

Evaluation of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teacher Preparation Program¹

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Abstract

The responsibility of a teacher preparation program (TPP) goes beyond teaching future educators the knowledge and skills of the profession. It needs to provide experiences that help them succeed in the real classroom settings (Garza-Rodríguez, 2019). However, there is evidence that disconnection between what is taught in TPPs and what is needed in the practical work exists. Therefore, there is an urgent need to improve the quality of these programs by constantly evaluating their quality and effectiveness. This paper reports a pilot study on pre-service teachers' perspectives about their English as a foreign language teacher (EFL) teacher preparation program in Mexico. The aim of the study was to reveal how pre-service teachers evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of their EFL teacher preparation program. Following a mixed-method, data were collected from 17 participants using an online Likert scale, adapted from Peacock (2009), and three open questions to elicit strengths and weaknesses. Findings were divided in both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data indicated that students were undecided or to some extent in agreement with most of the items associated with the features of the program; however, the lowest mean was shown in the areas of meeting students' needs, the balance between theory and practice and learning some practical teaching skills. On the other hand, the qualitative results showed that students' preparation as linguists and self-reflective learners as well as some subjects from the program were perceived as strengths, while the lack of teaching experience, the content, and low English language proficiency as the main weaknesses. In conclusion, though students' perspectives were still uncertain, they provided useful information to improve the curriculum.

Resumen

La responsabilidad de los programas de formación de futuros docentes va más allá de enseñar el conocimiento y las habilidades. Necesita dotarlos de experiencias que los ayuden a tener éxito en ambientes educativos reales. Sin embargo, ha sido evidente que existe una desconexión entre lo que se enseña en los programas de preparación docente y lo que se necesita en el trabajo práctico. En consecuencia, hay una urgente necesidad de mejorar la calidad de estos programas evaluando constantemente su calidad y efectividad. La presente investigación reporta un estudio piloto sobre las perspectivas de los maestros de inglés en formación acerca de su programa de preparación en la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera. El propósito del estudio fue explorar cómo los maestros de inglés en formación evaluaron las fortalezas y debilidades de su programa de preparación docente. A partir de una metodología mixta, se recolectó información de 17 participantes utilizando un instrumento de escala Likert adaptado de Peacock (2009) y tres preguntas abiertas para obtener las fortalezas y debilidades. Los resultados se dividieron en cuantitativos y cualitativos. Los datos cuantitativos indicaron que los estudiantes estaban indecisos o hasta cierto punto de acuerdo con los ítems de los aspectos del programa. Sin embargo, la media más baja se presentó en las áreas de satisfacción de las necesidades de los estudiantes, el balance entre la teoría y la práctica y el aprendizaje de algunas habilidades prácticas de enseñanza. Por otra parte, los resultados cualitativos mostraron que la preparación de los estudiantes como lingüistas, como aprendientes reflexivos, así como algunas materias del programa fueron percibidas como fortalezas, mientras que la falta de experiencia docente, el contenido, y el bajo nivel de competencia en el idioma inglés, como las principales debilidades.

Introduction

Teacher preparation programs (TTPs) become the place where pre-service teachers develop an understanding of what it means to be a teacher. One of the roles of TPPs is equipping pre-service teachers with the knowledge and abilities to cope with the school culture realities (Beijaard, 2019). In doing so, TPPs must close the bridge between theory and practice by creating relevant links between these two areas (El-Sawy, 2018).

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Context

In Mexico, there are different venues for becoming an English teacher. Mexico's leading undergraduate teacher preparation institutions are *Normal Schools (Escuelas Normales)* and other private and public universities (Banks, 2017; Cornea et al., 2015). These institutions offer various English TPPs that differ in time, content, and purpose. The programs offered by *Normales* aim to prepare EFL teachers to teach at secondary public schools. In contrast, universities have a wider field for EFL pre-service teachers that includes preparing teachers to work at public and private institutions at preschool, elementary, secondary, high school, and college level. This last context covers the area under this study, which includes a public university that offers a TPP with a wider scope of specialization not limited to teaching for basic education.

Unfortunately, English TPPs are not standardized in Mexico (Cornea et al., 2015; *Mexicanos Primero*, 2015) and although some recommendations have been provided (*Mexicanos Primero*, 2015) to address the heterogeneity issue, it is still unclear if these recommendations have been incorporated in the curricula of English TPPs in Mexico (Banks, 2017).

According to Calderón (2015), the profile of English teachers in Mexico established under the *Programa Nacional de Inglés de Educación Básica (PNIEB)* and still valid for *Programa Nacional de Inglés (PRONI)* is:

- Demonstrating at least English level B2 and receiving help to reach level C1.
- Certifying their English language proficiency level by having an undergraduate degree in teaching English or having a solid certificate of their English teaching skills such as TTC (Teacher Training Course), ICELT (In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching), and TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test).
- Having work experience in the grades they teach and enough knowledge about basic education plans and programs.

Unfortunately, very few English teachers in Mexico meet these standards. Calderón (2015) reported that in the 2014 Competitive Entrance Exam for Teaching Posts in Mexico, out of the 2,123 positions offered, only 945 competitors turned out to be "adequate" English teachers. The recent National Strategy of English (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2017) described the flaws of English teaching in Mexico. Most of the English teachers who graduated from *Escuelas Normales* did not show mastery of the English language; 50% of in-service English teachers failed the teaching evaluation in 2016; and the national certification for teachers was still in progress. In sum, English teachers in Mexico not only lack mastery of the English language, but also lack effective preparation to fulfill both the national and international certifications for English teachers.

In the last decade, there has been an emphasis on the need to train highly qualified and competent language teachers due to the unprecedented importance of English as an international language (Martínez Agudo, 2017). Because of this increasing interest, program evaluation has become a popular area within many educational settings (Uzun, 2016), more particularly, in EFL teacher preparation programs.

Problem statement

According to Garza-Rodriguez (2019), the programs in teacher education play a fundamental role in preparing future educators with the necessary knowledge, skills, and experiences "to succeed in "real" school environments" (p.1). Therefore, their effectiveness should be constantly evaluated to achieve the goal of preparing high-quality English teachers. Martínez Agudo (2017) states that it is important to answer if the educational program and its content are effective and if such program is meeting the promised goals when evaluating teacher education programs. Therefore, there has been a new focus of research on second/foreign language teacher education, which advocates for a reconceptualization of the field and accountability measures such as standardized assessments to judge the adequacy of teacher education programs.

For more than a decade, there has been a disconnection in teacher education (TE) between the knowledge learned in the courses and the knowledge teachers need in their practical work in schools (Hopper et al., 2016). This situation has gotten the attention of many educational critics who have advocated for an improvement in TE and the need for evidence of high-quality teacher preparation. More particularly in the context of EFL, there is evidence of an apparent lack of quality in pre-service teachers' preparation.

Despite the growing interest of educators and researchers in this area, there has not been enough research done about the overall evaluation of EFL teacher education programs, except for a few studies (Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Peacock, 2009) which are context-specific and mainly focus on the program implementation in their setting. Besides, Coskun and Daloglu state that evaluation of pre-service English teacher education programs has not been researched because of its recent development. Hence, it is relevant to address program evaluation in EFL teacher education. According to Stufflebeam and Coryn (2014) evaluations have four main uses: improvement, accountability, dissemination, and enlightenment. For the purposes of this paper, we will mainly focus on the first two. Evaluation for improvement is intended to provide feedback to ongoing programs that want to ensure their quality or improve it while evaluations for accountability occur after completing a program and provide an overall judgment of the major successes and failures according to an evaluands' value system. These actions may allow finding better ways to give teachers the opportunity to develop the skills and tools needed to face the demands of new educational contexts as well as to apply the appropriate assessment methods.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate an English teacher preparation program in a Mexican university through the perspective of pre-service teachers in order to identify its main strengths and weaknesses.

The information presented in this article, not only will close a gap in the literature, but it can also become relevant for EFL teacher preparation programs around the world, and more particularly in Mexico, because it may help identify their strengths and weaknesses through the evaluation carried out. In addition, this research will provide important information for the stakeholders involved in the teacher preparation programs. On the one hand, students, the program's main consumers, will benefit from this study by establishing their needs and reflecting on what could be done to improve the program's overall quality. Finally, teachers and administrators will be able to use the data presented by the students to make improvements in the program and increase its quality to meet not only students' needs, but also the standards of EFL teacher preparation programs in general.

Literature Review

Though there is some research on program evaluation in EFL contexts such as in Hong Kong (Peacock, 2009), Turkey (Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Salihoglu, 2014), Spain (Martínez Agudo, 2017), and China (Ping, 2015), there is still a lack of it in other contexts. In a previous article, Garza-Rodríguez (2019), provided a detailed literature review of these research studies.

According to Chyung et al. (2013), evaluation plays a critical role in "facilitating the selection and effective solutions, initiatives, and programs, during the cycle of continuous learning and performance improvement of any organization" (p. 87). Since higher education institutions are now evaluated in terms of accountability and quality results, it is relevant to include this type of constant and systematic evaluation in all undergraduate programs to guarantee that they are achieving their goals and meeting the required standards.

Due to the lack of information related to the process of how to conduct a strict evaluation of education programs in foreign language teaching, Peacock (2009) proposed the following model to collect appropriate data to assess programs. The procedure consists of five steps. The first step includes a revision of literature and production of questions. The second suggests a recognition of proper sources of data in the setting. The third step consists of a selection and design of data collection methods and instruments while the fourth is about the analysis of the data with the research questions. The last is about a construction of an account by linking each interpretation to the others.

Several authors (Coskun & Daloglu, 2012; Hopper et al., 2016; Karimnia & Kay, 2015; Martínez Agudo, 2017; Salihoglu, 2012) have identified some of the most successful features of teacher preparation programs (TPP).

To start with, there are the foundations and methods courses as the core of most TPPs. The importance of these courses relies on the knowledge about learners' and learning, school's purposes and teaching practice that are provided to future teachers during the program. In Salihoglu's (2012) study, it was found that a combination of theory and practice and a well-structured relationship between courses were two of the most effective components of the program. Moreover, good pedagogical competence, the quality of teaching instruction, proved to be an effective characteristic of programs in the studies conducted by Coskun and

Daloglu (2012) and Martínez Agudo (2017). Therefore, it seems there is a strong relationship between the organizational structure of the program's curricula and the effectiveness of instruction.

According to the American Federation of Teachers (as cited in Wilson, 2014), some of the successful features of teacher preparation programs include:

extensive field-based experiences (including a minimum of one-year-long experience); participation in collegial learning communities with peers and mentors; opportunities for sustained work with expert practitioners as mentors; and documentation by the program of graduates' hiring, success, retention rates, and job satisfaction over time. (p. 187)

Based on the successful features mentioned by the American Federation of Teachers above, it would be expected that teaching practice and experiential learning in real life settings had a major role in TPPs. Nonetheless, one of TPPs' main problems is its strong emphasis on academic knowledge and a lack of its application in students' teaching practice (Wilson, 2014). This is also shown in some previous studies (Karimnia & Kay, 2015; Martínez Agudo, 2017; Ping, 2015). For instance, after collecting the opinions of both teachers and students, Karimnia and Kay found that teaching practice is usually neglected and that the content of the undergraduate program in Iran required more courses focused on teaching. Along the same line, in a study conducted in China, Ping (2015) reported that the pre-service teachers expressed the program lacked practice opportunities and that the pedagogic knowledge was unsuccessful.

Hence, it is crucial to "rethink how we design pre-service teacher education (TE) programs" (Hopper et al., 2016, p. 1015) so we can re-examine how TPPs are developed and consider these systemic flaws observed in some of the TPPs around the world. Overall, some of the main strengths found in the programs revised in the literature (Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Karimnia & Kay, 2014; Martínez Agudo, 2017; Ping, 2015; Salihoglu, 2012) include an exposure to a variety of materials and content, frequent student-teacher interaction, well-planned transition between courses, and teachers' quality of instruction and knowledge.

According to Dollar et al. (2014) one of the main problems in English teaching programs is the discrepancy between what is being taught and the needs of the learners. In addition, the limited connection established between theory and practice in a teacher's program is the main weakness (Martínez Agudo, 2017). According to Martínez Agudo, although most teacher preparation programs focus on providing students with "field knowledge (linguistic competence), teacher education (pedagogic competence), general knowledge, and teaching practices" (p. 63), which are fundamental elements of any TPP, there is less emphasis on teaching practice. Thus, this limitation results in students' lack of teaching expertise before entering the teaching working field.

Quality of professional training in L2 teacher preparation programs is an important issue in teacher education. Therefore, it becomes imperative to prepare pre-service teachers to be competent enough to apply a variety of approaches as well as to be able to adapt teacher materials (Wallace, as cited in Peacock, 2009). In addition, a major emphasis on reflection needs to be incorporated in most TPPs. In order to solve this problem, Wallace suggests that observation of other teachers and themselves can promote higher reflection in pre-service teachers. In this way, pre-service teachers will become aware and will appreciate their own learning process during the program. Finally, Stoyhoff (as cited in Peacock, 2009) stresses that TPPs must focus on teachers' long-term preparation due to the complexities of teaching and its demanding life-long process (Garza-Rodriguez, 2019).

Based on this review of literature, it is crucial that all TPPs engage in a constant dynamic of program evaluation, that includes feedback on the whole program from students, teachers, and other stakeholders. Dollar et al. (2014) state that a regular evaluation of language programs is needed so that the language needs, feelings, and attitudes of students regarding their program are identified. According to D'Aniello (2008), students' perceptions of the program have proved to provide critical information to make improvements in the programs. In conclusion, changes need to be made, particularly in the area of program evaluation, so that more attention is paid to the needs of pre-service teachers instead of focusing on what administrators, educational authorities and institutions think teachers should know and do in their teaching practice.

Consequently, the present study tried to answer the following research questions:

1. *Is the TPP effective according to participants' perspectives?*
2. *What are the main strengths and weaknesses of the TPP, according to participants?*

3. *What skills, knowledge, and experiences should TPP provide to pre-service teachers following participants' recommendations?*

Methodology

Mixed-method research

This pilot research was developed using a mixed-method approach to analyze pre-service teachers' views about the effectiveness of an English TPP conducted at the State University of Nuevo León (UANL) in Monterrey, Mexico. The voices of the participants were explored through a Likert-scale questionnaire and three open-ended questions. According to Creswell (2009), the mixed approach is a type of inquiry that "involves philosophical assumptions, the use of qualitative and quantitative approaches and the mixing of both approaches in a study" (p. 4). He also mentions that these methods can be combined along the whole research process, or in some of the stages. In the case of this research, the quantitative approach will be used to explore the pre-service teachers' perception on the effectiveness of one TPP in a public university because this type of design "provides information to evaluate programs in schools" (Creswell, 2012, p. 400). In addition, the qualitative questions were used to expand the information gathered in the survey. Qualitative data helped explain some of the responses found in the questionnaire.

Context of the study

This study was conducted in a five-year English TPP at the School of Philosophy and Arts at UANL in Monterrey, Mexico. The first year of the program is common to all students from the different Bachelor of Arts (BA) programs offered. During the following four years, the degree program offers courses of general knowledge in linguistics, language and culture, and research methodology. In addition to these courses, students take one subject per semester in the area of language teaching: *Learning Psychology, Educational Psychology, Methods in Second Language Learning, Methods in Bilingual Education, Planning and Curriculum Design, Evaluation, and Teaching Practice*. Also, in the eighth semester, students must complete their social service, something similar to community service, which can be done or not in the teaching area. In the ninth semester, students get to choose from a list of elective subjects, those courses within the field of their particular interest, such as *Educational Technology, Language Certifications, Research*, among others. All the program courses are delivered in English, except for those that need some Spanish-English comparison, such as the Grammar and Phonetics courses. In short, the program aims to provide students with a comprehensive education that offers them knowledge about English language teaching and teaching methodologies and knowledge of English language, linguistics, culture, and research.

It is worth mentioning that this program has been evaluated by national and international agencies of program accreditation such as COAPEHUM (Council for the Accreditation of Educational Programs in the Area of Humanities), CIEES (Interinstitutional Committees for the Evaluation of Higher Education), and EVALAG (International Accreditation Agency based on Germany). These agencies have recognized that the program offers quality education based on national and international standards. The first cohort of this program graduated in 2018; therefore, it is important to consider their perceptions of the program and consider them for current processes of curriculum design.

Participants

Seventy tenth-semester students, the last semester of the BA, enrolled in the January-June 2018 semester of the TPP were invited to participate in the study. From the total number of students, only 17 students answered the survey. The participants in this study were fifteen females and two males, 21 years old or more.

Data gathering techniques

The quantitative section of the instrument (Appendix 1) used for this research consisted of a 22-item survey using a 5-point Likert scale taken from Peacock (2009). The response format ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The qualitative part of the instrument included three open-ended questions to gather information about the main strengths and weaknesses of the program and suggestions for improvement. These questions were taken from Martínez Agudo (2017) to complement Peacock's (2009) survey. The complete instrument was called "Students' Perceptions about their TEFL (Teaching English as a

Foreign Language) Training Program." It was designed in an online version using Google Forms (See Appendix 1).

Overall, the instrument intended to measure pre-service teachers' perceptions about the program's effectiveness considering factors such as content, language teaching skills, students' needs, reflective practices, and the strongest and weakest elements of the program.

The reliability of the instrument was tested after the data was collected using Cronbach's Alpha. It was shown to be .8542, very close to Peacock's original instrument measure .8687, which are acceptable reliability indices. In addition, to test the construct validity, a factor analysis of the components was done. Moreover, the data validity was strengthened as the results obtained have been constant and reflect an overall evaluation of the programs being evaluated.

Data collection procedure

The procedure for data collection started by sending an e-mail to the two *Teaching Practice class* teachers, who were teaching tenth-semester students. In the e-mail, the researcher sent the consent form of the project along with the link to the online instruments so teachers could share it with the morning and afternoon students. After signing the consent to participate (Appendix 2), participants were able to access the instrument. The anonymity of the participants was maintained all the time and no personal contact was made between the researchers and the participants.

The information collected was sent to an EXCEL spreadsheet. Descriptive statistics were first used to analyze pre-service teachers' program evaluation in four main components that resulted from the component factorial analysis. In addition, the qualitative data gathered from the three open questions were analyzed using the code segments extracted from the emerging themes (program's strengths, program's weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement) using the MAXQDA 12 software for qualitative text analysis.

Findings

Quantitative results

A descriptive analysis of the instrument was conducted. The results are shown in Table 1.

Items	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Item 1	17	3.29	1.213	1.471
Item 2	17	3.12	1.269	1.610
Item 3	17	3.29	1.105	1.221
Item 4	17	3.12	1.317	1.735
Item 5	17	2.71	1.312	1.721
Item 6	17	2.94	1.088	1.184
Item 7	17	3.65	.931	.868
Item 8	17	4.06	.659	.434
Item 9	17	3.29	1.312	1.721
Item 10	17	2.82	1.185	1.404
Item 11	17	3.24	1.091	1.191
Item 12	17	3.18	1.185	1.404
Item 14	17	2.71	1.312	1.721
Item 15	17	2.5	1.320	1.743
Item 16	17	3.12	1.219	1.485
Item 17	17	3.24	1.033	1.06
Item 18	17	3.35	1.057	1.118
Item 19	17	2.53	1.179	1.390
Item 20	17	3.06	1.029	1.059
Item 21	17	2.53	1.125	1.265
Item 22	17	3.29	.985	.971

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Unlike previous studies, in this research, the data analysis was not made statement by statement but by categorizing the 22 items of the instrument (See Appendix 1) into four main components: content, teacher

training, students' needs, and reflective program. After conducting the factorial analysis (See Table 2), each of these components was tested using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient to evaluate the relationships among the items.

Component	Elements	Instrument items	Cronbach's Alpha
Content	7	1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, and 19	.848
Teacher Training	7	4, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20, and 22	.871
Students' Needs	3	5, 18, and 21	.835
Self-Reflection	4	7, 8, 12, and 16	.863

Table 2: Component factorial analysis

Content

Overall, the category of content was positively evaluated by the students. Items 1, 3, and 9 obtained the highest rates of agreement from students' perspectives. More than half (76%) of the participants agreed that there is a good linkage between the different courses and promotes curricular flexibility by having the opportunity to take optional courses related to teaching or translation that use different teaching practices. From the 76% of the positive opinions regarding the previous aspects, 47% of the students suggested that the program gave them adequate training in English while 29% were indecisive and the rest disagreed on this matter. The items that reflected some of the weaknesses of the programs were items 10 and 19. Almost half of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with the balance between teacher-centered and student-centered learning on the courses, and a high rate of almost 60% mentioned that the program failed to balance the teaching of English teaching skills and classroom management skills.

Teaching training

Regarding the characteristics of the program as to the teaching skills, it was shown that most of answers were neutral as they did not express total agreement or disagreement. Eight participants indicated a high agreement rate in items 4 and 1 and five participants disagreed. Also, item 7 about teaching foreign language and evaluation skills was one with the highest rate with almost 50 % of agreement. On the other hand, items 14 and 15 had the lowest scores in the evaluation. Almost half of the participants disagreed with the idea that the program taught them how to use foreign language teaching materials and ten participants agreed that the program did not teach them how to adapt foreign language teaching material. These two statements reflect the reality that there is no subject in the program that teaches students how to use or make material for English teaching classes. Hence, it is important to stress their concern in these matters. Finally, it is worth mentioning that item 22 was the highest with indecisive participants (52%). It showed students' lack of confidence when graduating because they felt that they did not have the necessary knowledge or skills to teach English effectively due to the lack teaching practice opportunities during the program.

Students' needs

This was an interesting category because the survey results expressed a situation that is important to analyze. While 47% of the students agreed that this program was relevant to their needs, 35% were indecisive, and 18% reported not being sure if the program was relevant to them or not. This situation implies that almost half of the students chose to study in this program because they wanted to be English teachers, while the rest might not be sure about what they needed to be English teachers and could not see the relevance of the program. In sum, as the results show, it seems that more than half of the participants (both indecisive and in disagreement) reported that the program neither met their need nor provided them with adequate training for the needs of the local context. Thus, even though students were interested in doing the program, they were not receiving what they had expected.

Reflective program

This category had one of the highest agreement rates. Item 8 refers to the program's purpose of encouraging students to become reflective teachers when they start teaching. This item was the highest in the entire instrument, with an agreement of 82% of the participants. Following this, nearly three-quarters of the

students also mentioned that the program successfully encouraged them to reflect on their past experiences as language learners. In addition, almost half of the students agreed that the program taught them how to self-evaluate. From the four items in this category, item 16 (The TEFL increased my powers in self-evaluation) was the one with more dispersion in the answers with almost one-third of the respondents in each area. This may be because the students did not understand the statement.

To sum up, the main strengths of the program were that it was relevant and promoted students' self-reflection, plus it offered a link between the different courses besides the training it gave students in the English language. On the other hand, the weaknesses of the program included the following: (1) it did not meet the needs of students, (2) it did not provide knowledge on using and adapting foreign language material, (3) it did not have a balance between teaching English and classroom management skills, and (4) it lacked a balance between teacher and student-centered learning. Finally, students could not decide regarding the program being up-to-date, relevant to their needs and if it provided them with enough classroom management skills and English teaching abilities to apply when they graduated.

Qualitative results

The qualitative results shown in Figure 1 illustrate de emerging themes and codes of qualitative analysis, referring to the segments recovered from the open-ended questions at the end of the instruments. Therefore, there will be more repetitions in some areas than in others and the comments do not equal the number of participants.

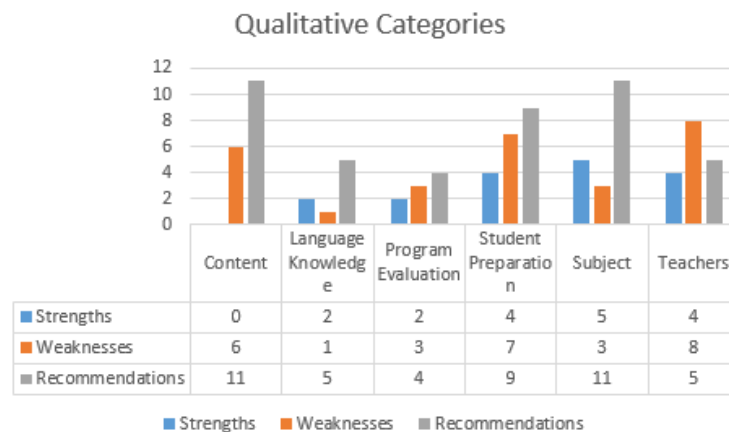


Figure 1: Qualitative categories of analysis

Content

There were no strengths mentioned in this component of TPP. Concurrently, it was one of the components with more segments recovered in the weaknesses category and the highest in students' recommendations. Students mentioned that, in general, the content of the program may be described as repetitive, irrelevant, unnecessary, outdated, and unrealistic. We can observe these ideas in comments such as "subjects that either repeat what we already studied or give us irrelevant information when we could be getting something that helps for when we go out into the world" or "some of the courses are outdated and unnecessary." (Participant 1). In addition, students strongly pointed out that some of the main weaknesses of content were the program's lack of content that developed teaching skills. This is shown in the following excerpt "there isn't enough information about psychology, teaching, classroom management, how to teach English in a real environment in Mexican schools, etc." (Participant 1)

Hence, some of the suggestions provided stress the importance of improving the program's content as well as the syllabus; the same applied to balancing theory and practice in each of the courses. For instance, participant 4 mentioned, "to balance theory and practice (practice in a real classroom, not just giving classes to our same classmates)." It was also recommended to include more classes related focused on the weak or missing areas in the program's curriculum. Participant 7 recommended improving the following:

The subjects about teaching, the ones that give us tools for when we are in front of a group, the ones about classroom management, lesson planning and course design should be emphasized and more subjects like that should be introduced, as well as something to teach people with disabilities.

Language knowledge

Unlike previous research on this topic, students emphasized language knowledge as one of the main strengths of this program referring to the fact that it includes information to prepare students to become English teachers and linguists. For example, participant 2 mentioned, *"I think that the TEFL program is good", "we not just learn language but about the language (grammar, semantics, semiotics, psycholinguistics, etc.)".* This is one of the main characteristics that distinguishes this TPP from others offered in the city. In fact, the linguistics area covers about 40% of the curricula, while teaching classes represents only the 20% of the content.

Hence, it seems that even when the program had some strengths related to the knowledge of language, students felt that the program did not prepare them to teach English due to the low numbers of classes related to teaching. Participant 11 stressed this major weakness with this statement. *"Teachers taught us how to teach content classes, but they never taught us how to teach English/Language classes."* This last statement refers to the fact that during the curricula, pre-service teachers were exposed to classes related to teaching English; however, the content of these classes remained theoretical and not practical. Therefore, there is a feeling of not knowing how to teach because they rarely had the opportunity to apply this knowledge in practical situations.

In addition to the lack of classes related to English teaching and opportunities to practice the theory, pre-service English language proficiency was a limitation of the TPP. Though most of the classes were taught in the target language, and two mandatory courses General English (B1-B2) courses were offered in the first two years of the bachelor's degree, a great number of students entered the TPP with a beginner (A1) or false beginner level. In this sense, an important recommendation in this area included an emphasis on improving students' language skills. Participant 3 stated that in this fragment *"The majority of my classmates have very poor English (speaking, understanding, pronunciation), especially pronunciation."* It is important that the program does not require students to know the language before entering the degree. Therefore teachers must make students develop their English language skills and not accept low language proficiency levels from students *"I also believe it is a perfect idea to force students to be better at English, especially students from English Teaching."* (Participant 3).

Program evaluation

Overall, although some students mentioned that this TPP was good and flexible, some others believed that the program has failed in some aspects, such as focusing more on theory than on practice and providing few hours for important subjects (teaching subjects). This idea was summarized by participant 6. *"In general, the program is more theory than practice and teaching is fundamental to practice as we learn stuff."*

Additionally, some students suggested that the program itself was not that bad, but attention was needed in the way the lecturers held their classes. *"It is useless to have an excellent program but incompetent professors"* (Participant 8); therefore, they recommended that the program needed to be changed and teachers should be observed and evaluated more often.

Student preparation

This section is one of the highest in the weakness and recommendations categories. It seems that pre-service teachers shared that they did not get the necessary skills to be competent teachers during their training. As shown in Calderón (2015), most English teachers in Mexico do not meet the minimum standards to teach the language, including the language level, the certification, and the effective teaching skills. However, it is worth mentioning that despite the weaknesses the program might have in these areas, there are some students who excel in achieving a higher level than the rest of their classmates. This situation might be an indicator that student preparation is not only about what the program offers to students but what they are willing to do on their own to improve their learning process.

This feeling of being unprepared is also reflected in Martínez Agudo (2017) and Peacock's (2009) studies. One of the main weaknesses was the lack of training in teaching and methodology subjects and the lack of time to practice, mainly because the program only offered one teaching class per semester, leaving more time for other classes related to linguistics, literature, and research classes. Some of the excerpts that reflect this belief are the following.

We need more hours of training and methodology and less of literature or research (but research should stay in the program) (Participant 2)

We didn't have enough time to practice what we learn. (Participant 5)

Besides, students demanded more feedback from all teachers in the program, not only the ones doing the subjects on teaching. In addition, pre-service teachers argued that the program's main strength in student preparation was reflective teaching, which obtained the highest results in the quantitative analysis. Participant 7 mentioned *"We do a lot of reflective teaching and we learn to study and learn independently."* Then, some improvements included more preparation in teaching skills and more time and emphasis on practice in real contexts. For instance, Participant 5 mentioned, *"practice makes perfect, and it seemed like it was not important during the major and the time that we had to apply what we had learned should be emphasized."*

Subjects/courses

So far, it has been pointed out that the program included subjects related to different areas that provided students with knowledge and skills in linguistics, literature, research, and teaching, all taught in the English language. In a certain way, this is a plus in comparison to other TPPs. This strength is reflected in comments such as *"most of the subjects offer something"*, *"subjects are balanced each semester"* (Participant 1), and *"the content of methodologies, psychology, and phonology was very good"* (Participant 4). Despite students' awareness of the variety of subjects offered, they still demanded more subjects in the teaching area and a reduction in others such as research; however, they suggested that it was important not to repeat the content in such courses. *"I think that all the subjects related to research should be truly optional, I find these subjects extremely repetitive."* (Participant 9).

Teachers

Last but not least, we have the teachers' section. Unlike previous studies, pre-service teachers did not mention much about teacher educators, except in Martínez-Agudo's (2017) study in which comments about their professional performance in terms of feedback were actually very positive. Contrary to this study, it was found that the teacher educators' section had the highest rate of weaknesses. Some comments were found about teachers who were prepared and committed to their work; it seems not all the students shared this idea. Some of the weaknesses in this area were expressed by participant 12:

Maybe it is not all the fault of the program because there are professors who are not well prepared, they are absent in many of the classes, they lack commitment- they don't know how to teach (not even if they have a Ph.D. or a master's degree.)

Because of this, students suggested that a lot needs to be done in this matter:

I deem [consider] that the lecturers as well as the program should be worked [improved][sic]. (Participant 5).

I think that teachers should be qualified to teach in the way the program requires (Participant 1).

To be sure that teachers are prepared to give specific classes because we have had teachers who don't have any idea of what they are teaching. (Participant 8).

Discussion

Interestingly, the quantitative results showed that in terms of content and organization and relationships between courses is similar to the findings of previous studies (Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Karimnia & Kay, 2014; Martínez Agudo, 2017; Ping, 2015; Salihoglu, 2012). The findings in this area reflect the great variety of courses in the curricula and the flexibility the students have to choose some subjects as there are some optional classes they can choose depending on their preferences and availability. Nonetheless, qualitative results somewhat contradict these discoveries when pre-service recognize that there is in fact a great variety of subjects in different areas but that the English teaching subjects represent a low percentage of the curriculum, which makes them feel "unprepared" to teach. In addition to this, qualitative data emphasized the importance of developing a higher English proficiency, as many students are not able to achieve an acceptable level despite the General English courses offered at the beginning of the program.

Both quantitative and qualitative data suggest that teacher training is a fundamental area of opportunity for the program. Overall, this is a common feature of most TPPs, where pre-service teachers report not having enough opportunities to practice English teaching in real scenarios and develop the pedagogical knowledge needed to actually teach the language (Karimnia & Kay, 2015; Martínez Agudo, 2017; Ping, 2015, Wilson, 2014). In this study, the reasons for this may be the large number of students per class (30 or more), the lack of spaces for practice teaching inside the university and the reduced number of subjects related to

teaching in the curricula. Hence, improvements need to be done regarding these limitations. Furthermore, teachers become a central part of the teaching training process: however, from participants' perspectives, the quality of teachers' instruction is not all the time as expected, and only some teacher educators were prepared and committed.

Regarding the area of meeting students' needs, a dual perspective can be observed in both quantitative and qualitative data. While some pre-service teachers state that they feel the program meets their needs or expectations in the areas mentioned previously, others disagree. Therefore, with the existing information gathered in the study, it becomes difficult to determine if the TPP is failing to meet the needs of the students or if it is just a personal perception from individual experiences. On the other hand, what most participants agree with is that the TPP provides them with significant moments for reflection about their learning process, which is an essential feature of what TPP must promote (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Finally, in the section of program evaluation, the existing data do not give significant findings. Due to the small numbers of pre-service teachers who participated in the study, there are not concluding facts to state if the program is good or bad. Nevertheless, what it can be concluded is that the evaluated TPP has some good areas that distinguish it from other TPPs and that there are others that need to be incorporated to increase quality.

Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this mixed-method study was to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of a TPP in a Mexican university through the perspective of students. The research questions presented at the beginning of the research were partially answered, at least from a very broad perspective.

In general, from the students' perspective, the program evaluated was neither good nor bad. Despite the low rating in some evaluations, particularly in the field-based experience, learner-centered approach, the relationship between theory and practice, and appropriate learning and teaching processes, the data are still inconclusive. Some of the main weaknesses found in students' answers had to do with the lack of practice in real teaching contexts, little preparation in the teaching area, poor quality of some teachers' performance, not enough time dedicated to practice, the overlapping of content in several courses, and more emphasis on theory than on practice.

Nevertheless, not everything was found at fault in the program. Students reported the program's strengths included students' preparation as both English teachers and linguists, students' development of self-reflection and independent learning, students' knowledge on different subjects, and teachers' preparation throughout the program. In fact, the area that stood out from the rest was the development of self-reflection that allows pre-service teachers to think about their past learning experiences and their future experiences as teachers.

Overall, the pre-service teachers of the program strongly demanded that knowledge about English should be a requirement for student as an admission requirement, such as having an English test to identify the entrance level of students, to have a balance between theory and practice, and to include more courses related to the teaching area such as psychology, classroom management, course planning, and materials design. Also, participants considered that it was important to develop more skills in English, especially in pronunciation, and more preparation and practice on how to teach. Finally, they suggested more teaching experience in real contexts, different schools, and levels. Additionally, it was stressed that practice should be done throughout the entire program of study and not only at the end in only tenth semester.

In conclusion, pre-service teachers' perceptions about their teaching preparation effectiveness still reflected a certain degree of uncertainty, which may indicate that the program had both positive and negative features. Therefore, it does not mean that there was no quality in the different areas of the TPP but only that there were some areas for improvement. Although their recommendations provide valuable information to make further changes in the program, there is still some analysis to be done. Furthermore, these results provide insight into the program's strengths and weaknesses that need to be worked out to make the necessary improvements.

The study results have contributed to the research in the field of teacher preparation in foreign language learning, more particularly in the Mexican context, where there is little or no information regarding program evaluation. Based on the results, it is suggested that it is imperative to identify what students' perceptions

towards the program effectiveness are because they are the main consumers of the program. They may provide a good insight into this issue. Understanding their opinions would provide relevant information to the stakeholders involved in the teacher preparation program (teachers, administrators, and employers) to make the necessary changes to improve TPPs.

Finally, there are still some issues to consider for future research. Although the questions of the study were, at least, partially answered, the study had some important limitations. The first one is the small sample used for this pilot study; more data from further generations is recommended to get more consistent results. Also, the presence of other variables besides the demographic ones would lead to other deeper interpretations of the data. For instance, students from other semesters of the same program or other TPPs in the city can be included to compare the analysis. Moreover, the study only considered students' perspectives. Therefore, it would be necessary to develop a questionnaire for other stakeholders to get different views on the program's effectiveness and include other instruments such as interviews and focus groups to gather deeper information.

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Appendices 1 & 2

Appendix 1: Instrument

Students' Perceptions about their TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) Preparation Program

The purpose of the following questionnaire is to collect information about the teacher training program you are taking at your university. Your responses are of great value; therefore, we require you to answer the following instrument in an honest way. Your responses will be anonymous and will be used for research and academic purposes only. We appreciate your collaboration in this project. Thank you!

Male: _____ Female: _____ Semester: _____ Generation (Cohort): _____

SECTION I: From the following statements mark with an X your opinion using the following key:

Strongly Disagree (1) Disagree (2) Undecided (3) Agree (4) Strongly Agree (5)					
Statement	SD 1 %	D 2 %	UD 3 %	A 4 %	SA 5 %
The Teacher Preparation Program (TPP)...					
1. has good linkage between different courses.					
2. avoids overlapping information between different courses.					
3. gave me adequate training in English.					
4. gave adequate training in teaching skills.					
5. gave adequate training for the need of the local context (teaching in Mexican schools)					
6. is up-to date.					
7. encouraged me to reflect on my past experiences as a language learner.					
8. encouraged me to be a reflective teacher (when starting teaching)					
9. promotes flexibility in using different teaching practices for different situations.					
10. balances teacher-centered and student-centered learning on its courses.					
11. taught me how to teach English.					
12. taught me how to evaluate myself as a teacher.					
13. taught me classroom management skills.					
14. taught me how to use foreign language teaching materials.					
15. taught me how to adapt foreign language teaching materials.					
16. increased my powers in self-evaluation.					
17. taught me foreign language and teaching evaluation skills.					
18. is relevant to my needs.					
19. has a good balance between teaching of English teaching skills, and classroom management skills.					
20. prepared me to teach English in the classroom.					
21. met my needs.					
22. By the end of the TEFL program, I will be ready to teach English.					

SECTION 2: Answer the following questions in the most descriptive way as possible.

1. What are the main strengths of the TPP?



2. What are the main weaknesses of the TPP?

3. What aspects of the TPP should be emphasized and improved?

Appendix 2: Informed Consent Statement

Students' Perceptions about their TEFL Preparation Program

The purpose of the following questionnaire is to collect information about the teacher training program of Language Sciences at UANL. Your responses are of great value; therefore, we require you to answer the following instrument in an honest way. Your responses will be anonymous and will be used for research and academic purposes only. We appreciate your collaboration in this project. Thank you!

 nalle24@gmail.com (no se comparten) [Cambiar cuenta](#) 

***Obligatorio**

I agree to participate in the research project * Students' perceptions about their Teaching Preparation Program (TPP). I confirm I am 18 years of age or older. *

Yes

No

[Siguiente](#) [Borrar formulario](#)