



English Language Learning in English Language Teacher Education in El Salvador

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Abstract: This research study aimed at describing student teachers' success stories related to the development of English language proficiency in teacher education programs at Salvadoran universities. The research methodology was qualitative and followed a phenomenological approach to understand participants' lived experiences in learning English in El Salvador. Participants of the study were 62 professors, 57 current student teachers, 16 EFL program coordinators, and 5 alumni who attended to the two-day symposium of applied linguistics held on September 2016. The instrument used was a semi-structured interview with open and close ended questions. The data was analyzed through the use of the qualitative software NVivo 10. The findings revealed that a) teacher education should be emphasized mainly on listening, speaking, and vocabulary, b) the courses that help student teachers to enhance English proficiency are speaking, reading, and grammar, c) student teachers' proficiency is evaluated mainly through the administration of the international TOEFL-ITP test, oral interviews, and paper and pencil tests, d) the main strategies student teachers employ to be successful on proficiency achievement tests are practice and self-paced learning, e) the strategies universities implement to enhance proficiency in teacher education programs are practice, remedial courses, professional development opportunities, and giving materials for self-study, and f) the activities student teachers frequently do outside the classroom to develop proficiency in English are watching movies, listening to music, and self-practicing.

Keywords: English – Teaching – Assessment – Case Studies, University Professors – Assessment – Case Studies, Professional teacher education – In-service teacher training, Linguistics.

Resumen: Esta investigación consistió en describir las historias de éxito de docentes de inglés en preservio durante el desarrollo de competencias lingüísticas en universidades salvadoreñas. La metodología utilizada fue cualitativa con un enfoque fenomenológico, con el propósito de comprender las experiencias de vida durante el aprendizaje del inglés. Los participantes fueron 62 catedráticos, 57 docentes en formación, 16 coordinadores y 5 graduados de programas de inglés, quienes asistieron al simposio de lingüística aplicada realizado en septiembre de 2016. El instrumento aplicado fue una guía de entrevista semiestructurada con preguntas abiertas y cerradas. El análisis de datos se realizó por medio del *software* NVivo 10. Los hallazgos establecen que a) el énfasis de la preparación de maestros de inglés debe enfocarse en comprensión auditiva,

expresión oral y adquisición de vocabulario, b) las asignaturas que contribuyen al desarrollo de competencias lingüísticas son expresión oral, comprensión lectora y gramática, c) la evaluación de competencias lingüísticas se realiza a través del examen TOEFL-ITP, entrevistas y exámenes escritos, d) las estrategias de éxito en exámenes estandarizados son la práctica y el estudio constante, e) las estrategias que las universidades emplean para desarrollar competencias lingüísticas son la práctica, cursos de refuerzo, oportunidades de desarrollo profesional y facilitar materiales, y f) las principales actividades que docentes en preservicio realizan fuera del aula son ver películas, escuchar música y la práctica constante.

Palabras clave: Inglés - Enseñanza - Evaluación - Estudios de casos, Profesores universitarios - Evaluación - Estudios de casos, Formación profesional de maestros, Entrenamiento en servicio de maestros, Lingüística.

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to inquiry how Salvadoran universities aid in enhancing pre-service teachers' English proficiency to be able to teach the language with a high level of proficiency. In El Salvador, the Ministry of Education publishes every year longitudinal data related to the enrollment and graduation rates of students in the different programs offered by all universities. The data shows that the total number of students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts Degree programs and the Associate Degree in English teaching from 2011 to 2015 was 44,407 students. The same statistical report demonstrates that, in the same period of time (from 2011 to 2015), only 2,409 students graduated from the Bachelor of Arts and Associate Degree programs in English teaching. The data presented reveals that the number of graduates represents just the 5.42% (Ministerio de Educación Ciencia y Tecnología [MINEDUCYT], 2016b). The low graduation rate in English teaching programs might be associated with students that are not meeting the exit requirements in the English Language Teaching programs established by the Ministry of Education due to the poor and low quality preparation given in all universities. In this regard, students taking the Bachelor of Arts Degree programs in English language teaching must achieve a 551 score on the TOEFL-ITP test, and student teachers taking the Associate Degree must achieve a 520 score to exit the program, on the same test, so they can become certified English teachers. However, as statistics of passing rates from 2013 to 2015 illustrate, only 31% of student teachers have passed the test with 520 or above (Ministerio de Educación Ciencia y Tecnología [MINEDUCYT], 2016a). Therefore, a high rate of those prospective English teachers (69%) do not achieve the required score, and thus, are not able to become certified English teachers, at least not immediately. They may continue their English learning and retake the test at a later time. Even though the statistics of approving the test is very low, it becomes the main purpose of this research because it is relevant to understand how just a small number of pre-service teachers succeed in developing their English language proficiency. Therefore, the main research objective for this study is to describe pre-service teachers' success stories related to the development of English proficiency in teacher education programs at Salvadoran universities.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main research objective helped to select the most appropriate methodological procedures to describe pre-service teachers' success stories that influence the development of English proficiency in teacher

education programs at Salvadoran universities. This study follows a qualitative research methodology because “qualitative research is concerned with subjective opinions, experiences, and feelings of individuals” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38). In this regard, a phenomenological approach was used in order to comprehend the meaning of participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). In order to make a proper interpretation of the data collected, the type of phenomenology used is hermeneutical (Lichtman, 2010).

The sampling strategy used to select participants is criterion sampling (Dörnyei, 2007; Patton, 2002). This sampling strategy allows researchers to establish a predetermined profile or criteria that participants must meet. To select the participants, all universities that prepare English teachers in El Salvador were invited to participate in the study through a formal call for participation to attend a two-day symposium on applied linguistics at IENS CCSA in September 2016. The sample for the study consisted of those participants that responded the call for participation in the study and attended the symposium.

Based on the population considered in the study, the sample obtained was 140 participants as illustrated by the table below.

TABLE 1
Number of participants in the sample

Number	Participants
57	Pre-service teacher
62	Professors
16	Program coordinators
5	Alumni

Fuente: Data taken from the semi-structured interview administered during the 2016 symposium on applied linguistics.

The number of participants presented in the previous table shows that an important number of students participated in the study. The participants’ background information is relevant because it shows the type of university participants come from. The following table shows the information regarding participants’ university background.

TABLE 2
Participants’ University Background.

Participant	Public University		Private University		Total
	#	%	#	%	
Pre-service teachers	9	17.54	47	82.46	56
Professor	26	41.94	36	58.06	62
Program coordinator	5	31.25	11	68.75	16
Alumni	4	80	1	20	5

Fuente: Data taken from the semi-structured interview administered during the 2016 symposium on applied linguistics.

The data reveals that most program coordinators, professors, and pre-service teachers come from private universities due to the existence of just one public university in El Salvador.

The instrument used was a semi-structured interview in order to collect the information related to the success stories of pre-service teachers learning English in El Salvador (Wellington, 2000). The data analysis procedures consisted of a three-step procedure that helped to analyze and interpret the information provided by participants (Lichtman, 2010). The first step was to transcribe the information provided on the semi-

structured interviews. The second step was aimed at classifying the information according to participants' categories as Wiersma (1995) stated that "qualitative data analysis requires organization of information" (p. 216). The third step was oriented to feed the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10 with the classified information to be analyzed.

FINDINGS

The data presented in each section helped analyze pre-service teachers' success stories and strategies that boost the development of English proficiency in teacher education programs at Salvadoran universities as presented below.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS TO BE EMPHASIZED IN THE TEACHER EDUCATION CURRICULA TO ENHANCE PROFICIENCY

The four English macro skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are the core elements to be developed when someone is learning the language. Based on their understanding, they produce comprehensible output related to the information shared. Hence, the following table illustrates the main findings related to this matter.

TABLE 3
English language skills to be emphasized in teacher education curricula to enhance proficiency.

Respondents	Listening		Speaking		Vocabulary	
Alumni	5	100%	5	100%	4	80%
Program coordinators	11	69%	13	81%	8	50%
Professors	58	94%	65	100%	48	77%
Pre-service teachers	49	86%	53	93%	44	77%

Fuente: Data taken from semi-structured interview administrated during the 2016 symposium of applied linguistics.

The data reveals a consensus among EFL program coordinators, professors, alumni, and current student teachers that listening and speaking skills need to be emphasized in the EFL teacher education programs. Besides listening and speaking, 48 professors, 44 students, and 4 alumni expressed that vocabulary is another area that needs to be emphasized in the curricula.

ENGLISH DEVELOPMENT COURSES THAT HELP PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS TO ACHIEVE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The data reports that participants of the study have determined the three main courses that help pre-service teachers develop English language proficiency. The courses are speaking, reading, and grammar. This data is presented in the following figure that illustrates the data gathered on this matter.

TABLE 4
English development courses that help pre-service teachers to achieve English proficiency in teacher education programs.

Respondents		Grammar		Reading		Speaking
Alumni	2	40%	2	40%	5	100%
Program coordinators	5	31%	8	50%	6	38%
Professors	17	27%	27	44%	16	26%
Pre-service teachers	32	56%	24	42%	17	30%

Fuente: Data taken from semi-structured interview administrated during the 2016 symposium on applied linguistics.

The data reveals that for 6 EFL program coordinators, 31 professors, 32 current pre-service teachers, and 5 alumni the courses focused on speaking skills are the ones that have helped them develop proficiency in English. The data also demonstrates that for 8 EFL program coordinators, 27 professors, and 24 current pre-service teachers reading courses are helping language learners to enhance English proficiency. The data also reveals that for 6 EFL program coordinators, 17 professors, and 32 current pre-service teachers the grammar courses help to enhance English proficiency in teacher education programs as well.

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY EVALUATION IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS AT SALVADORAN UNIVERSITIES

To analyze the evaluation procedures being implemented in the English teacher education programs, the following table illustrates how universities are assessing pre- service teachers' proficiency.

TABLE 5
English proficiency evaluation in teacher education programs at Salvadoran universities.

Respondents	Oral Interviews		Paper and Pencil		TOEFL	
Alumni	1	20%	1	20%	4	80%
Program coordinators	7	44%	5	31%	14	88%
Professors	34	55%	26	42%	55	89%
Pre-service teachers	27	47%	17	30%	51	89%

Fuente: Data taken from semi-structured interview administrated during the 2016 symposium on applied linguistics.

The data shows that universities test pre-service teachers' proficiency mainly through the administration of the international TOEFL-ITP test, oral interviews, and paper and pencil tests prepared locally. These findings demonstrate that there are actually two main procedures for evaluating learners' language knowledge. The first one is related to universities own testing procedures and the second one is related to the exit requirement mandated by the Ministry of Education which is the international testing certification that validates pre-service teachers' proficiency in English.

STRATEGIES THAT MAKE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS SUCCESSFUL ON PROFICIENCY TESTS

This section of the analysis focuses on determining the strategies that make pre-service teachers successful on proficiency achievement tests in teacher education programs. The following figure illustrates the main strategies being used.

TABLE 6
Strategies that make pre-service teachers successful on proficiency tests.

Respondents	Content knowledge		Practice		Self-preparation	
Alumni	2	40%	4	80%	-	-
Program coordinators	1	6%	10	63%	-	-
Professors	7	11%	30	48%	11	18%
Pre-service teachers	4	7%	26	46%	3	5%

Fuente: Data taken from semi-structured interview administrated during the 2016 symposium on applied linguistics.

The data presented on the figure above shows that for 10 program coordinators, 30 professors, 26 current pre-service teachers, and 4 alumni the main strategy that let student teachers to be successful on proficiency achievement test is practice. Besides practice, 11 program coordinators believe that self-preparation helps pre-service teachers to be successful on proficiency achievement tests. Self-preparation is related to students' autonomy. Notwithstanding self-preparation, 7 program coordinators and 4 current pre-service teachers also highlighted that content knowledge makes pre-service teachers successful on proficiency achievement tests.

STRATEGIES USED TO ENHANCE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMS AT SALVADORAN UNIVERSITIES

It is worth mentioning that participants' contributions in this area were very limited because in all groups consulted half or less than half of them provided some input regarding the strategies that universities implement to help pre-service teachers to develop proficiency. The following figure shows the main findings obtained on this matter.

TABLE 7
Strategies used to enhance English proficiency in teacher education programs.

Respondents	Practice		Professional development		Provided materials		Remedial courses	
Alumni	-		1	20%	-		2	40%
Program coordinators	3	19%	2	13%	-		-	
Professors	9	15%	9	15%	1	2%	10	16%
Pre-service teachers	13	23%	9	16%	9	16%	6	11%

Fuente: Data taken from semi-structured interview administrated during the 2016 symposium on applied linguistics.

Based on the findings shown in the table, it seems 3 program coordinators, 9 professors, and 13 current pre-service teachers expressed that universities provide the opportunities to practice English. Another strategy that 9 professors and 9 current pre-service teachers claimed is the opportunities of professional development provided by the universities. In addition, 10 professors emphasized that universities are providing remedial

courses to those pre-service teachers that need to improve their competencies in the language. Lastly, 9 current pre-service teachers mentioned that universities provide the materials for them to self-study as participants claim it.

ACTIVITIES PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS DO TO ENHANCE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

The following figure shows the main activities pre-service teachers do to practice their English outside the classroom.

TABLE 8
Activities pre-service teachers do to enhance English proficiency outside the classroom.

Respondents	Listening to music		Self-practice		Watching movies	
Alumni	2	40%	4	80%	2	40%
Program coordinators	1	6%	5	31%	2	13%
Professors	19	31%	20	32%	26	42%
Pre-service teachers	27	47%	19	33%	32	56%

Fuente: Data taken from semi-structured interview administrated during the 2016 symposium on applied linguistics.

The findings reveal that for 6 program coordinators, 26 professors, 2 alumni, and 32 current pre-service teachers the main activity students do outside the classroom to enhance their proficiency in English is to watch movies. In addition to the strategies and activities mentioned earlier, 19 professors, 27 current pre-service teachers, and 2 alumni express that listening to music helps to enhance proficiency outside the classroom. Another activity that pre-service teachers do to enhance their English is self-practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

English Language Skills to be Emphasized in the EFL Teacher Education Curricula to Enhance Proficiency

Based on the data presented and analyzed, the main English language skills to be emphasized in teacher education programs are listening and speaking. These findings suggest that the emphasis in teacher education programs might not currently be oriented to boost listening and speaking. The data also shows that vocabulary is another area that needs to be emphasized in teacher education programs because having extensive vocabulary knowledge helps learners to grasp the meaning from spoken and written texts.

English Development Courses that Help Students to Achieve English Proficiency in Teacher Education Programs

Based on the data gathered the courses that emphasize speaking, reading, and grammar greatly contribute to the development of English language proficiency. As it has been mentioned elsewhere, speaking allows learners to communicate their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and knowledge. In regards to reading, the data reveals that reading helps students gain information from written materials. Grammar also seems to be another course that needs to be enhanced in the teacher education programs because it helps student teachers to become proficient in English (Jacobs, 1995).

English Proficiency Evaluation in EFL Teacher Education Programs at Salvadoran Universities

The data reveals that student teachers get tested mainly through the administration of the international TOEFL-ITP test as an exit requirement for their teacher education program. In addition to the administration of TOEFL-ITP, Salvadoran universities also have their own testing procedures and strategies to implement along the course program. These testing strategies are oral interviews and paper-pencil tests that professors can prepare at each university. In regards to paper and pencil tests, it seems that paper and pencil tests are the most common types of tests implemented in all universities in El Salvador.

Strategies that Make Students Successful on Proficiency Tests

The data demonstrates that the main strategy that makes student teachers successful on proficiency tests is practice. Another strategy that makes student teachers succeed on English language proficiency tests is what they defined as “self-preparation”. However, practice and self-preparation must be focused on the firmly content knowledge students must develop because this knowledge will enable them to understand structures and rules of the language. As a result, they will make the most appropriate decisions when taking tests.

Strategies Used to Enhance English Proficiency in EFL Teacher Education Programs

According to the data gathered, the strategies universities use to enhance English proficiency in EFL teacher education programs are practice, professional development opportunities, remedial courses, and learning materials provided for self-study. In reference to the strategies mentioned above, 10 professors out of 62 argued that Salvadoran universities provide remedial courses to those students that encounter challenges learning the English language. The limited number of responses related to remedial courses demonstrate that this strategy is not implemented in all Salvadoran universities. Also, 9 out of 57 student teachers indicated that universities provide self-study materials. According to the respondents the provision of materials have advantages and disadvantages because the results expected might not contribute to the development and enhancement of proficiency in English due to the fact that there is not monitoring and follow up on the ways student teachers are using the material given. As a matter of fact, the limited responses related to this strategy shows that this practice is not very common in all universities.

Activities Students do to Enhance English Proficiency Outside of the Classroom

According to participants’ learning experiences, the main activities that student teachers do to enhance their English proficiency outside the classroom are watching movies, listening to music, and studying on their own. Based on the data gathered, watching movies and listening to music in English are sources of authentic real-life input for student teachers to be exposed to the language’ pragmatics, culture, and social conventions implied in a native-like English context. Another activity that student teachers frequently do to enhance proficiency is to study on their own.

RECOMMENDATIONS

English Language Skills to be Emphasized in the EFL Teacher Education Curricula to Enhance Proficiency

According to the conclusion drawn, it is recommended that English language teaching programs at Salvadoran universities should be based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (2012) Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers. Therefore, English language teaching programs’ courses should be taught in the target language to provide learners with the opportunities to practice and use the language in various scenarios that simulate natural settings.

English Development Courses that Help Students to Achieve English Proficiency in Teacher Education Programs

Based on the data gathered, the English development courses that help student teachers to achieve proficiency are speaking, reading, and grammar courses. Therefore, teacher education programs should emphasize all language skills in all courses. In addition, teacher education programs should revise and update the curricula to include more courses that can be taught in English rather than in Spanish.

English Proficiency Evaluation in EFL Teacher Education Programs at Salvadoran Universities

Teacher education programs should get exposed to TOEFL-ITP practice tests and TOEFL preparation along the course program to become familiar with the test's content and to learn the strategies for taking it. Above all, teacher education must prepare prospective teachers with firmly grammar and linguistics knowledge of English to succeed not only on proficiency achievement tests, but also on teaching the language. In spite of the testing procedures Salvadoran universities implement, it is recommended that formative feedback should be given more emphasis at any time during the teaching preparation process. Consequently, the test results should be used to assess student teachers' progress in English and to reinforce the least developed skills. This will contribute to enhance student teachers' English proficiency since in the field of ESOL teaching, it is important to have an excellent command of English (Liu, 1999, cited by Kamhi-Stein, 2004).

Strategies that Make Students Successful on Proficiency Tests

It is recommended that Salvadoran universities give emphasis to practice and self-preparation strategies along the teacher preparation programs, so student teachers can enrich their communication skills successfully. It is also recommended that professors provide student teachers with meaningful opportunities to practice the language. Salvadoran universities should stimulate learning strategies among student teachers to enable them to become more proficient language learners (Oxford, 1990, cited by Nunan, 2003).

Strategies Used to Enhance English Proficiency in EFL Teacher Education Programs

It is highly recommended that Salvadoran universities create an English practice program that provides the necessary support and opportunities for student teachers that fall behind in developing their competencies in English. Besides, Salvadoran universities should enhance their professional development courses. These courses should include learning activities that simulate real-life situations student teachers will face in the EFL classroom (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009). In addition, Salvadoran universities should implement remedial courses as a strategy on their teaching preparation programs. In this way, student teachers will have the opportunity to improve their communicative skills in English language (Walqui, 2000). Finally, it is recommended that Salvadoran universities keep providing learning materials to student teachers for independent study as a strategy to enhance their English proficiency.

Activities Students do to Enhance English Proficiency Outside the Classroom

It is recommended that professors at Salvadoran universities incorporate movies and music in English as a cultural and pragmatic input in their EFL teacher preparation programs. In addition, Salvadoran universities should encourage students to create study groups outside the classroom and not to practice in isolation. Therefore, student teachers will interact with other peers in order to use language meaningfully and group work will immediately increase the amount of students talking time (Raja, 2012).

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