

USO DE REALIA Y PERCEPCIÓN DEL DESARROLLO DE LAS HABILIDADES INTEGRADAS DEL INGLÉS EN BÁSICA SUPERIOR: UNIDAD EDUCATIVA TUFÍÑO, CARCHI, ECUADOR

REALIA USE AND SELF-PERCEIVED DEVELOPMENT OF INTEGRATED ENGLISH SKILLS IN UPPER BASIC EDUCATION: EDUCATIONAL UNIT TUFÍÑO, CARCHI, ECUADOR

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RESUMEN: El dominio del inglés es una competencia transversal en el sistema educativo ecuatoriano, pero en contextos rurales, la enseñanza del inglés se enfrenta a limitaciones de conectividad, infraestructura y recursos didácticos. Los objetos, textos e imágenes reales que emergen del contexto cotidiano se han propuesto como una alternativa pedagógica de bajo costo, alta pertinencia contextual. El objetivo de este estudio fue describir la frecuencia de uso de los distintos tipos de realia y la percepción de los estudiantes sobre el desarrollo de sus habilidades integradas del inglés. Se utilizó un diseño no experimental, descriptivo, cuantitativo y transversal. Participó la totalidad de estudiantes de octavo, noveno y décimo año ($n = 105$) de una unidad educativa rural de la parroquia Tufiño, cantón Tulcán, provincia del Carchi, en el período lectivo 2025-2026. Se utilizó un cuestionario que contenía 23 ítems, 22 en escala tipo Likert de 4 puntos y 1 de selección única. Los resultados revelan un bajo uso de Realia (2,13 de 9 ítems en una escala de 1-4), siendo el uso de objetos tangibles el ítem con el valor más bajo ($M = 1,63$; 81,0 % de respuestas negativas). En contraste, el 54,3 % de los estudiantes reporta que el material impreso les ayuda a aprender, aunque se reporta que se usa poco. La percepción de desarrollo de las habilidades integradas también fue baja, con una media de 2,13, siendo la comprensión auditiva la dimensión más débil, con 2,03. Se concluye que hay un uso limitado de un recurso que está presente en el entorno cercano y se recomienda priorizar el Realia impresa y cultural, viable en escenarios de baja conectividad. El diseño es descriptivo, no se pueden establecer relaciones causales.

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Palabras clave: *Realia; materiales auténticos; habilidades integradas; enseñanza de idiomas; educación rural*

ABSTRACT: English is a cross-cutting competence in the Ecuadorian education system, but its implementation in rural areas is limited by connectivity, infrastructure and instructional resources. The use of realia, namely authentic objects, texts and images from the context, has been suggested as a low-cost and contextually relevant pedagogical alternative. The objective of this study was to describe the frequency of use of different types of realia and students' perceptions of the development of their integrated English language skills. A quantitative, descriptive, cross sectional and non-experimental design was used. The entire population of the upper level of basic education of a rural school in the parish of Tufiño, in the canton of Tulcán, province of Carchi participated in the activity, which included a total of 105 students in grades 8, 9 and 10 of the 2025-2026 school year. A 23-item questionnaire was used, 22 of which were measured on a four-point Likert scale and one was a single choice item. The results indicate that the use of realia is not often found, with the mean of 2.13 on the frequency items in the scale 1-4, and the lowest value is found on the tangible objects frequency item, namely 1.63 with 81.0 % negative responses. In contrast, 54.3 % of students believe that printed material helps them learn, and reports seldom use it in the classroom. Self-perceived development of integrated skills was also low (mean = 2.13), with listening comprehension being the lowest (mean = 2.03). The study concludes that a resource that is readily available in the immediate environment is underutilized, and suggests the use of printed and cultural realia, which are possible in low connectivity situations. The design is descriptive and cannot be used to make causal inferences.

Keywords: *realia; authentic materials; integrated skills; language teaching; rural education*

INTRODUCTION

English is a key language in the Ecuadorian national curriculum and is required as a subject in all basic and upper secondary levels. It is not just an academic requirement but a prerequisite for access to global information, higher education and labor mobility, as the global reframing of English language teaching described by Rose and Galloway (1) suggests. However, there is a significant gap between the curricular aspiration and classroom outcome, and this gap is even larger in rural schools with poor connectivity, limited technological infrastructure, and a lack of commercially produced teaching materials.

In this context, the issue is not what advanced resources should be used, but what resource, available in the limited context, is not being used to its potential. Realia, real objects, real texts, images, and cultural artefacts from the learner's own context that are presented in the classroom without pedagogical simplification, is one such resource. Unlike digital platforms, Realia does not need bandwidth, nor does it need to be licensed; it only needs the teacher to recognize the didactic potential of a food container, a bus timetable, a local photograph or a traditional tale. The pedagogical justification of realia is based on the relationship between form and meaning.

The meta-analysis by Webb et al. (2) shows that exposure to meaningful input in reading, listening and combined modes results in significant incidental vocabulary learning, and the repeated, meaningful encounters with the item in this way are a focus of accounts of vocabulary learning. Bhatti et al. (3) found that the realia-mediated instruction yielded significantly superior vocabulary performance in the experimental group as compared to the control group. In the qualitative study using teachers of young learners, Sitepu and Kurniawati (4) discovered that realia were used for introducing new vocabulary and checking the understanding of the students, which was not done by conventional materials in the learning process. Ahmadova (5) places realia in the context of a wider description of contextualised input, which covers vocabulary, listening, oral fluency and cultural competence.

There are more recent pieces of evidence for productive skills. In speaking activities, Ayu et al. (6) studied the perceptions of junior secondary students about realia-based scaffolding and reported the perceived benefits, as well as the practical challenges teachers face when using realia. In Ecuador, Nevárez Zambrano et al. (7) evaluated the use of real objects to enhance speaking in a rural primary class and found the method to be effective and viable in the material limitations of rural primary schools. The broader literature on authentic materials is in a similar direction: Peacock (8) found that the use of authentic materials led to marked improvements in on-task behaviour and observed motivation, while more recent studies linked authentic input to improvements in reading comprehension (9) and motivation (10).

The second axis of this study is the construct of integrated skills. The integrated approach to listening, speaking, reading and writing is based on the premise that communicative competence is achieved when listening and speaking skills are used together in a meaningful task, as are reading and writing. The position is expressed in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in its action-oriented approach, where learners are considered as social agents who work in real situations (11). In the study of the integral teaching of listening with speaking, Shago et al. (12) discovered that teachers in general advocate for integration in theory but do not do so uniformly in reality. Realia is appropriate for this model because an artefact can be used to sequence a task that involves reading, discussion, listening and written production.

The Ecuadorian evidence base refines this picture. Orosz et al. (13) discovered that public school teachers are aware of the importance of the subject, but they do not always follow the intent of the curriculum in their classroom practice and in-service training is not always available. With eighth year basic education students, Soledispa Gutiérrez (14) found that the didactic procedures implemented in English limit vocabulary development. Alvarez et al. (15) conducted a survey of 113 primary EFL teachers and found that there was a gap between teachers' beliefs about curriculum reform and their practices. Together, these studies indicate that the limitation of English in Ecuador is not only material.

Tufiño's choice is no accident. It is a rural parish in the northern Province of Ecuador with the infrastructural challenges that are common to rural school education: intermittent connectivity, finite technological equipment, and few commercially produced English materials. The artefacts measured by the instrument; however, there are no bandwidth or purchase requirements for the immediate environment of the local images, recipes and traditional narratives. The setting is thus

a critical case, as the pedagogical explanation is separated from the economic one when the material itself is free from a cost.

Three gaps remain. First, most empirical studies on realia are experimental, use small samples and focus on one skill; there is little descriptive evidence regarding the actual use of realia in the regular classroom. Secondly, the Ecuadorian rural context is poorly represented internationally. Thirdly, research seldom investigates the realia use and the learners' perception of their skill development in the same instrument and population.

This study thus presents the frequency of use of the various categories of realia and students' self-assessment of the four integrated skills for the total population of the upper basic education of one rural school in Carchi province. The analysis is based on three questions: What are the most and least frequently used realia? How do students feel they have developed in their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills? and Which type of teaching material do they feel is most suitable for learning English? There is no intervention tested and no causal effect is claimed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A quantitative, descriptive, cross sectional and non-experimental design was used. There were no manipulation of any variables and no introduction of any intervention; data were collected at one time in the natural setting of the participating institution. The design was chosen because the research questions are about the current level of resource use and self-perceived competence, rather than the impact of a treatment.

The study took place in a public school in the parish of Tufiño, in the Canton of Tulcán, in Carchi province, in the northern Andean highlands of Ecuador. It is in a rural area and must work within the limitations of internet access and technological equipment, which are shared by many schools in the region. No sampling procedure was used; the entire upper basic education population was surveyed, consisting of 105 students in the 8th, 9th and 10th years in the 2025-2026 school year. A census does not have sampling error, but it does not talk about a broader population.

A 23-item structured questionnaire was completed. The items 1-22 are rated on a 4-point ordinal scale, with 4 indicating always, 3 indicating almost always, 2 indicating sometimes, and 1 indicating never. The items from 1 to 10 refer to the presence of Realia in English lessons, which includes the following categories as defined in the theoretical framework: physical realia (container, clothing and pedagogical banknotes), printed realia (brochures, magazines, menus and geographical maps), student-produced realia (final projects and images of the surrounding environment) and cultural and situational realia (images of landmarks, traditional tales and culinary recipes). Items 11-22 focus on the students' own perceptions of the development of the four integrated skills, with three items on listening, four on speaking, two on reading and three on writing. The question 23 is a single-choice question where students must choose the most suitable material for learning English: printed material, educational projects or interactive games.

Items were written in Spanish, the students' first language, to prevent any confounding of comprehension of the instrument with the English language proficiency being studied. The

content validity was assessed by experts prior to administration, and the wording was modified based on the content validity assessment. The content of the test was judged as valid before being administered, and the wording of the items was modified based on the comments of the judges. Internal-consistency coefficients are not reported. The analysis was based on the marginal distribution of responses per item (marginal distribution analysis), which allows the estimation of the means and dispersion of each item, but not of inter-item covariance; therefore, the internal-consistency coefficients cannot be derived from the available data. This restriction does not apply to the results of this study as the results are item-level descriptive statistics for the full population and do not form composite scores, test hypotheses, or estimate relationships between constructs. As with Zakariya (16) no global coefficient is reported across the 22 items because a single value computed over a multidimensional set would not be evidence of scale quality. The entire instrument is attached as an appendix, and future applications should report the reliability of the instrument in each dimension in addition to Cronbach's alpha, including McDonald's omega.

The participants are minors and the school administration has given institutional authorization, as well as informed consent from parents/legal guardians, for data collection. Students gave their assent, participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no identifying information was recorded. Students were told about the study and their right to refuse or withdraw without penalty. The questionnaire was administered in class with the researcher's supervision and clarification was given on demand with no suggestions of answers.

Responses were tabulated and cleaned in a spreadsheet. Absolute frequencies and percentages were computed for each item on valid responses; there were no missing responses, and all 22 ordinal items had 105 valid responses. To allow for comparison across items, a mean and a standard deviation were calculated for each item, with the scale values of 4, 3, 2 and 1 assigned to the response categories of always, almost always, sometimes, and never, respectively, and the four categories were collapsed into a binary classification of positive (always and almost always) and negative (sometimes and never). The Dimension scores were calculated as the average of the means of the items in each dimension. The design was descriptive, and no inferential or correlational tests were performed, nor is any association between realia use and skill development claimed, as no item-level covariance was analyzed.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses for items 1 to 10, together with the mean, standard deviation and the proportion of positive and negative responses. Figure 1 displays the same distributions ordered by item means, so that the balance between positive and negative responses can be compared across items briefly.

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Tabla 1. Frecuencia de uso de realia en las clases de inglés (n = 105).

Ítem	S	CS	AV	N	M	DE	Pos %	Neg %
1. Interactive materials	24	18	42	21	2.43	1.05	40.0	60.0
2. Tangible objects	8	12	18	67	1.63	0.96	19.0	81.0
3. Printed material helps [opinion]	41	16	42	6	2.88	1.01	54.3	45.7
4. Real images for speaking	29	11	50	15	2.51	1.05	38.1	61.9
5. Magazines for reading	20	19	45	21	2.36	1.01	37.1	62.9
6. Recipes for vocabulary	21	17	28	39	2.19	1.14	36.2	63.8
7. Tales for listening	10	20	38	37	2.03	0.97	28.6	71.4
8. Projects with food items	19	17	28	41	2.13	1.13	34.3	65.7
9. Images of world landmarks	10	18	35	42	1.96	0.98	26.7	73.3
10. Images of local environment	14	11	35	45	1.94	1.04	23.8	76.2

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

Nota: S = siempre; CS = casi siempre; AV = a veces; N = nunca. M y DE calculadas en escala 1-4 (4 = siempre).

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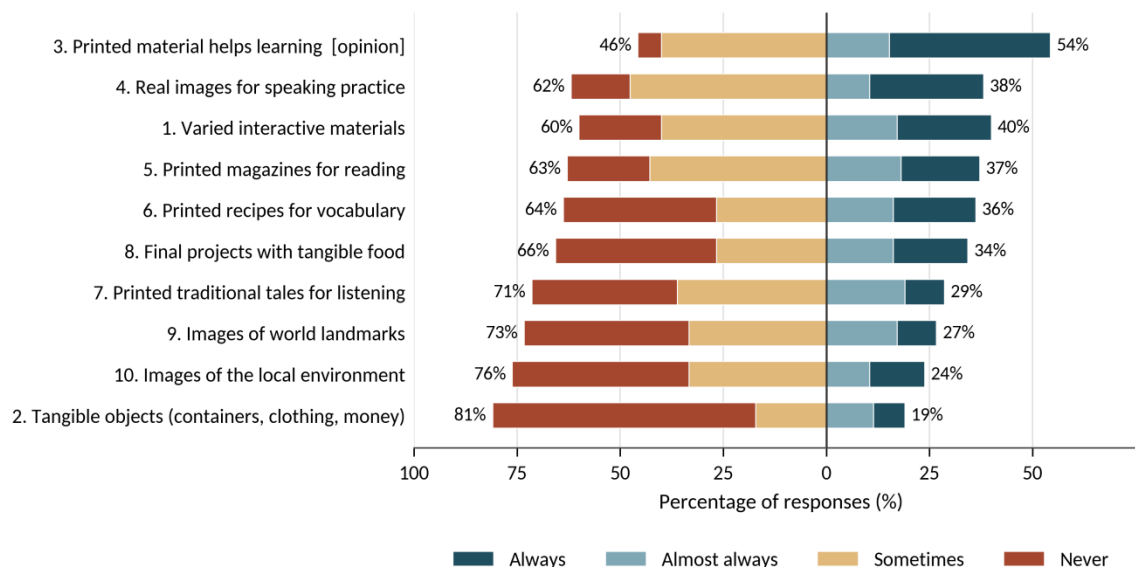


Figura 1. Distribución de respuestas sobre el uso de Realia, ordenadas por media del ítem (n = 105)

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

Nota: las barras divergen desde un eje central; las respuestas negativas se extienden a la izquierda y las positivas a la derecha.

The remaining nine items measure the frequency of a classroom practice, whereas Item 3 measures student opinion, so it is reported separately. The mean for the nine frequency items was 2.13, which is lower than the theoretical mean of 2.50, suggesting that realia is used in lessons but not regularly. The six items measuring teacher practice had an average of 2.19 and the three items measuring student activity had an average of 2.01. Standard deviations are not reported at the dimension level because they would need to be computed based on composite scores per respondent, and the marginal distributions provided for this analysis do not allow for that.

The lowest value was for the use of tangible objects (containers, clothing and pedagogical banknotes) (M = 1.63; DE = 0.96): 81.0% of students chose sometimes or never, and 63.8 % chose never alone. This is the most distinct outcome in the data set. Images of the local environment (item 10, M = 1.94) and images of world landmarks (item 9, M = 1.96) are also grouped at the bottom, suggesting that visual realia from either the immediate or the wider cultural context is seldom used.

The highest value is for item 3 (M = 2.88; DE = 1.01) which is the only item in the block that measures opinion rather than observed frequency: 54.3 % of students feel that printed materials like brochures, magazines, menus and maps help them learn English. The highest scores are for the use of varied interactive materials (item 1, M = 2.43) and real images for speaking practice (item 4, M = 2.51) among the items that measure frequency. The pattern of this block is most informative when compared to the favorable opinion expressed in item 3 and the low reported

frequency in items 5-7, which refer to the actual classroom use of printed magazines, recipes and tales (M = 2.36, 2.19 and 2.03 respectively).

Figure 2 contrasts the proportion of positive responses to item 3, which measures opinion about printed material, with the proportion of positive responses to items 5 to 7, which measure the reported classroom use of magazines, recipes and tales.

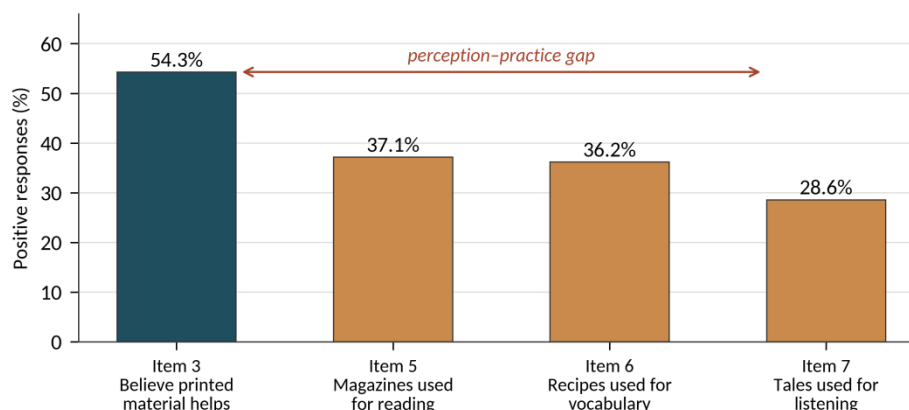


Figura 2. Percepción del material impreso frente a su uso reportado en clase (n = 105)

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

Nota: las barras muestran la proporción de respuestas positivas. El ítem 3 recoge opinión; los ítems 5 a 7 recogen frecuencia de uso.

Table 2 presents the results for items 11 to 22, organized by skill, and Figure 2 shows the corresponding response distributions grouped into the four skill blocks.

Tabla 2. Percepción del desarrollo de las habilidades integradas del inglés (n = 105).

Ítem	Destreza	S	CS	AV	N	M	DE	Pos %
11. Main ideas in audio	Listening	14	10	46	35	2.03	0.99	22.9
12. Vocabulary in audio		10	11	49	35	1.96	0.91	20.0
13. Understands a dialogue		17	9	45	34	2.09	1.03	24.8
14. Communicates fluently	Speaking	14	15	40	36	2.07	1.01	27.6
15. Pronounces correctly		20	15	40	30	2.24	1.07	33.3

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16. Spoken sentence structure		21	16	37	31	2.26	1.09	35.2
17. Vocabulary when presenting		15	17	36	37	2.10	1.04	30.5
18. Reads a text correctly	Reading	24	22	40	19	2.49	1.04	43.8
19. Written vocabulary		10	13	48	34	1.99	0.91	21.9
20. Spells correctly	Writing	9	9	49	38	1.90	0.89	17.1
21. Written sentence structure		23	18	35	29	2.33	1.11	39.0
22. Vocabulary when writing		18	15	36	36	2.14	1.08	31.4

Fuente: elaboración propia.

Nota: la destreza se indica una sola vez, en el primer ítem de cada bloque.

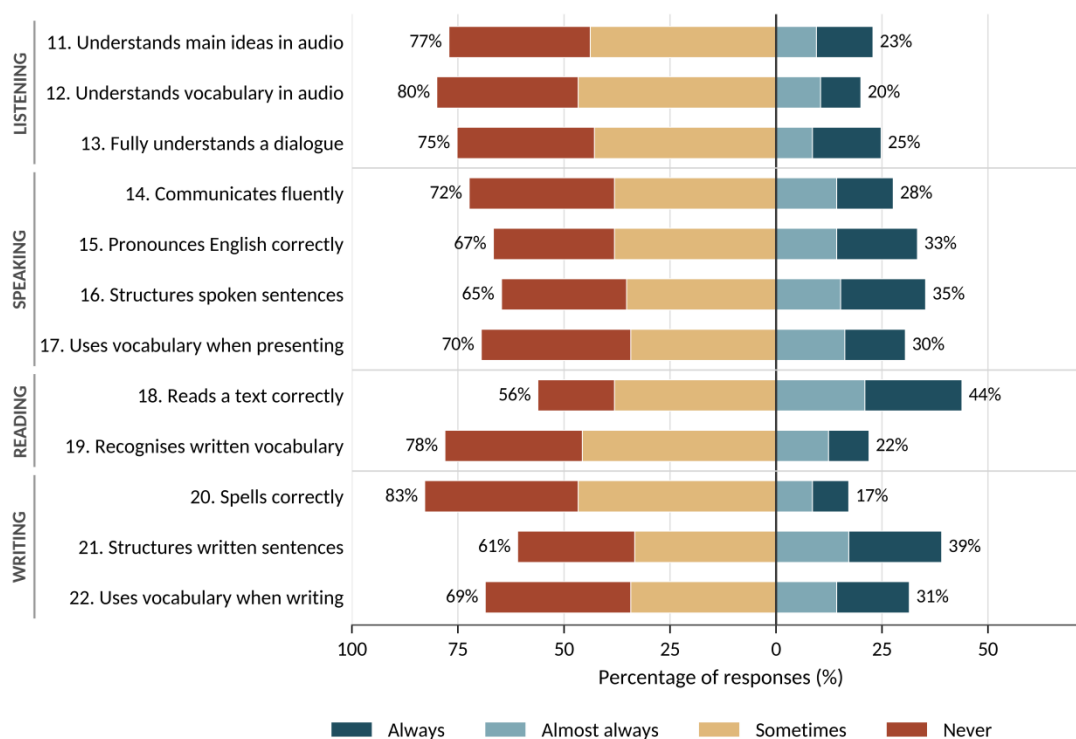


Figura 3. Distribución de respuestas sobre la percepción del desarrollo de las habilidades integradas, por destreza (n = 105)

Fuente: Elaboración propia.

Nota: las líneas horizontales separan los cuatro bloques de destrezas.

The mean for the 12 skill items was 2.13, with 71.0 % of the responses being negative. The meaning of self-perceived competence is therefore low and is consistently lower than the realia block, with no single skill item reaching a mean of 2.49. Listening was the lowest rated dimension ($M = 2.03$), and in this dimension, the item on understanding vocabulary in audio exercises (item 12, $M = 1.96$) received 80.0 % negative responses. The lowest single score was for correct spelling ($M = 1.90$; 82.9 % negative), followed by writing. Speaking ($M = 2.16$) and reading ($M = 2.24$) were slightly above the scale center but still were not at the center.

There are two exceptions to this trend. Reading a text in English correctly (item 18, $M = 2.49$; 43.8 % positive) and structuring sentences when writing (item 21, $M = 2.33$; 39.0 % positive) are the two highest values in the block, suggesting that decoding and formal sentence construction are perceived as more accessible than the comprehension and production of meaning in real time.

The meaning of each dimension is compared to the theoretical mid-point of the scale in Figure 3. All dimensions are below that mid-point. The realia frequency block and the aggregate of the twelve skill items are the same at 2.13, and the spread between the four skills is narrow, ranging from 2.03 for listening to 2.24 for reading.

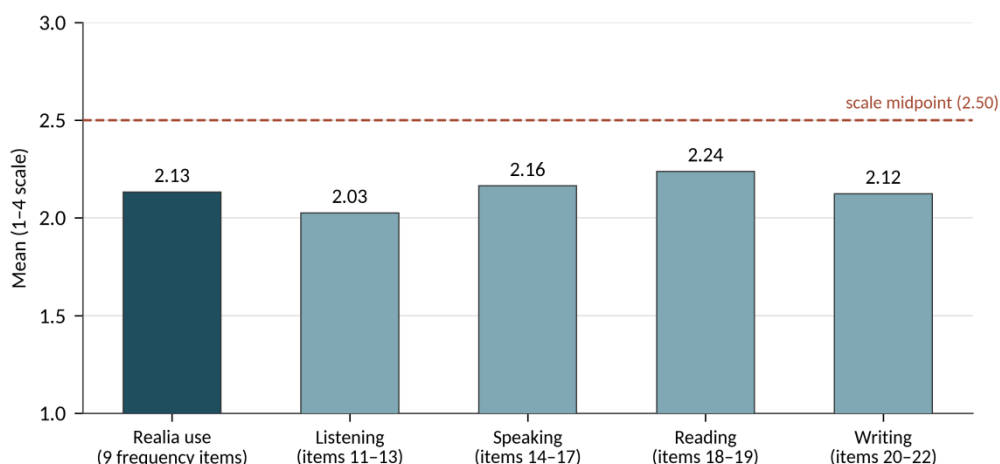


Figura 4. Medias por dimensión frente al punto medio de la escala ($n = 105$)

Fuente: elaboración propia.

Nota: los valores son el promedio de las medias de los ítems de cada dimensión en escala 1-4. El ítem 3 se excluye de la dimensión de realia por medir opinión y no frecuencia.

Item 23 asked students which teaching material they consider most appropriate for learning English. Educational projects were selected by 41 students (39.0 %), interactive games 33 (31.4 %) and printed material by 31 (29.5 %). The distribution is close to even, with no option

commanding a majority, which suggests that preference is not concentrated on any single resource type.

DISCUSSION

These data show that there is a gap between the pedagogical value given to realia in literature and the use of realia in these classrooms. Realia is present, but not consistently: two thirds of the responses to the frequency items were in the negative range, and the category that has the most theoretical justification, tangible objects that can be handled, had the lowest value of the instrument.

This outcome is hard to explain in terms of the scarcity of materials. They are free and have no infrastructure, while in a rural environment they are more accessible than the digital resources whose absence is often blamed as the main barrier to the teaching of English. The pattern is not a resource constraint but rather a methodological constraint. Similar challenges were reported by Ayu et al. (6) in a junior secondary setting, where the challenges were not economic but organizational and pedagogical. This reading is supported by recent measurement work that has demonstrated that pedagogical beliefs and pedagogical content knowledge are linked and that their interaction is related to how instructional materials are used (Almunawaroh et al., 17) and whether a teacher uses them constructively or transmissivity (Almunawaroh and Steklács, 18). The important factor to consider is not the physical availability of the materials, but how the teacher thinks about using them.

This reading is reinforced by the contrast between item 3 and items 5-7 (Figure 4). Over half of the students find printed materials useful, but the same students say that magazines, recipes and traditional stories are rarely introduced into the lesson. A resource that is useful to learners and is appropriate to the connectivity constraints of the setting is not being used. This is in line with Nevárez Zambrano et al. (7) who found that real objects are effective and feasible in a rural classroom in Ecuador and Nevárez Rosado et al. (19) who reported that methodological decisions, not resources, are what lead to the development of oral skills. A similar finding was reported by Soledispa Gutiérrez (14) who arrived at a similar conclusion about the didactic repertoire's narrowness, and by Alvarez et al. (15) who reported the same belief-practice gap among teachers in Ecuador.

Self-perceived competence was consistently low on the second axis, with listening being the lowest. That listening should be weakest is consistent with the reported input profile, as audio material presupposes either recorded resources or sustained teacher-led oral production. The absence of authentic input, material and context are cited as the main causes of listening difficulty by Shamsi and Bozorgian (20), which directly links the two blocks of this study; that is, the skill that is most dependent on the authentic material is the one that learner's rate as the lowest. The evidence also suggests patience: Milliner and Dimoski (21) found only small gains in self-efficacy with the lower-proficiency learners in their metacognitive intervention, and Pei et al. (22) reported gains in comprehension but not in self-efficacy. Low self-assessment seems to be a treatment-resistant symptom, further supporting the need for long-term changes in input conditions. Shago et al. (12) noted the same disparity between endorsed and enacted integration.

The split in item 23 is close, indicating that the three options were not widely experienced and not a true choice. The two blocks thus represent one situation: the action-oriented approach of the Common European Framework (11) puts the learner in the role of a social agent who has to perform tasks in authentic contexts, and when there is a lack of realia, it is difficult to design such tasks. The evidence on vocabulary (3), multi-sensory engagement (4), skill breadth (5), motivation (8, 10) and reading comprehension (9) all point to one mechanism: authentic input anchors form to meaning. This study records the state of the thing when it is not working.

Three implications follow. First, the least used and least expensive categories, realia (physical and printed), should be targeted. Second, the weakest dimension, listening, can be worked on with teacher-narrated stories and locally recorded material, without any infrastructural cost. Third, the focus of change is on teacher development, not on materials provision. Orosz et al. (13) identified that the teachers in the public sector in Ecuador are aware of the curricular value of English but have not received ongoing in-service training, meaning practice does not match up with curricular intent. If this training is not available, the didactic potential of an everyday artefact is not recognized and a free resource is not used, even if it is available. The present data demonstrate just this: materials that are free and locally available have the lowest frequency of the instrument, and the same students say that they would learn with printed materials. This barrier is therefore methodological and not economic (17, 18).

These findings are subject to several caveats. The study is conducted in one institution and the number of students involved is 105, which is not generalisable. All data is self-reported, and no external proficiency test was administered, which means that there may be some discrepancy between perception and competence. The design is descriptive, and it is not possible to make a causal inference. Results are disaggregated because the instrument mixes referents in the first block. Due to the analysis of only marginal distributions, dimension-level dispersion and inter-item associations were not calculated. Lastly, the pilot was administered before the full administration in the same institution, and the reliability estimate is not based on an independent sample.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to describe the frequency of realia use and the self-perceived development of integrated English language skills of the total population of the upper basic education of a rural school in Carchi province, Ecuador.

Although realia is the least costly and most readily available category of all, it is used infrequently, with a mean of 2.13 on a scale of 1 to 4 across the nine frequency items, and the category with the highest percentage of negative responses (81.0 %). Students still find printed authentic material useful in their learning as 54.3 % of them responded positively, but they reported that printed authentic material is rarely used in class. This gap is a clear immediate and low-cost opportunity for pedagogical change.

Second, the mean scores for self-perceived development of the four integrated skills are low for all of them, with listening being the weakest dimension (2.03) and spelling the weakest individual

item (1.90). There is an even split of preference for material type, reflecting limited exposure to any material type.

Third, the evidence allows for a very limited but definite conclusion: in this context, the problem with contextualized English teaching is not the lack of materials, but the lack of systematic use of them in teaching. Future studies should include more than one institution, add classroom observation and standardized proficiency assessment to the self-report, and experiment to determine if structured realia-based sequences result in measurable improvements in the integrated skills of rural Ecuadorian school learners.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Los autores declaran no tener conflicto de interés. La investigación no recibió financiamiento externo.

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