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Factors Associated with the Level of English Proficiency among Rural Education Students in Riobamba Canton, Ecuador.

Factores Asociados al Nivel de Competencia en inglés en Estudiantes de Educación Rural del Cantón Riobamba, Ecuador

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Abstract

This study examined English proficiency and the factors students perceive as associated with their English learning among final-year upper-secondary students in rural public schools in Riobamba Canton, Ecuador. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used. In the quantitative phase, 142 students from three rural institutions completed an adapted B1-oriented diagnostic test covering Use of English and Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking, together with a contextual questionnaire. In the qualitative phase, 12 students were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews to explain the quantitative patterns. Descriptive results showed performance below the study-defined curricular reference across all four components: Speaking obtained the highest overall mean (50.70%), followed by Use of English and Reading (31.17%), Listening (17.43%), and Writing (6.38%). The interviews revealed five recurring barriers: limited technological infrastructure and unstable internet connectivity, minimal exposure to English outside school, limited academic support within the family, the persistence of teacher-centred instruction, and structural rural constraints, including long daily commutes and agricultural or household obligations. Taken together, these results indicate that the low proficiency observed in the participating rural schools stems from a combination of pedagogical, technological, socio-familial, and environmental factors. The study therefore offers a locally grounded diagnostic reference that

connects objective language scores with the educational conditions reported by students, providing an empirical basis for context-sensitive interventions in rural English instruction. Because the diagnostic instrument was adapted for this study, the resulting percentages should not be interpreted as official Cambridge or CEFR certification equivalencies.

Keywords: English proficiency, rural education, English language skills, EFL, Ecuadorian students.

Resumen

El estudio examinó el nivel de competencia en inglés y los factores percibidos como asociados a su aprendizaje en estudiantes de tercero de bachillerato de instituciones fiscales rurales del cantón Riobamba, Ecuador. Se empleó un diseño mixto explicativo secuencial. En la fase cuantitativa participaron 142 estudiantes de tres instituciones rurales, quienes respondieron una prueba diagnóstica adaptada y orientada al nivel B1, compuesta por Uso del Inglés y Lectura, Comprensión Auditiva, Escritura y Expresión Oral, además de un cuestionario contextual. En la fase cualitativa se seleccionaron intencionalmente 12 estudiantes para entrevistas semiestructuradas destinadas a explicar los patrones cuantitativos. Los resultados descriptivos mostraron un desempeño inferior a la referencia curricular definida para el estudio en los cuatro componentes: Expresión Oral obtuvo el promedio general más alto (50,70%), seguida de Uso del Inglés y Lectura (31,17%), Comprensión Auditiva (17,43%) y Escritura (6,38%). Las entrevistas permitieron identificar cinco barreras recurrentes: infraestructura tecnológica limitada y conectividad inestable, escasa exposición al inglés fuera de la escuela, apoyo académico familiar reducido, persistencia de una enseñanza centrada en el docente y limitaciones estructurales del contexto rural, como desplazamientos diarios prolongados y responsabilidades agrícolas o domésticas. En conjunto, estos resultados indican que el bajo nivel observado en las instituciones rurales participantes responde a una combinación de factores pedagógicos, tecnológicos, sociofamiliares y ambientales. El estudio aporta, por tanto, una referencia diagnóstica local que vincula los puntajes obtenidos con las condiciones educativas reportadas por los estudiantes y ofrece una base empírica para diseñar intervenciones contextualizadas en la enseñanza rural del inglés. Dado que el instrumento diagnóstico fue adaptado para este estudio, los porcentajes resultantes no deben interpretarse como equivalencias oficiales de certificación Cambridge o del MCER.

Palabras clave: dominio del inglés, educación rural, destrezas lingüísticas, inglés como lengua extranjera, estudiantes ecuatorianos.

Introduction

English is formally incorporated into Ecuador's national curriculum as a foreign language and is expected to contribute to students' communicative, academic, intercultural, and digital development. The national English as a Foreign Language curriculum is aligned with communicative principles and with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), while the prioritized curriculum maintains English within the communicational competency framework (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016, 2021; Council of Europe, 2020).

However, curricular alignment on its own does not guarantee uniform pedagogical opportunities across schools. In practice, how faithfully the curriculum is enacted depends on a set of operational conditions: teachers' pedagogical preparation, the amount of instructional time available, access to learning resources, and the frequency with which students engage in authentic communicative practice.

This persistent gap between policy intent and classroom practice is well documented in recent Ecuadorian research. Alvarez et al. (2025) show that although teachers broadly endorse the communicative and student-centred principles of the curriculum, their capacity to translate these principles into daily practice is severely limited by structural deficits, including inadequate infrastructure, fragmented technological adoption, gaps in specialized professional development, and low parental involvement.

Similarly, Alvarez Llerena and Ha (2022) found that secondary teachers struggle to translate national curriculum expectations into daily practice. In rural settings, these challenges are often intensified by connectivity limitations, reduced access to materials, and fewer opportunities for authentic English use (Olalla Chávez & Mosquera, 2024).

Recent studies also show that English learning outcomes in Ecuador are shaped by multiple dimensions rather than by individual effort alone. Peña-Ledesma (2024) emphasizes the relationship between pedagogical approaches and the development of linguistic competencies, while Soto et al. (2024) identify student motivation, instructional repertoire, socio-cultural factors, and access to supplementary learning resources as recurring themes across Ecuadorian EFL

research. Within this line of inquiry, Camacho Castillo et al. (2025), focusing on rural Ecuadorian students, showed that the strategic integration of collaborative learning significantly reduces affective filters, particularly by strengthening oral production confidence even under conditions of acute technological deficits and scarce opportunities for authentic target-language interaction.

Despite this growing body of literature, an important gap remains. Recent studies in Ecuador have focused mainly on early childhood education, tertiary settings, isolated pedagogical interventions, or discrete linguistic competencies. As a result, there is little empirical work that systematically combines objective language proficiency measures with the multidimensional realities reported by upper-secondary students, specifically the interplay of personal, socio-familial, instructional, technological, and environmental constraints inherent to rural contexts. This gap is particularly acute in the rural parishes of Riobamba Canton, where locally contextualized diagnostic evidence is urgently needed to reconcile curricular expectations with the actual instructional conditions of high school learners.

Accordingly, the objective of this study was to determine the English proficiency profile of final-year upper-secondary students in three rural public institutions in Riobamba Canton and to identify the principal perceived factors associated with their English learning. Two research questions guided the study: (RQ1) What level of performance do students demonstrate across Use of English and Reading, Listening, Writing, and Speaking in relation to the study-defined curricular reference? (RQ2) Which personal/family, pedagogical, technological, out-of-class exposure, and rural-context factors are most frequently reported by students as barriers to English learning? The remainder of the article presents the theoretical background, materials and methods, integrated results, discussion, conclusions, limitations, and implications for future research.

1.1. Key considerations on English language teaching and learning in Ecuador

English language education in Ecuador sits at the intersection of national curriculum policy, institutional capacity, teacher knowledge, and learners' sociocultural realities. The 2016 EFL curriculum adopts a communicative, learner-centred orientation and promotes the integration of content, language, intercultural awareness, and critical thinking (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2016).

Still, empirical studies consistently show that putting these principles into practice depends heavily on the material and pedagogical conditions of individual schools. Examining Ecuadorian primary education, Alvarez et al. (2025) found that while English teachers view the national curriculum as modern and progressive, they face daily challenges involving physical classroom space, digital access, instructional materials, and specialized training. At the secondary level, Alvarez Llerena and Ha (2022) found noticeable misalignments between teachers' positive attitudes toward communicative teaching and their actual instructional routines.

Taken together, these studies underline the importance of analysing student achievement through a multilevel perspective that connects top-down policy goals with institutional support, classroom teaching practices, and individual student background factors.

1.2. Instructional resources and methodological approaches

Instructional resources and methodology are particularly relevant to this discussion. Acosta and Cajas (2018) showed that the resources used in Ecuadorian EFL classrooms can either support or constrain communicative language teaching. Barre and Villafuerte-Holguín (2021) likewise reported that the implementation of CLIL in Ecuador depended on methodological knowledge, institutional conditions, and contextual adaptation. More recent evidence from rural Ecuador indicates that collaborative learning can increase students' confidence in speaking when it creates structured opportunities for interaction and peer support (Camacho Castillo et al., 2025).

Motivation and learning conditions must also be considered. Soto et al. (2024), in a review of Ecuadorian EFL research, concluded that motivation is connected to teaching strategies, cultural factors, supplementary resources, and virtual learning conditions, while also noting a relative scarcity of research in primary and secondary education.

1.3. National English curriculum guidelines and the CEFR

Framed by the CEFR, the Ecuadorian English curriculum incorporates internationally accepted descriptors across language proficiency levels. At the end of upper-secondary schooling, official guidance has long treated B1 as the benchmark for what students are expected to attain. The CEFR itself, however, lays out broad bands of proficiency from A1 to C2 and deliberately refrains from fixing percentage cut-offs for locally designed diagnostic tools (Council of Europe, 2020).

It follows that any percentage threshold used in school-level diagnostic assessment is a local operational convention; it should not be read as a formal CEFR equivalence. Alongside this, Communicative Language Teaching and related approaches have been pushing instruction away from decontextualised grammar exercises and towards functional language use anchored in tasks.

This orientation is consistent with Ecuador's curriculum and with recent research emphasizing interaction, collaboration, and meaningful tasks (Alvarez et al., 2025; Camacho Castillo et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the success of these approaches depends on sufficient instructional time, teacher preparation, access to materials, and opportunities for students to engage with English inside and outside the classroom.

1.4. English proficiency in rural secondary education

Rural education is characterized by contextual conditions that may influence language-learning opportunities, including distance, connectivity, access to devices, availability of specialized teachers, and exposure to English beyond school. Olalla Chávez and Mosquera (2024) documented the relevance of contextualized strategies in a rural Ecuadorian setting and highlighted the need to adapt English instruction to local conditions. At a broader policy level, the OECD (2025) stresses that equitable learning increasingly depends on both learners' skills and the means available to sustain participation in digitally mediated educational environments.

These elements matter a great deal for listening, speaking, and writing, since these core skills rest fundamentally on sustained practice, feedback tailored to the learner, and exposure to authentic input. Peña-Ledesma (2024) points out that how well students achieve linguistically is tightly bound to the quality of the pedagogical guidance they receive in the classroom. Underachievement in rural settings, then, should not be read as proof of shortcomings at the student level; it is better understood as a reflection of persistent systemic gaps in educational resources, practice environments, and instructional mechanisms.

1.5. Factors associated with English learning outcomes

This study approaches the associated factors not as verified causal mechanisms but as contextual conditions that students themselves describe as shaping their acquisition of English. The analysis is organized around five main areas: personal and familial conditions, classroom teaching

practices, technology and connectivity, exposure to the language outside school, and rural environmental barriers. Keeping these perspectives distinct is worthwhile, since qualitative and descriptive data can bring recurring patterns and underlying dynamics into reasonably clear view, even where they cannot establish formal causality on their own.

Across these categories, the personal and family dimension covers self-efficacy, anxiety when speaking or writing, parental guidance on education, and the spaces available for study at home. The school dimension looks at teacher-centred instruction, chances for peer interaction, pedagogical feedback, and the use of communicative strategies. The technological dimension centres on access to computers or phones, a stable internet connection, and digital resources. The exposure dimension refers to contact with English through entertainment, independent learning, and authentic communication settings. Finally, the rural-context dimension takes in physical distance, long travel times, domestic responsibilities, and socioeconomic constraints, interacting dimensions whose relevance is well established in recent Ecuadorian educational literature (Soto et al., 2024; Alvarez et al., 2025; Camacho Castillo et al., 2025).

Materials and Methods

2.1. Research design

The study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. In the initial quantitative phase, we established a descriptive baseline of students' English proficiency and learning conditions; subsequently, the qualitative phase used semi-structured interviews to unpack and contextualize the main quantitative trends. This sequence is appropriate when numerical trends require additional interpretation through participants' experiences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The design was primarily descriptive and explanatory. It did not seek to establish causal relationships. Accordingly, the term "associated factors" refers to recurrent conditions identified through the contextual questionnaire and students' interview accounts, not to statistically proven predictors.

2.2. Setting, population, and participants

The study was conducted during the 2025–2026 academic year in three public rural institutions in Riobamba Canton, Chimborazo Province: Unidad Educativa 21 de Abril and Unidad Educativa Intercultural Bilingüe Óscar Efrén Reyes, both located in Flores parish, and Unidad Educativa Licto, located in Licto parish.

A total of 142 final-year upper-secondary students participated in the quantitative phase. For the qualitative phase, 12 students were purposively selected to reflect variation in English performance, technological access, family support, and learning conditions.

2.3. Instruments

English proficiency diagnostic test. The quantitative language measure was an adapted diagnostic instrument based on B1-oriented tasks and on the skill domains commonly assessed in Cambridge B1 Preliminary. It included four scored components: (a) Use of English and Reading, (b) Listening, (c) Writing, and (d) Speaking. Each component was scored on a 0–100 scale, yielding a maximum total of 400 points. Because the test was adapted in content and administration time, it should not be described as an official Cambridge B1 Preliminary administration. Its scores are therefore interpreted as local diagnostic percentages rather than as formal Cambridge or CEFR certification results (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.; Council of Europe, 2020).

Contextual questionnaire. A researcher-developed structured questionnaire was used to collect information on six dimensions: personal factors, family factors, school-related factors, technological factors, exposure to English outside the classroom, and constraints associated with the rural context. The questionnaire was used to describe the study context and inform purposive sampling for the qualitative phase. No causal or predictive estimates were derived from the questionnaire responses.Semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed from the quantitative findings to explore how students perceived the influence of motivation and anxiety, family support, pedagogical practices, connectivity, access to devices, exposure to English, commuting, and household or agricultural responsibilities. Twelve interviews were used to deepen interpretation of the quantitative results.

2.4. Procedure and ethical considerations

The empirical phase was conducted between February and July 2026. Institutional coordination and permissions preceded data collection. The quantitative assessment was administered in person during scheduled school hours, followed by the contextual questionnaire. The qualitative interviews were conducted after a preliminary review of the quantitative results so that participant selection and interview prompts could address the most relevant performance and contextual patterns.

Because participants were minors, written parental or legal-guardian consent and student assent were required before participation. Confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw were communicated in accordance with current educational-research ethics guidance (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024). Institutional authorization was obtained from the participating schools.

2.5. Data analysis and mixed-methods integration

Quantitative data were processed in Microsoft Excel using descriptive statistics. Arithmetic means were calculated for each language component by institution and for the sample as a whole. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the recurrence of contextual barriers reported by the 12 interviewed students. No inferential statistical tests were conducted; therefore, a significance level, parametric-assumption testing, p values, and effect-size estimates were not applicable to the reported analysis.

The original protocol used 240/400 points (60%) as a reference threshold for a curricular B1.1 expectation. In the revised manuscript, this value is retained only as a study-defined diagnostic benchmark. It is not presented as an official CEFR or Cambridge cut score because the CEFR does not prescribe percentage thresholds for adapted local tests (Council of Europe, 2020).

Interview data were analyzed thematically by grouping recurrent statements into five domains: personal/family factors, school/pedagogical factors, technological/connectivity factors, exposure to English outside the classroom, and rural-context constraints. Theme frequencies were used only to indicate recurrence within the interview sample and were not interpreted as population prevalence or statistical causality. The integration stage connected these qualitative themes with

the quantitative performance profile in order to explain how students' learning conditions may help contextualize the observed scores (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Results

Quantitative findings are presented first at the institutional and overall levels, followed by qualitative themes that contextualize the observed performance patterns. Because the analysis was descriptive, terms such as "statistically significant difference," "predictor," or "causal effect" are not used.

Average Scores by Educational Institution

Table 1

Educational Institution	**Use of English & Reading**	**Listening**	**Writing**	**Speaking**
Unidad Educativa 21 de Abril	31.85	18.40	7.25	48.60
Unidad Educativa Intercultural Bilingüe Óscar Efrén Reyes	33.70	14.15	5.80	62.30
Unidad Educativa Licto	27.95	19.75	6.10	41.20

Source: Own elaboration based on field data (2026).

Note. Scores are descriptive percentages on the adapted local diagnostic test. They are not official Cambridge or CEFR certification scores. Own elaboration based on field data (2026).

Table 1 shows a consistent pattern of low performance across the four components, although the magnitude differs by institution. In Speaking, Unidad Educativa Intercultural Bilingüe Óscar Efrén Reyes obtained the highest institutional mean (62.30), while Unidad Educativa Licto obtained the lowest (41.20). In Use of English and Reading, Óscar Efrén Reyes again recorded the highest mean (33.70), followed by Unidad Educativa 21 de Abril (31.85) and Unidad Educativa Licto (27.95).

Listening means were lower: Unidad Educativa Licto achieved the highest score (19.75), followed by Unidad Educativa 21 de Abril (18.40), whereas Óscar Efrén Reyes obtained 14.15. Writing was the weakest component in all three institutions, with means ranging from 5.80 to 7.25. These descriptive results indicate that the strongest component was not consistent across all schools, but Writing was uniformly the most underdeveloped area.

Table 2

Mean Diagnostic Scores by Linguistic Component and School

Linguistic component	U.E. 21 de Abril	U.E. Intercultural Bilingüe Óscar Efrén Reyes	U.E. Licto	Overall mean (%)	Calculation of the overall mean
Students in the quantitative phase	48	47	47	142	48 + 47 + 47 = 142
Use of English and Reading	31.85	33.70	27.95	31.17	(31.85 + 33.70 + 27.95) ÷ 3
Listening	18.40	14.15	19.75	17.43	(18.40 + 14.15 + 19.75) ÷ 3
Writing	7.25	5.80	6.10	6.38	(7.25 + 5.80 + 6.10) ÷ 3
Speaking	48.60	62.30	41.20	50.70	(48.60 + 62.30 + 41.20) ÷ 3

Source: Own elaboration based on field data (2026).

Table 2 summarizes mean diagnostic scores by linguistic component across the three participating schools (n = 48, 47, and 47; N = 142). Overall, Speaking obtained the highest mean (50.70%), followed by Use of English and Reading (31.17%), Listening (17.43%), and Writing (6.38%). All overall means fell below the study-defined 60% reference, with the widest gap in Writing (53.62 points) and the narrowest in Speaking (9.30 points). Institutional differences were most pronounced in Speaking, ranging from 41.20% at U.E. Licto to 62.30% at U.E. Intercultural Bilingüe Óscar Efrén Reyes, the only school exceeding the reference. Listening also varied from 14.15% to 19.75%, remaining far below the reference everywhere. Writing remained uniformly low (5.80–7.25%). These unweighted overall means provide a descriptive diagnostic profile, not inferential comparisons.

Table 3

Recurring Factors Reported in Semi-Structured Interviews (n = 12)

Reported factor	Main limitation	n	%
Personal and family factors	Limited family academic support and anxiety during productive tasks	11	91.6
School and pedagogical factors	Predominance of teacher-centered and grammar-focused practices	9	75.0

Technology and internet connectivity	Limited access to devices and/or reliable internet at home	12	100.0
Exposure to English outside the classroom	Minimal opportunities to use or encounter English beyond school	12	100.0
Rural-context constraints	Commuting time and household or agricultural responsibilities	10	83.3

Source: Own elaboration based on field data (2026).

Note. Frequencies indicate the number of interview participants who explicitly mentioned each barrier. Participants could report more than one factor; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%. These values describe recurrence within the qualitative subsample and are not statistical association coefficients.

The qualitative findings answer RQ2 by identifying the most recurrent perceived barriers. All 12 interviewees mentioned limited access to technology/reliable internet and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Eleven students (91.6%) referred to restricted family academic support and/or anxiety during productive language tasks. Ten (83.3%) identified rural-context constraints, including commuting and household or agricultural responsibilities, while nine (75.0%) described teacher-centered or grammar-focused practices as limiting opportunities for interaction.

When integrated with the diagnostic profile, these themes provide a plausible contextual explanation for the low averages, particularly in Writing and Listening. However, because the qualitative frequencies are based on a purposive subsample and no inferential association models were verified, the findings should be interpreted as explanatory perceptions rather than as causal or population-level estimates

Discussion

The first research question concerned students' English performance across the four assessed components. The overall pattern was clearly below the study-defined curricular reference, with Speaking obtaining the highest mean (50.70), followed by Use of English and Reading (31.17), Listening (17.43), and Writing (6.38). This profile suggests uneven development of language skills rather than a uniform level of competence. It also reinforces the need to distinguish between curricular expectations and actual opportunities to develop the target skills in rural schools. Similar tensions between policy expectations and classroom realities have been documented in Ecuadorian secondary education, where teachers report constraints related to instructional time, resources,

student prior knowledge, and the practical implementation of communicative approaches (Alvarez Llerena & Ha, 2022; Alvarez et al., 2025).

Writing emerged as the most critical area. Peña-Ledesma (2024) highlights that student linguistic competence is strongly conditioned by the structure and quality of classroom guidance. Although Moreira and Montero (2025) analyzed general writing skills in Ecuadorian Basic Education rather than EFL writing, their work points to parallel challenges in written composition and stresses the need for deliberate teaching interventions.

Speaking, on the other hand, registered the highest average among the evaluated components, though it still fell short of the study's reference standard. This relative outcome is particularly telling, given how rarely rural students actually use English in their everyday surroundings. Camacho Castillo et al. (2025) found that structured peer interaction through collaborative learning can do a great deal to build speaking confidence in rural Ecuadorian schools. What our participants told us echoes those findings: students described feeling anxious during productive activities and pointed to a shortage of communicative tasks in teacher-centred lessons. The stronger result in speaking, then, should not be taken as evidence of full oral mastery; it simply suggests that speaking was less affected than the other areas assessed.

The second research question focused on perceived factors associated with English learning. Technology and connectivity, and out-of-class exposure, were reported by all 12 interviewees. These findings are consistent with Olalla Chávez and Mosquera (2024), who emphasize the importance of contextual adaptation in rural English teaching, and with the OECD (2025), which identifies access to digital means as an important condition for sustained learning participation. In rural schools, internet connectivity tends to be erratic, and this frequently gets in the way of students' access to audiovisual input, digital dictionaries, interactive software, and materials they might use for self-directed study. Add to this the near-absence of English in family and community life, and opportunities for incidental exposure shrink accordingly. These structural conditions go a long way toward explaining the marked deficits in Listening performance, as well as the limited ability of students to consolidate vocabulary and syntactic structures outside class.

Individual, domestic, and pedagogical factors came up just as consistently. Eleven interviewees mentioned minimal academic support at home, heightened anxiety during productive tasks, or both, while nine described instruction dominated by teacher-led, grammar-centric routines. Soto

et al. (2024) identified learner motivation, cultural context, teaching strategies, and supplementary resources as recurring dimensions across Ecuadorian EFL research. In a complementary vein, Alvarez et al. (2025) showed that parental involvement, material resources, and established classroom habits significantly constrain what teachers can do when attempting to enact communicative language curricula. The alignment between these published studies and our qualitative evidence suggests that rural English acquisition is governed by a complex ecology of conditions rather than any single explanatory variable.

Mixed-methods integration, then, fundamentally changes how the numerical findings are read. Performance deficits should not be reduced to an assumption of poor student motivation; they need to be read alongside documented limitations in internet connectivity, language exposure, parental assistance, instructional methodology, and rural socioeconomic realities. This reframing carries concrete practical implications: pedagogical interventions should prioritize scaffolded writing instruction paired with formative feedback, regular guided listening practice, communicative and collaborative tasks, offline-compatible digital resources, and context-tailored professional development for educators. At the policy level, resource allocation must explicitly address systemic territorial disparities instead of assuming that standardized implementation conditions hold across all schools.

Finally, several methodological limitations deserve acknowledgement. First, the quantitative sample was confined to three public rural institutions across two parishes in Riobamba Canton, which restricts direct generalizability to broader rural or urban contexts. Second, because the diagnostic instrument was adapted for research purposes, its scores cannot be interpreted as official Cambridge B1 Preliminary or CEFR certifications. Third, the qualitative strand relied on a purposive sample of twelve students, so the reported frequencies denote theme recurrence within this cohort rather than population-level prevalence. Fourth, the research did not model statistical associations between contextual variables and language test scores. Future inquiries should leverage validated contextual scales, standardized proficiency measures, larger multi-centre cohorts, and inferential or longitudinal designs capable of quantifying the specific predictive weight of individual contextual variables on language outcomes.

Conclusions

This study provides a direct response to both research questions. Regarding RQ1, final-year upper-secondary students from the three participating rural public institutions demonstrated low diagnostic performance across all four English components. Speaking showed the highest overall mean (50.70), followed by Use of English and Reading (31.17), Listening (17.43), and Writing (6.38). None of the overall component means reached the study-defined 60% curricular reference, and Writing represented the most pronounced area of difficulty.

Regarding RQ2, the most recurrent perceived barriers were limited technology and internet connectivity (12/12), minimal exposure to English outside the classroom (12/12), personal/family limitations including reduced academic support and productive-task anxiety (11/12), rural-context constraints (10/12), and school/pedagogical limitations associated with teacher-centred practices (9/12). These frequencies should be interpreted as qualitative recurrence within the interview sample rather than as statistical association coefficients.

The main conclusion is that the English-learning difficulties observed in these rural schools are best understood as the result of interacting pedagogical, technological, socio-familial, and territorial conditions. By combining a localized performance baseline with the everyday educational conditions reported by learners, this research offers a nuanced alternative to reductionist student-deficit narratives. On a practical level, the evidence points toward an educational agenda based on communicative practice, scaffolded writing feedback, frequent listening tasks, low-data digital solutions, accessible home-school links, and ongoing training opportunities for rural language educators.

However, these conclusions are necessarily constrained by specific research limitations, such as reliance on three schools in one canton, an adapted diagnostic instrument, a qualitative group of twelve students, and non-inferential statistical methods. Future studies should broaden their geographic scope to include diverse rural and intercultural contexts in Ecuador, validate contextual measurement instruments, utilize certified language proficiency tests, and apply longitudinal or multivariable designs to identify key drivers of language achievement and measure which interventions yield lasting improvements.

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