

English Language Teaching in Ecuadorian Primary Schools: Teacher Beliefs in the Context of the Curriculum Reform Versus Actual Practices

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Abstract

Despite curriculum innovations that aim to teach English through current methodologies and approaches, research in English Language Teaching at primary schools has yet to be thoroughly explored. This study examined the impact of the Ecuadorian national curriculum on teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through the lens of primary school teachers' beliefs. The participants in this study were 113 EFL teachers from primary schools. This study applied a mixed-method sequential explanatory approach. The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire that associated teachers' beliefs and classroom practices regarding the new curriculum reform introduced by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education. To collect qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 teachers who participated voluntarily in this stage of the investigation, aiming to support the quantitative results by exploring their beliefs about instructional design, assessment, teaching materials, and classroom teaching practices. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of the gathered data reveals that primary EFL teachers perceive the new curriculum reform as an innovative and updated document that emphasizes the development of 21st-century skills through its core principles. However, participants do not apply these principles effectively due to various factors that prevent them from utilizing current teaching methods. These factors included excessive students per class, insufficient technology integration, a lack of parental involvement, low experience of teaching English at primary schools, and limited quality resources for EFL primary classrooms. The study also offers practical implications for EFL teaching and provides suggestions for future educational endeavors.

Keywords:

EFL curriculum reform, Language education, Pedagogical practices, Primary education, Teacher beliefs



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Introduction

English is a universal language since it is used by many people worldwide. Teaching English as a Foreign Language is taught as a compulsory subject in many countries due to its popularity and importance for students' academic success (Vu & Peters, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Macalister & Nation, 2019). Thus, English language learning for academic purposes can occur at different levels, from young children in primary schools to teenagers in secondary schools and adults at universities. Regarding primary schools, introducing languages is probably the most significant policy development in education due to various internal and external challenges, such as limited opportunities to use the language, motivation, identity, lack of learning resources, teachers' level of English, and class size (Tamayo et al., 2023; Cahyaty & Madya, 2019; Johnstone, 2009).

Several studies have been conducted to investigate language teachers' beliefs about teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools. For instance, in one study, Sulistiyo et al. (2019) described that Indonesian teachers consider teaching English as a foreign language in primary schools to be a challenging process due to the lack of teaching training to teach English to young learners and the lack of technological equipment that obstructs teachers from designing authentic resources, instruction, and assessment that need to be age appropriate. Kalaycı and Ergül (2020) stated that most primary school teachers are aware of the importance of parental involvement in teaching English to young learners, as it can reinforce students' language development in both academic and motivational ways. Furthermore, Copland et al. (2013) claimed that teaching in primary schools is challenging due to various factors, including maintaining student discipline, managing large classes, and gaining experience teaching young learners. Therefore, primary teachers must apply innovative and meaningful strategies to engage with parents and encourage students to learn English by promoting their language, literacy, and communication skills (Grigg, 2022).

Given the importance of family influence and students' encouragement in English learning, national policies must be established to align these factors with effective language instruction (Spolsky, 2021). In this way, this significant influence needs to be addressed in national curriculums to fulfill learning goals for language proficiency. However, while various investigations emphasize the importance of parental involvement and students' motivation to learn a language (Kalaycı & Ergül, 2020; Garton & Copland, 2019; Sulistiyo et al., 2019), the extent to which the Ecuadorian national curriculum incorporates these elements remains uncertain. It creates a need to understand the gaps between policy objectives

and classroom realities to improve students' English language proficiency outcomes.

The Ecuadorian Ministry of Education implemented the English as a Foreign Language curriculum, which aimed "to support the policy of developing citizens in Ecuador who can communicate effectively in today's globalized world" (Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2016). This curriculum supports students' general education goals of justice, innovation, and solidarity in the context of language learning. Benalcázar and Ortega (2019) explained that, according to the national curriculum, Ecuadorian EFL students at the end of secondary school are expected to achieve the B1 level, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. However, this is not the reality of ELT in Ecuador. According to the English First Organization (2023), Ecuadorian EFL students obtained one of the lowest English proficiency scores among 113 countries worldwide, indicating an inefficient alignment between the curriculum and the actual results.

Further research is needed on the English as a Foreign Language teaching and learning process in Ecuadorian primary schools. For instance, Copland et al. (2014) report a need for more research on teaching English to young learners worldwide, as investigations are more often focused on specific contexts. Likewise, Avci (2023) claims that most studies in EFL contexts are primarily conducted on teenagers and adult learners. This highlights the limited attention that research has given to teachers' beliefs on teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in primary schools. Consequently, to fill this research gap, this study examines teachers' beliefs about the factors that hinder the authentic connection between the new curriculum principles established by the Ministry of Education and their teaching practices.

Literature Review

Teacher Beliefs in Language Teaching

Teacher beliefs play a crucial role in shaping educational practices, student engagement, and learning outcomes in language teaching. Their "beliefs and practices have been agreed upon as an initially vital basis for continuing a qualified learning process" (Pusparini et al., 2021, p. 147). Motloung et al. (2021) claimed that teachers' beliefs are often grounded in diverse pedagogical and educational philosophies, as well as personal experiences, which influence their choices and practices in curriculum design, language acquisition, classroom management, and teaching strategies to support language learners. Therefore, beliefs are crucial in the learning process, shedding light on their applications in the classroom and the extent to which educational reforms are successful (Bay, 2014; Cheung & Hennebry, 2023).

According to Gao and Cui (2022), one aspect of pedagogical beliefs encompasses two broad types: the constructivist approach, in which students actively participate in the learning process, and the transmissive approach, where teachers present knowledge and students are passive recipients of it. Constructivist believers promote students' interactions by creating an active and dynamic learning environment and using authentic and meaningful strategies to foster students' deep understanding, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and autonomy (Quoc et al., 2023). On the other hand, the transmissive framework relies on traditional teaching methods, which involve the passive transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the students through lectures, readings, and guided problem-solving (Svensson et al., 2017; Kiely & Davis, 2010).

In teaching English as a Foreign language, teachers' beliefs also play a crucial role, depending on their teaching philosophy, cultural context, and pedagogical background. Borg (2017) stated that teachers' beliefs encompass language learning and pedagogical strategies to be applied to foster learners' knowledge and English skills. Furthermore, positive beliefs among English teachers are correlated with effective teaching practices (Shin et al., 2021). Thus, well-founded beliefs about language teaching can shape classroom practices in an engaging, supportive, and interactive environment, allowing teachers to critically reflect on their teaching practices and promote students' English skills development.

Practices in English Language Teaching for Primary Schools

Different teaching methods and approaches were introduced long ago to teach young learners English as a Foreign Language. Setiyadi (2020) explained that these methods and approaches derive from different theories and assumptions about the nature of language. For instance, translation into a second language through grammar use (Grammar Translation Method), the ability to use the language orally (The Direct Method), sounds with specific meanings (The Silent Way), spoken utterances of the average person (Audio Lingual Method), and a set of grammatical rules and language chunks (Total Physical Response), a system for the expression of meaning (Communicative Language Teaching), learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language (CLIL), or involving students to design, develop, and construct hands-on solutions to a problem (Project-based Approach) (Khasawneh, 2022; Cremin, 2022; Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2016; Stakanova & Tolstikhina, 2014).

Due to recent educational trends in addressing the challenges of globalization, teaching English as a Foreign language is a core aspect of both national

and school curricula. The national curriculum in countries where English is not spoken as a second language typically outlines guiding principles to ensure consistent and high-quality education across all schools. Currently, the main principles are focused on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), learner-centered approach, and inclusivity and differentiation, where students can develop their thinking, social, and creative skills needed for lifelong learning (Zhang, 2021; Macalister & Nation, 2019; Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2016). Furthermore, in connection with EFL teaching and assessment, the language curriculum is based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), developed by the Council of Europe, which has, as its primary objective, the description of how learners progress through different stages of learning (Fraga, 2021; Council of Europe, 2018).

Teaching English to young learners requires a thoughtful blend of methodologies and strategies that cater to students' emotional, cognitive, and linguistic development. Shaturaev (2023) claimed that one of the primary roles of teachers is to employ various methodologies, strategies, and means to enhance students' language skills. Teachers must stay current with various approaches to prioritize interaction and authentic communication by integrating technology and designing activities that foster 21st-century student skills to support English learning both inside and outside the classroom (Ekizer & Yildirim, 2023; Parker, 2023; Abdukhayotovna, 2022). Finally, it is essential to be aware of the existing critical issues in primary school contexts, including the starting age, the role of English in the curriculum, motivation, parental involvement, large and under-resourced classrooms, and limited exposure to the English language outside the classroom (Garton & Copland, 2019). Thus, teaching EFL in primary schools requires meeting specific educational qualifications, having practical experience, and possessing pedagogical and soft skills to help improve students' cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Challenges in English Language Teaching at the Primary Level

Regarding teaching English in a foreign context, institutional, instructional, and socio-economic factors hinder students from developing their language skills quickly (Chen, 2022; Kızıldağ, 2009). Regarding teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in primary schools, the instructional challenges include a heavy workload, inadequate basic infrastructure, crowded classrooms, limited contact hours, a lack of skilled and trained teachers, limited parental involvement and support, and excessive reliance on the native language (L1). Likewise, socio-economic factors involve working with students from low socio-economic backgrounds to determine access to educational resources, such as

quality textbooks and technological tools (Case, 2023). Finally, the instructional challenges include unrealistic learning goals and a need for supplementary materials and technological resources (Cahyati & Madya, 2018; Milon, 2016).

Teachers' beliefs about teaching English to young learners are crucial to teaching practices and students' performance. Roothooff (2017) claimed that teachers believe young learners benefit from a communicative approach, as it exposes children to extensive input from the target language. Likewise, they believe that incorporating songs, games, collaborative work, and authentic projects helps students enhance their language skills. However, some studies indicated that there are specific challenges in teaching English to young learners, including the role of parents in supporting language development at home, the lack of training for teachers to work with young learners, limited exposure to authentic contexts, and inadequate technological resources (Nkengbeza et al., 2022; Khulel, 2021; Sulistiyo et al., 2019).

Regarding family involvement, Khulel (2021) stated that parental income, educational background, and occupation are connected to students' academic English development and motivation to learn this language. Therefore, it is an important aspect that can reinforce or diminish students' motivation and encouragement to learn English (Kalaycı & Ergül, 2020). Likewise, Sulistiyo et al. (2019) noted that primary school EFL teachers often lack sufficient experience in employing age-appropriate strategies and maintaining a disciplined classroom environment, which may hinder students' improvement of their language skills. Finally, Nkengbeza et al. (2022) noted that primary English teachers encounter challenges when integrating media technology due to the scarcity of ICT resources in schools and a lack of appropriate skills and training in technology.

The studies reviewed above examine the factors that influence English language teaching in primary schools across various EFL contexts. However, there is little empirical evidence regarding teachers' perspectives on teaching English in primary schools in EFL contexts, such as in Ecuador. Extending the area of interest and the scope of the research, the current study was conducted to explore the factors affecting English language teaching among Ecuadorian primary school teachers. Consequently, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What are EFL teachers' beliefs about teaching English as a Foreign Language in Ecuadorian primary schools?
2. What are the practices of EFL teachers in teaching English as a Foreign Language in Ecuadorian primary schools within the context of curriculum reform?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory approach to gain in-depth insights into teachers' beliefs about the factors that influence EFL teaching practices in Ecuadorian primary schools. It is argued that this research design incorporates both qualitative and quantitative methods in two distinct phases, utilizing qualitative findings to explain and expand on the quantitative results, thereby understanding the complex phenomena of social worlds through multiple perspectives (Creswell, 1999; Dawadi et al., 2021; Malina et al., 2011). The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire that associated teachers' beliefs and classroom practices regarding the new curriculum reform provided by the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education. Likewise, for qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 teachers who participated voluntarily in this investigation stage to support the quantitative results by providing their insights into instructional design, assessment, teaching materials, and classroom teaching practices.

Context

This study was conducted with Ecuadorian primary EFL teachers in schools where English is a mandatory subject. In this regard, primary and secondary education strictly adhere to policies and regulations established by the Ministry of Education in the Ecuadorian National Curriculum (Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, 2016). This curriculum is designed for students whose mother tongue is not English, and it proposes three main objectives for English language learning: Developing students' understanding of the world and its cultures; fostering personal, social, and intellectual skills; and cultivating a love of language learning from an early stage. Likewise, its main principles focus on the Communicative Language Approach, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Lifelong Learning, the Common European Framework of Reference standards, and a Learner-Centered approach.

Participants

The participants were selected by applying a convenience sampling method. Emerson (2021) claimed that in this method, the enrolled participants fit the study's criteria, such as availability, willingness, or easy access to contact. Thus, in this study, 113 EFL teachers from public primary schools participated in the first data collection stage by answering a questionnaire. After that, 12 teachers participated in the interview process due to their availability, accessibility, and willingness to participate. All participants worked as EFL teachers at Ecuadorian public primary schools during the data collection and were from the four regions of Ecuador: The Highlands,

Coast, Amazon, and the Galapagos Islands. Their native language was Spanish, and they had over five years of experience teaching EFL. Of the 113 teachers, 70 held a bachelor's degree in EFL teaching, 10 had a master's degree in teaching EFL, and the remaining 33 held other bachelor's degrees in primary education, information technology, social studies, and sciences. On the other hand, the 12 teachers who participated in the interview met the criteria for holding a bachelor's or master's degree in teaching EFL for more than five years in primary schools and were willing to participate in this stage of the research voluntarily. All teachers were familiar with the Ecuadorian national curriculum principles established by the Ministry of Education.

Instruments

The first stage of this study involved administering a questionnaire to explore teachers' beliefs about the connections between Ecuadorian national curriculum principles and their teaching practices in primary schools. The questionnaire consisted of twenty questions using a Likert scale; its criteria were strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Furthermore, it comprised five constructs: curriculum, teaching materials and technology, parental involvement, teaching experience, and possible factors that hinder language learning. After completing the questionnaire, the teachers who agreed to participate in the interview were contacted in the second phase. This phase aimed to gain in-depth insight into the results obtained from the questionnaires; therefore, 12 teachers participated voluntarily, sharing their beliefs about English Language Teaching in primary schools. Each interview consisted of eight questions and lasted a maximum of thirty minutes, divided into sections covering introduction, instructional design, assessment, teaching materials, and teaching practices.

Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The research instruments received expert judgment and were piloted to ensure the collected data was accurate and consistent (Osizér, 2020). The feedback provided helped the researchers refine two questions that were unclear due to their wording and technical concepts. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated to show the reliability of the research instrument. As shown in Table 1, the internal consistency of the questionnaire was good across all sections. Sections such as teaching experience and parental involvement showed high consistency (0.87 each), with factors hindering language learning having the highest consistency (0.90).

Table 1

Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient of the questionnaire constructs.

Construct	Internal consistency
Curriculum	0.71
Teaching materials/technology	0.80
Parental involvement	0.87
Teaching experience	0.87
Possible factors that hinder language learning	0.90

Data Analysis

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to address the research questions. Descriptive statistics were applied to collate and analyze the quantitative data. The SPSS software was used to calculate means, percentages, and frequencies, as well as to perform Cronbach's alpha coefficient reliability test on the questionnaire. For the qualitative data, the interview content was transcribed, coded, and analyzed through a thematic analysis, which involves identifying repeated meanings across a dataset to interpret the phenomenon (Xu & Zammit, 2020).

Results

This section presents the findings in response to the research questions that guided this study. It highlights critical areas of concern and optimism among teachers regarding English language teaching in primary schools. The data reflect diverse attitudes towards the national curriculum, teaching methods, parental involvement, and available resources for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), shedding light on potential areas for improvement in the English language education system. From the Likert scale options, the terms disagree and strongly disagree were considered negative perceptions that refer to teachers' insights into teaching English in primary schools.

Category A: Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Ecuadorian primary schools in the context of the curriculum reform

Analyses of the interview and questionnaire results indicated that all teachers perceive an incongruence between the principles stipulated in the Ecuadorian national curriculum and their teaching practices. Table 2 presents the main results related to these inconsistencies, specifically the relevance of the curriculum for students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, the equitable development of language learners' skills, the resources provided for EFL in public schools, and the support for parental involvement in language learning.

Based on Table 2, the findings suggest that 50% of teachers disagree and 30% strongly disagree that the Ecuadorian National Curriculum, as provided by the Ministry of Education, supports their teaching practices; only 20% feel optimistic about it. Most participants (40% strongly agree and 10% agree) believe that the curriculum enables the flexible incorporation of innovative teaching practices.

Teacher A, for instance, stated that

Although, according to the Ministry of Education, teachers adapt the curriculum principles outlined in the syllabus, there needs to be a match between the curriculum standards and the actual implementation or outcomes in our schools and classrooms. The curriculum could be more ambitious, with too many objectives that are impossible to achieve due to different factors.

Furthermore, only 20% of teachers perceive the curriculum as relevant to learners' diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Likewise, the statements indicate that many teachers felt their students needed more engagement with the content (60%) and resources (70%) provided by the Ministry of Education. The following teachers' statements support these results:

Different factors, such as the economic resources and geographic location of the schools and students, lead to unequal implementation of the national curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education. For instance, even though the curriculum emphasizes technological integration, this integration remains a utopia. (Teacher C).

Even when the curriculum requires the implementation of innovative and current teaching strategies, the material provided by MINEDUC needs to be more engaging and relevant to capture students' attention and motivate them to learn. (Teacher B). Likewise, Teacher D explained that MINEDUC only provides digital resources, including textbooks, which could be more effective but may also lead to a lack of student participation.

According to the participants, the curriculum must effectively support or promote English skills development among primary students. Sixty percent of teachers disagree, 30% strongly disagree, and another 30% strongly agree with the statement that the curriculum encourages students to develop primary English skills. Additionally, only 10% of teachers strongly agree or agree that the educational resources provided by MINEDUC effectively enhance students' language skills. This is illustrated in the following examples:

Although the Ecuadorian curriculum is well-organized, the proposed teaching approaches and methods must align with our reality, making them irrelevant to our students. The primary constraint, for instance, is the need for more technological tools and the Internet in schools. (Teacher C).

The national curriculum needs to focus on critical language areas. For instance, it covers some aspects

of language, such as writing, reading, and grammar, but it needs to address speaking skills, which can hinder well-rounded language development. (Teacher G).

One of the main principles of the curriculum is the application of Communicative Language Teaching; however, this does not occur for various reasons. For instance, there need to be more opportunities to practice the language and a lack of authentic resources that could allow them to increase their English skills. (Teacher B).

Finally, regarding parent involvement, 80% of teachers strongly disagreed that the curriculum encouraged parent involvement in language learners. On the other hand, 90% of teachers strongly agreed, and 10% agreed that parental involvement has a positive effect on students' motivation to learn English. Teacher K claimed that parental involvement is crucial for motivating language learners at primary and secondary schools; however, the curriculum must promote this involvement. Likewise, Teacher D stated that the current curriculum needs to provide adequate structures for parents to engage with or support their children's language learning. Finally, Teacher C recognized the value of parental support, indicating that parents play a crucial role in increasing students' enthusiasm and effort in the English language. However, he explained that the curriculum needs to address clear instructions and engagement activities for parents to support their child's language learning at home.

Category B: Teachers' practices in teaching EFL in Ecuadorian primary schools

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that teachers employ diverse methodologies, with some favoring traditional approaches and others adopting communicative or interactive methodologies. According to the teachers' beliefs, the high-usage methods applied by teachers in primary schools are Content Language Integrated Teaching (80%), the Audiolingual Method (80%), and the Grammar-Translation Method (80%). Additionally, teachers employ moderate-usage methods, including task-based language teaching (70%), communicative language teaching, and a language-centered approach (60%). Finally, the low-usage percentages of applications, according to the data, are Direct-Method (30%), Total Physical Response (30%), and Silent Way (20%). The following extracts support the results addressed:

I prefer applying Content and Language Integrated Learning in the classroom because it enables me to integrate language learning with the content of other subjects, such as science, culture, and history. (Teacher F).

Using repetitions and drills, as well as patterns of speech in listening exercises, are my favorite techniques for developing the language habits of my young students. (Teacher A).

Although the grammar-translation method is considered traditional, providing a clear language structure is beneficial as it helps students communicate effectively later. (Teacher B).

Applying the Direct Method is challenging, according to our reality. Even when this method may be relevant to teaching young learners, it is limited for almost all students. (Teacher L).

Applying Task-Based Language Teaching is one of my favorite methods of teaching young learners. It enables me to engage in meaningful tasks that foster student interaction and communication. (Teacher D).

I have adopted the student-centered approach in my classes, as it enables learners to take responsibility for their learning. However, with young children, it can be challenging. Therefore, I prefer applying other methods, such as Task-Based Language Teaching. (Teacher F).

Category C: Factors that influence the English Language Teaching in Primary Schools

According to Table 4, English teachers in primary schools agreed with all the factors that influence EFL in Ecuador. The first challenge is related to

Table 2

Percentages of teachers' beliefs about teaching English in primary schools

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The curriculum principles support your teaching practices.	10%	10%	0%	50%	30%
The curriculum offers sufficient flexibility to incorporate innovative teaching practices.	40%	10%	30%	20%	0%
The curriculum is relevant to your students' diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.	0%	20%	50%	20%	10%
The curriculum encourages the efficient development of primary English skills.	10%	20%	10%	30%	30%
The students appear to be engaged with the curriculum content provided by the Ministry of Education.	0%	20%	20%	60%	0%
The quality of educational resources provided by the Ministry of Education is satisfactory for students' language learning.	0%	10%	20%	50%	20%
The Ministry of Education's educational resources enable students to develop their language skills efficiently.	0%	10%	20%	50%	20%
Technology is incorporated into teaching in primary schools.	20%	20%	20%	40%	0%
The curriculum supports parental involvement in student learning.	0%	0%	20%	50%	30%
Parental involvement motivates students in language learning.	90%	10%	0%	0%	0%

Table 3

Percentages of teaching methods applied for teaching English in primary schools.

Teaching Methods applied by teachers in primary schools	Number of teachers	Percentage of application	Mean	Standard Deviation
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	68	60%	60.18	5.2
Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)	90	80%	79.65	4.28
Learner-centered Approach	68	60%	60.18	5.2
The Audiolingual Method	90	80%	79.65	4.28
Grammar-Translation Method	90	80%	79.65	4.28
Direct Method	34	30%	30.08	4.88
Silent Way	23	20%	20.35	4.28
Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)	79	70%	69.91	4.88
Total Physical Response (TPR)	34	30%	30.1	4.88

Table 4

Percentages of teachers' beliefs about the factors that influence ELT in primary schools

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Parents, collaborate with your teaching practices.	10%	10%	20%	40%	20%
Do you think students have enough contact hours to practice their English skills?	0%	10%	10%	60%	20%
Does the number of students per class help you to conduct all the teaching strategies efficiently?	0%	10%	20%	50%	20%
All students in your class have access to the technology needed for learning.	0%	10%	10%	50%	30%
The teachers are skilled and trained to teach in primary schools.	0%	10%	10%	50%	30%
Do you have sufficient experience working at the primary school level?	20%	20%	0%	40%	20%
Do you have enough experience using strategies to teach young learners?	20%	10%	10%	40%	20%
Creating a disciplined and friendly classroom environment in primary schools is easy.	10%	20%	20%	40%	10%
The use of L1 in the classroom is a factor that hinders students' L2 improvement.	10%	20%	50%	10%	10%
Are your students exposed to sufficient L2 interaction outside the classroom?	10%	20%	0%	50%	20%

parental involvement. Although teachers recognize the vital role parents play in the students' learning process, 40% of teachers strongly disagree, and 20% disagree that parents collaborate with their teaching practices. Teacher B, for instance, stated that parental involvement is considered an essential factor in teaching EFL; however, sometimes parents overstep professional boundaries. Instead of helping, they tend to overwhelm and disrupt classroom routines. On the other hand, Teacher E claimed that instead of helping their children, parents often find ways to shield them from failure or expect immediate language success, which can lead to disagreements between teachers and students.

The participants also found that instructional challenges influence ELT in primary schools, specifically in terms of students' contact hours, the number of students per class, and the lack of technology in the classroom. Regarding the number of contact hours, 60% of the participants disagreed, and 20% strongly disagreed, that students had enough hours per week to practice the target language. On the other hand, only 10% of the teachers agreed that the number of students per class helped them conduct the planned strategies efficiently. Regarding students' access to technology, most teachers (80%) believed that students do not have access to technological tools and the Internet, which is a relevant factor in teaching in primary schools.

In public primary schools, students receive only three 45-minute English lessons per week, with each class typically having an average of 40 students. The limited time and excessive number of students prevent them from engaging in classroom speaking, listening, writing, and reading tasks. As a result, it is challenging to authentically cover interactive activities such as group discussions or role-plays. (Teacher F).

A teacher is tasked with teaching English to a class of 40 or 45 students. Due to the large number of students, managing noise and ensuring each student receives sufficient speaking practice is nearly impossible. Likewise, students from public schools rarely have access to technology tools and the Internet; therefore, they are limited to using printed materials in class and rely solely on the teacher's instruction. (Teacher G).

It was remarkable that only 40% of teachers considered themselves to have enough experience teaching English in primary schools. Likewise, 30% of teachers considered having enough experience using specific strategies to teach young learners. The following teachers explained these obtained results:

The authorities are responsible for assigning the teachers for the whole school year. Unfortunately, teachers are assigned according to the institution's needs. In this case, some teachers are required to teach English without any prior knowledge of the subject due to a lack of English teachers. Therefore, most teachers need to acquire specific pedagogical knowledge, which can lead to a lack of motivation to learn English. (Teacher C).

In my case, I have more experience working with teenagers and adults. When I was assigned to teach children, it was challenging because I needed to fully understand the developmental stages of primary school students. Additionally, I have had difficulties managing a classroom of young children, as I often struggle to maintain discipline and control. (Teacher L).

Regarding the classroom environment, 40% of teachers disagree, and 10% strongly disagree that creating a disciplined and friendly classroom is easy. In this regard, Teacher E stated that working with children, in general, is not easy. Managing a classroom goes beyond simply enforcing rules or creating a friendly atmosphere; it involves addressing the unpredictable needs of children's emotions, behavior, and learning. Likewise, Teacher L explained that working with children involves managing an unpredictable classroom environment and maintaining a balance between discipline and friendliness.

Finally, the data shows that 50% of teachers are neutral about using L1 in the EFL contexts. This finding suggests that teachers are undecided or see both benefits and challenges to incorporating the students' native language when teaching English. For instance, Teacher B indicated that if L1 is used strategically in the classroom, it will help teachers save time on lengthy explanations in L2 and keep students focused on English learning without overwhelming them. Likewise, Teacher J claimed that L1 can sometimes help explain complex concepts and provide students with more confidence to use the L2 language. Therefore, to reduce students' anxiety.

Discussion

This study focused on the English language teachers' beliefs about teaching English in primary schools within the context of curriculum reform and the challenges they face in actual practice. In general, the analysis of the questionnaires and interviews revealed that, according to the participants' perceptions, the principles established in the national curriculum are not effectively aligned with actual teaching practices in English education at public primary schools in Ecuador. The teachers highlighted various inconsistencies related to the relevance of the curriculum for students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, the equitable development of language learners' skills, the allocation of resources for EFL in public schools, and the support for parental involvement in language learning. Furthermore, they indicated that the objectives provided by the national curriculum are too rigid and decontextualized in relation to Ecuadorian reality. While the curriculum promotes communicative competence, the classroom realities do not align with that vision. These inconsistencies are shown in the low scores obtained by the Ecuadorian students on the English proficiency

test (English First Organization, 2023). These findings are supported by existing literature that indicates instructional, institutional, and socio-economic factors hinder students from developing their language skills quickly (Shaturaev, 2023; Sulistivo et al., 2020; Copland et al., 2013; Kızıldağ, 2009). Moreover, Case (2023) noted that the language curriculum primarily focuses on instructional aspects. Thus, leaving out the students' socio-economic backgrounds could be a significant factor in determining access to technological tools, interactive resources, and quality educational resources.

Due to the aforementioned reasons, the results also indicated that teachers employ diverse methodologies, with some favoring traditional approaches and others embracing communicative or interactive methodologies, including the high-usage methods such as Content-Language Integrated Teaching, the Audiolingual Method, and the Grammar-Translation Method. Additionally, teachers employ moderate-usage methods, including Task-Based Language Teaching, Communicative Language Teaching, and a Language-centered Approach. Finally, the low-usage methods are Direct-Method, Total Physical Response, and Silent Way. The teachers indicated that even when the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education (MINEDUC, 2016) requires teachers to apply innovative and current approaches, the reality in public primary schools in Ecuador differs. They found the curriculum to be a relevant and well-organized document for EFL teaching; however, some constraints hinder the application of the curricular principles stipulated. The main factors are related to the contextualization of the curriculum, the lack of technological tools, instructional factors, and the lack of opportunities to use the language authentically. Zhang (2021) emphasized the importance of employing current and innovative teaching strategies to enhance students' thinking, creative, and social skills, which are essential for lifelong learning. Likewise, the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2018) suggests that teachers employ various strategies, such as CLT (a Language-Centered approach) and TBLT, for EFL teaching and assessment to monitor learners' progress through different stages of learning. However, following the results of this study, Shaturaev (2023) claimed that teaching English in primary schools requires a thoughtful blend of strategies and methodologies to foster students' linguistic development and emotional and cognitive improvement. Likewise, Garton and Copland (2019) stated that applying different teaching strategies in primary schools is challenging, as teachers must be aware of critical issues such as students' motivation, parental involvement, large under-resourced classrooms, and the limited exposure of English to authentic contexts. Therefore, teachers at primary schools must have experience in applying age-

appropriate strategies to help students develop their English skills (Sulistiyo et al., 2019).

Furthermore, teachers believe that key instructional challenges, limited contact hours, large class sizes, and limited access to technology and the Internet are the primary factors hindering English Language Teaching in primary schools. These factors hinder and limit the application of effective teaching strategies, depriving students of valuable technological resources that could enhance their English language learning. Kızıldağ (2009) classified these educational issues as institutional, instructional, and socio-economic factors that hinder students from developing their language skills efficiently. When contact hours for learning English are limited, students have fewer opportunities to engage in English activities and actively participate in the classroom, which slows down their language development (Chen, 2022; Kızıldağ, 2009). Likewise, Cahyaty and Madya (2019) stated that working with large class sizes restricts students' dynamic interactions and forces teachers to adopt a teacher-centered approach, which is not advisable for promoting active learner participation. Finally, teachers perceived that they needed more technological resources and Internet access to use interactive, visual, and engaging materials for their students. The reality in Ecuador is different from that in other developed countries, such as the United States or Finland, where technology is provided to teachers and students more efficiently. Thus, the limited technology in EFL classrooms reduces access to authentic and meaningful resources, hindering students' ability to develop their language skills (Nkengbeza et al., 2022).

One remarkable finding from this investigation is that most teachers lack sufficient experience teaching English at primary schools, which can be an essential factor hindering students' practical English skills. Copland et al. (2013) supported this finding by indicating that most teachers have more experience working at secondary and university levels, which can be challenging when transitioning to primary schools, where maintaining discipline, managing classes, and applying teaching strategies can be particularly demanding at this educational level. Therefore, inexperienced teachers working with young children may need to thoroughly understand the developmental stages of primary school children. Another interesting finding is related to the importance of parents in enhancing students' English proficiency. Due to the limitations in English teaching in Ecuador, according to the participants, parental involvement plays a crucial role, as it helps students reinforce their knowledge outside the classroom and motivates them to continue learning. Thus, parental involvement is vital for young learners to help them meet specific language standards and improve their cognitive, emotional, and social development skills (Kalaycı & Ergül, 2020; Garton & Copland, 2019).

Conclusions

This study offers valuable insights into the beliefs of Ecuadorian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers regarding the challenges of implementing Ecuador's English language curriculum in primary schools. The findings revealed a significant misalignment between the Ecuadorian language curriculum and actual practices in primary schools. The teachers indicated that the national curriculum needs to align its principles with institutional, instructional, and socio-economic factors reflected in low student performance on English proficiency assessment. The leading challenges include heavy workload, basic technological infrastructure, crowded classrooms, limited contact hours, and excessive (L1) language use. Moreover, working with low socio-economic levels is another issue that impairs students' access to educational resources such as quality textbooks and technological tools.

Additionally, the lack of experienced teachers in primary school education and minimal parental involvement in students' learning complicate effective language instruction in Ecuadorian primary schools. To address these educational and contextual issues, teachers employ different traditional and innovative methods, such as the Grammar-Translation method, the audiolingual approach, and Content-Language Integrated Teaching, to teach young learners in primary schools. On the other hand, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are used less frequently, despite the recommendations from the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education and the Common European Framework of Reference. A notable challenge is the teachers' limited experience with primary students, as many come from secondary or university backgrounds, which impacts their ability to engage young learners and effectively manage EFL classrooms. Furthermore, limited parental involvement intensifies the challenges, as it prevents parents from supporting English learning outside the classroom and enhancing students' cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

This study has implications for the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education, policymakers, teachers, and researchers working in English language education, as it highlights the primary challenges that primary school teachers face when teaching in EFL contexts. The researchers suggest the need for greater alignment between curriculum principles and classroom realities by increasing the provision of technological resources, providing teacher training for EFL primary education, and fostering parental involvement to contribute to more successful English language learning outcomes in Ecuadorian primary schools. Additionally, the Ministry of Education and policymakers can make adjustments to ensure the curriculum remains practical

and effective over time. In this way, professional development programs and teacher training should be created to equip teachers with the skills to adapt curriculum content to diverse classroom realities, fostering innovative teaching practices and current methodologies that align with updated curricular objectives.

The limitations of this study are related to the sample representation. The sample was limited to volunteer participation, which may not fully represent the diverse experiences of teachers across Ecuador. Therefore, it restricts the generalizability of the results to other EFL contexts. Furthermore, the teachers' perceptions are based on self-reported data, which may introduce bias on the part of the participants. Therefore, future research could address the limitations of this study by incorporating classroom observations and specifying the sample to compare primary EFL teachers from urban and rural areas, thereby facilitating a comparative analysis between these contexts. Additionally, investigating students' perspectives and exploring the specific teaching training gaps can provide a more comprehensive view of the effectiveness and challenges of EFL education in primary schools. Finally, to enhance the study's relevance to international elementary education research, it will be crucial to link its findings to global discussions on teaching practices, learning outcomes, and policy implications. Additionally, it is recommended to conduct a comparative study between urban and rural schools or between experienced and novice teachers to provide further insights and enrich the findings of this study.

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