

Future Teachers Discuss their Readiness to Teach EFL in Ecuador: A Qualitative Approach¹

Futuros docentes analizan su
preparación para enseñar inglés como
lengua extranjera en Ecuador: un
enfoque cualitativo

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Abstract

This work examines Ecuadorian teacher trainees' self-reported pedagogy. Data gathered in focus groups documents participant' pedagogy, what they stated they learned about teaching in diverse contexts, and the challenges they anticipate as they prepare to begin careers as English language teachers. A constant comparison method was used to determine and cross-reference emergent themes in the data. Findings suggest a disconnect between the objectives of trainees' program of study and what the future teachers stated they need to know to be ready to implement in their practice.

Keywords: Teacher training, diversity, Ecuador, English language teaching, teacher professional development, qualitative research

Resumen

Este trabajo examina la pedagogía autoinformada de los maestros aprendices ecuatorianos. Los datos recopilados en grupos focales documentan la pedagogía de los participantes, lo que declararon que aprendieron sobre la enseñanza en contextos diversos y los desafíos que anticipan confrontarán cuando comiencen sus carreras como maestros de inglés. Se utilizó un método de comparación constante para determinar y hacer referencias cruzadas de temas emergentes en los datos. Los hallazgos sugieren una desconexión entre los objetivos del programa de estudio de los aprendices y los conocimientos que los futuros maestros consideran que necesitarán estar listos para implementar en su práctica.

Palabras claves: Formación docente, diversidad, Ecuador, enseñanza del idioma inglés, desarrollo profesional docente, investigación cualitativa

Resumo

Este trabalho examina a pedagogia autorrelatada por estudantes de formação de professores equatorianos. Dados coletados em grupos focais documentam a pedagogia dos participantes, o que afirmaram ter aprendido sobre o ensino em contextos diversos e os desafios que antecipam ao se prepararem para iniciar carreiras como professores de língua inglesa. Um método de comparação constante foi utilizado para determinar e cruzar temas emergentes nos dados. Os resultados sugerem uma desconexão entre os objetivos do programa de estudo dos aprendizes e o que os futuros professores afirmaram precisar saber para estar prontos para implementar em sua prática.

Palavras-chave: Formação de professores, diversidade, Equador, ensino de língua inglesa, desenvolvimento profissional de professores, pesquisa qualitativa.

Introduction to Educational Reforms in Ecuador

In the past decade, Ecuadorian teachers have experienced increased pressure to design innovative curricula (Van Damme et al. 2013; Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador 2011). With Ecuador adopting the United States (U.S.) dollar as its currency, the study of English became a requirement across all grade levels (British Council, 2015; Gallegos, 2008). This was preceded by the 1988 impetus for educational changes, with the government focusing on validating the cultures of indigenous groups and providing support for a resurgence of all native languages. At the time, schools were established with the goal of delivering intercultural bilingual education for all indigenous cultures (Ministerio de Educación, 2013). Mandates met strong criticism, primarily the speed at which revisions were put in place without piloting the efficacy of program components (Mesa Educación Pachakutik, 2002). Practicing teachers, future teachers, and students at levels kindergarten-twelfth (K-12) are challenged to develop high levels of language proficiency in Spanish and in an additional language such as English or an indigenous tongue. Efforts resulted in Ecuadorians mixing Spanish and indigenous tongues to create third languages such as Kichwañol, which is half Spanish and half Kichwa (Ministerio de Educación, 2013).

Added pressure on practicing teachers relates to the methods used to evaluate their competency. Future teachers need to be prepared for life in Ecuador's schools as evaluation of teachers' competency is based largely on K-12 students' academic success, and the teachers' ability to demonstrate how they address learners' cultural and linguistic needs (Ecuador Inmediato, 2016; Cevallos-Estrellas & Bromwell, 2015; Resultados Pruebas Censales, 2008; Ministerio de Educación y Cultura del Ecuador, 2006). The Ser Estudiante exam (Resultados Pruebas Censales, 2008) administered to students, is used to measure learners' academic achievement, teachers' competency and the overall success of the movement for educational improvement. Results inform the foci of revisions to curricular design, the Ministry of Education's selection of curricular materials, and the time allocated for instruction across the disciplines. This study explores teacher candidates (future teachers') perceptions of their readiness to teach in Ecuador's diverse context, the challenges they anticipate they might encounter in their work as educators, and how governmental mandates for English language teaching (ELT) influenced their preparation.

Ecuador's Diversity and Schooling Demands

Ecuador's cultural and linguistic diversity is visible in the numerous living languages spoken across this nation. According to Ethnologue (2019), there are 21 indigenous languages (e.g., Cofán, and Quechua) (Constitución Política del Ecuador, 1998). The Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (2015) documented that 93% of Ecuador's population speaks Castilian and 4.1% speak Quechua. Census information reflected the country's population was composed of 71.9% mestizos (mixed Amerindian and

white), 7.4% Montubio, 7% Amerindian, 6.1% white, 4.3% Afroecuadorian, 1.9% mulato, 1% black, and 0.4% other (INEC, 2015). The Ecuadorian educational system is challenged to understand and address the cultural diversity present in the nation's classrooms. Preparing future educators to design and implement culturally responsive curricula is therefore essential, given Ecuador's diverse demographic (Banks, 2014, 1981; Bucklewe & Fishman, 2011; Nieto 2018), and the mandate for English instruction (Ministerio de Educación, 2014). The addition of English to the curriculum, across all grades for private schools and 8th – 12th grades for public schools, has raised the level of pedagogical expertise and inter-cultural understandings required of future teachers (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2011). In addition, the demands on students to master English has likely added the study of English as an additional language to what may already compose an overcrowded curricular schedule. The question remaining is how efficiently institutions are able to adjust programs of study to prepare the country's future educators for the tasks of teaching plurilingual populations of students in the process of reaching mastery of English as a second language.

Theoretical Framework

Teachers' ability to reflect on the norms of their own culture and how their attitudes influence their pedagogy, is a factor when examining an educator's ability to establish empowering schools (Bennett, 2019; Giroux & Silva, 2010). These researchers consider that educators' respect of students' cultures and languages are key factors in ELT (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Beginning in the late 1970s, linguists sought to teach language as an event that had as its focus the communicative competence of the participants (Canale & Swain, 1980). Today, teacher educators are tasked with preparing future teachers able to communicate in academic and economic arenas represented by Ecuador's plurilingual and pluricultural populations. Candidates need to have linguistic knowledge and in-depth familiarity with the cultural norms of all the cultures present in Ecuador and in the English speaking world. In this millennium, culturally responsive teachers are committed to equity in schooling and to ensuring that students' rights are recognized in the enacted curriculum, and in the participatory methods they use to instruct diverse learners (Author, 2017, 2016; Hawkins and Norton 2009; Kincheloe 2008). As such, in second language acquisition (SLA), students' familial backgrounds, their languages and the norms of their communities, are treasure troves for future teachers who know that investigating learners' out of school experiences will help them improve their curriculum and methods for ELT (Bucklewe & Fishman, 2011; González et al., 2005; Ruiz, 1984). When one considers the affective domain and how learners' concentration on monitoring conversations both controls and limits their output (Krashen, 1981), it is evident that SLA methods that lean towards critical pedagogy and the awareness that language is a right (Ruiz,

1984), allow learners to more freely express their thoughts as they learn about the cultural norms of speakers of other languages (Freire, 1985). In this investigation, 28 future teachers' shared their vision of what educational equity requires of them in Ecuador's multilingual-multicultural society. Data gathered served to examine how well the participants felt they were prepared to begin their teaching careers while finishing internships in which they were asked to use SLA methods assigned by their mentors. This inquiry into future educators' teaching practices, and how they perceive their role in affirming all learners' rights in the EFL class, sheds light on the systemic challenges facing the Ecuadorian educational system. This research explored teacher candidates' perceptions of how the teacher preparation curriculum addressed the need for future teachers to examine learners' funds of knowledge (González et al., 2005) and aimed to identify the instructional methods that candidates will use to deliver effective and culturally responsive instruction after graduation (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Gay, 2018; Hult & Hornberger, 2016; Ramos Pellicia, 2020).

English Teacher Preparation

The Organic Law of Intercultural Education law focused on preparing teachers to teach English as a subject. The constitutional mandate, Decree 0041-014, (Ministerio de Educación, 2014) required English instruction from the 8th (12-13 years old) through the 12th grade (17-18 years old) levels in the country's public schools. Thus, teachers' English language proficiency was evaluated, using standardized international tests approved by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education selects and assigns English teachers to schools based on tests that require a minimum 70% of points (Ministerio de Educación, n.d.). The assessment aligns to the Acuerdo Ministerial Nro. MINEDUC-ME-2017-00065-A; which forecasted an announcement calling for the evaluation of all English teachers who desired to prove eligibility for EFL teaching vacancies (Ministerio de Educación, 2017).

Before the reform, teachers were trained in schools identified as *Normales*, which were training colleges for teachers of all levels and specialties. Future teachers studies topics such as pedagogy, psychology, and statistics. By the third year of the trainees' education, a specialization such as the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) could be selected. This added two years of training and study of subjects such as English history, English literature, and English grammar (Hoboud, 2009). In 1998, a national mandate (Decreto Ejecutivo, 203) created the Dirección Nacional de Educación Indígena Intercultural Bilingüe (DINEIB) to meet the needs of indigenous groups (Krainer, 1999). The Ministry of Education implemented the System of Intercultural Bilingual Education (Modelo del Sistema de Educación Intercultural Bilingüe) (MOSEIB) model to account for cultural and linguistic diversity as implemented through the Acuerdo Ministerial N. 112 (Krainer, 1999).

At the end of 2006, the Ministry of Education initiated conversations about education in the public discourse which led to the development of the Plan Decenal (PD) 2006-2015 [Ten-Year Education Plan] and the renewal of the PD for 2016-2025 as the plan to improve the educational system (Franco Pombo, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2006; Ministerio de Educación, 2018), and methods for teaching English (Fortalecimiento del Ingles, n.d.). During the process of the education reform, the National Evaluation and Accreditation Council (Consejo Nacional de Evaluación y Acreditación) was transformed to not only assess the work of the university professors in preparing future teachers, but also to assess the qualifications of the academic faculty to guarantee the outcome of high-quality EFL educators. At this time, the Evaluation, Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education Council (Consejo de Evaluación, Acreditación y Aseguramiento de la Calidad de Educación Superior) was put in place (Kuhlman & Serrano, 2017). The English standards were changed and enacted during 2012-2013 to ensure quality instruction for students to meet desired English proficiency levels (Diaz Maggioli, 2017). However, the number of English teachers in 2014 that met a proficiency level for B2 (Upper Intermediate), totalled 4,500 (2%), a number that was not sufficient to meet the needs of the education system (Kuhlman & Serrano, 2017).

To address the need to better prepare teachers to teach English, educators from the U.S. and Ecuador collaborated to develop a standards-based model for Ecuador's sociocultural context (Serrano et al., 2015). Ecuador's government signed agreements with the Alliance of Progress from the U.S. and the British Council. Five universities from the U.S., New Mexico State, Kansas State, the University of Kentucky, Valparaiso University and the University of Mississippi provided assistantships for practicing teachers and select future teachers to study English (Ambrecht, 2014). The professional development program, Teach English 2014, aimed to raise Ecuadorian teachers' English proficiency and teach them constructivist ELT methods. Government grants helped finance continued studies, providing teachers opportunities to study in the U.S. one academic year, and have numerous opportunities to interact with native English speakers and educators (Ministerio de Educación, 2013). However, insufficient provisions were made to support study abroad programs for adequate numbers of future teachers.

Brief History of Methods Used for ELT in Ecuador

Dating back to the 1990s, Ecuador's Ministry of Education identified English as the world's lingua franca for the economic development of the population and country (Diaz Maggioli, 2017; Kuhlman & Serrano, 2017). The focus of ELT was communication and meaning making. In Ecuador, the curriculum was purported to focus on content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Achieving the objectives of CLIL was problematic given teachers' level of English proficiency (El Telégrafo, 2014).

The challenge that remained was how to prepare teachers to consider the roles of CLIL and communicative language teaching (CLT), and how both may be effective within the Ecuadorian context (Santín et al., 2018). The Ministry of Education of Ecuador (Ministerio del Ecuador, 2016) identified the major goals of ELT are to help learners understand other cultures, be able to participate in global exchanges that use English, plus foster an appreciation for learning languages. These goals reflect CLT and not CLIL.

A problem to effective ELT noted by this article's authors, is that educational revisions for teaching English in Ecuador, and the rationale for selecting methods, seem to be based on models from the United States (Canale & Swain, 1980; Cummins, 1979; Krashen, 1981; Rosa & Burdick, 2017). These researchers ask if recommendations from the Council of Europe (2003), which have evolved from CLT and CLIL, and support models of SLA that validate all languages of plurilingual societies, have been considered for Ecuador's sociocultural context.

Study Methodology

A qualitative methodology was implemented to conduct an in-depth examination of future teachers' perceptions related to their readiness to teach in Ecuador's diverse context. Participants were completing the second term of a one-year required internship placement in their teacher training program. Before participation in this study, and to comply with ethical standards of the Institutional Review Board involving and to protect the rights, welfare and wellbeing of human subjects, participants signed informed consent forms prior to participation in this study and before data were gathered.

The inquiry approach used focus group as the vehicle to guide the conversations, and document future teachers' beliefs about their preparation to begin a successful teaching career as EFL educators (Cresswell, 2012). A constant comparison analysis technique was used to determine the emergent themes. The constant comparison process was chosen because it allows for coding of the data based on meaningful parts of the text and comparison of the codes to form themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Miles et al., 2014). Analysis of emergent and recurrent themes in the data served to determine participants' perceptions of their ability to design and deliver culturally responsive English instruction. Salient themes evidenced in the focus groups data were analyzed to determine barriers to learning and grouped under perceptions and practices. For example, keeping in mind understandings of the funds of knowledge, a participant indicated "I need to know the students' environment and culture" this statement was categorized under Teacher Trainee's Perceptions and Practices. Another participant stated "I may not be familiar with the student's living context", this statement was categorized under barriers to learning efficacy.

Questions guiding this study were:

SQ 1: What teaching practices do Ecuador's future EFL teachers state they feel qualified to implement?

SQ 2: What barriers do teacher candidates perceive will challenge them in their careers as EFL educators?

Participants and Setting

Future teachers (candidates) who voluntarily participated in this study (n=28) were in their last semester of their teacher preparation program to become EFL teachers. Candidates were enrolled in the second half of a two-semester internship at Borges University (a pseudonym), a private institution located in an urban area of Ecuador. Prior to the beginning of internships, the candidates prepared lesson plans which were approved by the mentoring teacher of the classroom where they were placed. During the internships, the candidates were formatively evaluated by their mentors (Pedagogía de los idiomas nacionales y extranjeros: UTN Accreditada, 2018).

Focus groups

Four focus groups consisting of six to nine participants per group were conducted with future teachers ranging in age from 21 to 25 years of age. Focus groups were used to gather the data because the time assigned to the researchers to collect the data did not allow for one-to-one interviews. Participants were asked the following questions:

Q1: What have you learned about teaching in diverse contexts in your teacher preparation program?

Q2: What challenges do you think you might encounter as you begin your career as an English teacher?

Q3: What pedagogies will you implement in your teaching?

Data Analyses: Focus groups with Future Teachers

Across focus groups, future teachers (candidates) identified educational practices that they believe need to be applied to teach effectively and to overcome existing barriers to learning efficacy. They were not hesitant to mention what they needed to learn and stated what had not been covered adequately in their university program. Recurrent themes were cross-referenced with what the professional literature recommends is

necessary to teach effectively in diverse contexts (Bennett, 2019; Farrell & Jacobs, 2020; González et al., 2005; Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Hult & Hornberger, 2016; Kincheloe, 2008; Vygotsky, 1986; Freire, 1985; Ruiz, 1984).

Findings

This study sought to examine candidates' beliefs at the end of their formal preparation to become EFL teachers. Focus group information was used to identify salient themes which provided evidence of teacher trainees' knowledge and readiness for the profession. Participants acknowledged the importance of utilizing different strategies to make learning engaging and voiced their perception that EFL educators need to use didactic materials that reflect topics that are familiar to the students. A recurrent theme which yielded many comments was how to effectively assess and evaluate teaching efficacy such as "assessing school student's understanding and comprehension", "assessing knowledge through classroom activities", "written assessments", "use of worksheets, practical exercises, and conversational tests". While positive aspects of practice were mentioned by the candidates, themes such as students' academic challenges ("school students do not have the necessary materials"), parent involvement ("parents do not support students learning a new language"), levels of formal instruction about multiculturalism ("We have not learned about multiculturalism concepts") and the use of differentiated strategies in teaching ("we develop our own materials and we don't have time to create several activities"), were not as strongly articulated in terms of their replicability across EFL classes. Thus, in analysis of this study's findings, the latter salient themes were interpreted as barriers to teaching efficacy.

Regarding SQ1, What teaching practices and educational philosophies do Ecuador's future EFL teachers share being prepared to implement?, participants mentioned affective aspects of learning such as learners' funds of knowledge and utilizing family and community background in relation to the subject manner. Comments included "the teacher needs to know the cultural context of the student", "classrooms in rural areas do not have adequate space to teach", "parents do not provide the needed materials", "my institution did not provide a curriculum that addressed multiculturalism", "well-prepared teachers are needed in the rural areas due to the student's needs", "communities are not supportive of teaching English", and "teachers should include the students' cultural background into the lesson plans". Teacher candidates acknowledged the importance of implementing differentiated instruction based on students' affective and academic needs as impacted by culture, and the value of examining data from formative and summative assessments. Candidates commented that in their internships they were using "different evaluation techniques", as other classmates nodded in agreement. The information suggests that candidates see teaching as a set of practices where the cultural background of the students assists

the teacher to present the content material in ways that better meet the needs of the students.

Concerning SQ2, What barriers do teacher candidates perceive will challenge them in their careers as EFL educators?, teacher candidates pointed out barriers they might encounter such as limited flexibility for adjusting the curriculum to students' backgrounds; their preparation to incorporate multicultural components in instructional strategies; and their desire to have innovative materials to teach culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students. Participants expressed "I adjust instruction based on my assessment of all the pupils", "I don't have a systematic approach to adjust instruction", "teachers should learn about other cultures", and "we have not learned about multicultural concepts or strategies". Since teacher candidates were completing classroom internships prior to graduation, comments about barriers were assumed to express perceptions formed during their internship.

Discussion of Findings

Analysis of the findings generated four salient themes related to the candidates' perceptions about their qualification and readiness as future EFL educators. The first theme related to instructional strategies to be used in the classroom. The second theme revealed different approaches to engage students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The third theme presented candidates' perceptions about their preparation to support diverse students. The fourth theme uncovered candidates' interactions with parents.

Instructional strategies

According to Frederick et al., (2015), educators often fail to address the affective needs that composed students' self-identity, self-efficacy, and self-concept. The participants recognized the need for teachers to use different instructional strategies and to tailor content and educational materials to students' learning styles and academic and affective needs (Gardner, 2011). Participants, in the focus groups shared that they had ideas for engaging the learners but lacked sufficient time during the internship to differentiate instruction and implement their ideas.

Several participants mentioned that strategies such as songs, drawings, and readings should reflect context familiar to the students (González et al., 2005). One participant suggested using "songs to reinforce the English vocabulary that students have learned in the EFL class" and also "materials that include traditions that are familiar to the learners." Other strategies mentioned in the focus groups were to have learners practice speaking in English, work in dyads, focus on tasks to identify key words in reading materials and/or visualize the meaning of words through drawings as well as

front loading new vocabulary prior to lessons and asking students to write sentences. Candidates indicated pairing students or forming small groups was a strategy that worked for them in their internship experience. They shared that “forming groups composed of an equal number of students with a high level of knowledge and students who were struggling “helped the students who were behind in content knowledge created...competition in the group between/among the children.” They believed this type of exercise “challenged the students within the group to discover new concepts.” Although the candidates explained strategies to support learning at different levels of knowledge and understanding (Chamot & O’Malley, 1994), they emphasized the limited time they had to plan their lessons and the need to challenge students to compete with each other. They stated, “Once I graduate and am teaching in my own classroom, I will make sure that all my students reach desired academic levels” and “I will try to do what I can to challenge all students”. The candidates also noted that differentiated strategies were infrequently utilized by their mentor-teachers in their internships, and that this may have been due to the large number of students in each classroom. Comments suggest that the candidates were asked to use instructional strategies recommended by their teacher. Mentors and their choices were limited to those strategies.

The participants noted that as they implemented strategies, it was important to assess the students’ progress. Candidates explained the process as “One day I teach vocabulary related to clothing and the next day vocabulary about food; then I assess all the students.” They indicated that assessment is dependent on the skill being taught. For instance, “if vocabulary was being evaluated, worksheets would be employed. If speaking skills were assessed, then conversations between students would be used.” One participant specified that continuous assessment at the end of each class is helpful; “I ask simple questions about the students’ day to assess the learning of the new vocabulary, and the integration of new words with previous knowledge.” These steps helped the teacher candidates re-assess the pedagogical strategies that were implemented, proceed with changes to the lesson plan, and know when there was a need to reinforce concepts. A few participants indicated that “It is important to perform a needs assessment of the students’ level of knowledge prior to selecting instructional strategies (e.g., visual prompts, aural inputs) to plan lessons accordingly”.

Approaches to engage Students

The candidates expressed that utilizing familiar themes while teaching helps the students acquire new knowledge and recall information (Ministerio de Educación, 2014). They recognized that “Not all teachers are prepared to teach in rural area where academic needs are greater and there are fewer resources.” Participants indicated that “Teachers need to be better prepared to teach in the rural areas so they will select material that makes sense to the students.” They seemed concerned that not all teachers

used materials that fit the school and community context. For instance, one teacher candidate noted that materials for teaching English did not relate to the students' lives. Although the participants stressed that reading assignments became cumbersome for students when they could not use previous knowledge or experiences to relate to the topic or the vocabulary in the assigned reading passage written in English, scaffolding instruction was only vaguely addressed or identified by the participants (Vygotsky, 1986).

Participants admitted following the curriculum required by their mentor and university supervisor without considering the needs of the students in their internships. They were unanimous in their agreement that the Ecuadorian Secretary of Education determines the school curriculum (Van Damme et al., 2013) and shared that the purpose of a unified curriculum is to provide the same education to all students across the country (Ministerio de Educación, 2014). This provided equity "If a student transfers from one public school to another, the transition is seamless". Although the participants acknowledged the importance of being able to effortlessly transition from one school to another, they indicated that "teachers need to be trained in the country's curricular expectations [and] well-prepared to teach in rural areas if they are to appropriately support the students because transitions are not simple." Several teacher candidates mentioned that lack of time to plan lessons was a challenge. A comment that elicited agreement was "I noticed that I was not reaching some of my students; however, I did not have the time to develop materials to help those students." Their comments provide evidence that the candidates had many questions about planning and delivering instruction that were not answered during their formal training nor during their internships.

Students with multicultural background

Concerning students from multicultural backgrounds, the participants provided comments demonstrating the enacted curriculum did not focus on preparing them to teach multicultural students (Bucklewe & Fishman, 2011). Comments such as "I was not taught [during my formal preparation before the internship] about multiculturalism; however, in my future classroom I know that I will encounter cultural diversity" demonstrated candidates concerns. It appears that explicit components of Ecuador's diversity are recognized by the government (Constitución Política del Ecuador, 1998) but not acknowledged to be a factor in schooling achievement (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). The candidates mentioned that they know there are different ethnic groups present in Ecuador and that "interactions with other cultures occurs at formal and informal levels." These interactions are reflected in the classroom as students come together in the classroom to learn; thus, it is important to consider how to support

a diverse school population's interactions and learning activities. A couple of participants acknowledged that "interpersonal interactions among students exposed them to other cultures and they learn from each other." Comments acknowledge the diversity in school populations and in the country's population, but there was little evidence of this in the curriculum (Banks, 2014; Kincheloe, 2008). The diversity in the classroom visible to the candidates reflected a consensus that "teachers should make efforts to know their students" so that they are able to "select the best resources." The teacher candidates overwhelmingly agreed on the need to make learning engaging. For instance, several participants indicated that the teacher should "find activities that students like and that make learning enjoyable." In addition, there was a voiced concern that teachers "should be respectful so that students will trust the teacher." The participants' intense focus on the quality of the classroom environment documented their awareness of the need to address and validate students' cultural capital (Freire, 1985) and make learning participatory. They mentioned they had not delved deeply into their students' backgrounds (Hult & Hornberger, 2016; Ramos Pellicia, 2020) and had made the assumption that languages other than Spanish would neither interfere nor contribute to the study of English.

Parent involvement

Parental involvement and the teacher's role in engaging families was not a priority in the candidates' conversations. Participants commented that this topic did not receive much attention in the teacher preparation program (Nieto, 2018). Moreover, the teacher's role in engaging families was not a priority in the candidates' conversations, as there was an almost complete absence of discussion about parents and other members of the community contributing to the school in ways other than through financial support (Bucklewe & Fishman, 2011). However, four participants explained the importance of parent involvement to address classroom behavioral issues that affect the child's academic achievement. One participant indicated "I observed that parent involvement would have been beneficial in disciplinary challenges at the high school level"; another participant supported the statement by stating, "I believe that parent involvement would have been a good avenue to solve disciplinary issues." Parent involvement was perceived as a factor that participants did not have control over but was needed to support students' academic success. One participant stated, "Parents do not support students learning another language." The candidates clearly stated the importance of parent participation in children's schooling to support the learning needs of diverse students.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that aspiring teachers are aware of the diverse instructional practices required for effective lesson planning, and they are committed to addressing both the academic and emotional needs of learners (Banks, 2014; Bucklewe & Fishman, 2011; Nieto 2018). Participants shared their perspectives on pedagogical practices that could be implemented in classrooms, including the importance of considering students' existing knowledge when developing teaching materials (Author, 2017, 2016; Hawkins and Norton 2009; Kincheloe 2008). The significance of actively engaging students emerged as a recurring theme, but other areas such as multiculturalism and parental involvement appear to require more focused attention in Ecuador's teacher training programs (Ecuador Immediato, 2016; Cevallos-Estarellas & Bromwell, 2015).

To enhance their preparedness for the classroom, teacher candidates would benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of how to design and implement a systematic approach to lesson planning (Bucklewe & Fishman, 2011; González et al., 2005). Engaging in reflective processes with fellow teachers in dyads or small groups could help improve their ability to identify effective instructional strategies specifically suited to (EFL) classrooms in Ecuador (Bennett, 2019; Farrell & Jacobs, 2020; Giroux & Silva, 2010). This reflective approach would provide a research-based foundation for EFL instruction (Serrano et al., 2015).

The absence of evidence demonstrating a system-wide approach to planning EFL classroom instruction is concerning because it supports participants' belief that they are not adequately prepared to design lessons for Ecuador's diverse learners (Van Damme et al. 2013). It is crucial for future teachers to have the self-confidence to take risks, evaluate their teaching methods, and make adjustments based on self-reflection. The educational system in Ecuador should aim to instill in educators a sense of confidence in their acquired knowledge so that they are empowered to experiment and adapt their instruction accordingly (Bucklewe & Fishman, 2011; Farrell & Jacobs, 2020; González et al., 2005).

Research Limitations

Data gathered in this study cannot be generalized beyond the 28 teacher candidates who volunteered to participate in this research. In order to establish a complete picture of teacher preparation in Ecuador and answer the study questions for the entire country, it will be necessary to conduct similar research in other institutions and also with teacher candidates' representative of the nation's public tertiary institutions. Understanding the tensions within the classroom about pedagogical theories, instructional strategies, and assessment techniques about multicultural education and

candidates' formal instruction would allow higher education institutions to adjust their teacher preparation programs.

Implications for the Future

Teachers' identities as educators (Fitts et al., 2008) require that they have opportunities to empower themselves and their students. Empowerment could be channelled through self-reflection so teachers would internalize their teaching philosophies and how these are evidenced in their practice in the day-to-day classroom activities. Participants did not share a system-wide approach to EFL guided by questioning, collaboration, exploration, and experimentation with curricular models. Future research might encourage educators to explore ways that programs of teacher preparation and professional development models might better evaluate local contexts and address the multilingual/multicultural nature of Ecuadorian learners. Another thread of future research relates to English educators' teaching loads after the academic reforms. Although the Ministry of Education provides lesson plans, English teachers are teaching more grade levels and it is not clear how time for preparation of educational materials is allocated at local levels.

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