Assessing the Need for the Implementation of Specialized English Conversation Clubs for Ecotourism Students

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Abstract
        This paper evaluates the need to implement specialized conversational clubs in English for ecotourism students to improve their communication skills. This study was conducted at the Escuela de Ecoturismo, Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, Ecuador. Survey questionnaires were applied, to forty-one students from 4th to 8th level and eighteen lecturers, to collect their opinion regarding the implementation of specialized English conversation clubs. The results showed that both students and teachers agreed that there is a need for implementing English Conversation Clubs.

Keywords: Oral communication; academic performance; EFL; assessment, Tourism

Introduction
        English is the official language of over seventy countries (World Population Review, 2019), and it is considered the lingua franca of the modern world. It is spoken by over a quarter of Earth's population (Crystal, 2012). People use it in almost all areas of science and development and for international communication (Fang & Baker, 2018; Musikhin, 2016). The

tourism sector is one of the fields where English is an essential tool for interactions between tourists, service providers (Al-Saadi, 2015), and inhabitants of the most diverse tourist sites. Many studies on tourism highlight the economic and business nature of this sector (Yuan, Houston, & Cai, 2006); however, although its economic-business side is recognized, tourism cannot be considered as an exclusively commercial activity (Leung et al., 2018). Abarca and Moreno (2001) claim that tourism is an economic activity, but in terms of communication and research, it is also a social discipline with multiple components in which the subjective and human elements play an essential role.

Tourism activities demand a good command of foreign language skills (Davies, 2000), especially English, because it facilitates understanding between tourists and service providers (Al-Saadi, 2015). Therefore, the need to master English today is an indisputable fact in a world where international relations are becoming increasingly important (Ehrenreich, 2010). English facilitates communication between people of different origins (Fang & Baker, 2018) and increases the opportunity of finding a job (Zahedpisheh et al., 2017).

Tourism learners are aware of the significance of English for their professional career (Al-Khatib, 2005; Zahedpisheh et al., 2017), and understand that improved language skills are essential to succeed in the tourism sector (Kostić-Bobanović & Gržinić, 2011). English is a necessary instrument in any tasks performed, from tourist information, activity planning, to management and promotion of destinations or tourist activities, and from intermediating companies to accommodation and transportation providers (Musikhin, 2016). English for tourism programs have to be constructed considering students' needs to fulfill their professional profile (Bracaj, 2014), keeping in mind real communicative situations they will face, so that they are prepared to perform any tasks assigned to them efficiently. Students may use English orally more often than in writing (Bury & Oka, 2017), although of course, they should be able to produce written documents such as letters, budgets, itineraries, also must have telephone conversations, make presentations to audiences, attend fairs and international congresses and need to understand all kinds of written information about tourist destinations (Davies, 2000).

On top of all these capacities, it is necessary to add cultural knowledge of the English-speaking countries, as well as their conventions and social norms to give an adequate professional image. To achieve these objectives, the English teacher must not only deal with academic training in the classroom but must encourage students to keep an open attitude towards the English language and its speakers (McKay, 2002). The language training should be continuous and permanent, taking advantage of any situation outside the classroom to enhance knowledge. Tourism educational institutions should

make every effort to promote this aspect of English learning. However, the methods used are not always adequate, and the content of the classes is not specific to each area. Hence the creation of specialized English conversation workshops for students of tourism may assist to successfully develop the skills needed to succeed in the profession, cover some specific topics about tourism and provide extra practice for tourism students.

Aim
This study aimed to assess the need for the implementation of specialized English conversation clubs for ecotourism students.

Specific objective
- To collect the opinion of the students and lectures of the Ecotourism Engineering School regarding the implementation of specialized English conversation clubs.

Theoretical Framework
Mastering foreign languages is an essential requirement to qualify for a job, especially in the tourism area (Dale & Oliver, 2000). "Language barriers sometimes create misunderstandings and a certain sense of frustration that can be avoided if the staff of any sector related to tourism has a good knowledge of foreign languages as an integral part of quality service (Dale & Oliver, 2000, p. 20)." Proficiency in foreign languages is often required, both in the interactive and formal aspects of the target language (Fortanet & Silveira, 2004; Zahedpisheh et al., 2017).

English for tourism
The language of tourism is one of the competences of concrete expression of a language as a system. Some authors advocate the specificity of tourism discourse and oppose its inclusion as part of the language of business (Cerdá Redondo, 2000). The language of tourism is a select type of communication that differs from other forms of human social exchange because it represents the largest industry in the world. This discursive specificity differentiates the tourist language of others such as the language of dance, architecture, music or business. Using such expressions implies the existence of peculiarities, descriptive phrases or vocabulary associated with these aspects or topics Cerdá Redondo, 2000. In This context, Goeldner and Ritchie (2007) claim that English can be an essential means of communication for future tourism professionals for communicating with other industry executives, tourists and preparing trips for clients to various national and international destinations.

According to Carbonell (2000) the socioeconomic importance of tourism and the lack of definition of English for tourism as a subject, have contributed to the consideration of English for tourism, as a component of Business English business on many occasions. The fact that both extensions of the English language have specific similar terms suggests the idea that tourist English shares particular points in common with business English (Carbonell, 2000). However, the different semantic fields that each branch includes also indicate that English for tourism has unique characteristics that distinguish it from its business counterpart. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approaches has been used to develop skills needed to function in a particular discipline, profession (Basturkmen, 2014) or to conduct a defined task at hand. Some subjects need an emphasis on different linguistic competencies (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005), some jobs may require highly trained personnel in written English, while other professions demand proficiency in spoken English (Wilson, 2018; Yuan et al., 2006). But often, most employers look for staff with excellent command of the four necessary English skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. English for tourism shares many features with business English. It advocates introducing within the program of English for tourism all those situations that belong to the thematic areas of tourism companies. Ellis and Johnson (1994) propose the following list of skills needed to deal with specific circumstances in this area of English use (Table 1).

Table 1. English skills needed to deal with different situations in the tourist industry

Oral production	Make formal and informal presentations, give instructions, or make demonstrations about work, give descriptions or explanations.
Interaction	Visiting a company, or receiving that treatment from others, entertaining or being entertained, participating in informal discussions or meetings, moderating meetings, interviewing, negotiating, talking on the phone.
Oral comprehension	Follow presentations, lectures or talks, instructions, descriptions, or explanations, information sessions.
Written comprehension	Documents (telex, letters and faxes, short memos and reports, professional journals, textbooks, long reports, contracts and legal documents, technical specifications, and manuals) and skills (look for particular points or aspects, read quickly to get general information,).
Written production	Telex, letters and faxes, memos and brief reports, lengthy reports and articles for professional publications, correct notes or reports from others.

Ellis and Johnson (1994)

Donna (2000) and Davies (2000) mention different activities that regularly appear in business English books, which are also roles that belong to the daily operations within the tourism industry: telephone conversations, meetings, negotiations, written correspondence (letters, faxes, emails), presentations, etc. In fact, among the vast offer of English courses, many tourism courses include aspects of business communication. However, besides the common elements, several features make up the uniqueness of English for the tourism industry. These features have to do with the specific context in which English is used for tourism. Donna (2000) and Davies (2000) add some other areas of action in business English. Table 2 presents a summary of these activities.

Table 2. Activities where a good command of English are useful in the business and tourism sectors

Talk to customers	Even if only some business English students need to deal directly with clients as part of their daily work, all students should be able to introduce themselves and talk about their own company if they know and establish a relationship with future or potential clients.
Deal with colleagues from other companies	Almost all business English students will have to deal with visiting foreign colleagues.
Speak with foreign colleagues or superiors	These skills are crucial for students and future professionals. A good impression before a foreign superior or colleague can suppose a professional promotion.
Inform foreign directors	All students working in a multinational company will need to obtain an understanding of relationships with international colleagues or managers according to the company's professional culture. We must ensure that students are aware of the importance of proper use of the language in these cases in terms of professional promotion.
Note taking	This skill combines writing to the same that the oral skills of comprehension and production are put into operation (in meetings or presentations). As this type of writing does not have the reading by another person as a final goal, it must be a very functional activity, without having to be a correct and formal composition as in the case of letters, for example.
Understanding news	Business English students need to be able to watch television, listen to the radio and read newspapers in English to keep up with developments in the international business world.

Donna (2000) and Davies (2000)

The tourist industry, in its commercial and business side, has a series of activities in which the English used will be partly the business itself (Cerdá Redondo, 2000). However, many subjects demonstrate the complexity of the world of tourism and that point out its specificity and uniqueness to the world of business in general: Sales Management, Customer Service, Quality

Management, Sociology, Psychology, Geography, Art and Culture, Tourism Promotion, Marketing, Territorial Resources, etc. The language of tourism is one of the capabilities of more concrete expression of language as a system. Some authors advocate the specificity of tourism discourse and oppose its inclusion as part of the language of business (Cerdá Redondo, 2000). The language of tourism is a select type of communication that differs from other forms of human social exchange because it represents the largest industry in the world. This discursive specificity differentiates the tourist language of others such as the language of dance, architecture, music or business. Using such expressions implies the existence of peculiarities, descriptive phrases or vocabulary associated with these aspects or topics.

Also, in the tourist area, it is crucial to develop cultural awareness to be able to manage some situations that could arise and be potentially uncomfortable both for tourist and for the service provider staffers. Cultural awareness is an "approach to conceptualizing the kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to undertake successful intercultural communication, which explicitly recognizes the cultural dimension of communicative competence (Baker, 2011, p. 64)." It refers to the ability to identify particular characteristics of a foreign culture by comparing it with other known ones. It is essential to pay special attention to the knowledge of geography, customs, or heritage of different countries and relate it to the language teaching, thus, incorporating historical, social, cultural, and artistic aspects that surround the most outstanding regions and cities of each country. It is not only about avoiding conflicts due to cultural differences, but about having good cultural knowledge about the history, the art, the gastronomy, of any place. Therefore, students of English for tourism must acquire linguistic competence-based skills, "not only on the technical knowledge of the field but also on the cultural specificity of the main tourist destinations in which they work. Also, people working in tourism must develop communicative and pragmatic competence; that is, they must have an adequate understanding of different social behaviors and the ability to act in various interactive situations. Finally, understanding diverse disciplines such as art, gastronomy or geography can help to develop the ability to relate them to the relevant linguistic elements (Winterton et al., 2006)

English for Tourism considers general linguistic features to create a discourse of its own (Dann, 1996; Hitchcock, 1998). Also, the language of tourism encourages people, using images, written texts, and audiovisual media, to buy tourist products. There is a restricted thematic core related to the organization and tourist structures, that is, the inn, the travel agencies, and the transport companies. Within this core is the specific language that is used in the communication that takes place between professions in the sector. On the other hand, according to this author, the language of tourism includes in

addition to certain technicalities, other thematic components related to the type of tourist destination concerned and with various cultural aspects such as geography, history, art, or customs and the folklore that are specific to each linguistic area.

According to (Balboni, 1989), the language of tourism is formed by a set of interrelated micro-languages that may have a greater or lesser relevance within each professional sector involved. Thus, this author suggests that we can talk about the hospitality micro-language with high significance in the professional environment of hotels and restaurants, the micro-languages of the international bureaucracy and the transport involved in travel agencies, or the micro-language of the history of art with its plot of importance in the tourist guide profession.

Gil and Colomar (2001) argue that the methodology used in an English for tourism class has two characteristics: the teacher must take into account particular knowledge of the topics related to tourism, and a detailed analysis of the needs of students to develop a program according to the specific materials of the discipline to be used in class.

Finally, tourism students must develop all the skills that allow them to perform well in any task assigned to them. Grammar knowledge, written proficiency, and reading comprehension are fundamental; nevertheless, in the world of tourism, speaking ability is often considered more important than all the other competencies (Bury & Oka, 2017).

Methods

The present study was carried out at the Ecotourism School, Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, Riobamba, Ecuador. Two different surveys were conducted: one addressing students, and another applied to lecturers of the Ecotourism Engineering. A total of 41 students (45.5% of the universe) enrolled in the Ecotourism program, from the fourth to the eighth level (semester), and 18 out of 22 lecturers (81.8% of the universe) participated in the study. The survey questionnaires contained Likert items (Likert, 1932) designed to elicit information about different aspects essential to assess whether the implementation of English conversation clubs may be considered an excellent option to improve Ecotourism students' language skills.

Results

This section presents the results of the surveys applied both to the students of ecotourism and lecturers sharing the different subjects in the School of Ecotourism. The survey questionnaires included items aimed to elicit information on various aspects related to the need for the implementation of Specialized English Conversation Clubs for Ecotourism Students.

Students survey

The survey questionnaire was applied to forty-one students who receive classes from the fourth to the eighth semester at the Ecotourism Engineering School, Faculty of Natural Resources, Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo. The students were asked questions on important aspects to be considered about the need for the implementation of English conversation clubs.

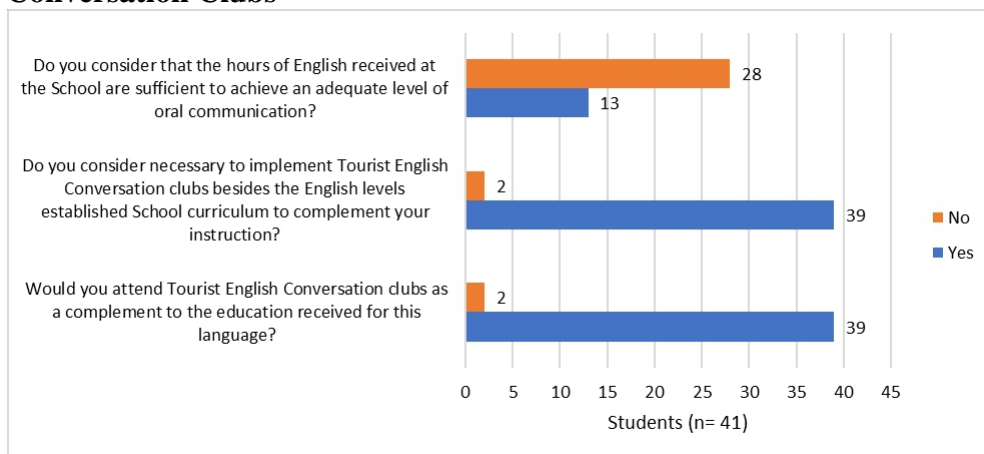**Students' opinion on the need to implement Specialized English Conversation Clubs**

Figure 1. Students opinion on the need for implementation of conversation clubs

Figure 1 shows the results of three questions formulated to the students participating in the survey about their opinion on the time (hours) devoted to English classes, students position on the implementation of English conversation clubs, and whether they would attend to the conversation club sessions. The respondents almost unanimously agreed on the need for implementing conversation clubs (95.1%) and that if offered they would attend to the conversation clubs (95.1%). Also, 68.3% of participants considered that the class time (hours) allocated to English classes was not enough to develop an adequate level of English oral communication.

The time that should be allocated for English Conversation sessions

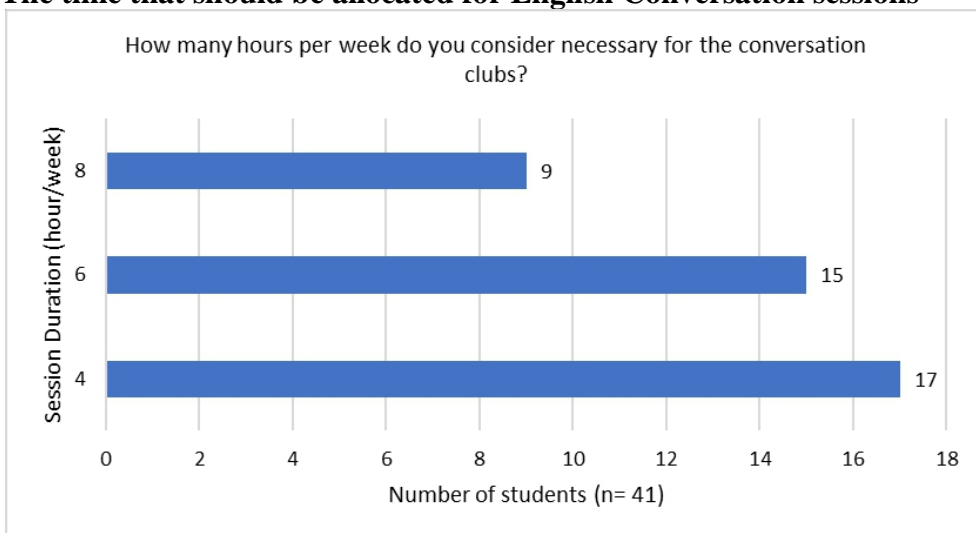How many hours per week do you consider necessary for the conversation clubs?

Figure 2. Students' opinion on hours per week that conversation clubs should be assigned

When questioned about the time (hours/week) that conversation clubs should be allocated (Figure 2), participant's responses were mixed: 41% of participants considered that the conversation clubs should last 4 hours per week, while, 37% and 22% expressed that 6 and 8 hours a week, respectively, should be assigned for conversation clubs.

Students opinion about the schedule for the Conversation Club Sessions

When do you think these clubs should be taught?

Figure 3. Students views on conversation clubs' schedule

The participants were asked whether the conversation club sessions should be carried out during or out of the daily class schedule (Figure 3). 61%

of the survey respondents considered that the conversation club meetings should be carried out within the class schedule, while 39% expressed that the club sessions should occur after class periods finished.

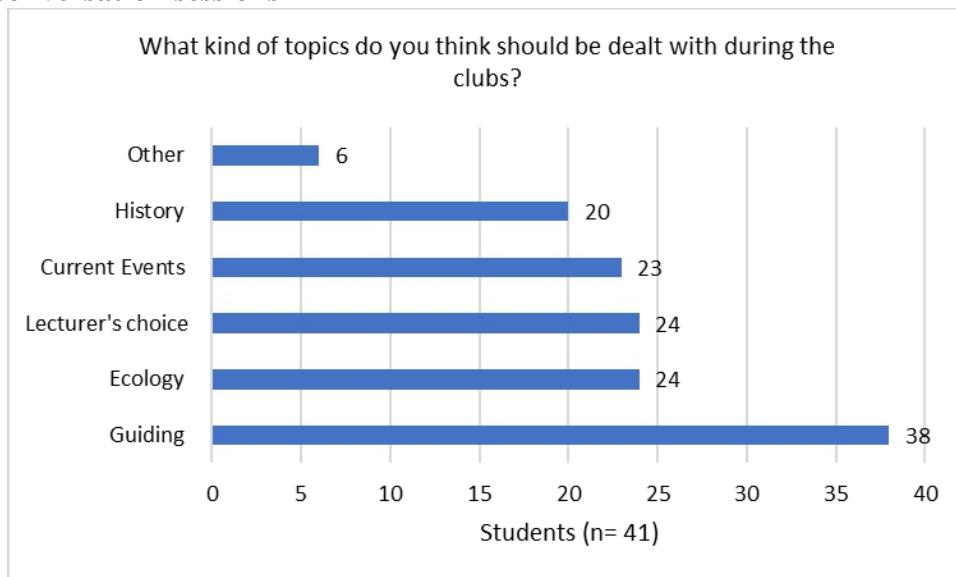**Students' views on the topics that could be covered during the Clubs' conversation sessions**

Figure 4. Topics that should be covered according to students

The themes that could be covered during the conversation club meetings were also included in a question in the survey questionnaire (Figure 4). Out of six topics proposed, the most popular was *guiding* (technics) with 93% of respondents' acceptance. On the other hand, almost half, 49% of the respondents indicated history as a topic of interest.

Lecturers Survey

The survey questionnaire was applied to twenty-two lecturers who teach classes from the fourth to the eighth semester at the Ecotourism Engineering School, Faculty of Natural Resources, Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo. The lecturers were asked questions on important aspects to be considered about the need for the implementation of English conversation clubs.

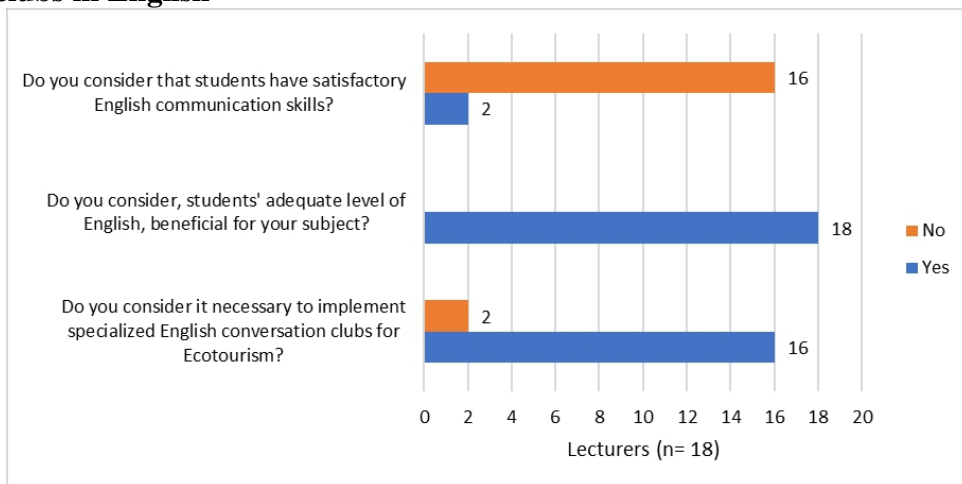## Lecturers' opinion on the implementation of specialized conversation clubs in English

Figure 5. Lecturers' opinion on the need for the application of conversation clubs

When questioned whether students had satisfactory English language communication skills, 89% of lecturers responded negatively (*No*). Conversely, only 11% of participants gave a positive response (*Yes*). Similarly, lecturers unanimously responded *Yes* to the question whether students' adequate level of English could be beneficial for their subjects. Also, 89% of respondents expressed that it would be necessary to implement specialized English conversation clubs for Ecotourism students (Figure 5).

Lecturers' views on the advantages for the students of having a good level of English
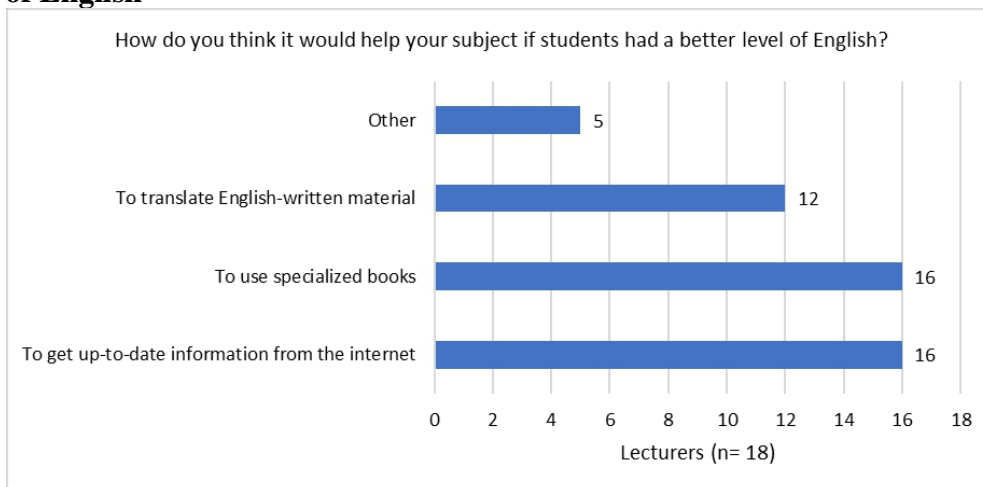

Figure 6. Lecturers' views on the benefits for students of a better level of English

When questioned, how do you think it would help your subject if students had a better level of English (Figure 6), 89% of the lecturers responded that it would be helpful for students to *get up-to-date information from the internet* and to *use specialized books.* Also, 67% of respondents considered that an improved level of English would help students to translate English-written materials.

Lecturers' opinion on the topics that should be covered during the Clubs' conversation sessions
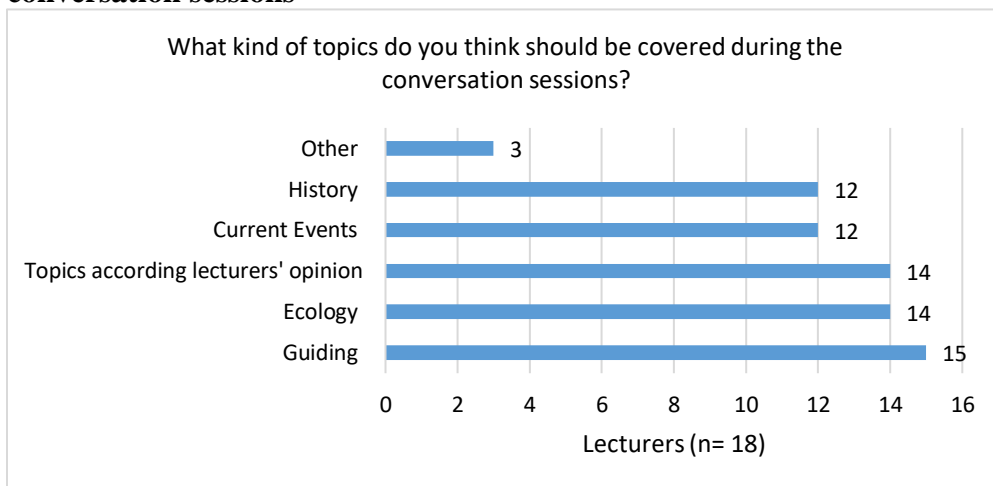

Figure 7. Topics that should be covered according to lecturers

A question about the themes that should be covered during the conversation club meetings was also included in the survey questionnaire (Figure 7). Out of six topics proposed, the most popular was *guiding* (technics) with 83% of respondents' acceptance. *Ecology* and *Topics, according to lecturers' election,* were rated second with 78% of the participant's responses.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, English is the most important language for international exchange. English is the official language of over seventy countries around the world (World Population Review, 2019). An adequate level of English is essential to succeed in many social, scientific, and technical situations. Tourism is one of the sectors where English proficiency is critical and emphasis, should be paid to speaking since most activities performed by tourism professionals require oral communication.

The results of this study show that students and lecturers agree that the time assigned to English classes is not enough. Also, lecturers of the School express that the students' English communication skills are not satisfactory. Therefore, the implementation of English conversation clubs is a suitable

131

option to improve their English proficiency. Concerning to when the conversation sessions should be carried out, more than half of the students said that the meetings should be organized within the daily class schedule and that the sessions should last four hours a week. Both students and lecturers concurred that guiding (techniques) and ecology are among the most important topics to cover during meetings.

Given the results of this study and considering that English communication proficiency, especially oral competence, is essential to succeed in the tourism profession, it is strongly recommended the implementation of English Conversation Clubs.

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