Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of C1 English Proficiency in a Chilean Teacher Education Program

Percepciones de docentes en formación sobre el nivel de dominio de inglés C1 en un programa chileno de formación docente

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This mixed-methods study examined preservice teachers' perceptions of C1 English proficiency, focusing on their linguistic competence, understanding, attitudes, and challenges. Conducted at a university in Ñuble, Chile, with 13 participants, data were gathered through a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Findings suggest that perceived linguistic competence improves as students advance academically. Although participants' understanding of the C1 level was often fragmented, they acknowledged the difficulty of achieving it and the importance of mastering grammar by graduation. Despite challenges, participants held positive attitudes toward the C1 standard. These findings aim to help teacher education programs better support preservice teachers' progress toward C1 proficiency.

Keywords: C1 level, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, English language proficiency, English language teaching standards, teacher education

Este estudio mixto examinó las percepciones de docentes en formación sobre el dominio del inglés C1, centrándose en su competencia lingüística, comprensión, actitudes y desafíos. Realizado en una universidad en Ñuble, Chile, con 13 participantes, los datos se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario cerrado y una entrevista semiestructurada. Los resultados sugieren que la percepción de competencia lingüística mejora con el avance académico. Aunque su comprensión del nivel C1 era fragmentada, los participantes reconocieron la dificultad e importancia de dominar la gramática al graduarse. Pese a los desafíos, mostraron actitudes positivas hacia este estándar. Estos hallazgos buscan ayudar a los programas de formación docente a apoyar mejor el progreso de los futuros docentes hacia la competencia C1.

Palabras clave: estándares para la enseñanza del inglés, formación docente, nivel C1, nivel de dominio del inglés, Marco común europeo de referencia para las lenguas

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Introduction

A growing number of studies are dedicated to examining future teachers' language proficiency levels. This trend may be linked to the increasing graduation requirements of educational institutions, which mandate certification of proficiency levels for upcoming generations of educators (Kostina, 2012; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas-Tamburini, 2023). To certify language proficiency, institutions commonly adhere to an international standard for assessment, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Charttrakul & Damnet, 2021; Hishamudin & Li, 2023; Kostina, 2012). This framework seeks to provide "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) describes language proficiency across six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) grouped into three bands: Basic User (A1–A2), Independent User (B1–B2), and Proficient User (C1–C2). This proficiency scale serves not only to assess language testing but also to support curricular and teaching aspects addressed in second or foreign language education (Little, 2007, 2011). Furthermore, it must be noted that each level of proficiency possesses descriptors that, according to the Council of Europe (2020), are consistently positive, avoiding any mention of what the learner is unable to do. In addition, these descriptors should be understood as guidelines rather than objectives or outcomes (Council of Europe, 2020; Little, 2011), as they emphasize expected performance criteria rather than providing flexible, supportive benchmarks for learners' progress (Figueras, 2012; Little, 2007).

Given the global recognition of the CEFR, research indicates that English education programs are adopting this framework to assess the language proficiency levels of preservice teachers (Charttrakul & Damnet, 2021; Hishamudin & Li, 2023; Naser & Ali, 2023; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas-Tamburini, 2023). The overarching goal of these teaching contexts is to guide preservice teachers toward advanced proficiency in English, specifically at the C1 level (Hishamudin & Li, 2023; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas-Tamburini, 2023; Shukor & Sulaiman, 2022). Despite these expectations, empirical studies reveal that preservice teachers struggle to achieve the level of proficient users (e.g., Kostina, 2012; Naser & Ali, 2023; Ramos-García & Fernández-Viciana, 2019). Kostina (2012) reports that in a Colombian teacher education program, on average, only half of the participants achieved the expected national English proficiency level, corresponding to B2 (intermediate level). Similarly, in a Spanish context, Ramos-García and Fernández-Viciana (2019) observed that only 7.4% of preservice teachers in a sample of 135 achieved a proficient user level (C1). Most of the sample consisted of intermediate users, with B1 representing 35.6%, followed closely by B2 at 34.1%. The study concluded that these future teachers were still far from reaching advanced English proficiency. Furthermore, as noted by Yee and Periasamy (2019), this issue appears to extend to in-service teachers who face challenges in attaining the C1 benchmark in both public and private sectors, as highlighted by Cárdenas and Chaves (2013).

Beyond English proficiency attainment, research has also explored preservice teachers' attitudes toward language proficiency testing. These findings are noteworthy because, despite acknowledging their lack of English language mastery, most preservice teachers hold positive attitudes toward C1 testing and certification (Kaur & Jian, 2022; Nii & Yunus, 2022; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021; Shukor & Sulaiman, 2022). Other findings indicate that preservice teachers have limited or uncertain knowledge of the CEFR and its proficiency bands (Basic User, Independent User, Proficient User) and practical implications (Figueras, 2012). Similarly, Cárdenas and Chaves (2013) reported discrepancies between preservice teachers' perceived linguistic competence and their proficiency test results. These studies highlight the need for further attention to both language

proficiency attainment and preservice teachers' familiarity with standardized frameworks like the CEFR, which can play a crucial role in their professional preparation.

C1 English Proficiency in Chilean English Teacher Education

Chilean teacher education aligns with international English language proficiency standards. In 2021, the Chilean Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) released new standards for English language teaching (ELT), titled *Estándares de la profesión docente: carreras de pedagogía en inglés* (Standards for English Language Teaching Programs). In this framework, preservice teachers are expected to master both teaching and disciplinary English language knowledge (MINEDUC, 2021). In particular, the disciplinary knowledge domain is composed of five standards: (a) Communicative Competence and Language Teaching, (b) Fundamentals of English Language Teaching and Learning, (c) Development of Communicative Skills, (d) Resources for Learning, and (e) Cultural and Intercultural Competence. In particular, Standard A evidences a direct connection to CEFR levels of proficiency, stating that preservice teachers must "communicate in English, both orally and in writing, at an expert C1 level" (MINEDUC, 2021, p. 79, translated by the authors). It is important to note that these new standards are being implemented but have not yet become graduation requirements for English language teaching programs.

Three years after the publication of the ELT standards, there remains a need for empirical research in Chilean teacher education on the attainment of C1 English proficiency from multiple perspectives and methods. The work by Ramírez-Draughn and Cárdenas-Tamburini (2023) marks an important starting point for understanding preservice teachers' experiences with proficiency testing. Building on their foundation, this study aims to further explore these experiences and expand the empirical efforts in this area.

This study aims to explore preservice teachers' perceptions of C1 English proficiency by focusing on their perceived linguistic competence, understanding of the C1 level, attitudes toward it, and challenges in attaining it. In light of the new standards for ELT, it is hoped that the results from this study will help teacher education programs better understand this phenomenon. To meet this goal, the study centered on the following subsidiary aims:

1. To determine the linguistic competence perceived by EFL preservice teachers.
2. To identify EFL preservice teachers' understanding of C1 English proficiency.
3. To identify EFL preservice teachers' attitudes toward C1 English proficiency.
4. To identify EFL preservice teachers' perceived challenges of C1 English proficiency.

Method

Based on an explanatory sequential design, this mixed-methods study emerged from the need to understand EFL teachers' perspectives and experiences in attaining an advanced proficiency level, specifically C1. The lack of empirical research on this topic and the pressing need to integrate new ELT standards further motivated this study. A group of researchers, comprising three teacher candidates guided by an academic, designed the study and research instruments and collected data over six months. The research site was located in Ñuble, Chile, within the English education program of a private university. This program comprises five years of education, incorporating modules delivered in Spanish (30%) and English (70%). Preservice teachers in this program must take an external English proficiency test upon completing their fifth year of the teacher education program. At the time of the study, participants had not yet taken this test.

Thirteen participants (eight women and five men) were selected through convenience sampling. Their age ranged between 20 and 40 years, and they all were in

their final years of professional education (5th and 4th years). While most participants did not possess language certifications, two reported having C1 proficiency certificates in English and French prior to entering the teaching program. This information was gathered during the quantitative questionnaire administration phase (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was specifically designed to gather insights into participants' perceived linguistic competence and explore potential relationships with other study dimensions: understanding, attitudes, and challenges. To analyze the perceived linguistic competence, the researchers adapted the descriptors of Communicative Language competencies, centering on the linguistic competence of the Council of Europe (2020), to a Likert scale. This adaptation involved simplifying the language and adding response options ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* for each area (see Appendix A). Next, the instrument was validated by three ELT academics and piloted with six preservice teachers who shared characteristics similar to those of the study participants. These steps ensured the instrument's reliability and appropriateness for the study.

Subsequently, data were collected and analyzed both at the individual participant level and by group to identify similarities and differences in the linguistic competence of 4th-year and 5th-year participants. Means and standard deviations were calculated, and the comparison was performed using the t-test for independent samples. All analyses were conducted with Jamovi software version 2.3.21.0 with a significance level of 0.05.

Three weeks after administering the questionnaire, the researchers began the qualitative data collection phase. This phase involved semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) conducted in focus groups with 4th- and 5th-year participants. We decided to interview the participants separately to ensure their comfort. We recorded the interviews and used a question checklist to provide consistent questions and address emergent questions for each group. Subsequently, the data were transcribed with minor style corrections to preserve the participants' original modes of expression. Data were grouped by dimension (understanding, attitudes, challenges) and further analyzed using the software Atlas.ti.

It is important to underscore that our study adhered to the ethical considerations of the research site. Participants were fully informed about the study and voluntarily participated, understanding they could withdraw anytime. To participate, they signed an informed consent form in both phases of data collection.

Results

Linguistic Competence

Table 1 displays the participants' demographic data and their perceived proficiency across five linguistic subdimensions: general linguistic range, vocabulary range, grammatical accuracy, phonological control, and orthographic control. The scores range from 1.0 to 5.0, with values closer to 5.0 indicating a higher perceived proficiency level. Overall, participants in their 5th year, especially those with language certifications (e.g., P1 and P8), report higher perceived proficiency, as evidenced by scores consistently around or above 4.0 in most subdimensions.

Means and standard deviations were calculated per group, as shown in Table 2. For the general linguistic range, the mean score for fourth-year participants was 3.28 ± 0.976 compared to 4.48 ± 0.539 for fifth-year participants, with a *p*-value of 0.009. In the vocabulary range, fourth-year participants scored a mean of 3.10 ± 0.961, while fifth-year participants scored 4.40 ± 0.611, with a *p*-value of 0.007. Grammatical accuracy also showed significant differences, with fourth-year participants scoring a mean of 2.75 ± 1.255 compared to 3.79 ± 0.636 for fifth-year participants ($p = 0.040$). Orthographic control exhibited similar patterns, with fourth-year participants scoring 3.29 ± 0.900 and

Table 1. Perceived Linguistic Competence per Participant

Participant	Gender	Age range	Academic training year	Language certification	Language and proficiency certification	General linguistic range	Vocabulary range	Grammatical accuracy	Phonological control	Orthographic control
P1	Male	20–22	5th year	Yes	English - C1	4.7	5.0	4.0	4.7	4.5
P2	Male	20–22	5th year	No	-	5.0	5.0	4.0	4.6	4.8
P3	Female	38–40	5th year	No		4.7	4.6	4.5	4.4	4.3
P4	Female	23–25	5th year	No		4.7	4.8	4.5	5.0	4.8
P5	Male	23–25	5th year	No		3.3	4.0	3.0	3.6	4.8
P6	Male	23–25	5th year	No	-	4.3	3.4	3.5	4.1	3.3
P7	Male	23–25	5th year	No	-	4.7	4.0	3.0	3.7	5.0
P8	Female	34–36	4th year	Yes	French - C1	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.9	5.0
P9	Female	23–25	4th year	No	-	2.3	2.6	2.0	3.1	3.0
P10	Female	20–22	4th year	No	-	3.3	2.6	2.0	3.7	3.0
P11	Female	23–25	4th year	No	-	2.7	2.6	2.0	3.9	2.5
P12	Female	23–25	4th year	No	-	2.7	2.6	2.0	3.2	2.8
P13	Female	20–22	4th year	No	-	3.7	3.2	3.5	3.7	3.5

Table 2. Perceived Linguistic Competence per Group

	4th year (n = 6)		5th year (n = 7)		t-test	
	Mean	*SD*	**Mean**	*SD*	*t*	*p*
General linguistic range	3.28	0.976	4.48	0.539	-2.80	0.009
Vocabulary range	3.10	0.961	4.40	0.611	-2.96	0.007
Grammatical accuracy	2.75	1.255	3.79	0.636	-1.92	0.040
Phonological control	3.74	0.635	4.29	0.532	-1.69	0.060
Orthographic control	3.29	0.900	4.46	0.585	-2.83	0.008

Note. H_a μ 4th year < μ 5th year

fifth-year participants 4.46 ± 0.585, yielding a *p*-value of 0.008. Although phonological control was higher in fifth-year participants (4.29 ± 0.532) compared to fourth-year participants (3.74 ± 0.635), the difference was not statistically significant (p = 0.060).

Understanding

The results for this dimension correspond to the qualitative phase of data collection. Findings from the focus group discussions reveal that most participants in both groups had difficulty conceptualizing the C1 level. Among the 10 participants, only one demonstrated confidence in describing certain features of this benchmark. The remaining participants provided partial information, primarily related to the implications of C1 English proficiency, with many acknowledging that they had not yet achieved this expected level of proficiency. Furthermore, participants recognized that certifying a C1 level is an external process, yet they expressed uncertainty about the specifics of how and by whom this certification is conducted.

The thematic analysis within each group provided a detailed examination of participants' understanding of C1 English proficiency, identifying three main themes: *perceived difficulty*, *awareness and importance of grammatical competence*, and *expectations and program requirements* (see Table 3). Regarding *perceived difficulty*, both groups perceive the attainment of C1 English proficiency as challenging. A 4th-year

participant explicitly stated not having attained that level of proficiency, while a 5th-year participant referred to the expectations for non-native speakers and the associated complexity in attaining it. Under the *awareness and importance of grammatical competence* theme, 5th-year participants demonstrated a clear understanding of the significance of grammar in achieving proficiency. In contrast, this theme did not emerge among the 4th-year participants, who focused more on the expectations and program requirements, acknowledging the importance of attaining proficiency as a goal in their education program. Similarly, 5th-year participants also referred to language proficiency expectations upon graduation, although the C1 level does not constitute a graduation requirement for either group of participants, being considered solely a standard to aspire to upon graduation.

Overall, the results in the understanding domain align with those from the perceived linguistic competence dimension. Participants who scored higher in the perceived linguistic competence were generally more confident in describing the requirements of C1 English proficiency. Notably, 5th-year participants demonstrated a clearer understanding of the importance of grammar in achieving C1 proficiency, which corresponds with their higher scores in grammatical accuracy. This theme did not emerge among 4th-year participants, reflecting their lower scores and possibly a less developed understanding of this aspect. Both groups recognized

Table 3. Preservice Teachers' Understanding of C1 English Proficiency

Themes	4th-year participants	5th-year participants
Perceived difficulty	"I know that I don't have a C1 level." (Participant 8)	"I think it is the ideal level [C1] to reach for someone who is not a native speaker...I consider that C1 is difficult to reach." (Participant 1)
Awareness and importance of grammatical competence		"My classmates who have the C1 level are the ones who master English the most, especially regarding grammatical structures." (Participant 2) "This level is associated with finishing grammatical structures well, that is, speaking clearly." (Participant 4)
Expectations and program requirements	"In our program [English Language Teaching], we should graduate with a C1 level." (Participant 9) "The C1 level is part of the graduation profile of the program." (Participant 8)	"It is the level [C1] that we should try to attain upon graduation." (Participant 2) "It is the level that is expected for us to have." (Participant 3) "The professors always mention it before starting the semester when they read the graduation profile." (Participant 5)

the importance of attaining C1 English proficiency in their education program. This expectation is mirrored in the higher perceived competence scores among 5th-year participants, who are nearing graduation and thus more aware of program requirements.

Attitudes

Participants generally showed positive attitudes toward the C1 level regardless of their perceived language proficiency. The thematic analysis of participants' answers per group yielded three themes (see Table 4). In the first theme, *value of C1 proficiency*, both 4th-year and 5th-year participants recognize the importance of achieving C1 English proficiency, viewing it as a standard to improve their language and professional skills. While both groups value C1 English proficiency, 4th-year participants seem to place a slightly stronger emphasis on integrating linguistic and teaching skills as a holistic development. On the other hand, 5th-year participants more explicitly view C1 English proficiency as a formal goal and requirement, likely due to their proximity to graduation. In the second theme, *importance of pedagogical skills*, both groups highlighted the significance of pedagogical skills, suggesting that being a good teacher involves more than just language proficiency. Regarding *teaching quality and classroom practices*, participants in both groups addressed the relationship between high standards and teaching quality; they also noted potential gaps between language proficiency and effective teaching.

In relation to quantitative data, it can be observed that regardless of the level of linguistic competence, participants held positive attitudes toward achieving C1

Table 4. Participants' Attitudes Toward C1 English Proficiency

Themes	4th-year participants	5th-year participants
Value of C1 proficiency	"If the preservice teacher has a high proficiency at the university, this will improve the quality of their teaching." (Participant 8) "Having a high standard is connected with attaining higher linguistic competence and teaching skills as well." (Participant 9)	"I see the C1 requirement [in the ELT program] as a good measure." (Participant 2) "It is the level [C1] we are expected to attain." (Participant 3) "I think requiring a C1 level [in the ELT program standards] can serve as a filter or a goal for improving as a teacher…It is the level we should strive to reach upon graduation." (Participant 4)
Importance of pedagogical skills	"I don't know if our teacher was a C1 or B2, but when she taught me in high school, I loved not only the language but the way she taught. It was so smooth, so cool, and it inspired me to study this program [ELT]. So, I think she had very strong teaching skills." (Participant 10)	"When I did my practicum last year, my mentor told me that it was not necessary to have a perfect English level; pedagogical skills…are important as well; for example, the way you are as a teacher, the methodologies teachers use, and the way you make students learn. All this does not depend on a specific English level…The ideal is to do both things well, but being a good teacher is more important." (Participant 6)
Teaching quality and classroom practices	"The higher the standard, the better the quality of the teacher…this may affect teaching, student motivation in the classroom." (Participant 8)	"I know people who have a very advanced level of English, but they don't know how to teach, or in fact, they don't have the vocation to be teachers." (Participant 2)

English proficiency. The 5th-year participants' higher scores in linguistic competence are consistent with their belief that higher standards (C1 proficiency) contribute to better teaching quality. Fourth-year participants with lower scores in linguistic competence might feel less confident about their immediate impact on teaching quality but still recognize the importance of high standards.

Challenges

Notably, in this dimension, participants in both groups were very reflective of the perceived factors hindering their language proficiency (see Table 5). The analysis revealed that both 4th-year and 5th-year participants shared similar challenges in attaining C1 English proficiency, though their experiences and progress vary. *Oral communication and listening skills*, *self-directed learning*, and *the adequacy of preparation and resources* are key areas where they encounter difficulties. In this sense, 4th-year participants critically remarked on several aspects of preparation and resources, specifically the importance of feedback, alignment of reading materials, and incorporation of more practice tests. In contrast, 5th-year participants focused more on their concern to improve language skills, at the same time emphasizing the need to strengthen feedback and practice tests.

Table 5. Participants' Perceived Challenges in Attaining C1 English Proficiency

Themes	4th-year participants	5th-year participants
Oral communication and listening skills	"I think that oral communication is challenging…when you are asked a question and you have to start elaborating sentences in your head and maybe you do not express yourself in the correct grammatical way." (Participant 9) "Additionally, the listening aspect is challenging for me because I either grasp the audio immediately or need some sort of guidance to listen and read along to understand the general idea of the audio." (Participant 9)	"I think perhaps the challenge lies in stepping out of the comfort zone when speaking. We all feel comfortable using certain tenses or our favorite verbs. I believe that it has been the most difficult part for me: incorporating new words into my vocabulary." (Participant 2) "Personally, speaking makes me nervous and the listening component during tests." (Participant 2) "In my case, thinking in English instead of Spanish has been a significant challenge, but I'm improving with practice." (Participant 2)
Self-directed learning	"Personally, I feel I have not been disciplined. During the first and second years of the program, in all activities and subjects related to the English language, I was not disciplined. I learned a lot of things by memorization, but it was not a learning that would endure. Even though professors focus their classes towards the C1 level, I feel I have not made my best effort to reach it." (Participant 9) "Despite having access to materials and resources, the lack of self-discipline in early years affected my progress towards C1 proficiency." (Participant 8) "I think autonomous work is crucial, but in my case, I have struggled to be consistent with my self-study routines." (Participant 11)	"I believe that the constant support from teachers is important, but self-directed learning and practice are equally necessary to achieve C1 proficiency" (Participant 4). "I think the most difficult part for me has been incorporating new words into my vocabulary. My teachers have always pointed this out. So, I see it as a challenge. Whenever I come across words I don't know, I Google them and try to learn them to use them in my conversations. I've been doing this gradually, and in the last integrated exams, I got better grades compared to the beginning. Initially, I used to think in Spanish and then translate into English, but now that doesn't happen as much." (Participant 2)

Themes	4th-year participants	5th-year participants
	"For me, feedback is crucial. I believe it is often not given the necessary weight or time, especially in our small group. It is essential not only to point out errors but also to advise on how to overcome them, how to improve, and what actions to take. I think feedback, particularly in language learning, is very, very important; it's fundamental, actually." (Participant 9)	"Yes, definitely, in my personal experience, it's the reading assessments. For instance, with one teacher, it's about summarizing, while with another, it's delving into the context rather than the text itself, just like with other teachers. I feel that brainstorming ideas or discussions are where we can use all four skills and receive feedback." (Participant 4)
	"We have conversation sessions with native speakers, but sometimes they are not well-organized, and we miss out on valuable practice time." (Participant 10)	"Yes, I think that throughout all the years of my studies, I have felt constant support from the teachers to improve my English. I believe the feedback has always been meaningful when received. I always remember the feedback that has been helpful, and I don't forget it. I learn from my mistakes; effective feedback is very valuable." (Participant 2)
	"The lack of structured feedback sometimes makes it difficult to understand where I need to improve." (Participant 11)	
Preparation and resources	"Resources like software are beneficial, but we often get access to them late, which hinders our learning process." (Participant 11)	
	"Having access to diverse resources and consistent feedback throughout the program is crucial for my progress…more structured sessions would enhance learning." (Participant 8)	
	"The different strategies used by the professors sometimes create a fragmented learning experience, which affects my preparation for C1 proficiency." (Participant 9)	
	"The reading materials and tests provided were not always aligned with the goal of achieving C1 proficiency, making it hard to see progress." (Participant 11)	

The *challenges* dimension reveals interesting findings in relation to the perceived linguistic competence collected in the quantitative stage. In this regard, it is observed that both groups struggle with oral communication and listening skills, reflected in the non-significant difference in phonological control scores, indicating a persistent challenge. Furthermore, the gap in linguistic competence between 4th-year and 5th-year participants highlights the impact of disciplined self-study, with higher scores correlating with improved self-directed learning practices over time. Finally, the significant differences in orthographic control and vocabulary range suggest that structured feedback and timely access to resources are critical for achieving higher proficiency levels, as emphasized by participants in both groups.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study provide insights into the perceived linguistic competence, understanding, attitudes, and challenges of Chilean EFL preservice teachers regarding C1 English proficiency as one of the key aspects in standards for English language teaching.

The starting point of this study was to determine the identified linguistic competence of the participants, establishing a reference point for a more comprehensive understanding of their perceptions of the C1 level. The analysis of each participant indicates that learners with prior experience in proficiency tests report a higher perceived linguistic competence. This finding underscores the importance of exposing preservice teachers to proficiency testing or incorporating student-centered instruction, as reported by Van Loi and Hang (2021) or implementing curricular changes, as suggested by Kostina (2012). This aspect is crucial, particularly when implementing national teaching standards in English language education. This emphasis is further highlighted by extensive research, which consistently shows that English language proficiency in foreign language contexts often falls short of the expected C1 proficiency level (Cárdenas & Chaves, 2013; Kostina,

2012; Naser & Ali, 2023; Ramos-García & Fernández-Viciana, 2019). Hence, in addition to proficiency testing, English education programs should prioritize the quality of practicum experiences, as the present study found that 5th-year participants' perceived linguistic competence was higher than that of their 4th-year counterparts. This difference can be attributed to their academic progression, particularly their practicum experiences, which may enhance their linguistic confidence and perceived competence. These experiences likely enable them to apply their language skills in real teaching contexts, reinforcing their self-perception as capable language users and teachers. Consequently, practicum experiences may play a significant role in boosting perceived linguistic competence among more advanced preservice teachers.

In terms of participants' understanding of C1 English proficiency, the present study reveals a complexity in both groups of participants to fully conceptualize the C1 level. Although participants possessed information about this benchmark, their understanding was fragmented even in participants with higher perceived linguistic competence. This finding aligns with previous research (Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021), which suggests that EFL preservice teachers should be well-versed in the CEFR and its framework for language proficiency. In this context, Figueras (2012) emphasizes the need for a systematic approach to CEFR descriptors, as both educators and students often refer to the proficiency levels (A1 to C2) without fully understanding what learners can accomplish at each level. A lack of this knowledge may explain the discrepancies noted by Cárdenas and Chaves (2013), where self-perceptions of linguistic competence differed from actual proficiency test results. Future research could further explore this issue. In the present study, however, no significant discrepancies were found between participants' perceived linguistic competence and their perceptions of C1 English proficiency. Participants generally acknowledged that C1 level is the expected goal upon graduation, though they

recognized it as challenging to achieve, particularly due to the mastery of grammatical competence—an area emphasized mainly by 5th-year participants.

Regarding participants' attitudes toward C1 English proficiency, it was found that they hold favorable views regardless of their perceived linguistic competence. This finding aligns with previous research, which highlights participants' favorable perceptions of C1 English proficiency, recognizing it as a valuable benchmark for foreign language education programs (Kaur & Jian, 2022; Nii & Yunus, 2022; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021; Shukor & Sulaiman, 2022). In addition to recognizing C1 English proficiency as a high-quality standard, as noted by Ramírez-Draughn and Cárdenas-Tamburini (2023), participants in this study believed that achieving this level of language proficiency may be directly linked to enhanced pedagogical skills and classroom practices, an area that could be further explored in subsequent studies.

Regarding the challenges of attaining advanced language proficiency, both 4th-participants and 5th-year participants have similar experiences identified in three main areas, *encompassing language skills*, *self-directed learning*, and *preparation and resources*. Although this study did not observe major anxiety and stress problems as addressed by Ramírez-Draughn and Cárdenas-Tamburini (2023), we did identify perceived nervousness associated with the language proficiency exam format. Hence, it is highly recommended that EFL education programs expose teacher candidates to more instances of standardized testing and the overarching implications of such assessments (Figueras, 2012; Van Loi & Hang, 2021), enabling preservice teachers to assess and monitor their own language proficiency (Cárdenas & Chaves, 2013). Participants in this study believe that feedback and language learning materials play a fundamental role in enhancing their linguistic competence. Future research could explore the relationship between achieving C1 proficiency and the amount and quality of feedback provided to preservice teachers.

It is worth noting that this study's small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, suggesting a need for future research with a larger sample to validate and expand upon these results. The significance of these findings lies in their potential to inform EFL education programs, emphasizing the importance of addressing CEFR and its overarching framework, integrating more standardized testing, and providing comprehensive feedback mechanisms to better prepare preservice teachers for the demands of achieving C1 English proficiency.

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Appendix A: Linguistic Competence Questionnaire

Description

We are conducting the study *Exploring EFL pre-service teachers' understanding, attitudes, and challenges attaining the C1 level of English proficiency*. To meet this end, we invite you to participate in our study by completing the following questionnaire. It is important to mention that your participation will be voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Your answers will be solely used for this study and by the researchers. If you decide to withdraw from the study or have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the corresponding researcher responsible for the study and data collection.

1. I have been informed about the purpose of the study.
   a. Yes
   b. No
2. I consent to participate in the study, understanding that my information will be managed anonymously.
   a. Yes
   b. No
3. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary, and I can withdraw at any time.
   a. Yes
   b. No

Participant's information

1. Name:
2. Gender:
   a. Female
   b. Male
   c. I prefer not to say it.
3. Age:
4. Current education year:
   a. 4th year
   b. 5th year
5. I have an English language certificate provided by an international examination.
   a. Yes
   b. No
6. If you have a certificate, specify the language of the exam and the level you attained.

Questionnaire

This questionnaire addresses five subdimensions of linguistic competence adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference by the Council of Europe (2020). Please read the statement of each subdimension and select the option (*strongly agree* = 1, *agree* = 2, *neither agree nor disagree* = 3, *disagree* = 4, *totally disagree* = 5) that best represents your answer.

Subdimension I: General Linguistic Range

1. I can use complex grammatical structures appropriately.

   1   2   3   4   5

2. I can use varied complex grammatical structures in both professional and daily basis contexts.

   1   2   3   4   5

3. I can choose the right words to express myself clearly.

   1   2   3   4   5

4. I can express myself without linguistic barriers.

   1   2   3   4   5

Subdimension II: Vocabulary Range

1. I can confidently use a wide range of words.

   1   2   3   4   5

2. I can choose different words and their synonyms in a variety of contexts.

   1   2   3   4   5

3. I can use a range of idiomatic expressions, collocations, and words [related to English language teaching].

   1   2   3   4   5

4. I can use advanced [English] words and idioms appropriately.

   1   2   3   4   5

5. I do not make significant vocabulary errors.

   1   2   3   4   5

Dimension III: Grammatical Accuracy

1. I can consistently maintain a high level of grammatical precision.

   1   2   3   4   5

2. I normally make no or minor grammatical errors.

   1   2   3   4   5

Dimension IV: Phonological Control

1. I can use most of the phonological sounds [in the English language] and be understood.

   1   2   3   4   5

2. I might have a bit of an accent [from Spanish], but it does not interfere with my comprehensibility.

   1   2   3   4   5

3. I can correctly pronounce most of the phonological sounds of the [English] language.

   1   2   3   4   5

4. I can typically correct myself if I mispronounce a sound in English.

   1   2   3   4   5

5. I can speak English fluently.

   1   2   3   4   5

6. I can speak English in a way that is easily understood.

   1   2   3   4   5

7. I can stress English words appropriately.

   1   2   3   4   5

8. I can speak English, controlling rhythm and/or intonation.

   1   2   3   4   5

9. I can vary my intonation while speaking.

   1   2   3   4   5

Subdimension V: Orthographic Control

1. I can maintain a consistent organization of my ideas when I write.

   1   2   3   4   5

2. I can paraphrase information appropriately.

   1   2   3   4   5

3. I can use punctuation rules appropriately.

   1   2   3   4   5

4. I normally make no or minor errors in my spelling.

   1   2   3   4   5

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Understanding

1. What do you know about the C1 level?
2. How is a C1 level demonstrated?
   2.1. Who determines this level?
   2.2. Do you, the university, your professors, or external agents determine this level?
3. Does your program require a specific level of English proficiency?
4. What do Chilean ELT standards state about C1 proficiency in English?

Attitudes

1. Would you say that you currently have a C1 level of English proficiency?
2. What impact might C1 proficiency in English have in the classroom?
3. What are your thoughts on the support provided by your education program to develop your linguistic competence?
   3.1. What type of preparation have you received?
   3.2. Do you think this preparation has been beneficial? How?

Challenges

1. Do you feel prepared to reach or maintain the C1 level?
2. What challenges have you faced in reaching this level?
3. What aspects of your program should be improved to enhance the development of your linguistic competence?