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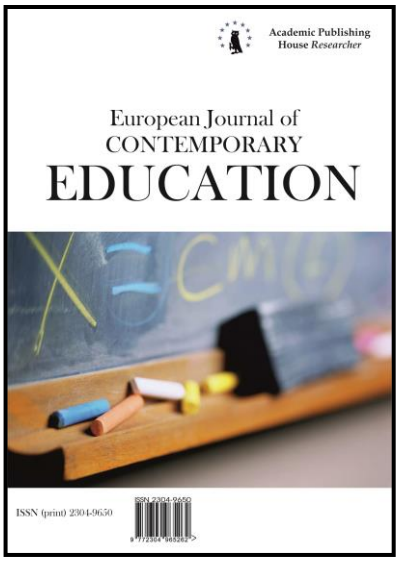

Variables Affecting Proficiency in English as a Second Language

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Abstract

This study explores different variables leading to proficiency in English as a second language. Level of English on a placement exam taken upon entering a private university in Mexico was correlated to several variables. Additionally, participants (N=218) were asked their perception of their own proficiency. A linear regression and a one-factor ANOVA were carried out. Three variables best explain the level obtained on the placement exam. These are: number of instruction hours, type of school, and how frequently the learner reads in English. Findings also show that the participants' perception of their proficiency corresponds to the results obtained on the placement test.

Keywords: English as a second language, proficiency, placement test

1. Introduction

English is the language of technology, of business and of science (Graddol, 2006) and it is becoming increasingly common for speakers of other languages to learn English. In Latin America, for example, several countries have established educational policies designed to increase proficiency in English among their populations. Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, Honduras, Peru, Costa Rica, and Paraguay have all implemented educational policies in the past two decades with this end in mind (Sanchez, Diez, 2014).

In Mexico, for example, English as a second language was included in educational programs beginning in 1993, first, in secondary and high school, and later in elementary schools. The National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE) was implemented in 2009 and expanded in 2012, replacing local or state-wide programs. Mexico thus became the first Latin

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American country to mandate English instruction in levels K-12 in public schools (Sayer, 2015). In higher education, the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) has included as an objective "Encouraging the teaching of, at least, one second language (mainly English) as part of the curriculum, and favoring its inclusion as an exit requirement from higher education" (SEP, 2007: 45).

In spite of these efforts, the results have not been altogether favorable. The citizen group Mexicanos Primero has been a strong critic of the PNIEB program, concluding that "in Mexico, English has been taught little, badly, and late" (O'Donoghue, Calderón, 2015: 73). A British Council study (2015) mentions that only 18 % of Mexican public schools have implemented PNIEB, reaching only 6.7 million students, in a country of roughly 120 million people.

In the private sector, however, the English language fares better. Access to more instruction hours with better prepared teachers and in smaller groups contributes to a better level of English among students in private schools. Davies (2009) describes a study which compares the level of English between students from private universities in Mexico and students from public universities. The study found a strong correlation between the socio-economic level of the participants and the level of English as shown by an exam. The study explicitly compares two universities in central Mexico – one is public and the other private. In the public university, 7 % of the students surveyed demonstrated a higher level of English proficiency, with 78 % placing in basic or elementary levels. On the other hand, 16 % of the students from the private university placed in basic or elementary levels, with 41 % placing in advanced levels.

This present study was carried out at a private university in Mexico. It aims to explore the variables which can lead to a better learning of the English language in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. The study correlates the level of English obtained by participants on a placement exam taken upon entering the university, with variables such as instruction hours, type of institution, and type of teacher.

Few studies have looked at the gap between the quality of learning in private and public institutions in Latin America. The few which have done so tend to be qualitative (Mejia, 2016). Understanding the variables which really make a difference in language learning is necessary in order to use resources more effectively, and to reach a country's goals for bilingual education.

2. Literature Review

Second language acquisition has been extensively studied from both cognitive and the sociocultural perspectives. The first view emphasizes individual characteristics of the learner, whereas the second considers the social context of learning. Most linguists, however, tend to believe in the Fundamental Differences hypothesis which states that adults and children approach language learning in different ways. Adults, for example, tend to be more analytical; thus, they learn better by direct instruction and explicit explanations of linguistic concepts (Fromkin et al., 2011; Brown, 2000). Proficiency of the mother tongue also has an impact on second language learning (Lightbown, Spada, 2013).

Though most people learn their first language easily, the same cannot be said for the second language. Facility or difficulty in learning a second language depends on a variety of factors, both individual and contextual. The individual differences can be divided into two categories: affective factors and cognitive factors (Brown, 2000; Lightbown, Spada, 2013; Mitchell, Myles, 2004). The social context where the language learning takes place is also important. This includes elements such as learning opportunities – either formal classroom instruction or informal acquisition, perhaps by contact with native speakers (Mitchell, Myles, 2004).

2.1. Cognitive factors

Cognitive factors include intelligence, aptitude, and learning strategy use. Persons with above average intelligence, for example, tend to be better language learners, especially in the context of the classroom (Mitchell, Myles, 2004).

Though it is not easy to distinguish language aptitude from general intelligence, some studies (among them Gardner & MacIntyre, 1992, quoted in Mitchell & Myles, 2004) show that some specific abilities correlate to language learning facility. Among these are phonemic coding ability, grammatical sensitivity, inductive language learning ability, and associative memory. Harley &

Hart (1997) quoted in Mitchell & Myles (2004) state that these skills have shown to be the best predictors of success in second language learning.

Some studies – for example, that of Ranta (2002), or that of Erard (2012), both mentioned in Lightbown & Spada (2013) – have shown that learners with ability for language analysis tend to be more successful learners, including those who study in programs without a grammar focus: "... learners with greater aptitude can figure out the rules of language based on input" (p. 32). Likewise, successful learners show, besides aptitude, a willingness to work hard to reach their goals.

Learning strategy use is another cognitive factor. Though it has been shown that more capable language learners tend to use more strategies, it is not clear if they are more capable because they use these strategies, or if they use strategies because they are more capable learners. The metacognitive strategies are the ones with greatest impact on second language learning (Brown, 2000; Santana, 2005).

2.2 Affective factors

The affective domain includes a variety of factors: empathy, self-esteem, extroversion, inhibition, imitation, anxiety, attitudes, among others. Attitudes toward the language are of particular importance because the greater the learner's interest in the language and its culture, the easier learning will be (Mishan, 2005).

Attitude is linked to motivation. Gardner & MacIntyre (1992) quoted in Mitchell & Myles (2004) explain motivation as the desire to reach a goal, the effort devoted towards the goal, and the satisfaction obtained in the doing the activities needed to reach the goal. Dornyei & Chan (2013) state that "learning motivation in second language comes from three different possible sources: (a) the learners' internal desire to become an effective L2 user, (b) social pressures coming from the learner's environment to master the L2, and (c) the actual experience of being engaged in the L2 learning process" (p. 439). Different studies have shown a significant correlation between motivation and success in language learning.

One final decisive affective factor is language anxiety, a phenomenon which has been the object of several studies (Horwitz, 1988, among others) and which has a negative impact on performance. Its counterpart, self-confidence or Willingness to Communicate (WTC), contributes to second language proficiency (Lightbown, Spada, 2013). This is partly due to the important role of output- the opportunity to put into practice that which has been learned. The practice may take place within the classroom, or outside the classroom, through everyday activities.

The importance of input – access to oral and written examples of the language is widely recognized. Fewer authors, however, has written about the importance of output. Swain (1985) and her colleagues (Swain, Lapkin, 1995) highlight that it is not necessary to know the grammar of a language in order to understand it, whereas it is necessary to know the grammar in order to create spoken or written messages. Thus, output may be more effective than input in reaching language proficiency (Mitchell, Myles, 2004).

It is also necessary to consider the sociocultural context in learning a second language. Learning not only occurs within a social environment, but the reason for learning a language is also social: one learns a second language in order to communicate with others.

2.3. Age as a factor in language learning

Contrary to what many people believe, the age at which a learner begins his or her studies does not seem to be a determining factor in language learning. A study carried out by Lightbown (2012) and cited in Lightbown & Spada (2013), showed that age is not as important as the number of hours of instruction. Muñoz (2006) found that "...late starters outperform early starters on most ... oral fluency measures ... and support the view that an early start does not necessarily imply an advantage in the acquisition of a second language in the formal learning context" (p. ix).

Brown (2000) mentions that children at age seven or younger do not have a greater advantage in language learning than children at age 11 or 12. There is strong evidence for a critical period for the acquisition of a "native" accent, but not for other aspects of language learning. In Mexico, as in other countries, there has been a strong push to implement English classes in pre-school, based on the belief that the younger learners start, the more effective their learning will be. However, the only advantage there seems to be for an early start is better pronunciation.

As more governments seek to implement mandatory English learning in school, the number of studies on the effectiveness of these measures increases. The following are a sample.

Ardasheva & Tretter (2013) carried out a study involving 840 English language learners from third to tenth grade in 37 schools throughout the United States. They used Hierarchical Linear Modeling for their study, which showed that four variables – spoken proficiency, metacognitive strategies, reading skills in their native language, and the quality of teaching at their school contributed in an important way to the participants' reading comprehension in the second language.

A study in Chile (Rodriguez, 2013) used Inferential Bivariate Analysis to find the differences in achievement between students in public and in private schools. The study took advantage of the national database, which contains data on over 65 thousand students. The study showed that levels of achievement are low in both reading and listening comprehension in both types of institution. There was a slight advantage for private schools, which was explained in terms of socioeconomic context. Once this variable was controlled, it was found that students from public schools showed greater communicative competence.

Baker-Smemoe, Dewey, Bown & Martinsen (2014) studied 102 English speakers who participated in study abroad programs to Mexico, Spain, France, Russia, Egypt and China. The researchers sought to understand the factors which come into play in taking advantage of the time abroad to learn the local language. The variables studied were: time abroad, opportunities to use the language, cultural sensitivity, sex and age of the participants, personality, and participants' social networks (the size, dispersion, and density of the networks). They found that the variables which better predict an increase in proficiency were cultural sensitivity and social networks.

A Spanish study (Valero, Jimenez, 2015) examined the possible existence of a specific language learning difficulty. They interviewed teachers and tutors to detect low performing students, and to determine if the difficulty existed only in the English class, or if it was generalizable to other subjects. The study showed that 79 % of the students who failed English classes failed other subjects as well. In only 21 % of the cases did they find a specific difficulty in learning English as a second language.

A study carried out in Costa Rica (Lopez et al., n/d) looked at the impact of social context on second language learning. It attributes this considerable impact on, in part, the availability in higher socio-economic levels to resources such as the internet, books, works of art, and other cultural goods.

Finally, a Colombian study (Mejia, 2016), sought to explain the achievement gap in English language learning between students of private and public schools, and if this gap has narrowed as a result of government implement policies designed to make Colombia a bilingual country. The study compared exam results from 2008 and 2013. No significant differences were found in terms of achievement, but there was a significant increase in student motivation toward learning the language.

3. Design and Method

This was a non-experimental cross-sectional quantitative study which sought to explain which variables best explained English language proficiency among the selected population. The variables included: study abroad, reasons for studying the language, how often the participant read in English, the hours of instruction, measured in years, the type of school, access to private language tutors, and classes at a language institute.

3.1. Participants

Participants were incoming students at a private university in western Mexico, who took an English language placement test at the beginning of their university studies in August, 2016.

3.2. Sample

897 students registered for the fall term in 2016. They all took an English placement test to determine in which of the eight levels offered at the university they would begin their English studies. These students were all sent a questionnaire. 291 responses were received, of which 218 had complete data (identifying information and placement level).

3.3. Instruments

The placement test used is WebCAPE, administered by Perpetual Works. It is a computer-based adaptive test which determines language knowledge through multiple choice questions and it has been calibrated according to the standards of the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The results adjusted according to the levels specific to the user institution.

The questionnaire sent to the participants was designed by the first author specifically for this studies. The questions are based on the variables which, according to the literature, are the ones which most impact second language learning: number of instruction hours, study abroad, and motivation for study, among others. The questionnaire was made using Google Forms and was distributed to the students via their institutional email accounts.

Incoming students at the university take placement exams in the week prior to the start of their first semester of classes. It takes between five and 20 minutes to answer the test, and students are informed immediately on finishing of their results. The university offers eight different levels of English, as shown in Table 1, with their corresponding level according to the Common European Frame of Reference (CEFR).

Table 1. English levels

Institutional level	CEFR
Basic 1	A1
Basic 2	A2
Intermediate 1	B1
Intermediate 2	B2
Advanced 1	B2.2
Advanced 2	C1
Upper Advanced	C1.2

Table 2 shows the breakdown of where the participants placed, according to the WebCAPE test.

Table 2. Percentage placing in each level

Level	Number of students	Percentage
Basic 1	7	3.21
Basic 2	14	6.42
Intermediate 1	18	8.26
Intermediate 2	60	27.52
Advanced 1	70	32.11
Advanced 2	31	14.22
Upper Advanced	18	8.26
Total	218	100

3.4. Procedure

The statistical procedure consisted of a multiple linear regression and a one-factor ANOVA. Firstly, it was sought to measure the possible influence of the independent variables X1...X11 on the dependent variable (Y1). Later, an ANOVA was carried out to contrast any possible difference among the population variables X1 to X11 with variable factor Y1. Some theoretical perspective on each procedure are given in the following section (Hair et al, 1999; Triola, 2006).

4. Data analysis

A). Multiple Regression Model

For the first regression analysis, two groups of variables are formed. The first is made up of the following variables: INSTHOURS (X1), TYPESCHOOL (X2), LANGINST (X3), PRIVTEACHER (X4), STUDYABROAD (X5), REASONSTUDY (X6), FREQREAD (X7) corresponding to group related to study background. The variables in the second group SPEAK (X8), WRITE (X9), LISTEN (X10), READ (X11) correspond to self-perception of skills. Both groups are predictor variables which are confronted with the score obtained for variable Y.

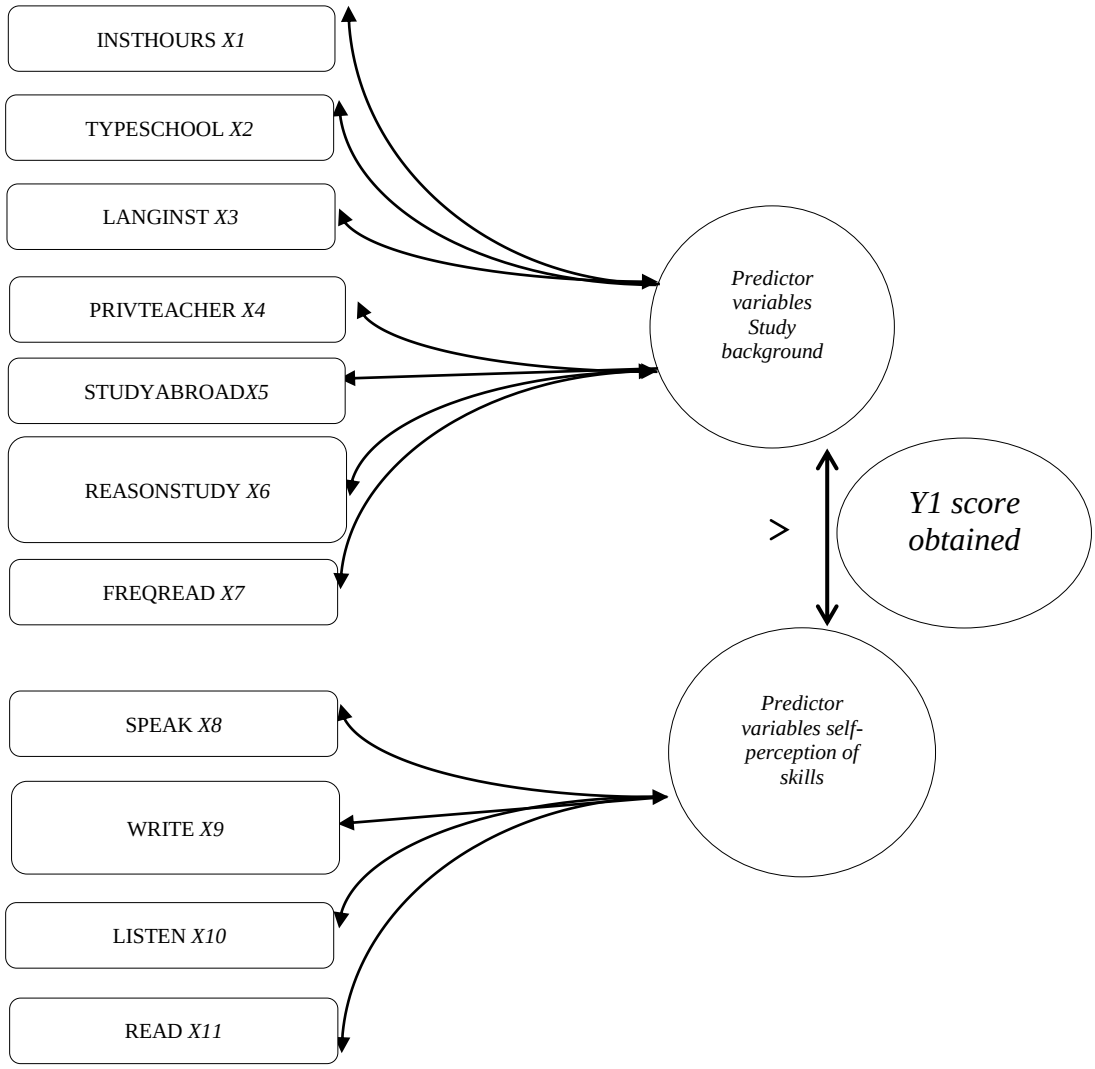

Fig. 1. Regression model by groups of predictor variables (Source: Own)

Following are the results for the group of predictor variables on study background. Table 3 shows the statistics for the regression. The value of the coefficient R^2 (0,324) reveals that the regression equation explains 32.4 % of the values observed. The value of the correlation coefficient (0.569) indicates an acceptable association between the variables. The standard error (1.16) indicates that the model does not have a good fit.

Table 3. Statistical values of predictor variables

Parameter	Value
Multiple Correlation Coefficient	0.569
Coefficient of determination R^2	0.324
R^2 Adjusted	0.302
Standard error	1.163
Observations	218.0

Source: Own

However, the statistical value $F^{7}_{210}(14.394)$ of the test shows a greater value for F in Tables; likewise, the significance value is less than de 0.05 (Table 4); this indicates that the explanatory variables influence jointly and linearly on the dependent variable.

Table 4. Contrast Model (background)

Model	Sum of squares	gl	Quadratic mean	F	F_{Tables}	Sig.
Regression	136.300	7	19.471	14.394	1.747	.000(a)
Residual	284.085	210	1.353			
Total	420.385	217				

Source: Own

Table 5 shows the regression coefficients, the values of the column of non-standard coefficients contain the coefficients that define the equation together with the significance shown in the final column.

Table 5. Signficance values of independent variables

Model	Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	Typ. error	Beta	T	Sig.
(Constant)	1.037	.776		1.337	.183
INSTHOURS	.213	.052	.258	4.088	.000
TYPESCHOOL	.813	.408	.122	1.991	.048
LANGINST	-.186	.166	-.066	-1.122	.263
PRIVTEACHER	-.208	.188	-.066	-1.109	.269
STUDYABROAD	.280	.096	.171	2.929	.004
REASONSTUDY	.073	.091	.047	.811	.419
FREQREAD	.618	.120	.306	5.137	.000

Source: Own

It is observed that only four variables are significant; thus the equation is represented as follows.

Y = 1.037 + .213INSTHOURS + .813TYPESCHOOL + .280STUDYABROAD +.618 FREQREAD

Each value of each independent variable corresponds to a prediction in the dependent variable (Y) based on a constant increase of (1.037) and each of the variables included in the equation.

Results for the group of predictor variables on self-perception of English skills.

Table 6 shows the statistics of the regression; the value of the coefficient R2 (0,324) reveals that the regression equation explains 46.8 % of the observed values. The value of the correlation coefficient (0.684) indicates an acceptable association between the variables. The standard error (1.02) indicates that the model does not have a good fit.

Table 6. Goodness of fit model of dependent variables

Parameter	Value
Multiple correlation coefficient	0.684
Coefficient of determination R^2	0.468
R^2 Adjusted	0.458
Standard error	1.02

However, the value of the test statistic F_213 ^ 4 (46.911) has a value greater than the value in F in Tables; in addition, the value of significance is less than 0.05 (Table 7). This indicates that the explanatory variables influence jointly and linearly on the dependent variable.

Table 7. Contrast model (perception)

Model	Sum of squares	gl	Quadratic mean	F	F_{Tables}	Sig.
Regression	196.891	4	49.223	46.911	1.747	.000(a)
Residual	223.494	213	1.049			
Total	420.385	217				

Table 8 shows the regression coefficients. The values of the non-standardized coefficient column contains the coefficients that define the equation in conjunction with the significance shown in the final column.

Table 8. Regression coefficients (perception)

Model	Non-standardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	Stand. Error	Beta	T	Sig
(Constant)	1.515	.245		6.177	.000
SPEAK	.235	.144	.129	1.635	.104
WRITE	.526	.128	.312	4.100	.000
LISTEN	.232	.138	.128	1.676	.095
READ	.398	.145	.213	2.735	.007

It can be observed that only two of the variables are significant. Thus, the equation can be stated as follows:

$Y = 1.515 + .526WRITE + .398READ.$

Each value of each independent variable corresponds to a prediction in the dependent variable (Y) based on a constant increase of 1,515 and each of the variables included in the equation.

ANOVA Results for INSTHOURS (X1), TYPESCHOOL (X2), LANGINST (X3), PRIVTEACHER (X4), STUDYABROAD (X5), REASONSTUDY (X6), FREQREAD (X7) which make up the group study background and SCORE Y1.

Table 9 (ANOVA) allows us to see that the significance of the variables INSTHOURS, TYPESCHOOL, LANGINST and FREQREAD are lesses than 0.05, which indicates that the students's scores on the placement test varies according to these variables. On the other hand, variables LANGINST, PRIVTEACHER, STUDYABROAD and REASONSTUDY are not significant; that is, these variables do not influence the dependent variable.

Table 9. Significance of the dependent background variables

		Sum of squares	gl	Quadratic mean	F	Sig.
INSTHOURS	Inter-groups	121.520	6	20.253	8.702	.000
	Intra-groups	491.072	211	2.327		
	Total	612.592	217			
TYPESCHOOL	Inter-groups	1.462	6	.244	6.365	.000
	Intra-groups	8.079	211	.038		
	Total	9.541	217			
LANGINST	Inter-groups	3.646	6	.608	2.581	.020
	Intra-groups	49.679	211	.235		
	Total	53.326	217			
PRIVTEACHER	Inter-groups	.894	6	.149	.763	.600

	Intra-groups	41.202	211	.195		
	Total	42.096	217			
STUDYABROAD	Inter-groups	12.220	6	2.037	2.965	.008
	Intra-groups	144.954	211	.687		
	Total	157.174	217			
REASONSTUDY	Inter-groups	3.047	6	.508	.647	.692
	Intra-groups	165.526	211	.784		
	Total	168.573	217			
FREQREAD	Inter-groups	20.353	6	3.392	8.663	.000
	Intra-groups	82.624	211	.392		
	Total	102.977	217			

Table 10 shows that the level of significance of all variables is less than 0.05, which indicates that the students' scores vary according to these variables. Therefore, it is concluded that the populations defined by the dependent variable (SCORE) differs in relation to the variables SPEAK, WRITE, LISTEN, READ; i.e., the score will vary according to whether they believe they speak, write, understand, or read English well.

Table 10. Significance of the dependent perception variables

		Sum of squares	Gl	Quadratic mean	F	Sig.
SPEAK	Inter-groups	48.440	6	8.073	21.585	.000
	Intra-groups	78.918	211	.374		
	Total	127.358	217			
WRITE	Inter-groups	62.251	6	10.375	25.535	.000
	Intra-groups	85.731	211	.406		
	Total	147.982	217			
LISTEN	Inter-groups	48.099	6	8.016	20.904	.000
	Intra-groups	80.915	211	.383		
	Total	129.014	217			
READ	Inter-groups	49.708	6	8.285	24.477	.000
	Intra-groups	71.416	211	.338		
	Total	121.124	217			

5. Discussion of the findings

According to the tests carried out, there are three variables related to learning background which have a greater impact on the level of English, as measured by the placement test.

The first of these, instruction hours, agrees with the literature consulted; a higher number of instruction hours in the second language leads to greater language proficiency (Brown, 2000; Lightbown, Spada, 2013; Muñoz, 2006). This is regardless of the age in which the learner began his or her studies.

The second significant variable – the type of school- also agrees with studies carried out throughout Latin America (Davies, 2009; Mejía, 2016; Rodríguez, 2013), where the academic level tends to be greater in private schools than in public schools. This may be due to the difference in the number of students per group in both types of institution. In Mexico, for example, 70 % of public secondary schools have 30 students or more per group (INEE, 2005).

One last variable, frequency of reading in English, has also shown to influence language proficiency as measured by the placement exams. This element is not included in the literature consulted, though numerous authors (Andersen, 2013; Guo, 2012; Krashen, 2004; Robb, Kano, 2013) have studied the impact of extensive reading on language proficiency.

Finally, as to the variables related to perception of proficiency, it can be seen that the participants' perception of their own mastery of the language corresponds to the reality. Believing

that one speaks, reads, writes and understands the language well all correlated significantly to the level on the placement test.

6. Conclusion

The present study shows that – contrary to common belief – neither the age at which language learning begins, nor learning a language in a country where it is spoken have a significant impact on language proficiency. However, the study also shows that the number of instruction hours devoted to the language is important. Likewise, one element which receives little attention – how often the learner reads- can also lead to greater proficiency.

The findings seem to show that government policies should not focus so much on early start programs for English language learning, but rather on increasing the number of instruction hours devoted to language learning, as well as to implementing reading programs. Both actions will lead to greater proficiency among learners.

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