

## Teaching English to Young Learners in Mexico: Teachers' Perceptions About Their Teaching Contexts

La enseñanza del inglés para jóvenes estudiantes en México: las percepciones de los profesores acerca de sus contextos de enseñanza

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This paper discusses the perceptions that six English language teachers, from public schools in the south region of the state of Veracruz in Mexico, have about their particular teaching contexts. A qualitative approach was adopted, and main data collection was through semi-structured interviews. The results show that all teachers have mostly negative perceptions about their teaching conditions. It was concluded that urgent action is needed on the part of the government to improve the English as a foreign language scenario, especially now when the introduction of English as a foreign language has been proposed at even earlier ages in all levels of education in the country.

*Key words:* English for young learners, English language teaching, Mexico, working conditions.

Esta investigación describe las percepciones que tienen seis maestros de inglés de escuelas públicas de la región sur del estado de Veracruz en México acerca de sus propios contextos de enseñanza. Se decidió adoptar un enfoque cualitativo y entrevistas semi estructuradas para la recolección de los datos. Los resultados muestran que la mayoría de las percepciones que los maestros tienen son negativas y se concluyó que las autoridades deben tomar medidas urgentes para mejorar el panorama de la enseñanza del inglés especialmente ahora que se ha propuesto que el inglés sea obligatorio en todos los niveles de educación básica en el país.

*Palabras clave:* condiciones laborales, enseñanza del inglés, inglés para jóvenes, México.

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This paper reports some of the findings of a bigger research project focused on "Researching and Creating Opportunities for Continuous Professional Development for English Teachers Working With Young Learners in Mexico". Funded by CONACYT as part of the programme "Estancias Postdoctorales en el Extranjero Vinculadas a la Consolidación de Grupos de Investigación y Fortalecimiento del Posgrado Nacional" (EPE 2018-2019).

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How to cite this article (APA, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.): Millán Librado, T., & Basurto Santos, N. M. (2020). Teaching English to young learners in Mexico: Teachers' perceptions about their teaching contexts. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 22(1), 125-139. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v22n1.82105>.

This article was received on September 4, 2019 and accepted on October 18, 2019.

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## Introduction

The Secretariat of Public Education in Mexico (Secretaría de Educación Pública en México, SEP in Spanish) launched a new educational reform in 2017. One of the main goals of this reform was to introduce the teaching and learning of English in all levels of compulsory education in Mexico: from pre-school to preparatory education. The reason behind introducing English from very early stages is that:

The Secretariat of Public Education wants you [students] to be bilingual when you finish your preparatory education so that you can express yourself in Spanish and English in a natural way. Thanks to your knowledge of English you will be able to communicate with more people in the world and discover new cultures. (SEP, 2017, translated from Spanish)

In order to reach this goal, many English teachers will be needed, especially English language teachers who will need to be prepared to effectively teach English to young learners in the Mexican context. Research conducted in public schools where English has been an official subject for decades has shown that there still exist problems in teaching and learning English in secondary and preparatory education (Basurto Santos, 2010; Basurto Santos & Gregory Weathers, 2016; Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016). Moreover, research carried out to find out how other English programmes implemented before, such as the National English Program in Basic Education (PNIEP in Spanish) in primary schools in Mexico, has shown that an effective change in the provision of English as a foreign language (EFL) has not taken place as had been expected by all parties involved in the processes of teaching and learning English. This paper presents a small-scale research which is part of a larger project funded by the *Consejo Nacional para la Ciencia y la Tecnología* (CONACYT).

The main focus of this study was to examine the realities of the teaching and learning of EFL in public schools in a context where teachers' voices have to date been unheard. This study is expected to inform the

stakeholders of public education in Mexico about what EFL teaching is like in an informed way so that they can be in a position to develop and propose a policy and the planning of English in education in the Mexican context that respond to the needs of all our students and teachers accordingly. Furthermore, this study is expected to contribute to the development and/or improvement of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes for English teachers in universities and *Escuelas Normales* in Mexico, as the results could help them decide what can or cannot be done in their schools given the actual working conditions in Mexican schools. Therefore, the research question guiding the current study was: What are the teachers' perceptions regarding their EFL classes in their particular teaching contexts?

In order to answer this question, we decided to adopt a qualitative approach where interviews were the main instrument of data collection. We will describe the relevant literature that informed the conceptual framework and then the research procedure in the method section below. Finally, the findings and conclusions are provided.

## Literature Review

### EFL in Mexico

We live in a globalised world where the exchange of information and communication are everyday necessities. In our modern world, when we find a group of people whose native languages are very different and they want to communicate with each other, we are likely to witness that these people will use the English language as the main means of communication. English has positioned itself as a hyper-central language according to Calvet (as cited in Moore, 2012). In fact, it is the only hyper-central language that exists in the world. Taking this into consideration, one sees it is not surprising then that it is the foreign language most schools choose to include in their curricula (Yano, 2009) in countries where English is not the official language.

Mexico, a country that shares one of the largest borders with the United States of America, is not the exception to this phenomenon. Even though English has been present in the curricula of Mexican schools since 1960 (British Council, 2015), it has not received adequate attention to obtain better academic results. This lack of attention can also be noticed by examining how proficient Mexican citizens are in English. According to Education First's<sup>1</sup> (2018) English Proficiency Index, Mexico currently ranks #57 out of 88 countries in English proficiency levels. This result might come as a shock considering that since 2009 there have been three different English programmes created specifically for the basic education level. The problem, according to Reyes Cruz, Murrieta Loyo, and Hernández Méndez (2012), is that they lack a clear course of action. Even though they are consistent with international trends, the feasibility to have them fully functioning in a complex context such as Mexico is not an easy task. In their research, Basurto Santos and Gregory Weathers (2016) discovered that teachers think that the people in charge of creating those programmes are out of touch with the reality of Mexican public schools. Therefore, the actions discussed in the programmes cannot be applied to every context. Ramírez-Romero and Sayer (2016) claimed, discussing the National English Program in Basic Education, that the government did not set "general or binding commitments or linguistic legislation or policy that sheltered the program" (p. 11). This statement could also be applied to the other programmes. Furthermore, they also added that these programmes cannot thrive unless attention is paid to more complex issues such as state policies and teacher training. These two are more important in the long-term than "the form and props."<sup>2</sup> For this reason, even though students receive over 1,000 hours of EFL instruction during all the years

of basic education level (Székely, O'Donoghue, & Pérez, 2015), they finish basic education without being able to use English efficiently. Székely et al. (2015) argue that when it comes to English, "the education system does not fulfil its duty of promoting the right to have good quality education" (p. 94, translated from Spanish).

In every education system, teachers are key actors who should not be overlooked. In Mexico, to become an English teacher, there are no strong regulations yet. According to Calderón (2015), in some schools we can find English teachers who do not hold a bachelor's degree. In many cases, they are people who were deported from the United States after living there for a period of time. On the other hand, there are many universities that offer a bachelor's degree in EFL across the country. Ramírez-Romero and Sayer (2016) admit that there have been tremendous improvements in the quality of the BA programmes in EFL offered in public and private universities in Mexico. However, most of the teachers teaching in basic education schools in Mexico have studied at *Escuelas Normales* where the main aim is teaching in general and they hardly ever prepare English teachers. Some of these *Escuelas Normales* only offer a degree for the teaching of English at the lower secondary level. But for the ones who will teach at the primary school level, for example, the preparation seems to be insufficient. According to Roux (2012) for in-service English teachers, the training consists of "the accumulation of hours in short isolated courses and the gathering of certificates and diplomas" (p. 191). She also adds that some of the practices taught in these courses are becoming obsolete and that authorities need to direct their attention to new developments in the EFL field. Quezada (2013) conducted research in five different Mexican states with EFL teachers. They complained about lack of materials, school support, and students' and parents' negative attitudes. This was not exclusive of rural areas given that the research was carried out in different environments. For Banks (2017), authorities at the top are not familiar with what being

<sup>1</sup> A private company that teaches foreign languages across the world.

<sup>2</sup> Ramírez-Romero and Sayer (2016) refer to this as the administrative aspects of a program/reform/strategy.

an English teacher entails: “foundational knowledge, skill set, and teaching contexts” (p. 18). Finally, all these studies carried out in Mexican schools have highlighted the need to carry out more research in real contexts to inform the stakeholders and all people interested in improving the quality of EFL teaching and learning in Mexican classrooms.

**Method**

As the title of this paper suggests, the focus was on teachers’ perceptions of EFL in Mexican public education, more specifically on their own working environments. Therefore, a qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate because it provides the adequate methods that enable researchers to discover and understand teachers’ perceptions. As Kardorff and Steimke (as cited in Schmitt, 2001) state: “qualitative research claims to describe life-worlds from the inside out; from the point of view of the people who participate” (p. 3). The qualitative approach has many advantages, such as its focus on context, its use of an emergent design and the use of thick description (Sallee & Flood, 2012). Furthermore, it appears that it

“can transcend beyond the limitations of quantitative research” (Rubel & Atieno, 2017, p. 54).

**Research Site and Participants**

This research took place in three different contexts in the south region of the state of Veracruz, Mexico: One is an important city and port with a population of over 230,000 inhabitants. The second is also a city although it is smaller than the first in terms of population. Like the first place, violence is also incredibly common nowadays. The third place is semi-urban with a small population with not many schools and there is a large drop-out rate between lower and upper secondary schools. Most families live in low-income housing.

Six EFL teachers working in lower secondary and upper secondary public schools were the participants. Three of them have a degree in English from the main public university in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. The other three studied in different institutions such as *Escuelas Normales* but have also taken courses in the State University. Their ages range from 29 to 59 years old and they have between 2 and 25 years of teaching experience (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Participants’ Information

<b>Participants’ Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Alison</b>	<b>Karla</b>	<b>Daniela</b>	<b>Martha</b>	<b>Pedro</b>	<b>Raul</b>
<b>Age</b>	42	41	29	59	39	52
<b>Years of EFL teaching experience</b>	20	19	2	20	7	25
<b>Institution attended to get a degree in English</b>	Universidad Veracruzana (UV)	Normal Superior de Tamaulipas	UV	CELEX (Centro de Lenguas Extranjeras) Politécnico and some courses at the UV in Minatitlan	DELEX (Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras) at the UV in Xalapa	UV
<b>English level</b>	Does not know	B2	B2	A2	Does not know	Does not know
<b>Work place</b>	Lower secondary level	Lower secondary level	Lower secondary level	Upper secondary level	Upper secondary level	Lower and Upper secondary level

## Data Collection Methods

Given that this paper sought to learn teachers' perceptions, it was decided that semi-structured interviews were the best option to obtain the data. According to Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008), semi-structured interviews "consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allow the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail" (p. 291). This type of interview also allows the discovery of information that is of particular relevance to the participants, but that might have been overlooked by the researcher (Gill et al., 2008). However, it is worth noting that in order for interviews to accomplish their goal, the researchers should attempt to establish a good atmosphere or rapport. In order for this to be possible, Tania, one of the researchers, learnt and made every effort to listen attentively to each of the interviewees without voicing her own views on the subject being researched (Richards, 2003). For the interviews, a guide was designed (see Appendix A) to remind the interviewer what topics to cover and, at the same time, provide some flexibility needed when the face to face interviews were conducted. Following all the ethical considerations (de Laine, 2000; Delamont, 2002), participants gave their permission to audio-tape the interviews; they were also informed that a pseudonym would be employed. They were offered the choice to read the transcripts and were asked about the place, time, and language in which they preferred to be interviewed. All interviews were transcribed verbatim using a three-column template (Richards, 2003) which proved to be very useful for doing the preliminary analysis (see Appendix B). The process of the data analysis adopted was "thematic content analysis." We focused on the content of the teachers' experiences looking for similar themes, then we grouped them in categories and searched "for patterns of association between them" (Barkhuizen, 2015, pp. 99-100). We present those categories that emerged from this process in the following section.

## Findings

After a thorough analysis of the participants' responses, three categories emerged: (1) EFL Syllabi, (2) Teaching Conditions, and (3) Students and Parents' Attitudes according to the EFL participants. It is worth noting that these findings seem to be consistent with the discoveries of the studies presented in the literature review chapter. However, as stated before, EFL teachers in this region of Mexico had not been given the opportunity to be heard. Therefore, it is expected that their voices will be taken into consideration when new reforms to EFL teaching and learning are launched in the future.

### EFL Syllabi

Syllabi are a fundamental part of the English language teaching (ELT) field since they serve as a guide for teachers. They spare them the uncertainty of what contents to cover, how to cover them, what grammar structures, and so on. However, it is important that they match the needs of the teaching context in which they will be implemented. In Mexico, according to what teachers expressed, the official EFL syllabuses are not ideal because the goals established appear to be unfeasible and they also appear to neglect important learning skills. Some of the problems teachers have faced regarding the language programmes they are asked to follow are presented and discussed below.

**Mismatch with reality.** Teachers expressed that the syllabi they are asked to follow are out of touch with reality because they consider them to be too advanced for students. Teachers blamed this situation on the fact that, for most of the students, the lower secondary level is their first contact with English. Daniela expressed that:

The contents of the program are good but students do not have the previous knowledge they should have acquired in primary school. This is what makes it hard to teach them the content. (02.03.19:027-029)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The information provided in brackets in all interview extracts refers to the day, month, and year when the interview was carried out followed by the number of the turn lines where those particular extracts can be found in the transcripts.

The mismatch between the syllabus and the real EFL students' knowledge was highlighted by all the participants. They all expressed that even though the language programme may be well organised and be presented in an excellent way, the syllabi imposed upon them by the authorities do not work given the kind of students who attend public schools in their contexts. Karla further explains that:

Students do not take English since kindergarten and primary school. So, when they enter lower secondary, they have no knowledge of the language. I start teaching them the ABC's and for example, if I want to teach them how to ask for the time in English, for example, I have to explain first how you say the time in Spanish. If you want to teach them how to write sentences, you have to explain how to write them in Spanish first. (03.03.19:013-020)

The goals that the government expect from lower secondary school students is that they should be able to read literature and write different types of essays (SEP, 2017) but teachers do not think this is possible in the Mexican education system. This is the reason why they emphasized the importance of teaching English to kids from kindergarten or primary school so that when they reach lower secondary, they are more prepared. Raul, for example, said kids need to start learning English in primary school:

Researcher 1: Which level do you consider should receive more attention?

Raul: All levels, but most importantly, primary school because I think that it is at this level where students acquire certain habits that will help them in their lives as students. (04.03.19:062-066)

In order to do this, they said the government should invest more in providing more resources to schools and hiring real EFL teachers. It is hard to predict whether this will happen anytime soon given that austerity is one of the biggest policies of the current federal government. Nonetheless, it is clear that the contents of the syllabi should be examined and perhaps adjusted should the goals be too ambitious

given the reality of the students in public education in Mexico.

**Not enough grammar.** Teachers also showed their dissatisfaction with the contents of the syllabi because, apparently, they are too focused on a communicative approach and not enough on grammar. This result came as a shock given that most teachers in other research studies complain about programs being too grammar-oriented (Basurto Santos, 2010; Borijan, 2015). Karla's words show this:

I think we're wrong in that aspect, because when students do their exams to enter high school, they're not going to do an oral exam, they have to write. So, we have to teach them how to write and a little bit of grammar. Grammar is something that we should not skip. (03.03.19:028-033)

A plausible reason for Karla's complaint is that the EFL teachers may feel more comfortable with a very traditional way of teaching instead of other language approaches where oral and listening skills are required not only from the students but from teachers as well. Teachers, not only in this study but in prior research publications, have acknowledged their lack of oral-aural and even written skills (see the participants' level of EFL in Table 1). Daniela added that "the 2017 program focuses more on a social aspect and leaves grammar aside. The program is not bad but as a teacher, I would not leave grammar aside because I think it is fundamental" (02.03.19:078-081). Likewise, for Raul, even though the new approaches seem to be better, he seems to feel more comfortable teaching English by using the grammar-translation method:

Researcher 1: Do you think the ELT scenario is better now?

Raul: In some aspects, it has improved but now it is more focused on everyday situations. More focused on a communicative approach, whereas in the past it was more focused on translation. In the past, the teaching was through translation. So, I think we learned better in the past. Even though translation is not a modern method, I think we learned better. (04.03.19:022-029)

As we can observe, three teachers expressed the same worry, even though all of them belong to different learning generations. These answers may come as a surprise to some; however, it is certainly important to discover what the root of the problem is. On the one hand, it is argued that EFL instruction should not return to the grammar-translation method days because it makes students too dependent on translating everything (Kong, 2011). On the other hand, grammar cannot be overlooked because, as Chang (2011) pointed out: "without grammar, words hang together without any real meaning or sense" (p. 21). It appears that teachers would like to have access to a more integral syllabus, one that covers the four language skills equally and not one where the scale is tipped to focus on one in particular. However, if this is to be achieved, students must receive more EFL instruction than they do. Alison, for example, commented that her students get only three hours of English instruction per week. With this time constraint, it appears to be difficult to give students access to all four skills. Nevertheless, another plausible explanation for this complaint about the lack of enough focus on grammar and translation in the new syllabuses might be owing to the fact that these teachers have been teaching EFL by concentrating mainly on grammar rules and translation and for a long time. Therefore, they might have a limited understanding of the communicative approach which focuses more on the spoken language rather than on explicit grammar rules and which does not include translating from the target language to the students' mother tongue. The shift from a grammar-translation method to EFL teaching to a communicative approach requires a long and well-organized teacher training period and it definitely cannot happen overnight as expected by the authorities.

**Recent National Programmes for EFL.** Teachers were also asked to share their views on the latest programs launched by the government, the National

English Strategy<sup>4</sup> (announced in 2017) and the one announced this year<sup>5</sup> (2019) by the current Secretary of Education. Regarding this topic, all of them rejected the second and favoured the first one. They think that a platform is not the most adequate teaching method and emphasized the need to hire specialized teachers or offer good training to in-service teachers. They expressed that the platform would not work unless it is accompanied by other features. They also mentioned that they suspected this strategy came from someone who was not familiar with the different EFL contexts in Mexico. Pedro mentioned that:

I don't think anyone can teach something they don't know, so I think this strategy comes from someone who doesn't know about this field. (31.03.29:138-140)

Daniela, on the other hand, said she thought it was a good idea, but it would be difficult to implement it in Mexico because it lacks the infrastructure:

Teachers should have the knowledge, so they are able to offer feedback to students. So, it's better to train teachers than replace them with machines. (02.04.19:120-121; 130-131)

The teachers' views show that they are sceptical of the use of a platform to learn English. As a matter of fact, the government has already tried to use a platform, called *Enciclomedia*,<sup>6</sup> for the teaching of English in primary schools in the past. This program was piloted in 13 states and lasted only six years (2005-2011). It failed

4 Strategy announced by the former Secretary of Education, Aurelio Nuño, where it is stipulated that aspiring teachers from the *Escuelas Normales* (schools where the majority of future teachers study) would be prepared in order to teach English to children at the basic education level.

5 This is not a strategy per se but more of a statement made by the current Secretary of Education, Esteban Moctezuma. He announced the creation of a platform that any primary school teacher could use to teach English to kids even if they do not know English. However, it appears to be at its early stages, and he did not disclose more details about it.

6 Software containing the books, used by kids in the last two years of primary school, in their digitized version. Teachers and students had access through an electronic blackboard.

because, according to Ramírez-Romero and Sayer (2016), it was rooted on the mistaken assumption that both teachers and students could learn English at the same time without any guidance. They also pointed out that teachers were not able to offer feedback or clear any doubts, as Daniela mentioned.

In terms of the first strategy, the responses were slightly more positive, but most participants said it would only work in a few teaching contexts. Alison, for example, expressed that she would support this only if teachers were properly trained and not just on the surface level. Raul concurred that this strategy could only work if teachers received adequate training. However, according to his own experience, teachers are not trained well enough in the *Escuelas Normales*:

According to some experiences of teachers who graduated from the *Escuelas Normales*, their English isn't so good. . . . I know some teachers who graduated from there, they're good teachers but their level is not as high, but if they prepared them better it would be great. (04.04.19:226-231)

As observed, the common thread in these opinions is that most teachers agree that adequate teacher training is of paramount importance. In fact, *this* is needed more than anything else. It is evident that without training, an initiative will always stay at the surface level no matter how well-structured it might be on paper (Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016). It is hard to predict the fate of both of these programmes given the outcomes of the previous strategies. Unfortunately, there is not enough research carried out about teachers' perceptions concerning these two strategies given that they are very recent. Therefore, the perceptions presented here cannot be compared.

### Teaching Conditions

Teaching conditions are also an important element in the education system. A good teaching and learning environment will always be beneficial to both teachers and students. The frequency of teacher training

workshops, the amount of support teachers receive to improve their language abilities, the infrastructure of classrooms, amongst others, are all factors that have the power to make teachers feel they are well-equipped to help their students in the learning of English.

**Lack of opportunities for teacher training/development.** Regarding the training aspect, most teachers said they do not receive regular training. They explained that the only training they are usually offered is concerning pedagogical facets, as Banks (2017) pointed out. However, when it comes to English, the training is scarce or absent. Three teachers expressed that they have not been supervised for a long time. Karla and Raul specifically said that they have not received any training in the last 15 years, which made them feel a strong dissatisfaction and frustration towards their teaching contexts. These feelings, they explain, are triggered by the realisation that they cannot improve their teaching because there is neither help nor support to make them aware of areas they might be failing at and that need improving. These are Alison's and Martha's voices on this issue:

They have given us courses about how to improve our teaching and some of them are good, but the reality is way different. When you arrive to the classroom, we do not have the material and the groups they present [in the courses]. Those courses have nothing to do with what we face in the classroom. (Alison, 02.03.19:144-148; 140-141)

I think university teachers are the ones who are properly trained but, in my case, it has been my own [every day teaching] experience. (Martha, 01.03.19:080-081)

For this reason, teachers have to look in different places to find their own resources. Karla, for example, resorts to the internet to discover new trends in the teaching of English or new strategies. This lack of training appears to be best reflected precisely on the level of proficiency teachers have. Regarding the participants of this study, most of them admit to having an A2 and B2 level of the Common European Framework Reference for Languages (CEFR). This contradicts what Calderón



(2015) stated about the ideal level for an English teacher. He expressed that lower-secondary teachers should have a C1 level. However, three teachers in this research do not even know what their English language level is. In fact, two were not aware of the CEFR. Nevertheless, teachers are mindful of this fact and they actually shared their discontent with their level. Karla, for example, pointed out that she has a B2 level, which she had to find out on her own because the school she works at never provided the resources for her to do so. The B2 level is the level students are supposed to reach when they leave the lower secondary level. Therefore, she finds it difficult that students reach this level because teachers themselves appear to be “stuck” in this level.

It is noteworthy to highlight the participants' awareness of the aspects that they need in order to improve their level of English. In general, they agreed that teachers should find ways to continue their learning of English, especially their command of the spoken language. For example, Martha said they should interact with native speakers to obtain real-life practice:

Most teachers have a basic level and it is only theoretical. They should interact with people who speak it and practice it. (01.03.19:066-067)

Raul said that teachers should show more commitment to obtain a more advanced level of English than they have because most of them do not have the level expected for them to be in front of a group. Pedro also agreed with this statement. These opinions are consistent with what Reyes Cruz et al. (2012) criticized about the lack of expertise on the part of teachers. They explained that most of them did not necessarily study to become teachers. This scenario fosters an unhealthy environment for professional development. EFL teachers, it seems, are not a priority for authorities in both the federal and state education sectors or at least it seems so in this part of the state of Veracruz. This contradicts what is discussed in the different programs created by the SEP where there are sections that cover the aspect of teachers' training. As

we have outlined here, this does not appear to happen in practice. Teachers need to be trained, evaluated, and given feedback continuously. It is unrealistic to expect for students to reach a B2 level by third grade in lower secondary schools if teachers feel that their English level is not the necessary to help students to achieve what is stipulated in the official documents. Nonetheless, despite this bleak scene, teachers—or at least the participants of this study—are tackling this problem by taking action themselves. Karla and Alison are two examples. They both took the initiative to find out their English level on their own. Karla, through the CENNI<sup>7</sup> exam and Alison commented that she will travel to Canada to take one. Such endeavours are to be applauded because they do it with their own economic resources, which is a clear sign of their passion for their profession.

**Lack of adequate resources.** Besides the scarce training, EFL teachers expressed that they also experience a lack of teaching materials and a deficient infrastructure in their classrooms. It is widely known that in order to teach English, many resources are needed such as books, computers, and recorders, among other elements. Many teachers in this research do not have access to most of these objects. Alison's words represent all the participants' experiences:

The books we ask for are never available in the school. In just one classroom we have two or three different books. (02.05.19:104-105)

For Pedro and Raul, the lack of resources is not only about books, but they would like to have special spaces to improve the teaching and learning of the foreign language:

I can only speak for myself but in the school I work at, I do not have the resources that I would like to have. For example, I'd like to have an audio-visual room or an English laboratory. The students

<sup>7</sup> *Certificación Nacional de Nivel de Idioma* (National Certification of a Language Level) is an instrument that measures the level people have of a foreign language. It is the equivalent in Mexico of the CEFR.

do not have material, books, or a guide. We work with the material that we make. (Pedro, 01.05.19:123-128)

If the government really wanted to put emphasis on teaching English, they would support us with the materials. When we have listening activities, I have to take my own equipment. But if we had an English laboratory it would be better. (Raul, 04.03.19:034-039)

Karla also sheds light on the differences between public schools and private schools, arguing that the latter have better teaching conditions. In the following extract she illustrates this scenario:

The thing is . . . for starters, a private school teacher has around 13 or 20 students in their classroom. We get sent saturated groups of over 40 students. For example, in the other school, I have groups of 52 students. So, having to control 52 students is complicated. Besides, a private school teacher has many advantages. Since they are private schools, they have computers and they say they work with platforms, because I have talked to some of them. Students upload their homework there. . . . Here, in public schools we do not have that and the students we get come from low-income families. I see it as a win if a student brings to school a dictionary, their notebook, and some colour pencils because so many of them cannot even afford colour pencils. (03.03.19:088-106)

All the issues that the participants pointed out above are a reflection of the lack of support from the government. Two teachers even mentioned corruption as one of the reasons why their teaching conditions and EFL instruction in general are not to be improved. It is hard to say whether this is true, although given Mexico's and Veracruz State's long-time corruption scandals, it would not be surprising. However, whatever the case may be, it is undeniable that strict measures should be taken in order to improve what has been failing for a long time. Needless to say, EFL teachers are not the only ones experiencing hardships. Even so, given that learning English is extremely beneficial to Mexico's economy, it is definitely a sector worth prioritizing since it appears to be one of the most neglected in the public education system in our country.

## Students' and Parents' Attitudes

Given that students and their parents also play a large role in the EFL field in the public education sector, teachers also shared their perceptions on the attitudes that both students and parents show towards English. Unfortunately, they complained that students show apathy most of the time. For Martha, the problem is rooted in the fact that most of the students are not completely aware of the importance English has globally and how much they could benefit from learning it:

Students are unable to reach an advanced level because it requires a lot of effort and because they are not aware of how relevant it is and what learning English represents. (31.03.19:055-057)

The students' apathy is disheartening for teachers because it demotivates them to keep looking for strategies so that their students can learn better. Paprock (as cited in Madero, 2019) mentions that the students' attitudes represent an intrinsic factor in the education system; thus representing a significant component when it comes to teachers' dissatisfaction with their work. Raul, for example, expressed that he has witnessed that most students are forced by their parents to attend school, which makes the teaching of English very difficult since, as Martha pointed out, it is not a top priority for both students and parents alike:

Most students do not like the subject [English] and it does not matter how many strategies we look for, very few show real interest. We notice this because many students are forced by their parents to go to school . . . they do not really go because they want to learn. This makes the teaching and learning difficult. (04.03.19:076-081)

Karla explained that she has noticed that the students who show more enthusiasm are the ones who attended either private schools or took private lessons before entering the lower secondary level. According to her, this happens because as they have to take English from a young age, they feel more confident in their skills and thus, show more enthusiasm in the classroom:

They feel more confident when they have taken courses . . . They also are more intelligent in other subjects. (03.03.19:151-154)

In the same vein, Raul commented that in his experience, parents from private schools are more involved in their children's academic life than those in public schools. In this section, Daniela was the only one who showed more enthusiasm regarding students' attitudes saying that more than half of her students like learning English. But for the majority, this does not seem to be the case.

As shown in this section, teachers deem students' and parents' attitudes as mostly negative. Evidently, this is an issue that also affects students' learning. Perhaps what Martha said about their not realising the tremendous importance English has is true. This problem may be owing to the fact that most of the students of our participants appear to come from low-income families. These students probably do not have internet access, which is why they are not as informed. Furthermore, their parents are not as concerned with English probably because of their economic situation. Given that most people from the region where this paper is focused on struggle financially, the findings are not surprising. Of course, there is also the case where students may just dislike English and their economic situation is not an obstacle to learning it. Nevertheless, whatever the case may be, solutions are needed. Even though this topic is not within the scope of this paper, it was significant to highlight this problem because, as previously mentioned, students also play a crucial role in the EFL sphere in Mexican public education. Therefore, further research is needed to assess the solutions that could be applied to change students' attitudes.

### **Conclusions**

As stated from the beginning of this paper, the main goal of this small-scale research was to describe and raise awareness about teachers' perceptions on different aspects of their teaching contexts that are

present in the EFL field in Mexico's public education in the south region of the state of Veracruz. The teachers' voices highlighted several aspects that impinge on their work: the programmes, their teaching conditions, and the students' attitudes. However, embedded within these categories are sub-categories which emerged that provide a more complete report on their perceptions.

The perceptions that teachers have are, for the most part, negative. Teachers expressed their discontent with the programmes they are asked to follow because they do not seem to match the real language level that their students have. Furthermore, they complained that they focused on communicative skills, leaving the other skills relegated to a lesser status. When it comes to the more recent strategies that have been announced, they were hesitant as to whether they would work efficiently or that they were realistic given the teaching/learning contexts in public education in Mexico. Naturally, they witness the failure of the current ones, which is why they are wary of them. Their perceptions also uncovered the poor conditions they work in, such as the lack of training and the poor and inadequate infrastructure. This paper also included the perceptions teachers have on their students' attitudes towards learning English because their role is vital in the EFL field. Most of them agreed that students are apathetic towards English, for the most part.

These findings show that the EFL field in Mexico's public education is still failing both students and teachers. The literature review chapter and these findings suggest that this problem is endemic among Mexican classrooms. Therefore, it is imperative that authorities, at the federal and state level, take action. If these problems are left unattended, they will keep growing and the implications for English language learning and teaching are that the expected outcomes as they have been stated in the official documents (SEP, 2017) will not be achieved in many more years to come.

### Limitations of the Current Study

At first, we intended to include the perceptions of English primary school teachers in this paper as well. However, all primary schools that were visited did not have an English teacher. The Heads of all schools visited expressed that they did not have one because “parents did not longer want to pay for one” or because they simply had never had one. Therefore, it was decided that only teachers at the lower and upper secondary levels were going to be included. This poses a limitation because their perceptions could have enriched the view presented here of the EFL field. If English is to be introduced in primary schools, more and urgent research is needed to find out what the real current situation is in this level of education in the country and not only in the state of Veracruz.

### Recommendations for Further Research

This paper focused on merely describing teachers’ perceptions. However, the issues presented should be further examined in order to obtain a more integral perspective on the topic at hand. It is also suggested that more research is needed on teachers and students in schools (both urban and rural) not only in the south region of the state of Veracruz that appears to be overlooked in the existing EFL bibliography, but in the whole country. This includes not only focusing on teachers’ perceptions, but also delving deeper into the myriad of problems present in the EFL field in Mexico’s public education and in other countries where these findings resonate.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide (Some Possible Questions)

- Age?
- Years of experience?
- Higher education institution attended?
- English proficiency level?
- Personal general opinion about EFL teaching and learning in Mexico?
- Help/support that the government provides to EFL teachers?
- Teaching/learning aspects that could be improved? If so, what are they?
- Students from private vs. public schools?
- Can students afford private courses?
- Tell me about students' attitudes towards learning English.
- Problems/obstacles for students to reach advanced English levels?
- What is needed to help students reach an advanced level in English?
- Situation of teachers in the south region of Veracruz?
- Any formal teacher training programme(s) provided by the government?
- Kind of support needed for you to deliver your courses the way you would like to?
- Are teachers' opinions taken into consideration in the design of EFL programmes?
- Teacher training workshops taken implemented by the government? How often? How many? What about?
- Your opinion regarding the statement made by the current Secretary of Education about teaching English through a platform without having to know English?
- What do you think about the strategy proposed by the former Secretary of Education about teachers from the *Escuelas Normales* being trained so they can teach English to kids?

## Appendix B: Transcript (Extract)\*

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Name: Mtro. \_\_\_\_\_, Date: March 2, 2019, Pseudonym: Pedro (P),  
 Interviewer: Researcher 1 (T)

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		Comments
032	P: The English subject, most of all, should be	
033	implemented in <i>public schools from kindergarten,</i>	
034	<i>elementary, lower, and upper secondary schools so</i>	Teacher perception
035	<i>that when students enter university, they already</i>	regarding beginning of
036	<i>know the basics of the language. Also, train</i>	EFL learning
037	<i>teachers; keep them updated because some are</i>	
038	<i>stuck in the past with old strategies. Schools should</i>	
039	also be provided with <i>books, audios, videos,</i>	Teachers' needs: training
040	<i>and everything that has to do with pedagogical</i>	and resources
041	<i>material and, especially, in public schools because</i>	
042	they are the ones that do not have this type of	
043	material.	
044	T: Do you think that students who attend private	
045	schools learn English better than those who at-	
046	tend public schools?	
047	P: Yes	
048	T: Why?	
049	P: Because in most <i>private schools</i> , they take Eng-	Private vs. public schools
050	lish from kindergarten until the upper second-	
051	ary level. This enables students to have access to	
052	a more integral education regarding the English	
053	language.	
054	T: A lot of people seem to think that private	
055	courses are the best option to learn English, but	
056	do you think most people can afford them?	
057	P: Most of the people, at least in the south region	
058	of the state, <i>do not have the necessary means to</i>	Socio-economic
059	<i>afford these types of courses. They're really good...</i>	situation/working
060	this type of courses to reinforce what has been	conditions
061	already learned at school or simply when people	
062	want to learn because they have <i>smaller groups</i>	
063	<i>and, in some cases, they are personalized.</i>	

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\* In Spanish in the original.