

Colombian University Students' Experiences as Users of the English Language During International Mobility

Estudiantes universitarios colombianos como hablantes de la lengua inglesa durante una movilidad internacional

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This exploratory case study analyzes Colombian university students' experiences as English users during international mobility. Data collected through surveys and interviews were examined based on content analysis and principles of grounded theory. The students' self-perceived English proficiency and communicative performance before and during international mobility were analyzed, while challenging areas were identified. The results evidence that mobility students have insufficient levels of English proficiency to engage in academic and social activities due to inadequate production skills and a lack of practice. The students also perceive university academic English opportunities for practice as basic, and they underutilize practice spaces. Nonetheless, they highlight that active engagement in autonomous language exposure and developed interpersonal skills positively impact their perception of language performance.

Keywords: autonomous learning, communicative competence, English language proficiency, soft skills, student international mobility

Este estudio de caso se centró en las experiencias de estudiantes universitarios colombianos, como hablantes del inglés, durante una movilidad internacional. Se recolectó información mediante encuestas y entrevistas, y se examinó siguiendo los principios de análisis de contenido y teoría fundamentada. Se identificaron las percepciones de los estudiantes respecto a su nivel de lengua antes y durante la movilidad, así como áreas problemáticas. Los resultados indican las dificultades para desenvolverse en entornos académicos y sociales debido a bajos niveles en habilidades comunicativas y práctica escasa. Los estudiantes perciben que la oferta académica en inglés es básica y que no se aprovechan los espacios de práctica. No obstante, la exposición autónoma a la lengua y el desarrollo de habilidades interpersonales impacta positivamente la percepción de competencia respecto al uso del idioma.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje autónomo, competencias comunicativas, dominio del inglés, habilidades interpersonales, movilidad internacional

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This article is based on the undergraduate monograph completed by Bello (2023). Professor Cárdenas acted as the monograph supervisor.

How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Bello, P. V., & Cárdenas, M. L. (2024). Colombian university students' experiences as users of the English language during international mobility. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 26(1), 149–165. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v26n1.112148>

This article was received on April 3, 2023 and accepted on November 15, 2023.

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Introduction

Internationalization of higher education is “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, and global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of higher education at the institutional and national levels” (Knight, 2008, p. 11). Internationalization strategies encompass international cooperation through agreements and networks; integrating an international and intercultural dimension into teaching, learning, and research; and promoting academic mobility. It also involves facilitating initiatives such as student exchange programs and semesters abroad, implementing double-degree programs, and establishing twinning partnerships. Among them, international student academic mobility has become one of the most assessed elements of internationalization.

Efforts have been made to boost mobility through assorted programs and platforms by governments, international cooperation agencies, and networks of higher education institutions (Echeverría & LaFont, 2017). Colombian government strategies for the internationalization of higher education play a major role in economic and diplomatic openness, which has resulted in a more favorable perception of Colombia at an international level (Valderrama Alvarado & Herrera Grajales, 2015). Therefore, it has become increasingly important for higher education institutions to foster student internationalization because it enhances integral formation; multicultural competencies; and personal, academic, and professional skills.

Whereas the Colombian government strategically propels internationalization through economic and diplomatic openness, it stresses the importance of English proficiency as an indispensable tool for effective communication and engagement on the global stage. In higher education, many students opt for international mobility in English-speaking countries or countries where English, although not being the native language, is essential for academic affairs.

The Universidad Nacional de Colombia (UNAL) is a renowned public university. One of its established goals is to foster internationalization and to look for opportunities for the university community to pursue education abroad. Hence, student international mobility has been pointedly promoted, and students perceive mobility as an option for their academic, professional, and personal development. Hand in hand with the promotion of international mobility, the University offers English language practice opportunities for its whole community. Introductory English courses, part of the Foreign Language program, are provided to help students achieve a B1 level—based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). At the Bogotá campus, students can benefit from the intensive English program, a language training course designed to strengthen communicative competence. In addition, English practice spaces such as English conversation clubs, immersion sessions, conversational-oriented sessions, and online English courses with foreign institutions are available for students.

Nevertheless, the students’ language proficiency is not what is expected. Although many are proficient—mainly in reading skills—the majority have weaknesses in speaking and writing. This situation seriously limits internationalization processes (Vicerrectoría de Investigación UNAL, 2011). The reasons for a low level of the language are diverse. According to Barrero (2021), the motivation behind learning English among students tends to be instrumental and driven by external or practical necessities, such as fulfilling a language or job requirement. Barrero also notes the influence of past experiences on students’ perceptions of the language, with English being described as “difficult.”

Barrero’s (2021) study aligns with the objectives of this research because students recognize their weaknesses in communicative competence, and, as we have mentioned, this may potentially impact their engagement in internationalization processes. This study

analyzes students' experiences as English users during international mobility. The objectives are:

1. To contrast the participants' perceptions of English proficiency before and during mobility.
2. To identify challenging areas of improvement in language competence.
3. To propose targeted solutions to address mobility students' linguistic needs before participating in mobility programs.

This study holds relevance in the Colombian context, where higher education institutions promote internationalization and face challenges regarding English language proficiency for successful global and professional engagement. At UNAL, the gap in students' level (particularly productive skills) needs to be addressed, specifically, the disparity between expected and actual language proficiency levels. This research aims to analyze how students perceive their performance in English during international mobility, where the language is taken out of the classroom to be used in real-life situations. The challenging areas revolving around language competence shed light on what has to be done to improve the experiences of future mobility students. It seeks to find improvements that enhance language skills and prepare upcoming mobility participants for the demands of international academic engagement.

Literature Review

This section deals with three issues: (a) English as a foreign language (EFL) in student international mobility, (b) language proficiency and communicative competence within Colombian higher education, and (c) success factors for international mobility. The lack of competence in the language impacts students' experiences, whereas the reports on English proficiency in Colombia reveal unfavorable outcomes. Lastly, factors contributing significantly to enhancing the experience

and benefits of international mobility, such as soft skills development, are tackled.

English as a Foreign Language in Student International Mobility

As much as mobility grants a tremendous benefit for students, it also demands preparation to communicate in the academic and cultural spaces in the destination country to profit fully from the benefits of the exchange. As highlighted by Adriansen et al. (2022), English is a global lingua franca that is relevant in higher education internationalization and student mobility because it vanishes "the blurred boundaries between nation-statist understandings of language and culture" (p. 3). Universities in diverse countries—even those whose native language is not English—offer academic programs for internationalization taught in English, ensuring the participation of people from different corners of the world.

Corbella and Marcos (2020) claim that, at the university level in Chile, only a few students about to go into international mobility programs possess the linguistics competence necessary to partake in the international experience, which requires comprehension and a high level of language meaning abstraction. Likewise, Ortellado Mendoza (2019) concludes that mobility students from a university in Paraguay do not feel competent with the English language classes they receive in higher education. He also exposes the obstacle that the lack of the English language represents in a mobility experience, given that English works as an "internationalization linkage" (p. 64). Echeverría and LaFont (2017) assert that low English levels pose a latent obstacle to incoming and outgoing academic mobility for Colombian students due to a general lack of English proficiency. They assure that, in Colombia, the low level of English is a drawback when talking about internationalization. A high level of proficiency means an advantage for mobility students; therefore, universities

must grant students opportunities to enhance those levels in the internationalization framework.

Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence in Colombian Higher Education

Language proficiency refers to the ability to use language effectively and accurately. Communicative competence means using appropriate and effective language in specific social contexts and real-life situations. Whereas language proficiency deals with the speaker's level of language skills, communicative competence addresses the ability to use those skills in real-life communicative situations. High proficiency in a language does not imply high communicative competence. One speaker might be proficient yet unable to communicate in a specific context, such as a job interview or a casual conversation with friends, due to a lack of understanding of social norms and expectations. Communicative competence includes not only grammatical competence—or knowledge of the rules of grammar—but also contextual or sociolinguistic competence—knowledge of the rules of language use (Campbell & Wales, 1970; Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972).

Colombia's greatest obstacle in terms of EFL teaching is to boost students' English level. Because of this, the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) has set English proficiency goals for students to achieve. High school graduates are expected to attain a B1 level (based on the CEFR), undergraduates should meet a B2 level, and graduates in languages-related fields must reach a C1 level (MEN, 2006). These goals and the programs implemented to achieve them have been of little improvement in English-level results.

The 2022 national *Saber 11*¹ results show that the population evaluated has difficulties in attaining the knowledge and skills of the required performance levels

(B1 and B+) in English: “At the national level and for the population of urban schools, around 70% are at the lowest levels (A- and A1)” (Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación, Icfes, 2023, p. 22). The population evidences a basic command of the language to understand simple sentences or produce simple, coherent texts in English. At the end of higher-education studies, a similar situation is found. The national report of the *Saber Pro*² 2020 shows that 68% of the total population evaluated were placed in the lower levels: A-, A1, and A2. The remaining 32% corresponds to B1 or B2 performance levels (Icfes, 2021). As noted, the level students have by the end of middle school contrasted with the one students have by the end of higher education does not increase drastically or considerably.

More recently, the Laboratory of Economics of Education of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (2023) reports that in 2021, *Saber 11* test participants were ranked at the lowest level of performance in English. In Latin America, Colombia was ranked 17 out of 20. Besides, relevant differences between the English level in regions and cities of the country indicate that besides the problem of low English proficiency in comparison with other countries, there are also gaps in different Colombian territories that constitute obstacles within the country.

Similarly, other scholars have examined the implications for Colombian higher education and international mobility. Benavides (2021) concludes that a significant percentage of university students in Colombia still fail to reach a B1 level of the CEFR by the end of their academic programs. This percentage decreased from 25% in 2007 to 20% in 2017. In other words, there has not been a significant improvement in English proficiency over ten years in Colombia,

¹ The High School State Exam, *Saber 11*, is a standardized evaluation instrument that measures the quality of formal education provided to high school graduates.

² The State Examination of the Quality of Higher Education, *Saber Pro*, is a standardized evaluation instrument for measuring the quality of higher education that evaluates the competencies of students close to completing undergraduate programs..

regardless of the numerous strategies and programs implemented (Bastidas Muñoz, 2021). In connection to this, Gómez Sará (2017) claims a need for more suitable methods for English teaching where local conditions such as class size, available materials, the use of the target language in daily life, and other characteristics of the diverse student population are under consideration.

López Naranjo and Sellamen Garzón (2019) highlight the relevance of analyzing the implications of English language proficiency in the university population who will enter the competitive and demanding labor market in a globalized and internationalized world. Students planning to participate in international

mobility programs find the considerable language barrier posed by low proficiency levels that may hinder their ability to benefit from the mobility experience fully. This gap could lead to missed opportunities and diminished advantages during international mobility experiences.

Success Factors for International Mobility

Successful international mobility experiences are embroidered with a series of conditions that enhance the benefits of the journey. Tsai et al. (2020) explore the key success factors for international mobility (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of the Average of Key Success Factors for International Mobility of College Students (Tsai et al., 2020, p. 414)

Facets	Title
International language proficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluent international language or verbal skills • Proficiency in reading and writing in international languages • Transmitting precise and clear messages in international languages
Environmental adaptability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to adjust to living overseas • Psychological adjustment ability • Adaptability for work/study abroad • Personality traits for environmental adjustment ability
Global perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global attention to new knowledge and dynamics • Cross-cultural thinking • Multicultural tolerance or acceptance
Challenge and adventure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Willingness to try or experience new matters • The courage to challenge difficult tasks • Being unafraid of risk or failure

As noted, proficiency in the English language and communicative competence that enable communication in varied contextual situations in heterogeneous cultural spaces are at the top of this list. Appropriate expression in oral and written texts and comprehension of messages, announcements, signals, or texts—according to the sociolinguistic and pragmatic norms—enrich the student's perception of comfort and performance. Likewise, developed productive and receptive skills

permit engagement within the academic and informal environment of a foreign institution and a foreign country. Hence, achieving a high linguistic level before mobility boosts students' confidence to participate in social and academic activities.

On the other hand, adaptability for work/study abroad and personality traits for environmental adjustment ability play a major role in mobility success. In other words, highly developed soft or interpersonal

skills are essential for international mobility students. Aligned with Roy et al. (2019), the performance and experience during international mobility will inevitably affect employment or career benefits in the long term. Establishing international connections and teamwork with people from different places, ages, and mindsets is paramount to broadening professional horizons. Interpersonal skills materialize here. Marked interpersonal abilities such as effective, clear, and concise communication; teamwork; leadership; and adaptability separate good from better when developing academic activities in a foreign country. Potts (2015) concludes that the benefits of international mobility, such as higher employability, are possible thanks to improved interpersonal communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and analytical skills during international mobility.

Method

This exploratory case study aims to investigate and understand the participants' meanings, perspectives, and experiences. In line with Tellis (1997), a case study delves deeply into the experiences, phenomena, or issues of a person or group of people oriented to gather rich and detailed information. As stated by Creswell (2006), this investigation involves the examination of an issue through one or more cases using comprehensive data collection and emphasis on case-specific topics or themes. Likewise, this study aligns with the collective case study, where multiple cases are investigated to address a shared issue.

Sampling and Participants

Based on the guidelines provided by Pérez-Luco et al. (2017), we employed a purposive sampling of typical cases; thus, we focused on intentional cases that were considered representative of the typical characteristics, traits, or attributes under investigation. The selection of participants followed pre-established criteria: (a) students or graduates from any campus or program at UNAL, and (b) having participated in an international

mobility program where English played a significant role.

Sixty-nine participants answered a survey (four of them were interviewed). There were 36 (52.2%) undergraduate, 19 (27.5%) postgraduate, and 14 (29.3%) graduate students from the UNAL who took part in international exchanges to English-speaking and non-English speaking countries where English was relevant to their academic and social activities. As for geographical location, participants belonged to three campuses of the University: Bogotá (78.3%), Medellín (20.3%), and Manizales (1.4%). The mobility destinations reported included Austria, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, the Czech Republic, Mexico, Brazil, Australia, Germany, Canada, the USA, France, and the United Kingdom.

Data Collection

The data collection methods included surveys, which comprised opinion-scale and open-ended questions, targeted to gather information about the participants' perceptions and experiences of the addressed issue, as well as demographic data. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix) were also used, which allowed for a deeper analysis of the participants' experiences. This was based on the fact that, in qualitative research, interviews serve as a space for exchanging information and constructing meaning between the interviewer and interviewee (Janesick, 2016).

Data Analysis

Content analysis and the principles of grounded theory were followed. Content analysis entailed identifying patterns in data, codifying those crude patterns, and finally categorizing them into global topics along with their resultant subcategories. At the same time, grounded theory principles played a significant role in the data analysis process, as no predetermined categories were established beforehand; categories emerged directly from the data (Devadas et al., 2011;

Elliot, 1990). The transcribed and enumerated data were then classified using color coding based on the identified common topics. Codes were used as labels or tags for specific sections or segments of data. These codes served as the foundation for creating categories, which represent broader groupings or themes that emerge from the codes. Categories provide a higher level of abstraction and organize similar codes into meaningful clusters. Lastly, subcategories were derived from the main categories, allowing for a more detailed

data analysis by capturing variations or nuances within the broader category. We constantly compared and triangulated the results from both instruments to ensure the validity and quality of the interpretative conclusions from the analysis process.

Findings

Table 2 shows the categories, subcategories, and attributes related to English language proficiency and available options for improvement.

Table 2. Categories Derived From Data Analysis

Category	Subcategories	Attributes
1. Looking back: My level of English and the options at hand	1. Low English level	In primary and higher education
	2. English academic offer at the University	Basic or non-accessible
	3. Private courses needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language skills • Preparation for international exams
	4. Spaces for practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice with native speakers • Specific spaces for international mobility
2. During mobility: Use of English in context	1. Insufficient English skills for formal and informal spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral and writing • Listening and reading
	2. Insecurity remains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of proficiency and practice • Lack of soft skills
3. Autonomous learning	Connection between autonomous learning and English level improvement	Low familiarity with autonomous learning

Looking Back: My Level of English and the Options at Hand

This category embraces students' experiences before their international mobility regarding English proficiency and the available options for practice and improvement. It depicts students' perception of language skills and the importance of formal education in language learning. It also portrays the students' need for courses to enhance language skills and the importance of practical application in developing fluency

and confidence. The findings were grouped into four subcategories.

Low Level of English in Primary and Higher Education

The participants reported low levels of English proficiency before the mobility experience. In both middle and higher education, participants' English skills fell short of the expected or necessary level, as portrayed by two participants:

I studied in a school where English training was the classic verb “to be” throughout high school. It was an elementary training, very limited, in fact. (Participant 4)
 At a public school in Bogotá, the English classes were insufficient for what was required. (Participant 2)

Participants are conscious of insufficient English language preparation during primary and secondary school. This aligns with the broader Colombian context, where, as Benavides (2021) highlighted, students are not reaching the expected level of English proficiency after completing middle or high school.

Once in higher education, students recalled experiencing difficulties in different English language competencies. Participant 2 exemplified this by saying: “I could not speak fluently before I went to mobility because speaking means all the other skills.” Insufficient language proficiency can obstruct full participation in academic coursework, research projects, and networking opportunities. It also adds stress and pressure as students try to bridge the gap between their current level and the required proficiency. On the other hand, participants recalled the difference between learning and using English in a classroom context and real-life situations. Participant 1 stated: “In the courses, we have to speak, but as one speaks in the English training books.” This sentiment was further reinforced by Participant 2, who explained:

It is very different to learn in a classroom than to learn in real life . . . I felt good in the Explora classes. In fact, I felt that I had a good level, that I could speak with my classmates. When I got to the country, I could not establish a conversation in the first two or three weeks . . . that is a long time.

The experiences shared by the participants pinpoint the challenges they faced when changing from a controlled classroom environment to the complexities of real-life communication. Classroom activities that overuse scripted dialogues, audio, and material found in

textbooks may not accurately represent actual language usage. This can result in students’ inability to adapt their language skills to authentic situations once in their mobility. This suggests that authentic language use in classroom activities and opportunities for practical application may enhance the development of the skills necessary to plunge into communication effectively. As highlighted by Participant 1, the absence of sufficient language skills prior to international mobility is an obstacle to engaging in the experience: “Many people say *I don’t do that because I don’t know English* and prefer to go to another Spanish-speaking country.”

English Academic Offer at the University

The courses offered by the University are divided into two categories: mandatory language courses and elective advanced English courses. Mandatory English courses were perceived as basic, whereas elective ones were perceived as useful but inaccessible. Mandatory courses were described as “very introductory . . . as a starting point, but to go further, to consolidate or learn, other tools are necessary, such as Explora or Intensive” (Participant 1).

Some participants found the courses insufficient for international mobility because they “did learn a lot but not enough” (Participant 2). Moreover, elective advanced courses such as Intensive English and Explora, available to students at the Bogotá campus, were praised. Participants mentioned: “I felt good and could converse with my classmates” (Participant 2), and “I think I got a B2, and with that, I went to mobility . . . after Explora, I wrote better than before” (Participant 3). These courses are considered beneficial for English language learners as future international mobility students. However, not all participants were able to enroll in elective advanced courses. One of the reasons for this is that free courses have limited spots, and students are selected based on their grade point average. As a result, a student with a medium-low average is not likely accepted, as Participant 62 stated: “Access to other English courses, such as

Intensive or Explora, is minimal and the grade point filter for enrollment limits one's access."

The reason for the contrasting perceptions of the two English courses offered by the same University is examined by Barrero (2021), who attributes a significant portion of the negative perception to the compulsory courses. These courses are mandatory for all students, which may lead to reduced motivation and engagement. In contrast, the advanced elective course is chosen by students out of their own volition and the need to learn English, resulting in greater motivation. The author emphasizes that the perceptions through English course experiences impact students' intrinsic motivation and perceived language abilities. The participants' opinions indicate that while some courses provide good insights into English learning, a significant concern arises from the limited availability of these courses, creating a barrier for students who require higher English language proficiency.

Private Courses Needed

Given the perceived lack of language competence, students expressed the need to enroll in external courses and indicated a demand for private language courses. Nearly half of the participants (49%) confirmed they had taken private English courses to enhance their language proficiency. In response to the question, "How did you learn English?" the typical answer was perceived inadequacy in high school or university English classes. Participant 2 mentioned having studied at a public school where English classes were basic, and "to balance it out," the participant enrolled at a private institution. Participant 3 had a similar experience with a public school:

English courses took two hours per week. There was not much to learn then. From the age of 15, I studied at [private institute] all levels of English up to the last one . . . everything I learned was outside the University, in courses at the [private institute].

Although the private courses benefitted a proportion of participants' English level and skills, some others did not perceive an optimal level of English in such courses. Furthermore, participants highlighted the issue of accessibility to private courses: "Not all of us can afford a private course to help us improve our performance" (Participant 42). The participants' need for additional support indicates a perceived gap in the language instruction offered by the University. Thus, though private courses are a valuable complement to enhancing English language abilities, they should not be a student's sole solution. Limitations in language instruction and accessibility to additional support are ways to provide equal opportunities to enhance language proficiency.

Spaces for English Practice

Practice spaces are available, yet students do not utilize them optimally. The University offers various English practice opportunities: conversation clubs provided by the Second Language Program, Comunidad Universitaria Reformada, Explora UNmundo, immersion journeys, conversation sessions, and English courses with international institutions. Nonetheless, participants admitted limited utilization of English practice spaces before their mobility experiences. A significant portion of them (49.3%) do not participate in any English practice sessions; others who did attend mentioned infrequent attendance, as portrayed by Participant 2: "I went to about two English clubs, no more."

Although the available spaces for English practice were not successfully used, participants pinpointed the need for practice with native speakers in specific spaces geared to international mobility students. For instance, Participant 64 emphasized that personalized sessions once mobility is confirmed may be a great option: "When the mobility is already confirmed, open spaces that are more personalized and better targeted to the students in the process." This shows that despite the lack of utilization of practice opportunities, a need for spaces

targeted to mobility students reveals a request for effective and specialized sessions for language development. Opportunities to engage with native speakers, discuss relevant topics, and simulate academic settings can better equip students with language skills and foster the necessary confidence for successful mobility experiences.

During Mobility: Use of English in Context

This category embraces students' experiences during international mobility in terms of the use of English in various contexts and its major challenges. It permitted the identification of the main challenges and limitations that participants face during mobility.

Insufficient Language Skills in Informal and Academic Contexts

English level was considered insufficient to engage in academic and informal activities effectively: "Despite everything I had done, I arrived at an elementary level. The first few weeks, I felt very lost; I said I was going to fail my classes" (Participant 1). Participants recalled ranking language skills based on the perceived level of difficulty. Oral skills emerged as the most challenging aspect in all performance contexts. Participant 3 mentioned that "speaking felt like a brake. I knew things theoretically but could not say them either informally or academically." In this regard, the importance of previous practice with native English speakers surfaced. Informal contexts allowed flexibility in mistake-making and received corrections, but the lack of everyday vocabulary and slang posed a barrier. By contrast, academic contexts occurred in a more controlled space where students fell short regarding technicalities and academic vocabulary. This proves what Llanes et al. (2016) assert regarding oral fluency as the most crucial and demanding skill for learners, and which requires more practice.

Listening comprehension was rated as the second most challenging skill. The lack of exposure to "natural" language, diverse accents, and a wide range of vocabulary

makes it difficult to understand people in real scenarios with a speed of speech different from EFL classroom audios. Students learn standardized English variations that highly differ from the linguistic landscape found in an English-speaking context conformed by people from different nationalities, strong accents, and registers. Notably, in academic communicative events, the English speaker is not expected to repeat as many times as needed for the interlocutor to understand. Thereby, listening turns into a challenge and limits experiences, as expressed by Participant 3: "I did take classes, but in the classes I did not understand."

In the third position, writing skills were identified as a significant challenge due to limited practice, unfamiliarity with technical vocabulary, and uncertainty regarding the appropriate structures for written expression in English. Regarding a research stay in the city of Lafayette, Indiana, Participant 3 expressed: "When I tried to write a paper, they didn't understand me, they didn't understand how the sequence of the experiments was. . . . [Writing] is something fundamental." Writing skills are closely tied to the acquisition of technical vocabulary specific to the students' field of study, as commented by Participant 17: "In the academic world, it is imperative to prepare text typologies and to write using the appropriate vocabulary." Finally, reading skills were underemphasized by the participants. Those who mentioned difficulty in it referred to the lack of vocabulary to understand written texts and the lack of reading habits in English.

Insecurity Remains

Insecurity was a significant barrier to expressing ideas due to a perceived lack of ability, vocabulary, grammar, and practice. A crucial aspect to improve before the mobility experience is overcoming the fear of speaking, "not being afraid to speak out," as mentioned by Participant 26. The fear of making mistakes, lacking vocabulary, and struggling with grammar undermines confidence and hinders effective communication. This

insecurity not only limits the students' ability to express themselves but also impacts their language development and cultural integration during their mobility experiences.

Furthermore, the lack of interpersonal or soft skills among participants was identified as a contributing factor to this insecurity. High interpersonal skills equip individuals with a sense of security and confidence to express themselves in English in a foreign context. As highlighted by Echeverría et al. (2020), leadership, problem-solving, assertive communication, and networking skills enable students to engage in various activities and connect with their peers actively. Soft skills are essential for success in international mobility, as their benefits heavily rely on one's performance and the ability to establish connections and engage in various academic, professional, and informal activities. In addition, interpersonal deficiencies limit interaction in meaningful discussions, networks, and learning opportunities in various academic and professional contexts.

Autonomous Learning

The relevance of autonomous English learning and active practice also emerged from data analysis. Here, we discuss the findings regarding the connection between autonomous practices and language proficiency perception, as well as the limited familiarity with autonomous learning among some participants.

Connection Between Autonomous Learning and English Level Improvement

Autonomous learning “involves attributes related to understanding personal learning preferences, setting goals, preparing study plans, and creating learning opportunities” (Khotimah et al., 2019, p. 372). In the digitalized environment we are immersed in, the creation of learning opportunities is full of options. Participants who expressed engagement in autonomous language exposure and practice activities—such as listening to podcasts, series, music, and videos of their interest and learning through websites and apps—exhibited a more

positive perception of their language level improvement than those who did not. Participant 6 mentioned the importance of “autonomy for learning English. Search for tools on the internet: videos, movies, apps, etc.” By those means, participants were able to develop a deeper understanding of idiomatic expressions, colloquialisms, and overall comprehension, which ultimately led to an improved perception of their language skills and confidence: “I was very self-taught doing the BBC courses. I also watched movies. I started to listen to English songs; that helped me a lot” (Participant 1).

The previous testimonies highlight the significance of self-directed learning and the role of technology in language learning and improvement. They are in tune with Wang and Han (2020), who assert that learner autonomy is the learner's ability to take control of his or her learning. Regardless of the advantages, not all participants showed a strong inclination towards autonomous learning tools and independent language exposure. Few participants mentioned actively and prolongedly engaging in autonomous activities to improve their skills. This indicates that while they acknowledged the importance of formal education—such as courses at school, university, or private institutes—they did not mention autonomous tools or activities as part of their learning journey. One of the reasons behind this behavior is demotivation resulting from a perceived lack of progress in language proficiency. The significance of motivation was highlighted by Participant 29, who mentioned that it is relevant to have “motivation to want to learn, listen to music in English, watch movies in English without subtitles, listen to podcasts in English.” This aligns with the findings of Barrero (2021), who stated that not achieving good results in the autonomous learning process results in demotivation and low commitment.

Therefore, students actively seeking opportunities to immerse themselves in the language demonstrate a proactive approach to language learning, unlike those who do not partake in these activities. This highlights

the importance of fostering motivation and providing students with the necessary resources and support to engage in autonomous learning, as it can significantly impact their language proficiency and overall learning outcomes.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Action

This research focused on analyzing the experiences of Colombian university students as English users during international mobility and the challenging areas of improvement. The findings revealed three key elements related to participants' English proficiency and language practice options before and during international mobility.

Before international mobility, students perceived low levels of English proficiency from their previous educational experiences. The lack of an appropriate level represents challenges and barriers for students. The academic English opportunities at the University seem basic for the introductory courses, whereas elective subjects, mainly intensive programs, are considered great tools. Nonetheless, the latter are inaccessible to all students and with limited spots.

The results also indicate that international mobility students are underutilizing English practice spaces at the University. However, this population highlights the need for targeted spaces for international mobility to respond to their specific needs in terms of language and their future mobility experience. Besides, students feel in need of enrolling in private courses to enhance their level, although some reported not being able to afford them.

During international mobility, the participants' English skills were insufficient to perform satisfactorily in the new formal and informal contexts. Low oral skills, absence of informal and slang vocabulary, and lack of previous practice with peers and native English speakers pose significant challenges for students once in a foreign country. Listening comprehension appears hindered by little previous exposure to authentic language uses and

how it sounds outside of the EFL classrooms. On the other hand, the practice of writing skills and technical vocabulary appears to have considerable relevance for the academic performance of international students.

Findings also portray the impact of insecurity as an obstacle to good English performance. The lack of interpersonal or soft skills among participants was identified as a contributing factor to their insecurity in international mobility. Thus, it is vital to have strong interpersonal skills to develop a sense of security and confidence when using English. Additionally, insufficient interpersonal skills can hinder leadership roles, collaborative work, clear communication, and student mobility benefits.

Likewise, results show that engagement in autonomous language exposure and practice activities—such as listening to podcasts, watching movies, and using online resources—produces a positive perception of language proficiency. However, a lack of motivation limits commitment to autonomous work.

The results also call for strategies that respond to the students' needs in terms of the English language so that they can take more advantage of the mobility experiences. Given this, Table 3 depicts a possible course of action that can be useful for meeting the needs of mobility students.

The suggested English practice sessions seek to cover essential language skills required for international experiences. Led by a proficient English speaker, sessions can emphasize speaking and listening through conversations where pronunciation, accents, slang, and formal/informal language usage are considered. The cultural aspects of the destination country and practical advice for living abroad are also expected to be covered. Additionally, the sessions can enhance (academic) writing, reading, and technical vocabulary skills. Participants must also be encouraged and given the tools to engage in autonomous learning outside of the sessions to become aware of their options to keep up with developing their language competence.

Table 3. Proposal of an English-Practice Space for Mobility Students

Targeted population	Students with approved international mobility	
Instructor	Native English/High proficient C1 non-native speaker	
Material	Authentic	
Skill focus	Speaking/Listening	
Schedule	Consulted with possible participants beforehand	
Topic/Thematic	Details	Means
Improving speaking skill	Maximized student speaking time, improvised conversation among peers or with the teacher	Peer and professor practice
Exploring pronunciation, accents, slang, and register	Phonetics/Pronunciation	Listening practice
	Different accents/Variations of English	
	Slang, daily-life English, idiomatic expressions	Class practice
	Informal vs. formal English	
Where am I going?	Cultural aspects of the destination country	Autonomous research by the student
Enhancing writing, reading, and technical vocabulary skills	Useful tips for living abroad	Class practice
	Academic writing/reading	Writing academic reports
	Technical vocabulary	Reading academic papers
Teamwork and leadership activities must be fostered.		
Student speaking time must be a key element.		

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Acknowledgments

The first author wishes to thank professor Melba Libia Cárdenas, tutor of the monograph and coauthor of this article, for her non-stop efforts, support, and shared knowledge in the process of this project.

Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Stage	Guide
Introduction	Greetings and presentation of the researcher
	<p>As you participated in international mobility, I will ask you some questions about it. I will ask you some questions about your experiences learning and practicing English and its relationship with your experiences in the country where you had your international mobility.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you agree with the consent you have just read? • Do you have any questions or comments before we begin?
Body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you an undergraduate or graduate student? • When did you do your mobility? • Which country did you go to? • Before that mobility, had you been in an English-speaking country?
	<p>In this section, I will ask some questions about your experience learning and practicing English.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you learn English? At school, at the university, through external courses...? • Are you familiar with the English practice opportunities offered by UNAL? Which ones? • At UNAL, did you have English classes? Did you participate in clubs, workshops, or English sessions? • During your experiences learning English, was there any aspect that you found particularly challenging? • Do you think your language proficiency was sufficient for your international mobility? • Do you believe the University offered enough English practice spaces to prepare for international mobility?
Closure	Further comments and doubts