Master in Teaching English as a Foreign Language
Applied Research Paper

English Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Standardized Proficiency Tests on Classroom Instruction in Ecuador

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Key Words

standardized English proficiency tests

washback effect

instructional strategies

Abstract: English is a well established pillar in the Ecuadorian national curriculum and the number of bilingual high schools and universities is only growing, hence the demand for proficient English teachers. Albeit, research in this field in an Ecuadorian context is do still lacking. This mixed methods study investigated English Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of Standardized English Proficiency Tests (SEPT) on classroom instruction in Ecuador. Language proficiency, washback effect, and teacher efficacy were the main variables focused on.. To achieve the objectives of the study, 20 teachers completed a 31-item researcher-made Google survey validated by an expert. To cross-validate the quantitative results, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 teachers selected purposefully from among the questionnaire respondents. The semi-structured data was analyzed thematically. The results of the qualitative phase corroborated those of the quantitative part revealing that each educational level has different English needs and goals and that while SEPTs indicate skill levels and language proficiency they are not strong enough indicators to ensure language teaching efficacy. Three areas that would benefit from future studies are highlighting feedback as a main indicator of teacher preparedness, socio-economic differences and lack of access to SEPTs and further analysis of self-perceived beliefs, values and perceptions of English teachers with direct classroom observation

Palabras clave

examen estandarizado de competencias en Inglés

efecto ´washback´

estrategías de enseñanza

Resumen: Inglés en un pilar bien establecido dentro del currículum nacional ecuatoriana. y el número de escuelas secundarias y universidades bilingües continúan creciendo, de ahí la demanda de profesores de inglés competentes. Sin embargo, aún falta investigación en este campo en un contexto ecuatoriano. Este estudio de métodos mixtos investigó las percepciones de los profesores de inglés sobre el impacto de las pruebas estandarizadas de dominio del inglés en la instrucción las aula Ecuatorianas. El dominio del idioma, el efecto ´washback´ y la eficacia del maestro fueron las principales variables en las que se centró. Para realizar una validación cruzada de los resultados cuantitativos, se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con 8 docentes seleccionados a propósito entre los encuestados. Los datos semiestructurados se analizaron temáticamente. Los resultados de la fase cualitativa corroboraron los de la parte cuantitativa y revelaron que cada nivel educativo tiene diferentes necesidades y objetivos de inglés y que, si bien los SEPT indican niveles de habilidad y dominio del idioma, no son indicadores lo suficientemente sólidos para garantizar la eficacia de la enseñanza del idioma.Tres áreas que se beneficiarían de estudios futuros destacan la retroalimentación como un indicador principal de la preparación de los docentes; las diferencias socioeconómicas, la falta de acceso a los exámenes estandarizados y un mayor análisis de las creencias, los valores y las percepciones auto percibidos de los docentes de inglés con observación directa de la clases.

Introduction

Worldwide, English proficiency tests have been implemented as the main tools to assess English language competence and have become a clear indicator of proficiency for a large number of people, including English teachers. These tests have been used by a great number of higher level educational institutions as a default requirement regarding admission and/or placement. Likewise, they have also been used by several educational and non-educational organizations for hiring, which denotes the ever- increasing importance of languages. Thus, particularly in the educational area, it is of the utmost significance to further identify and analyze the position of English teachers in terms of English proficiency and competence, as measured through standardized proficiency tests.

Standardized testing, language learning and teaching methodology have long been well researched areas within the social sciences. Taking into consideration globalization and the popularity of the English language in business and all levels of education there is a substantial amount of research available that delves into the previously mentioned topics.

Saglam (2018) in her study, "Can Exams Change How and What Teachers Teach? Investigating the Washback Effect of a University English Language Proficiency Test in the Turkish Context", examined how the washback effect manifested on teaching for tertiary education in Turkey. This mix-method study collected data through classroom observations and 14 focus group interviews. Findings of this study point towards both positive and negative test effects on teaching. Regarding the former, positive effects were observed on materials. As for the latter, negative effects included narrowing of the curriculum, and changes in content and methodology.

In an additional study by John B. Collins and Nicholas H. Miller (2018) titled "The TOEFL (ITP): A survey of teacher perceptions." The objective was to gain a better understanding of teachers' perceptions of the TOEFL (iBT) while reflecting on the history of the TOEFL. After surveying teachers at the mid-sized private university in rural western Japan, a low level of agreement among teachers concerning the validity of the TOEFL (ITP) was found, and a mid to low level alignment of the TOEFL (ITP) with the English program at the University. The level of willingness among teachers to teach TOEFL (ITP) classes was also low.

Overall, the teachers generally agree that the TOEFL (ITP) is important for students.

Sevy- Biloon and Julia Raina Fetima (2019) researched “Educators and Students Perceptions about Ecuadorian NEST Knowledge and Quality in Terms of Effective Teaching.” The objective of this study was to find out the effectiveness of non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) when teaching oral communication proficiency and sharing declarative knowledge. Moreover, this study also aimed to identify both the student's and teachers' perspectives about defining those "important qualities" that constitute effective teaching. Based on their research using a mixed method approach to interview and question both teachers and students, it was concluded that being native or non-native is not the most important factor in English language teaching in Ecuador, while many of the NNESTs showed some abilities which determined that they were effective teachers, they fell behind in procedural language, fluency and pronunciation.

Faez, Kars and Uchihara (2021) carried out the research study “Connecting language proficiency to teaching ability: A meta-analysis”, in which it was sought to analyze the relationship between teachers’ language proficiency and their self-efficacy. This meta-analytic study examined the combined data of 19 studies. Out of the 19 studies, 14 were conducted in Asia (4 in Japan, 3 in South Korea, 3 in Iran, 2 in Thailand, 1 in Turkey, and 1 in the Philippines), 4 in North America and 1 in Venezuela. A moderate relationship was found between language proficiency and self-efficacy, meaning there exist other factors that make up the beliefs English teachers hold of their pedagogical capabilities and teaching skills.

Despite the usefulness in identifying the English level of an individual, standardized English proficiency tests have also spurred conversation regarding what proficiency looks like and how it should or should not be measured. These concerns are taken to a higher level when talking about the testing of non-native English teachers and how their constant exposure to these tests may affect their own perceptions of teaching and their instruction. In Ecuador, public English teachers previous to their hiring are required to be assessed in order to identify their level of English proficiency. Currently, said prospective teachers can take any of the 16 certifications that follow the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which have been pre-approved by the Education Ministry of Ecuador (MINEDUC, 2018).

Given foreign languages have always had a place in education, perspectives from both the learner and teachers need to be analyzed in conjunction in order to properly examine efficacy and allow for advancement and professional development. The expectations and standards outlined by the Ministry of Education in Ecuador are not being met. Sevy-Biloon and Fetima (2019) revealed a study completed by educational authorities in 2012 in Ecuador, which showed 74% of all current Ecuadorian English teachers were at an A1 or A2 level. Additionally, the authors reported that only 1% of teachers met the B2 standard for teachers in Ecuador, according to a 2015 study conducted by the British Council of Educational Intelligence.

Previous research focusing on standardized tests, English proficiency, and classroom instruction highlights the impact or effects on students rather than the teachers. To understand the effect on ESL/EFL teachers in Ecuador, it is necessary to research if and how these standardized tests impact; proficiency, self-efficacy, and classroom instruction. In Sevy- Biloon and Fetima's (2019) findings, it was noted that being a native or non-native English speaker did not influence effective teaching. High-stakes English proficiency tests are required for both teachers and students, and as Saglam (2018) explained, an overemphasis on systematic standardized testing can cause changes, investigating which various forms of instruction are currently effective, is crucial.

Investigating to what extent standardized proficiency tests for English teachers improve teachers' instruction, what other types of tests or professional development indicators could also measure teacher competency, and how different proficiency tests affect teachers' instruction are essential questions. Considering the research area, inquiring as to what extent said tests are useful for, whether it be language assessment and/or curricular evaluation is also important. Based on the identified research problem, as well as its aforementioned justification, the general objective of this paper is to identify English teachers' perceptions of the impact of standardized English proficiency tests on English language teachers' classroom instruction in Ecuador.

The impact of standardized English proficiency testing in Ecuador and how it may affect teachers' perceptions and classroom instruction is related to Planning and Development of Educational Organizations. This field scrutinizes the constant changes the educational system undergoes in order to achieve effective educational outcomes for the national territory and has

pushed the need for research and conversation regarding what proficiency looks like and how it should or should not be measured.

The methodological approach for this research topic is deductive, and of a descriptive nature. As for the instrument's design, a mixed- method design, through the application of online surveys and interviews, was identified as most suitable to obtain data. Quantitative (survey) and qualitative (in-depth interviews) data will be used to analyze the relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable, namely, standardized English proficiency tests and classroom instruction. In order to ensure the instruments designed by the authors of this paper answer effectively to the main objective of study, a professional will review and validate their design.

The sample group will be university and high school English teachers in Ecuador, as well as educational administrators from different positions. The self-administered surveys will provide general information on the variables of interest, as well as a first glance at the beliefs and perceptions of teachers regarding standardized English proficiency tests (SEPTs). These perceptions will be further analyzed in the in-depth interviews, by exploring the beliefs, values, experiences and perceptions respondents have of effective instruction in terms of language proficiency.

The first section of this paper is the Introduction, which collects information and concepts regarding the research topic in order to understand the significance of the research problem and general objective. The following section on Methodology indicates the nature, approach and methodological strategy used to collect data. As for the Literature Review section, it situates the research within the existing literature on the topic, allowing to identify existing debates around it. In the following section of Results, the results of the research are evidenced. These results are analyzed in the ensuing Discussion section both, in terms of the existing literature, as well as of the author's ideas regarding the research's obtained results.

The Conclusion, as the sixth section of this paper, focuses on the analysis of the general objective in terms of the research results, that is, in terms of the interaction of the study variables. In addition, this section provides clues for the future about the place of SEPTs within English teaching in Ecuador. The Strengths and Limitations section, as stated by its name, contains

information regarding the strengths and limitations of the research. Regarding the Future Research Areas section, this section explores what new approaches this research topic could take in the future in terms of methodology, variables, sample groups, among others. Finally, the section of Bibliographical References contains the references to the works of authors that have served as the theoretical backbone of this paper.

Literature Review

In the following literature review the variables of standardized English proficiency tests and classroom instruction will be explored. These variables will be analyzed based on their dimensions, namely, standardized English proficiency tests, the washback effect, instructional strategies, self-efficacy of teachers, and teacher cognition. Lastly, the aforementioned variables will be analyzed in terms of their relation and purpose of this paper.

Standardized English Proficiency Tests

Galikyan et al. (2019) assert ¨The broad range of English language teaching and learning contexts present in the world today necessitates high quality assessment instruments that can provide reliable and meaningful information about learners' English proficiency levels to relevant stakeholders¨ (p.3) "The information obtained through tests and upon which decisions are made should be reliable and valid." (Bachman, 1990, as cited in Galikyan et al., 2019). English Language Proficiency tests have been around for almost half a century. The TOEFL® test was launched in 1964, and has undergone several major revisions due to advances in English instruction (Educational Testing Service, 2021).

In Ecuador, "English as a Foreign language (EFL) in Ecuador began in 1950, during the Government of Galo Plaza Lasso" (Barre & Villafuerte, 2021, p.101). While these exams have a long history and are high-stakes, Harding and McNamara pointed out that "The international English language assessment industry appears to be quite insulated and slow in response to changes and developments in contemporary language practices" (cited in Jenkins et al., 2019, p.88)

The International English Language Test System (IELTS) and the TOEFL are large-scale proficiency tests for both students and working professionals. Generally, the IELTS academic test is recommended for students who may study abroad and the General Training test for work or immigration. According to the ETS "TOEFL iBT emphasized integrated skills and provides better information to institutions about how students´ communicate skills and capability to handle academic coursework" (ETS.org) TOEIC and CELTA while less popular tests actually evaluate ESL/EFL teaching ability.

The most common proficiency framework used to standardize or create a frame of reference in relation to language abilities and test scores is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Created by the "Council of Europe which aims to validate the language ability. There are six CEFR levels, which are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 (Saieedi, 2019 as cited in Rali & Wizan, 2022). A1-B2 are the basic users or beginners; B1-B2 are independent users or intermediate and C1-C2 are the proficient users or advanced. (Council of Europe)

Many studies have explored the issue of ESL/EFL teachers and proficiency levels, including variables such as teachers' and/or students' perceptions of proficiency, and subtopics such as efficacy, teaching methods, and washback (Bachman, 1990; Renendya, 2018; Hung & Huang, 2019, Yusuf & Novita, 2020; Alzeebaree & Zebari, 2021; Argudo et., 2021).

The definition of "proficiency" in relation to the English language varies. In his seminal work *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing* Bachman (1990) describes rather than defines "language proficiency", synonymous with "communicative language proficiency and ability" a concept which "distinguishing characteristics" one being the ability to use language appropriately while recognizing the importance of context as well as the social situation, determining the interaction in relation to both form and function (p. 4).

Conversely, Bachman (1990) recognizes that the ability of language tests to measure language proficiency is not without its faults and "presents some of the most complex and challenging problems." (pg. 4) Additionally, Bachman determined; "The way that the ACTFL and ILR define proficiency has brought to the forefront questions about the relationship between test content, test method, and the validity of interpretations or uses that are made of test scores" (Bachman and Savignon 1986; Bachman 1988 as cited in Bachman, 1990).

Furthermore, Renandya (2018) affirms that “TOEFL does not assess one's ability to use English for teaching purposes” highlighting the consensus in teacher education literature that English teachers require proficiency in both general and classroom English. Yusuf and Novita (2020) also show a “strong relationship” between teacher language proficiency and teaching effectiveness, nevertheless it is “complex,” ultimately concluding that being an effective teacher does not guarantee “mastery” of language proficiency and vice versa.

In addition, the importance of distinguishing between “General English Proficiency” (GEP) and “Classroom Language Proficiency” (CEP). GEP, defined as being comfortable in using English to speak or teach and as opposed to CEP, “language used in the classroom environment” is essential. (Pham, 2017, as cited in Argudo et. al, 2021) Likewise, distinguishing the differences between and being able to define ESL, EFL and CLIL is also essential. Stern (1983) defined the differences between “foreign language” and “second language” in relation to how the language is used, why one is learning the language, in what environment and with what methods.

In “A Study of the Differences between EFL and ESL English for the Classroom Teaching in China,**”** Si (2019) explains:

> EFL is regarded as English as a Foreign Language, and ESL is called English as a Second Language……EFL means learning in non-English speaking countries, while ESL means English as a second language, which has the same or even more important status as the mother tongue ” (p. 33).

Content and Language Integrated Learning known as CLIL, was created by academic professionals working under the European Commission. They defined CLIL as, “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (Coyle et al., 2010, as cited in Hashmi, 2019).

Washback effect

A plethora of literature and studies on English proficiency tests, what they measure, and the perceptions they have created, have been published. Therefore their impact; within a number of contexts, naturally exists which relevantly leads to the following variable, the washback

effect. In a test review conducted by Read (2022), he points out that while there is a large body of research related to IELTS “The largest group of external research projects come under the broad category of impact and washback” (p.687).

Washback, concerns the impact of tests and assessments on materials, teachers, and learners. Thirty years of research has shown that testing and assessment have influenced language teaching significantly (McKiney and Thompson, 2021). “The washback hypothesis, proposed by Alderson and Wall (1992), assumes that teachers and learners do things they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test.” (as cited in Sadeghi, et. al., 2021, p.6) Similarly, McKiney and Thompson explain, “Washback effect refers to the influence that language testing has on curriculum design, teaching practices, and learning behaviors” (2021).

Additionally, current research and studies have revealed how tests influence motivation, course content, teaching methods, effectiveness, as well as student and teachers´ perceptions of themselves and each other. (Collins, J. B. & Miller, 2018; Hung and Huang, 2018; Wang, 2019; Argudo et al.) The impact high stakes standardized tests have on teachers, perceived proficiency and efficacy is researched globally. In Indonesia, Wulyani et al. (2019) found that the EFL teachers had an issue rating their own proficiency with accuracy abilities and found it concerning that they believed their proficiency had improved over time, which did not correlate with their analysis between years of teaching and proficiency.

It is essential to consider how ESL/EFL teachers self-evaluate their language proficiency aside from standardized tests, if at all. Wulyani et al. (2019) stressed the importance of providing English language teachers support to maintain and improve their proficiency levels concluding that merely improving general proficiency is not enough for teachers to be efficient and effective English teachers (p.272).

Classroom instruction

In the upcoming section, the variable of classroom instruction has been disaggregated in the dimensions of instructional strategies, self-efficacy of teachers, and teacher cognition.

Instructional strategies

The main goal of classroom instruction, and the methods and strategies followed by teachers within it, is to allow all students to achieve full completion and understanding of the subject being taught (Seechaliao, 2017). This section will focus on the macrostrategies of direct instruction, indirect instruction, interactive instruction, experiential learning, and independent study.

Direct instruction refers to traditional vertical teaching where the teacher is a key actor in the classroom dynamics (Rolf & Slocum, 2021). The instructional format for DI as Rolf and Slocum indicate, needs to be based on strategies that are "delivered to homogenous skills-based groups of students using frequent, active student responding" (2021, p. 793). Conversely, indirect instruction is student-centered allowing "students to decide what to do and how to effectively do it"" (Garita et al., 2021, p. 4). Under the latter type of instruction, students' level of involvement is key in their learning process and it's reflected in how they handle their learning process metacognitively, affectively, and socially (Garita et al., 2021).

These types of instructions differ from interactive instruction in aspects such as that active interactive communication takes place as a means to promote learning, whether it is for encouraging communication with other students, teachers or experts (Senthamarai, 2018). Moreover, as stated by Senthamarai, interactive instruction strategies focus on collaboration and cooperation because "without practical application, students often fail to comprehend the depths of the study material" (2018, p. 37).

Regarding experiential learning, as its name states, places importance on the experience of each individual because "the richest resources for learning originate in the learners themselves" (Beard & Wilson, 2018, p. 2). Specific techniques within this strategy promote primarily the process of learning rather than the product of learning through the use of elements both, within the learners' inner private world and the outer (public world). Therefore, experience connects the particular learners' experiences and views of the world, with thoughts and ideas (Beard & Wilson, 2018).

As for independent study instructional strategies, students and their learning processes are based on self-reliance, self- improvement, and responsible decision making (de Leon & Garcia, 2020). However, it is important to highlight that students "do not become efficient independent

learners by themselves… pupils have to learn how to learn" (Kobiljanovna, 2021, p. 354). During this process, teachers enable to some extent the student's learning environment, with help from the student, while fostering autonomy, creativity and a wide array of skills (de Leon & Garcia, 2020).

Self- efficacy of teachers

The self-efficacy of teachers refers to the beliefs a teacher holds of his own teaching abilities in order to accomplish the tasks required from his professional role. Extensive literature on the subject has identified that "a teacher with a high level of self-efficacy is successful in student engagement, instructional strategies and classroom management by letting students participate in the lesson, improving teaching practices and carrying out a good orchestration of the learning environment" (Türkoglu, et al., 2017, p. 766).

Regarding student engagement, most research on the subject has focused on the impact of student-related factors and context-related factors on it; however, teacher self-efficacy has emerged as an important variable in determining the involvement of the student with his/hers learning process (Lu & Mustafa, 2021). A positive association has been found between higher levels of teacher's self-efficacy and higher student engagement as shown mainly by the implementation of techniques that encourage student self-determination (Mireles- Rios et al. 2019; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017). In this way, self-efficacious teachers, due to their high levels of commitment, resilience and persistence, are able to constantly look for ways that help them and their students achieve the set learning outcomes (Lu & Mustafa, 2021).

Likewise, higher levels of self-efficacy are associated with greater instructor's willingness to try new instructional strategies, as well as adapting to them (Mireles- Rios et al. 2019; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017). Such willingness is based on the instructor's confidence in their teaching ability, which "…may challenge their own thinking and the thinking of their students"(Mireles- Rios et al. 2019, p. 8). Poulou et al. (2019) when analyzing the relation of teacher self-efficacy and classroom practices corroborated previous research results that linked higher efficacy levels to a preference for the implementation of mastery-oriented approaches rather than performance-oriented ones; moreover, a high level of teaching efficacy has proven to

be a predictor of "the use of instructional practices based on creativity, understanding, and meaningfulness" (Poulou et al. 2019, p. 38).

Lastly, the element of classroom management is linked to a teacher's sense of self-efficacy due to the perceptions teachers hold of the control they have of the classroom, and therefore, of the learning environment. A higher level of teacher self-efficacy is linked to teachers who employ preventive strategies of classroom management rather than reward and/or corrective ones (Mitchell, 2019), this is, teachers who "are more likely to employ an effective system of rules to improve student behavior and engagement" (Mireles- Rios et al. 2019, p. 8). The importance of an effective and safe classroom environment furthermore reduces the chances of teachers experiencing burnout and negative feelings towards students, such as anger, frustration and/or distrust (Mitchell, 2019).

The aforementioned elements on which teacher self-efficacy has a spillover effect have as a main goal the improvement of student performance because, as Shahzad and Naureen (2017) state, self-efficacy "influences an individual's action, effort and the way of accomplishing tasks resulting in enhanced abilities and makes on more confident about the desired results" (p. 49). Thus, teacher's self-efficacy has the power to translate into student's self-efficacy given teachers seek to obtain the same attitudes of motivation and confidence in their students (Shahzad & Naureen, 2017).

The level of self-efficacy of a teacher is determined by several factors, among which personality characteristics, and values stand out as the most important (Mahler, et al., 2018). Current literature on the subject has focused on identifying the level of self-efficacy of teachers in order to analyze its impact on teaching effectiveness. Higher levels of self-efficacy have proven to be indicators of greater efforts made by teachers towards successfully helping students achieve their learning goals and improving students' performance (Barni et al, 2019).

Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that a third element has been analyzed as part of the positive association between teacher's self- efficacy and student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management, namely, teacher's collective efficacy (Lu & Mustafa, 2021). As its name states, collective efficacy refers to the collective shared belief of the groups capabilities to achieve the desired learning goals and outcomes (Lu & Mustafa, 2021), acting "as

powerful contextual resources in sustaining self-efficacy" (Guidetti et al. 2018, p. 203). Across the literature on the subject, the contextual resources of mastery faculty experience and support from educational administrators/ superiors have been identified as key factors in enhancing teachers' self-efficacy (Lu & Mustafa, 2021; Guidetti et al. 2018).

Teacher cognition and pedagogical practices

Teacher's decisions as to what pedagogical practices they choose to implement in the classroom greatly vary even within the same institutions and/or organizational structures. The term of teacher cognition has been thoroughly analyzed in the literature to account for such decisions; in this way, teacher cognition explores "the complex relationship between what teachers know and believe and how their cognition affects their decisions in the classroom" (Krulatz et al. 2021, p.3).

Regarding language teaching cognition, beliefs, as indicated by Borg, "cannot be reduced to the yes/no answer a teacher gives to a decontextualized statement about some aspect of language teaching" (2018, p. 87), the complex nature of beliefs needs to be recognized in order to adequately understand and analyze them. This complexity starts by making a distinction between the different types of beliefs, namely, stated beliefs and enacted beliefs. The former refers to beliefs held explicitly by teachers, including personal pedagogical principles, and the latter to those that actually take place (Borg, 2018).

Moreover, it is important to note that beliefs and practices are oftentimes not aligned as several research studies have shown (Krulatz et al. 2022; Başar, 2020; Borg, 2018). Such inconsistency is mainly due to external factors, regarded as contextual necessities, that shape the teacher's instructional decisions within educational institutions, such as set curriculum, timing, and the level of student's proficiency (Başar, 2020). Thus, "beliefs and practices are mutually informing and mediated by the sociocultural contexts teachers are part of" (Borg 2018, p. 87) under which teachers are expected to adapt their beliefs in order to work within the provided conditions.

Standardized English Proficiency tests and ensuing classroom instruction

As has been mentioned throughout this literature review, classroom instruction depends on many external and internal factors. Out of such factors, the self-efficacy of teachers has been mentioned as a key indicator of perceived teaching ability. However, current studies have pointed out that proficiency cannot and should not become "the sole measure of teaching efficacy", but teacher language proficiency must be considered "in relation to the specific tasks required of teachers to avoid general language proficiency comparisons couched in the native speakerist perspective" (Faez et al. 2021, p. 773).

Regarding perceptions about English proficiency related to standardized test results, stakeholders at educational institutions attribute a high degree of credibility to proficiency tests and their ability to determine learning performance including other variables such as teaching content and classroom practices (Hung & Huang, 2019). However, "Having a high level of GEP does not necessarily guarantee a teacher can handle the specific language needed to carry out classroom tasks in English (Le & Renendya, 2017 as cited in Argudo et al., 2021).

Argudo et, al. (2021) correlate with Faez et al. (2021) study who found that ¨students' they surveyed expressed that their teachers´ ¨language proficiency does not interfere their teachers' efficacy for giving instruction¨ adding that it did not affect classroom engagement either. This acknowledges Tsang's research findings (2017), which indicate that after teachers meet a specific proficiency threshold, other factors such as personality and skills become better indicators of teaching effectiveness.

There is no contention to the fact that tests influence content, curriculums, teaching practices and both students and teachers. Therefore, given the existing literature, it seems adequate to analyze to what degree standardized English proficiency tests, the preferred proficiency indicator by many, are appropriate indicators of teacher's language proficiency and effective classroom instruction.

Methodology

The nature of this study is descriptive since numerous theories and research related to standardized English proficiency testing and classroom instruction have already been published. The approach was deductive, and a mixed method design was used for this study. The

independent variable is standardized English proficiency tests, and the dependent variable is classroom instruction. The data was collected using interviews and surveys with both open and closed ended questions, as well as testimonies and grounded theory. The sample consisted of university and high school English teachers in Ecuador.

The 31 question survey as well as the 12 question interview were reviewed and validated by Andrea Bobor Letamendi, Magister in Higher Education and Digital Processes (See Annex #). The aforementioned instruments were designed to inquire about key concepts mentioned in the literature regarding the relationship between the variables of standardized English proficiency tests and classroom instruction, such as teacher's beliefs and perceptions related to SEPTs, washback effect, instructional strategies, self-efficacy of teachers, and teacher cognition. .

The survey was self-administered using Google Forms in order to obtain a wide number of responses from teachers and educational administrators of different institutions and educational levels (See Annex #). The sample group consisted of 20 educators, all participants were authorized by the institutions who employ to take part in the study. (See Annex #). Of the total, 20, 65 % are male (13 respondents) and 35 % female (7 respondents). Respondents are experienced English teachers, including and not limited to ESL, EFL, CLIL, and IB teachers, many holding simultaneous positions as Coordinators, Deans and Viceprinpals. The surveys were conducted between January 20, 2023 and March 13, 2023.

Amongst those surveyed a select group of 8 English teachers and educational administrators was purposefully selected to be interviewed in order to analyze their beliefs, values, experiences, and perceptions regarding effective classroom instruction and standardized proficiency tests (See Annex #). The importance of a follow-up interview after the surveys lies in the idea that, "Participants' voices and representations or their perceptions' are important resources to help develop an understanding of fairness, justice and validity from test-takers' lived experiences" (Hamid et al, 2019); hence, a detailed testimony of the participants' experiences further allows them to bring up topics and issues that could have otherwise been overlooked.

The applied interviews were of an in-depth semi structured nature, which were later analyzed by developing a coding system and assigning themes where similar responses, perceptions were identified. Of the 8 in-depth interviews conducted, 6 were done online using

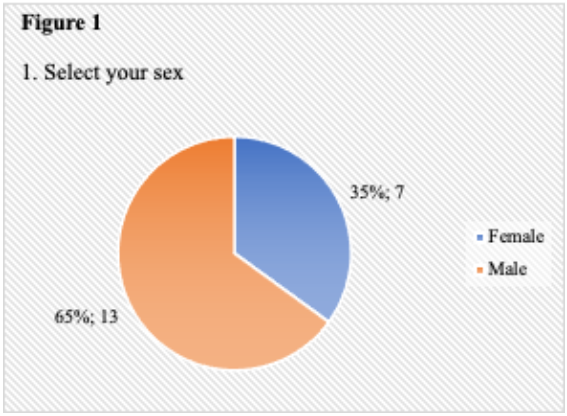
video conferencing platforms while 2 were face to face. On average, each interview took around 25 minutes. Each interview began with a brief introduction by the researcher about the topic and problem to be analyzed. Under prior agreement with the participants, all interviews were recorded for later transcription and analysis. The number of interviews ceased once theoretical saturation was reached, that is, when the information obtained about the object of interest of the interview became repetitive and redundant (Bertaux, 1989).

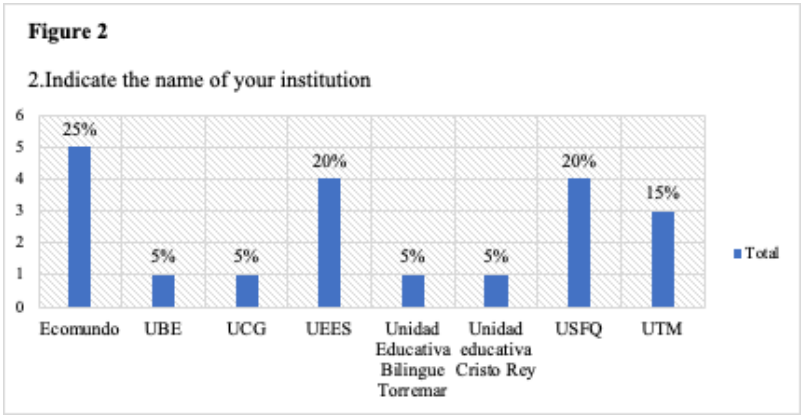
Results

The following results evidence the experience the sample group possesses as well as their perceptions and thoughts regarding SEPTs' importance in relation to their professional teaching strategies. This section has been divided into subsections in order to easily identify and analyze the results in the upcoming discussion section. Once the results of the survey are described, they are then compared to the qualitative survey question answers in order to cross check and validate responses.

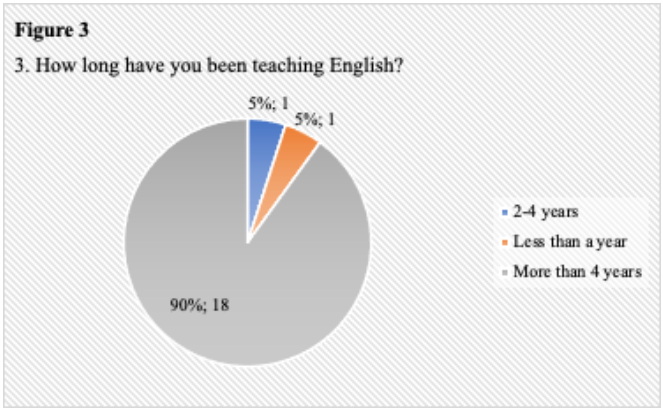
General information of respondents

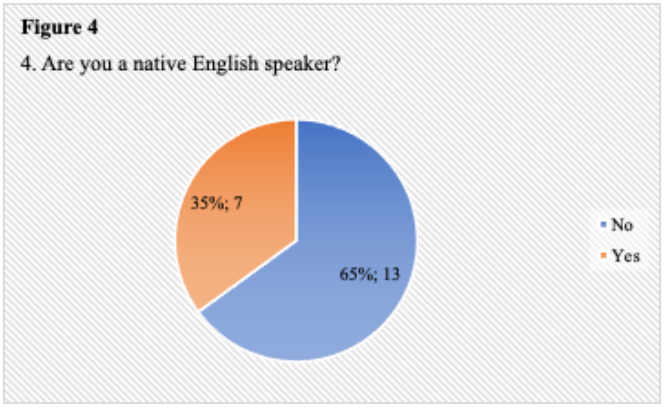
The first 8 questions inquire about general information and provide general demographics about the respondents. Out of the total sample, 20 people, 65% of respondents are male and 35% are female (Question 1. See Figure 1). Regarding the institutions the respondents work for, 25% work for Ecomundo, followed by 20% from UEES (Universidad de Especialidades Espiritu Santo) and 20% from USFQ (Universidad San Francisco de Quito), 15% from UTM (Universidad Tecnica de Manabi), 5% from UBE (Universidad Bolivariana de Ecuador), as well as 5% from Unidad Educativa Billingue Torremar, 5% from Unidad Educativa Cristo Rey and 5% from Universidad Casa Grande (Question 2. See Figure 2).





Regarding English teaching experience and professional degrees; 90% of respondents have been teaching English for over 4 years, 5% for 2-4 years, and another 5% for less than a year. None have been teaching for less than 1-2 years (Question 3. See Figure 3). Additionally, 65% of respondents are non-native English speakers, and the remaining respondents, 35%, are native English speakers. (Question 4. See Figure 4).

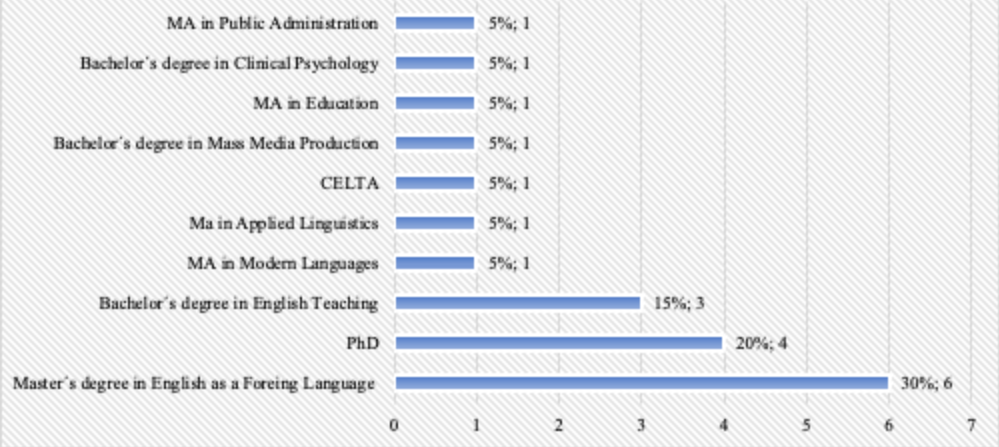




The most recent degree obtained by each respondent was a master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (MTEFL) 30% , followed by 20% who have a PhD, and 15% who indicated to have attained a bachelor's degree in English Teaching. The remaining sample selected the following, Master´s (MA) in Modern Languages (5%), MA in Applied Linguistics (5%), CELTA (5%), bachelor's degree in Mass Media Production (5%), MA in Education (5%), bachelor's degree in Clinical Psychology (5%), MA in Public Administration (5%) (Question 5 See Figure 5).

Figure 5

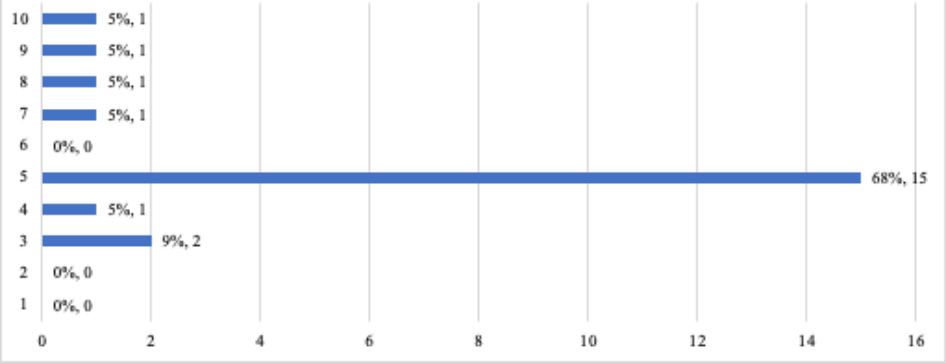
5. What is your most recent degree in?



In relation to the subjects currently taught by the respondents, 68% of them chose Language, 9% chose Human Sciences, and 5% chose History. The remaining 20% entered their own response in the survey, under the option “Others”. To define “Others” respondents included the following subjects; English as a second language (ESL) (5%), language teaching (5%), business (5%), and linguistics (5%). This question was a multi-selection choice question, therefore one or more options could have been chosen(Question 6. See Figure 6).

Figure 6

6. What if any subjects do you teach in English?



As demonstrated by Figure 7, 55% of respondents teach more than 12 hours of English per week on average, 20% of respondents do so 9-12 hours per week, followed by 15% of respondents who teach English 1-4 hours per week, and a 10% teach on average 5-8 hours per

week (Question 7). The aforementioned number of hours of English taught take place in different environments. When asked (Question 8) about what educational level respondents were currently teaching, the main response was at a College/University (undergraduate) level with 65%, followed by high school level with 35% and, finally, 25% of respondents indicated currently teaching at the postgraduate university level as demonstrated by Figure 9. None of the respondents chose the given option of "Not teaching; educational administrators/superiors".

Figure 7

7. How many hours of English classes do you teach on average per week?

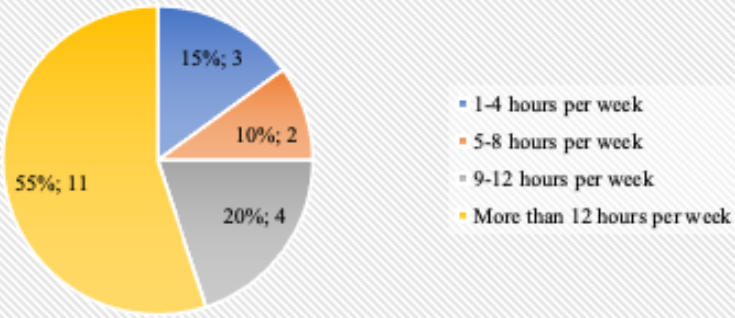
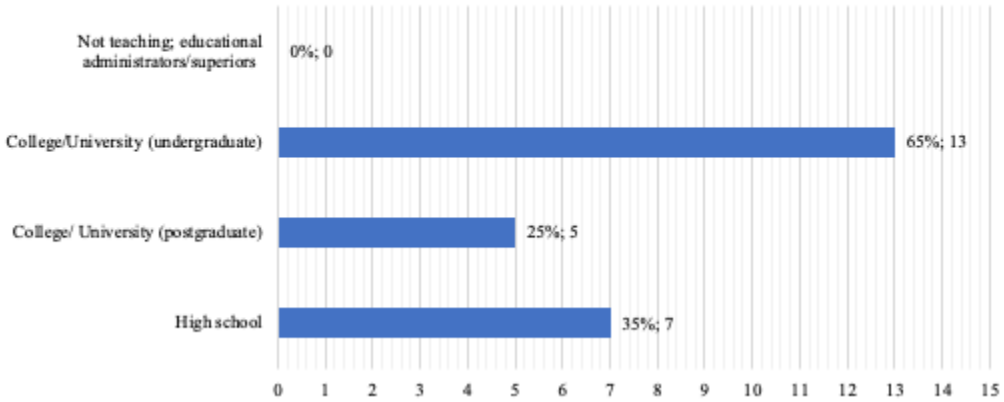


Figure 8

8. What educational level are you currently teaching?



Perceptions of the importance of SEPTs

Survey questions 9 to 15 examined general information regarding respondents' records taking proficiency tests. Figure 9, which illustrates the answers to Question 9 investigating whether or not respondents have taken a SEPT, shows 85% of respondents have taken a test, while the remaining 15% have not taken one. Out of the reasons provided in Question 10 as to why respondents have taken SEPTs, 58.8% of them (10 respondents), indicated "Job requirement" as the reason, followed by "To get to know my language skills", which was selected by 52.9% of respondents (9 respondents). To a lesser degree, 41.2% and 29.4% of respondents choose the reasons of "Educational requirement" and "To improve hiring opportunities/ career prospects"', respectively (Figure 10). Similar to Questions 6 and 8, this question was also a multi-selection choice question.

Figure 9

9. Have you ever taken an English language proficiency test?

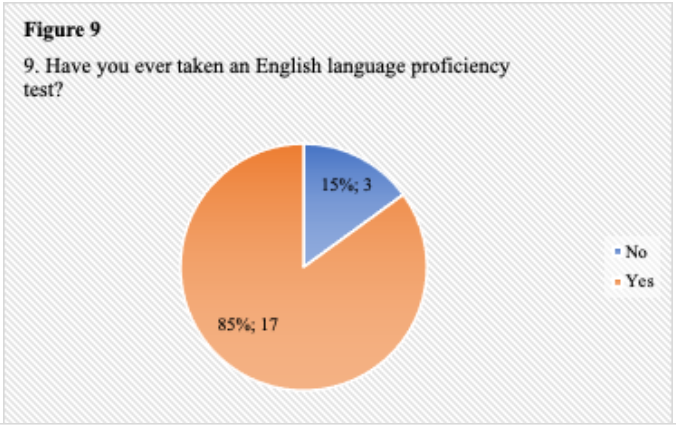
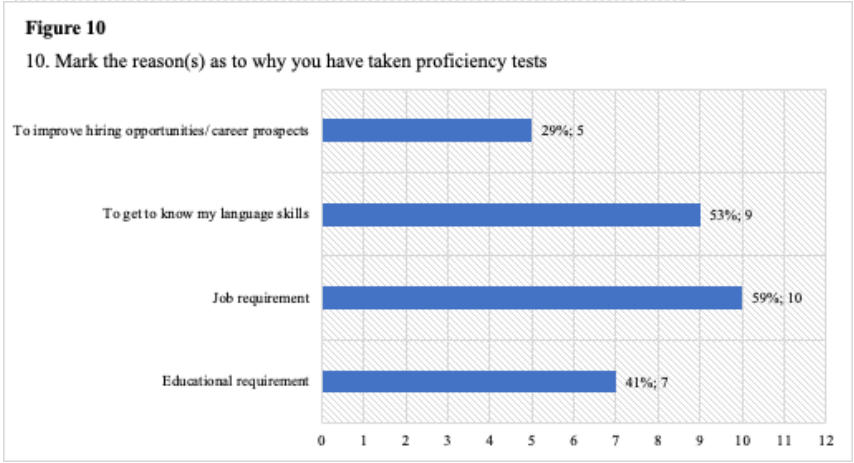


Figure 10

10. Mark the reason(s) as to why you have taken proficiency tests

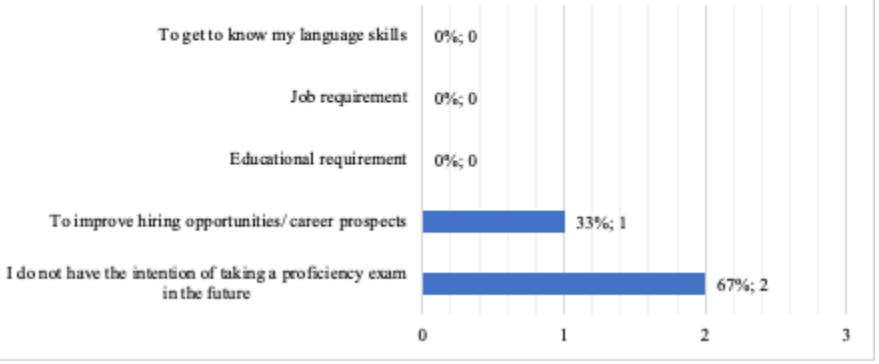


Question 11 of the survey inquired about reasons the respondents would take a SEPT in the future. The majority of responses, 66.7% have no intention of taking a SEPT in the future

since they chose, “I do not have the intention of taking a proficiency exam in the future”. The second most prevalent answer was “To improve hiring opportunities/ career prospects”, selected by 33.3% of respondents (one respondent). The rest of the options; “Educational requirement”, “Job requirement” and “To get to know my language skills” went unchosen (See Figure 11).

Figure 11

11. Mark the reason(s) as to why you would take a proficiency exam in the future

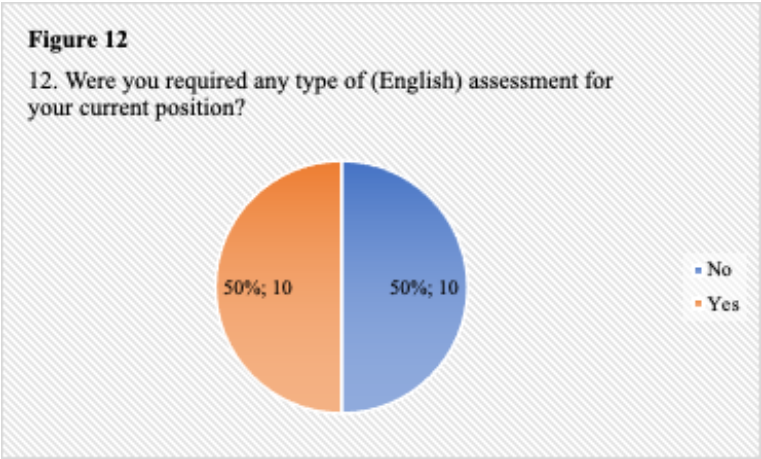


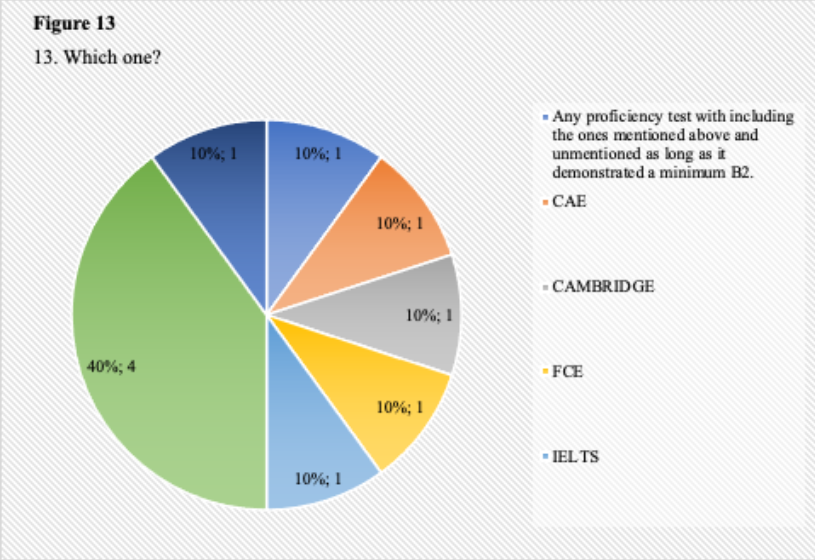
Set requirements

Figure 12 provides information on Question 12 of the survey regarding whether or not the respondents were required to take any type of (English) assessment for their current position. Half of the respondents chose “Yes”, while the remaining respondents from the sample chose “No”. Those who answered yes (10 respondents), indicated the following to be the assessments required, TOEFL/TOEFL iBT (40%), IELTS (5%), TOEIC(5%), FCE(5%), Cambridge(5%), CAE(5%), “Any proficiency test including the ones mentioned above and unmentioned as long as it demonstrated a minimum B2” (5%), and CELTA (0%) (Question 13. See Figure 13).

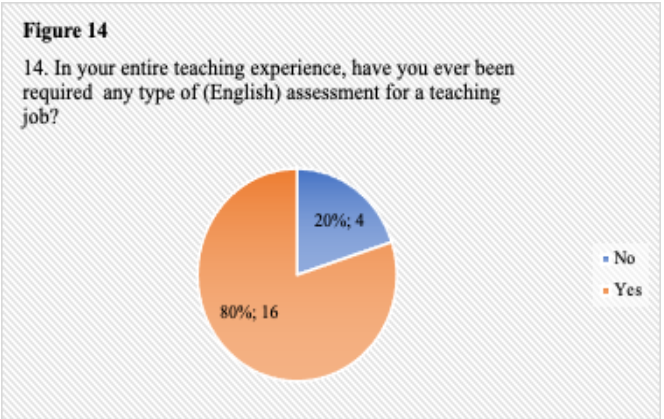
Figure 12

12. Were you required any type of (English) assessment for your current position?





Respondents were asked in Question 14, "In your entire teaching experience, have you ever been required to do any type of (English) assessment for a teaching job", to which, as shown by Figure 14, 80% of respondents selected the "Yes" option and 20% selected the "No" option. The respondents that answered affirmatively, further indicated in Question 15 the assessments required, with the TOEFL/TOEFL iBT being selected by 6 respondents (37.5%), IELTS selected by 2 respondents (12.5%), and TOEIC, FCE, Cambridge, BEC, CPE (Cambridge Proficiency), C1 level, CELTA and IELTS, and "A minimum or level B2" being chosen each once, that is, by 6.3% of respondents (See Figure 15).



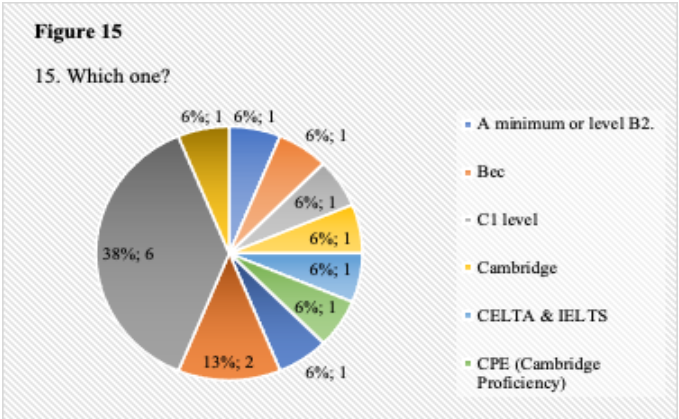
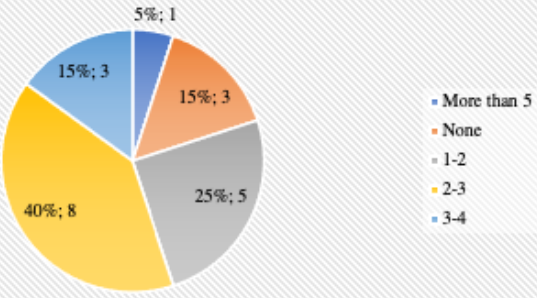


Figure 16 displays responses to Question 16 of the survey, which inquired "Around how many proficiency tests have you taken so far?". The majority of respondents, 40%, selected the "3-4" option, 25% of respondents selected the "1-2" option, followed by 15% of respondents who selected "None" and another 15% selected "4-5". As for the "More than 5" option, one respondent selected this option.

Figure 16

16. Around how many proficiency tests have you taken so far?



SEPTs and English proficiency

Question 17 illustrated in Figure 17, reveals the answers to the question, "Do you think the scores you got on the last proficiency test you took reflect your proficiency level accurately?", to which 82.4% of respondents (14) selected the "Yes" option, while 17.6% (3 respondents) selected the "No" option. For Question 18, "After taking your latest proficiency test, which skill(s) do you think you need to improve?", which was a multi-selection choice question and portrayed on Figure 18, the skills were chosen as follows, Writing (41.2%, 7 respondents), Reading (29.4%, 5 respondents), All of them (11.8%- 2 respondents), None of them (11.8%, 2 respondents).

Figure 17

17. Do you think the scores you got on the last proficiency test you took reflect your proficiency level accurately?

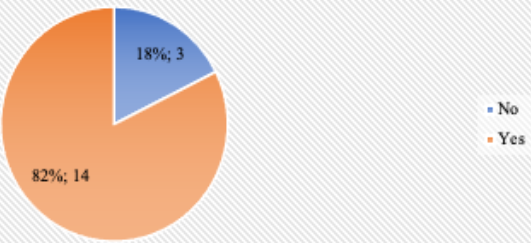
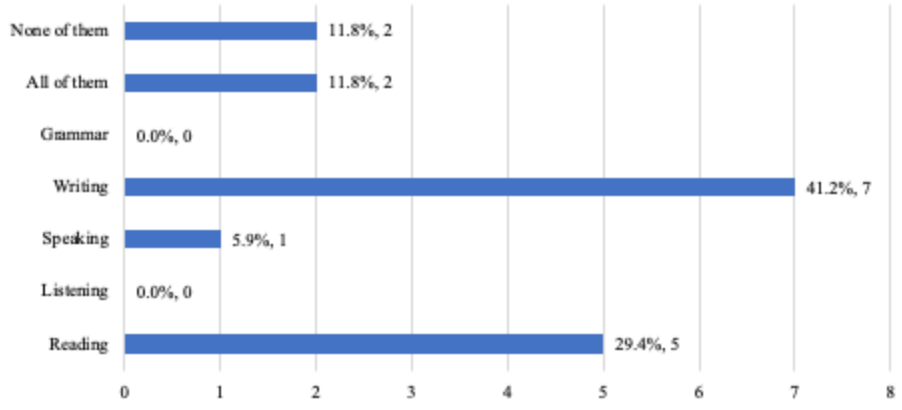


Figure 18

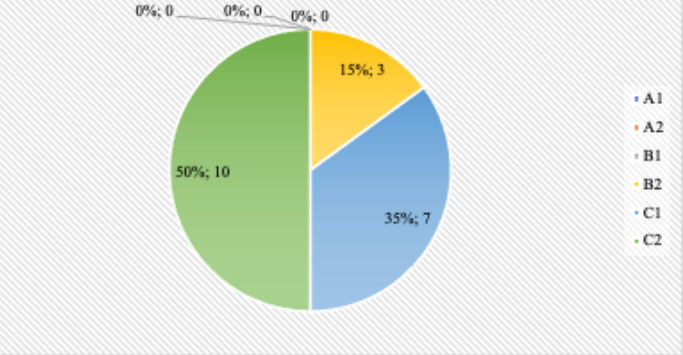
18. After taking your latest proficiency test, which skill(s) do you think you need to improve?



When asked, "Which of the following CEFR levels do you think reflect your current English proficiency level?", on Question 19, Figure 19 illustrates that 50% of respondents (10) chose a C2 level, followed by 35% (7) who indicated a C1 level, and 15% (3) who chose a B2 level. None of the respondents selected the A1, A2, or B1 level options. Qualitatively, when asked for a definition of English proficiency during the interviews (Question 1), English proficiency meant the acknowledgment of one's English level, being an appropriate one the B2 level (2 respondents). For others, English proficiency entailed the confident use of the language as means of proper communication (4 respondents). And for the 2 remaining respondents, English proficiency was exclusively related to demonstrated language competence in all four language skills.

Figure 19

19. Which of the following CEFR levels do you think reflect your current English proficiency level?



Answers to Question 2, which asked interviewees which skills, in their opinion, most accurately measure English proficiency, indicate there was a general consensus regarding English proficiency as shaped by effective oral communication, that is, the speaking skill. A main claim supporting this answer was the need to create and produce language on the spot as a means to communicate in any type of environment. R2 replied, “Being able to use it in real life then there's nothing more real.” Moreover, it was indicated that listening and reading are ultimately receptive skills, which makes them skills students will understand well. As for writing, this skill was mentioned by one respondent, who indicated that even though this is also a skill that creates content production, there are many tools, such as online translators, that have reduced the need to foster such skill.

SEPTs and classroom instruction

As can be seen in Figure 20, the majority of respondents (85%, 7) selected “Interactive instruction” when asked multi-selection choice Question 20, “Which of the following mostly reflect your teaching strategies in the classroom”. The options “Indirect instruction” and “Experiential learning” were each chosen by 35% of respondents, that is by 7 of them. The options least selected were “Independent study” and "Direct instruction”, with 15% (3) and 10% (2), respectively.

Figure 20

20. Which of the following mostly reflect your teaching strategies in the classroom?

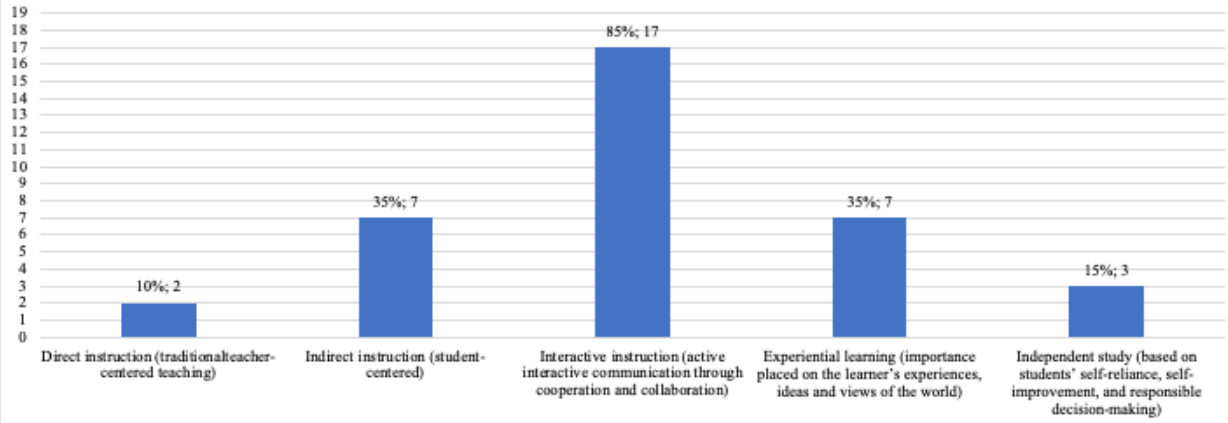
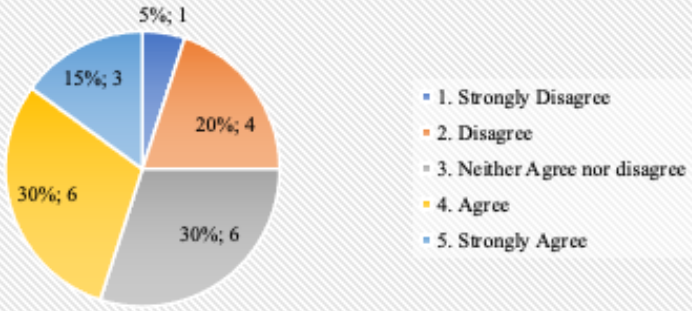


Figure 21 illustrates the degree of agreement to Statement 21, “I believe standardized proficiency tests have had an effect on my classroom instruction”. An equal number of

respondents, 30% (6), selected the options “Agree” and “Neither Agree nor Disagree”, followed by 20% who chose the option “Disagree”; lastly, the smaller percentages were obtained for the options “Strongly Agree” with 4 responses (20%), and “Strongly Disagree” with 1 response (5%).

Figure 21

21. I believe standardized proficiency tests have had an effect on my classroom instruction.



Open-ended survey Question 22 obtained a wide range of responses to the question “In which ways, if any, has taking a proficiency test modified the way you teach your classes (materials, curriculum design, course content, teaching practices, learning environment, etc.)?”. The following answers have been paraphrased and grouped in order to easily analyze them in the Discussion section. Out of the 13 respondents who answered this question, 3 of them wrote about these tests having no influence on their teaching, 1 of them wrote about these tests helping to focus on building real life skills, 4 of them wrote about the influence of these test on teaching particular skills, such as in writing because students will be prepared in the future to take any SEPT, 5 of them wrote about the influence of these tests on class preparation (course content), curriculum design and management.

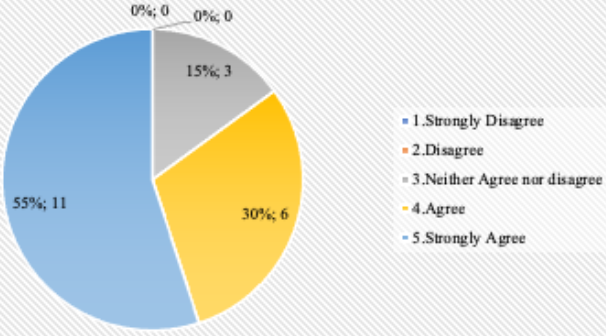
Perceptions of the importance of SEPTs and classroom management

Figure 22 provides information about the degree of agreement to Statement 23 “I believe all teachers should take a proficiency exam at least once”. The majority of respondents (55%, 11) selected the “Strongly Agree” option, followed by 30% (6) of respondents selecting the “Agree” option”, and the remaining 15% of respondents (3) selected the “Neither Agree nor Disagree” option. Similarly, Figure 23 illustrates the degree of agreement to Statement 24 “I believe all

teachers should take a proficiency exam every two years". All answers were selected in the following order, "Strongly Agree" (30%, 6 respondents), "Neither Agree nor Disagree" (25%, 5 respondents), "Agree" (20%, 4 respondents), "Strongly Agree" (15%, 3 respondents), and "Strongly Disagree" (10%, 2 respondents).

Figure 22

23. I believe all teachers should take a proficiency exam at least once.



As can be seen on Figure 24, when asked Question 25, "Are you planning on taking a proficiency test in the short term", an equal number of respondents chose the "Yes" and "No" answers, that is 40% each (8 respondents each). The remaining 20% of respondents (4), selected "Maybe" . Those who answered "Yes" or "Maybe" were further asked which SEPT they would take (Question 26). As shown by Figure 25, 50% (6 respondents) would take an IELTS, 25% (3 respondents) would take a CAE, 16.7% (2 respondents) would take a TOEFL/ TOEFL iBT, and 8.3% (1 respondents) would pursue something related to the CEA (Commission on English Language Program Accreditation).

Figure 24

25. Are you planning on taking a proficiency test in the short term?

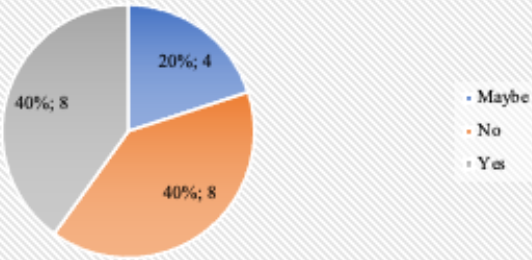
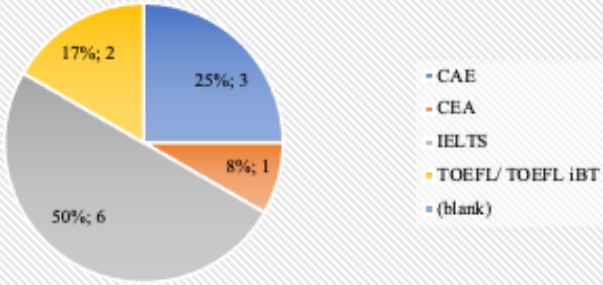


Figure 25

26. Which one?



In terms of the interviewees, 5 out of 8 of them have not taken a SEPT in the last few years as indicated during the interviews for Question 5. As for the ones who have taken a test in the last couple of years, all of them, 100%, agreed that their recent test scores reflected their perceived English level. Regarding the rest of respondents, some indicated shortcomings of the tests such as limited time to solve the reading sections and speaking sections that are carried out through the use of recordings instead of live interaction. In the opinion of approximately 63 % of respondents (5), these tests in great part measure the ability to take the test itself.

Figure 26 provides information on the degree of agreement to Statement 27, “I am constantly looking for way to update the teaching strategies I carry out in class”, to which two options were the selected ones, namely, “Strongly Agree” by 60% (12) of respondents, and “Agree” by 40% (8) of respondents. Subsequently, multi-selection choice Question 28 inquired

"What are some new strategies you have been implementing in your classroom?". Answers to this question are illustrated in Figure 27 and were selected as follows, 60% (12) of respondents selected "Project based strategies", 55% of respondents (11) selected "Cooperative work", 35% of respondents (7) selected "Field trips, experiments, surveys, etc.", 25% of respondents (5) selected "Teaching others", and 5% of respondents (1) selected flipped classroom.

Figure 26

27. I am constantly looking ways to update the teaching strategies I carry out in class

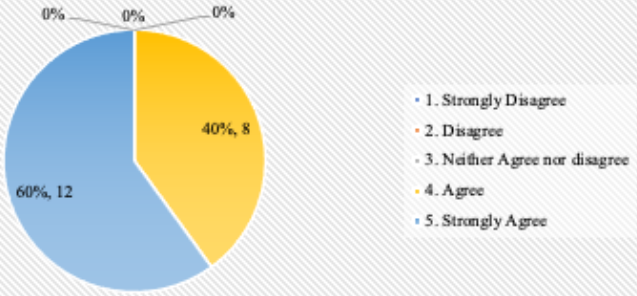
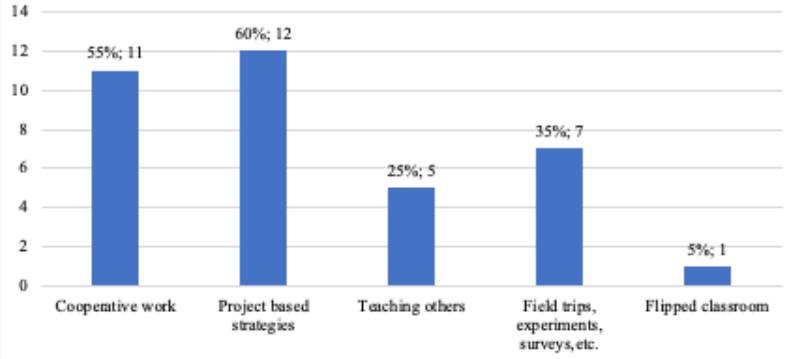


Figure 27

28. What are some new strategies you have been implementing in your classroom?



Question 29 sought to measure the degree of agreement to Statement 29, "My values as a teacher reflect on the decisions I make in the classroom". Answers to this question are shown on Figure 28, where it can be observed that 50% of respondents (10) selected the "Strongly Agree" option, followed by a 45% of respondents who chose the "Agree" option and, finally, the remaining 5% of respondents (1) chose the "Disagree" option. On the other hand, Question 30 sought to obtain the level of agreement to Statement 30, "External factors strongly influence the way I teach my class, such as set curriculum, timing, student's proficiency levels, etc." The majority of respondents, 50% (10), indicated to "Agree" to the statement, 15% (3) indicated to

“Strongly Agree”, 20% (4) selected to “Neither Agree nor Disagree” with the statement, while the remaining 15% (3) indicated to “Disagree” with the statement (See Figure 29).

Figure 28

29. My values as a teacher reflect on the decisions I make in the classroom.

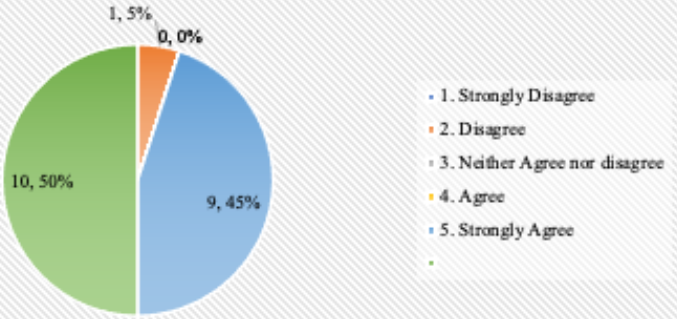
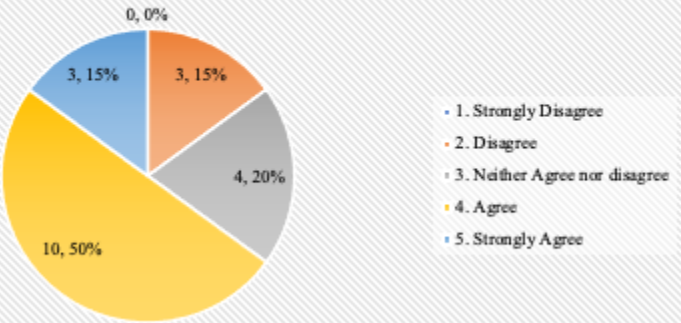


Figure 29

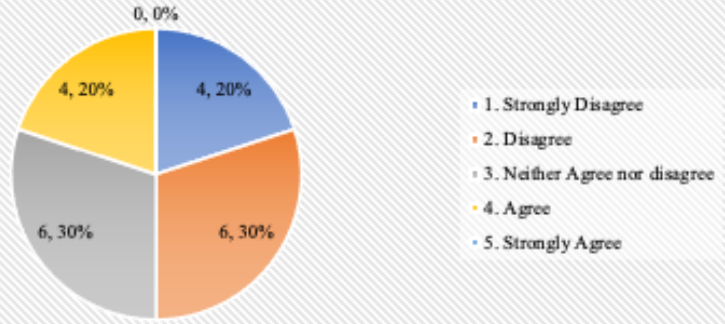
30. External factors strongly influence the way I teach my class, such as set curriculum, timing, student,Ãôs proficiency levels, etc.



Question 31 is the last question that measures degree of agreement and is displayed in Figure 30, which has as a guiding statement “Results of English proficiency tests are better indicators of teaching effectiveness as opposed to personality and skills”. Answers to this question were selected as follows, 30% (6) of respondents indicated to “Neither Agree nor Disagree”, another 30% (6) of respondents indicated to “Disagree”; finally, a 20% of respondents indicated to “Strongly Disagree”, and a similar percentage indicated that they “Agree”.

Figure 30

31. Results of English proficiency tests are better indicators of teaching effectiveness as opposed to personality and skills.



SEPTs and teacher competency

Open-ended Question 32, last of the survey, gathered different responses to the question "Besides English proficiency tests, which other indicators do you think could be used to measure teacher competency?". The 20 responses obtained have been paraphrased and grouped in order to easily identify and analyze them in the Discussion section. Most of the respondents (17) indicated "Feedback" as an indicator of proficiency. Under this category, 6 respondents alluded to students' evaluations of teachers, 8 respondents indicated classroom observations of a teacher's classroom management as a possible indicator, and lastly, 3 respondents wrote about feedback from colleagues and peer interaction.

The following category identified from responses was the one of "Teacher qualifications", under which CELTA, DELTA, TESOL and TKT were mentioned by 2 respondents. The possible indicator of "Learning outcomes" was indicated by 3 respondents, "Teaching portfolio" was indicated by 2 respondents, while "Workshops about methodology" was also indicated by 2 respondents. The following possible indicators were mentioned once by different respondents, including, "Lesson planning, such as the one based on PBL", "Student's results on Standardized Tests", "Face to face interviews", "Informal Assessments", and "Only indicator is a SEPT".

Mandated SEPTs

When asked about whether or not SEPTs should be mandatory (Interview Questions 3 and 11), three out of the eight interviewees indicated these tests should be mandatory in order to identify the English level of English teachers prior to their hiring and as a means for teachers to seek improvement of their English skills. Two of the eight respondents further indicated that these tests should only be taken by people who want to teach in high schools or higher institutions (at least a B2). One respondent added that by making SEPTs mandatory a downside is the pressure placed on teachers to take these types of tests often which results burdensome on different levels.

R4 indicated that during the hiring process conducted at his institution for English teachers, a one on one interaction as well as experience of the candidate are more important than the results of an SEPT; however, the interviewee noted that a SEPT does make a candidate stand out. He argued his position that nothing should be mandatory by stating that "specially for teachers involved in education it is our absolute duty to be engaged in nuance and not just kind of apply like robots any kind of standardized anything".

Even though a few respondents agreed with the current policy regarding English teacher testing in ecuadorian public institutions every four years, 100% of respondents provided recommendations to improve this policy (Question 4). A one-on-one interaction was mentioned as an extra step of the process that should be taken to make test administration a clearer and more thorough process given there are problems such as corruption that have tainted SEPTs administration. This inadequate administration of tests was brought up by 3 of the respondents.

As for the time period, every four years, 3 respondents indicated it is a good time period that does not impose a burden on teachers. Two respondents indicated that this policy has a sound reason behind it given that languages can be unlearned and one can lose language abilities. R5, linguist by profession, brought up the phrase "language is not innocent" and stated that speakers give life to language; therefore, language is never steady and it can evolve or (partially) go back.

Teacher's instruction ability and English proficiency levels

Teacher effectiveness was overall defined by interviewees as strategies that are student-centered and actively promote student collaboration, engagement and motivation (Interview Question 6). As R4 indicates, "...nowadays professors in other subjects are having to almost align themselves with the kind of practices that we've been using for many years and yet something like collaborative learning is a perfect example". Other responses mentioned only once by respondents were a good separation of students by their English level, classroom management, adequate materials selection and empathy, as the psychological aspect of it.

Furthermore, English proficiency was not perceived as a determiner of a teacher's ability to teach English (Interview Questions 7 and 8). On the one hand, 6 out of 8 interviewees emphasized numerous times that proficiency (language skills) and teaching ability (teaching skills) are two different things. R5 declared that, "Proficiency only determines competence" in the language. Similarly, R6 indicated that SEPTs do not show ability to teach and that knowing English, even as a native speaker, does not equate with being able to teach said language. R4 further stated that this linear way of thinking, through standardization, can be perceived in other areas of English language instruction, being the most prominent the usage of L1 and L2 in the classroom.

On the other hand, two respondents indicated that SEPTs are necessary to build on teaching skills because a teacher needs to know English in order to teach it. The majority of interviewees, 6, provided the example of an English teacher not being able to teach a B2 or C1 level if he/she holds an A2 level. A different analysis to the relation between English proficiency levels and teaching effectiveness was given by R2, who stated that, "Effectiveness is demonstrated by the ability to get students to learn, rather than the way one teaches".

Regarding interview Question 9, the requirement established by educational institutions for students to reach a B1 or B2 level upon graduation and its relation to instructional strategies used in class was consistently defined by teachers as a long-term goal. Half of the interviewees (4) agreed that having to achieve the goal of obtaining a B1 or B2 level does influence the way that class is taught and especially in regards to long term planning. An emphasis on teacher requirements such as long term planning, goals and preparation echoed amongst the respondents

replies. Communication as a skill was a recurring point of inflection although it was not specified as oral or written.

Perceptions of how to measure the level of English proficiency of teachers

When interviewees were asked for their opinions on finding alternative methods to measuring the proficiency level of an English language teacher (Interview Question 10), participants completely agreed (90%) that there should be more emphasis on speaking and mixed methods. Some methods mentioned included but were not limited to; speeches, demo classes, interviews, internally created evaluations and a focus on communicative output such as speaking. All of the respondents agreed on the importance of reassessing and amplifying the method of evaluation and the level of importance or lack thereof. Finally, one respondent placed importance on teachers acquiring a tool set of different teaching techniques through active teacher collaboration and exchange of ideas as to improve organically as a group.

Within the TEFL/TESL community, each country and governing educational authority has different standards and rules related to L2 teacher requirements. Question 12 of the interviews, final qualitative question, found that the majority of interviewees believe that SEPTs such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, and Cambridge certifications like the FCE do not denote preparedness but proficiency at best. TKT and CELTA were considered credible evaluation instruments related to teacher preparedness because as R6 indicated, “these focus on how to teach plus for taking them you need to have a B2 already”. TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) was mentioned by 4 respondents as the most friendly test to measure English proficiency.

Discussion

Investigating teachers´ perceptions as to what extent SEPTs improve teachers' instruction, what other types of tests or professional development indicators could also measure teacher competency, and how different proficiency tests affect teachers' instruction are essential questions. Reassessing the role or function of SEPT to serve as more than a mere evaluative language proficiency tool, and rebranding SEPTs to assist in curricular analysis and professional development is worth discussing.

In order to identify teachers' perceptions of the impact of English proficiency tests on English language teachers´ classroom instruction, each variable was assessed within the survey and interview questions. The English teachers' perceptions of SEPT, their necessity and ability to assess proficiency varied in relation to the context.

From the results obtained in both the survey (7 to 18) and interview questions there is a clear consensus in the findings which categorize SEPT as widely recognized and validated instruments. These perceptions resonate Bachman´s (1990) theory which acknowledged that asking a language test to measure language proficiency has faults and brings forth complicated issues. While the survey results and interview answers acknowledge SEPTs as valid instruments used to measure proficiency, their degree of effectiveness in accurately evaluating proficiency levels and specific skill set and the connection to effective classroom teaching needs further research.

While SEPTs are prevalent in the ESL-EFL community and educators take as well as prepare and administer them to students the results of those same experiences, educators expressed an overwhelming desire to change the methods of hiring future professionals for educational institutions requiring teachers with higher proficiency levels. Based on the information obtained from survey the 90% questioned thought that experience and interviews as well as internal institutional evaluations seemingly outweighed the traditional reliability and validity assigned to utilizing solely standardized test score CEFR levels equivalents.

Most of the respondents separated and labeled tests based on what they measured thus separating teacher competence from proficiency. Respondent 2 declared, “SEPT only measures what you know.” There was a general consensus regarding English proficiency as shaped by effective oral communication, most respondents agreed that effective communication indicated a high level of proficiency, that is, mainly speaking. Pham´s study (2007) supports the importance of communication and language ability by distinguishing between “General English Proficiency” (CEP) and “Classroom Language Proficiency” and the prerequisite of demonstrating proficiency in not only general but classroom English as well.

There was no general consensus on mandating tests for all English teachers or if SEPTs could accurately determine one's ability to teach. The overall underlying consensus about the

relationship between language proficiency , actual levels and effective teaching is that there is a direct relationship yet the issue is far from simple. When asked about how much of an impact English proficiency levels have on a teachers ability to teach English R1 and R3 claimed respectively:

> "You know, direct relationship, you know you cannot have an A1 professor teach a C1 class, I think it's a direct relationship."

Similarly, Yusuf and Novita´s (2020) research revealed a "strong relationship" between teacher language proficiency and teaching effectiveness, but just the same, the complexity has not been eradicated and that effective teaching will not always guarantee "mastery" of language proficiency and vice versa. Renandya (2018) more blatantly affirmed in a previous study that SEPTS, specifically TOEFL "does not assess one's ability to teach."

According to the findings between the survey and the interviews, a less complex issue which was agreed upon and that left no room for debate was the need for alternative evaluations besides. SEPT were needed for both hiring professionals, admitting students and a means to continuing to improve, maintain a level of proficiency and professional development in language education. This is consistent with what Wulyani et al. (2019) previously stressed, which was the importance of providing English language teachers support to maintain and improve their proficiency levels.

In previous studies, conclusions about the degree of importance of SEPT and the subsequent results and effects of these evaluative tools has become a widely researched and debated topic within so many different contexts and variables. Irrefutably, the washback effect is a common denominator. Are teachers and learners in Ecuador changing their teaching strategies and learning styles or habits in response to SEPTs?

A third of the respondents believe that standardized proficiency tests have had an effect on their classroom instructions according to question 26, we must also factor in that 82% also believe that their last SEPT score reflects their current level of proficiency. In a previous study McKiney and Thompson (2021) explained that the "Washback effect refers to the influence that language testing has on (but not limited to) curriculum design and teaching practices." While

this effect was not explicitly stated in the survey or written into the survey questions, it is linked to SEPTs.

Surprisingly, in question 31, 30% of survey respondents strongly agreed that the results of SEPTS are better indicators of teaching effectiveness as opposed to personality and skills. Read (2022) notably mentions that of the large body of research related to IELTS (SEPT) the largest external research projects come under the broad category of impact and washback." This supports Alderson and Wall´s (1992) original hypothesis when they assumed that teachers and learners behave differently and are influenced by a test. Teaching ability and learning outcome fall under this effect as well.

In line with previous studies, answers obtained from survey questions 26 to 29, as well as from interview questions 2 and 6, confirm that an important part of the values and beliefs that a teacher holds of his/her teaching ability are mainly associated with improving the English performance of the student as well as achieving the set learning outcomes (Lu & Mustafa, 2021; Barni et al, 2019). Adequate students' English performance was linked to the production of language by most interviewees, particularly oral production. This finding matches results from survey question 17, where the productive skill of speaking was only chosen by 1 respondent out of 20 as the skill that needed to be improved upon after taking their last SEPT. However, it is important to highlight that the counterpart of speaking, meaning the productive skill of writing, was chosen by most participants as the skill that needs the most improvement.

Moreover, similar to results from the existing literature, a majority of survey respondents, around 65%, indicated external factors strongly influenced the way their classes are taught (Question 29). Such contextual influence, as mentioned in the work of Krulatz (2022) and Başar (2020), creates a gap between teachers' beliefs and values, and teachers' actual practices in the classroom. This finding contrasts that of Question 28, which indicates that most of the respondents, around 95%, believe that their values as teachers reflect on the decisions they make in the classroom. Therefore, they do not actively perceive any type of external influence on the way they handle their classes.

The survey sample (outwardly) shows a high level of self-efficacy as indicated by the previously mentioned responses, but particularly by question 26 for which all respondents

indicate to constantly look for ways to update the teaching strategies they carry out in class. Moreover, in terms of SEPTs, respondents auto perceived English proficiency level denotes that teachers hold in high regard their mastery of this language, as evidenced by responses to Question 18, for which most respondents indicated to have a C2 or C1 level (85%).

As widely mentioned in the literature, teachers' perceived positive teaching ability is a good indicator of instructional practices that depart from traditional ones because teachers feel motivated to stretch their teaching styles (Poulou, 2019). Among such practices, in both the interview and survey, the following stand out, project based learning strategies, cooperative and collaborative learning strategies, and experiential learning. However, the perceived positive teaching ability of the sample, as well as their statements on their teaching values and beliefs, are not enough to directly link those results to results on SEPTs. As analyzed in Faez et al. (2021) work, teaching efficacy can not be reduced to proficiency but needs to be analyzed in terms of contextualized tasks teachers' need to perform.

Another key concept brought up by interviewees, in line with the work of the spillover effect of teacher self-efficacy of Shahzad and Naureen (2017), is the one of motivation and confidence. Ultimately, interviewees indicated that by fostering motivation in their students, aspects such as active participation and willingness to adopt and adapt to English learning ensued. This spillover effect can further be analyzed from responses for which respondents both in the survey on Question 31, as well as on the interview on Question 10, identified as an important part of teacher competency and as alternative methods to measure English proficiency, teacher methodological preparedness.

This preparedness was identified in this paper's data analysis in the form of demo-classes, feedback from students and colleagues, and teaching qualifications such as the CELTA, DELTA, and TKT. Thus, the way of teaching and strategies used for it remain to be perceived as key drivers of student engagement, motivation and progress, as well as indicators of teaching effectiveness as opposed to the independent variable of interest of this paper, SEPTs. These findings are supported by the results obtained in Question 30, for which 20% of respondents stated to agree with the idea that SEPTs are good indicators of teaching effectiveness as opposed to personality and skills.

Lastly, after the thorough analysis of results in this section, the dimensions of beliefs and feedback (as teacher's collective efficacy) need to be further studied in subsequent research. Regarding beliefs, these can not be solely reduced to auto-perceived ones because, as Borg (2018) indicates, stated beliefs tend to give a decontextualized account as to what actually happens in the classroom. Thus, there is a need to jointly analyze enacted beliefs. As for feedback, as greatly mentioned in the surveys and interviews, it was identified as a main indicator of not only teacher's proficiency, but also of teacher's effectiveness and preparedness. Teacher's collective efficacy needs to take a similar role to the one of SEPTs in research given it has been identified as a main contender to it when identifying teacher's proficiency levels as well as teacher preparedness.

Conclusion

The general objective of this study was to identify English teachers' perceptions of the impact of standardized English proficiency tests on English language teachers' classroom instruction in Ecuador, which was achieved through the appropriate selection and pertinent design of quantitative and qualitative research. Data gathered through surveys and interviews, with open and close-ended questions, allowed for an investigative approach to discover the relationships and common themes between the variables related to SEPTs while connecting the perceptions held by English teachers and administrators regarding this ever relevant research topic in Ecuador.

Particularly, qualitative data provided this study and the general objective the necessary supporting information through first-hand testimonies as to what teachers think and believe regarding standardized English proficiency tests as the world's leading tools to measure English proficiency. Irrefutable, SEPTs are an evaluative tool, which ultimately links proficiency, washback effect, self efficacy and classroom instruction. Moreover, regarding the connection between SEPTs and classroom instruction, a wide array of answers were obtained; however, all respondents placed emphasis on SEPTs not being the only and most important factor when it comes to effective English teaching.

Therefore, classroom instructional strategies, as perceived by respondents, are not defined by a test that measures proficiency instead of methodological educational skill. This was

supported by the belief that teacher qualifications such as; Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) are not of equal intrinsic nature as SEPTs. CELTA along with student and colleagues' feedback, were further considered as better indicators of teacher preparedness and classroom effectiveness. However, the prestige, relevance and institutional backing that SEPTs continue to maintain came up countless times during interviews and indirectly in surveys.

The identification and analysis of teachers' beliefs and values, both auto-perceived, as well as the ones observed while conducting class, are important in order to promote educational public policy that guarantees teacher preparedness and effectiveness from the needs and skills English teachers need to develop under contextualized environments. Hiring and admissions policies and their reliance on standardized proficiency tests converts them into high stakes evaluations that must be under constant and careful scrutiny. Therefore, while SEPTs provide an initial measure of a teacher's proficiency level, it most definitely does not reveal the whole picture to the educational community as to what ultimately influences the different choices a teacher makes in the classroom and why.

Strengths and limitations

The main strengths of this research study are found in its methodological design, the nature of the research topic, and the collaborative work behind the deep theoretical review and analysis of articles related to the study variables. The mixed-method research of this study, through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, proved suitable and insightful when answering the research questions surrounding the general objective. Likewise, all participants were eager to collaborate, as well as obtain the results of this research, since the topic of English proficiency, from the experience of English teachers, continues to be explored in greater depths within existing literature. Finally, collaboration and effective communication were key factors in the exhaustive analysis of the existent literature on the subject.

On the other hand, among the limitations encountered while carrying out this research study, the most pressing ones were the lack of response from institutions, as well as the low number of survey responses obtained. Regarding the former one, long wait times and bureaucratic communications with institutions, that ultimately resulted unresponsive, hindered

the process. Moreover, obtaining authorization from institutions in order to conduct surveys and interviews on their English teachers was, at times, burdensome and inconclusive. As for the latter, even for those institutions that authorized their participation, not even half of all English teachers took the survey. The number of survey respondents was expected to almost triple in comparison to the actual number had authorization been given by more than those 5 institutions included.

Future research areas

The lack of willingness to participate in the research directly supports the need for contemporary research related to English teacher's classroom instructional strategies and their perceptions linked to feedback and motivation, variables which were made evident while conducting and analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data of this paper. Further research on feedback as a main indicator of teacher preparedness could bring light as to what extent collaborative work within institutions modifies actual classroom practices and to what degree. Likewise, a deeper look into the variable of motivation from a longitudinal research design could serve to analyze the phenomenological lack of motivation of teachers to continue evaluating their proficiency through SEPTs as the years go by.

Socio-economic differences and lack of access to SEPTs could spur inequalities among potential test takers. Institutional hiring and recruitment changes that could substitute the status quo high stakes tests to measure English proficiency within each skill should be further researched to ensure homogeneous and non discriminatory hiring and selection practices as well as fewer turnover amongst English teachers.

Methodologically, as has been found in previous studies and corroborated by this research paper, this topic should be further analyzed by complementing the self-perceived beliefs, values and perceptions of English teachers with direct class observation of instructional strategies in order to identify whether one element aligns with the other, or if there exists a disconnect, as hypothesized by previous studies. As for the sample group, the topic of English proficiency could also be analyzed in connection with different educational levels given it was made clear from the results of this research that each educational level has different English needs and goals.

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