

Teacher Capabilities Valued by English Language Teacher Educators: Insights From Ecuador

Capacidades docentes valoradas por formadores de docentes de inglés:
perspectivas desde Ecuador

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Efforts to ensure quality English language teacher education often impose external criteria that emphasize predetermined language proficiency and pedagogical skills. Inspired by the capabilities approach, this paper describes teacher capabilities valued by English language teacher educators in Ecuador. I analyze focus group interviews with 37 teacher educators from 18 universities about their language use practices and instructional goals, providing insights into how educators may think about content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, teacher identity and cognition, and their importance relative to or together with English proficiency. Drawing on insights from Ecuador, I encourage programs in varied global contexts to critically explore how and by whom the desirable outcomes of English language teacher education are defined and valued in everyday practice.

Keywords: English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, teacher capabilities, teacher identity, teacher knowledge base

Los esfuerzos por garantizar una formación de calidad para docentes de inglés suelen imponer criterios externos que enfatizan competencias predeterminadas en dominio del idioma y en pedagogía. Inspirado en el enfoque de capacidades, este artículo describe las capacidades docentes valoradas por formadores de docentes de inglés en Ecuador. Analizo entrevistas de grupos focales con 37 instructores de 18 universidades sobre sus prácticas de uso del idioma y sus metas instruccionales, para revelar varias maneras de concebir el conocimiento de contenido, el conocimiento pedagógico, la identidad y la cognición docente, así como la importancia de esas áreas en relación con el dominio del inglés. Partiendo de las experiencias de Ecuador, aliento a explorar cómo y quiénes definen y valoran el dominio del inglés y la buena enseñanza.

Palabras clave: base de conocimiento docente, capacidades docentes, conocimiento pedagógico, dominio del inglés, identidad docente

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Introduction

How English language teacher education (ELTE) should prepare English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) teachers is a matter of much discussion in ELTE literature (Barahona, 2016; Richards, 2017). Barahona and Darwin (2021) observe that concerns about student learning outcomes across Latin America regularly raise “broad questions as to the quality of teacher preparation” (p. 2281) in ELTE programs. National efforts to ensure the quality of teacher education have too often disparaged teachers and imposed external criteria, though ELTE should be rooted in the knowledge and experiences of local educators (Calle et al., 2019; González Moncada, 2021).

The teaching knowledge, skills, attitudes, and states of being that are important for student learning and for teachers’ own well-being can be thought of as teacher capabilities (Buckler, 2016; Tao, 2016). I use the term “capabilities,” as defined by the capabilities approach (DeJaeghere & Walker, 2021), to refer to what teachers-in-formation have the opportunity to be and do. With this approach, capabilities do not refer to decontextualized skills, but rather to opportunities that arise from the interplay of educational resources, sociocultural, and material factors that vary by context and learner, and individuals’ agency.

Inspired by the capabilities approach, which holds that stakeholders should engage in dialogue about what capabilities constitute desirable ends in a given educational context (DeJaeghere & Walker, 2021), this paper describes the capabilities valued by English language teacher educators in Ecuador. It is based on focus group data from a larger mixed-methods study exploring links between teacher educators’ reported language use practices and the teacher capabilities they most valued. This research offers insights into what teacher educators valued (the capabilities they mentioned and ascribed importance to) when reflecting on a specific decision in practice (how they use language).

In studying valued teacher capabilities in this way, I sought to make sense of what I, in my own work as a (North American) teacher educator in Ecuador, perceived as tension between prioritizing English proficiency and prioritizing other capabilities. I also saw that tension in ELTE literature from the region (e.g., Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019). While designing, implementing, and writing about this study, I grappled with whether it is meaningful to categorize and ascribe relative importance to teacher capabilities. As argued by Castañeda-Londoño (2019), attempts to categorically define teacher knowledge are rooted in colonial/modern scientific discourses that obscure other ways of conceptualizing valuable teacher knowledges. I recognize the influence of those discourses in this study. Nonetheless, I believe the findings are worth sharing, not to define categories and priorities, but to engage in an ongoing dialogue with educators in Ecuador, South America, and beyond about what we believe matters in ELTE and how the most-discussed types of teacher knowledge come together in practice.

Literature Review

Teacher Capabilities in Ecuadorian ELTE

Ecuadorian English language teaching (ELT) literature consistently identifies English proficiency and pedagogical skill as essential teacher capabilities that ELTE should better address. Policymakers and the media have long critiqued local teachers and teacher preparation in those regards (González Moncada & Llurda, 2016).

Since 2012, the Ministry of Education has required English teachers to obtain an international certification of a minimum B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2020) to qualify for tenure and promotion, and ELTE programs have set related requirements (Acosta et al., 2023). Most teachers performed poorly on a

standardized proficiency assessment conducted at that time. Serrano et al. (2015) describe a subsequent collaboration between the U.S. Embassy and Ecuadorian universities to standardize ELTE based on their diagnosis that “the majority of English teachers in Ecuador have neither the language proficiency nor the methodologies to teach English effectively” (p. 109). A more recent Embassy-funded project by a network of Ecuadorian researchers based in ELTE programs reached a similar conclusion after surveying 3,813 public school EFL teachers (Acosta et al., 2023). Just 35% of respondents self-reported having the mandated minimum B2 level of English proficiency, and the reported use of specific pedagogical methods that are often considered best practices was not as consistent as hoped. These publications evidence local scholar-practitioners’ ongoing efforts to develop Ecuadorian ELTE while also elevating international standards and U.S. or British cooperation, a problematic pattern in the region that positions local educators as inadequate (González Moncada & Llurda, 2016; Granados-Beltrán, 2022).

Regarding pedagogy, some local publications evoke a “theory and practice divide” (Barahona & Darwin, 2021, p. 2281) observed in the region. A rare study documenting classroom practices at scale, including observation of 92 public-school EFL teachers in Cuenca, pointed to “the teacher-centered approach, the lack of interaction with and among students in the target language, and the confusion of teachers when applying different communicative strategies” (Calle et al., 2012, p. 1). Burgin and Daniel (2017) observed that nine public high school EFL teachers in the Highlands region used teacher-centered, transmission-based rather than participatory methods, though these teachers were skilled at managing activities and engaging learners. Similarly, Ortega-Auquilla and Minchala-Buri (2019) observed eight EFL teachers in rural schools during an academic school year and found that the grammar-translation method was

predominant. These authors observe that “meaningful communicative interaction[s] in English...are almost non-existent” (p. 66), contrary to the ostensible requirement of communicative and content-based methods in the national curriculum.

Teachers themselves voice a variety of concerns. Sevy-Biloon et al. (2020) held roundtable discussions with 40 experienced public school EFL teachers from central Ecuador who had demonstrated proficiency at the B2 level in English. They discussed findings from classroom observations conducted with 15 of these teachers. Salient topics in these discussions were the difficulty of planning under the mandated national curriculum, large class sizes, insufficient preparation to support students with special needs, and the low prioritization of English within the school system. On Acosta et al.’s (2023) large-scale survey of public-school EFL teachers, over 75% agreed that class size affects the quality of instruction, and about half agreed that the required B2 English level for teachers ensures effective teaching. These studies evoke a disconnect between top-down recommendations for curriculum and testing and teachers’ actual experiences in the classroom. In a theoretical critique of Ecuador’s education reforms from 2009 to 2015, Fajardo-Dack (2016) emphasizes the disconnect and argues that the standardized approach has disempowered teachers.

Concern for balancing English language learning with other objectives, especially when student-teachers’ proficiency levels are low, is conspicuous in the Ecuadorian context (Abad et al., 2019; Argudo et al., 2018). Cajas et al. (2023) quote a program coordinator who participated in their study of ELTE curricula:

According to the Ministry of Education, when students finish their secondary school, they need to have a B2 level of English. We all know that it is not the case. Some students finish with an A2 level and, in some cases, they even have an A1 level. These are the type of students who come to the university pursuing a career in English language teaching. Regrettably, we cannot deviate much

from the standardized curriculum requirements and increase the number of English proficiency teaching hours to improve language proficiency among our students. (p. 26)

Argudo et al. (2018) note that at the University of Cuenca (Ecuador), most students enter the undergraduate ELTE program with a basic level and, despite several semesters of language instruction, “students have issues when learning content courses taught in English” (p. 82). The authors observe that “according to the students’ perceptions, it seems they are acquiring the necessary subject knowledge; nevertheless, language is being relegated to second position, and it is not being developed with content, simultaneously” (p. 82). According to the authors:

The main objective of the Pre-Service EFL Teaching program is for students to achieve an adequate oral and written use of the target language at a B2 level, with relevant knowledge about English linguistics, as well as its literary and cultural manifestations. (p. 72)

Much of this literature emphasizes language and pedagogy and presents teacher knowledge as a specific set of skills, with little attention to how those are mediated by identity and beliefs. Yet, growing research on teachers’ and students’ experiences shows the influence of a sociocultural understanding of education. ELTE curricula include learning through experience and reflection, as well as teacher research. One sign that educators may value teacher identity and cognition in ways that are not yet broadly documented is a literature review—conducted by Heredia-Arboleda et al. (2021) as part of a preliminary study for the development of a new master’s program in ELTE—on “personal traits that [English language teachers] should empower themselves with” (p. 1526). Furthermore, Calle et al. (2019) note a need for more bottom-up teacher professional development based on assessment of teacher needs and contexts rather than predetermined techni-

cal skills, drawing in part on literature from Colombia on critical ELTE.

Regional Perspectives on Teacher Capabilities in ELTE

The literature from the region includes both mainstream and critical perspectives on ELTE. Policy-oriented literature emphasizes linguistic and pedagogical shortcomings of EFL teachers and teacher education programs. For instance, Cronquist and Fiszbein (2017) assert that in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay, “the quality of [teacher] training is varied and overall poor” (p. 6). In a subsequent report, Stanton and Fiszbein (2019) call for language-proficiency certification requirements for EFL teachers and more rigorous, standardized criteria for preservice ELTE. Those recommendations reflect the view that teachers need a defined set of skills—with language proficiency foremost—and have been incorporated into regional policy. González Moncada (2021) critically describes how approaches to EFL teacher education in Colombia espoused the view that “teachers required intervention to ‘fix’ their limitations, mainly in English proficiency and ELT methodologies” (p. 141).

While there are common trends in the region, ELTE programs vary in how they approach teacher capabilities. Based on their review of the literature from three countries, Banegas and Martínez Argudo (2019) observe that Colombian university-based ELTE programs seem to place greater emphasis on pedagogy and decision-making, while Chilean and Ecuadorian programs tend to emphasize English proficiency. Buendía and Macías (2019) describe Colombian ELTE as “transitioning” towards critical models. In contrast, Martin (2016) found that Chilean ELTE took an “applied science” approach and did little to connect curricula to local contexts. Barahona and Darwin (2021) consider that ELTE programs in the Southern Cone aim to be contextually responsive, in part due to “the theory and

practice divide” (p. 2281) impeding teachers’ implementation of what they learn. Yet, those authors note that ELTE priorities are largely defined elsewhere, citing Díaz Maggioli’s (2017) observation about ELTE policies shared by Chile, Ecuador, and Uruguay.

As in Ecuador, tensions appear between dedicating time to English proficiency and other teacher capabilities. Barahona (2016) describes this as the challenge “for pre-service teachers to appropriate pedagogical knowledge and language proficiency concurrently” (p. 39). Banegas and Martínez Argudo (2019) describe the difficulty of balancing future teachers’ “English language proficiency and the development of higher-thinking skills to take control of their own teaching development” (p. 198). Drawing parallels with Ecuador and Chile, they describe an Argentine ELTE program that admits students at varying levels of English proficiency due to teacher shortages and concerns about equity. As in Ecuador, this poses challenges for cohort-based curricula taught in English (Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019). While Cajas et al. (2023) argue that curricular standardization in Ecuador has been detrimental by *constraining* the number of hours dedicated to English language development, Barahona and Darwin (2021) and Martin (2016) suggest an *overemphasis* on language proficiency in Chile.

Critical approaches to ELTE in South America offer a different perspective on what teachers should have the opportunity to do and be. They view teachers as becoming creators of knowledge about teaching, language, and society rooted in particular contexts (Buendía & Macías, 2019). This approach is most visible in the ELT literature from Colombia, where scholars such as Castañeda-Peña and Méndez-Rivera (2022), González Moncada (2021), and Granados-Beltrán (2022), among others, have produced research on critical and decolonial ELTE. As participants in a network of critical language teacher educators in Brazil, Borelli et al. (2020) describe additional examples of decolonial ELTE practices. These scholars and programs emphasize teacher

identities, beliefs, and critical thinking, along with social justice aims. Dávila (2018) highlights the impact of policies in Colombia that make achieving international certifications of English proficiency central to EFL teacher identity. He considers that the emphasis on standard CEFR levels leads teacher educators to “give more relevance to formal aspects of the language rather than the social, political, cultural and pedagogical aspects of the process of education” (p. 229).

In summary, mainstream ELTE in Ecuador and the region gives considerable attention to whether and how teachers acquire determined skills, often characterized as language and pedagogy. The types of teacher learning that are of most concern vary, and critical ELTE offers a different perspective. Yet, there are common tensions regarding the role of language among teacher capabilities.

Types of English Language Teacher Capabilities

Before continuing, it is relevant to specify some key aspects of the teacher capabilities discussed thus far—more commonly presented as elements of a “knowledge base” (Castañeda-Londoño, 2019), “core practices” (Barahona & Darwin, 2021), or “competencies” (Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019). I overview four types of capabilities: English proficiency, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and teacher identity and cognition. These categories are interconnected and have been conceptualized and problematized by ELT scholars in a variety of ways (for a critical historical view, see Castañeda-Londoño, 2019). I identify these “types” as a manner of briefly synthesizing complex concepts relevant to this paper.

English Proficiency

Mainstream perspectives on ELTE emphasize English proficiency as a requisite for teacher effectiveness, though the relationship between proficiency and effectiveness is difficult to specify (Faez et al., 2021; Freeman,

2020). Accepted theories of language development indicate that significant amounts of input and output in the target language are necessary; thus, teachers need to be able to use English and support their learners in using it (Barahona & Darwin, 2021; Richards, 2017). Some suggest teachers need to reach a “proficiency threshold,” beyond which non-linguistic factors are more important (Richards, 2010; Tsang, 2017). In Ecuador, Abad et al. (2021) studied the relationship between proficiency and observed pedagogical practice of 17 private-school EFL teachers. They found no significant relationship between proficiency level and classroom management or activities, while more English-proficient teachers did provide clearer explanations and less-routine exchanges. There was no significant correlation between teachers’ proficiency and students’ ratings of instructional efficacy (Argudo Serrano et al., 2021).

English proficiency may be valuable as a contributor to teachers’ own belief in their professional abilities (Faez et al., 2021). In a quantitative meta-analysis of 20 studies across various national contexts, Faez et al. (2021) found a moderate relationship between proficiency and teacher efficacy. Being proficient in English is certainly important to many EFL teachers (Argudo Serrano et al., 2021; Richards, 2017). A core practice identified by ELTE instructors in Barahona and Darwin’s (2021) study was “building discourse communities” (p. 2294) of classroom interaction in English, suggesting how using English may intersect with pedagogy and identity.

There is no clear consensus on the level and nature of proficiency that is desirable. Teacher proficiency is often measured with mainstream tests (e.g., the TOEFL or Cambridge B2 First) and general scales of language competence (e.g., the CEFR), suggesting that EFL teachers need broad, general English proficiency (Faez et al., 2021; Freeman, 2020). An alternative position is that ELT requires a kind of “English for specific purposes,” limited to how teachers use language while teaching (Freeman, 2020; Richards, 2017).

Content Knowledge

Language is an incontrovertible part of teachers’ ELT knowledge and includes knowledge *about* language, in addition to proficiency. ELT content knowledge also involves *more* than language, though scholars debate what it encompasses (see Richards, 2010, for an introduction to that debate). ELTE course topics suggest what content the field considers relevant but vary by program, ranging from applied linguistics and sociolinguistics to literature and culture to research methods (Richards, 2017). Argudo et al. (2018) characterize content knowledge in an Ecuadorian program by listing courses that include English literature, history of English, second language acquisition, language learning theories and methods, and assessment. Undergraduate programs also require courses that impart general education knowledge (Cajas et al., 2023), though this is not specifically part of ELT content knowledge.

Following Shulman’s (1987) seminal work, Richards (2010) notes that ELT content knowledge has both theoretical and applied components that may be distinguished as “disciplinary knowledge” and “pedagogical content knowledge.” In the ELTE literature introduced previously, content knowledge is sometimes discussed in connection with teaching practices and teacher identity development. For instance, Barahona and Darwin (2021) describe the practice of “focusing on cultural products, practices, and perspectives” (p. 2291). Buendía and Macías (2019) describe research as an area of teacher learning for becoming “knowers” and changemakers. What constitutes essential content knowledge depends somewhat on the model of pedagogical knowledge employed.

Pedagogical Knowledge

Pedagogical knowledge involves the ability to identify and apply teaching strategies, methods, and approaches that are appropriate to the learners and the context (Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019). This

includes planning and executing learning activities, managing the learning environment, communicating with students, assessing learning, and responding to problems (Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019; Richards, 2010).

There are several approaches to pedagogical knowledge, which Barahona (2016) characterizes as “craft,” “applied science,” and “reflective” models. The craft model sees expert teachers’ practice as the source of pedagogical knowledge, while the applied-science model looks to research-based theories of learning and language acquisition. Both view teacher education as the imparting of a set of techniques. In contrast, the reflective model considers good pedagogy to be situational and to involve unforeseeable possibilities. Teachers-in-formation are themselves the source of pedagogical knowledge, so teacher education should develop capabilities to experience and reflect on teaching (see Barahona, 2016, for further discussion of these models in South America).

Critical ELTE offers yet another approach, based on critical pedagogy (see Cruz Arcila, 2018). Thus, pedagogy should not only be responsive to context but also involve identifying and acting on issues of power and justice. Critical approaches go beyond contextualizing traditionally recognized teaching skills to make them more effective; they question “effectiveness” as the only measure of value and conceptualize a broader set of “knowledges” (Castañeda-Londoño, 2019). Both reflective and critical models emphasize teacher identity and cognition, rather than pedagogical knowledge as an object.

Teacher Identity and Cognition

Attention to teacher identity arises from a broader “sociocultural turn” in ELTE (Johnson, 2016), where teaching and learning to teach are:

No longer viewed as a matter of simply translating theories of linguistics and/or second language acquisition (SLA) into effective instructional practices but as a dialogic

process of co-constructing knowledge that is situated in and emerges out of participation in particular socio-cultural practices and contexts. (p. 122)

Barkhuizen (2017) conceptualizes language teacher identities as “cognitive, social, emotional, ideological, and historical” (p. 4). He further clarifies that these identities are “dynamic, multiple, and hybrid” (p. 4). Teacher identities are constructed in relationship to the self, others, and material and immaterial objects, and deeply impact how teachers engage with ELTE and their work (Johnson, 2016). From the sociocultural perspective, “the extent to which teacher education leads to positive changes is believed to be largely determined by the identities teachers bring to courses and how they are reconstructed” (Abednia, 2012, p. 707).

The sociocultural perspective is associated with both the “reflective” and “critical” models mentioned above. Content and pedagogical knowledge remain relevant, but the focus of ELTE shifts from developing knowledge and skills to developing behaviors and beliefs (Singh & Richards, 2006). ELTE programs may aim to “socialise teachers into particular ways of conceptualising themselves as teachers, carrying out their teaching practices and supporting student learning” (Johnson, 2016, p. 127). This socialization occurs through learning the professional discourse and canon ideas of the field, which “enact” teacher identity and group membership (Singh & Richards, 2006, p. 158).

Thinking critically about ELT and co-constructing teaching knowledge are important teacher capabilities in this area, particularly for EFL teachers who have been positioned as “non-native.” Those teachers have been marginalized by the dominant ways knowledge has been constructed in the field and “have suffered from a lack of self-confidence and a feeling of illegitimacy” (Llurda, 2016, p. 58). To address that, as well as the limits of uncritical reflection, Kumaravadivelu (2003) emphasizes teachers being “transformative intellectuals” who use their situated expertise to trans-

form society. Examples can be seen in decolonial ELTE in the region (Borelli et al., 2020; Castañeda-Peña & Méndez-Rivera, 2022). I refer to teacher identity *and cognition* to highlight teacher knowledge construction, though knowledge is not only cognitive, nor is it distinct from identities. Readers are encouraged to consult Barkhuizen (2017) and Kumaravadivelu (2003) for more nuanced discussions of these concepts.

Method

I sought for this study to foster dialogue about the valued capabilities that inform teacher educators' everyday practices, specifically their approaches to language use. It employed a convergent mixed-methods design grounded in a pragmatist paradigm, which considers the interplay of constructivist and postpositivist research perspectives to be valuable for practical applications (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Thus, I used complementary quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses to examine links between teacher educators' language use practices and valued teacher capabilities in the case of university-based ELTE in Ecuador (see De Angelis, 2024b, on the overall design). This paper focuses on part of the qualitative component.

Participants and Data

I collected data in 2023 after an ethics review and with participants' informed consent. Focus group participants were a subset of 115 respondents to a survey that drew from 22 of the 24 universities offering ELTE in Ecuador and achieved a 34% response rate (see De Angelis, 2025a, for the survey design and results). All survey respondents who indicated willingness to participate in focus groups were invited. The 37 teacher educators from 18 universities who participated (see Table 1) had a similar breakdown of demographic and teaching circumstance characteristics as the quantitative sample, which is likely representative of ELTE educators in Ecuador.

I conducted nine focus group interviews virtually via Zoom, primarily in Spanish, following a semi-structured guide. Interviews grouped together participants based on the type of language use practices they reported on the survey: English only or primarily English ($n = 16$; Groups 1, 2, 6, 8) and multilingual or primarily Spanish ($n = 16$; Groups 4, 5, 7, 9). The five non-Ecuadorian participants were invited to a separate group ($n = 5$; Group 3). I began with questions about language use practices and then inquired about goals, specifically:

- Does your use of language help you achieve your goals as a teacher educator? If it does help, how?
- Does your use of language impede you from achieving those goals in any way? If it does impede, how?
- What goals are most important to you in teaching English teachers?

Final questions addressed beliefs about language and the purposes of teacher education. I recorded and transcribed the interviews in the original language.

Analysis

I coded the data in NVivo using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches (Saldaña, 2021). I initially coded comments pertaining to teacher educator goals inductively using in vivo codes, then consolidated codes into themes. Themes related to broader visions of ELTE purposes, such as “teacher accountability” and “serving society,” are discussed elsewhere (see De Angelis, 2025b). Here, I focus on the themes related to what is sometimes described as a teacher's knowledge base, which I conceptualize as specific teacher capabilities. My analysis of those themes was guided by the questions:

- What specific teacher capabilities do teacher educators refer to when discussing their language use practices and goals?
- What types of teacher capabilities are prominent?
- How do teacher educators characterize the importance of English proficiency relative to other capabilities?

Table 1. Participant Demographic and Teaching Circumstance Characteristics (*n* = 37)

Variable	Number	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	22	59%
Male	15	41%
<i>Race or ethnicity</i>		
Mestizo	27	73%
Montubio	5	13%
White	3	8%
Afro-Ecuadorian or Black	1	3%
Other	1	3%
<i>Origin</i>		
Ecuador	32	86%
North America	3	8%
Europe	2	5%
<i>Type of university employer</i>		
Public	32	86%
Private	5	14%
<i>Level of program taught</i>		
Undergraduate only	25	68%
Both undergraduate and graduate	10	27%
Graduate only	2	5%
<i>Type of employment at the university</i>		
Tenure	19	51%
Contract	18	49%
<i>Courses taught (some teach multiple)</i>		
Pedagogical methods	19	51%
Research methods	18	49%
Teaching practicum	15	40%
Linguistics	15	40%
Various other courses	15	40%

I deductively grouped themes by “types” I had identified in the literature (see Appendix A). Because my analysis focused on areas of emphasis, I associated each theme with just one type. However, I considered that individual teacher educators could express multiple themes and value multiple types of capabilities. I re-read each teacher educators’ focus group comments and identified which types of teacher capabilities they mentioned and which type(s) they attributed most importance to when asked about their most important

goals (see Appendix B). In doing so, I noted where participants explicitly commented on the relative importance of various teacher capabilities.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, I checked for any discrepancies between the survey results and my coding of the focus group data at both group and individual levels and sought clarification from two participants. I also invited feedback from all focus group participants on a draft of the study’s qualitative component. Twenty-six participants

acknowledged they had received the draft and nine sent comments. The findings and interpretations presented should, nonetheless, be viewed as arising from my own approach as a researcher. That approach was shaped by my positionality as a North American, White, English-as-a-first-language, multilingual educator working in Ecuadorian ELTE at the time of this study and particularly interested in multilingual approaches.

Findings

The findings relate to the four types of teacher capabilities, which I first present separately, and to how participants characterized their importance relative to English proficiency.

English Proficiency

Given the context of discussing language use, it is unsurprising that developing and demonstrating English proficiency was the most prominent theme related to specific teacher capabilities, and that 20 participants described it among their most important goals. Of interest is how participants expressed that theme, as EFL teachers' English language capability can be understood in various ways. Fourteen teacher educators referred generally to "proficiency" or "knowing English," perhaps implying a commonly understood expected level. Yet, more specific descriptions varied. Sometimes, teacher educators referred to teachers' desired English proficiency as having a certification or meeting standards for a specific CEFR level; others spoke in terms of communication, as in having "an absolute capacity to communicate, to be able to adequately educate their future students" (Edison, Group 2). Participants also referred to the act of using English as a valued capability, related to being an example of language and behavior in classrooms. For instance, Laura (Group 1) stated: "We have to create habits of using English all the time." Such comments focused on developing English proficiency while implying its relevance to pedagogy.

Pedagogical Knowledge

While no single aspect of pedagogical knowledge stood out, the themes in this category, taken together, were nearly as prominent as English proficiency in participants' remarks. References to teacher pedagogical knowledge revolved around three themes: knowing how to teach, knowing how to design instruction, and knowing how to enact instruction. The first of these themes was expressed in general comments, such as noting the importance "that [our students] know how to teach" (Rosa, Group 8). The latter themes involved more specific remarks, such as references to lesson planning, classroom management, and the ability to engage and support students. Some teacher educators saw being able to adapt to varied local realities as a key pedagogical capability. For example, Olga (Group 9) stated that given varied access to technological resources, good pedagogy involved being prepared to teach "in places where we have everything and sometimes in places where we have absolutely nothing and we have to be creative." Teacher capabilities related to pedagogical knowledge were among the most important goals for 15 of 37 participants.

Teacher Identity and Cognition

Taken together, themes in the category of teacher identity and cognition were similarly prominent as themes in the category of pedagogical knowledge. The three themes focus on teacher dispositions: developing dispositions towards the profession, the self, and learners. Developing teachers' dispositions towards the profession was the theme evoked by the highest number of participants, across categories, after English proficiency. Those dispositions included vocation, commitment to continuous learning and reflection, and an interest in professional collaboration. Seven participants used the word "love" (Félix, Gloria, Mercedes, Nancy, Teresa [Group 4]; Jaime [Group 5]; Olga [Group 9]), as in Mercedes's comment that "they should love their

profession and love what they do so they do it in the best way.”

Regarding dispositions toward the self, some teacher educators highly valued helping ELTE students construct a professional identity. Ricardo (Group 9) described that process as follows:

At the beginning the mindset is hard for them, to get out of [the mindset] that they are students...you see that change when eventually they end up taking ownership in the classroom and looking to become teachers, trying to teach...already teaching, already changing their mindset to “I’m a teacher and that what I’m preparing for is to live in this space and to be a person and to help with being a person and not just to transmit content.”

Relatedly, participants spoke about ethical and empathetic dispositions towards learners. Six teacher educators referred specifically to the importance of seeing EFL students as “human beings” (Fernando [Group 2]; Mercedes, Teresa [Group 4]; Walter, [Group 8]; Milton, Ricardo, [Group 9]). Fourteen of the 37 participants most valued capabilities related to teacher identity and cognition.

Content Knowledge

While participants considered content knowledge goals beyond English proficiency, these elements were less prominent than pedagogical knowledge or identity and cognition in teacher educators’ discussions of their practices and priorities. Setting aside English proficiency in its own category, content knowledge appeared in comments across five themes: linguistics, ELT terminology, culture, research methods, and language acquisition, with linguistics being the most referenced. Just nine teacher educators described aspects of content knowledge other than English proficiency as among the most important goals of ELTE.

Valuing Teacher Capabilities

I identified four ways in which teacher educators characterized the importance of English proficiency relative to other teacher capabilities: *primary*, *integral*, *competing*, or *secondary*. Those who characterized *English as primary* emphasized language proficiency as foremost among their goals for teachers. For instance, Blanca (Group 8) stated that her priorities were “first, that they use the language they are going to teach and, second, that they have classroom management.” Franklin (Group 2) initially said what mattered most was “being good professionals,” but then immediately pivoted: “though, the most important quality of any English teacher will always be that they know English and that they are fluent in it.” Participants who characterized *English as integral* described English proficiency as inseparable from non-linguistic teacher capabilities, sometimes suggesting the former gives rise to the others. Thus, Sonia (Group 8) stressed that “their pedagogical capabilities and their linguistic capabilities . . . go hand in hand, they’re exactly the same.”

In contrast, those who saw *English as competing* with other capabilities they valued expressed feeling torn between language and content goals. Teacher educators referred to tensions between engaging in deep reflection and fostering a love of the profession, on the one hand, and prioritizing English practice, on the other. Mariana (Group 7) described this as a “battle between two worlds.” Teacher educators who characterized *English as secondary* reported similar tensions but expressed clear priorities that placed English after other teacher capabilities. Diana (Group 6) thus explained her focus on developing dispositions towards the profession and self, saying “we’re teaching *teachers*, we’re not teaching *language*” (original emphasis). This analysis does not suggest that English *should* be, nor that it *is*, more or less important than other capabilities; rather, it illustrates how teacher educators may think about the relative importance of multiple capabilities when considering their language use.

Discussion and Conclusion

With many potentially valuable teacher capabilities for ELTE to address and with limited time and other constraints (Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019; Cajas et al., 2023), teacher educators make instructional decisions based on individual and collective understandings of what matters most. Teacher educators in this study valued teacher capabilities that sometimes echoed dominant discourses in the region, where teachers are expected to acquire predetermined skills in proficiency and pedagogy (Stanton & Fiszbein, 2019). At the same time, themes of teacher identity and cognition were prominent, reflecting the trend towards conceptualizing ELTE as the cultivation of behaviors and beliefs rather than simply knowledge and skills (Singh & Richards, 2006). Both the “applied science” and “reflective” models for pedagogical knowledge (Barahona, 2016) were notably present. These insights are relevant in and beyond Ecuador, as educators and program designers may see more clearly what they value when it is echoed or contradicted here.

While regional policies emphasize general measures of English proficiency—such as the required CEFR B2 level in Ecuador (Cajas et al., 2023)—these teacher educators, as a group, offered a more nuanced picture of what they hoped teachers-in-formation would do with English. If they did consider English proficiency a priority, it was not necessarily seen as a discrete skill, but as a capability that comes before or integrates or competes with other teacher capabilities like dispositions to the profession and knowing how to teach. In fact, specific teacher capabilities were important to educators as one piece of their broader theories of change for ELT (De Angelis, 2025b). How educators understand English proficiency within a set of valued capabilities has implications for the sequence and nature of courses and assessments, for when and to what extent language and content goals are integrated, and for language-of-instruction approaches and policies.

These data show that pedagogical knowledge and teacher identity and cognition were also valued—more so than English, for some participants. The interest in dispositions that teachers-in-formation develop towards the profession, themselves, and learners is important given that such outcomes have been less prominent than language and pedagogy in ELTE literature in Ecuador and parts of the region. However, it is unclear to what extent teacher educators valued capabilities emphasized by critical models of ELTE, such as analyzing systems of power and understanding themselves as legitimate producers of pedagogical knowledge (Castañeda-Londoño, 2019). Teachers-in-formation need those capabilities if they are to challenge deficit discourses that position teachers as problems to be fixed and to embrace “creative contextualized practices” (Cruz Arcila, 2018, p. 67) mentioned by a few participants in this study. Without critical perspectives, sociocultural approaches to ELTE risk socializing teachers into dominant ELT models that do not fit their contexts.

Creating opportunities for teachers to be critical and responsive ELT professionals requires contextualized approaches from ELTE practitioners themselves, rather than top-down policy solutions. The focus group conversations in this study offer participants and readers one place to explore such approaches. My choice of a pragmatist research paradigm, my focus on language use practices, and my identities as an insider-outsider to Ecuadorian ELTE doubtlessly shaped our conversations. This study’s findings are not generalizable nor contextualized within participants’ varied programs and communities. Whether in South America or other global contexts, educators should critically explore how and by whom the desirable outcomes of English language teacher education are defined and valued in everyday practice.

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Appendix A: Categories, Themes, and Sample Codes Describing Teacher Capabilities

Category from literature	Theme	Sample in vivo codes	Participants with theme present (n = 37)
English proficiency	Developing & demonstrating English proficiency	“ <i>Dominio</i> ” (Competence) “ <i>Nivel B2</i> ” (B2 Level) “ <i>Comunicarse</i> ” (To communicate) “ <i>Usar el idioma</i> ” (Using the language)	29
	Knowing how to enact instruction	“ <i>Llegar a sus alumnos</i> ” (Connecting with students) “ <i>Flexibilidad</i> ” (Flexibility)	12
Pedagogical knowledge	Knowing how to teach (general)	“Pedagogy” “ <i>Estrategias</i> ” (Strategies) “Approaches”	10
	Knowing how to design instruction	“ <i>Actividades</i> ” (Activities) “ <i>Plan</i> ” “ <i>Recursos</i> ” (Resources)	7
Teacher identity & cognition	Developing dispositions towards the profession	“ <i>Amar su profesión</i> ” (Love the profession) “ <i>Reflexión</i> ” (Reflection) “ <i>Trabajo en equipo</i> ” (teamwork)	21
	Developing dispositions towards self	“ <i>Confianza</i> ” (Trust) “ <i>Ser docente</i> ” (Be a teacher)	9
	Developing dispositions towards learners	“ <i>Seres humanos</i> ” (Human beings) “ <i>Valores</i> ” (Values)	6
Content knowledge	Knowing linguistics	“Linguistics” “Phonetics”	9
	Knowing terminology	“ <i>Terminología</i> ”	6
	Knowing culture	“ <i>Cultura</i> ” “Literature”	4
	Knowing research methods	“ <i>Investigación</i> ” (Research) “ <i>El contenido</i> ” (The content, referring to research courses)	3
	Knowing language acquisition	“Language acquisition” “Theories”	3

Appendix B: Types of Teacher Capabilities Mentioned and Most Valued by Teacher Educators

	English proficiency	Pedagogical knowledge	Teacher identity and cognition	Content knowledge
	Alice	Alice	Blanca	Alexandra
	Blanca	Blanca	Daniel	Alice
	Daniel	Daniel	Diana	Blanca
	Diana	Diana	Fernando	Darwin
	Edison	Fernando	Félix	Diana
	Fernando	Franklin	Franklin	Fernando
	Franklin	Gloria	Gloria	Franklin
	Gloria	Jaime	Jaime	Jaime
	Jaime	Lindsay	Janet	Janet
	Johanna	Luz	Johanna	Laura
	Julia	Mariana	Luz	Lindsay
	Laura	Mark	Mariana	Mariana
	Lindsay	Mayra	Mark	Mayra
Participant pseudonyms	Luz	Mercedes	Mayra	Nancy
	Mariana	Miguel	Mercedes	Sonia
	Mario	Nancy	Milton	Verónica
	Mark	Olga	Nancy	Walter
	Mayra	Pedro	Olga	Yolanda
	Mercedes	Robert	Pedro	Zoila
	Miguel	Rosa	Ricardo	
	Milton	Sonia	Robert	
	Nancy	Teresa	Teresa	
	Pedro	Verónica	Walter	
	Robert	Walter	Zoila	
	Rosa			
	Sonia			
	Teresa			
	Verónica			
	Walter			

Note. Pseudonyms appear in bold if participants described at least one capability of that type as most important to them.