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PROBLEMS IN FLUENCY AND PRONUNCIATION IN THE FRENCH ORAL  
PRODUCTION AMONG SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS OF THE BACHELOR OF  
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**ABSTRACT**

This study quantitatively analyzed the primary difficulties in French oral production among second-year Modern Languages students at the University of El Salvador, seeking to empirically investigate persistent anecdotal oral pronunciation issues. Using a descriptive, cross-sectional design, a sample of 30 students was assessed with two instruments: a survey to gauge self-perceptions and an oral elicitation task to measure actual performance. The results revealed disfluency as a major obstacle, with frequent silent pauses ( $M=3.90$ ) indicating high cognitive load. Mispronunciation was a systemic problem, with the lowest performance scores found in intonation ( $M=3.23$ ) and phoneme substitution ( $M=3.87$ ), suggesting strong L1 interference. A significant gap was also found between students' self-perception of pronunciation errors and their more severe measured performance. The study concludes that the primary obstacles are the cognitive management of real-time speech and the misapplication of L1 phonological rules, highlighting the need for pedagogical strategies that build automaticity and target both segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation features.

**Keywords:** *Oral Production, Disfluency, Mispronunciation, French as a Second Language, Error Analysis.*

## RESUMEN

Este estudio analizó cuantitativamente las principales dificultades en la producción oral de francés entre estudiantes de segundo año de Lenguas Modernas en la Universidad de El Salvador, buscando investigar empíricamente problemas en la producción oral anecdóticos persistentes. Usando un diseño descriptivo y transversal, se evaluó una muestra de 30 estudiantes con dos instrumentos: una encuesta para medir la autopercepción y una tarea de elicitación oral para el rendimiento real. Los resultados revelaron la disfluencia como un obstáculo principal, con frecuentes pausas silenciosas ( $M=3.90$ ) que indican una alta carga cognitiva. La pronunciación incorrecta fue un problema sistémico, con las puntuaciones más bajas en entonación ( $M=3.23$ ) y sustitución de fonemas ( $M=3.87$ ), sugiriendo una fuerte interferencia de la L1. También se encontró una brecha significativa entre la autopercepción de los errores de pronunciación y el rendimiento medido, que fue más severo. El estudio concluye que los obstáculos principales son la gestión cognitiva del habla en tiempo real y la aplicación de reglas fonológicas de la L1, destacando la necesidad de estrategias pedagógicas que desarrollen la automaticidad y aborden los rasgos de pronunciación tanto segmentales como suprasegmentales.

**Palabras claves:** *Producción Oral, Disfluencia, Errores de Pronunciación, Francés como Segunda Lengua, Análisis de Errores.*

## INTRODUCTION

Learning a second language (L2) is a complex process, and developing effective oral production is arguably its most demanding component. For students in the Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages program at the University of El Salvador's Eastern Multidisciplinary Faculty (UES-FMO), achieving a high level of oral proficiency in French is not merely an academic exercise; it is imperative for degree completion and provides a crucial differentiating factor in professional prospects. Furthermore, robust oral competence is a prerequisite for the competitive exchange programs that are central to their advanced training. However, preliminary classroom observations and consultations with faculty members have consistently identified significant and persistent challenges among second-year students, primarily related to disfluency and poor intelligibility stemming from mispronunciation. These anecdotal findings highlight an urgent need for a systematic, empirical investigation into the nature of these difficulties.

Oral production is a highly complex and dynamic skill requiring the simultaneous activation of cognitive, physical, and socio-cultural processes in real-time (Goh & Burns, 2012). The challenges observed at UES-FMO can be understood through a comprehensive theoretical framework that accounts for the cognitive, psycholinguistic, and affective dimensions of speech. Disfluency, characterized by phenomena such as silent pauses, repetitions, false starts, and self-corrections, is not simply a sign of poor knowledge but rather an external manifestation of the intense cognitive load placed upon the learner. As Williams (2023) explains, mid-clause pauses and repetitions often occur as a speaker searches for a lexical item or plans syntactic structure, signaling that working memory is being overwhelmed. Similarly, mispronunciation errors are not random but are frequently systematic. The prevalence of phoneme substitution, for example, can be explained by the concept of L1 Phonological Interference, where learners replace unfamiliar French phonemes with phonetically similar ones from their native Spanish (Hue & Lang, 2024). This aligns with Flege's Speech Learning Model (1995), which posits that transfer effects from a learner's native language are a key factor in

shaping L2 pronunciation accuracy.

Furthermore, the act of speaking is profoundly influenced by internal, psychological factors. Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a valuable lens for understanding how variables such as anxiety and low self-confidence can create a mental block that obstructs performance. This "filter" may not only hinder a student's ability to produce language fluently and accurately but may also distort their self-perception, leading to a gap between their perceived competence and their actual performance. A comprehensive analysis, therefore, requires an understanding of error analysis not just as a catalogue of mistakes, but as a method for determining the incidence, nature, and causes of unsuccessful language use within this complex interplay of cognitive and affective factors (James, 1998).

While numerous studies have examined oral production in English as a foreign language, research focused specifically on the challenges faced by Salvadoran university students learning French is scarce. The anecdotal evidence from instructors at UES-FMO, though valuable, lacks the empirical weight necessary to guide evidence-based pedagogical reform. This study addresses that gap by presenting the first systematic investigation to quantitatively analyze the specific markers of disfluency and mispronunciation in French oral production within this institutional context. Utilizing precise analytical techniques, this research moves beyond general observation to provide objective, fine-grained data on the specific hurdles students face.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to quantitatively describe the primary problems in fluency and pronunciation that second-year Modern Languages students encounter in their French oral production. The findings are intended to have a significant pedagogical payoff, providing the empirical foundation needed to design adapted instructional techniques and refine teaching emphasis. By establishing an evidence-based baseline, this research will not only inform immediate pedagogical improvements but will also serve as a cornerstone for future studies aimed at

enhancing the oral communicative competence of graduates from the program.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study was conducted within the post-positivist paradigm, which relies on empirical and quantitative evidence to understand phenomena. The research employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive, cross-sectional design. Descriptive research, according to Mackey and Gass (2022), focuses on observing and characterizing language phenomena as they naturally occur. This design was selected as the most appropriate method for systematically identifying and describing the prevalent patterns in students' oral performance without manipulating any variables.

The study population consisted of all 67 second-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in Modern Languages program at the University of El Salvador's Eastern Multidisciplinary Faculty during the 2025 academic year. From this population, a final sample of 30 students was selected through a simple random sampling technique, ensuring each student had an equal and independent probability of being included in the study. As Mackey and Gass (2022) highlight, random sampling enhances the representativeness of the sample and minimizes selection bias, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings. Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent.

The two data collection techniques were the survey and also the SLA Elicitation Task. Data were collected using two primary instruments designed to capture both student perceptions and actual oral performance.

**Self-Administered Questionnaire:** A 10-item online questionnaire was developed to gather data on students' self-perceptions of their oral production difficulties. The instrument utilized a 5-point frequency scale (Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never) for all items. The questions were designed to probe students' awareness of specific disfluency markers and mispronunciation challenges.

Surveys are recognized as systematic tools for collecting standardized data on learners' experiences (Mackey & Gass, 2022, p. 131), and as Williams (2023) notes, self-report instruments are useful for understanding learners' awareness of their own fluency difficulties.

**Oral Elicitation Task:** To assess actual performance, a semi-structured Oral Elicitation Task was designed to elicit spontaneous speech. The task required each student to choose one of four general monologue topics. After one minute of preparation, students delivered a two-to-three-minute monologue, which was followed by two-to-three minutes of interactive follow-up questions from the researcher. According to Mackey and Gass (2022), such performance-based tasks are effective ways to obtain comparable speech data and analyze fluency markers while reflecting the cognitive processes involved in L2 production. Each session was audio-recorded for subsequent analysis.

The data collection procedure began with the administration of the online survey, followed by individual oral test sessions conducted in a controlled classroom environment to ensure consistency. All instruments and procedures were pilot-tested prior to the main study to identify and rectify potential flaws, as recommended by Mackey and Gass (2022, p. 52).

The analysis of the audio-recorded oral performance data was conducted using a technologically advanced, dual approach. The recordings were first processed using a sophisticated machine learning model: a custom-programmed Microsoft Azure Pronunciation Assessment tool built with Python. This provided an initial layer of objective, computational analysis of the speech data.

Subsequently, the performance on each recording was computationally rated using a detailed 8-dimension analytical scoring rubric embedded on Vertex AI Cloud Services. This rubric was designed to quantify specific markers of oral production, assessing four dimensions of disfluency (silent pauses, repetitions, false starts,

self-corrections) and four dimensions of mispronunciation (phoneme substitution, phoneme omission, phoneme insertion, intonation). For each dimension, student performance was assigned an index score from 1 to 10 and classified into one of three performance levels (High, Mid, or Low) based on precise descriptive criteria. Finally, the quantified data from both the survey and the oral test analysis were organized and processed. As noted by Mackey and Gass (2022), descriptive analysis involving frequencies and percentages helps researchers summarize data clearly and allows patterns to emerge from the results .

## **RESULTS**

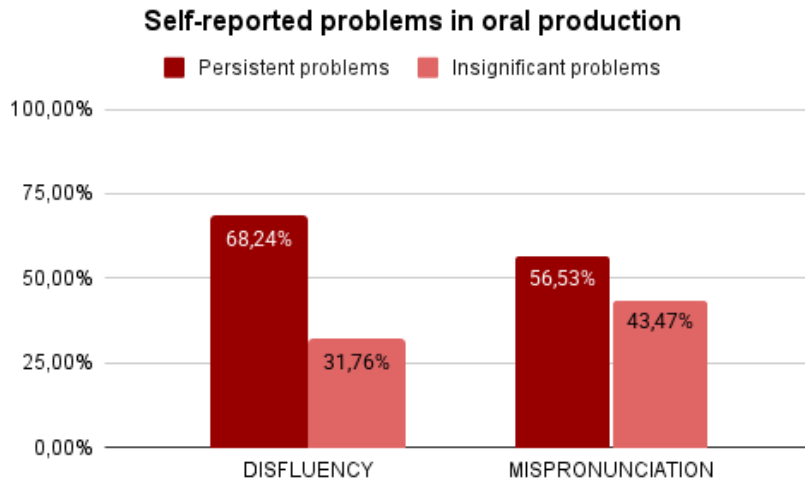
This section presents the quantitative findings of the study, organized into two main parts. The first part details the results from the self-administered questionnaire, outlining the students' perceptions of their own oral production difficulties. The second part presents the performance data from the Oral Elicitation Task, providing an objective analysis of students' measured abilities in disfluency and mispronunciation.

The data gathered from the 10-item self-administered questionnaire reveal students' metacognitive awareness of their challenges when speaking French. Table 1 summarizes the prevalence of self-reported problems for each of the eight indicators, which were grouped into the two main dimensions of the study: disfluency and mispronunciation. Prevalence was calculated based on the percentage of students who responded "Often" or "Always" on the 5-point frequency scale.

**Table 1. Self-Reported Prevalence of Problems in French Oral Production**

<b>DIMENSION</b>	<b>INDICATOR</b>	<b>Prevalence per indicator</b>	<b>Prevalence per dimension</b>
<b>DISFLUENCY</b>	<b>Silent pause</b>	86,49%	68,24%
	<b>Repetitions</b>	64,86%	
	<b>False Starts</b>	51,35%	
	<b>Self-Corrections</b>	70,27%	
<b>MISPRONUNCIATION</b>	<b>Phoneme Substitution</b>	74,77%	56,53%
	<b>Phoneme omission</b>	43,24%	
	<b>Phoneme insertion</b>	43,24%	
	<b>Intonation</b>	64,86%	

According to the survey results, the majority of students 86.49% reported experiencing silent pauses, while 13.51% did not report this difficulty. Regarding repetitions, 64.86% of students reported having problems, compared to 35.14% who did not. Regarding false starts, 51.35% of students experienced them, while 48.65% did not have any problems. Self-corrections were frequent in 70.27% of cases, in contrast to 29.73% who did not show this difficulty. With regard to pronunciation, phoneme substitution affected 74.77% of participants, while the remaining 25.23% did not experience it. In contrast, phoneme omission and insertion were reported by 43.24%, compared to 56.76% who did not report these difficulties. Finally, intonation was a challenge for 64.86% of students, in contrast to 35.14% who did not experience difficulties. In addition, the survey results also revealed general difficulties in oral expression. Specifically, 68.24% of students reported problems with fluency, in contrast to 31.76% who did not report such difficulties. Similarly, 56.53% of students identified mispronunciation as a persistent problem, while 43.47% did not consider it problematic.

**Figure 1***Summary of Self-Reported Problems in Oral Production*

Source: Survey data

Figure 1 visually summarizes the overall prevalence for the two main dimensions, highlighting that a majority of students perceive both disfluency and mispronunciation as persistent problems in their oral production.

### Oral Production Performance

This section details the quantitative results from the Oral Elicitation Task. Student performance was scored using an 8-dimension analytical rubric on a 10-point index scale, where a higher score indicates better performance. The following analysis presents the descriptive statistics, score distributions, and a detailed breakdown of performance for each of the eight measured dimensions.

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptives

	<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>Silent Pauses</b>	3.90	3.50	1.81
	<b>Repetitions</b>	4.60	4.00	2.21
	<b>False Starts</b>	5.57	5.50	2.16
	<b>Self-Corrections</b>	4.90	6.00	2.48
	<b>Phoneme Substitution</b>	3.87	4.00	1.28
	<b>Phoneme Omission</b>	5.50	5.00	1.61
	<b>Phoneme Insertion</b>	7.27	8.00	1.96
	<b>Intonation</b>	3.23	3.00	1.68

Table 2 displays the measures of central tendency and dispersion for each of the eight dimensions of oral performance across the 30 participants. The results reveal areas of relative strength and significant weakness. Phoneme insertion stands out as the strongest area, with the highest mean score ( $M=7.27, SD=1.96$ ). In stark contrast, intonation and prosody emerged as the most challenging dimension, registering the lowest mean score ( $M=3.23, SD=1.68$ ). Among the disfluency dimensions, performance on false starts was highest ( $M=5.57$ ), while silent pauses scored the lowest ( $M=3.90$ ). For mispronunciation, phoneme substitution was a point of uniform weakness, indicated by its low mean ( $M=3.87$ ) and the smallest standard deviation ( $SD=1.28$ ).

Figure 2. Score Distributions

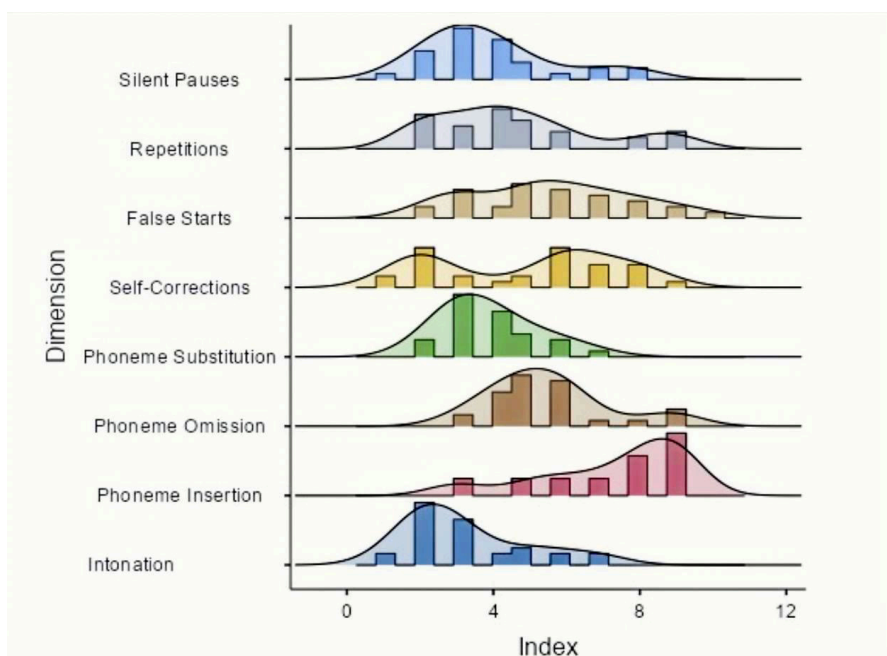


Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of the score distributions for each dimension, confirming the numerical findings in the table. The distribution for intonation and prosody shows a distinct leftward skew, with the vast majority of scores clustered in the lower range, reinforcing its status as the most problematic dimension for the cohort. A similar, though slightly less pronounced, clustering in the lower range is visible for phoneme substitution. Conversely, phoneme insertion scores are skewed to the right, indicating stronger performance. The disfluency dimensions like silent pauses and repetitions show distributions centered in the lower and mid-ranges, reflecting persistent difficulties in maintaining speech continuity.

### General Analysis of Oral Performance

The descriptive statistics confirm that both disfluency and mispronunciation were prevalent in students' oral performance. For disfluency, mean scores clustered in the mid-range: false starts ( $M=5.57$ ), self-corrections ( $M=4.90$ ), repetitions ( $M=4.60$ ), and silent pauses ( $M=3.90$ ). For mispronunciation, a stark contrast emerged between the weakest areas—intonation and prosody ( $M=3.23$ ) and

phoneme substitution (M=3.87)—and the areas of stronger performance, namely phoneme omission (M=5.50) and phoneme insertion (M=7.27).

### **Variable 1. Disfluency.**

**Silent Pauses.** The quantitative results for silent pauses show this is a significant obstacle. The mean score of M=3.90 (SD=1.81; Median = 3.50) places performance in the lower-mid range of the scale. The high standard deviation indicates considerable variability across students, while the median score being slightly lower than the mean suggests a distribution skewed toward weaker performances.

**Repetitions.** Repetitions presented a moderate level of difficulty, with a mean score of M=4.60 (SD=2.21; Median = 4.00). The large standard deviation of 2.21 again highlights significant performance variation among the learners. The distribution of scores was centered around the median value of 4.00, situating the majority of students at a level where repetitions were noticeable.

**False Starts.** This was the least problematic disfluency dimension. With a mean of M=5.57 (SD=2.16; Median = 5.50), learners performed in the mid-to-upper range. The close alignment of the mean and median scores indicates a fairly symmetrical distribution of results, suggesting that most students operated at a similar, moderate level of competence for this variable.

**Self-Corrections.** This dimension presented a complex statistical profile. The mean score was M=4.90, but the standard deviation was the highest of all dimensions at SD=2.48, reflecting substantial variability. Furthermore, the median value of 6.00 was notably higher than the mean, which indicates a distribution skewed by a number of low-scoring cases that pulled the average down.

### **Variable 2. Mispronunciation**

**Phoneme Substitution.** The data highlight phoneme substitution as one of

the most persistent pronunciation issues. The mean score was low at  $M=3.87$  (Median = 4.00). Crucially, this dimension had the lowest standard deviation ( $SD=1.28$ ), which suggests that this problem was highly consistent and systemic across the entire cohort, with very little variation between students.

**Phoneme Omission.** Phoneme omission showed a more favorable profile, with a mean score of  $M=5.50$  ( $SD=1.61$ ; Median = 5.00). These statistics place this dimension squarely in the mid-range. The moderate standard deviation and the proximity of the mean and median indicate a balanced performance, with most students achieving a level where speech remained largely comprehensible.

**Phoneme Insertion.** This dimension was the area of strongest performance. The mean score was high at  $M=7.27$  ( $SD=1.96$ ; Median = 8.00), demonstrating relatively advanced control. Both the high mean and median place the majority of learners in the upper range of the scale, and the distribution of scores was skewed toward these stronger performances.

**Intonation.** In stark contrast to phoneme insertion, intonation emerged as the weakest dimension overall. The mean score of  $M=3.23$  ( $SD=1.68$ ; Median = 3.00) clearly situates performance in the lower range of the scale. The closeness of the mean and median confirms a consistent trend of low performance, and the statistical profile remained firmly skewed toward these lower-level outcomes across the cohort.

## **DISCUSSION**

The quantitative findings of this study offer a detailed, multi-faceted view of the oral production challenges faced by second-year Modern Languages students learning French. The results confirm that significant difficulties in both disfluency and mispronunciation are prevalent within the cohort. More importantly, the data reveal a complex interplay between students' self-perception of their abilities, as captured by the survey, and their actual performance as measured in the Oral Elicitation Task. This discussion will now interpret the specific findings for each of these two

dimensions by connecting them to the theoretical frameworks of Cognitive Load, Phonological Interference, and the Affective Filter. Finally, it will explore the broader pedagogical implications of these findings and acknowledge the limitations of the current study.

### **Disfluency**

The data on disfluency strongly suggest that students are struggling with the cognitive demands of real-time speech production. The low mean score for silent pauses ( $M=3.90$ ), the most frequent disfluency marker observed, aligns directly with Cognitive Load Theory. As explained by Williams (2023), such pauses are external manifestations of an overwhelmed working memory, occurring as learners struggle with the simultaneous tasks of conceptualizing ideas, retrieving vocabulary, and applying syntactic rules. The mid-range scores for false starts ( $M=5.57$ ) and the high self-reported frequency of self-corrections (70.27%) further indicate that while students are actively monitoring their output, this very process of online editing consumes cognitive resources and contributes to halting, fragmented speech.

This performance data is compounded by the students' own perceptions. The high overall prevalence of self-reported disfluency (68.24%) suggests that the Affective Filter, as described by Krashen (1985), is a potent barrier. Students are acutely aware of their struggles to speak smoothly, which can heighten anxiety and linguistic insecurity. This, in turn, can raise the affective filter, creating a detrimental feedback loop where the fear of disfluency leads to further hesitation and cognitive strain, thereby impeding the natural flow of communication.

### **Mispronunciation**

The findings for mispronunciation reveal a clear hierarchy of difficulty, with learners showing profound and systemic weaknesses in specific areas. The extremely low mean scores for intonation and prosody ( $M=3.23$ ) and phoneme

substitution ( $M=3.87$ ) identify these as the most critical obstacles to intelligible speech. The very low standard deviation for phoneme substitution ( $SD=1.28$ ) is particularly telling, as it suggests this is not a random error but a uniform problem across the cohort. This provides strong empirical support for the concept of L1 Phonological Interference, where learners systematically replace unfamiliar French sounds with phonetically similar ones from their native Spanish, a process explained by Flege's Speech Learning Model (1995). The struggle with intonation, a suprasegmental feature, is also a common challenge for intermediate learners, whose instruction often focuses more on segmental (individual sound) accuracy.

A significant discrepancy was observed between students' self-perception and their actual performance. While a majority (56.53%) identified mispronunciation as a problem, this figure underestimates the severity of the issue revealed in the oral test. This gap suggests that while students may be aware of having a "foreign accent," they may lack the specific phonological awareness to identify the precise nature of their errors. This finding is consistent with previous research, such as that of Erazo Jiménez (2021), which noted that learners' self-assessments do not always align with their measured performance.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

The results of this study carry direct practical and theoretical implications for the field of foreign language teaching. The prevalence of disfluency markers tied to cognitive load suggests the importance of instructional strategies that address the development of automaticity. The findings highlight the potential value of pedagogical frameworks, such as task-based learning with pre-task planning, which may mitigate the cognitive burden on learners during speech. Similarly, the data underscore the significance of creating low-stakes communicative environments, as these may help lower the affective filter and foster linguistic confidence.

For mispronunciation, the findings imply that an effective pedagogical approach would likely need to balance instruction on both segmental and suprasegmental features. The systemic nature of phoneme substitution suggests that explicit phonetic training, including contrastive analysis between Spanish and French phonology, is of high relevance. Furthermore, the profound weakness in prosody emphasizes the significance of contextualized pronunciation practices that focus on rhythm, stress, and intonation. Developing communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in this area would logically involve activities that immerse students in the natural flow of the language, such as shadowing authentic audio or practicing with prosodically-rich dialogues .

### **Limitations of the Study**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research, which in turn suggest avenues for future inquiry. First, the sample size (N=30) and its focus on a single cohort from one institution mean that the results cannot be generalized to all French learners in El Salvador. Nevertheless, this study provides a crucial, data-rich baseline for the UES-FMO context. Second, the cross-sectional design offers a snapshot of student abilities at one point in time; a longitudinal study would be necessary to track the development of these oral skills over the course of the degree program. Finally, while the monologue task was effective for eliciting speech, future research could explore these variables in different communicative contexts, such as interactive dyadic conversations, to provide a more complete view of students' oral competencies.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to quantitatively describe the primary oral production problems in disfluency and mispronunciation experienced by second-year Modern Languages students learning French at the University of El Salvador. Through a detailed analysis of student self-perceptions and measured oral performance, the research has yielded several key conclusions that provide an evidence-based understanding of the challenges these learners face.

First, student disfluency appears to be critically dependent on cognitive load rather than a fundamental lack of linguistic knowledge. The low performance scores in areas like silent pauses ( $M=3.90$ ) reveal that the primary obstacle is the inability to retrieve and assemble language automatically under the pressure of real-time communication. This issue is exacerbated by a high affective filter; students are acutely aware of their disfluency, with a high self-reported prevalence of problems (68.24%), which likely increases anxiety and further impedes the development of fluid, confident speech.

Second, mispronunciation is a systemic and deeply rooted challenge, driven primarily by L1 interference and a significant deficit in suprasegmental control. The uniformly low scores for phoneme substitution ( $M=3.87$ ), marked by the lowest standard deviation of all variables ( $SD=1.28$ ), point to a consistent, cohort-wide application of Spanish phonological rules to French. Even more critically, the lowest scores overall were for intonation and prosody ( $M=3.23$ ), indicating that the musicality, rhythm, and stress patterns of French—features essential for naturalness and intelligibility—are the least developed aspect of the students' oral competence.

Third, a significant gap exists between students' perception of their errors and their actual performance, particularly regarding pronunciation. While a majority of

students acknowledged having pronunciation issues (56.53% self-reported prevalence), this figure significantly underestimates the near-universal and severe problems measured in the oral test. This discrepancy suggests that while students know they possess a "foreign accent," they lack the specific phonological awareness required to identify and address the systemic nature of their pronunciation errors.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the French oral production curriculum:

To combat disfluency and reduce cognitive load, instructional methods should focus on building automaticity. This can be achieved through structured, low-stakes communicative activities and task-based learning cycles that include a pre-task planning phase. Such an approach would allow students to organize their thoughts and language before speaking, thereby lowering the affective filter and fostering more fluid speech.

To address systemic mispronunciation, pedagogy must adopt a dual focus on both segmental and suprasegmental features. For persistent errors like phoneme substitution, explicit phonetic instruction involving contrastive analysis between Spanish and French sound systems is warranted. To remedy the profound weakness in prosody, instruction must move beyond individual sounds to incorporate contextualized practice with the rhythm, stress, and intonation of authentic French speech through techniques such as shadowing and mirroring.

To close the perception-reality gap and improve metacognitive skills, pedagogical activities should be designed to enhance students' phonological awareness. Incorporating exercises where students record, listen to, and analyze their own speech against a native model can empower them to identify their specific error patterns, transforming them into more autonomous and effective learners.

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