

Educators and Students Perceptions about Ecuadorian NEST Knowledge and Quality in Terms of Effective Teaching

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ABSTRACT

EFL has become necessary in all areas of education over the last decade in Ecuador. There has been a widespread push for changes in the level of knowledge and quality of EFL teacher effectiveness throughout the educational system. This paper aims to look at what perceptions current EFL participants have about the Ecuadorian NNEST and if they have the necessary linguistic awareness, language skills and teaching qualities to teach EFL effectively. The data for this investigation includes 89 student questionnaires and 30 teacher interviews based on their perceptions. The findings illustrated how students at lower levels tend to be more comfortable with teachers who use primarily the first language (L1) and have effective teaching qualities, while upper intermediate students tended to choose NESTs, because they needed proficiency skills such as language fluency and high levels of oral communication to be examples in class. The study goes onto demonstrate how many Ecuadorian NNESTs cannot speak, understand, communicate or pronounce English fluently at higher levels since many did not have teachers who possessed these qualities. This phenomenon creates the perception that a native speaker will have better fluency, pronunciation and overall better proficiency than an Ecuadorian NNEST. These results show it is necessary for these teachers to increase their English proficiency to be effective teachers in the future and change the perception that native speakers have higher levels of English in Ecuador.

Keywords: English Language proficiency; effective teaching; fluency; communicative competency; motivation

INTRODUCTION

The author noticed a repeated situation throughout years of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching experience in Ecuador. Being a native English speaking teacher of EFL (NEST) in Ecuador gave the author a unique opportunity to work inside an educational system mostly dominated by non-native L2 English speakers. This allowed for an insider perspective on problems that can arise from being a native or non-native EFL teacher. One of the problems the teacher recognized was how students from different courses would regularly ask how to pronounce a word or how to correctly say certain things in English. The author would then ask the students why they didn't ask their own EFL teacher these questions. The students would reply that their teachers are Ecuadorian and cannot pronounce English words correctly. They would also reply that their teachers do not know common expressions or speak fluently like native speakers even though these teachers were hired to be EFL teachers based on their English abilities. Based on this reoccurring situation the author decided to research why this situation is a common occurrence.

This paper goes on to discuss some of the differences between (NESTs) and non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) in terms of oral communication and linguistic awareness in English and necessary effective teaching qualities that shape an EFL teacher in Ecuador. The information was gathered through questionnaires and interviews of current EFL teachers and students about their perceptions on these topics. All of the EFL teachers in the study were non-native Ecuadorians who primarily learned English in Ecuador. This type of EFL teacher was focused on since they are the majority of EFL teachers in Ecuador. It is their job to advance the language learning process throughout the country. The problem seen by the author was that many of these teachers have oral communication and fluency deficiencies. Many NNESTs cannot speak English with high levels of fluency, because most do not have

the necessary English proficiency level. Therefore, students when learning higher levels of English cannot learn to speak using advanced proficient procedural English skills from their teachers; therefore they must learn how to communicate independently if they are aspiring to gain fluency in English.

Most participants in the study agreed their teachers did not have high levels of communicative skills or were not able to communicate fluently in English. This argument is further supported by 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 (Andes 2012). This explains why students perceive that many Ecuadorian NNESTs have weak pronunciation or low speaking skills in comparison to a native speaker even if these qualities are seen as a necessary effective teaching quality for EFL teachers themselves.

ECUADORIAN CONTEXT

After realising that many students have difficulties advancing in English fluency and communication under Ecuadorian NNEST guidance, the author wanted to find out why this was occurring in Ecuador and specifically in the Universidad Nacional de Educacion (UNAE). Currently this question is an important topic in Ecuador because all students are expected to be at a B2 level according to the Common European Framework (CEFR) in order to graduate from university. It can be seen through the research provided in this paper that this could be a difficult level to attain since most EFL teachers do not meet this standard or are not at this level. According to the British Council of Educational Intelligence (2015) about the status of English in Ecuador only 1% of teachers meet this B2 requirement. The fact is that most teachers interviewed did not have the mandatory level of English required to teach this language in Ecuador, which is a C1 level according to the Ministry of Education (2016). The previous president of Ecuador put a huge emphasis on English language learning to help improve the country ranking and economic status. This report also found before the current government there was not a huge emphasis on English language learning throughout the educational system (British Council of Educational Intelligence 2015). Even with these changes it has been shown that English proficiency and dominance over the language is still very low compared to countries around the world and throughout Latin America. Ecuador is ranked 47 out of 72 countries for English dominance and only 9th out of 14 in Latin America. (Education First 2017)

It can be seen that there are huge changes occurring in EFL education in Ecuador. However, according to English First (2017) Ecuador is still considered to have a low level of English compared to other non-native English speaking countries. It was found that Ecuador has moved from a ranking of 37 to a ranking of 47 in the last 5 years, which shows an incremental improvement of overall English language throughout the country (English First 2017). It was also concluded that the Ecuadorian government had demonstrated the need to increase and improve English language throughout the educational system to aid in improvement of life and the country's economy. However, this study demonstrates how these changes do not happen overnight and they still need more development to progress (British Council of Educational Intelligence 2015).

NEST OR NNEST?

As Ulate (2011) explained as long a teacher is prepared and trained to be an effective EFL teacher it does not matter if they are native or non-native speakers. Sawyer (2011) supports this idea that teachers who possess subject knowledge and creativity will be not only good but great teachers. This supports the idea that NNESTs who have low levels of procedural skills, but have other mentioned effective teaching qualities could still be competent language

teachers. However, native teachers who can only speak fluently, but do not have good teaching strategies are not the most effective teachers either. Merino (1997) discusses some of the differences between (NESTs) and (NNESTs), explaining that pronunciation and fluency are difficult areas for NNESTs to master, thus supporting the experience of the author.

Ulate (2011) explains how just being a native speaker, does not automatically make you a qualified or better language teacher. This is when a trained NNEST is a better option for EFL teaching especially since they can use the students L1 in the classroom and understand the students' language needs (Ulate 2011). Ulate (2011 as cited in Mahboob 2004) further explains how NNESTs tend to have a much better grasp at the declarative aspect of English language and tend to have better skills to explain this aspect of language. This explains why students in Ecuador tend to feel more comfortable with an Ecuadorian NNEST in the beginning of the language learning process.

The study completed by Medgyes (2001) creates a detailed list of students' perceptions of NEST and NNESTs. The research explains that NESTs and NNESTs vary greatly in personality, language use, teaching abilities and focus. This research can help support the results of this paper. As students in Ecuador begin to improve in language they want a teacher who focuses more on communication and fluency rather than grammar and structure, Medgyes (2001) shows how this is one difference between native and non-native speakers. Walkinshaw (2012) explained that in Vietnam many students also chose native over non-native teachers because of their perceptions of the non-native fluency and oral abilities. However, the findings of Walkinshaw's (2012) research showed that this bias was based on the fact that many Vietnamese teachers lacked professional EFL training. These teachers did not have effective teaching qualities and also lacked communicative procedural knowledge. This study revealed that all students and educators alike agreed that the most important quality for EFL teachers to possess is to have a high level of subject knowledge.

Sung (2010) explains that one of the major differences between a NNEST and NEST is that a NNEST can lack linguist skills in comparison to a NEST. Without personal motivation and proper training a NNEST cannot gain certain communication competences a NEST naturally has. While the same understanding of grammar and linguist rules a NNEST may have, a NEST cannot gain without the same motivation and training (Sung 2010). Llorca (2009) discussed various studies completed around the world showing how a NNEST can be an effective teacher as long as they have fluency. These studies showed that depending on the country or city, students have shown varying attitudes towards NEST or NNEST preference depending on teaching qualities and language abilities. Medgyes (2001) demonstrates that while there is a big difference between native and non-native speakers, they can both be good teachers, but that can depend mainly on the teachers themselves. That is why many educators explained that they had to be highly motivated to increase procedural English language skills during their studies, at the present and in the future.

MOTIVATIONAL FACTOR

Abrudan (2013) explained that motivation can come from many different aspects of one's life and there can be intrinsic or extrinsic reasons for all people to be motivated to advance in the language learning process. Tuan (2012) further explains how intrinsic motivation is one of the most important factors in foreign language learning. If students are not independently motivated to learn they have a very difficult time gaining proficiency in second language acquisition. Many Ecuadorian NNESTs learn English in Ecuador with the expressive purpose of graduating from school, earning more money or obtaining employment. Norris-Holt (2001) explains that this is a type of instrumental motivation where students are motivated to learn English for specific purposes and never really have a lot of contact with the native

language in the target culture. Another reason NNESTs are motivated to learn English is when and for travelling abroad. Benzie (2009) states to be part of a different linguistic community can also give an individual an intrinsic reason to learn another language. He goes on to explain how this can create a connection between the learner's second language and identity allowing for the language to be internalized, producing better pronunciation, fluency and an able L2 speaker. This is important as Gan (2012) explains (as cited in Richards 2010) that language proficiency is one of the most effective qualities an English language teacher can have and motivation is normally connected to a NNESTs level of language proficiency.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING QUALITIES

It can be difficult to decipher what qualities make an effective language teacher. Coombe (2014) wrote that through her experience there are 10 qualities to be an effective English language teacher. Some of those qualities include content knowledge and communicative competence of the language, specific personality traits, teaching methodology and teaching strategies. Al-Marooqi, Denman, Al-Siyabi and Al-Maamari (2015) found that students and teachers alike also feel that a high level of linguistic awareness and teaching abilities were very important in effective teaching. Similarly, Kourieros and Eviripidou (2013) found a teacher who can focus on students' needs is important to aid effective EFL teaching. Khojastehmehrand Takrimi (2009) shows the importance for an EFL teacher to have excellent communication skills in Khuzestan. The research supports these ideas and helps explain how these are just some of the effective teaching qualities that are similar and necessary for all teachers to possess around the world to be proficient and overall 'good' teachers. Qualities of an ideal English language teacher forum (2009) explains one of the most important qualities of a teacher is to have a high level of subject knowledge, however they cannot just possess this knowledge but must have the abilities to be able to make themselves understood to their students. When a teacher possesses these qualities there is an increased chance for success in the classroom. These qualities can be from a native or non-native teacher. Walkinshaw (2012) found that it does not matter if the professors are NEST or NNEST, but that they possess the qualities discussed in this paper. Al Marooqi et al. (2015) researched the necessary teaching qualities one must possess to be an effective teacher in Oman. They focused on the perspectives of students and teachers to decipher which qualities are important in the country of Oman in EFL. Some of the qualities researched by these authors were command of the language and teachers possessing certain personality traits such as compassion, playfulness and diversity.

Another study completed by Al-Khairi (2015) in Saudi Arabia explains that high language proficiency; specific personality traits and teaching strategies have been found to be effective qualities in EFL teachers. His study found that students were of the opinion that one of the most important qualities is that a teacher can be understood by the students. It is not important whether this teacher is a NEST or NNEST. Kourieros and Eviripidou (2013) in Cyprus also demonstrated similar effective teaching qualities such as the need for teachers to have specific personality traits, appropriate teaching strategies and domination of the subject being taught. These studies are important because they demonstrate the need for EFL teachers around the world including the sample investigated in this paper to have these qualities. Many of the same qualities discussed in the previous research cited that effective teaching qualities for EFL teachers apply in Ecuador as well.

Gan (2012) in Hong Kong discusses ten of the most important competencies an English language teacher needs to be effective of which the most important is language proficiency. In the United States there are specific standards in place to be considered an effective ESL teacher. The Standards for English as a Second Language Teacher Candidates (2009) include 6 standards. These standards also include the necessity of having a high level

of knowledge and proficiency in the language and oral English communicative competence. Richards (2011) explains that being an effective teacher can change depending on the situation of that teacher and the students. He goes on to discuss how teacher effectiveness can be measured by their knowledge, teaching strategies and abilities to be flexible in the classroom. These are just some of the studies completed around the world about necessary effective teacher qualities. The previous research presented and the investigation completed in this paper supports the author's point that communication and knowledge are top effective teaching qualities around the world. However, there are other competencies an ESL teacher must have to be effective as well. Tsui (2009) found through investigation that having a high level of knowledge is important, but it is more important to be able to use that knowledge in an interactive, creative and interesting in lesson planning and classroom activities to be an effective teacher.

Another way to master this language and become proficient in English is to learn independently or travel to a native English speaking country to increase their oral fluency. Gan (2012) points out that if an ESL teacher cannot communicate or speak English fluently then they will not be able to use it in the classroom and promote high levels of communicative competence to their students.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are to find out how effective NNESTs are when it comes to teaching oral communication proficiency and imparting declarative knowledge and to identify what students and teachers perceive as important qualities to be an effective EFL teacher. This paper demonstrates the current situation in Ecuador, emphasising how many NNESTs have certain effective teaching qualities discussed throughout the professional community and found in the research of this paper, but are lacking in procedural language, fluency, and pronunciation to allow for effective English language teaching.

PARTICIPANT (SUBJECT) CHARACTERISTICS

The participants of this study included 30 Ecuadorian EFL teachers who taught in elementary school, high school and university in different cities in Ecuador. Would age or gender have made a difference? These teachers participated in the qualitative interview given by the author. The investigator also administered a questionnaire to 89 male and female university age students from two different universities who were beginner and upper intermediate level English language learners.

To be able to collect a large amount of varied data the interviews took place in various places such as a private university and a public university, a language institute and two free teacher-training courses. All of the teachers and educators involved in the research of this project agreed to participate in the interview process to complete the research for this paper. It was important to the investigator to have EFL teachers from various institutions, universities and schools to have a varied sample range. There were EFL university students and EFL elementary, high school and university teachers who made up the different groups of participants of the study. There were 89 students ranging from A2 to B1 levels and 30 EFL teachers included in the research sample. The sample populations show a wide range of different learners and teachers to represent the target population of EFL teachers and learners in Ecuador.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method approach was used in the creation of the investigative tools used in the research. This approach used quantitative and qualitative research to gather information used in the study. There were two tools primarily used to complete the research and these were interviews and questionnaires.

The interviews took a purely qualitative approach. There was a broad sample of teachers from all levels of schooling who were interviewed. The interview questions were first given to other EFL professionals to read, give feedback and analyses. These interview questions were then edited according to the feedback given. After the interview questions were reviewed and the appropriate changes were made, these interview questions were administered to a variety of ELT educators from Ecuador. The interview was conducted in a structured and semi-structured style. The questions asked in the interview included a combination of yes and no questions and semi-open ended questions about perceptions of effective teaching qualities for an EFL teacher in Ecuador, motivational factors and the current CEFR levels of the interviewees.

Another tool used in the investigation was student questionnaires and the questions asked were based on a mixed method approach to information gathering since there were three quantitative questions and 3 qualitative questions included in the questionnaire. These included open-ended questions, scaling questions and dichotomous questions. These questions provided information about students' perceptions on effective EFL teaching qualities and the current level of the students according to the CEFR. This data was analysed through bar graphs and critical analyses depending on the answers provided.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

There are five different figures below analysing the data and findings. Figure 1 looks at the top 5 teaching qualities EFL teachers feel one must have to be an effective teacher in Ecuador. The second figure discusses perceptions about skills teachers need to have to be able to teach fluency and oral communication in the classroom. The third figure shows what qualities EFL students think are important for a teacher to be an effective English language teacher in terms of proficiency and fluency. The fourth figure shows the levels of current English teachers who participated in this study. The last figure explains motivation factors in for NNESTs.

STUDENT DATA

TABLE 1. Top 5 Effective English Language Teaching Qualities according to 89 University Level English Language Students

# of importance	% of teachers who agree	Effective teaching quality
1	71.9%	knowledge of the subject
2	57.3%	interactive, creative, and innovative in the class
3	53.9%	good English oral communication skills
4	40.4%	takes personal interest in every student
5	38.2	understanding the students' individual needs

It can be understood from Table 1 that the majority of teachers who were interviewed agree that knowledge of English language is the most important quality combined with teaching strategies, communication, interest in students and students' needs. It can be seen that teachers understand knowledge is the most important, but yet many of them have low levels of language knowledge. It can also be seen that communication is very important, but many of them have trouble communicating orally in English with the necessary fluency to teach EFL competently at more advanced levels.

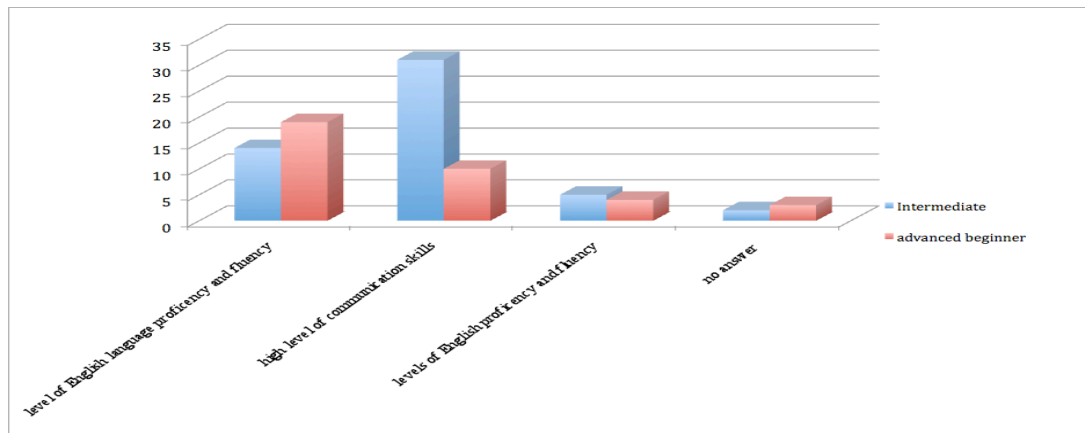


FIGURE 1. A comparison of 89 intermediate and advanced beginner students' perceptions of an Effective English Language Teacher.

Figure 1 explains how the majority of students at intermediate learning levels would prefer a teacher who has a high level of oral proficiency no matter if those teachers were a NEST or NNEST. These questionnaires were given in English and Spanish depending on the levels of the students participating in the study. Students also see English language knowledge as an important trait a teacher must possess when teaching lower levels and would normally choose this teacher who is linguistically aware over a teacher who can communicate fluently. However, at advanced levels students would tend to choose a teacher who speaks fluently over a teacher who does not, so they can learn directly from that teacher.

TEACHER DATA

TABLE 2. Top 5 Effective English Language Teaching Qualities according to 30 ELTs in Ecuador

# of importance	% of students who agree	Agreed effective qualities EFL teachers must possess
1	73%	high level of knowledge about subject
2	56%	flexible methodology to teach to students needs
3	56%	creative, innovative and interactive teaching strategies
4	46%	up-to-date teaching strategies and pedagogy
5	45%	ability to make yourself understood

The other tool used to collect data was an interview using the qualitative research method to gather data about the perceptions and thoughts of Ecuadorian NNESTs about English language teachers in Ecuador. This tool specifically collected data about what teachers thought are necessary qualities for effective teaching and what levels of English they have after taking an internationally recognized exam. This interview also collected data showing that almost every teacher that has a B2 or higher stressed that they improved or were able to get to this high level of procedural English through motivation or travel abroad, not by learning English oral communication in English language classes.

The information collected through questionnaires show how EFL students also believe that teachers must possess a high level of English language knowledge. However, students believe it is important for teachers to have a flexible teaching methodology to teach to students' needs, have good up-to-date teaching strategies, and possess the ability to make them understood. It can be seen that students want teachers be proficient in English, but it is also very important to them how the teacher teaches, not necessarily how well the teacher can communicate. Effective teaching qualities are much more important than language fluency for students.

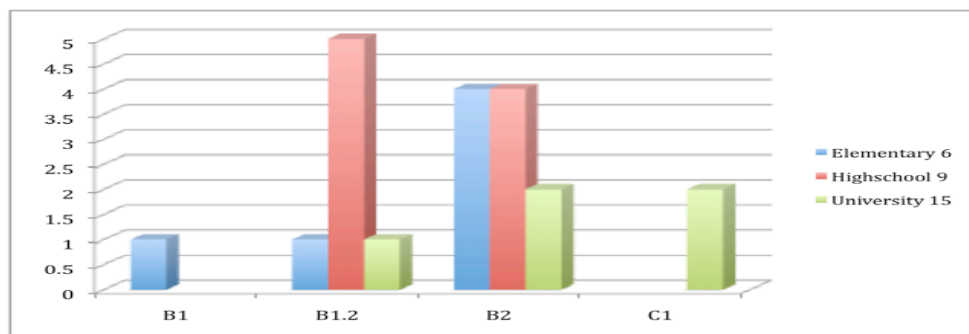


FIGURE 2. Self- reported English language levels of ELTs interviewed in research

The table above explains the self reported teachers' English language levels throughout different years of education. This was the level the teachers said they had when participating in the interview. There was no exam or test given to these participants. It shows the participants of this study range from a B1 to a C1 level of English language knowledge. It can be seen that the majority of teachers in Ecuador are not at the C1 level of English that is mandated in the curriculum. This could be one of the underlying problems for students learning English. If the teachers do not have the basic criterion necessary to teach English, it will impede learning in the future.

TABLE 3. Types of motivation NNESTs needed to learn English

Motivational factors for NNESTs in Ecuador to learn English proficiently	N	% of teachers
Intrinsically motivated	25	83.34
Motivated by EFL teachers in courses	2	6.66
Motivated through travel abroad in English speaking countries	3	1
Total	30	100

Every teacher with a higher level of English made it clear in the open ended questions in the interview that motivation whether it be intrinsic or supported, was a huge factor in aiding them in attaining their goals to be proficient in English and be an effective English language teacher. Almost every EFL teacher interviewed explained that if they had not taken time outside of the classroom to practice English independently or was not given an opportunity to travel abroad to an English speaking country they would never have achieved the level of English they had at the time of the interview.

The interview provided detailed information about perceived necessary NEST or NNEST effective teacher qualities, self-reported CEFR levels and motivational factors in the creation of proficient effective NNESTs in Ecuador. These questions in the interview gave data as to what are motivational factors for English language learning in Ecuadorian NNESTs and perceived effective teaching qualities necessary to be an effective teacher. These interviews also expressed the connection between effective teaching and motivation in Ecuadorian NNESTs.

DISCUSSION

Students believe native speakers are more effective teachers at higher English language levels mostly because they possess proficiency in oral communication skills, not necessarily because Ecuadorians NNESTs lack effective teaching qualities or content knowledge. The findings of the research actually implied beginner Ecuadorian English language learners would choose Ecuadorian NNESTs to be their English language teachers, since they have

certain teaching qualities a native speaker may not have, such as grammatical knowledge and a better ability for explanation. Medgyes (2001) explains that these are two factors NNESTs tend to be stronger in when it comes to effective teaching and Merino (1997) emphasizes that while communication competency and fluency are very important other effective teaching qualities play a major role in the student language learning process.

However, when it comes to speaking, the results showed that the current teachers who did have oral proficiency either studied abroad in an English speaking country or had high intrinsic motivation for English language learning. Many of the teachers interviewed expressed that they could recognise the importance of learning English for furthering their education and for personal reasons from early in their studies. This was seen by the educators' responses during the interview process. Some of those perceptions included:

A personally motivated university teacher:

"I learned the grammar rules in school. But I did everything I could to practice English outside of class. We didn't practice speaking in class"

A motivated high school teacher:

"My (English) teachers didn't speak a lot English. I learned to speak alone by listening music, watching TV and online programs."

Some of the teachers who participated in the study were able to be part of immersion programs in native English speaking countries.

C1 level university teacher:

"I was at an A2 level before going to study in the United States. After my time abroad I tested at a C1 level. I learned how to communicate more fluently while immersed in English."

The research has clearly shown that being native or non-native is not the most important factors in English language teaching in Ecuador. Rather the qualities such as communicative competence, linguistic awareness, teaching strategies and ability to explain subject matter. EFL teachers possess are more important for building and being an effective English language teacher in Ecuador. It can also be seen that to form and develop procedural and declarative skills inside an EFL class, the professors must have a high level of each of these competencies to effectively teach Ecuadorian EFL students. It is clear Ecuador is going through an educational revolution and is improving language learning throughout the educational system, but much more work and training needs to be completed to see if the newly mandated guidelines and teacher knowledge is improving. To see if the new mandates that have been put in place throughout the EFL curriculum are advancing the language process, further studies in this area will have to be repeated in the years to come.

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