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EFL Pre-Service Teachers' Perceptions Towards C1 Proficiency: Understanding, attitudes and challenges

Percepciones de futuros maestros de inglés sobre la lengua extranjera hacia la competencia lingüística C1: Comprensión, actitudes y desafíos

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Abstract:

In recent years, language certification as a graduation requirement has become an increasing priority of teacher education institutions to guarantee the linguistic competence of future English educators. En los últimos años, la certificación lingüística como requisito de titulación se ha convertido en una prioridad cada vez mayor para las instituciones de formación docente, con el fin de garantizar la competencia lingüística de los futuros docentes de inglés. Research into the proficiency levels of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers, by adopting the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), has grown significantly. Drawing on the principles of Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, this convergent parallel design mixed-method study examines EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of C1 English proficiency, focusing on their linguistic understanding, attitudes, and challenges. Conducted at a public university in Nuevo León, Mexico, with 106 participants, data were collected through a Likert scale and an open questionnaire and analyzed through descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Participants expressed relatively positive perceptions of their linguistic competencies; however, their qualitative responses revealed uncertainty about whether their overall proficiency met the C1 level. They report difficulties primarily with grammar, vocabulary, speaking, and pronunciation skills. The study is set against a backdrop of increasing institutional requirements for language proficiency certification, highlighting the need for high-quality instruction. The findings aim to inform curricular reforms and strategies to enhance the pedagogical effectiveness of future English language educators.

Keywords:

Language proficiency, pre-service English teachers, language teacher education

Resumen:

En los últimos años, la certificación lingüística como requisito de titulación se ha convertido en una prioridad cada vez mayor para las instituciones de formación docente, con el fin de garantizar la competencia lingüística de los futuros docentes de inglés. La investigación sobre los niveles de competencia de los profesores en formación de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), mediante la adopción de los estándares del Marco Común Europeo de Referencia para las Lenguas (MCER), ha crecido significativamente. A partir de las teorías de autoeficacia de Bandura y la teoría del filtro afectivo de Krashen, este estudio mixto convergente paralelo examina las percepciones de los profesores en formación de inglés como lengua extranjera sobre el dominio del inglés C1, centrándose en su comprensión, actitudes y desafíos lingüísticos. Realizado en una universidad pública de Nuevo León, México, con 106 participantes, los datos se recopilaron a través de una escala Likert y un cuestionario abierto y se analizaron mediante estadísticas descriptivas y análisis temático. Como parte de los hallazgos, sus respuestas cualitativas revelaron incertidumbre sobre si su dominio general cumplía con el nivel C1. Reportan dificultades en las habilidades gramaticales, de vocabulario, expresión oral y pronunciación. El estudio se desarrolla en un contexto de crecientes requisitos institucionales para la certificación de dominio del idioma destacando la necesidad de una instrucción de alta calidad. El estudio aporta información para realizar reformas curriculares y estrategias que permitan mejorar la eficacia pedagógica de los futuros educadores del idioma inglés.

Palabras Clave*:*

Competencia lingüística, maestros de inglés, formación docente, programas de lenguas

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Introduction

In recent years, a growing number of studies have focused on examining the language proficiency levels of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers (Hernandez-Ocampo et al., 2024; Kostina, 2012; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas Tamburini, 2023; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025). This trend is linked to the increasing graduation requirements of educational institutions, which mandate certification of proficiency levels for future English educators. Given the global recognition of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), research indicates that teacher education programs are adopting this framework to assess the language proficiency levels of EFL pre-service teachers. The CEFR is a recognized international framework that seeks to define, develop, and assess the language proficiency of English language learners and teachers (Hishamudin & Kee, 2023; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021) across the four macro-skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. In addition, the CEFR plays an important role in the design of curriculum guidelines and English courses, and in the implementation of standardized assessments and language proficiency descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020). English language teaching in Mexico faces challenges similar to those reported internationally, including a shortage of well-qualified English teachers and gaps in students' English language knowledge and proficiency (British Council, 2013; Richards, 2008; TESOL, 2014; Eyres & Akhter, 2019).Though new educational reforms have been implemented in Mexico (Davies, 2019; Davies, 2020; Goodwin Seadler et al., 2015; Ramírez-Romero, 2013) as a strategy to increase the English level of students in the Mexican education system, several challenges remain, particularly in the preparation of English teachers.

Since the implementation of the National English Program (PRONI) in 2016, the demand for a bachelor's degree in English teaching and English teachers' qualifications has increased. In 2015, the Mexican Ministry of Education published the desired profile for English teachers (Table 1) in basic education. Notwithstanding, Ramírez-Romero (2013) reported that Mexican English teachers in elementary public schools lacked professional training in English language teaching, had low language proficiency level, and had no or little skills to work with children. In 2017, the Mexican Ministry of Education, launched the National English Strategy (SEP, 2017), whose purpose was, within the next 20 years, to make Mexican students bilingual at a B1 level after concluding basic education, and guarantee that English language teachers achieve a C1 proficiency level. The findings regarding English teachers whose current language proficiency fell considerably below the expected level highlight the need to critically examine teacher preparation programs, particularly how their curricula construct and promote the ideal profile of an English language teacher. Based on this context, it is important to set standards not only for English teachers who apply for teaching positions in basic and higher education but also to identify if Mexican English teacher education programs are adequately preparing teachers based on these standards (Table 1).

In Mexico, the two principal venues for becoming an English teacher are *Normal Schools (Escuelas Normales)* and universities, both at the state level in public and private institutions. According to Banks (2017), *Normal Schools* prepare teachers for basic education levels (K-12) while university teacher education programs target students at K-20 levels. These two types of programs differ in the timing of English instruction within the curriculum and in the English level requirements for admission and graduation, which are not typical of *Normal Schools.* Most language teacher education programs in Mexico are aligned with the CEFR framework in terms of language goals for admission and exit requirements (Ruiz-Delgado & Santos García, 2021); nonetheless, given the lack of national guidelines and goals in English language teaching preparation at higher education institutions, policies to teach foreign languages are implemented according to each institution's needs and context but with heterogeneous results (Cely & Stanton, 2023, Goodwin Seadler et al., 2015; Ruiz-Delgado & Santos García, 2021).

Table 1 Mexican Teacher's Desired Profile

Teacher Profile	1st Cycle Preschool-2grade	2nd Cycle Third & Fourth grade	3rd Cycle Fifth & Sixth grade	4th Cycle: Junior High School First, Second, & Third
Ideal CEFR	A2	B1	B2	C1
TOEFL iBT	30-40	41-52	53-64	65-78
Basic CERF	A1	A2	B1	B2
TOEFL Ibt		30-40	41-52	53-64

Note: Taken from Banks (2017)

Nowadays, higher education institutions in non-English speaking countries, such as Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León (UANL) in Mexico, consider internationalization as one of the fundamental axes of their academic models. Therefore, considering the global demands for the development of general competencies, the mastery of a foreign language becomes the priority in the education of students and teachers (UANL, 2020). Particularly in language teacher education programs (Fierro-López et al., 2021; Garza-Rodríguez, 2023;

Hernandez-Ocampo et al., 2024; Kostina, 2012; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas Tamburini, 2023; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025), pre-service teachers are required to certify their English language proficiency at an advanced level (C1), which implies the ability to function effectively in complex academic and professional settings.Most language teacher education programs focus on the areas of English language teaching or translation, areas that require linguistic, technical, and professional expertise based on international standards, norms, and policies (Méndez Marín et al., 2025). Hence, institutions must ensure that graduate requirements and their assessment meet the demands of the professional field.

Several studies in Latin America (Hernandez-Ocampo et al., 2024; Kostina, 2012; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas Tamburini, 2023; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025) and Asia (Hishamudin & Kee, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2026; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021) have investigated the importance of assessing and certifying EFL pre-service teachers with C1 proficiency levels at the end of the program. Despite the challenges faced by Mexican English teachers to achieve a C1 proficiency level, few studies in Mexico have explored this issue implicitly (Fierro-López et al. 2021; Garza-Rodríguez, 2023; Goodwin Seadler et al., 2015; Méndez Marín et al., 2025; Martínez & Sánchez Huarcaya, 2025; Meneses Cid de León, 2023; Perales-Escudero et al., 2017; Perales-Escudero et al.,2024; Ruiz-Delgado & Santos García, 2021). Therefore, there is a need to investigate how pre-service teachers understand C1, perceive their own proficiency, experience this as a graduation requirement, and identify barriers within a Mexican university context.

Responding to this gap, the present study examines the perceptions of EFL pre-service teachers from a public university in northern Mexico towards their C1 English proficiency. It specifically examines their perceived linguistic competence, their understanding of the C1 level, their attitudes toward it, and the challenges they face in achieving it. Drawing on a mixed-method approach, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1. What are EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions of C1 English proficiency?

RQ2. How do EFL pre-service teachers describe their understanding, attitudes, and challenges of C1 English proficiency?

By exploring these perceptions, this study contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding the implementation of graduation requirements based on the C1 level of the CEFR in non-English-speaking countries. In particular, it addresses not only the inconsistencies between institutional policies and the proficiency outcomes resulting from their implementation, but also the need to understand how EFL pre-service teachers experience and respond to these academic and institutional demands. Moreover, by recognizing these perceptions, teacher education programs will be able to assess the language proficiency of graduate students and make the necessary adjustments in the program to support students in developing the linguistic competencies needed for the professional field.

Language Proficiency in Language Teacher Education

According to Crandall (2000), language teacher education programs have been influenced by the departments of applied linguistics, education, or language and literature (Goodwin Seadler et al., 2015; Ruiz-Delago & Santos García, 2021). These departments have established the knowledge, skills, and dispositions expected of prospective teachers. Given the central role that teachers play in the learning process (Al-Seghayer, 2017), these competencies are essential for preparing teachers to effectively support student learning.

For this reason, teacher education is responsible for providing teachers with the essential competencies to perform their professional responsibilities effectively. According to Rychen and Salganik, (2003, cited in Yüksel & Saglam, 2018), "teacher competency is the key unitary concept that encompasses tacit and explicit knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, as well as dispositions; motivations, beliefs, value orientations and emotions" (p. 206). Based on this definition, the term *competency* refers to the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students can effectively apply in real-world contexts and situations.

In language teaching, there have been numerous proposals that have defined what the knowledge base of teachers should include (Al-Seghayer, 2017; Fandiño, 2013; Richards, 2008). In terms of knowledge, Fandiño (2013) pointed out that effective teachers master both *content knowledge* and *pedagogical knowledge*. Content knowledge "refers to the knowledge a teacher should possess in the subject itself" while pedagogical knowledge "refers to the teaching and learning of subjects and their curricula" (Fandiño, 2013, p. 84). In contrast, according to Al-Seghayer (2017), the most important competence for EFL teachers is developing English language proficiency, which includes linguistics, sociocultural, discourse, and strategic competencies.

Language proficiency refers to an individual's ability to use language accurately to accomplish linguistic tasks in real-world situations (Council of Europe, 2020; Little, 2009; López-Medina, 2024). According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), language proficiency can be measured through "Can-Do" descriptors by distinguishing language users as

basic (A1-A2), independent (B1-B2), or proficient users (C1-C2) based on their mastery of each language ability (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) and the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic competencies.

Based on the Self-Assessment Scale of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020), the descriptors for a C1 proficiency are shown in Table 2 below,

Table 2. Self-Assessment Scale of the CEFR C1 Descriptors

Language skill	Descriptors
Oral Comprehension	I can understand extended talk even when it is not clearly structured, and when relationships are only implied and not signalled explicitly. I can understand television programmes and films without too much effort.
Reading Comprehension	I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. I can understand specialised articles and longer technical instructions, even when they do not relate to my field.
Oral Production	I can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.
Written Production	I can express myself in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. I can produce detailed expositions of complex subjects in an essay or a report, underlining what I consider to be the salient issues. I can produce different kinds of texts in a style appropriate to the reader I have in mind.

Source: Prepared by the author.

While the linguistic competence descriptors to reach a C1 proficiency level are shown in Table 3:

Table 3. Linguistic Competence C1 Descriptors

Linguistic Competence	C1 Descriptors
Linguistic range	Can use a broad range of complex grammatical structures appropriately and with considerable flexibility. Can select an appropriate formulation from a broad range of language to express themselves clearly, without having to restrict what they want to say.
Vocabulary range	Has a good command of a broad lexical repertoire allowing gaps to be readily overcome with circumlocutions; little obvious searching for expressions or avoidance strategies. Can select from several vocabulary options in almost all situations by exploiting synonyms of even words/ signs less commonly encountered. Has a good command of common idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms; can play with words/signs fairly well. Can understand and use appropriately the range of technical vocabulary and idiomatic expressions common to their area of specialisation.
Grammatical accuracy	Consistently maintains a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot.
Vocabulary control	Uses less common vocabulary idiomatically and appropriately. Occasional minor slips, but no significant vocabulary errors.
Phonological control	Can employ the full range of phonological features in the target language with sufficient control to ensure intelligibility throughout. Can articulate virtually all the sounds of the target language; some features of accent(s) retained from other language(s) may be noticeable, but they do not affect intelligibility.
Orthographic control	Layout, paragraphing and punctuation are consistent and helpful. Spelling is accurate, apart from occasional slips of the pen.

Source: Prepared by the author.

Several studies have examined the importance of developing high levels of language proficiency in language teacher education programs (Hishamudin & Keem, 2023; Méndez Marín et al.,2025; Nguyen et al, 2026; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas Tamburini, 2023; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025). However, findings reveal that language teachers are expected to have the necessary repertoire to teach and develop their linguistic competence effectively. EFL pre-service teachers often struggle to achieve C1 proficiency, indicating a gap between institutional aims and student outcomes.

The Policy-Practice Gap

A recurrent theme in the literature is the increasing demand for pre-service teachers to reach a C1 level as a graduation requirement. Studies in both Asian and Latin American settings reveal a contrast between institutional language policies and actual student outcomes (Méndez Marín et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2026). While some researchers argue that these linguistic gaps directly impact pedagogical effectiveness (Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025), others emphasize that pedagogical competence is as importance as linguistic competence (Nguyen et al., 2026).

In Mexico, research has shown the importance of providing students with opportunities to develop their linguistic skills both productive and receptive emphasizing

that external factors and a lack of policy adjustments can affect students' linguistic development (Méndez Marín et al., 2025). Moreover, other studies (Hishamudin & Kee, 2023) identify the need for enhanced training and support focusing not only on the understanding of the CEFR framework but also on the development of linguistic competencies during the program.

A recurrent suggestion of these studies stresses that language policies should be implemented while considering specific contexts and needs, and that pre-service teachers experience a range of difficulties to attain the desired results.

Proficiency and Professional Identity

Linguistic mastery extends beyond meeting technical requirements, serving as a critical component in the construction of future teachers' professional identities and pedagogical confidence (Fierro-López, 2021; Garza-Rodríguez, 2023; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025). Accordingly, teacher education programs have increasingly incorporated language proficiency requirements at both the admission and graduation stages. Research suggests that establishing higher entry or exit proficiency requirements, together with sustained language development throughout teacher education, can provide pre-service teachers with a competitive advantage in the professional field (Ruiz-Delgado & Santos García, 2021).

Advanced language proficiency is widely recognized as fundamental for future English teachers, who serve as language models in the classroom and whose linguistic competence may shape their developing professional identities. Accordingly, teacher education programs in Mexico have traditionally prioritized disciplinary knowledge, academic preparation, and technical professional competence, while giving comparatively less attention to socio-emotional skills (Goodwin Seadler et al., 2015; Ruiz-Delgado & Santos García, 2021). Nevertheless, linguistic mastery, accurate language use, and advanced proficiency remain core characteristics of effective English teachers (Garza-Rodríguez, 2023), highlighting the close relationship between language competence and the construction of professional identity.

The Affective Toll of Certification

The pressure to bridge the gap between current proficiency and the mandated C1 level often manifests in significant psychological barriers for pre-service teachers. One of the main reasons is that knowledge and proficiency are prioritized over socio-emotional aspects (Fierro-López, 2021). In this context research indicates that the process of preparation to reach a C1 level, comes with negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and nervousness, and a feeling of a lack of institutional preparation to excel in this type of certification, ultimately hindering their linguistic development and performance (Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas Tamburini, 2023). Hence, the authors suggest a better integration of these standardized assessments in the curricula.

Overall, research shows that EFL pre-service teachers hold a positive perception of the integration of the CEFR framework as a baseline to assess language proficiency in teacher education programs. Yet, an important number of studies describe students not only struggling to achieve advanced levels of proficiency (C1), but also dealing with psychological factors such as anxiety, stress, and lack of confidence that come from high-stakes testing. Moreover, studies indicate that institutions need to support pre-service teachers with a program that focuses on C1 certification preparation and provides enough real-world practice opportunities. Finally, although national and international standards set the C1 level as the required proficiency level of graduating students, institutions need to consider their specific context and recognize the disconnection between policies and the actual proficiency of their students.

Teacher Education Program at UANL

The BA program in Applied Linguistics in English Teaching and Translation at Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León aims to prepare professionals with an integrated focus on both teaching and translation who graduate with at least C1 language proficiency (UANL, 2019). This program requires applicants to demonstrate a minimum of A1 language proficiency to enter and consists of 10 semesters divided into different curricular areas.

Based on the UANL Academic Model (UANL, 2015), these curricular areas focus on developing the general, basic, and professional competencies required to achieve the graduation profile. In addition to the General University Training Curriculum Area (ACFGU) and Basic Training Curriculum Area (ACFB), the Professional Training Curriculum Area (ACFP) is designed to establish the content, sequences, and characteristics of the courses according to the established graduation profile. The latter area includes both fundamental (ACFP-F) and integrative (ACFP-I). The first subarea is designed to provide students with the necessary competencies for the professional field, including mandatory subjects in the areas of linguistics, teaching, translation, culture, and research, while the second aims to integrate competencies previously acquired in their academic training, allowing them to relate them to professional practice through mandatory and elective courses.

Although the main focus of this BA program is to prepare future English teachers and translators, one of its core

elements is the mastery of the English language proficiency. To achieve this goal, from the 2nd year of the program, English is the main language of instruction in the Professional Training Curriculum Area (ACFP) courses. Additionally, to enhance students' knowledge and development in the English language, the curriculum includes various courses such as English Communicative Competence in the 1st semester, followed by English Certification Laboratories at levels A2 (2nd semester), B1 (3rd semester), B2 (4th semester), and C1 (7th semester).

The English Communicative Competence and English Certification Laboratories (A2-B2) are General English courses combined with language certification elements whose purpose is for students to demonstrate that they have mastered the required level in the four language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) in a final sample examination by Cambridge (KET, PET, FCE, respectively).

On the contrary, the course of English Certification Laboratory C1 (ACFP-I) is a certification preparation course that intends to provide students with the necessary knowledge and practice to select the most appropriate language certification examinations at the C1 level (FCE, TOEFL, IELTS, CAE) that best suit their learning styles by performing a variety of practice and simulation examinations. By the end of the course, students are expected to have gained sufficient practice and to have engaged in self-evaluation of their language skills, preparing them to take a real certification exam with greater opportunities of achieving the desired language requirement (C1) for graduation.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the principles of Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which serve as the primary lens for understanding the way PSTs perceive and describe their own proficiency level development.

In his theory, Bandura's (1997) defines self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p.3). In other words, self-efficacy is related to the degree in which a student thinks he or she has the ability or skill to do something or deal with a learning challenge and becomes a predictor of performance and achievement. Other authors (Oh, 2016; Saleem et al, 2018) have also used the concept of "perceived self-efficacy" as students' perceptions of how competent they are to execute certain tasks in particular situations and it is mediated by different processes including both cognitive and affective.

Stephen Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis posits that learners' emotional factors including motivation, anxiety and self-confidence impact the language proficiency (Cruz, 2025; Behsaraei, et al., 2026). Within this theory, research has shown that anxiety is a negative predictor of English language proficiency (Cruz, 2025) and that it correlates negatively with motivation and self-efficacy.

Therefore, in this study self-efficacy theory provides lens to analyze why PSTs perceived linguistic competence might vary across skills while Affective Filter Hypothesis supports the effect negative emotions such as stress and anxiety lead to negative perception on speaking fluency and phonological accuracy, as well as in achieving the C1 proficiency level.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, specifically a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), this design allows for the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data, which are then merged during the interpretation phase to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon. In this case, the quantitative section measures the 106 pre-service teachers' perceptions in a numerical way (RQ1), while the qualitative section explores their understandings, attitudes, and challenges in-depth (RQ2).

Participants and Context

The study was conducted at a large public university in Nuevo León, Mexico, specifically within the BA program in Applied Linguistics in English Teaching and Translation. A purposive sampling strategy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) was utilized to select participants who were actively enrolled in the Professional Training Curriculum Area (ACFP-I). The sample consisted of 106 EFL pre-service teachers (n= 106) who were registered in the English Certification Laboratory C1 during the semesters January-June 2025, August-December 2025, and January-March 2026. This population was selected because they were at key point in their studies, where reaching C1 proficiency is mandatory for them to graduate (UANL, 2019).

Instrumentation

Data were collected through an adapted instrument (Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025) designed as an integrated questionnaire. Following the principles of instrument design by Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009), the instrument was divided into two primary sections: A 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree which used the Linguistic Competence C1 Descriptors established by Council of Europe (2020) as a reference for the items. As Vogt (2011) notes, such scales are highly effective for quantifying subjective perceptions within

academic environments to provide a statistical baseline for the study.

The original instrument from Vega-Abarzúa et al. (2025) consisted of a demographic section, a 5-point Likert scale addressing the five subdimensions of linguistic competence adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference and a semi-structured interview with 10 questions related to participants' understanding, attitudes and challenges. The adaptation of the instrument for this study, included few changes, particularly changing the context of the questions to the Mexican context and program of the students and including the questions of the interview in the same online instrument with the Likert-scale questions. No other changes were made to the original scale or open-ended questions.

This section focused on the perceived linguistic competence toward the C1 level. To measure the intensity of perceptions regarding their linguistic C1 competence, this section was subdivided into five linguistic dimensions: General Linguistic Range (4 items), Vocabulary Range (5 items), Grammatical Accuracy (2 items), Phonological Control (9 items), and Orthographic Control (4 items).

The second was the qualitative section, which comprises three open-ended question subdivisions. These subdivisions are: Understanding (6 items), Attitudes (5 items), and Challenges (3 items). The open-ended questions were designed to elicit rich, descriptive data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These questions allowed participants to elaborate on their personal challenges with specific language skills (grammar, vocabulary, speaking, listening), their conceptual understanding of the CEFR C1 descriptors, and their perceived level, specifically developed to measure the intensity and distribution of participants' attitudes toward the C1 proficiency requirement, as well as their self-perceived linguistic competence. By embedding both closed and open-ended items within a single instrument, the study ensured a holistic data set that bridged the gap between general trends and individual student narratives.

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining institutional consent, the instrument was administered digitally as a diagnostic activity by the professors of the class who were also the researchers of this study. The 106 participants were informed of the study's purpose, and anonymity was guaranteed. The initial section of the digital instrument consisted of an informed consent form; by clicking the 'Continue' button, participants provided their explicit consent to engage in the study while acknowledging their right to withdraw at any time they wanted. The survey was shared during the semesters of January-June 2025, August-December 2025, and January-June 2026 during the seventh semester in the English Certification Laboratory C1 course.

Data Analysis

Following the mixed-methods framework proposed by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010), data were analyzed using triangulation. The first step was the analysis of the quantitative data to identify general trends in perceptions. The second step was to analyse qualitative data obtained from the open-ended questions using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Such analysis involved an iterative process of initial coding, searching for patterns, and defining themes related to participants' understanding, attitudes, and challenges towards C1 level. Once quantitative and qualitative analyses were done, the triangulation stage involved data merging, where qualitative themes were used to validate, contrast, or illustrate the statistical results, thereby enhancing the study's overall inference quality (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Findings

The quantitative data analysis of the n=106 EFL pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding C1 linguistic competence revealed a generally high level of self-efficacy across the instrument's 25 items, subdivided in five sections which demonstrated strong internal consistency (alpha = .936).

When examining the subdimensions independently, most demonstrated acceptable to high reliability. Subdimension 4 (9 items) exhibited the highest internal consistency (α = 0.850), followed closely by Subdimension 2 (α = 0.821), Subdimension 1 (α = 0.807), and Subdimension 5 (α = 0.757). Subdimension 3, which consists of only two items, yielded a lower alpha coefficient (α = 0.646). While this value is below the traditional 0.70 threshold, lower alpha values are common and generally acceptable in the scales containing fewer than three items. Overall, the statistics indicate that the instrument reliably captures the constructs under investigation (Table 4).

Table 4. Reliability and descriptive statistics (n=106)

Subdimensions	***Items***	**(M)**	**(SD)**	**(α)**
I. General Linguistic Range	4	3.656	0.632	0.807
II. Vocabulary Range	5	3.532	0.629	0.821
III. Grammatical Accuracy	2	3.429	0.695	0.646
IV. Phonological Control	9	3.907	0.513	0.850
V. Orthographic Control	4	3.762	0.583	0.757

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Data trends suggest that while participants largely identify as possessing C1-level skills, their confidence is significantly stratified according to specific linguistic domains. Table 5 comprises the five sections percentages of strongly agreement, disagreement, neutral, agreement and strongly agreement of the participants (n=106).

According to data illustrated in Table 5, the quantitative analysis of the perceived C1 linguistic competence among (n=106) pre-service English teachers (PSTs) reveal a clear stratification of perceived self-efficacy. While the overall confidence is moderate to high, the data distinctly highlights where PSTs feel most and least certain about meeting the C1 standard, with the neutral responses being key indicators of uncertainty.

The highest levels of self-perceived competence are concentrated in the technical and communicative foundation of the language, with the Phonological Control (50.3%) the highest. This section registered the highest overall positive response rate at 72.2% (50.3% Agree & 21.9% Strongly Agree). This result suggests the strongest conviction among PSTs regarding their ability to maintain functional intelligibility. The low disagreement (3.9%) suggests a clear consensus that their non-native accents do not impede comprehensible communication in professional settings. The Orthographic Control section is the second strongest, with a combined positive response rate of 64.5% (47.75% Agree & 16.75% Strongly Agree). This is, PSTs feel highly competent in the mechanical and formal aspects of writing, such as spelling, punctuation, and layout, viewing these as the most accessible components of C1 proficiency.

Table 5. Perceived C1 linguistic competency of PSETs (n=106)

Subdimension	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
	%	*%*	*%*	*%*	*%*
I. General Linguistic Range	1	5	34	48	12
II. Vocabulary Range	1	9.75	38.75	40.25	10.25
III.Grammatical Accuracy	0	12.5	39	40.5	8
IV.Phonological Control	0	4	23.7	50.3	22
V. Orthographic Control	0	5	30	48	17

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The area of greatest hesitation is located in the Grammatical Accuracy which is identified as the primary threshold of difficulty for the PSTs, yielding the most uncertain and lowest confident results. The third section in Table 5 has the lowest percentage of positive responses at 48% (40.5% Agree & 7.5% Strongly Agree). This shows that fewer than half of the participants are confidently asserting they possess the high degree of consistent, grammatical control required by the C1 level. Additionally, subdimension III registered the highest rate of neutrality at 39% which reveals a critical indicator of uncertainty. It suggests that while PSTs may be functionally fluent in general conversation, they are uncertain about their ability to master the structural precision and error-free consistency expected at the C1 standard, this means a perceived developmental plateau. PSTs' responses also recorded the highest rate of disagreement at 12.5% (0% Strongly Disagree & 12.5% Disagree), confirming that a significant minority actively recognizes a deficit in their grammatical skills.

PSTs generally believe they possess a broad range of language. However, the high neutral response rate of 34% suggests significant hesitation regarding the overall flexibility and scope needed to handle complex topics with ease. The Vocabulary Range section shows a slightly higher percentage than Grammatical Accuracy, the positive rate of 50.5% is compromised by the second-highest neutral response rate of 38.75%. Thus, high percentage of the neutrality indicates uncertainty regarding the lexical depth required for C1, specifically concerning the use of low-frequency idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms that characterize "effortless" language use.

Data analysis confirms a critical distinction between the participants' confidence in technical skills (Phonological and Orthographic Control) and their confidence in structural precision and sophisticated range (Grammatical Accuracy and Vocabulary Range). The highest positive results indicate a strong foundation in mechanics and intelligibility, while the lowest positive results and the highest neutral responses, particularly in Grammatical Accuracy, demonstrate that structural precision remains the most challenging and uncertain barrier for PSTs transitioning toward mandatory C1 certification.

Qualitative Findings

The open-ended questions showed data on pre-service teachers' understanding, attitudes, and challenges towards the C1 proficiency level. Thematic data analysis was conducted to identify the most salient subthemes for each of the initial identified themes, as shown in Table 6. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data, and identified preliminary codes related to the research questions and initial themes of the instrument (understanding, attitudes, and challenges). Then, based on the research questions, themes were created and

relevant excerpts from all participants' responses were grouped until no new data was found to guarantee data saturation. Finally, to ensure credibility, the researchers informed participants about the main aim of the diagnostic activity (instrument) and latter shared the answers in class to listen to participants' opinions and insights of the research topic. Later, both researchers found commonalities expressed in their groups and connected them with previous research in different settings.

Table 6. Qualitative thematic analysis

Main Themes		Sub-Themes
I.	Understanding	1.1. Definition and CEFR framework 1.2. Demonstration and certification 1.3. Requirement of the program 1.4. Mexican ELT standards
II.	Attitudes	2.1. Self-evaluation of current level 2.2. Support of the teacher education program 2.3. Perceived preparation to reach C1 level 2.4. Perceived relevance to the profession
III.	Challenges	3.1. Linguistic barriers 3.2. Gaps in the teacher education program 3.3. Uncertainty about preparation or access to certification

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Understanding

The first theme, "Understanding", sought to identify how pre-service teachers defined C1 level and how familiar they were with its characteristics.

Definition and CEFR framework

Findings indicate that, overall, participants define C1 level as an advanced language level determined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) that includes the mastery of complex texts and structures, as well as enough fluency to communicate. For instance, Participant 63 states the following: "*The C1 level is an*

advanced level of language proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages (CEFR). At this level, a person can understand complex texts, both literary and technical, express themselves fluently and spontaneously, and use the language flexibly and effectively in social, academic, and professional contexts." Although most of the participants do not make explicit reference to the CEFR, the vast majority of the segments retrieved confirm that they acknowledge the complexity of the level, as expressed by Participant 55 "I know that it is not easy to get a C1 level because you need to practice a lot." and the mastery of 4 language skills " It's a level that requires all the 4 skills to be not certainly mastered but rather be proficient while using the language or comprehending it." (Participant 87)

Demonstration and certification

Moreover, participants understand that the C1 level can be demonstrated in two main ways: First, by external agents, such as standardized certification examinations, and second, by informal assessments like classwork, teachers' evaluations, or self-evaluation. Most of the participants refer to the first option, agreeing with Participant 39 when mentioning "It's demonstrated by taking recognized English exams, like the Cambridge C1 Advanced (CAE), TOEFL, or IELTS. These exams test skills such as speaking, writing, reading, and listening to prove that someone has reached the C1 level." On the contrary, segments like Participant 64's "However, universities and professors may assess it through classwork and internal evaluations based on CEFR standards" suggest that pre-service teachers might have a sense of accomplishment in their language level based on how their teachers assess their proficiency or how they perceive their own level as mentioned by Participant 70 "It is demonstrated through a perfect or almost perfect use of grammar, an appropriate pronunciation and fluency while speaking, being able to write a text without misspellings or punctuation mistakes, and having the ability to listen to something without feeling lost."

Requirement of the program

Finally, most of the participants recognize the importance of achieving a C1 because it is a mandatory requirement for graduation from their teacher education program. Many responses align with Participant 3's opinion regarding this demand *"My program requires a specific level of English proficiency. For example, to graduate, we need to demonstrate a C1 level".* In fact, answers in this theme reflect that PSTs are aware of the linguistic demands of the program that require an A2 level as a minimum to enter the career and to move to a C1 level at the end of the BA. Participant 68 summarizes this view in the following segment "*I need a C1 for obtaining my degree, but when I started this degree the level required was A2. I consider that I have been improving my English, which is ideal since I will be an English teacher in the future."*

Mexican ELT standards

However, despite the general understanding of the C1 proficiency level, the evaluation agents, and the requirements of the programs, most participants show little or no knowledge about how these standards are

aligned to Mexican education language policies and how or why these are implemented. Phrases such as *"I don't know about that" (*Participant 2) or *"I honestly don't know"* (P85) show a lack of understanding of the rationale behind the program and the profession requirements.

Attitudes

The second theme, "Attitudes," primarily describes how PSTs perceive their own language level and the attitudes towards its relevance to the teaching/translation profession, as well as how prepared they feel with their education program.

Self-evaluation of current level

When asked about their English proficiency level, only a few participants reported they had a C1 level, while most of them confirmed that they were either below or close to the required level. These responses suggest that some participants seem quite unsure about having the C1 level in all language skills; for instance, Participant 87 points out the following "*I may say that if I focus on reading and listening, I probably have C1, because I understand accents and have a wide lexicon. But in producing skills I don't feel certainly confident. So in general, I am below C1."* Moreover, a strong recognition of their current level based on assessments generates a sense of a lack of language proficiency as indicated in these assertions "*No, I do not have a C1 level. I took a test from Cambridge last month and it said that I have B2 level. But now I know that I have to improve to get C1 and get my certificate by the end of this semester"* (Participant 88) and "*Currently I have a B2 level but I'm sure I will be C1 soon because I can understand conversations easily, I have a good level of vocabulary and I'm open to learn more"* (Participant 51). These affirmations show a slightly positive attitude towards the C1 language proficiency, showing PSTs are aware of the current language levels but recognize they have the skills and motivations to achieve C1 soon.

Support of the teacher education program

Interestingly, most participants hold a positive attitude towards the support their teacher education program gives them to prepare to reach the C1 level, though they also recognize it has its limitations, which might affect their perception of their abilities to reach the level. To illustrate this paradox, while Participant 70 holds a more positive view, stating, *"It [the program] has enriched my abilities in an exponential way. After all the subjects I have taken in the last two years, I have learned many structures and expressions that I am able now to use in a common conversation."* Participant 10 expresses a completely negative attitude, mentioning, *"I think it is deficient. I really believe the school could do more to help us achieve the C1 level. The lab classes are not enough, since we cover a lot of content in a short period of time."* Nonetheless, it can be assumed that attitudes vary due to each individual's experience, so despite having some segments attributing a negative attitude, most segments indicate that Certification Laboratories courses, test simulations, and teachers' support are important activities the program offers, while some improvements are needed in the development of oral communication and written skills as mentioned by Participant 39 "*I think the program provides good support by offering courses focused on grammar, vocabulary, and communication. However, sometimes it could include more real-life scenarios or advanced-level practice."*

Perceived preparation to reach C1 level

PSTs stress that their teacher education program has been beneficial not only in the acquisition and mastery of language and professional skills but also in providing them with opportunities to increase their language proficiency during the program. Participant 65 reflects on these benefits by mentioning the following "*Yes, it has helped me improve fluency, confidence, and academic skills in English. It has also prepared me to use the language in real-life teaching and translation contexts.* This positive attitude is reflected in most participants' segments, where they point out, they feel somewhat confident in reaching the C1 level soon by acknowledging that some extra effort and practice are needed, besides what the program has to offer. Participant 36 said "*Honestly, I feel too prepared to be able to receive and reach the C1 level. I really enjoy learning new things and I am a fast learner. Besides, I would like to prove that I can improve my English level and skills.*

Perceived relevance to the profession

The previous findings correlate positively with PSTs' attitudes towards the relevance of achieving a C1 level with the demands of their future profession. Data indicates that by achieving this proficiency level, there will be a positive impact on their teaching effectiveness and translation work. To illustrate this, Participant 4 indicates that *"C1 proficiency in English can have a significant impact in the classroom and my future profession. As an English teacher, it allows me to provide accurate explanations, model proper language use, and engage confidently with students in a different situation,* while Participant 5 points out "*C1 proficiency allows for a deeper understanding of the language, which is essential for teaching and Translating complex texts."* Moreover, Participant 18 exemplifies that another benefit is related to getting more and better job opportunities in the following statement "*I will develop more professionally for international opportunities that required this advanced level, and usually they're the ones with highest paid."* In

sum, this linguistic requirement is described as an essential element for their professional life, as Participant 26 stresses,

"It has a significant impact both in the classroom and in the professional development of those aspiring to be English teachers and translators, C1 level allows for fluent and accurate communication, it also amplifies your opportunities for professional and personal growth."

Challenges

The third, and last theme, "Challenges", identifies the main difficulties PSTs experience while trying to attain a C1 proficiency level. Linguistic barriers, along with the program's gaps, are described as the most influential subthemes. Additionally, feelings of uncertainty about their preparation process are described in this section, followed by recommendations from PSTs to the teacher education program.

Linguistic barriers

Firstly, participants reported that the most common linguistic barriers include the development of speaking fluency and good pronunciation skills, and limited real-world practice opportunities, which might affect their confidence. Participant 9 describes this situation in this assertion "*There's been difficulties in my confidence when I want to speak out loud, because I'm afraid of making mistakes in the pronunciation of some words and that leads me to lose practice and therefore not being able to speak fluently."* Also, Participant 90 agrees with the previous quote, adding that the lack of practice in real-world settings affects its speaking confidence *"Lack of confidence when speaking, limited opportunities for real-life interaction in English."*

In addition to this productive skill, the other important linguistic barriers are related to grammar understanding and vocabulary usage, while the least repeated are writing, reading, and listening skills. Some segments that illustrate these difficulties are expressed by Participants 31, 85, and 87

"The grammar rules and a little bit of vocabulary" (Participant 31)

"I am learning a lot about grammar and vocabulary, recognizing that there are areas where I need to improve, such as writing, passive voice, and verb tenses" (Participant 85)

"I think I need more vocabulary to express my ideas more fluent because when I use the language, I always doubt about which words I have to choose to express myself" (Participant 87)

Uncertainty about preparation or access to certification

Finally, participants reported that in some cases, linguistic barriers cause negative feelings such as a lack of confidence in using the language, embarrassment, nervousness, and anxiety. For example, PSTs reported that the process of preparation for a C1 certification provokes feelings of uncertainty regarding the ability to achieve the required certification level, the stress of the exam timing, and the preparation time required to master certain skills. Participant 94 said that the process of preparation is frustrating "*Frustration, and unawareness about how much was going to take me to develop more my English and if I would fail or stay behind".* Negative feelings through the process are shown in this segment "constant self-doubt, stress, anxiety" (Participant 37). Participant 45 describes these challenges in the following quote "*The time that I need to practice, I haven't found the correct way of studying. And maybe I'm lacking motivation"* and Participants 35 illustrates this situation about examinations "*Take the final exam, I get nervous when I'm doing an exam, besides you must do it quickly."*

In sum, the quantitative and qualitative findings revealed some apparent discrepancies. One of the most notable differences. First, while more than 70% of the participants reported having positive perceptions about their phonological control, the qualitative segments reported pronunciation as one of the most difficult linguistic barriers, along with speaking skills. Secondly, in general terms, grammar accuracy and vocabulary range were reported to be moderate on the Likert scale; however, participants' statements showed that PSTs still feel unconfident in using complex grammar structures and understanding and usage of advanced vocabulary. While some data were found to be contradictory, participants' attitudes towards their linguistic capabilities confirmed the positive tendency in the statistical data of the general linguistic range. Though some participants' quotes indicate that they are at a B2 level, their answers suggest they are improving and more motivated and might be able to increase their perceived self-efficacy to reach C1 levels. Finally, orthographic control showed itself to be the highest, which is consistent with qualitative data, where little or no responses reported having difficulties in this category.

Discussion & Conclusions

The findings of the study highlight the perceived linguistic competence, understanding, attitudes, and challenges of 106 EFL Mexican PSTs regarding their perceived C1 proficiency level.

The first aim of this study was to identify PSTs perceptions towards their C1 proficiency level. The overall results indicated that there is a positive perception about their linguistic abilities, particularly in phonological control, orthographic control, and linguistic range; however, lexical and grammatical range and accuracy represent the areas participants struggle the most. Although the pre-service teachers demonstrated moderate to high confidence in technical areas of the language, they still show difficulties with the flexibility and idiomatic depth expected at the C1 level.

Nonetheless, both quantitative and qualitative findings reveal a notable discrepancy regarding phonological control, exposing a critical tension in the pre-service teachers' linguistic development. Quantitatively, participants demonstrated the highest levels of perceived self-efficacy in this domain, with 72.3% reporting positive confidence in their phonological control and mechanical intelligibility. Viewed through the lens of Bandura's self-efficacy theory, these results suggest that students possess a strong belief in their technical ability to produce sounds accurately. However, the qualitative narratives complicate this finding; participants repeatedly identified speaking and pronunciation as their primary linguistic barriers, frequently describing feelings of stress, anxiety, and self-doubt when required to perform orally. This contradiction can be effectively understood through Krashen's affective filter hypothesis. While students perceived themselves with enough self-efficacy to produce the language, the mandatory requirement of C1 certification significantly raises their affective filter. Consequently, these emotional and psychological stressors might hinder their ability to access their technical skills during oral production. This combination of elements highlights that relying solely on technical "Can-Do" descriptors is insufficient; teacher education programs must also address the socio-emotional dimensions and performance anxieties inherent in language proficiency development.

In terms of participant's understanding of C1, our findings align with previous studies (Hishamudin and Kee, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2026; Phoolaikao & Sukying, 2021; Vega-Abarzúa et al., 2025). It is clear that PSTs, possess well-informed knowledge about the linguistic requirement of the C1 proficiency level regarding the complexity of the language; however, it seems that they cannot accurately established the right level when comparing their own proficiency level. Therefore, as mentioned in previous studies there is a need for explicit information about the CEFR so that they become more aware of the complexities of this standard, and be certain about the ways to demonstrate it.

Regarding participants' attitudes towards C1 proficiency, PSTs reported a general positive attitude towards C1 proficiency, similarly to participants in Ramírez-Draughn and Cárdenas Tamburini's (2023) and Vega-Abarzúa et al.'s (2025). Though they recognize they are in the process of achieving it, they constantly stress their motivations and needs to improve in order to reach the required level. Unlike previous studies (Nguyen et al., 2026) in which participants refer a close relationship of language proficiency, findings report that with the support of the language subjects in the program and constant practice of the language, there is a shared optimism of attainment among participants, not only of linguistic skills but also an improvement in pedagogical and translation abilities. This finding suggests that PSTs recognize the value of C1 certification level as a standard of quality and that it is definitely a beneficial asset for professional development and job opportunities.

In relation to the challenges, PSTs reported linguistic barriers and program's gaps as the most challenging factors for getting a C1 level like other researchers (Hishamudin & Kee; 2023; Nguyen et al., 2026; Ramírez-Draughn & Cárdenas Tamburini, 2023). In both quantitative and qualitative data grammar and vocabulary range and accuracy proved to be the highest in this category while pronunciation and speaking skills were only reported in qualitative responses. Interestingly, while some PSTs appreciate the program provides subjects directly related to foster language skills and expose them to certification assessments; there is still a group of students who criticize the lack of practice in real settings and opportunities to develop speaking and pronunciation which prevent them to feel more confident in attaining the required level. Additionally, the lack of confidence in the development of linguistic skills, a normal feeling in non-native English speakers (Susilo, 2019; Faez & Karas, 2019), provokes negative reactions such as stress, anxiety, embarrassment, and nervousness to the exams, the process of preparation, and the pressure to reach the level.

The present study shows some important limitations. First, the data reports participants' self-perceived proficiency rather than objective proficiency based on a standard examination. Second, the adapted section of the original instrument for qualitative data collection does not allow for "in-depth" data as interviews. Third, the instrument used was not piloted or validated by an expert in our context. Finally, the researcher's dual role as course professor and researcher may have influenced students' responses or their decisions regarding participation in the study.

Further research could explore the relationship of PSTs' perceptions and the results of a C1 examination and the influence of the Certification Laboratory courses in the development of linguistic skills through the program to expand upon these results. Additionally, in-depth

interviews or focus groups could be conducted. The significance of these findings lies in their potential to inform teacher education programs to make informed curricular decisions to better prepare PSTs for the proficiency requirements for English language teachers.

Findings of this study suggest the need for specific curriculum adjustments that focus on increasing institutional preparation for certification and reduce student anxiety.

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