positioned as one of the lowest in the Latin American context. This low proficiency is a matter of public concern, frequently highlighted in national media and cited in academic articles. The current English curriculum in Ecuador sets the goal for high school students to achieve an intermediate (B1) level of proficiency by graduation (Burgin & Daniel, 2017; Calle et al., 2012; Halim, 2017); however, attaining this target has proven challenging (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2017).

Despite the clearly identified challenges in English language proficiency, research specifically focused on English speaking appears to be limited (Pacheco et al., 2022). Investigations into motivation and EFL teaching in Ecuador published between 2010 and 2023 reveal that while motivation in higher education has received some attention, there is considerably less research on this topic in relation to primary and secondary school levels. This is a significant gap, as these foundational levels are crucial for building a strong base in English language skills. Furthermore, a notable research gap exists concerning the perspectives of teachers on the factors contributing to weak speaking performance among students in Ecuador (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

Despite the growing importance of English as a global language, many EFL learners struggle to develop sufficient speaking skills. This difficulty arises from a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic factors, including limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, lack of confidence, and insufficient opportunities for practice. These challenges typically lead to anxiety and hinder fluency, ultimately impacting learners' ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations (Kehing & Yunus, 2021). While global studies have identified speaking strategies to mitigate these difficulties, research tailored to Ecuador's unique educational landscape is lacking. Investigating how Ecuadorian teachers address these challenges and teach speaking skills offers a valuable opportunity to assess the effectiveness of localized strategies, explore the role of cultural and technological influences, and evaluate their long-term impact on students' fluency, accuracy, and confidence, thereby contributing to more contextually relevant EFL pedagogy. In view of this, the researcher proposes the research questions below:

How do four EFL teachers perceive and address the development of students' speaking skills?

In what ways do they describe the challenges they experience as they navigate applying these strategies?

By employing a qualitative approach, the researcher sought to gain an understanding of the types of strategies employed by students, the factors that influence strategy use, and the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in promoting oral communication skills, and what actions the teachers implement in their desire to help learners improve their oral competency in English. This investigation will contribute to the existing body of literature on speaking strategies in EFL learning by providing valuable insights into classroom practices and student behaviors, ultimately informing pedagogical approaches and interventions aimed at enhancing EFL learners' speaking proficiency and confidence in various educational settings.

RESULTS

This study was guided by two research questions:

How do four EFL teachers from Manta perceive and address the development of students' speaking skills?

In what ways do they describe the challenges they experience as they navigate applying these strategies, and how they dealt with them?

The findings of these two research questions are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes obtained from participants interviews

		Theme	Example Quote
RQ 1		Interaction as a Core Component of Effective Speaking	*"In my own learning I have joined conversation groups and have encouraged my students to join them as well because it is a great way of practicing it and developing experience with those aspects typical of oral communication such as using connectors and "muletillas""* (Carmen) *"The most effective strategies are those that combine practice with real-life situations. For example, games that students participate in doing are a powerful tool because students take on different characters and contexts, such as going shopping, ordering food in a restaurant, or conversing with a native speaker"* (Pedro) *"Well, the most effective strategies are those that allow them to interact constantly, such as role-playing, question-and-answer activities, and group projects. These activities provide them with a practical environment to lose the fear of making mistakes"* (María)
		Diverse Resources to Enhance Speaking Proficiency	*"Well, I believe that students don't take enough advantage of recording their voice, whether with their devices, for self-assessment. I create activities where they do this and then can incorporate it as independent strategies. Another strategy that I have explored with my students is the use of keywords or mental notes before speaking, which would help them organize their ideas and speak with more confidence."* (Maria) *"In my case, the resources I utilize vary depending on the group, especially age. But one that particularly works with almost any group age is using songs"* (Alejandro) *"Most prefer listening to music, others watching videos and materials in Youtube and Instagram, also watching series. Some others work with apps like Duolingo and least but not less, others use video games"*

		(Carmen) *"Some students who are more proactive tend to imitate the intonation and pronunciation of dialogues we have rehearsed in class, especially after having listened to recordings or songs in English. It is an effective strategy because it helps my students sound more natural and to gain confidence" (Pedro)*
RQ 2	Personal Challenges in Speaking Development	*"Yes, one of the biggest obstacles is the students' insecurity when speaking. Many are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates" (María)* *"They [the students] simply translate to speak English without adhering to proper language structures" (Alejandro)* *"First, their motivation towards learning English, sometimes their previous experience has been sort of negative, some other times they don't feel the need of practicing." (Carmen)* *"The students hold a few beliefs that limit their learning English. It is a difficult cultural aspect that is tough to eradicate" (Alejandro)* *"In my years teaching, I have observed the students use basic memorization strategies. It is common to see them use simple sentences based on previous examples. For instance, when we are practicing daily conversations, they keep their expressions to "What's your name?" o "I'm fine, thank you", but very rarely they venture more advanced expressions" (Pedro)*
	External Challenges in Ecuador's EFL Context	*"Lack of resources, I mean technology, connectivity problems, limited access to the internet and to some apps." (Carmen)* *In my case, we can't take advantage of more dynamic activities such as the sketches or short plays because of the few hours the students receive per week." (Alejandro)* *An important obstacle that I have observed is the limited time every student has to use or practice English, in those classes with over 40 students (Pedro)*

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide valuable insights into how EFL teachers perceive and describe their students' use of speaking strategies in the classroom. The qualitative approach employed allowed for an exploration of the types of strategies employed by students from the teachers' perspectives and observations, the factors that influence strategy use, and the perceived effectiveness of these strategies in promoting oral communication skills. Also, it sheds light on some of the difficulties that they face in their unique contexts as they execute their instructional strategies and dispositions as teachers.

Theme 1: Interaction as a Core Component of Effective Speaking

The study revealed that teachers view interaction as central to developing speaking skills, echoing findings from global research (Shumin, 2010; Amiruddin et al., 2023). Let us take as an example teacher Carmen with her comment:

In my own learning I have joined conversation groups and have encouraged my students to join them as well because it is a great way of practicing it and developing experience with those aspects typical of oral communication such as using connectors and "muletillas". This statement emphasized conservation groups as a practical way to practice oral communication, highlighting the use of connectors and fillers to enhance fluency and authenticity.

Similarly, Teacher Pedro advocated for authentic tasks, such as role-playing real-life scenarios like shopping or ordering food, which aligns with Faiz's (2023) findings that authentic materials boost student motivation and engagement. This is illustrated in his comment: The most effective strategies are those that combine practice with real-life situations. For example, games that students participate in doing are a powerful tool because students take on different characters and contexts, such as going shopping, ordering food in a restaurant, or conversing with a native speaker

Lastly, teacher María further supported the importance of authentic tasks and interaction by noting that consistent interactive activities, such as role-plays and group projects, help reduce students' fear of making mistakes, a key challenge. Notably, these findings contrast with the literature's emphasis on anxiety as a barrier (Kehing & Yunus, 2021), as the teachers in this study actively used interactive strategies to mitigate shyness and fear, suggesting a proactive approach to fostering fluency and confidence in Ecuador's EFL classrooms.

Theme 2: Diverse Resources to Enhance Speaking Proficiency

Teachers in this study highlighted the use of varied resources to amplify speaking proficiency, a strategy that resonates with the literature's call for innovative approaches to EFL teaching (Farrell & Macapinlac, 2021). Teacher María's comment "Well, I believe that students don't take enough advantage of recording their voice, using their devices…" is an instance of advocacy for students recording their voices and using keywords to organize thoughts aligns with metacognitive strategies that promote self-awareness and planning, as noted by Amiruddin et al. (2023).

Also, songs were mentioned as a powerful way of enhancing speaking. Teacher Alejandro commented the following about using songs: "in my case, the resources I utilize vary depending on the group, especially age. But one that particularly works with almost any group age is using songs". His suggestion that songs provide a universal tool for improving pronunciation and fluency reflects the literature's recognition of nonlinguistic components, such as intonation, in effective communication (Amiruddin et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Teacher Carmen's observation that students engage with videos, language apps, and video games connects to the growing role of technology in EFL learning, as highlighted by Cronquist and Fiszbein (2017) in the Latin American context. However, these findings contrast with the literature's noted lack of research on technology's role in Ecuador specifically (Pacheco et al., 2022), suggesting that teachers are independently leveraging digital tools to address limited practice opportunities, a challenge prevalent in non-English-speaking environments.

Theme 3: Personal Challenges in Speaking Development

The teachers identified personal challenges, such as students' fear of mistakes and reliance on basic or translated language structures, which align closely with global EFL challenges (Kehing & Yunus, 2021). Teacher María attributed the lack of speaking to students' fear of making mistakes "Yes, one of the biggest obstacles is the students' insecurity when speaking. Many are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates". She noted that this insecurity hinders fluency and confidence, as discussed

in the literature. On the other hand, teacher Alejandro's observation that students translate word-for-word rather than using proper English structures reflects a linguistic challenge tied to limited vocabulary and accuracy (Amiruddin et al., 2023). Teacher Pedro's comment on students' reliance on memorized, basic expressions further underscores the difficulty of progressing to advanced fluency, a gap also noted in Ecuador's low proficiency levels (Orosz et al., 2021). These findings highlight a need for targeted strategies to move students beyond rote memorization, aligning with the literature's call for more research on addressing these foundational issues at the primary and secondary levels in Ecuador (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017).

Theme 4: External Challenges in Ecuador's EFL Context

In addition to challenges related to personal challenges, the teachers described obstacles to effective teaching of speaking because of external difficulties that escaped their control and caused them frustration. One common aspect was limited resources. For instance, teacher Carmen highlighted problems with access to the Internet "the main problem is lack of resources, I mean technology, connectivity problems, limited access to the internet and to some apps". Another aspect that they mentioned was the short number of hours per week they had to teach formal aspects of the language and practice speaking along with writing. Alejandro's comment shows this shared worry about time "In my case, we can't take advantage of more dynamic activities such as the sketches or short plays because of the few hours the students receive per week". The last external challenge that these teachers faced pertained to class size which prevented enough speaking practice. Teacher Pedro expressed his frustration in this regard saying "it is a major obstacle that I have observed, the limited time every student has to use or practice English, in those classes with over 40 students"

Implications of this study

The findings of this study have important implications for EFL pedagogy and research. By understanding how teachers perceive and describe their students' use of speaking strategies, educators can better support learners in developing effective communication skills. The study also highlights the need for further research on the long-term impact of strategy training on fluency, accuracy, and confidence. Future research should also explore the effectiveness of specific strategies for diverse learners and contexts, and investigate the role of technology in facilitating strategy development and use. Furthermore, these insights can inform the design of more targeted and effective teacher professional development programs, equipping educators with the knowledge and tools necessary to explicitly teach and scaffold speaking strategies in their classrooms. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of these dynamics can contribute to more learner-centered approaches in English language teaching, empowering students to become more autonomous and strategic communicators.

Further Studies

Given the qualitative nature and specific scope of this study, future research could expand on these findings by employing quantitative methods to measure the impact of specific speaking strategies on a larger sample of EFL learners in Ecuador. Additionally, comparative studies involving teachers and students from different levels of education in Ecuador could provide a broader understanding of contextual factors influencing speaking proficiency. Research could also inquire deeper into the long-term effectiveness of technology-integrated speaking strategies and explore specific interventions to address the identified personal challenges, such as fear of mistakes and reliance on translation, among Ecuadorian EFL students. Finally, investigating the perspectives of the students themselves, rather than solely relying on teacher perceptions, would offer a more comprehensive view of their strategy use and challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the perceptions and practices of EFL teachers in Manta, Ecuador, regarding the development of speaking skills in their students. The findings underscore the critical role of interactive activities and the diverse use of resources, including technology, in fostering oral communication. Despite these efforts, teachers continue to struggle with significant personal challenges faced by students, such as shyness and over-reliance on direct translation, alongside external obstacles like limited resources and large class sizes. The insights gained offer valuable implications for EFL pedagogy, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and professional development programs that equip teachers to address these multifaceted challenges. By promoting learner-centered approaches and incorporating relevant strategies, the aim is to empower Ecuadorian EFL learners to become more confident, fluent, and autonomous communicators in a globalized world, ultimately contributing to improved English proficiency indicators in the region.

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