

**Challenges and experiences in teaching English as a foreign language:
Reflections from didactic experiences in Ecuador**

Retos y vivencias en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera: Reflexiones desde experiencias didácticas en Ecuador

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Doris Magaly Guzmán Mayancha^{1*}

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5027-9852>

dguzman@uea.edu.ec

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study involves discussing the didactics of English language teaching, in connection with strengthening conditions that promote the importance of this language as a fundamental competency for students and professionals in developing their career profiles. This is approached through reflection and experiential experience from the applicability of educational materials, using a playful approach, based on the Pick Up the Idea methodology. Employing a qualitative approach, within a documentary design, a bibliographic review was conducted, using an analytical matrix as the basis for the content analysis present throughout the study. In accordance with these premises, legal contexts and relevant theories are examined. The findings highlight a critical perspective towards the traditional model of language teaching, especially regarding grammatical instruction. This approach has long dominated second language teaching methods, focusing primarily on structural accuracy and linguistic rules as the basis for language acquisition. However, there are currents that propose a revision and expansion of this approach to include a broader range of competencies and knowledge that are significant for effective communication.

Keywords: Reflections, English teaching, innovation.

1. Universidad Estatal Amazónica- Ecuador

* Autor de correspondencia: dguzman@uea.edu.ec

RESUMEN

El propósito del presente estudio implica disertar sobre la didáctica de la enseñanza del idioma inglés, en correspondencia con el fortalecimiento de condiciones que promuevan la importancia de este idioma como competencia fundamental para estudiantes y profesionales en el desarrollo de su perfil laboral. Ello, desde la reflexión y experiencia vivencial desde la aplicabilidad de materiales educativos, con enfoque lúdico, con base a la metodología Pick Up the Idea. Bajo un enfoque cualitativo, desde un diseño documental, se realizó una revisión bibliográfica, utilizando una matriz analítica, como base para el análisis de contenido, presente en todo el estudio. En correspondencia a estas premisas, se examinan contextos legales y teorías pertinentes. Los hallazgos destacan una perspectiva crítica hacia el modelo tradicional de enseñanza de lenguas, especialmente en lo que respecta a la instrucción gramatical. Este enfoque ha predominado durante mucho tiempo en los métodos de enseñanza de segundas lenguas, enfocándose primordialmente en la precisión estructural y las reglas lingüísticas como base para la adquisición del idioma. Sin embargo, existen corrientes que proponen una revisión y expansión de este enfoque para incluir una gama más amplia de competencias y conocimientos que resultan significativos para una comunicación efectiva.

Palabras claves: Reflexiones, enseñanza del inglés, innovación.

INTRODUCTION

Mastery of the English language has become a fundamental skill in the 21st century, both for its role as a lingua franca in international communication and for its strategic value in academic, scientific, technological, and professional fields. In a globalized and interconnected world, access to information, employment opportunities, exchange programs, and scientific publications largely depends on functional knowledge of English (Crystal, 2012). This reality has led many countries to adopt educational policies that integrate the teaching of English as a foreign language from an early age, recognizing its potential to enhance both individual and collective competitiveness in global markets.

In Ecuador, the Ministry of Education has recognized the teaching of English as a key component of the national curriculum. According to the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI, 2011), English is a compulsory subject from basic education to high school. Additionally, through the English Teaching Enhancement Project, teacher training, curricular updates, and the provision of texts aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) have been promoted (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, despite these regulatory advances, numerous challenges persist that hinder the achievement of the proposed objectives. One of the main indicators reflecting the country's situation regarding English proficiency is the EF English Proficiency Index. In its 2024

edition, Ecuador ranked 82nd out of 113 evaluated countries, falling into the category of "low proficiency" (Education First, 2024).

Compared to other Latin American countries, Ecuador is below nations such as Argentina, Bolivia, or Costa Rica, highlighting the need to review current strategies. This low performance, in addition to limiting access to international academic opportunities, affects the employability and competitiveness of Ecuadorian youth in a labor market that increasingly demands English proficiency as a cross-cutting skill (British Council, 2015).

Factors explaining this lag include the structural conditions of the educational system, limitations in the initial and ongoing training of English teachers, and methodological approaches still dominated by grammatical instruction. In many institutions, English teaching focuses on the memorization of rules and linguistic structures, neglecting the communicative and intercultural dimension of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This approach, inherited from traditional structuralist methods, while providing a theoretical foundation, has been widely criticized for limiting the functional use of the language in real contexts.

This study arises from a specific need identified at the Pompeya Educational Unit in Ecuador, where, despite efforts by the English department, there are still challenges and situations to improve in the development of oral competence in third-year high school students. Although there are well-structured assessment instruments, there is a lack of a specific methodological guide to direct the teaching and assessment of each skill individually, especially oral expression. This skill is fundamental, as it allows students to interact, express ideas, and perform in real contexts, being highly valued in the social and labor environment.

Students recognize the importance of English not only as a compulsory subject but also as a key tool for their future professional lives. However, this motivation is not always accompanied by pedagogical strategies that encourage continuous and meaningful oral practice. The methodology proposed in this study, called "Pick Up the Idea," aims to bridge this gap through the use of dramatizations, role plays, and activities based on communicative scripts. This approach, inspired by constructivist principles, seeks to place the student at the center of the learning process, promoting active participation and contextualized use of the language.

From a qualitative approach, with a documentary design, a systematic review of specialized literature was conducted, using an analytical matrix to organize, classify, and interpret the most relevant theoretical and regulatory information. Special emphasis was placed on analyzing the national legal framework, current methodological approaches, and innovative proposals for teaching English as a foreign language. This review allows contrasting the experiential experiences of the Ecuadorian educational context with contemporary language learning theories, thus proposing a critical reflection that contributes to the strengthening of oral competence as a central axis of English teaching.

In short, the purpose of this work is to discuss English didactics from a critical and experiential perspective, with the aim of contributing to the

improvement of pedagogical practices and the comprehensive training of students. It starts from the conviction that learning English should not be reduced to the acquisition of linguistic structures but conceived as a dynamic process of meaning construction, cultural interaction, and communicative empowerment.

DEVELOPMENT

The traditional model of language teaching, prevalent for decades, has been marked by a structuralist and grammatical orientation, in which the knowledge of linguistic rules is prioritized as a means for language acquisition (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). While this approach has provided clarity in the structure of the language, it has limited the development of real communicative skills, essential for interacting in social, professional, and academic contexts.

In contrast, communicative and sociocultural approaches have gained strength in the teaching of English as a foreign language, proposing instruction that is more student-centered, focused on meaningful interaction, intercultural competence, and the contextualization of learning (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Canagarajah, 2018). These models recognize that effective language learning involves not only the knowledge of grammatical structures but also the development of pragmatic, discursive, and strategic skills.

In the Ecuadorian context, the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI, 2011) and the national curriculum establish English as a compulsory subject from the early levels, recognizing it as a fundamental tool for accessing knowledge, technology, and professional mobility. However, various studies (Alvarado, 2020; Vásquez, 2022) have documented the persistence of challenges in the effective implementation of English programs, such as limited teacher training in communicative approaches, the lack of authentic materials, and institutional constraints that hinder pedagogical innovation.

Moreover, from an experiential perspective, English teachers in the country express tensions between institutional expectations of measurable outcomes (standardized assessments) and the need to adapt their strategies to the cultural, social, and cognitive realities of their students. This reinforces the importance of adopting flexible and culturally sensitive approaches, such as those proposed by critical pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), which promote reflection on the role of language in the construction of identity and power.

The use of technologies, digital platforms, and active methodologies like project-based learning also represents an opportunity for didactic transformation. These tools, when well-applied, can enhance linguistic immersion, student motivation, and meaningful learning (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

Tabla 1.
Matriz analítica

Author(s) and Year	Document Type / Source	Context / Country	Main Category	Relevant Findings	Contribution to the Study
Alvarado (2020)	Academic Article	Ecuador	Structural Challenges	Limited teacher training, scarce	Highlights institutional barriers that

				resources, dominant grammatical focus	hinder effective English teaching in the country
Vásquez (2022)	Scientific Article	Ecuador	Teacher Training and Communicative Approach	Poor initial training in communicative methods, resistance to change in teaching practices	Reinforces the need to reform English teacher training based on current approaches
Richards & Rodgers (2014)	Academic Book	International	Traditional Approaches	Structuralist approaches focused on grammar, applied for decades	Provides a foundation for critiquing the predominant traditional model in English teaching
Canagarajah (2018)	Academic Book	International	Alternative Approaches / Translingualism	Proposes translingual and flexible practices that respond to globalized and multilingual contexts	Offers a global perspective on language teaching beyond the standard normative approach
LOEI (2011)	Legal Framework	Ecuador	Educational Policy	English is mandatory from basic levels; official focus on communicative competence	Establishes the legal framework that supports the teaching of English as a basic competence in the educational system
Godwin-Jones (2018)	Academic Article	International	ICT and Language Teaching	Use of mobile technologies for contextualized, collaborative, and motivating learning	Provides updated methodological tools to transform English teaching with ICT

Analyzed Categories

a. Structural Challenges in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Ecuador

In the Ecuadorian context, the teaching of English faces structural limitations that directly affect the quality of learning. Among the main challenges identified are inequality in access to teaching resources, limited ongoing teacher training, and a lack of institutional conditions for implementing innovative methodologies

(Alvarado, 2020). Despite efforts by the Ministry of Education to improve the curriculum and provide texts aligned with the CEFR, many establishments, especially in rural or peripheral areas, lack language laboratories, audiovisual materials, and adequate connectivity (British Council, 2015).

This precariousness limits the possibility of developing dynamic, student-centered classes based on communicative interaction. Additionally, the rigidity of official programs and the pressure to meet evaluative standards contribute to maintaining a teaching model focused on the memorization and reproduction of grammatical content, to the detriment of the development of comprehensive linguistic skills (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

b. Teacher Experiences: Between Institutional Planning and Classroom Reality

Teaching practice reveals tensions between institutional planning and the actual conditions of the classrooms. Testimonies from teachers show that, although there are well-structured assessment instruments, they often are not accompanied by methodological guides that differentially guide the development of each linguistic skill, especially oral production. At Pompeya Educational Unit, for example, there is a commitment from the English area to improve results, but also a concern about the absence of significant improvements in oral competence.

This situation highlights the need to reconceptualize the role of the teacher as a reflective mediator of learning, capable of adapting content to the needs of the students and the sociocultural context in which they are inserted (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Experience shows that the success of any methodological proposal largely depends on the teacher's ability to read the context, innovate, and connect with their students through sensitive and inclusive pedagogy.

c. Pedagogical Approaches: From the Grammatical Paradigm to Communication-Centered Methodologies

For decades, the teaching of English has been dominated by the structuralist approach, focused on explicit grammar teaching and text translation. This approach has been criticized for promoting mechanical and decontextualized learning that does not ensure real communicative competence (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In contrast, the communicative approach and methodologies based on constructivism have gained strength by considering that language learning should be meaningful, interactive, and situated.

These currents propose centering the process on the student, promoting the functional use of the language, and generating authentic communication contexts (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). An example of this methodological transformation is the "Pick Up the Idea" proposal, developed to be applied at Pompeya Educational Unit.

This methodology uses dramatizations, role-plays, and thematic scripts that allow students to practice the language in simulated situations, developing not only oral fluency but also social, cognitive, and creative skills. It is based on Vygotsky's

social constructivism, which posits that learning is an active process mediated by interaction with others and with the environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

d. Regulatory Framework: Educational Legislation and Public Policies

Ecuadorian legislation formally supports the teaching of English as a foreign language from the earliest levels of basic education. The Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI, 2011) establishes that a foreign language, with an emphasis on English, must be promoted as a tool for accessing scientific, technological, and cultural information. Furthermore, the national foreign language curriculum aligns with the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), establishing progressive learning levels based on the development of communicative competencies (Ministry of Education, 2016). However, despite this regulatory framework, its application presents challenges. According to data from the Ministry of Education (2020), only 20% of English teachers in the public system have valid international certifications accrediting their language proficiency. This creates a gap between curricular objectives and pedagogical practice, affecting the quality of the teaching-learning process.

e. Didactic Innovation: Use of Technologies and Active Methodologies

Pedagogical innovation in teaching English not only involves changing the content but transforming the way it is taught and learned. Active methodologies, such as project-based learning, the flipped classroom, and simulations, allow students to engage more actively in their learning process, construct meaning, and apply the language in real contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2018). The use of technology has also expanded teaching possibilities. Platforms like Duolingo, BBC Learning English, or Edmodo allow access to dynamic content, interactive practices, and opportunities for digital immersion. However, their effective use requires careful teacher planning and the development of digital competencies, both in teachers and students. In the case of the "Pick Up the Idea" methodology, the use of audiovisual resources and collaborative group work during dramatizations has created a more participatory and motivating learning environment. This type of innovation depends not only on technology but on a pedagogical attitude open to change and committed to continuous improvement.

CONCLUSION

The review conducted on the challenges and experiences in teaching English as a foreign language in the Ecuadorian context allows for the identification of significant tensions between the normative aspirations of the educational system and the pedagogical reality in the classrooms. Although the national legal framework, expressed in the Organic Law of Intercultural Education (LOEI, 2011), recognizes English as a fundamental competence for academic and professional development, the effective implementation of this subject continues to face multiple challenges, especially in terms of developing oral competence.

The persistence of a traditional grammatical approach, focused on the memorization of rules and linguistic structures, limits meaningful language

acquisition and hinders the construction of true communicative competence. This model, although still prevalent in many educational settings, has been widely surpassed from both theoretical and methodological viewpoints.

Instead, a student-centered English pedagogy is proposed, based on the contextualized use of the language, meaningful interaction, and the development of integrated linguistic skills (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Furthermore, the teaching experiences collected in the analysis highlight an urgent need for professional empowerment of teachers, through continuous training processes, spaces for pedagogical reflection, and access to adequate didactic resources. As suggested by Kumaravadivelu (2006), the teacher should not only be seen as a transmitter of content but as a critical designer of contextualized learning experiences, capable of making informed and transformative pedagogical decisions.

From this perspective, it is pertinent to highlight experiences like the "Pick Up the Idea" methodological proposal, developed at the Pompeya Educational Unit. This methodology, based on constructivist principles and theatrical techniques such as role-plays and dramatizations, represents an innovative effort to promote oral English production in real and meaningful contexts for students. In addition to promoting the functional use of the language, these strategies contribute to the development of socio-emotional skills, creativity, and collaborative work, which are essential aspects in the comprehensive training of 21st-century students (Vygotsky, 1978; Godwin-Jones, 2018).

It is also necessary to emphasize that any methodological innovation requires institutional conditions that support it. This includes policies supporting pedagogical innovation, provision of materials and resources, teacher support, and evaluation mechanisms consistent with communicative approaches. In this sense, the sustainability of proposals like "Pick Up the Idea" will depend on the institutional will to promote a culture of continuous, collaborative, and learning-focused improvement.

Finally, this review invites a rethinking of the teaching of English not merely as a curriculum subject but as a tool for linguistic and social empowerment. Teaching English in the Ecuadorian context means recognizing the sociocultural conditions of the students, respecting their diversity, and offering them real opportunities to communicate, participate, and access global knowledge. Consequently, it is recommended to strengthen teacher training programs, promote methodological approaches focused on orality, integrate educational technologies critically, and create spaces for pedagogical dialogue that allow educational actors to collectively construct more inclusive, dynamic, and transformative practices.

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