CHAPTER 2

The Perceived Effects of Workload, Class Size, and Teacher English Proficiency on EFL Learning

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Introduction

During the past four decades, Ecuador has implemented a variety of curricular and pedagogical reforms with the goal of improving English language proficiency nation-wide (see Introduction). These classroom-oriented initiatives have frequently coincid-ed with broader educational reforms designed to update institutional infrastructure as well as to recruit and train more public-school teachers. Given this overlap of internal and external concerns, efforts to improve public proficiency have turned by and large to national standardization. Some progress has been made in broader programmatic and institutional issues to diversify English teachers and create gender parity, at least with regard to technology, with modernizing infrastructure.[1] But efforts to address overall English language proficiency vis-à-vis classroom practices involving workload, class size, and teacher proficiency have proven less successful.

While broader concerns of physical infrastructure and access are not addressed within this chapter, this lack of coverage is not merely because they are, as proverbi-ally stated, beyond the chapter's scope. Because this volume advocates a ground-up, contextualized approach to reforming the Ecuadorian EFL educational system, this chapter —and the future research and efforts to which it points— must start with the day-to-day working conditions. As such, this chapter considers the problem of English teacher language proficiency degree by considering the degree to which class size, overall workload, and access to teaching materials influence student learning and overall teaching quality. Thus, this chapter considers questions from the national survey designed to assess teachers' workload, their perceptions about the impact of class size on teaching and learning, and the relationship between teacher English pro-ficiency and student achievement. Teachers indicate that class sizes are too large to promote effective teaching. Yet, they do not significantly adapt their teaching practices according to the demands of larger classes. Teachers, moreover, question the claim that teacher English language proficiency is a prerequisite for developing student lan-guage competency. As such, this survey data reveals additional discrepancies between teachers' perceptions of their lived classroom experiences and external requirements, discrepancies that suggest several responses within a ground-up, situated approach.

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1   Announced by President Rafael Correa in 2007, the Escuela del Milenio (Millennial School) initiative, for example, promised the construction of hundreds of modernized schools, a promise that has yet to be fulfilled. Communities complained that such schools were located too far for students to attend without difficulty, while others saw projects abandoned or never started. Meanwhile, small community schools, often with only one or two teachers, were closed.

The Conditions of EFL Teaching: Class Size/Workload, Teacher Proficiency, and Outcomes

In addition to curricular/methodological matters, individual classroom practices depend on class size, workload, and teacher EFL proficiency. The latter is in part determined by the individual teacher and in part by authorities, while the former two are largely beyond the teachers' control. As such, determining best and/or most reasonable possible classroom practices, especially in EFL, requires considering class size/workload and teacher proficiency holistically and also in terms of accepted interactive methodologies and Ecuadorian national mandates (see Introduction).

Workload, i.e., number of sections, class size, and student-teacher ratios are a standard means of considering the relationships between student, teacher, and effectiveness issues. Although past scholarship has considered these components individually, at present, they are understood as interrelated, context-bound, complex, and contested issues.[2] These contexts comprise a variety of managerial, pedagogical, and administrative aspects (Blatchford and Russell, 2020) and include class subject and resources (the presence of aids and technologies); teacher and student gender and ethnicity; student age and level, teacher training and experience; and the school's geographic location.

Of the workload components, class size is the current measure for workload issues. Experienced teachers may be more effective in large classes. Students may be more susceptible to the negative effects of large class size in required courses as opposed to elective courses (Karas, 2021). Students in disadvantaged regions are less likely to have small classes but would benefit from them the most (ACTFL). Some studies have examined how class size effects income (Leuven 2020; Wang 2022). EFL, with its need for direct dialoguing, tends to benefit more from smaller classes than certain other subjects (Shen and Konstantopoulos, 2021). Clearly, it is impossible to determine precise, standardized workload numbers. What is large in one context is not in another. That said, Tennessee's 1985-89 STAR project made the following recommendations: small 13-17, regular 22-26, large >30 (Harris and Mikaye 2017, pp. 237). UNESCO endorses having a 25

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2   Student-teacher ratio has borne too much significance in global assessment measure of instructional quality (Bennell, 2022).

to 1 student-teacher ratio in secondary school in developing countries such as Ecuador (Bennell, 2022, p. 4).

By and large, the scholarship takes two positions on workload, again framing them in terms of class size. For advocates of the first position, large class sizes have negative consequences for effective teaching, in EFL specifically. The negative impacts include discomfort (physical constraints), control, individual attention, evaluation, and learning effectiveness (Hayes, 1997). Teachers are typically negative about class size (Watanapokakul, 2020, p. 209), noting that large classes hinder their ability to provide individual attention to students; to shape class to all student needs; and to retain student attention (Blatchford and Russell, 2020). Moreover, large classes expand teacher administrative and management responsibilities and, thereby, rob teachers of sufficient time to develop, explain, and present materials to students (Bennell, 2022, p. 2). Large class size effects EFL in particular ways; big classes, for instance, increase the difficulty of providing opportunities to practice speaking and receive feedback (Blatchford and Russell, 2020, 208)

According to the second position, large class size is not necessarily disadvantageous but indeed offers various advantages; reducing class size, therefore, does not necessarily improve student outcomes (Karas, 2021; Koc and Celik, 2015; Shen and Konstantopoulos, 2021; Watanapokakul, 2016, p. 199). The key to maximizing the advantages and minimizing the disadvantages of large classes is for teachers to use interactive learning approaches while adapting their practices to context (see Introduction; Blatchford and Russell, 2020; Karas, 2021; Richards, 2017; Ujir et al., 2020; Wang and Calvano, 2022). Communicative approaches include having students work collaboratively in groups and engage in games and flipped classes; significantly for EFL practices in Ecuador, these practices do not involve technology. In a large speaking/listening class, EFL teachers can use a variety of activities that allow students to mix according to proficiency levels for different purposes. "Therefore, an eclectic approach utilizing principles and approaches from various theoretical perspectives has an important role for teaching large EFL classes" (Blatchford and Russell, 2020, p. 212). The positive position on large classes offers hope to most courses worldwide since classes are generally getting larger and large classes are often unavoidable.

Like class size, teacher proficiency is critical to effective EFL learning. Similarly, it is neither a direct cause of poor student outcomes nor a matter embraced within

strict numerical boundaries. Instead, it is a context-based matter; although all teachers would, ideally, be highly proficient as would all classes be small, such high proficiency alone does not guarantee good outcomes. The key to enhancing teacher language proficiency in the classroom is, again, communicative teaching (Canh and Renandya, 2017; Faez and Karas, 2017; Richards, 2017, p. 125; Tsang, 2017). Shifting from teacher lectures and substitution workshop style exercises to student engaged activities empowers students and maximizes their abilities to learn from each other. Thus, non-native English teachers (NETs), nearly the exclusive situation in Ecuador, are not necessarily less effective.

As the scholarship indicates, class size, teaching materials and methods, and teacher proficiency must be considered holistically to understand how they influence student learning (Blatchford and Russell, 2020). The most effective classroom configurations of these elements consider context and use interactive methodologies to create environments within which teachers can adapt to better teach the language, manage the students, and provide feedback (Freeman, 2017, p. 33). Teachers and administrators can harness these complex, dynamic interactions to improve EFL within their walls even when most teaching programs are hampered by large classes, undertrained teachers, and poor access to state-of-the art technologies.

In sum, class size and teacher curriculum and English proficiency are important factors that contribute to student learning achievement, especially in foreign language learning contexts. In most parts of the world, Ecuador included, class size and teacher workload far exceed those recommended by foreign language teaching organizations, and those that the scholarship suggests are most effective for EFL teaching and learning. Surveyed EFL teachers share these concerns. In the Ecuadorian context, as Chapter 1 shows, these challenges are compounded by low English proficiency among teachers.

As detailed in the subsequent sections, teachers were surveyed on the number of students they teach, as well as the number of sections they teach during a regular academic period. In addition, they were queried about the extent to which they believe class size and teacher English proficiency affects student learning. The agreement questions were structured on a 5-point Likert scale, in which 1 represents strong disagreement and 5 represents strong agreement. Following these tabulations, a correlational analysis was conducted to test for statistical significance, strength, and directionality, revealing the ways in which class size and teacher English proficiency

may affect teaching and learning. The results indicate that —despite teachers' beliefs that class size and English proficiency affect learning— little evidence shows that teachers are adapting their practices to address these concerns. Given the significance of context and the complexity of making decisions about class size on numerous levels, top-down, from administrative practices to classroom practices, the study recommends a ground-up approach to workload and teacher proficiency.

Distribution of Workload Among EFL Teachers

According to survey results, EFL teachers face a relatively high workload both in terms of the number of students and the sections they teach. More than half (59%) report teaching more than 150 students, and 79.1% report teaching 6 or more sections (see Figure 1). Although the survey did not address average class size, the results provide insight into the typical English teacher's workload. Based on the threshold numbers, the survey suggests that the teacher with 150 or more students across 6 sections would have a minimum of 25 students per class. This number stands at the upper thresholds of the STAR Project's and UNESCO's recommendations for developing countries. But their numbers are generic rather than topic specific. Most teachers, therefore, must spend their day in the classroom, leaving little time available to prepare classes, evaluate student work, and participate in critical non-teaching related activities at their institutions. Given the demands of EFL classrooms, this rough average class size is not ideal.

Figure 1. EFL Teacher Workload by Number of Students and Number of Sections Taught (N = 3183)

Number of students	50 or fewer students	51-100 students	101-150 students	More than 150 students
Frequency	395	434	734	2250
Percent	10.4%	11.4%	19.2%	59.0%

Number of sections	1	2	3	4	5	6	More than 6
Frequency	91	76	100	179	353	1414	1600
Percent	2.4%	2.0%	2.6%	4.7%	9.3%	37.1%	42.0%

Moreover, the data suggests that the high workload is disproportionately distributed. A correlational analysis reveals a positive relationship in which those who teach more sections also teach more students overall, $r(3811) = .360$, $p = .010$. As such, teachers with more students also teach more sections, which increases their instructional hours and lessens their attentiveness to students in larger classes. Conversely, the minority of teachers have small classes across fewer sections, allowing them time that could be dedicated to other professional activities.

The data also provides no insight into the degree to which these workloads are specific to particular EFL teaching contexts or whether they are generalizable to Ecuadorian EFL teachers as a whole. Further analysis reveals no relationship, for example, between ethnicity and teaching load, but it does show that women are somewhat more likely than men to have more students, $r(3811) = .052$, $p = .001$. Teachers who report higher levels of English proficiency also have heavier teaching loads according to the total number of students they teach, $r(3811) = .111$, $p = <.001$, as do teachers with more experience, $r(3811) = .075$, $p = <.001$, and those with higher educational attainment, $r(3811) = .070$, $p = <.001$. In contrast, teachers in rural areas are somewhat less likely to teach as many students as their peers in urban schools, $r(3811) = −.137$, $p = .010$; they also teach fewer sections, $r(3811) = −.045$, $p = .010$.

These statistics indicate that teacher workloads are highest for teachers in urban areas, especially women and teachers with higher qualifications and more experience in the field. This profile is consistent with those in Chapter 1. That demographic analysis determined that women comprise most teachers with more experience and professional training, even as the percentage of rural English teachers and male teachers is growing among younger teachers.

Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Factors Influencing EFL Teaching and Learning

In addition to tabulating relative number and size of workloads, the analysis considered the relationships between these tabulations and teachers' perceptions of their influence on effective teaching. The survey results clearly indicate that most teachers agree that class size is an important factor on student

achievement. When asked whether class size affects the quality of English education, 77.6% reported agreement or strong agreement on a 5-point Likert scale, with only 22.4% expressing disagreement or indifference (n = 3519). It also appears that the teaching workload of EFL teachers influences their perceptions about outcomes. Those who report teaching a greater number of students are more likely to agree with the statement regarding the effects of class size on quality, r(3517) = .098, p = <.001, than those who teach fewer students. To some extent, then, teachers base their opinions about the effects of class size on their own experiences (see Figure 2).

Given the heavy teaching loads, very few teachers believe that students achieve the expected English language proficiency (a topic that will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 4). Specifically, only 15.9% of teachers agree or strongly agree with the statement (N = 3519) that students reach the B1 proficiency required by the national curriculum. Teacher responses are considerably more positive about whether their own students achieve curricular outcomes; 37.4% agree or strongly agree (N = 3310). No direct relationship exists between teachers' self-reported teaching load, their views on student achievement, or the attainability of nationally mandated curricular outcomes. Thus, teachers do not overtly connect their views about curricular objectives to their immediate teaching context. Mirroring teacher self-confidence in Chapter 4, these figures suggest that many teachers feel they are doing a better job than their peers and calls for more inquiry into the relationship between self-confidence and teacher effectiveness. Self-confidence aside, the results do not offer an optimistic view of teaching effectiveness.

 At first glance, the relationship between teaching load, student achievement, and teacher practice appears simple: teachers blame poor outcomes, to some extent, on their heavy teaching workload, but some believe they are doing a better job at managing it than others. The data, however, reveals discrepancies between everyday realities and teachers' beliefs. For example, the responses disclose relationships between teachers who agree that class size affects student learning outcomes and their views on the attainability of curricular goals. That is, teachers who recognize the effects of class size on teaching are less likely to agree that the curricular objectives are reasonable or that their students achieve those outcomes.

Figure 2. Beliefs About Student Achievement as a Factor of the Perceived Effects of Class Size

		The curricular objectives are reasonable and obtainable	In general, my students achieve the curricular learning objectives	The students in public institutions achieve the B1 level in English by graduation
The total number of students per class affects the quality of English education	r	−0.101	−0.094	−0.083
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	3310	3310	3519

Thus, teachers who are most exposed to higher work demands are not necessarily conscious of the impediments such workload presents to effective teaching and learning. However, those teachers who are aware of these effects are also, to an extent, more cognizant of the systematic failings of the EFL educational framework. Should the results hold consistent, those teachers who are more conscious of the effects of class size should also be more likely than their peers to adapt their teaching methods to achieve better results. There is little evidence to suggest this is the case. Overall, these results call for greater teacher awareness of the influence of workload demands on their teaching.

A similar disconnect appears between teacher belief about workload, teaching, and teaching methodology. A correlational analysis considered teaching workload alongside the teaching methodologies they report using in their classes. Both teachers with high workload and those who believe that class size affects student achievement are more likely to describe their methodologies as communicative in accordance with national curricular guidelines $r(3517) = .141$, $p = <.001$ (an issue discussed in greater detail in the next chapter). The only increase for teachers with larger classes involves the use of interactive games $r(3304) = .037$, $p = .033$ and of reading and audio activities $r(3296) = .068$, $p = <.001$. Moreover, teachers who believe that class size affects student achievement depend more on group work $r(3305) = .055$, $p = <.001$ but only to a small extent. In other words, teachers who recognize the effects of class size are more likely to report using communicative teaching methods; but, overall, teachers are not adapting their teaching methodologies to apply communicative teaching strategies. As such, although many teachers understand the effects of class size on teaching and learning, few are doing anything about it.

The data also discloses discrepancies between teachers' beliefs about their English proficiency and teacher preparation, practice, and learning outcomes. Teachers were asked if they agreed that having the mandated B2 English proficiency guarantees the quality of English teaching. On a 5-point Likert scale of agreement, 49. 4% agree or strongly agree with the statement, while 50.6% are indifferent or disagree. Thus, only around half of English teachers believe that the B2 language proficiency requirement is indispensable for effective EFL teaching.

These results have complex relationships with other aspects of teacher preparation and experience (see Chapter 1). On the one hand, the B2 proficiency requirement is inversely related to the number of years of teaching experience, $r(3517) = -.07$, $p = <.000$; this implies that newer teachers are somewhat more likely to value English proficiency as a condition for effective teaching and learning than their more experienced peers. The same relationship holds true for the highest degree of educational attainment, $r(3517) = -.045$, $p = .008$. However, those who consider teacher English proficiency important are also likely to self-report higher proficiency levels $r(3517) = .171$, $p = <.001$ and holding a certification verifying the teacher's proficiency, $v = .122$, $p = <.001$. Therefore, this analysis reveals greater consistency between teachers' beliefs about the importance of language proficiency and their own proficiency; in contrast, higher educational attainment and experience indicate greater doubts about the role that English proficiency plays in effective teaching. Thus, an inverse relationship exists between teachers' beliefs about proficiency and the impact of class size on achieving learning objectives. Teachers who think it is important to have the required B2 proficiency hold more positive views about the curriculum and student outcomes (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Beliefs About Student Achievement as a Factor of the Perceived Effects Teacher English Proficiency

		The curricular objectives are reasonable and obtainable	In general, my students achieve the curricular learning objectives	The students in public institutions achieve the B1 level in English by graduation
Having the required B2 English proficiency guarantees the quality of English teaching	r	0.206	0.171	0.136
	p	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	3310	3310	3519

These results about relationships between teacher language proficiency and outcomes contradict those in the analysis of workload and class size. Teachers' beliefs about class size revealed negligible relationships with self-reported teaching methods; more consistent relationships emerged when methods are considered in relation to teachers' beliefs about English proficiency. Both sets indicate a positive relationship with describing their teaching methods as communicative, r (3517) = .171, p = <.001 (it was .141 when correlated with views on class size); but the difference appears when teachers describe their teaching methods. Whereas class size held positive relationships with only two of the twelve methods measured in the survey, oter teachers' perceptions about English proficiency showed positive relationships with nine of them. Significantly, the relationship between English proficiency align with a greater variety of methodologies that are used are communicative approaches, even though the strength of the relationships overall are weak (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Teaching Methodologies as a Factor of the Perceived Effects of Teachers' English Proficiency

	r	p	N
Working in pairs or groups	.040*	0.021	3307
Interactive games and songs	.046**	0.008	3306
Dramatizations, interviews, roleplay, and simulations	.049**	0.005	3300
Thematic exploration (for example, math, social studies, natural sciences) in the context of English teaching.	.051**	0.003	3305
Homework based on readings and audio	.053**	0.002	3298
Group research and/or projects	.045*	0.010	3301
Cooperative reading and writing	.049**	0.005	3282
Dialogues and exercises with controlled grammatical patterns	.046**	0.008	3295
Narration and/or retelling experiences, stories, and events	.043*	0.014	3285
Repetition and substitution exercises	0.004	0.829	3301
Completion and ordering of texts and phrases	0.020	0.248	3292
Memorization exercises: exercises, verses, riddles, dialogues	0.031	0.075	3302

Conclusions and Recommendations

This chapter's analysis of Ecuadorian English teachers' perceptions of class size, English proficiency level, and methodology usage uncovers disconnects, once again, between teacher views of their everyday classroom experiences and the external resources available and higher-level requirements over which they have little control.

Teachers by and large, and no doubt rightly, consider their workloads greater than is generally considered effective, especially for foreign language learning environments. Yet, they seem unaware of how it effects their teaching and how to adapt. Moreover, the data prevents drawing any conclusions about average class size or the institutional reasons for such demanding workloads, for example, the availability of classroom space, personnel, and financial resources. Further inquiry must address these class average issues and the institutional factors individually but more significantly how they affect each other in specific contexts.

At first glance, the relationships between teaching load, student achievement, and teacher practice appears simple: teachers tend to blame poor student outcomes on their heavy teaching workloads, and some also believe that they are doing a better job at managing their workload than their peers. The data, however, indicates that the situation is more complex. For example, the data exposed discrepancies between teachers who recognize the effects of class size on their teaching and those who do not. Moreover, teacher workloads are highest for teachers in urban areas, especially for women and teachers with higher qualifications and more experience. More data must be collected and analyzed to better understand how the factors interact and affect teaching in context. Also, teachers claim they use communicative teaching practices, although that does not seem to be the case.

Overall, these results indicate that teachers must acquire greater awareness of how teaching demands effect their teaching in terms of their classroom realities and more abstract notions of curriculum design and student achievement. As part of these acquisitions, more inquiry is needed into the relationship between self-confidence and teacher effectiveness. Additionally, teachers must learn more about communicative methodologies and improve their English proficiency.

Professional development is one key to helping teachers enhance their awareness. This is especially important in the wake of COVID-19 when such development was

limited. The pandemic has made training in their specialties, including English, difficult at best. This professional development must be designed according to teacher contexts, needs and experiences as well as aligned with the group needs, mission, goals, and context. Given the significance of context and the complexity of making decisions about class size on numerous levels, top-down, from administrative practices to classroom practices, the study recommends a ground-up approach to workload and teacher proficiency rather than the previously advocated standardized one.

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