

Factors Affecting English Language Teaching in Public Schools in Ecuador

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Abstract. The 2016 Ecuadorian curriculum mandates students must graduate high school with an intermediate or B1 in English. However, it has been found there are factors that aid and/or impede EFL and ELT in the Ecuadorian context. For this reason, the researchers conducted exploratory qualitative research practices such as observations in public schools and round table discussions with EFL public school teachers. For this research, the authors asked the following research question: what are the factors that affect ELT and EFL in the country of Ecuador? To answer this question, the overall aim of this paper is to identify the factors that impede and aid EFL teaching and learning in the country of Ecuador. The round table discussions were transcribed and put through maxQDA qualitative analysis software to retrieve various codes and revealed the factors impeding and aiding ELT in Ecuador. They were then grouped into 5 categories, which are pedagogy related factors, use of Spanish, perceptions and status of ELT, infrastructure and educational policies. These show the various positive and negative factors, which affect language learning and teaching in the country. The above factors are the findings from the first phase of a two year research project that were found that can aid and impede EFL in the country based on the participants of the focus group and classroom observations in public schools and these findings will play a role in shaping EFL/ELT education in the future.

Keywords: EFL factors; Use of L1; ELT; Pedagogy related factors; ELL

Introduction

In Ecuador, the reality of English as a foreign language (EFL) is shown in a study completed by Education First (EF) about the level and English competence of language speakers in the country in 2019. This new study has shown that while there is an implementation of the 2016 curriculum, which is supposed to improve EFL in the country and there is a raising importance of EFL around the country, the actual level of knowledge of English has declined in the last few years and is currently ranked 19 out of 19 in English language proficiency compared to other Latin American countries (2019, EF). This study supported the data found in this paper through the observations completed by the authors that public schools'

students are not graduating with the mandated level of English and teachers are struggling to follow the methodologies and strategies included in the curriculum.

Research completed discusses English language teaching and learning, focusing primarily on the various factors that can aid and impede EFL and English language teaching (ELT) in public school classrooms in Ecuador. Though, Acosta and Cajas (2018) explain how Ecuador is attempting to make EFL a top priority in Ecuadorian education. Many professionals from different regions in the world who work and complete research in EFL classrooms, such as Noom-ura (2013), Gulnaz, Ahmad & Mandouh (2016), Paker and Karaagac (2015), Dakhiel (2014), and Hjalmarsson (2015) discuss various factors that affect English language learning in different levels of schooling beginning with young children up to teenagers. Many of these points that have been previously discussed can be compared to the factors as they play a role in the success or difficulties of EFL when it is considered part of the curriculum in public and private schools in Ecuador and around the world.

In Ecuador, English is seen by educational policy makers as an important tool to move forward in the global world in many different aspects and areas and this is shown in the new planning in the *Curriculo lengua extranjera* (2016), which is the new language curriculum in the country. With the change of the curriculum came up to date methodologies, strategies and various types of technology to promote English language learning throughout the country. The methodologies discussed in *Curriculo lengua extranjera* (2016) include content and language integrated learning (CLIL), communicative language teaching (CLT) and the use of technology for educational purposes, which support and aid in EFL learning. Adding to 2016 curriculum, the 2018 curriculum has also mandated that students must graduate high school with an intermediate level of English in reading, writing, listening and speaking and this can be found in *Currículos de niveles de educación obligatoria* (2018) which is a B1 according to the common European framework (CEFR), which is the base or evaluation guidelines for deciding students' levels and knowledge of EFL in Ecuador.

The National University of Education (UNAE), one of the four emblematic Ecuadorian universities, aims:

“to contribute to the training of people in the educational system for the construction of a democratic, free and fair society, generating excellent educational models, characterized by a scientific approach of rights and interculturalism” (Pérez Gómez, 2015, p.1). The mission of the university implies that through the formation of new education professionals Ecuador will be able to respond to the current challenges throughout the country and transform the educational system. When referring to the current needs of the Ecuadorian society, Dr. Angel Pérez Gómez, former president of the academic committee of the management committee of UNAE, emphasizes the foundations of the pedagogical model in the university which states that, “teacher training for these demands requires a radical transformation of the traditional approaches. It is necessary to train expert professionals in the respective knowledge domains. They must be competent and committed to provoke, accompany, encourage and guide the learning of every citizen” (Pérez Gómez, 2015, p.11).

Based on the aims of the university, an exploratory research project was opened in the Universidad Nacional de Educación (UNAE). The research project stemmed from the need to identify the varying factors that are impeding and facilitating EFL to begin to understand why students are not learning and attaining the mandated goals in the EFL curriculum as mentioned in *Currículos de niveles de educación obligatoria* (2018).

The above-mentioned situation has led the authors to ask the following research question: what are the factors that impede and aid EFL teaching and learning in the country of Ecuador?

This paper will identify base findings for what impedes and aids EFL learning and teaching from an Ecuadorian perspective compared to the international realm to have a better understanding of the reality of EFL and ELT in Ecuador and ultimately give a basis for transforming English language teaching and learning to increase the proficiency in the country.

Literature Review

General factors that impede and aid ELT in the classroom

There are many researchers around the world presenting data about factors that aid and impede ELT in classrooms. Noom-ura (2013) discussed various literature that lists multiple factors that can impede English language learning for EFL learners. Some of those factors cited by Noom-ura (2013) are discussed by Dhanasobhon (2006) ONEC (2003), and Wiriyachitra (2002) and explain how teachers who are poorly trained and have insufficient knowledge of the English language, unmotivated students, classes with many students, teachers who have too many assigned class hours, insufficient hours given to EFL classes and inadequate infrastructure, which Gulnaz, Ahmad and Mandouh (2016) go onto explain that these factors ultimately demotivates students to improve and learn EFL. However, through the study completed in Thailand by Noom-ura (2013) the main components found that impede learning are student's inability to connect to the language and the fact that they have very little access to English outside of the classroom.

Dakhiel (2017), Valsecchi, Barbeito, and Olivero (2017) and Fareh (2010) completed studies in different parts of the world about EFL programs that found various factors. They found information that students, teachers and administrators felt a textbook was very important to EFL learning and the teacher's ability to explain and teach to this textbook was equally important. The author also explained impeding factors such as inadequate technology and infrastructure such as no air conditioning, small classrooms and lack of projectors in the classroom impeded language learning.

As these seem to be general trends of reoccurring problems in EFL around the world this paper will look at various literature from different countries that discuss the use of L1 or native language in the classroom, the effects of teacher knowledge of L2, inclusion in the classroom, evaluation, methodology used for teaching and learning, educational policies that affect EFL classrooms and general views of EFL in countries and the classroom around the world.

Pedagogy related factors

There are many factors related to pedagogy that can affect language learning and teaching around the world. Acosta and Cajas (2018) found that in Ecuador communicative language teaching (CLT) is the most mentioned and widely used methodology, though they found it is not used correctly in most instances. Many educators would preach the use of CLT, but what was the actual reality in the classroom was much different. Another problem was many of the topics teachers used were not interesting or created a disconnect for students as they were based on places outside of students' knowledge and not focused on Ecuador or Ecuadorian culture shaping the students views of English as a foreign language as something that is not directly associated to the learners daily lives and reality. However, Hjalmarsson (2015) found that with the use of ICTs, CLT and CLIL could create authentic spaces in non-English-speaking countries when the teachers are trained properly and use the methodologies correctly.

According to Hjalmarsson (2015) information and communication technologies (ICTs) are an increasingly popular methods for increasing learner autonomy, teaching to student's needs, increasing motivation and improving overall development of various EFL skills. However, the author points out that these positive effects can only occur when ICTs are used correctly as a teaching tool to promote language learning. Teachers must be prepared and understand how to use ICTs as a tool especially when they are used together with CLT and CLIL. Another important aspect is class size. According to Almulla (2015), there have been more and more studies confirming smaller class sizes have positive impact on student learning and a teacher's ability to teach.

According to UNESCO as quoted by Kormos and Kontra (2008) inclusion of special educational needs or SEN includes all students who have needs that come from learning problems and physical disabilities. This idea also functions for EFL teachers throughout the countries public and private schools. However, it can be seen through research from Russak (2016) that most EFL teachers are unprepared to teach students with special needs as they do not have the necessary training or knowledge of the multiple need's students have. Many of the teachers in the study agreed that if there was an aid who was specialized in special education assisting the special needs students in the classroom this would overcome many of the problems found, but in most countries that teach EFL there is no policy to mandate a special needs teaching assistant. This study also found that teachers are unable to give SEN students the attention and care they need when they have been incorporated into large classes. When these teachers did not have proper training, they would tend to feel inadequate and unable to do their jobs when SEN students were in their classes creating unmotivated teachers.

Use of the L1 in the classroom

Professionals in English language teaching have been debating the positive or negative use of the L1 or the first language in the classroom for a long time. The use of the L1 in an EFL classroom is one of "the most long-standing controversies in the history of language pedagogy" (Stern, 1992, p. 279). It can be seen there are many factors that can aid and impede the learning of a foreign language in a classroom. Gulnaz, Ahmad and Mandouh (2016) explain that the use of the L1 or L2 by the teacher of a foreign language classroom can ultimately motivate or

demotivate students to succeed in learning the L2 depending on how it is used, and the individual student's needs.

Atkinson (1987) was one of the first pioneers that demonstrated the L1 could aid in EFL when it is used strategically as a tool for teachers to use in the classroom. Then Juarez and Oxbrow (2008) went on to explain in a more recent study that these original ideas of Atkinson (1987) are beginning to return. They focus on the positive use of L1 in the classroom. These authors explained that L1 can aid in L2 learning when it is used to facilitate the learning process. They pointed out that the L1 can have a positive effect on learning a foreign language if it is used in small doses for specific activities such as giving directions, explaining activities and checking that students understand the tasks they are participating in. Based on the mentioned pioneers in the use of L1 in the classroom, Clancy, (2018) looked at students' perspectives of the use of the L1 in the classroom and found similar results specifying that when used for specific purposes, students prefer the teacher use it. They feel more motivated when they understand what is happening in the classroom and can use it to increase their L2 knowledge and gain proficiency quicker when the L1 is used purposefully.

When Juarez and Oxbrow (2008) found through their research that the use of the L1 in their case Spanish specifically aided in English language learning for grammar explanation and linguistic content and found that difficult concepts directly related to language learning were better understood and accepted by students when the L1 was used, while communicative activities and student interaction could be conducted in the L2 language without any L1 assistance. This study gave basis to an up to date study of Paker and Karaagac (2015) which identified many reasons teachers use the L1 in the classroom such as, clarify and explain grammar, give overall general information, teach new vocabulary and check students understanding of the activities and content of the class. Another study that supports the idea of using the L1 in specific situations was conducted by Anh (2012). The author specifically focused on the use of Vietnamese in an EFL classroom and found it aided in checking for student understanding, teaching new grammar and new vocabulary. The author found the use of the L1 language saved time and aided in student understanding of difficult topics, but Anh (2012) pointed out that it is important to not overuse the L1 in language classes and the level and age of the students can play an important factor in when and how to use the L1.

Anh (2012) goes on to explain that many teachers feel the use of the L1 has been frowned upon with the rise of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and gained increasing popularity among EFL teachers around the world but particularly in Southeast Asia. Anh (2012) completed a study to find out if teachers who use CLT in the classroom find the use of L1 to have a positive and negative effect on language learning. However, more and more studies are showing that the use of L1 in certain instances can aid in the foreign language learning process, specifically in English language learning. Paker and Karaagac (2015) also explained that many teachers tend to feel guilty or do not want to admit they use L1 regularly in their English language classrooms. However, their study also showed that the appropriate use of L1 can aid in language learning when it is used for specific explanations about the content and checking for student

understanding. On the other hand, they point out that if a teacher uses the L1 too much they can become dependent on it and this can hinder L2 learning because students lose opportunities for direct contact with the foreign language. The initial data in Ecuador has shown that when a teacher uses the L1 in a classroom for specific purposes teachers explain that have found it to be helpful, but when it is over used or used as a crutch it can impede EFL learning and teaching.

Perceptions and status of EFL

It can be seen through the literature and data that most teachers enter the classroom with preconceived notions of ELT and of their students. Parra (2008) discussed various factors in Colombia and in EFL in general that may impede EFL learning for students. The author focused on how students' and teachers' personal views, attitudes or pre-conceived notions of foreign language learning could have a huge impact on being able to process and improve in EFL. The author goes on to explain that the research findings show that the teaching strategies chosen by the teacher can improve initial negative preconceived notions of EFL students in Colombia. The strategies which aid in this process can be verified through action research completed by the classroom teacher. Another study carried out by Valsecchi, Barbeito and Olivero (2017) explained that most of the participants believed English was one of the most important subjects to learn for their academic and economic future but many also did not have any intrinsic motivation to achieve language competency. It was found that the students thought all motivation to increase language competence depended solely on the teacher and not the students themselves. Therefore, the study expressed that even though students understood and viewed English as an important tool for their future this did not affect their intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to increase their L2 language skills.

Gulnaz, Ahmad and Mandouh (2016) and Susilo, Suhatmady, Sunggingwati, Farisa, Nurul & Ilmi (2017) demonstrate that students are not motivated to learn a language because they have no social contact outside of the classroom with the L2 language and no authentic interaction other than the classroom. Students do not have authentic reasons to use the L2 in their daily lives and therefore do not feel motivated to internalize or learn it. A study conducted by Zappa-Hollman (2007) in Argentina found that teachers who worked in areas of poor economic backgrounds perceived that since these students had many social problems that stemmed from being economically poor, the teachers were not properly trained to teach them English and therefore when these students did not improve in their language skills the teachers could not be held accountable.

Infrastructure

According to Gulnaz, Ahmad and Mandouh (2016), having the necessary resources and infrastructure in an EFL classroom are very necessary for EFL learners to be able to increase their knowledge and be successful L2 learners. When the teacher does not have different types of resources such as technology or teaching aids an EFL class can be monotonous and an ineffective learning environment. Gulnaz, Ahmad and Mandouh (2016) points out that when infrastructure does not allow for smaller classes and teachers are made to teach overpopulated class sizes and this can also impede L2 learning and teaching. However, Negi (2016) points out that the resources available, the number of

students in a classroom and the technology available are not aspects a teacher normally has control over. These are circumstances decided by the educational system of the country and teachers and schools must find alternative forms to better L2 teaching and learning when the infrastructure and resources available are not ideal. Zappa-Hollman (2007) describes similar situations in Argentina where the class sizes are too large and there are not enough resources, which create a difficult environment for teachers to teach EFL according to the standards set by the government in the curriculum.

Educational policies

Around the world assessment and evaluation, factors can either impede or aid in EFL for students. A lot of this can depend on the policies put into place by the country where foreign language learning is taking place. Fareh (2010) explains that when educational policy creates assessment techniques that allows for students to just study for an exam that can create an EFL classroom where teachers begin to teach specifically for a test and stops being about gaining competency or increasing language skills and knowledge. This author emphasizes that when this occurs basic skill learning and critical thinking abilities are forgotten. Two other authors, Alcazaren and Rafanan (2017) conducted a broad study of various countries in Asia and Africa where they found that poor planning and implementation of educational policies can have a large effect on language learning in schools. They saw that when pedagogical, professional training, teacher's previous language knowledge and infrastructure factors are not considered by policy writers language learning and teaching are generally negatively affected.

According to Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez (2016) negative views and beliefs and low motivation can stem from changing educational policies with foreign language learning in a country. The author goes on to explain that when educational policies are dictated by the economy, not the reality of education within a country it can create an environment that does not promote learning and motivation to increase knowledge of a subject, in this instance language. Another problem found is that when a government put unattainable policy into place without first researching if the teachers are at a level to reach the politically set goals students and teachers become disenfranchised and unable to reach the unrealistic standards set by governments.

Teachers are then expected to follow sets of foreign standards that have no connection to what is occurring in the classroom. This creates a situation where teachers are not teaching, and students are not learning. Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez (2016) found that when students must attain a high level of knowledge specifically in English it becomes impossible when teachers are not prepared and students have no real connection to the language itself besides having to pass various evaluations to move forward in their educational career, because it has been decided through educational policy that for the country's economic growth English at a high level is a necessary tool for all. Zappa-Hollman (2007) can also describe a situation in Argentina where the country ambitiously adopted a new curriculum for EFL, however did not have trainings of the curriculum, ways to manage the classroom and the reality of EFL in the country.

Zappa-Hollman (2007) found that newly implemented policies for EFL functioned on paper but made EFL teaching and learning more difficult in the country.

Methodology

The present exploratory study following a qualitative approach was based on initial observations of public-school teachers in the classroom. This study is part of a two-year research project funded through UNAE. The data presented in this article is the data collected in the first phase of the project. The data collection techniques used were chosen based on the methodology used in the project.

The data collected was grouped into specific themes for roundtable discussions where codes were then created through content analysis. These codes were then categorized into the areas that are discussed in the results section. The main techniques used were observations of EFL classes in public schools in Ecuador and three round table discussions developed in a workshop carried out at the National University of Education (UNAE) in Cañar province in Ecuador. The participants of the research came from public schools with EFL areas in Ecuador.

The participants were 40 EFL teachers from public schools whose profile followed certain criteria. All the teachers had a B2 level of English according to the CEFR and this was certified through a countrywide exam given to all English language teachers including speaking, reading, writing and listening skills. Second, they all had to be currently teaching in a public school in elementary, middle or high school in Ecuador. Lastly, they had to have at least two years of teaching experience in public schools in Ecuador.

To provide the initial exploratory data classroom observations were completed for 15 of the 40 EFL public school teachers in different areas to provide a general picture of classrooms in the country. Once all the observations were complete, they were analyzed, and main themes were identified to serve as the topics for each round table discussion, which was completed with all forty participating teachers.

These teachers and others from the same area were invited to the workshop: Contextualizing English Teaching: Bringing to the fore teachers' views through roundtable discussions and workshops. It was organized in six round table discussions run by a group of researchers' part of an overarching two year research project. There were two research project members conducting these roundtables based on different topics. The topics chosen from the observations and used in the round table discussions were the use of L1 in teaching EFL, resources used in the classroom, class organization, methodology, and responding to students' needs during "teaching moments". These project members led the round table discussions but did not participate actively in the discussion itself. They were only there to facilitate and record the discussion. Workshops focused on the needs of the teachers that were found during the observations and were offered during these two working days intertwined throughout the day with the round table discussions.

The data was recovered from the 40 participants of the round table discussions. These teachers shared their perceptions and knowledge about the various topics

presented from the observations. The round table discussions were then transcribed and put through maxQDA qualitative analysis software to retrieve various codes explaining different areas that aid and impede EFL. Once the coding was completed, the content was analyzed and grouped into 5 categories that are shown identifying the characterizations that aid and impede EFL in Ecuador.

Discussion

The research has presented various factors effecting ELT in Ecuador. The information has been grouped into five categories that seemed to affect language learning the most. These categories are pedagogy related factors, use of Spanish, perceptions and status of ELT, infrastructure and educational policies including professional development. Each of these categories identifies the different factors that were found through focus groups made up 40 teachers from various public schools who taught different levels of EFL. The obtained results show similar findings to other places in the world that are discussed in the literature review.

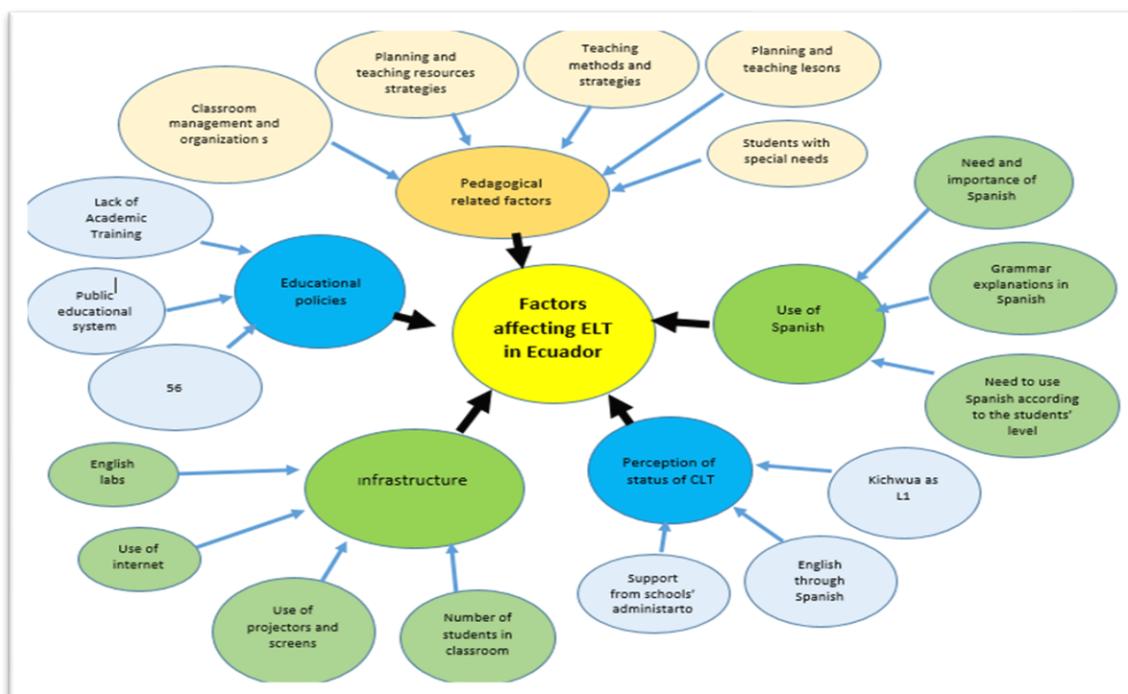


Figure 1: Factors affecting ELT in Ecuador.

To answer the scientific question and to accomplish the research objective that led to this article and based on the literature review, the identified categories are defined as follow:

Pedagogy related factors identified in this research are those related to the application of the current language teaching approaches CLT, ICTs and CLIL. These include classroom management and organization, planning and teaching strategies, teaching methods and strategies, planning and teaching lessons as well

as other factors about inclusion of special educational needs students in the EFL classroom. Coincidentally, with what was stated in the literature review, the use of Spanish or L1 in the classroom stated by round tables participants can have a positive or a negative effect. Participants referred to factors such as the need and importance of the use of Spanish for grammar explanations and the necessity to speak Spanish according to the students' level. The perception and status of EFL refer to students and teachers' personal views, attitudes or pre-conceived notions and judgements of foreign language learning. In our research, the participants referred to motivation and academic and economic factors such as support from school administrators, teaching English through Spanish and the influence of indigenous languages as L1. Another category was related to infrastructure, which can be defined as the necessary resources in an EFL classroom. These are necessary according to the teachers participating in the round tables. Participants referred to English labs, the use of projectors, screens, as well as the number of students in the classroom as areas of infrastructure.

The educational policies create assessment techniques and their planning and implementation can have a large effect on language learning in schools. The conducted research revealed factors such as lack of academic training and the influence of national public educational system essentially those related to the mandated textbook for ELT in Ecuador. The results will now be presented and discussed in more detail.

Results

Pedagogy related factors

Pedagogy related factors discuss various areas of ELT such as teaching methods and strategies, inclusion with difficulties of teaching special needs students incorporated into the classroom, the use and implementation of lesson plans and the way classes are organized and managed. Pedagogical has been defined "as the teaching methods that a teacher engages in a classroom that focused on achieving his lesson objectives" (Kagenyi, 2016) The authors of this paper found varying factors related to this subject mentioned by public school teachers in Ecuador. These teachers believe pedagogy in ELT to be made up of the different areas mentioned above. Teachers 1,4,7 and 8 commented,

"some teachers simply fill the book and that is all"

When discussing how they taught they said they,

"start with motivations, and usually bring up some reflections on activities"

"usually I work with the four skills listening, speaking, reading and writing"

"I always make competitions"

Through the teachers' comments the authors can infer that teachers feel the different skills are important and strategies such as games are used a lot in the

classroom. There was not much talk in sequenced planning with the use of various methodologies that are discussed in the current curriculum.

Another factor that affect EFL and ELT related to pedagogy is planning and teaching lessons according to the mandated Ecuadorian curriculum. Many said that it was very difficult to plan and implement in their classrooms because they had not been trained in the pedagogical areas mentioned in the curriculum and are not given enough time to plan. Many teachers also mentioned that when they did try and do English clubs or extra activities to promote English language learning the authorities of their school did not support them and in the end, they could not complete the activities they would plan. Teacher's 10, 12, 8 and 4 comments were,

"no, no we do have the support of the administration for English activities"

"We only have to complete with some exercises. we don't plan in advance, we don't have to. In addition, for example in my case I am not only an English teacher, I teach other things, other subjects"

"I think that planning is also important within the organization. Before we have to teach a class, it is important to see how we are going to work, what is the topic that is going to be addressed, if we are going to work in individual groups"

"All planning for English class cannot be improvised, because that is when we speak a lot of Spanish"

These comments showed that some teachers felt planning was a very important pedagogical factor, while others do not, but would plan more often if properly trained and given more time to do so.

Classroom management is a very important part of EFL pedagogy. The way students are organized in pairs or groups greatly influences the development of communicative competence of foreign language learners. Many of the teachers participating in the round tables also found classroom organization as an important pedagogical factor since they normally had large class sizes in small classrooms which is defined by Almulla (2015) as how many students a teacher has allotted to them in the attendance roster. Teachers made it clear they face challenges of organizing their classrooms to manage them because of how many students they have. This is a problem because having many students in the classroom has been shown as an impediment to teaching and learning.

Teachers 1, 3, and 15 explained that in each of their classes they,

"organize the students and sit them in different places, especially the students who have more needs, I put him in the front near of the stronger students in English or I can help them, help them to figure out what to do and what to do in the class"

"I start class with the warm up, our classes are very large: We have, usually we have forty, thirty-eight or forty students. Ah, it is

uncomfortable to work in groups, I usually work in groups with the skill of reading”

“I sit them in different groups, then assign roles and establish dates for all activities.”

Another major pedagogical factor mentioned by the teachers is the mandated law that all students must be included in the regular classroom. This was explained that in almost every class there is one or more special needs student included in the general population and it is the teachers’ job to create materials for them, plan activities and use methodology that includes these students, so they have an equal education. They made this clear that for them this is a problem, because they have many other students and most teachers are not trained to teach to the specific needs of these types of students. However, the teachers explained how they felt about these students and some of the strategies they use to include them. Teachers 32, 5, 6 and 2 said,

“I always ask one or the best student to support them”

“they don’t understand, the students with the special needs, they need to understand more”

“I have problems because I work with special educational needs (students) in 3 classrooms, so they work differently”

“They send us children with different needs that unfortunately we were not trained for, like Braille and we are asked to include or integrate these children and we are not trained.....the end result of all this is we are not forming high school graduates with the profile they request, we are forming beings that will be unable to face the world because then they will not have aids, supports, or anything... they will not be a useful person to society.”

It is clear these pedagogical related factors can either aid a teacher or impede a teacher in ELT depending on how that teacher structures the classroom and the other factors that are found in this paper. Teachers are struggling to find ways to teach and deal with special needs children that are placed in their classrooms without having the proper training to help them thrive.

Use of the L1

As previously stated in the literature review, the use of the L1, Spanish in this case, in an L2 language classroom is controversial. The use of Spanish in the classroom was a widely discussed topic in the round tables conducted in the workshop. It focused on how it can aid or impede EFL depending on how and how much it is used by the teacher. Juarez and Oxbrow (2008) point out that the positive use of the L1 is mostly advocated by the teachers themselves through research studies. This is important to understand when reviewing the data provided below. Many of the teachers who participated in the round table discussions felt the use of the L1 or Spanish was very important in the EFL classroom. Teacher 31 explained this was for various reasons such as aiding in teaching grammar, for young learners, giving context to the course content, and support students understanding.

“it is necessary and important to use Spanish when we are giving our classes, because, in the context itself our students all come from or are Ecuadorians”

Teacher 15 explained especially in the context of teaching young learners that

“they do not understand, and it is necessary for me to try to use the mother tongue so that they can perform and fulfill their activities”

Teachers 19 and 25 went on to discuss with each other aspects of the use of the L1 that could aid in English language learning in the classroom. The teachers said,

“grammar needed to be explained in Spanish, so they understand how it functions in Spanish” and

“the use of Spanish firstly if it depends on the student's level and the age and depends a lot on the topics that we are going to deal with”

At the end of the discussion teacher 38, who said she had many years of experience teaching English commented on how Spanish can also impede increasing language competence.

“it's a fallacy of Ecuador to speak in Spanish, that is, if you must speak Spanish, but only when it is really necessary not all the time, or not for comfort, we (teachers) prefer to speak Spanish so as not to improve our English, because when one practices English one improves, if we do not practice English we forget it and the students cannot learn it”

The use of the L1 in the classroom is also a controversial topic for Ecuadorian EFL teachers. Some feel it is a necessary tool to use in specific instances, while others see it as a crutch to use in a language teaching classroom.

Perceptions and status of EFL and ELT

In Ecuador, EFL is a mandated subject and is affected by the status and perception of the language by the EFL teachers in the country. According to Gulnaz, Ahmad & Mandouh (2016), pre-conceived notions and little support for from authorities can be demotivational for students and teachers in EFL classrooms. With negative pre-conceived notions teachers cannot motivate their students to improve. Dakhiel (2017) also found that the administration plays a role in the success of EFL. This author pointed out that without the support for language learning from the staff, ELT can be much more difficult and not thrive. Based on the teachers experiences this category shows that perceptions teachers have about student language barriers, overall perceptions of language acquisition in Ecuador, perceived notions of a student's socio-economic background can affect their language learning abilities, and a student's intrinsic motivation to learn English.

The literature review revealed that social context with L2 and socio-economic conditions of the country where the EFL teaching-learning process takes place influences foreign language learning. It was made clear in the focus group that neither parents nor school authorities consider English as an important subject. The participants said that students might struggle to learn English because of predominant language barriers such as Spanish being their second language, so the teachers cannot communicate with the students.

Teacher 21 said,

“students whose first language is Quichua, I do not know Quichua” Teacher 4 believes that

“our reality is different; I am in a rural school. There are stereotypes in rural sectors, our students do not have the same opportunities”.

Teachers 6 and 13 believe that in the current educational system,

“Only students with money will benefit or really put their part to learn English in the educational system”

Many teachers have pre-conceived notions about how EFL should be taught. Teacher 34 made clear,

“if we are sincere, we didn't have English since school, we went to school and teachers taught us in Spanish so, I think that obviously according to our reality, we have to speak to them in Spanish, give instructions, explain grammar.....I do consider the culture we have had in the past to be a problem”.

Finally, Teachers 1, 16, 21, 30 and 38 commented how they do not have much support from their school authorities. Different teachers pointed on that

“there is a new class the administration wants to include, so now we have only two hours a week of (English) class, not three hours”.

They said that when there is something extra or a different activity, the administration always plans them during the class hours of English, but not during other subjects.

Infrastructure

An important variable in ELT that was considered by the teachers is the infrastructure that is available or not available in the public schools where EFL is taught. CAF (2016) describes educational infrastructure as a comfortable space specifically designed for learning. This space includes adequately sized classrooms, which are designed with enough light, running water and necessities. This also includes spaces for teachers, outdoor areas for students to do sports and play, learning spaces such as libraries, laboratories and medical facilities. The teachers who participated in these focus groups saw infrastructure mostly as technology and classroom size. In the round table discussions, many teachers complained about having small classrooms for too many students and they said that this did not allow them to conduct group and pair work activities to put CLT into practice and the lack of technology such as projectors, screens, internet access, and whiteboards. These were the comments from teachers 5,12 and 22 about the infrastructure of different classrooms in Ecuador.

“We use material that is not suitable for small children, because, they need projectors, and a big screen”

“Sometimes I want to use internet because we don't have internet in our schools and I only use my flash memory. I work with the computer to watch some videos”

“when we wanted to create an English lab, I was looking for funding, but the principal said, no we will take care of this, but until now, we have no English lab”

It can be seen from these quotes that many teachers see the infrastructure available in public schools inadequate, but they do not look at what is available, only what is not. Most of the participants did not mention how or if they used the learning spaces outside of the classroom or what spaces were available in the public institutions that they worked in.

Educational Policies

The participants also explained that educational policies are mandated in the school and can have positive or negative effects on ELT and EFL. These policies effect promotion of students, specifically the leniency of students' promotion to the next year or level, teacher qualifications needed or not needed for ELT, the 2016 English language curriculum, includes the mandated use of textbooks, and general policies teachers must follow in various areas of ELT and methodologies and strategies teachers should use in planning their classes. Educational policies are defined as “rules that are intended to help schools teach students efficiently, fairly and safely. These rules determine how students are taught, what they are taught, and how schools manage students and school personnel” (Classroom, 2020). However, the participants of this study do not see the educational policies in Ecuador in this way. They see them as specific rules for students to follow or a hinderance for student learning. Teachers do not see these policies as help for teaching and learning in the ELT/EFL public school environment.

Teacher 23 said,

“the public education system is very fragile, especially when considering a free education system and it is considered the duty of the government, the authorities or teachers to give them all materials, call them, look for them while as teachers we feel quite demotivated and we no longer work 100% and we simply try and meet the policies that have been mandated through the curriculum.”

Teachers must have certain levels of English to teach EFL in public schools. However, some teachers in Ecuador have degrees in English and are qualified to teach this subject, while others are not. Teacher 19 admitted during the round table discussion that,

“in my particular case I am working 2 years with English, I am not academically prepared person in this area. Due to the needs in the school, they forced to impart me this subject”

Teacher 20 and 33 also pointed out that,

“English is not my area of study, but I teach it to children”

Another mandated policy is EFL textbooks. These are supposed to promote learning in the classroom and help the teacher do their job. There were very different opinions of the use of the textbooks in an EFL classroom. Some were

positive such as serving as a “reference” or a “learning tool” and some were negative. Teacher 7, 11 and 34 mentioned that,

“it is not a matter of sitting with the students to fill the books, no, but it is a very good support material for us”

“The book for me is not so good because it has enough problem, errors, ... ehh, it´s too complicated”

“I DO NOT FOLLOW THE BOOK, I create the situation myself, I take the subject, I take the objectives from the book but I create the situation, context, and activities. That fascinates me because it is really the context where they are, it is what they now like, so if we get hooked on it, the children will develop and they discover what the grammatical point is or what I need to express”

Teachers 8 and 12 believed that how you use the textbook is important,

“what I do, is have the student, fill in the books, I work with the activities, not those of the book and I develop the activities and I complete it with a real experience”

“the book does help me a lot, because, it has activities like reading, writing, speaking, that for me is good”

Another issue is some teachers said they received the guide for the textbook and others did not. Teacher 13 said,

“The school has not given it to me” or “the administration should give it to every teacher”

A large problem many teachers mentioned are the number of hours required for English every week. Teachers 1, 5, 6, 9, 14, 20, 22, 34 and 40 do not feel they are given a sufficient number of hours to teach.

“I understand the rules of the Ministerio de Educación, but I don´t agree with that because it´s only three hours with them and they need more”

While educational policies are supposed to support the teacher and promote learning in some instances the participants explained that is not happening. We can see from the teacher´s discussions that there is a disconnect from the English language curriculum and policy and the actual classroom reality. This finding may be a main reason that English language competency may be low throughout the country.

Conclusion

It has been proven through international studies discussed in this article that Ecuador has a very low level of proficiency in the English language. Therefore, identifying the factors that came to light because of the teachers involved in the focus groups will be the first step in identifying what will aid and impede EFL in schools and this will lead to more studies and is very important to improve proficiency around the country. That is why exploratory qualitative research practices such as observations of EFL classes in public schools and round table discussions to provide the awareness and knowledge of a large sample population of EFL public school teachers were necessary to reveal the data presented in this paper. The professional development or training of EFL teachers, infrastructure, perceptions and status of EFL, pedagogical related factors and educational policies that effect EFL were the areas that were discussed and seemed to affect the participating teachers the most. These categories will be shared with the Ministry of Education and various public schools to attempt to improve EFL and ELT in Ecuador and affect future policy writing in the region for EFL at the school level to ultimately aid in making educational changes that will improve English language proficiency for future generations. Now that the factors have been identified that aid and impede EFL, the next step will be to find deeper meaning to the categories and attempt to identify forms of improving English language learning in Ecuador through future interviews and surveys of larger populations based on the findings of the focus groups and the future interviews.

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