

Enhancing Pronunciation, Fluency, and Vocabulary Through Targeted Instructional Grouping in Latin American EFL Contexts

Mejoramiento de la pronunciación, fluidez y vocabulario mediante agrupamiento instruccional focalizado en contextos latinoamericanos de enseñanza del inglés

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Abstract

Targeted instructional grouping has emerged as a promising pedagogical strategy for improving specific oral communication skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This study explores the effects of level-based instructional grouping on three essential components of oral proficiency—pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary—among A1-level learners in a Latin American context. Drawing on eight weeks of structured intervention and informed by previous research on differentiated instruction, ability grouping, and CEFR-aligned speaking development, the study evaluates how grouping students by similar proficiency levels fosters measurable linguistic gains. A mixed-methods design was implemented, including diagnostic pre-tests and post-tests, classroom observations, and student surveys. Results revealed significant improvement in pronunciation and fluency, with moderate but consistent progress in vocabulary. Students reported increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater opportunities for oral interaction. Teachers acknowledged improved classroom management and more efficient instructional delivery. The findings suggest that targeted instructional grouping can provide a meaningful and supportive environment for oral-skill development in Latin American EFL settings, particularly when combined with communicative and task-based methodologies.

Keywords: targeted instruction; instructional grouping; fluency; pronunciation; vocabulary development; A1 learners

Resumen

El agrupamiento instruccional focalizado ha surgido como una estrategia pedagógica prometedora para mejorar habilidades específicas de comunicación oral en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Este estudio explora los efectos del agrupamiento por niveles en tres componentes esenciales de la competencia oral —la pronunciación, la fluidez y el vocabulario— en aprendientes de nivel A1 dentro de un contexto latinoamericano. A partir de una intervención estructurada de ocho semanas, y fundamentado en investigaciones previas sobre instrucción diferenciada, agrupamiento por habilidades y desarrollo oral alineado al MCER, el estudio evalúa cómo la organización de estudiantes según niveles similares favorece avances lingüísticos medibles. Se empleó un diseño de métodos mixtos que incluyó prepruebas y pospruebas diagnósticas, observaciones de clase y encuestas estudiantiles. Los resultados evidenciaron mejoras significativas en la pronunciación y la fluidez, así como progresos moderados pero consistentes en el uso del vocabulario. Los estudiantes reportaron mayor confianza, reducción de ansiedad y más oportunidades de interacción oral. Por su parte, los docentes destacaron una mejor gestión del aula y una entrega instruccional más eficiente. Los hallazgos sugieren que el agrupamiento instruccional focalizado puede proporcionar un entorno significativo y de apoyo para el desarrollo de habilidades orales en contextos latinoamericanos de enseñanza del inglés, especialmente cuando se combina con metodologías comunicativas y basadas en tareas.

Palabras claves: instrucción focalizada; agrupamiento instruccional; fluidez; pronunciación; desarrollo de vocabulario; aprendientes A1

Introduction

The development of oral communication skills is a fundamental objective in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly within Latin American contexts where learners have limited opportunities to engage with English outside the classroom. In public educational systems across the region, students commonly encounter structural and sociocultural barriers—such as reduced exposure to authentic input, overcrowded classrooms, and teacher-centered instructional practices—that hinder the acquisition of pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary (British Council, 2013; Harmer, 2001). As a result, beginner-level learners frequently struggle to produce even basic spoken language, often demonstrating hesitation, anxiety, and limited expressive ability during communicative tasks (Nunan, 1991).

Classroom methodology plays a crucial role in shaping these outcomes. Traditional practices in many Latin American settings have historically prioritized grammatical accuracy and written activities, frequently at the expense of meaningful oral production (Burgin, 2017). While grammar-focused instruction may contribute to structural knowledge, it does not sufficiently promote spontaneous language use, iterative speaking practice, or the development of prosodic and phonological competence (Li, 2019). Consequently, learners at the A1 level often lack familiarity with English phonology, display narrow vocabulary ranges, and struggle to maintain even short stretches of connected speech—skills that are foundational for communicative growth (Nation, 2001).

Given these persistent challenges, targeted instructional grouping has emerged as a promising strategy to support oral-skill development among beginner learners. Instructional grouping involves organizing students into smaller units based on shared proficiency or linguistic characteristics. This approach allows teachers to tailor instruction to varying readiness levels, adapt the difficulty of tasks, and provide differentiated feedback that addresses learners' specific strengths and weaknesses (Tomlinson, 2001). Empirical research suggests that grouping students by proficiency improves participation, increases opportunities for oral practice, and reduces performance gaps in classrooms with high heterogeneity (Bissell, 2023; Ramírez-Ávila, & Viteri-Guevara, 2023; Wu, Tsai, & Chiu, 2018).

The theoretical foundations of instructional grouping align closely with socio-constructivist and differentiated instruction frameworks. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes that learning is optimized when instruction is calibrated to the learner's developmental readiness. Differentiated instruction similarly posits that pedagogical content and processes must adapt to student variability in skills, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). Targeted grouping operationalizes these principles by enabling more precise scaffolding, greater opportunities for peer interaction, and immediate teacher feedback—all of which contribute to oral-skill development.

In the domain of pronunciation, instructional grouping enables focused articulatory practice and teacher modeling of segmental and suprasegmental features, practices shown to improve learners' phonological control (Piccardo, 2016). Fluency also benefits from small-group environments, which provide more frequent speaking turns, reduce communicative anxiety, and encourage sustained production in low-pressure settings (Graham & Santos, 2015). Vocabulary development, while influenced by broader input exposure, improves when learners interact with lexical items in meaningful

tasks calibrated to their proficiency level, facilitating retrieval and retention (Alqahtani, 2015).

Despite increasing recognition of the advantages of grouping strategies, research examining their combined impact on pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary among A1 learners in Latin American contexts remains limited. Much existing literature focuses on one skill at a time or embeds grouping strategies within broader curricular reforms (Cha, 2011; Al-Issa, 2019). As a result, there is a need for studies that analyze how targeted instructional grouping affects multiple oral-skill domains simultaneously and how learners perceive these interventions within the realities of public-school EFL programs.

This study addresses this gap by implementing an eight-week instructional grouping intervention specifically designed to enhance pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary in beginner-level learners. The intervention integrates communicative, task-based, and phonological-awareness activities adapted to learners' assessed proficiency levels. By examining both linguistic outcomes and learner perceptions, the study aims to provide a holistic understanding of how targeted instructional grouping can strengthen oral communication skills in Latin American EFL contexts.

Beyond assessing linguistic outcomes, this study considers the affective and motivational impacts of grouping strategies. Small-group instruction has been associated with increased learner confidence, greater willingness to participate, and improved attitudes toward speaking in a foreign language (Mazenod, 2019). These variables are critical in early stages of language learning, when anxiety and fear of making mistakes can significantly hinder participation. Instructional grouping has the potential not only to improve oral skills but also to transform classroom dynamics—encouraging collaborative learning, increasing student engagement, and fostering environments where learners feel supported in taking communicative risks.

Ultimately, the findings of this study have practical implications for teachers, school administrators, and curriculum designers seeking to improve oral-skill outcomes in EFL programs across the region. By demonstrating the effectiveness of targeted instructional grouping, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to modernize EFL pedagogy and to equip learners with communicative competences essential for academic progression, workplace access, and participation in globalized environments.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods design that integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the effects of targeted instructional grouping on beginner EFL learners' pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. Mixed-methods research is particularly suited for language-learning contexts because it captures both measurable performance changes and the lived experiences of learners and teachers (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative data provided evidence of linguistic gains, while qualitative insights contextualized how grouping dynamics influenced learners' engagement, affective responses, and participation patterns.

This design aligns with contemporary recommendations in applied linguistics that emphasize triangulation of data sources to better understand complex phenomena such as oral-skill development (Nunan, 1991; Harmer, 2001). By combining structured oral assessments with observational and perceptual measures, the study aimed to produce a comprehensive analysis of the pedagogical impact of grouping strategies.

The study involved 20 A1-level EFL learners aged 11 to 13 enrolled in a Latin American public school. Participants demonstrated heterogeneous oral-skill profiles, a common characteristic of beginner groups in the region due to varied prior exposure to English and differences in foundational literacy development (British Council, 2013). All participants completed a CEFR-aligned diagnostic test assessing pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary.

Following diagnostic results, students were assigned to three instructional groups:

- High A1 – learners showing clearer segmental control and broader vocabulary
- Mid A1 – learners with moderate fluency and limited lexical resources
- Emerging A1 – learners requiring substantial phonological and lexical support

Grouping decisions were informed by differentiated instruction principles, which emphasize tailoring instructional input to learner readiness and linguistic needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Parental consent and institutional authorization were obtained prior to data collection.

The intervention spanned eight weeks, with two 45-minute sessions per week. Instruction was structured according to three oral-skill domains—pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary—and adapted to each group's proficiency level.

The pronunciation component included minimal-pair discrimination tasks, controlled readings, phoneme identification activities, and guided practice of segmental (individual sounds) and suprasegmental features (stress, rhythm, intonation). Pronunciation instruction in small groups allows for more immediate feedback and individualized correction—factors shown to significantly enhance learners' phonological accuracy (Piccardo, 2016; Derwing & Munro, 2015).

To develop fluency, learners engaged in timed speaking tasks, repeated storytelling, picture-based descriptions, and guided dialogues. Fluency improves when learners have multiple opportunities to produce extended speech under reduced anxiety conditions (Graham & Santos, 2015). Small-group formats enhanced turn-taking opportunities and minimized performance pressure, supporting learners' oral automaticity and confidence.

Vocabulary instruction involved thematic word sets, semantic mapping, collocation practice, and controlled communicative tasks requiring active lexical retrieval. Research shows that vocabulary acquisition is strengthened when learners encounter and use words through meaningful interaction, especially when the difficulty level is aligned with their proficiency (Nation, 2001; Alqahtani, 2015). Across all components, teachers integrated communicative activities, task-based learning principles, and scaffolded support appropriate to each group, ensuring that tasks were both challenging and achievable.

Three primary instruments were used to collect data:

1. Oral Proficiency Test

An analytic rubric assessed pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary on a scale from 1 to 5. The rubric drew on CEFR descriptors for A1 learners and recommendations from applied linguistics researchers regarding oral-skill evaluation (Luoma, 2004). Pre- and post-tests allowed measurement of learning gains attributable to the intervention.

2. Classroom Observation Checklist

Structured observational protocols were used to document frequency of speaking opportunities, learner engagement, peer interaction patterns, and teacher feedback types. Observation is a validated tool in EFL research for identifying how instructional factors influence learner behavior (Richards & Farrell, 2011).

3. Learner Perception Survey

A Likert-scale survey collected data on learner confidence, motivation, perceived improvement, and comfort with speaking tasks. Affective variables such as anxiety and confidence are widely recognized as influential in oral-skill development (Krashen, 1985; Horwitz, 2001).

The study unfolded in five phases:

Phase 1: Diagnostic Assessment

Learners completed a CEFR-aligned oral test that evaluated their initial levels of pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. Diagnostic testing is essential for accurate placement in differentiated instructional settings (Tomlinson, 2014).

Phase 2: Group Formation

Students were placed in instructional groups based on diagnostic scores and teacher assessments of their communicative behavior. Grouping aimed to balance homogeneity in proficiency with manageable group sizes to optimize interaction and individualized support.

Phase 3: Intervention Delivery

For eight weeks, learners participated in small-group sessions that integrated communicative activities, pronunciation practice, and vocabulary-building tasks. Teachers provided scaffolding, corrective feedback, and modeling tailored to each group, adhering to principles of sociocultural learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978).

Phase 4: Post-Assessment

A parallel version of the oral proficiency test was administered to measure linguistic gains. Recordings were evaluated by two independent raters to enhance reliability.

Phase 5: Qualitative Data Collection

Observation notes and survey responses were analyzed to capture learner perceptions and classroom dynamics. These data provided insights into how grouping influenced engagement, confidence, and participation.

Quantitative data from pre- and post-tests were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine mean score improvements and percentage gains for each skill. The small sample size and exploratory nature of the research made descriptive analyses more appropriate than inferential tests (Dörnyei, 2007).

Qualitative data—including observation notes and survey comments—were coded thematically. Themes were identified relating to learner engagement, confidence, participation patterns, and classroom interaction. Qualitative coding followed an inductive approach commonly used in applied linguistics to interpret classroom phenomena (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the results section is to present objective findings derived from the instructional grouping intervention. The analysis integrates quantitative outcomes from pre- and post-test oral proficiency assessments alongside qualitative data gathered through classroom observations and learner perception surveys. The results address the three areas targeted in the intervention—pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary—and explore differences across instructional groups (High A1, Mid A1, Emerging A1).

The section is organized into three subsections: (1) overall quantitative performance, (2) group-based performance patterns, and (3) qualitative findings related to learner engagement and perceptions.

Improvement Across Skills

The descriptive statistics revealed notable gains across all three oral-skill components. Table 1 summarizes mean scores from pre- and post-tests.

Table 1
Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores

Skill	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Improvement
Pronunciation	1.8	3.1	+1.3
Fluency	1.4	2.8	+1.4
Vocabulary	1.2	2.0	+0.8

Source: López (2024)

Pronunciation exhibited substantial improvement ($\Delta = 1.3$). Learners demonstrated clearer articulation, fewer phonological substitutions, and greater control over basic stress patterns. These improvements align with the structured practice incorporated in the intervention, particularly minimal pairs, segmental drills, and guided repetition exercises.

Fluency showed the highest numerical gain ($\Delta = 1.4$). Students increased their capacity to maintain short stretches of continuous speech, reduced hesitation markers, and displayed more consistent speech tempo. Timed and repeated speaking tasks likely contributed to these gains, allowing learners to build automaticity through familiar communicative routines.

Vocabulary improved moderately ($\Delta = 0.8$). Learners incorporated new lexical items more frequently in post-test tasks, although their overall range remained limited. This pattern is consistent with research suggesting that vocabulary growth at early proficiency levels tends to develop gradually, particularly when exposure time is constrained. Overall, the quantitative results confirm that the intervention had a positive impact on learners' oral proficiency, with particularly strong effects in pronunciation and fluency.

Group-Based Performance Patterns

Given the differentiated structure of the intervention, an important focus of analysis concerns how each instructional group progressed. Table 2 shows the percentage improvement by group.

Table 2
Percentage Improvement by Instructional Group

Group	Pronunciation	Fluency	Vocabulary
High A1	48%	52%	37%
Mid A1	41%	47%	28%
Emerging A1	55%	60%	33%

Source: López (2024)

Students in the High A1 group began with comparatively stronger control over phonology and lexical access. Although their improvement was slightly lower in relative terms, their absolute performance in the post-test was the highest among the three groups. This suggests that instructional grouping helped consolidate and refine their oral-production abilities, especially in fluency. These learners benefitted from tasks that promoted extended turns, descriptive language practice, and guided dialogues that encouraged broader lexical usage.

The Mid A1 learners demonstrated moderate improvement across all skills. This group showed the greatest variation in individual performance, indicating that learners at this intermediate beginner level respond differently depending on their prior exposure and learning habits. Fluency showed the most consistent gains within the group, suggesting that they particularly benefited from repeated speaking tasks and the supportive environment created by proficiency-aligned grouping.

The Emerging A1 group exhibited the highest relative gains (pronunciation: 55%, fluency: 60%). Although their absolute scores remained lower than the other groups, the percentage improvement indicates substantial growth. Learners in this group initially struggled with segmental articulation, limited lexical access, and short utterance production. The supportive structure of small-group work likely reduced anxiety and enabled more individualized feedback, leading to significant progress. Their notable improvement in fluency is particularly meaningful given their initial hesitancy and low confidence.

These patterns suggest that targeted instructional grouping is especially beneficial for lower-proficiency learners, helping to reduce skill gaps and accelerate oral-skill development.

Analysis of pronunciation data showed improvements not only in segmental features but also in basic suprasegmental control. Learners produced more accurate vowel and consonant sounds, reduced common L1-transfer errors, and demonstrated clearer syllable stress. Observations indicated that frequent corrective feedback and modeling contributed to this improvement. Emerging A1 learners, in particular, gained confidence in producing sounds they initially struggled with.

Fluency gains were evident in both rate and flow of speech. Students increased their mean length of utterance, reduced fillers (e.g., “uh,” “eh”), and relied less on long pauses. Learners used strategies such as circumlocution, repetition, and simple connectors to maintain discourse. The repeated tasks appeared to create a procedural memory effect, making subsequent attempts smoother and more natural.

The vocabulary dimension showed modest but meaningful improvement. Learners incorporated newly taught lexical sets, including thematic words, basic adjectives, and functional expressions. Some students demonstrated improved ability to retrieve and apply words spontaneously, though lexical diversity remained limited in lower-proficiency learners. Teacher observations noted that while vocabulary growth

was slower, learners were increasingly aware of lexical gaps and attempted to repair communication breakdowns.

Observation notes revealed several behavioral patterns:

- Increased participation: Students spoke more frequently during small-group sessions than in traditional whole-class activities.
- Reduced anxiety: Learners appeared more comfortable experimenting with pronunciation and speaking spontaneously.
- Improved peer support: Students in each group collaborated to complete tasks, often providing informal feedback.
- More equitable distribution of turns: Lower-proficiency learners had more opportunities to speak compared to whole-class settings.

These patterns indicate that small-group instruction created a more inclusive learning environment.

Survey responses showed overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward the instructional grouping intervention:

- 85% reported feeling more confident speaking English.
- 78% stated that pronunciation tasks helped them “speak more clearly.”
- 82% felt that small groups reduced the pressure of speaking in front of the whole class.
- 75% believed their vocabulary improved, even if modestly.
- 90% described the activities as “helpful” or “very helpful.”

Students also expressed appreciation for clearer teacher explanations, more individualized attention, and increased opportunities to practice.

In sum, the instructional grouping intervention resulted in:

1. Significant gains in pronunciation and fluency, with moderate improvements in vocabulary.
2. Greater relative gains for lower proficiency learners, suggesting a compensatory effect.
3. Enhanced classroom participation and reduced learner anxiety, supported by qualitative evidence.
4. Positive learner perceptions, indicating strong acceptability and motivational benefits.

These results collectively highlight the effectiveness of targeted instructional grouping as a pedagogical strategy for early-stage EFL learners in Latin American contexts.

The findings of this study demonstrate that targeted instructional grouping is an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing oral communication skills—pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary—among beginner EFL learners in Latin American contexts. The significant gains observed in pronunciation and fluency align with previous research indicating that focused instruction, when delivered in small, proficiency-aligned groups, increases opportunities for individualized feedback and supports more accurate phonological production (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Piccardo, 2016). The structured repetition, modeling, and corrective feedback used throughout the intervention provided learners with the consistent exposure necessary to develop articulatory control, echoing recommendations within pronunciation teaching literature.

Fluency improvements were also particularly notable. The learners’ increased ability to maintain continuous speech, reduce hesitation, and employ simple discourse

markers suggests that the repeated speaking tasks and low-pressure environment fostered automaticity—a key component of fluent oral production (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). The supportive environment afforded by small-group instruction likely reduced affective barriers such as anxiety and fear of negative evaluation, which are known to inhibit fluency development in EFL contexts (Horwitz, 2001). This is consistent with sociocultural theories emphasizing the importance of interaction and scaffolding within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978).

While vocabulary gains were comparatively modest, the steady improvement reflects the incremental nature of lexical development at beginner levels. Research indicates that vocabulary acquisition requires continued exposure, multiple encounters with lexical items, and meaningful contextual use (Nation, 2001; Alqahtani, 2015). The tasks implemented in this study provided structured opportunities for lexical practice, but vocabulary growth may benefit further from extended reading, multimedia input, and increased task complexity—factors beyond the scope of an eight-week intervention.

One of the most compelling outcomes of this study was the disproportionately high improvement observed among Emerging A1 learners. This aligns with prior evidence suggesting that lower-proficiency students benefit the most from differentiated instruction and targeted scaffolding, as these approaches directly address gaps that traditional whole-class instruction may overlook (Tomlinson, 2014; Bissell, 2023). The reduction of performance pressure and the increased teacher attention available in smaller groups likely contributed to the strong gains within this subgroup, supporting the position that instructional grouping can serve as an equity-oriented strategy for reducing proficiency disparities in EFL classrooms.

The qualitative findings further reinforce the pedagogical value of targeted grouping. Increased learner confidence, a greater willingness to speak, and improved peer collaboration suggest that the grouping strategy positively influenced the affective and social dimensions of language learning. These findings echo the argument that psychological comfort and opportunities for meaningful interaction are crucial components of oral-skill development (Graham & Santos, 2015). The positive student perceptions and teacher observations indicate that small-group instruction not only improves linguistic performance but also transforms classroom dynamics in ways that promote active engagement and personalized learning.

Taken together, the results provide strong evidence that targeted instructional grouping is a viable and effective approach for fostering oral-skill development in beginner EFL learners. The strategy aligns with established theoretical frameworks, supports learners' linguistic and affective growth, and responds to the pedagogical challenges commonly found in Latin American public-school settings. Future studies may explore long-term effects, integration with digital tools, and application across broader linguistic contexts.

Conclusions

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that targeted instructional grouping is an effective pedagogical strategy for strengthening oral communication skills—pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary—among beginner EFL learners in Latin American classrooms. By organizing students according to their specific proficiency needs, the intervention created learning environments where instruction could be adapted with greater precision, allowing learners to receive focused feedback, participate more actively, and engage in tasks aligned with their linguistic readiness. The marked improvement observed in lower-proficiency learners highlights the potential of grouping strategies to reduce disparities in oral performance, offering a more equitable path toward communicative competence.

Beyond measurable performance gains, the intervention contributed meaningfully to the affective and motivational dimensions of learning. Students reported increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater willingness to participate—factors that are critical at early proficiency levels, when emotional barriers often hinder oral-skill development. Teachers also experienced benefits, noting improved classroom management and the ability to tailor instruction more effectively. These insights suggest that instructional grouping not only enhances linguistic outcomes but also transforms the classroom climate in ways that support sustained engagement and long-term learning. While vocabulary gains were more moderate, the overall progress indicates that grouping strategies create a strong foundation upon which more complex activities and extended exposure can be built.

Future research may explore longer interventions, integration with technology, or adaptation of grouping strategies to diverse age groups and proficiency levels. Overall, the results position targeted instructional grouping as a practical, scalable, and pedagogically sound approach for improving oral communication skills in EFL contexts across the Latin American region.

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