

## English as Foreign Language Teaching in High Schools: A Chilean Case Study

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**Abstract.** In Chile, English is taught as a foreign language and its poor performance, as per the English Proficiency Index report, is a disturbing factor now that Chile is an official member of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This study seeks to understand the dynamics of English language teaching by focusing on the didactics, methodologies, evaluative tools, techniques and resources commonly used in the municipal schools in the city of Talca. This case study involves a quantitative method within the characteristics of a descriptive, interpretative and correlational framework. The purposefully selected participants were fifteen teachers from four municipal schools in the city of Talca to whom an open-ended questionnaire was distributed to collect the primary data. The secondary data consisted of the Sistema de Medición de la Calidad de la educación (education quality measurement system) (SIMCE) results from 2010 to 2014 and the National Study results of the English language testing in 2017. The results show that the teaching of English as a foreign language is a difficult task because the didactics and methodologies used by the teachers are not adequate to favour students' reaching the level of proficiency established by the Chilean Ministry of Education. The findings suggest a systematic teacher training programme and continuous focus on the teaching of the English language to enhance learners' language proficiency.

**Keywords:** didactics; English as a foreign language; methodology; SIMCE

### 1. Introduction

English as a foreign language has been taught in Latin America for more than a hundred years, mainly because of economic communication with the globalised world (Glas, 2013; Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Chile is no exception to this reality. The substantial growth of Chile's economy in the 1990s encouraged the

use of the English language as a tool for its competitiveness in the international market (Castro, 2011; Albuja & Merino, 2017). By the end of the decade it had become a compulsory subject to be taught at schools from the 5th grade as established by the Ministry of Education (Mineduc, 2012). The aspiration of Chile to transform the nation to the highest international standards is challenged, especially since only 2% of working adults speak a moderate level of English. Moreover, the results from the education quality measurement system, namely the SIMCE regarding the English language indicate the poor quality of English teaching in the municipal schools. One of the hypotheses to explain these results is that the didactics and methodologies currently used are not adequate, or that the teachers have failed to adapt them to the Chilean context.

Chile, as per the English Proficiency Index report (EF EPI), stands 37th out of 100 countries evaluated (EF EPI, 2020). This is relatively a good position in terms of the Latin American region and indicates progress but not so encouraging at the global level. Despite the apparent progress of Chileans in English language proficiency, an analysis of the English SIMCE results from 2010 to 2014, the National Study results of the English language tests of 2017, and the EF EPI report reveal that there are still important challenges ahead. The SIMCE and the National Study are Chilean evaluation programmes which are highly relevant and referred to by the teachers to enhance their teaching practices. These programmes provide essential information on language proficiency and are carried out in a systematic process of collecting, dissecting, and interpreting information (Loi & Hang, 2021). Given this importance, the data from the above-mentioned years were considered since there has been no other English proficiency assessment carried out by the Chilean Ministry of Education. The proficiency level established by the Chilean government based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) by the end of high school ranges from A2 to B1. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability. It defines language ability on a six-point scale from A1 for beginners, up to C2 for those who have mastered a language. The results show that more than half of the students in Chile were below level A1, indicating the lowest level of proficiency in the English language (Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2017).

Given such results of the English language performance, it becomes relevant to understand the underlying concept of education as a process of the development and empowerment of individuals, and as the enabler of efficient responses to the new conditions imposed by globalisation. In the development of any nation, education is a key success, and the introduction of language teaching becomes even more important (Philominraj et al., 2020). In Chile, despite the implementation of the English language education for so many years, the proficiency in this language as established by the Ministry of Education has not yet been achieved by the learners. English language proficiency enhances the capacities and skills of learners, leading to integral development and enabling success in language learning. Proficient learners are believed to possess a “good command of the language”, i.e., they have the ability to comprehend the

language without difficulty, communicate various ideas distinctly, and interact with other language users easily (Renandya et al., 2018).

Therefore, educational institutions must develop a new organisational culture and innovative strategies, and design a curriculum according to the context. It is necessary to revise the teaching practices in terms of methodology, techniques of learning and reading comprehension, elements on which the Chilean school curriculum is based. It is for this purpose the literature review of the study covers educational reform, basic skills, and the didactics, methodologies, and strategies used for teaching English for a better understanding of the whole pedagogical process. Hence, the focus of the present research is to examine the didactic strategies, methodological approaches, evaluative tools, techniques, and resources employed by the teachers in urban schools in their English language teaching process. This was carried out by surveying fifteen urban municipal schoolteachers on their teaching practices that could approximate the reality of the teaching of a foreign language as that of the English language in the Chilean context (Ávila et al., 2010).

## **2. Educational Reform**

In the past, the educational reform in Chile proposed a restructuring that considered the main elements such as equity, equality, and quality education, characteristics that are essential to all schools (Bellei et al., 2018). Currently the need for learning English as a second language is on the increase, given the fact that it is a language of international communication (McKay & Brown, 2016). English as an international language has led ministries to formulate new national policies for language curricula and language teacher education (Garton, 2020). The Chilean national curriculum clearly states that the English language is considered a tool that allows global communication and at the same time permits wider access to a knowledge of information and technology. This in turn enables the country to face the demands of the global society (Barahona, 2015). The first reform to the English curriculum carried out in 1998 (McKay, 2003) was oriented towards the receptive skills of the language. Indeed, it was believed that reinforcing receptive abilities was going to facilitate access to the information network and thus, to the global economy. Therefore, productive skills such as speaking and writing were relegated to a secondary role (Barahona, 2016). Nonetheless, Ormeño (2009) states that during the 1980s, English teachers were asked to change the traditionally known grammar-translation method, giving more emphasis to the use and production of the language rather than replicating it perfectly.

In 2009, and later in 2012, the English curriculum was adjusted to give more emphasis to productive skills, ensuring the development of the four skills of the language (Barahona, 2016). These modifications made by the Ministry of Education in 2012 led to aligning the objectives of the curriculum according to the CEFR to uplift the English curriculum to international standards.

The educational reforms carried out by the Ministry of Education laid the foundation for the individual competencies towards English language

communication and thus considered these individualities in developing the language learning skills. However, the development of competence is due to a cognitive mediation that points to different competencies (Iglesias Ortuño, 2019).

### 3. Basic Skills

Competence is defined as the development of a set of linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, strategic, and discursive processes and knowledge that the speaker-listener-reader-writer must put into action to produce or understand discourses appropriate to each context (Garcia & Fierro, 2017). Although the Chilean educational reform has promoted some of these in its plans and programmes, it has not been sufficient enough to achieve success and optimal management of the same (Bellei et al., 2018; Barahona, 2015). There are different competencies such as communicative, linguistic, literary, and metric; and the development of each one of these has its own different strategy.

In communicative competence, for example, it is necessary to form an idiolect with knowledge and information of pragmatics. Linguistic competence demands the mediation of knowledge of linguistics, essentially in the text and rules of contextualisation. To develop these competencies new learning strategies are required. Concerning the comprehension of a text, many activities follow after the identification of the words, such as constructing propositions and ordering the ideas of the text, extracting the global meaning, and interrelating the ideas globally. These operations give rise to one of the dimensions of understanding: the textual representation or base of the text. However, the understanding also has another dimension, namely situational representation, which entails the construction of a model about the world or situation described by the text, where the readers' previous knowledge becomes useful to accommodate the present information (Richmond & Zacks, 2017).

Understanding a text requires understanding the meaning of the text and at the same time building a context-based model (Figueiredo, 2010). Subsequently, to understand each sentence within the text and construct the structure to integrate it with the knowledge that one already has means the process is divided into two blocks; on one hand, identifying the written text, a low level process and on the other hand the comprehension of the text, a high level process (García, 2006). It is important to underline that reading is something artificial that does not develop spontaneously as occurs with oral language.

Speaking and reading are the two processes with clear differences, since the latter, besides needing to understand what is written to decode phonemes, also requires knowing the written word and contextualising it. The faster identification of the words results in a better understanding of the text. Reading is related to the development of phonological awareness and socioeconomic and cultural factors, which imply school performance. This proposition would explain the differences in students from a low economic stratum, those who fail to follow the reading process of the formal school programmes due to the lack of access and are also disadvantaged in cognitive and verbal scope (Libertad & Desarrollo, 2010). Students who have greater linguistic, verbal, and emotional

stimuli at an age before they enter basic education have a greater prediction of success in the reading and writing process (Hoyos & Gallego, 2017).

Writing is the graphic representation of oral language since everything that is spoken must appear in the written form in the process of teaching. Therefore, the importance of written language should be emphasised as it favours the development of the teaching process, both individually and collectively (Davidson, 2019). The communicative activity in the classroom must produce a dialogue between the teacher and the student that explains situations meaningfully, both in the mother tongue and in the foreign language. In this way, the student and the teacher can share with others their affective world, emotions, expectations, and feelings. Thus, the learning of English becomes relevant, emerging as an easy, pleasant, useful, and effective task (Ramírez Ortiz & Artunduaga, 2018).

On the one hand teaching is a communicative process and, on the other, it has the function of transmitting and developing communicative faculties. Therefore, the teaching process requires that the English teacher should encourage communication and avoid a monologue in which the teacher is the only one who knows and who passively transmits knowledge without taking into account the cognitive ability of the students with their preconceptions and concepts (Monsalve & Correal, 2006). In order to be successful, the English teacher should communicate in and out of the classroom, have command of the language, know how to interpret information and ideas, as well as understanding what his or her student wishes to communicate in another language efficiently.

The teacher should show respect for what the students say, fostering understanding and tolerance before frustration so that the students can participate actively. The teacher must generate a communicative environment of familiarity which favours independence and creativity, and facilitates a dynamic positive group. The use of appropriate verbal language is essential; hence, the need for vocabulary and precision in ideas to express oneself effectively. The teacher could be an excellent facilitator of learning if s/he has a good command of oral language since s/he could very easily convert complicated information into something simple (Ramírez Ortiz & Artunduaga, 2018).

To sum up, it could be said that facility of communication in English is vital for success in learning and teaching the language. This means the teacher should be capable of keeping the student motivated throughout the lesson by speaking only in English, in an easy, entertaining, and meaningful way. This could encourage the students to communicate in another language and ultimately make them feel capable of expressing themselves spontaneously both in and out of the classroom.

#### **4. Didactics, methodologies and strategies used for teaching English**

In the process of teaching-learning, curricular disciplines and content organisation that stimulates the capacity to learn are introduced into the educational practice. This process involves methodology, didactic strategies,

evaluation, techniques, and resources. The methods form the sequence of teacher and student actions aimed at achieving the objectives of teaching. It is essentially the method which makes the process dynamic.

To be consistent with the teaching didactic idea that is used, the methods must be characterised by being essentially productive carried out with expository methods; guaranteeing the active and interactive participation of students in their search for knowledge, and helping them to find solutions to their problems. At the same time, it should be directed towards promoting group work in harmony with the individual as well as teaching students to learn through developing skills of guidance, planning, supervision or control, and evaluation (Bravo, 2011).

In the trajectory of the teaching of English as a foreign language, methods that are of importance and which have been frequently used are the grammar translation method, direct method, audio-lingual method, cognitive approach, natural approach, and communicative approach.

The strategy of teaching is a description of learning environments; therefore, the organisation of a classroom can be considered as a strategy as it would be supported by cooperative learning. Moreover, the means and didactic resources can be considered as products of didactic strategies, such as texts or printed materials, without losing their category of being mediation tools (Muñoz, 2010). Strictly speaking, a strategy is a process of execution of the subject's ability to learn, for which skills are chosen, coordinated, and applied. These sequences of action are strongly oriented toward the final objective to be achieved. On the other hand, Ruiz (2001) as cited in Urgellés and Hernández (2018) understands that every strategy transits through a phase of obtaining information and a phase of evolution. Strategies are designed to solve practical problems and optimise time and resources. They also involve a planning process in which target-oriented action sequences are established. Depending on the context in which the strategies are targeted, they can be pedagogical, educational, didactic, and methodological.

The didactic strategy is a result of a system of actions carried out in the short, medium and long term that allows the transformation of the teaching-learning process in an assignment, level, or institution based on the components of the same and that allows the achievement of the proposed objectives at a specific time (Vergara, 2015). The term 'didactic' comes from the Greek *didaskein* meaning 'teach' and *teckne* meaning 'art'. It is a pedagogical discipline of a practical and normative nature the specific objective of which is the teaching technique. This technique stimulates and guides students effectively in their learning (Amos, 1998). In any teaching, the use of pedagogy is in the foreground, taking into account the social aims and adapting these to new programmes and methods of teaching. The purpose of teaching is to provide the student with the resources of expression, comprehension, and reflection on linguistic uses (Vergara, 2015).

In terms of didactic order, the starting point to define the learning process is the theory of communicative learning, based on conflict solution, derived from the interactions of individuals with their environment. It becomes a process that evolves from the concept of transmission of knowledge to the concept of generating active learners through social interactions (Martinez, 2005). From this perspective, it is assumed that the teaching of a second or a foreign language must favour the development of a communicative learning strategy, understood as an active and constructive process. In addition, communicative learning is significant in regulating, developing, and systematising (Martínez Lagares, 2015).

The following terms - methodology, didactic strategies, evaluation, techniques, and resources - are interrelated in the exercise of educational practice. As a whole, these items seek a quality result in the teaching-learning process in the geographical, social, political, historical, and cultural reality of the student, identifying the learner as an integral part of a particular social group. In the Chilean context, there has been a proposal to strengthen the English language teaching through several educational reforms, as seen in the introductory section, which is also highlighted in this literature review. These aspects discussed above indicate the lacuna, which is currently far from being addressed in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Chilean classrooms.

## **5. Methodology**

This case study involves a quantitative method within the characteristics of a descriptive, interpretative, and correlational framework.

### **Participants**

The participants were fifteen teachers from four municipal schools in the city of Talca. The selection of the participants for this research was directed or purposeful (Otzen & Manterola, 2017). This was done taking into account the teachers from Marta Donoso Espejo School, Abate Molina School, Carlos Condell School, and Diego Portales School, who were teaching English as a foreign language in these schools. These schools are public schools managed by the municipality and are categorised as schools of excellence by the Agency of Quality of Education under the Ministry of Education.

### **Research instrument**

In the current study, an open-ended questionnaire was used to collect the primary data. This instrument was distributed to the teachers of the above-mentioned schools. It was constructed based on the categories of the Chilean National Curriculum (Mineduc, 2012), such as methodology, strategies, techniques, evaluation, and resources used in the teaching of English as a foreign language. The questionnaire was validated through a panel of experts in the field of English language teaching methodology. The secondary data consisted of the SIMCE results from 2010 to 2014 and the National Study English language results in 2017.

### Data analysis

The responses of the open-ended questionnaire were coded in an Excel file and were categorized thematically. These themes were the independent variables representing different categories such as methodology, strategies and techniques. The results from the SIMCE and the National Study of English constituted dependent variables with which the independent variables from the survey were correlated and the data were analysed through means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The objective of this study was to analyse the didactics and methodologies of the English language teaching used by the teachers to understand the dynamics of teaching and consequently its impact on students' achievement in the learning of English as a foreign language. Hence, the study aimed to describe and analyse the meaning of teachers' actions related to the didactic sequences (Denardi, 2017).

### 5. Results and Discussions

The independent variables and their percentages used by the fifteen sample teachers are presented in the following graphs.

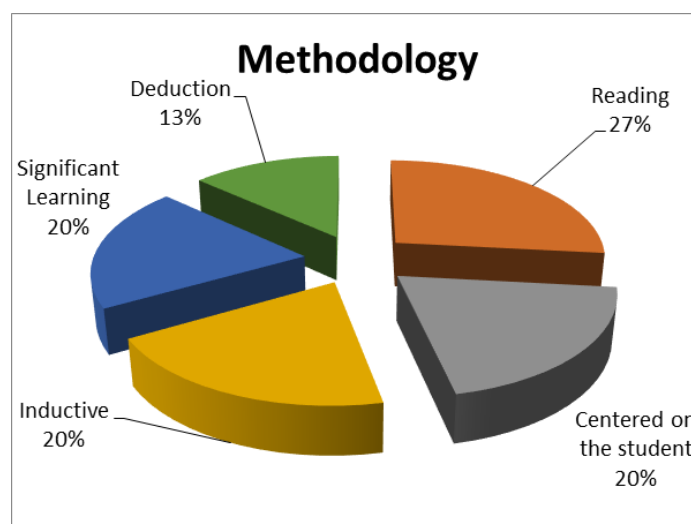
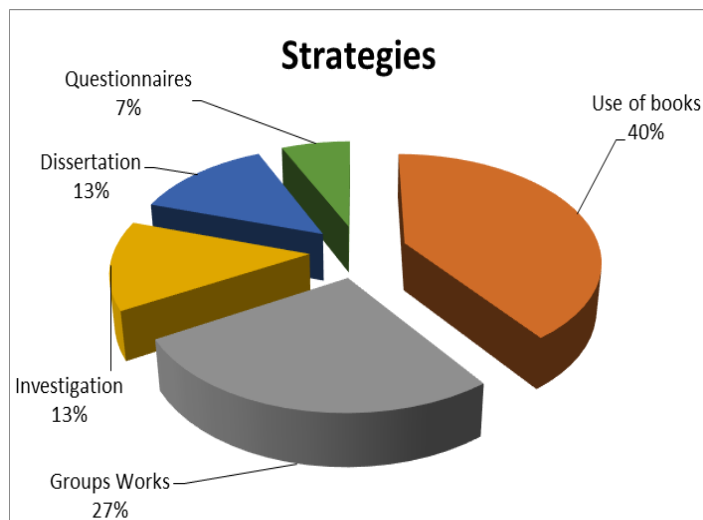


Figure 1: Frequency of methodology

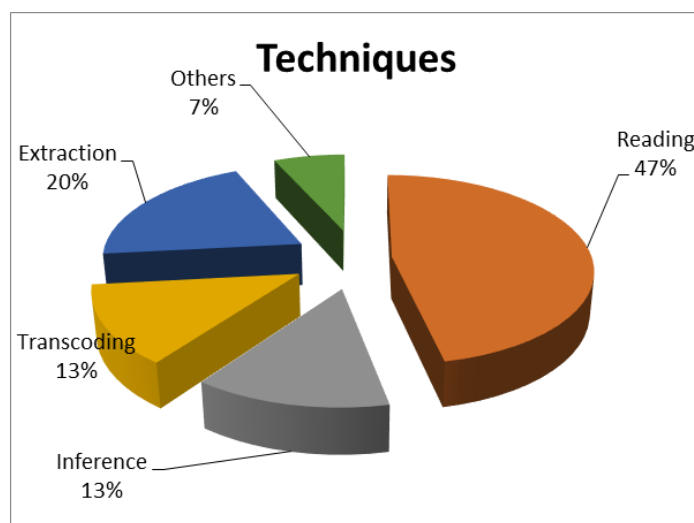
On comparing the most used methodologies, Figure 1 indicates that with 26.7%, the reading or oral method enjoys priority. The second most used are shared by communicative act centred on the student, meaningful learning, and the inductive methodology, all three with 20%. Lastly, the deduction with 13.3% refers to exercises and examples of daily acts that require logical reasoning on the part of the students.





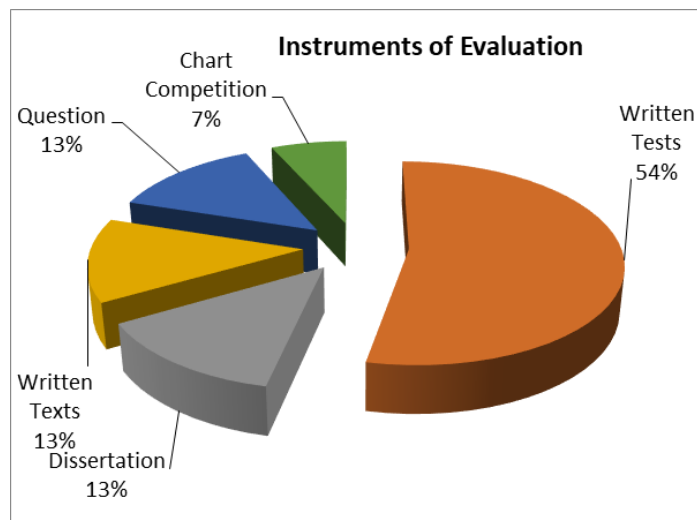
**Figure 2: Frequency of commonly used strategies**

In analysing the most used strategies, the use of books, which are distributed free to the students by the Ministry of Education, is employed by 40% of the teachers. Group work is favoured by 26.7%, followed by 13.3% who rely on research and dissertations.



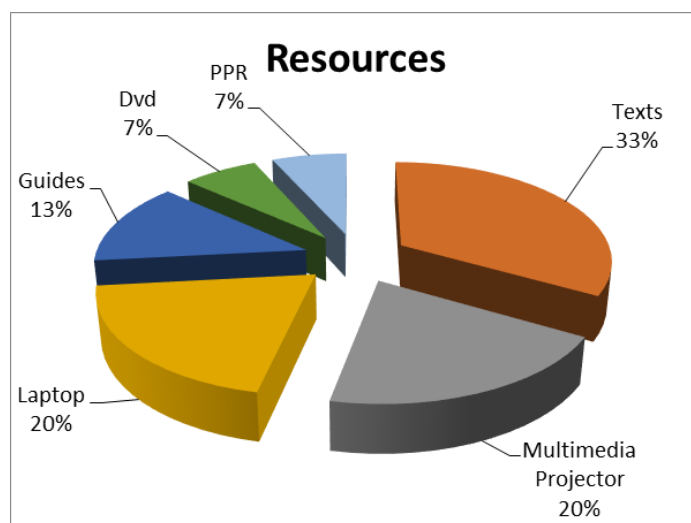
**Figure 3: Frequency of techniques**

In analysing the most used techniques, 46.7% of the teachers use books for reading purposes. These are commonly distributed to students by the Ministry of Education for free. The technique of extraction or simplification of content taught being used in the teaching process is favoured by 20%, while inference and transcoding are used by 13.3% of the teachers.



**Figure 4: Frequency of instruments of evaluation**

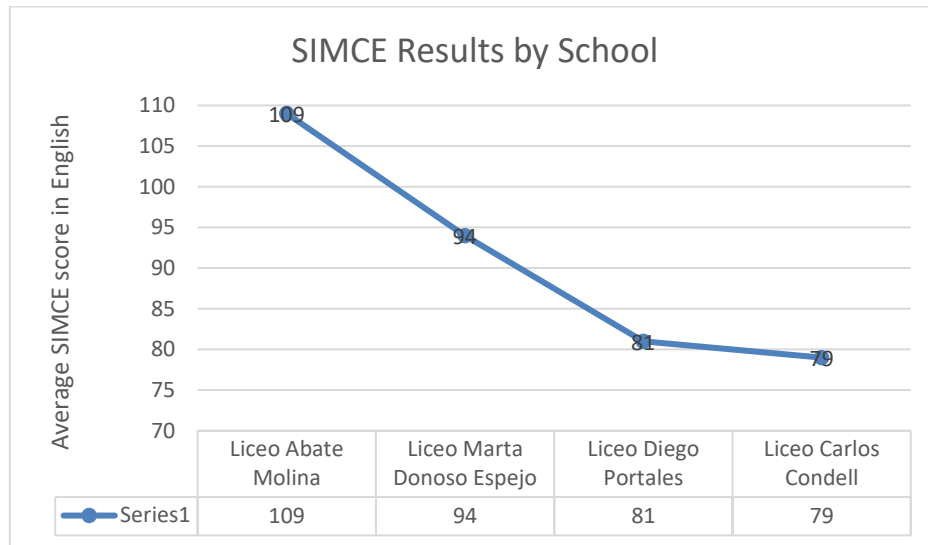
The written test is the assessment instrument most frequently used by 53.3% of the teachers of the municipal schools in the city of Talca. This is followed by dissertations, written texts in the English language, and interrogation, each employed by 13.3% of the teachers.



**Figure 5: Frequency of resources**

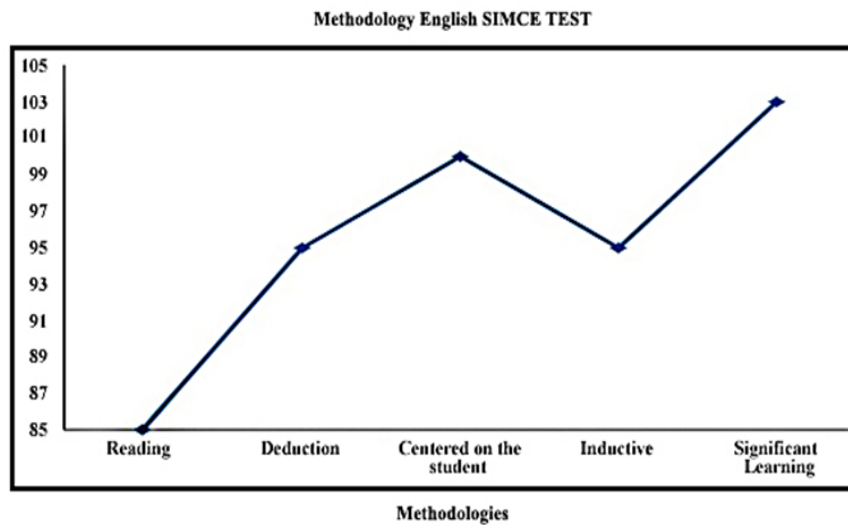
When considering the resource materials used by the English teachers from the participating high schools, there is a tendency to use textbooks among 33.3%, followed by multimedia projectors and the use of laptops with lectures and techniques such as PowerPoint being used by 20% of the teachers.

The results of the English test collected from the four schools as published by the SIMCE are shown in Figure 6:



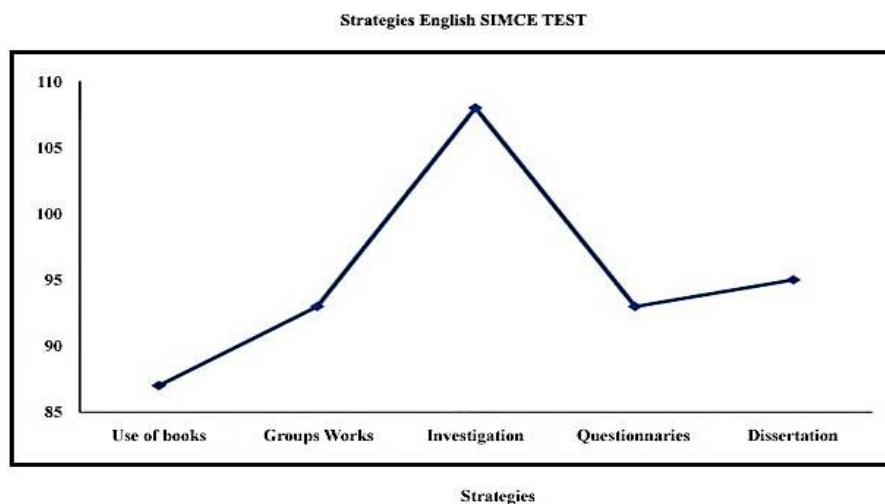
**Figure 6: SIMCE results by school**

With regard to the results obtained between dependent variables (results obtained from the SIMCE test) and their correlations with the major relevant independent variables of this study based on the Chilean National Curriculum are presented in Figure 7 below.



**Figure 7: Average of SIMCE English test by methodologies used**

In terms of methodologies, the significant learning and the learning centred on students indicate the highest results in the SIMCE test. The reading or oral method implemented by the teachers (27%) in these schools has the least relevance in the SIMCE results as evident in Figure 7. This is because there may be a mismatch between the methodology used by the teachers for enhancing oral and communicative production and the evaluative criteria used by SIMCE.



**Figure 8: Average of SIMCE English test by strategies used**

On comparing the results of the SIMCE test with the strategies reported by the teachers, research was found to be statistically significant and to have the most influence leading to good results. It is also important to note that the use of only books in the classroom determines the lowest score in this measurement.

**Table 1: Average of SIMCE tests on listening and reading to evaluation instrument**

<b>Instruments of Evaluation</b>	<b>Written Tests</b>	<b>53.3</b>
<b>Test Results</b>	<b>Listening result</b>	<b>42.75</b>
	<b>Reading result</b>	<b>47.75</b>

On comparing the results of listening and reading skills obtained from the the SIMCE test with one of the items from the list of evaluative instruments based on the national curriculum, the written tests were found to be the most used instrument by 53.3% of the teachers at school. The SIMCE test measures listening and reading skills to determine the achievement of the English language in students. The SIMCE does not include oral assessment which reflects a gap in their evaluative criteria. This seems to be contrary to the instrument of evaluation predominantly used by the teachers, which clearly indicates the incoherence between these two types of evaluative activities, namely the one used by the teachers to foster English language teaching and the other employed by the SIMCE to verify the achievement of the same in students. This proves the hypothesis of this study, namely that the teachers are not using appropriate methodologies and strategies. They have also failed to adapt these to the Chilean context.

This study indicates that textbooks continue to dominate as the didactic resource most used by the high school teachers of English. In three of the five categories taken from the national curriculum, all of three highlighted the use of textbooks as the main source, whether for methodology, strategies, or evaluation. It is because this tool helps the teachers to maintain order in the classroom; on the

other hand, it is a resource to which all have access since it is facilitated to all students of municipal education by the Ministry of Education in Chile. Of all the strategies used by the teachers, one could derive that communicative competence is the least used, contrary to the literature, which states that it is one of the most effective strategies to learn a language such as English (Ramírez Ortiz & Artunduaga, 2018). This is because many of the teachers who teach in the classrooms of the municipal schools do not have advanced levels of competence in the language they teach (Mineduc, 2019). This is an impediment in terms of correction and oral stimulation. The data on the resources used by the teachers surveyed show the use of some technological tools such as the multimedia projector and laptop. However, there was a lack of language laboratories to consolidate students' reading and listening skills.

The secondary data, which consisted of the SIMCE results from 2010-2014 and the National Study results of the English language test of 2017, were compared and are presented in Figure 9 and Table 2:

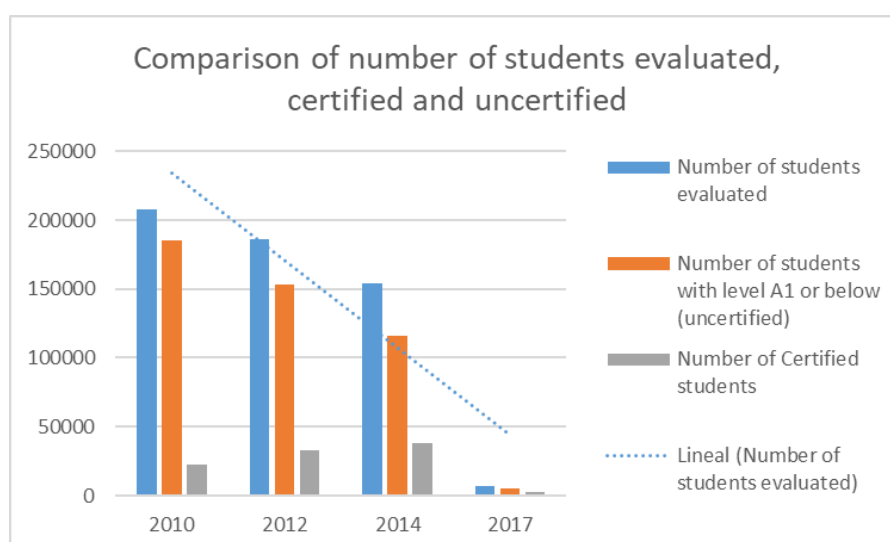


Figure 9: Comparison of number of students evaluated, certified and uncertified

Table 2: Percentage of certified and uncertified students

Test*	Year	No. of students evaluated	% of certified students	% of uncertified students
SIMCE	2010	208,038	11.00	89.00
SIMCE	2012	186,385	17.80	82.20
SIMCE	2014	154,097	24.50	75.50
National Test	2017	7,340	32.00	68.00

\* The data in the above table have been compiled from the various reports from the Chilean Ministry of Education (Mineduc, 2010; Agencia de Calidad de la Educación, 2012, 2014, 2017).

The results of the English test carried out by the Agency for Quality of the School Education (2017) revealed that 68% of the students evaluated were below level A2 as defined by the CEFR. On the one hand, data from 2010 to 2017 is

promising, showing an increase in terms of the percentage of students obtaining certification to prove their proficiency in the English language; on the other hand, the same data also indicates a decline in the number of students participating in the certification process, as highlighted in Table 2 and Figure 9 respectively. Based on the CEFR definitions of the level of proficiency, this data clearly indicates that students in Chile are not able to understand frequently used phrases and expressions related to areas of experience that are especially relevant to them. Students in level A2 should be able to communicate when carrying out simple daily tasks that require only simple and direct exchanges of information on issues that are common to them. In addition, they should be able to describe in simple terms aspects pertaining to their past experiences as well as issues related to their immediate needs.

To sum up, the analysis of the above results shows that the teaching of English as a foreign language is regarded as a difficult task because the didactics and methodologies used by the teachers are not conducive to students' reaching the level of proficiency established by the Chilean Ministry of Education.

## **6. Conclusion**

The data of this study revealed that the methodologies, which are student centred and provide meaningful learning, are correlated with language achievement (SIMCE results) ensuring greater success as shown in Figure 1. In terms of strategies, research and dissertations favoured students' achievement of language as evident in Figure 2. Concerning evaluative tools, there is a need to include evaluation of listening and reading skills, which were lacking in the teachers' responses. This may be because oral assessment is not included in the SIMCE test, which the present study aims to highlight. Referring to resources, the study found it was necessary to have language laboratories at schools to strengthen the reading and listening skills, as well as oral production in students. The data enable the conclusion that the teachers do not do specific planning for each class; they rather use the available resources to carry out their job as best as they can, even when this implies not having sufficient comprehension of the didactic concept and methodology for better teaching. The data analysis also indicates that there is a need to systematise mediation and design planning according to the pedagogical model or the time invested. It also highlights the necessity to create a synergy between teaching and learning strategies, balancing the most appropriate techniques and resources to develop activities for students that will stimulate their thinking and their conceptualisation of thought appropriate to the learning of English as a foreign language. Despite all the efforts made by the teachers, the research highlighted the challenges that Chile needs to tackle in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

## **7. Recommendations and limitations**

The present study was limited to municipal schools in the city of Talca, and the inclusion of private and subsidised schools for further study in other cities is proposed. Teachers of English were the only participants and perhaps the responses from students learning English as a foreign language could have

strengthened the findings of this study. The findings of the current study recommend a systematic teacher-training programme and continuous development in the teaching of the English language to enhance learners' language proficiency.

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