Native Speaker Conversation Sessions to Enhance Communicative Competence and Oral Fluency in Tourism and Hospitality EFL Students

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how monthly conversation sessions with native English speakers influence the development of communicative competence which encompasses grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic components as well as oral fluency in Tourism and Hospitality Management students at the University of Cuenca. A qualitative methodology was employed through three focus group sessions involving ten students each. All conversations were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently coded both deductively, drawing on Krashen's Input Hypothesis (i+1, quantity, authenticity, variability, and implicit feedback) and guided by Hymes' theoretical framework of Communicative Competence. Results indicated significant improvement in discourse competence, particularly during guided city tours, where students demonstrated the use of cohesive devices and coherent speech. Grammatical competence and oral fluency showed moderate progress, hindered by the limited frequency of practice opportunities. Sociolinguistic competence was perceptually activated, though without evidence of critical cultural reflection. Strategic competence remained underdeveloped. The study concludes that unless input quantity increases and tasks become more varied, professional-level fluency and automatization will remain difficult to achieve.

Introduction

The learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has increasingly emphasized conversation sessions with native speakers, given their value in enhancing students' fluency and communicative confidence (Alberth, 2023; Anjarani et al., 2025; Herlina & Said, 2022; Reynolds & Teng, 2020; Toboula, 2021; Wahyuni & Afrianti, 2021). This approach is especially relevant in Tourism and Hospitality Management programs, where language proficiency can significantly impact professional performance and global employability (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Erazo et al., 2019; Kandel, 2024; Prima, 2022). However, in Global South contexts, many students come from under-resourced public or rural schools that provide insufficient English foundations, creating considerable heterogeneity in classroom proficiency and thus a learning environment unsuitable for uniform instruction. In this context, the speaking skill typically presents the strongest underdevelopment; some causes that have been identified are mental translation from the mother tongue to English (Herlina & Said, 2022; Zhang, 2009), lack of confidence (Saraç & Doğan, 2024; Toboula, 2021; Utama et al., 2023; Wahyuni & Afrianti, 2021; Yenkimaleki & van Heuven, 2023), and poor target language (TL) immersion (Riyadini, 2022; Savaşçı, 2014). About the latter, alternative strategies, such as in-person sessions with native speakers (semi-immersive environments), are used (Anjarani et al., 2025; Cadd, 2012; Harzanah et al., 2024; Hoshi, 2015; Pizarro Chacón, 2022).

While various studies have broadly recognized the motivational and linguistic benefits of immersive contexts (Pranata et al., 2023; Reynolds & Teng, 2020), few have delved into their specific influence on verbal fluency, communicative confidence, and intercultural awareness (Harzanah et al., 2024; Ingvalson et al., 2011; Riyadini, 2022; Saraç & Doğan, 2024). Moreover, research remains scarce on how these interactions shape perceptions and progress in language competence among tourism and hospitality students, especially in Spanish-speaking countries with low English proficiency, like Ecuador (Alvarez et al., 2024; Erazo et al., 2019; Orosz et al., 2021).

It presents a theoretical potentiality for bringing together Krashen's Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (1985) and Hymes' framework for communicative competence (1972) and examining the interplay between quality input and authentic communicative use in semi-immersive environments.

This work wants to analyze the effects that the conversation interviews with native people have on the sense of fluency in students pursuing Tourism and Hospitality Management at the University of Cuenca (Ecuador), through a Hymes's model of

communicative competence, Krashen's Input Hypothesis, and oral fluency construct-based analysis. It was further carried out according to the ethical recommendations that the World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki sets out. All human participant procedure followed these recommendations in order to respect, keep safe, and maintain integrity during the process of the work. Ethical considerations were very strict all the time.

This work was carried out through the Tourism and Hospitality programs at the School of Hospitality Sciences, Universidad de Cuenca (Cuenca, Ecuador), where, estarting in second semester of 2022, one-hour conversation meetings have taken place every month in small groups (6–4 students) with native English speakers. They occur in a learning setting designed with students who need special conversational skills for professional settings. Centered on this institutional reality, the results provide valuable information for the best use of EFL programs in Spanish-speaking universities with a similar challenge.

Literature Review

This study is framed within the essential principles of Krashen's Input Hypothesis, as well as Hymes' notion of Communicative Competence; these constructs provide a basis upon which language acquisition and usage are understood in a given context. All these have a relevant framework through which one can analyze the language growth among the interactive EFL learners.

Input Hypothesis

Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis suggests that language acquisition is achieved when students receive linguistic input that is just beyond the level of competence that they currently possess; this type of input is more often called comprehensible input. In theory, acquisition is enhanced when input is understandable, but at the same time challenging, consequently increasing the intake of new structures and lexicon (Liu, 2022). Spoken interaction with native speakers is a valuable source of comprehensible input, allowing learners not only to have the chance to practice linguistic structures but also to get accustomed to different types of accents, colloquial lexicon, and idiomatic formulae. All these elements are indispensable for the achievement of the level of fluency (Fitriani, 2022; Hijrah & Umar, 2021; Nurdin, 2021). In fact, Krashen (1991) stresses that comprehensible input is the key instrument towards linguistic development, making native speaker interaction a very valuable pedagogical resource for EFL language learners (Hijrah & Umar, 2021; Pranata et al., 2023). Constant meetings with native speakers facilitate the provision of input that is challenging yet comprehensible, featuring prosodic variability, idiomatic formulae, and natural conversational flow, which are characteristics of professional usage of the English language.

Comprehensible input can be conceptualized through six key dimensions (see Table 1), which collectively explain its effectiveness for fostering spoken fluency (Zhang, 2009). The notion of i+1 refers to the extent to which linguistic content slightly exceeds the learner's current competence level, thus ensuring an optimal challenge without going beyond their zone of proximal development. This notion can be determined by the proportion of new elements or structures that are introduced, allowing for a gradual progression (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Namaziandost et al., 2019).

The quantity of input — understood as the volume of exposure to English in each session, including both the native speaker's speaking time and the student's spontaneous responses — promotes automatization and conversational rhythm, directly influencing processing speed and pause reduction (Zhou & Zheng, 2023). For its part, input authenticity refers to the degree of alignment between the classroom and real-world scenarios in the tourism and hospitality industry — such as reservations, customer service, and negotiations — thereby increasing motivation and facilitating the transfer of learning to professional contexts (Taspanova & Babanazarova, 2023).

Kieseier (2021) adds that this framework is completed by the dimension of linguistic variability, i.e., the range of accents, registers, and speech rates to which students are exposed. This diversity prepares learners for real-world interactions and enhances communicative confidence when engaging with a variety of interlocutors. Complementarily, comprehensibility assesses how effortlessly learners can process the input without external mediation; this is measured by the frequency of clarification requests. These notions reflect the delicate balance between challenge and understanding, which drives acquisition (Saito et al., 2015). Lastly, implicit feedback — indirect reformulation by the native speaker — functions as a real-time corrective mechanism that promps learners to adjust and refine their oral production (Mashrah, 2017). Together, these dimensions provide a robust theoretical framework for understanding how conversation sessions with native speakers can enhance both fluency and communicative confidence in tourism and hospitality EFL learners.

Table 1

Dimensions of Comprehensible Input

Dimension/Component	Theoretical Description	Example
i+1	Material slightly above the student's current level, balancing comprehension and challenge.	The tutor first explained the use of "unless" and then corrected it only slightly above our level.
Input Quantity	The volume of exposure (native speaker talk time and student responses) facilitates conversation.	The native speaker talked about bookings for 20 minutes, and I responded interactively.
Authenticity	Correspondence with real situations in the tourism/hospitality sector, boosting motivation.	We simulated a real call to confirm a room reservation for three people.
Linguistic Variability	Exposure to different accents, registers, and speech rates reinforces communicative confidence.	One native from Ireland, another from Australia, and another from the USA described check-in with different accents.
Comprehensibility	Ease of assimilation without mediation; balance measured by a few clarification requests.	I only asked for clarification of "breakfast buffet" once; I understood the rest without issues.
Implicit Feedback	Indirect reformulation by the native speaker, real-time correction, and reinforcing oral production.	I said, "I want booking." and the native responded, "You mean 'I'd like to make a reservation', right?"

Note: Adapted from Kieseier (2021), Krashen (1985), Mashrah (2017), Namaziandost et al. (2019), Saito et al. (2015), Zhang (2009), Zhou and Zheng (2023).

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence is a concept introduced by Hymes (1972) that refers not only to the ability to use grammar correctly but also to the capacity to employ language appropriately across various contexts (Keshmirshekan, 2019; Wahyuni & Afrianti, 2021). This competence encompasses grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic components (see Table 2).

Table 2

Communicative Competence Components

Dimension/Component	Theoretical Description	Example
Grammatical competence	Mastery of phonetics, morphology, syntax, and lexis for constructing correct sentences.	I used the past perfect correctly: "I had already checked out when…"
Sociolinguistic competence	Adjustment of language to formality, politeness, idioms, and registers according to context.	I changed "Hey, can I book?" to "Good afternoon, may I make a reservation, please?"
Discursive competence	Ability to organize discourse with cohesion (use of connectors) and coherence (logical meaning).	On a guided tour: "First, we'll visit the museum. Then, we'll go to the historical square…"
Strategic competence	Use of resources (circumlocution, reformulation, gestures, clarification requests) to maintain fluent interaction in case of gaps.	Unable to recall "amenities", I described "the facilities you offer in the room, like Wi-Fi and minibar."

Note: Adapted from Hymes (1972), Keshmirshekan (2019), Wahyuni et al. (2021).

At the grammatical level, competence involves mastery of the internal structure of the language, including aspects such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, and lexis. Practically, this means knowing and correctly applying grammatical rules, word formation processes, and sentence construction (Lahuerta, 2018).

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability to adjust language use based on social and cultural factors, including levels of formality, politeness norms, register, idiomatic expressions, and dialectal variation. In essence, it includes understanding the implicit conventions of interaction in different settings: among friends, in classrooms, or in professional environments (Emike et al., 2021).

Discourse competence relates to the ability to organize ideas with cohesion (through the use of connectors and discourse markers) and coherence (through logical structuring of content), in both oral and written texts (Sato & Crane, 2023).

Lastly, strategic competence entails the use of resources and techniques that help maintain communication when difficulties arise, such as reformulation, circumlocution, gestures, or requests for clarification or repetition. This enables speakers to sustain interaction and negotiate meaning even when experiencing lexical or structural gaps (Rabab'ah, 2016).

In this respect, native speaker conversation sessions offer valuable stocks-in-trade in practicing these abilities under more realistic and dynamic conditions. They enable learners to deal with the rules of the grammar in use, work beyond the limitations of customary discourse in the classroom, and negotiate meaning through shifting their language into multiple social and cultural contexts (Emike et al., 2021; Lahuerta, 2018; Rabab'ah, 2016; Saraç & Doğan, 2024).

Previous Studies

Acquiring the second language (L2) — more specifically, achieving verbal fluency — is the cornerstone of linguistic competence. It is not just the know-how to self-monologue grammatically correct sentences, but the capability, as well, to communicate effectively and effortlessly across varied settings (Sabar et al., 2024). Over the past decades, the learning of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has transformed from the rule-based approach towards the one that incorporates the macro-skills, that is, with particular focus on spoken communication (Dewan & Sharma, 2025). In this Communicative paradigm, the conversations with native informants have found the center stage as the chief learning tool, with the intention, that is, towards the achievement of fluency, both in semi-professional, face-to-face settings as well as virtually through the internet-based platforms (Cempaka, 2024; Ameen et al., 2021).

Oral fluency is one of the key elements in linguistic competence (Chambers, 1997). It is the capability of communicating without the prolongation of pauses or hesitations and with naturalness and economy (Aziez et al., 2024; Tavakoli, 2025). In second language acquisition (SLA) as a branch of linguistic science, fluency is the partner companion with accuracy, complexity in language, and comprehension (Chambers, 1997; Lambert & Kormos, 2014). However, it also requires the strategic use of communicative resources that allow for immediate and contextually appropriate responses (Chou, 2024). By providing authentic scenarios in which learners must negotiate meaning and manage conversational turns, conversation sessions with native speakers constitute an ideal setting for consolidating both grammatical automatization and the conversational strategies necessary to attain advanced fluency (Mavidi, 2025).

Extensive research has also examined the factors that hinder the development of speaking skills. Evidence shows that both linguistic and extralinguistic factors impact oral proficiency (Nageen et al., 2025). Linguistic factors are primarily related to language use, that is, insufficient knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to produce accurate and fluent speech. Additionally, cognitive, cultural, and particularly emotional and motivational factors also obstruct oral development (Mytara & Köpke, 2024).

In order to solve these problems, many studies confirm the efficiency of such authentic interaction. For example, students who participated in video and text conversations with native speakers showed greater achievement across all the language skills. In the same way, interacting with native speakers monolingually is a highly efficient way to develop the speaking competence (Mitrulescu & Negoescu, 2024). It was also discovered that the use of video-based conversational exchange with native speakers can enhance university students' conceptual fluency and comprehensibility through the exposure to prosodic variability, colloquial lexicon, and natural flow rhythm in the conversations (Cadoux & Quezada, 2025). Moreover, the use of the native speakers' direct feedback and the oportunity for repeated practices in natural environments significantly support the achievement of oral competence (Harzanah et al., 2024). Likewise, other studies confirm that speaking competence can be efficiently developed through the use of in-person as well as online interaction. Spoken production improvement through such interaction is also connected with learners' self-perception of the learning process, as well as with these activities being less didactic/instructional (Martinsen & Thompson, 2024). Moreover, it was found that conversation clubs enhance learners' critical thinking (Ávila Ávila & Medina, 2024). These benefits are closely tied to the practice opportunities offered by motivating activities, which support the acquisition of vocabulary, accuracy, pronunciation, and fluency (Ihsani et al., 2025).

The mentioned studies have emphasized that the pedagogical integration of native speaker interaction into EFL curricula extends beyond linguistic development to also encompass affective and intercultural dimensions of learning. Empirical evidence

demonstrates that sustained exposure to authentic communicative exchanges fosters learners' confidence, mitigates foreign language anxiety, and enhances their willingness to communicate. Furthermore, such interaction facilitates intercultural communicative competence by familiarizing learners with pragmatic norms, idiomatic expressions, and sociolinguistic variations that are typically absent in traditional classroom contexts. This multidimensional progress highlights the pedagogical necessity of recontextualising EFL instruction to include experiential, conversation-based strategies that simulate real-life communicative demands. Consequently, the integration of structured native speaker sessions can serve not only as a catalyst for fluency development but also as a transformative element in shaping learners into confident, culturally aware communicators capable of navigating diverse global contexts.

Native Speakers and Tourism and Hospitality Management Students
According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF Education First, 2024), Ecuador ranks 82nd out of 116 countries assessed, with a score of 465, corresponding to a low level of English proficiency. Within the Latin American context, Ecuador is positioned 19th out of 21 countries, falling below the regional average. In the fields of tourism and hospitality management, improving second language competence is imperative, as English proficiency ensures effective interactions with international guests, enhances service quality, and increases the competitiveness of establishments in the global marketplace.

As stated above, recent research highlights that direct interaction with native speakers, whether face-to-face or online, significantly boosts learners' confidence, oral proficiency, and intercultural effectiveness, particularly by exposing them to authentic and varied language use contexts (Alberth, 2023; Cadd, 2012; Hoshi, 2015). In this regard, conversation sessions with native speakers are crucial for tourism and hospitality students for several key reasons. First, they faithfully replicate real-world scenarios related to international customer service, e.g., reservations and tours (Anam, 2020). Second, practicing with native speakers accelerates learners' confidence and spontaneity in speaking (Alberth, 2023). Third, communication with native speakers fosters intercultural competence, which is essential in the tourism sector, by exposing students to diverse accents, customs, and communication styles (Liu et al., 2023).

Integrating these practices into the EFL curriculum for tourism and hospitality students reflects a commitment to developing authentic professional competence. The goal is not merely to teach grammar but to cultivate practical communicative skills that are immediately applicable in the workplace. Upon completion of their training, students will have expanded their language proficiency and be prepared to interact naturally, effectively, and culturally appropriately with international clients. Within this context, the city of Cuenca, Ecuador, offers a privileged opportunity. Since the mid-2000s, Cuenca has welcomed a significant expatriate community, predominantly from the United States.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative methodology with an exploratory and descriptive approach. The focus groups consisted of a convenience sample of 30 students enrolled in the Tourism and Hospitality Management programs at the University of Cuenca, a public higher education institution in Ecuador. All participants provided informed consents to take part in the focus groups and to be recorded. The written free and informed consent of all participants was obtained before the research started, based on the requirements of WMA. The patcicipants had engaged in eight conversation sessions with native English speakers residing in Cuenca during the spring (March-August 2022) and fall (September 2022–February 2023) semesters. These sessions were considered extracurricular activities. These face-to-face sessions were conducted in English and lasted one hour each month. The characteristics of each focus group are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Category	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Total
Male	2	2	2	6
Female	8	8	8	24
Age 21-22	9	10	10	29
Age 23-25	1	0	0	1
8th semester	10	10	10	30
Tourism Major	7	6	6	19
Hotel Industry Major	3	4	4	11

The native speakers (NS), predominantly retired professionals (including former educators), had the autonomy to select the activities they deemed most appropriate, based on the students' academic specialization, interests, and experiences from previous sessions. Meanwhile, others started the sessions by asking students what they would like to talk about. The expatriates who volunteered responded to an invitation published in an online newspaper that holds popularity in this expat community . Each small student group was paired with one native speaker, with group sizes ranging from five to ten students. The same set of questions, validated by a panel of five local university professors, was administered to all three focus groups.

To gain in-depth insights into students' perceptions of their language development through native-speaker sessions, a qualitative approach was employed. Specifically, data were collected through three focus group discussions, each comprising 10 students, for a total of 30 participants. The students were purposefully selected based on their active participation in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program at the University of Cuenca, ensuring a range of perspectives while maintaining relevance to the study's aims.

The focus group sessions were fully recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data. All participants provided informed consent to take part in the focus groups and to be recorded. This allowed for detailed analysis and the

preservation of the participants' original language, expressions, and discourse patterns, which are critical in language learning research. Subsequently, a two-phase manual coding process was conducted:

- Deductive coding based on Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis to identify evidence of i+1, quantity, authenticity, variability, and implicit feedback.
- Anchoring within Hymes' framework to analyze how students' perceptions of fluency, grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence are constructed through interaction with native speakers.

Each focus group was moderated by an external teacher, a professional in the field of English language teaching who does not teach at the institution where the study took place. This strategy was employed to reduce potential biases and encourage participants to express their views more openly, free from concerns about academic evaluation or classroom dynamics.

A semi-structured interview format was adopted to guide the focus group discussions. This format allowed for flexibility in responses while ensuring that all key areas of interest were addressed. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that explored students' experiences, challenges, and perceived gains in linguistic and communicative competence during the native-speaker interaction sessions (Appendix 1).

To ensure content validity, the questions on the interviews had been vetted and validated by five master's degree-holding English language teaching specialists. In turn, these specialists, who had high levels of experience in EFL classrooms as teachers and researchers, checked the items on clarity, relevance, and congruence with the goals of the research. Minor changes were implemented on the basis of their recommendations in order to refine the quality and focus of the instrument.

The integration of these analytical levels allowed for a direct connection between the characteristics of authentic input and learners' subjective experiences of fluency and communicative competence. Regarding reflexivity, four of the researchers involved in this study are EFL instructors at the university where the research took place, three of whom teach within the faculty where the study was conducted. This professional experience contributed valuable perspectives to the analysis and discussion of the findings. However, several measures were implemented to mitigate any potential bias due to this familiarity. The focus group interviewer was a researcher unaffiliated with the faculty where the study was conducted.

Internal validity was maintained throughout the coding process by having each researcher independently identify codes within the transcripts. Subsequently, these codes were grouped and analyzed by another researcher who had also participated in earlier phases of the study.

Data analysis was conducted entirely manually and comprehensively: initially, two researchers read all transcripts in detail, highlighting significant passages and taking margin notes; next, they deductively applied theoretical codes derived from Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (i+1, quantity, authenticity, variability, implicit feedback) to label relevant segments; then, they anchored the same transcripts within Hymes' framework, identifying expressions related to students' grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic competences, and oral fluency; during consensus sessions, they compared and reconciled their coding, incorporating emergent categories arising from participants' narratives; finally, consolidated codes were grouped into core themes and a comprehensive analysis was developed linking authentic input characteristics coherently with subjective perceptions of fluency and communicative competence (see Table 4).

The combination of verbatim transcription, external moderation, expert validation, and a structured yet flexible format provided a robust framework for collecting rich, credible, and relevant qualitative data. This methodological rigor supports the trustworthiness and transferability of the findings.

Table 4
Codes and Descriptions

Code	Description
i+1	Degree to which content slightly surpasses the student's current level, balancing challenge and comprehension.
Input Quantity	Volume of exposure to English (native speaker talk time and student responses) in each session.
Authenticity	Connection of input with real situations in tourism and hospitality, increasing motivation.
Linguistic Variability	Diversity of accents, registers, and speech rhythms to which the student is exposed.
Comprehensibility	Ease with which the student assimilates input without mediation is measured by a few clarification requests.
Implicit Feedback	Indirect reformulation or adjustments made by the native speaker in real time to correct and reinforce.
Perceived Fluency	Student's sense of their ability to speak without prolonged pauses or hesitations.
Communicative Confidence	Degree of confidence the learner feels when interacting in English in professional contexts.
Progress Assessment	Subjective perception of progress achieved through conversation sessions.
Contextual Factors	External elements (frequency, duration, practice environment, topics, etc.) influence learning.

Note: Adapted from Krashen (1985).

Results
Communicative Competencies Concerning the Input Hypothesis
Grammatical competence
Within the Faculty of Hospitality Sciences at the University of Cuenca, conversation sessions with native speakers functioned as an authentic linguistic laboratory where,

beyond mere exposure to English, comprehensive teaching-learning dynamics focused on Hymes' four competences were established. Regarding grammatical competence, native tutors applied a carefully dosed i+1 scaffolding, combining the introduction of slightly supra-level lexis and syntactic structures with "on-the-fly" corrections. Thus, when a student attempted to construct the future perfect, the facilitator intervened without interrupting the flow of discourse:

> *"I wanted to use 'will have been' and they explained its use in the same sentence"*
> *(FG1, personal communication, July 4, 2023).*

This strategy favored the immediate processing of complex forms, enabling their gradual incorporation into the learner's interlanguage system without sacrificing communicative authenticity.

However, formal practice was constrained by the monthly frequency of sessions, whose one-hour duration proved insufficient for automating advanced syntactic patterns:

> *"It was 1 hour of just listening" (FG1, personal communication, July 4, 2023).*

Only in semi-structured contexts — for example, during guided tours of the historic center followed by extended discussions — was there more time to rehearse and consolidate compound tenses and conditionals with less communicative pressure:

> *"On the tour… we reviewed compound predicate structures" (FG2, personal communication, July 5, 2023).*

Despite this, the perceived progress in grammatical competence remained moderate: *"I've been improving… but not just because of these sessions" (FG1, personal communication, July 4, 2023)*, suggesting the influence of external factors beyond the program.

These findings highlight the need to increase session frequency as a sine qua non condition for grammatical competence to move beyond the anecdotal level and achieve sustainable automatization. In fact, participants themselves proposed doubling the number of monthly meetings to consolidate learning:

> *"It would be ideal to have two sessions a month" (FG2, personal communication, July 5, 2023).*

Accordingly, it is recommended as a priority to establish at least two hours of interaction with native speakers each month to optimize i+1 scaffolding and ensure the progressive internalization of complex structures.

Discursive competence

Regarding discursive competence, sessions with native speakers provided a rich and varied environment for the construction of cohesive and coherent discourse. The topics covered—from poetry readings and debates on geopolitics to promoting Cuenca as a tourist attraction—required students to confront often unknown or complex content, prompting them to deliberately use discourse markers ("however", "moreover", "on the other hand") instead of empty fillers. Nevertheless, the one-hour monthly limitation remained an obstacle to sustained practice in planning, reformulation, and topic-change signaling in longer interventions.

A notable success was the guided tour of the city: in presenting and explaining Cuenca to native speakers, students put into practice their discursive resources in an integrated way, combining description, argumentation, and cohesion in an authentic context. This exercise not only reinforced confidence when articulating brief monologues but also highlighted the need to increase the frequency and duration of sessions to firmly consolidate advanced discursive competencies.

Sociolinguistic competence

For sociolinguistic competence, students experience an immediate contrast when confronted with the school-like speech of non-native teachers—based on a carefully subject-predicate register—versus the spontaneous orality of native speakers. This discrepancy generates surprise:

> *"…teachers speak very formally, always with subject-predicate, whereas native speakers often omit verbs or subjects. Very natural. Like we speak" (FG2, personal communication, July 5, 2023).*

However, this reaction remains at a perceptual level and does not lead to conscious reflection on politeness norms, mitigation strategies, or pragmatic variations that characterize interaction in informal contexts.

This gap between rigid teaching—where grammatical rules are presented as immutable—and the real variability of colloquial English leads to an erosion of learner confidence in their knowledge. Throughout their academic trajectory, students internalize the idea that communicative success depends on the strict application of normative structures; upon discovering that in authentic settings these rules "change", a cognitive mismatch occurs that undermines their confidence in expressing themselves. Nevertheless, at the session level, it was seen positively, as students achieved a practical intuition based on spontaneous conversations.

Moreover, the heterogeneity in the training and motivation of native tutors is another key factor in the development of sociopragmatic competence. Most of these interlocutors are

retired professionals, including former university lecturers with solid teaching experience and a marked passion for transmitting the language, as well as other natives who participate in the program simply for a different activity in retirement. This diversity in teaching profiles enriches interactions: ex-lecturers contribute didactic strategies and a reflective perspective on pragmatic English use, while those motivated by personal interest offer more spontaneous and creative communication models. Incorporating both types of profiles not only provides authenticity but also promotes an understanding of how variations in intention and context influence politeness norms and real English discourse patterns.

Strategic competence
Finally, strategic competence emerged as a great omission in student narratives. Although implicit feedback from natives — reformulations such as *You mean reservation?* — instructed students in meaning negotiation practices, there is no evidence that they actively deployed their compensatory resources (e.g., circumlocution, paraphrasing, or gestures to overcome lexical gaps). Only when misunderstandings occurred did the tutor intervene, but there was no evidence of students independently managing strategies to redirect interaction. This gap highlights the urgency of designing role-plays with unexpected situations — conflicting bookings, guest complaints—where students must, without immediate tutor intervention, employ reformulation and clarification tactics, documenting them later in metacognitive learning journals.

Oral fluency
In terms of speed and continuity, participants showed slight progress. While authentic input and practice with natives generate moments of fluency, the amount and frequency of contact are insufficient to develop the automatizations required to speak without prolonged hesitation. The monthly session — one hour of active exposure — barely meets the minimum threshold to activate linguistic automatization processes. Without continuous practice, students consolidate vocabulary and structures, but do not achieve the relational fluency that defines professional speech in tourism and hospitality. Moreover, field practice by students acting as tour guides proved particularly significant. When faced with a real group of foreigners, they displayed notable communicative confidence, integrating informational functions, interaction management, and discursive resources in real time, underscoring the importance of complementing conversation sessions with practical experiences in their professional field.

A participant in Focus Group 1 noted:

> *"My fluency level was bad and… I've been improving, but not much because of these conversations, because they only come once a month"* (FG1, personal communication, July 4, 2023).

Another noted that their fluency changed:

"from bad to regular... I think it went from regular to good (noting that they still had to) 'ask to repeat' to keep the thread of conversation (FG1, personal communication, July 4, 2023).

In Group 2, students perceived some stability:

"You understand more and learn more and it's perfect" (FG2), and "I stayed the same... I think so too" (FG2, personal communication, July 5, 2023).

This suggests that, without increased intensity, fluency stagnates at intermediate levels. In Group 3, evaluations were more critical:

"My level was intermediate, but I didn't notice much change" and "it stayed as it was before: normal, maybe a bit clumsy" (FG3, personal communication, July 6, 2023).

Partly attributing the rigidity to a lack of internal confidence:

"...maybe what we lacked was more confidence in ourselves" (FG3, personal communication, July 6, 2023).

Discussion

The monthly native speaker sessions at the University of Cuenca uncovered a trend through advances and limitations that deserve further consideration. Discursive competence was undoubtedly the widest progressing segment; e.g., students embedded discourse markers like "moreover" and "however," constructed cohesive monologues, and delivered cohesive arguments in controlled city tours. Such outcomes confirm that authentic communicative activities cultivate organizational and pragmatic conscience, making academic discourse a usable professional instrument applicable to tourism and hospitality environments.

But such progress needs to be read very cautiously. It appears that discursive gains were heavily context-specific, deriving from guided and rehearsed interactions as opposed to spontaneous talk. This points towards transferability, such as how far students can reproduce such coherences and fluencies beyond structured tasks. It also goes against the general assumption under communicative teaching that mere exposure underpins sustainable competence. In actuality, the findings indicate that authenticity with scaffolded authenticity beyond mediated authentic tasks is better than unmediated interaction.

Slow progress in the accuracy of grammar and in oral fluency reveals, hidden deeper, a structural flaw inherent in input-based methods like Krashen's (1985) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis. Though i+1 scaffolding was implemented, the findings show that input quality is not able to make up for input insufficiency. Being able to meet just one hour per fortnight, students could not receive the repetition needed in order to automatize the structures. This result undermines the practical viability of Krashen's proposal in environments with limited contact hours and indicates output-based and interactionist viewpoints (Long, 1996; Swain, 1995) as possible indispensable complements. In-time negotiation of meaning and pushed output seem critical in inducing the reduction of hesitation as well as the achievement of procedural fluency with elements that simple exposure was unable to yield under this condition.

It is further complicated by the sociolinguistic competence analysis. Students saw a discrepancy between the local teachers' formal English and the native informants' spontaneous orality, but they did not turn the perceptual shock into intercultural sensibility. This result points to a pedagogical weak spot. Authentic exposure is not sufficient for sociopragmatic development on its own. Without reflective guidance, learners will stop at the level of curiosity instead of advancing their adaptive communication habit. So, our results corroborate Emike et al. (2021) but go beyond the latter's extension by proving that reflection, not exposure, is the key variable in low-contact settings beyond sociolinguistic development.

Strategic competence was the least developed dimension, and the data showed dependency on tutor intervention and sparse use of compensatory strategy use. This indicates that implicit native-based feedback is not necessarily enough to promote autonomy. In this respect, the data highlight the following pedagogical contradiction: interaction with proficient speakers can, unconsciously, maintain passivity if the learners consider them as judges and not as interlocutors. In the footsteps of Chou (2024) and Rabab'ah (2016), the present work underscores the need for pedagogical design to intentionally incorporate breakdowns and reformulation situations in order to prompt strategic behavior, instead of waiting for interaction alone to spring this behavioral paradigm.

Together, these results demand a more integrated theory, one that blends Krashen's attention to input quality with interactionist concerns with negotiation and output. In our case, we objectify the polar opposition between "authentic" and "didactic" communication, demonstrating that language growth is efficacious when authenticity is balanced, structured, and reflectively mediated. In Global South EFL, the work contributes by providing empirical demonstration that semi-in-person, low-tech programs can facilitate tangible discursive advancement if and only if such exposure is systematic and pedagogically mediated.

From a curricular standpoint, increasing contact with native speakers to at least two hours per month is a necessary but insufficient condition. True competence will depend on integrating task-based, reflective, and strategic components that link linguistic input to cognitive processing and intercultural understanding. Field-based simulations and reflective tools in journals and recorded performance analysis should not be optional add-ons but central mechanisms for transforming exposure into awareness and control.

Finally, accent homogeneity among volunteers may have inadvertently limited the development of adaptive listening skills. Future research should treat accent variation not as a confounding factor but as a pedagogical opportunity to prepare students for global intelligibility standards.

Conclusion

This study examined the effects that monthly conversation sessions with English native speakers had on the development of communicative competence, in all of its dimensions, in Tourism and Hospitality Management majors at the University of Cuenca. The findings of the research reveal that the development of discursive competence has particularly benefited from the exposure to authentic input, especially during activities such as guided tours and role-plays. These activities prompt the production of coherent sequences of speech, supported by the correct use of cohesive devices. On the other hand, the modest progress that was observed in grammatical competence and fluency can be connected with the limited frequency of the spoken sessions, which hindered the automatization of grammatical structures and the reduction of hesitation. Furthermore, the lack of a deeper intercultural reflection and a demand for independent meaning negotiation can be noted as the causes for the underdevelopment of the sociolinguistic and strategic competences, respectively.

The findings of the study highlight the pedagogical need of increasing the frequency and the variety of interactions with English native speakers. Specifically, it is suggested that two-hour monthly conversation sessions, combined with field-based simulation activities, such as customer service interactions or guided tours, can effectively foster the development of all the dimensions of communicative competence. Moreover, complementing these conversation sessions with reflection activities, e.g., journal writing or class discussion, is likely to motivate the autonomous use of communicative strategies.

Another aspect to consider is that the perpetuity and ultimate success of these conversation sessions should not only depend on the efforts from the teaching staff but also on institutional support, collaboration with expatriate communities, and partnership with local tourism and hospitality entities.

It should be noted that generalization of results is not sought for because of the limited sample of participants: 30 students in one Ecuadorian university, as well as because of

the low frequency of the conversation sessions; this later factor hampers the identification and analysis of long-term gains in communicative competence development. Therefore, future research could encompass larger and more diverse populations and include quantitative assessment of communicative competence and oral proficiency development. Furthermore, a concurrent focus on the other productive macro-skill, writing, might provide more comprehensive insights regarding the influence of comprehensible authentic input on EFL education.

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We used Grammarly, an AI-based writing assistant, throughout the manuscript to ensure linguistic accuracy and stylistic consistency. As non-native English speakers, we relied on the tool to identify and correct grammatical and spelling errors, improve sentence structure, and enhance clarity. Our goal was to make the text natural, precise, and accessible to a broad academic audience while preserving the integrity and originality of our ideas.

Ethics Declarations

World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki–Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki. All procedures involving human participants complied with these guidelines to ensure respect, safety, and integrity throughout the research process. Given that the study participants were legal adults, they were asked to sign an informed consent form. This form outlined the study, its objectives, and its methodology; it explicitly stated that participation was voluntary and that individuals were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, anonymity was ensured through the use of a coding system for data analysis and result presentation. Ethical standards were rigorously maintained throughout the study.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there have been no conflicts of interests in the development of this research.

Data Availability

The data of this study has been stored, and it is available on the pertinent request by the interested party.

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