

English for employment:

English language learning
in technical and professional
education

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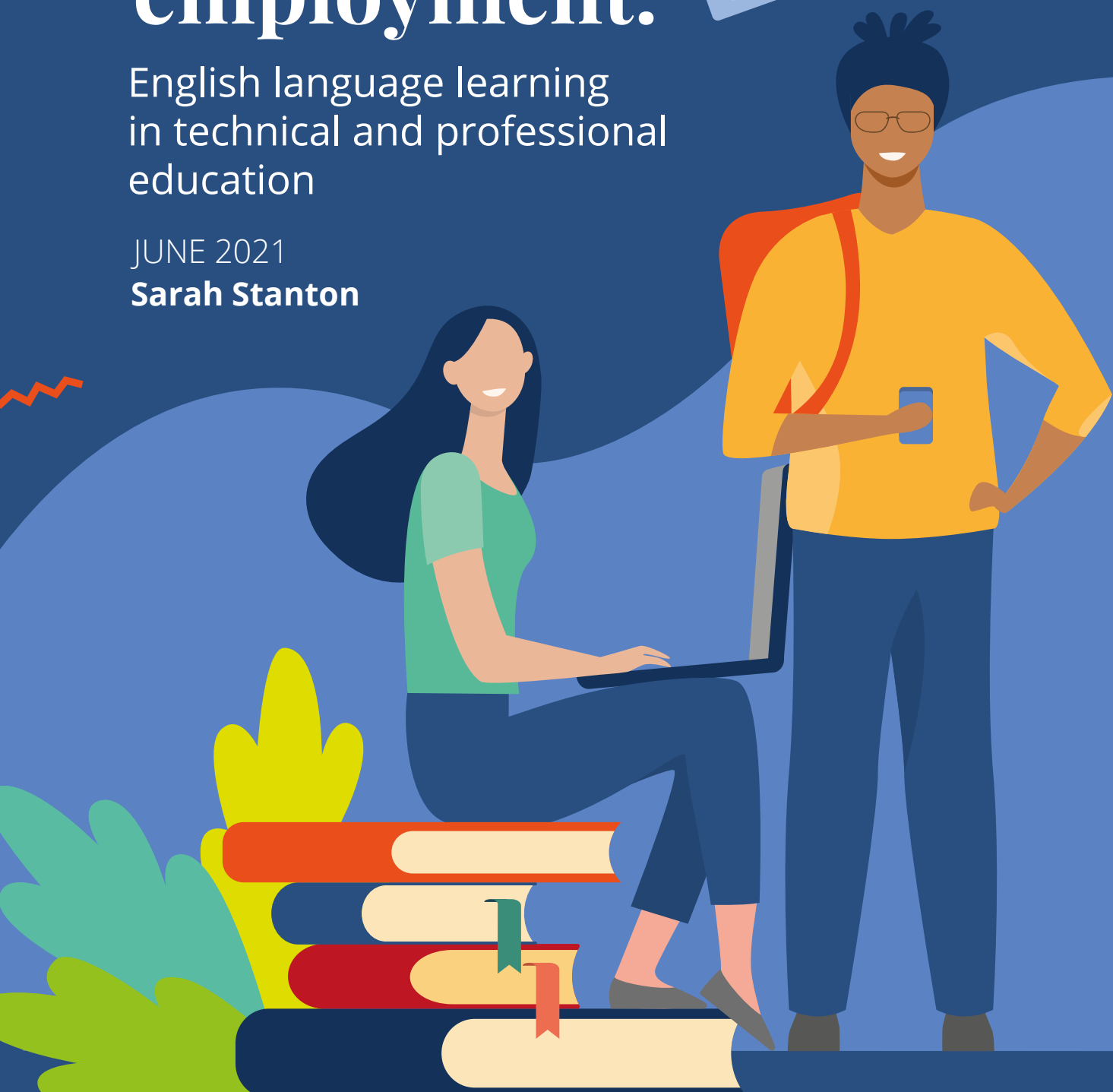


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Introduction

English language proficiency is increasingly important in the workplace and can have a determinative effect on the job opportunities and professional growth of today's workers. In studies and surveys of employers throughout Latin America, they consistently identify English as one of the most important and highly-demanded skills. English language instruction at the primary and secondary levels has expanded significantly in the past couple of decades, with many Latin American countries now requiring the subject in their national curricula and setting clear standards and benchmarks. Although there is still much progress to be made in meeting these goals, national education ministries have made it clear that English instruction is an important subject of study for students throughout the public education system.

What is less examined is English language learning in Latin America with the specific aim of preparing young people to enter the workforce. In other words, to what extent is English incorporated into the curriculum for technical and professional education? Do students learn general English skills, or are they studying English for specific purposes; that is a more technical English that relates directly to their field of study? And finally, to what extent does this instruction align with the demands of the labor market and the specific English skills and abilities that employers seek when making decisions about who to hire and promote? (see methodological note for more detail on the research process)

The following study looks at English language instruction at the technical and professional education levels in six Latin American countries: Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay. In each country, it considers the legal and regulatory framework for English instruction in technical and professional institutions; to what extent English instruction focuses explicitly on improving students' preparation for the labor market; and, finally, the gaps and challenges that exist between labor market demands for English language proficiency, specifically in the tourism and hospitality sector, and the skills that students actually have when they begin seeking employment.

The paper finds that almost all of the countries studied here do include English as a core curricular subject area within technical and professional education. Nevertheless, there is quite a bit of diversity in terms of whether students follow a general English curriculum as a continuation of their primary or

secondary education, or if they develop specialized vocabulary and skills based on their area of study. Additionally, while countries or even specific program areas may set proficiency goals for students, only a few countries systematically evaluate English proficiency in technical and professional education, even when they have robust evaluation systems for English general in primary and secondary education. Many technical and professional institutions also use their own English evaluations both as a diagnostic to assess student proficiency when they begin their studies and, even more commonly, to evaluate student performance throughout the program. While, in some cases, individual institutions may additionally require students to demonstrate a certain proficiency level, this is rarely tracked or reported at the national level.

Almost all countries have specific requirements for English teachers in technical and professional education, but these are most often the same requirements as English teachers at the secondary level generally. Nevertheless, survey data indicates that, within individual institutions, subject area teachers with high English proficiency are sometimes called upon to teach English classes, especially more technical ones.

In-depth interviews with employers from the tourism and hospitality sectors reveal the profound necessity of English language skills as many countries see the number of international tourists, especially from English-speaking countries, increase. Although different positions require different English proficiency levels, professional advancement within the hospitality and tourism sector will eventually require strong language abilities. Even more than specific or technical vocabulary, however, employers emphasized the need for strong communications skills and oral fluency in English. In fact, in some cases English language abilities were more important in a hiring decision than whether or not the candidate had a professional background in hospitality and tourism. Finally, many employers and private sector leaders have worked with the education and labor ministries to provide guidance and feedback on the skills needed within the hospitality and tourism industry generally, including English proficiency abilities. Nevertheless, these formal collaboration spaces are not always sustained or ongoing for iterative feedback, and no country evaluates specifically the impact of English on employment outcomes for students from technical and professional institutions.

Introduction

As this report seeks to show, in order to improve English language instruction in technical and professional education, Latin American countries should work to ensure the implementation and success of existing curricula and policies, while also addressing remaining challenges such as teacher preparation, student evaluation and collaboration with the private sector to ensure job readiness. This paper offers five recommendations aimed at strengthening student English proficiency in technical and professional fields and linking the language skills they develop directly with the labor market demands in their chosen sector:

1. Create relevant, specialized curricula and learning objectives for English proficiency in technical and professional education;
2. Develop training and certification opportunities for teachers to certify their language and content knowledge simultaneously;
3. Assess students' English abilities—both their general fluency and their content-specific skills;
4. Strengthen dual education and internship programs to provide students with opportunities to build necessary English skills, and to give employers space for feedback;
5. Build public-private partnerships in strategic sectors to develop initiatives focused on English for employment.

Section I: English Language and Teaching Policies in Technical and Professional Education

Although this report looks at technical and professional education programs across six countries, it is important to note that these are not comparable systems in the sense that they serve different student populations with different objectives. While in some countries, such as Uruguay, technical and professional education may begin as early as eighth grade, in other countries it is primarily offered in the final years of secondary school or even as a short-term degree after completing secondary school, as is the case in many of the SENA programs in Colombia and in Peru's superior technical education institutions. The size and scope of technical and vocational education is also highly varied across these six countries. In the case of Chile, it accounts for approximately a third of all secondary enrollment, whereas in Costa Rica it is only a small proportion of the secondary offerings. Likewise, the number of potential career tracks, as well as the extent to which there is a shared curriculum across all programs (even general education ones) versus a highly-specialized program of study are also important factors in characterizing each system. Because of this variation in the definition and scope of technical and professional education, this report is not meant to be a comparative study in terms of the achievement of any particular country, but instead seeks to illustrate the diversity of that Latin American countries have in place to promote English language learning in technical and professional education.

To start, it is important to have a grasp on how technical and professional education is organized in each of the six countries and, within each system, how the question of English language learning is addressed. It is fair to say that for all countries, however, technical and professional education includes some combination of secondary and post-secondary or tertiary education.

In Colombia, technical and professional education is divided into two levels: technical professional and technological, which is offered by the National Training Service (abbreviated as SENA in Spanish), and Higher Education Institutions (in Spanish, *Instituciones de Educación Superior*, or IES), which include technical, technological and professional institutions and universities. The National Ministry of Education (MEN in Spanish) regulates the majority of technical and professional education, although the Ministry of Labor is responsible for overseeing SENA. Both MEN and SENA write policies and guidelines at the national level to orient technical and

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professional training, but the education system is quite decentralized, allowing each institution to establish their own curricula, foreign language and graduation requirements.

Technical and professional education in Costa Rica is divided into secondary level programs, offered in technical high schools (*colegios técnicos*); formal training, which is offered by the National Training Institute (INA in Spanish); and university or para-university instruction, which is generally offered by two institutions: the Technological Institute of Costa Rica and the National Technological University.

The Costa Rican Ministry of Education (MEP) regulates the technical high schools, which begin in tenth grade (students can matriculate once they have completed their basic education, which ends in ninth grade). Although several of the courses are currently in the process of being revamped (including the English language component), in 2017, there were 54 specialties offered, including six that were specifically bilingual. In INA and universities, while officially under the umbrella of the MEP are autonomous, and each institution can determine its own policies and programs.

In Ecuador, as in Costa Rica, technical and professional education occurs in two levels: secondary education, which offers students in the last three years of schooling the opportunity to receive a technical or technical productive degree specializing in one of 34 different areas; and higher education, which provides technical and technological training.

Ecuador's Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) regulates and administers the secondary level, while the Secretariat of Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (SENESCYT) regulates the higher education levels and the Technical Secretariat of the National System of Qualifications and Professional Training (SETEC) regulates and administers the national qualifications framework as well as additional trainings.

In Chile, similarly, there is a division between technical and professional education at the secondary and higher education levels: technical professional upper secondary education (*Educación Media Técnica Profesional*), which accounts for 36% of enrollment at that level and is offered in the final two years of secondary education; and technical higher education (*Enseñanza Técnica de Nivel Superior*), which includes institutes, technical training centers and universities. Technical and

professional training is organized into 15 productive sectors with 35 specialties. Each specialty has its own program of study and exit profile.

In Peru, at the secondary level, students can complete a technical-productive degree, and technical education is also offered at the higher education level through higher education technical training institutes (IEST). At the secondary level, the Ministry of Education determines the reach and supply of technical and professional education, where it is **considered** part of the general program of basic education. In this sense, there are **not** separate technical and professional training schools at the secondary level, although some secondary schools do collaborate with technical and productive training centers (CETPROs) to offer vocational classes for their students. In this case, each **CETPRO** is responsible for programming their own curriculum, planning and development. Most CETPROs, are private institutions (55% of institutions accounting for over 63% of students in 2018), and therefore have greater control over their own curriculum and program designs.

At the post-secondary education level, EDUCATEC (*Organismo de Gestión de Institutos y Escuelas de Educación Superior Tecnológica Públicos*) in conjunction with regional governments, is in charge of managing the national network of IESTs, although the institutions retain academic and administrative autonomy. IESTs fall into a middle ground between secondary and higher education, instead being classified as post-secondary level. They award a variety of different degrees and diplomas, including a technical bachelor's degree and technical titles. The Ministry of Education establishes **general** academic guidelines for all IESTs, including basic matriculation and graduation requirements, but the curriculum program, the planning of classes and the instructional or teaching activities are the responsibility of each IEST.

Uruguay has a highly centralized system, whereby all technical and professional education is regulated by the General Directorate of Technical and Professional Education (**DGETP** or *Dirección General de Educación Técnico Profesional* in Spanish) and divided into three levels, beginning in lower secondary with Basic Intermediate Technological Education (*Educación Media Básica Tecnológica* or CBT), which corresponds to the first three years of secondary education, and which, in addition to the general curriculum, includes a technological

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component. The second level or branch of technical education in Uruguay is offered in upper secondary education and divided into two tracks: technological, lasting three years and preparing students to either enter the workforce or continue on to higher education; and professional, which typically has a duration of two years and prepares students to enter the labor market directly. Uruguay also offers technological degrees and programs at the higher education level with a variety of specialties and durations, from tertiary technological courses (two years) to technologist degrees and technological engineering degrees both (three years). The curriculum, study plans and programs authorized by DGETP apply to all training institutions throughout the country.

All of the countries studied here offer some form of secondary technical and professional education, although it can vary between specific classes that have been contracted out with training institutions (for example, at CETPROs in Peru), or through dedicated technical high schools covering the final two, three or four years of secondary education (such as the colegios técnicos in Costa Rica) (see Table 1). All of the countries studied here also offer some form of post-secondary technical or professional training, although, once again, this can mean a wide variety of things, from university degrees to highly specialized programs lasting only a few semesters. Likewise, the number of institutions administering these programs can have a significant impact on their implementation. For example, in Costa Rica there are only four institutions responsible for all technical and professional training at the post-secondary level, leading to a highly centralized system linked by a national qualifications framework. In other countries with a less centralized or larger system, there may be many more.

Table 1: Technical and professional education in Latin America

Country	Technical and professional education structure	Students		Institutions	
		Secondary	Post-secondary	Secondary	Post-secondary
Chile	Offered as a specialized track in final two years of secondary school along with general curriculum. Post-secondary level through training institutes and universities.	155,283		946	
Costa Rica*	Separate technical high schools for final three years of secondary school. Post-secondary level offered through universities and the National Training Institute.	118,834	14,597	224	4
Colombia*	Technical education track offered separately in the final two years of secondary. Three post-secondary degrees: technical professional (4 semesters), technological (6 semesters) and university (4-6 years). SENA offers technologist training (8 trimesters including a practicum experience) and technical professional training (4 trimesters).	2,234,285		299	
Ecuador*	Technical education tracks in final three years of secondary education and post-secondary through technical universities and superior technological institutions.	280,123		1,502	
Peru*	No specific technical education schools at secondary level, although schools can partner with training institutions. Superior technological institutions offer post-secondary training.	2,074,703			
Uruguay	Secondary technical education offered beginning in eighth grade through upper secondary with two different diplomas. Two and three year post-secondary programs in higher education.				

Source: Authors' communication with country experts

*Includes public and private institutions.

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English Instruction in Technical and Professional Education

The six countries studied in this report all recognize the importance of English as a practical and critical workplace skill with a place in technical and professional education curricula. Therefore, most countries (at least where the national government has authority to regulate such matters), especially at the secondary level, do require English instruction, whether as part of a core secondary curriculum or specifically for technical and professional education students.

In Costa Rica and Chile, English instruction is required by law in technical and professional education. Costa Rica began this process in 2003, stipulating that high school graduates from technical programs should speak a second language at an acceptable level for their work environment. In 2010, the High Council for Education (Consejo Superior de Educación or CSE), the governing body of Costa Rica's education system, approved the English programs for technical education students. In Chile, the national English program "Inglés Abre Puertas" (English Opens Doors) was established in 2004 with a mandate to improve English language learning outcomes for all students from fifth grade through the end of secondary school. Only in **2020**, however, has the program taken official responsibility for working with technical and professional education to improve the quality of English language instruction in that sector. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the program developed booklets for each of the professional tracks and began consistently training English teachers in technical and professional education institutions to strengthen their language teaching abilities.

In several other countries, although English instruction may not be officially required, foreign language learning is, and English is usually the preferred language. This preference is often further reinforced through national curricula and programs as well as through the overall demand for English. For example, in Colombia, although there is not a regulatory framework for English instruction in technical and professional education, **Law 1651 passed in 2013** requires all students (not just those in technical and professional education) to develop skills in a foreign language, although it does not specify which language. Nevertheless, for most students, this means English, and university graduates specifically must meet an English proficiency to fulfill their graduation requirements. In **2005**, Colombia also officially adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a

benchmark for setting minimum language standards. This is an important step for creating a shared understanding across the country and education levels in regard to English language learning, since all programs and schools must state their learning objectives and outcomes in relation to the CEFR.

The **CEFR** is the most commonly used language learning reference framework throughout Latin America. Even in countries where it may not have officially been adopted as the national standard, it is still widely known and referenced. The CEFR is an international standard for measuring and describing language proficiency that can be applied to any language. It was initially developed by the Council of Europe in 2001 and updated in 2020. The Framework is divided into six reference levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2), with A1 being the most basic and C2 representing full proficiency (see Table 2).

In Uruguay, similarly to the case of Colombia, the **General Law of Education of 2009** includes foreign language learning as a requirement, but does not specify English. Likewise, in Ecuador and Peru, students must demonstrate proficiency in a second language to graduate from technical and professional programs, but it does not have to be English, and foreign language instruction is not explicitly required in schools. This means that even though students can be required to pass a proficiency exam to receive their diploma, they may need to receive instruction outside the formal education system in order to gain the skills necessary to pass the exam.

However, even when English instruction is required in technical and professional education programs, there are not always curriculum documents or plans of study to guide that instruction. In other cases, while law or policy may not require English instruction, the creation of national curricula and programs along with investment in teacher training and certification can effectively universalize English instruction, despite the lack of a legal framework. In many countries, the level to which English guiding policy documents and curricula for English instruction exist depends in large part on how centralized the education system is. Autonomy at the higher education level can often complicate the situation further, since in many Latin American countries, universities are able to set their own curricula or graduation requirements, and national training institutions, while under the regulation of education ministries, may likewise enjoy greater autonomy than other educational establishments.

Table 2: Common European Framework for Languages

PROFICIENT USER	C2	Can understand virtually all types of texts. Can summarize information from different oral and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express themselves spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express themselves fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
INDEPENDENT USER	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in their field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with users of the target language quite possible without imposing strain on either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
BASIC USER	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of their background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce themselves and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where someone lives, people they know and things they have. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help

Source: Council of Europe, 2020.

Colombia, for example, has a highly decentralized education system, which allows individual secondary institutions to set their own curricula and graduation requirements, although they are required to use the CEFR as a reference. The Colombian education system does, however, establish certain minimum English proficiency levels for students, with evaluation tools to measure student performance. Although not curricula, these requirements, along with the CEFR, give technical and professional schools, institutions and universities guideposts to orient their English programs. For example, students graduating from university-level programs should have a B1 level or higher in a foreign language, and those studying foreign languages (including English teacher training programs) require a C1 level. Although English is not explicitly specified, it is by far the most common language selected by students.

Likewise, in Ecuador, although there is a language requirement to graduate from technical and professional education, it is up to each institution whether to include English instruction in their curriculum or not. Ecuador also uses the standard of the CEFR to establish these English proficiency requirements. As of 2019, students receiving a technical or technological post-secondary degree must demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language (not necessarily English) at either the A1 (technical) or A2 (technological) level. This is in comparison to students receiving a university degree who must demonstrate B1 foreign language competency.

In Peru, the CEFR was adopted as the national standard through the English policy “**Inglés, Puertas al Mundo**” (English, Doors to the World). In 2018, the Ministry of Education declared that, in order to obtain a *bachiller técnico*, a degree granted by technological higher education institutions, students should ideally reach a **B1** level in a foreign language, preferably English. In comparison, students who complete non-technical bachelor’s degrees are expected to reach a **B2** level certification in a foreign language.

In more centralized education systems, there is more likely to be a universal policy or curriculum for English language instruction at the technical and professional level, especially at the secondary level where there is generally less institutional autonomy. Uruguay, for example, has a highly centralized program where a central authority (DGETP) sets all English policy for technical and professional education.

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In Costa Rica, English instruction is obligatory in all technical specialties at the secondary and tertiary levels, and English for specific purposes must be included in each curriculum, even if it is only a basic level. Instruction is regulated by the **National Qualifications Framework**, which requires that graduates are familiar with the technical language and vocabulary of their chosen field in a second language. For more advanced levels, students are required to not only know but master the technical language of their field.

A few countries, namely Peru and Chile, have explicitly linked their national English programs or policies with workforce development or employability objectives. In the case of Peru, the national policy of “Inglés, Puertas al Mundo” includes **“Learning English for Work”** as one of its four central pillars. In Chile, the national program **“Inglés Abre Puertas”** has partnered with the technical and professional education system, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to offer teacher training and curriculum resources.

In Ecuador, although there is a **national policy** for strengthening technical and professional education, published in 2018, it makes no explicit reference to English language learning, or to instruction in any other foreign language, for that matter.

Through varying combinations of legal frameworks and policy documents, national curricula and learning guidelines, as well as graduation requirements and exit profiles, all of the countries studied here recognize the importance of English as a critical workplace skill. This is especially true for students in technical and professional education programs, whether at the secondary, post-secondary or tertiary levels, who, in many cases, plan to enter the workforce directly after completing their program of study.

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Technical and professional education is generally distinguished from general education programs or those with a liberal arts curriculum because of its highly technical focus. Because students are being trained to enter the workforce directly after graduation, they are expected to have already developed the knowledge and skills necessary for their profession. For many countries in the region, this includes an on-the-job training component or **apprenticeship**, in addition to the traditional classroom instruction that students receive. These practical experiences give students real-world opportunities to develop their professional skills, including their English language abilities.

Given the wide variety of career tracks offered in most technical and professional education programs, the language skills that students will need to develop (both communicative and technical) will also vary. Since the **1960s**, there has been a rich landscape of **academic research** and **literature** devoted to studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Although there is not a **single**, agreed-upon definition of ESP, in general, it can be defined as English language instruction that is designed to meet the needs of the learners and adjusts the methodology and activities used as well as the grammar, vocabulary, register and genre that students develop to meet that specific purpose. In this sense, the study of English for employment is a critical component of broader ESP studies.

Beyond national laws or policies that mandate English instruction in technical and professional education, students may often need to learn ESP depending on their field of specialization. In this case, the specific objectives, standards and curricula that ministries or even individual institutions have in place play an important role in determining the skills that students acquire. Additionally, the role of evaluation is important in determining whether or not students are prepared to meet established benchmarks.

In about half of the countries studied here, namely Ecuador, Colombia and Peru, there is not a national curriculum for English in technical or professional education and, even when English proficiency may be required as a graduation requirement, individual institutions and programs are not required to include it as part of their curriculum.

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In **Ecuador**, English at the secondary level is part of the general curriculum, and so, while students do not generally have access to ESP instruction, they do still receive instruction in the language. English instruction is included in “**common core**” classes for all secondary students, with 5 hours per week in the first two years reduced to two hours per week in the final year. Because **technical classes** are only 10 hours/week of students, schooling (with the remaining 35 hours taken up by the core curriculum), English is not always included in the curriculum. Some specialties, however, do include technical English instruction. For example, hospitality, tourism, international trade and sales and marketing careers all include “technical English” in at least one year of the curriculum. Higher education institutions, because of their autonomy, have the freedom to set their own curricula, although students are still expected to complete their program of study with some degree of English competency (A1, A2 or B1) based on the degree that they receive.

In the case of Colombia, as mentioned in the previous section, there is not a national English curriculum for technical and professional education. In 2014, SENA, Colombia’s national training system, in alliance with a British partner, designed a National Curriculum for General English Education and eight ESP curriculum documents to guide the teaching of English in technical areas such as Tourism, Gastronomy, Hospitality, Business Management, Logistics and International Business. Although the curricular documents were in place for a couple of years, later the decision was made to follow a different strategy.

Nevertheless, institutions and universities are required to include English instruction in their curriculum, which must also be aligned to the CEFR. In the case of programs offered by SENA, sectoral roundtables (*mesas sectoriales*) play an important role in bringing together private sector employers with trainers and educators to determine precisely how and what English should be taught. There are currently **85** roundtables, organized regionally based on the main industries around the country and specializing in areas as diverse as telecommunications, fashion design and textile arts, and mining. Within the competency description of each degree program is included, where relevant, the English competencies that students are expected to acquire during their studies.

Outside of SENA, the Ministry of Education is responsible for regulating and overseeing technical and professional

education at the secondary and higher education levels. Higher education institutions, however, enjoy curricular autonomy for their degree programs. Nevertheless, all students graduating from a higher education institution are expected to develop at least an A2 level of proficiency in a foreign language, and although it does not have to be English, that is the **most common** language. Students receiving a Bachelor's degree are expected to demonstrate B1 proficiency in a foreign language, although some degree programs require a B2 or C1 certification.

In Chile, technical and professional education at the secondary level occurs as a specialized track in the final two years of high school. Throughout all four years of secondary education, all students follow a common curriculum, which includes English as one of the six core subject areas. Beginning in their third year, students can opt for the technical and professional education track, which offers 35 specialties divided among 15 different sectors.

While there is not a specific curriculum for English in technical and professional education, several of the specialties do include an ESP curriculum as part of their program design, in addition to the general English courses that students take. Students studying for hotel and tourism specialties as well as airplane maintenance mechanics receive additional English instruction with learning objectives specific to their field of study. Of the 35 technical specializations currently offered, these are the only three that include specific learning objectives related to English proficiency. The learning objectives themselves are highly detailed and directly tied to that particular area of study. For example, students in the **hotel services program** are expected to be able to welcome tourists and offer a brief description of hotel services, but also "Describe important places, historical events, traditional dishes, celebrations and festivals and local attractions, according to the needs of the client." Additionally, Chile's National Qualifications Framework, which also includes higher education qualifications, contains English competencies for several technical specialties, namely those in the hospitality and tourism sectors.

Costa Rica and Uruguay also have specific English curricula for technical and professional education that are used in all public institutions. In Costa Rica, technical and professional education, whether in technical high schools, INA or higher education institutions, must align with the national

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qualifications framework. The Ministry of Education has also stipulated the number of weekly hours of English instruction that students are supposed to receive in each technical field. For example, while students studying agriculture or aquaculture may not receive any specialized English instruction, those **studying** to work in service centers or bilingual fields may be expected to receive up to 14 hours a week of English instruction. **Costa Rica** is also currently in the process of updating its technical English curriculum so that it can better align with the skills and competencies described in the national qualifications framework.

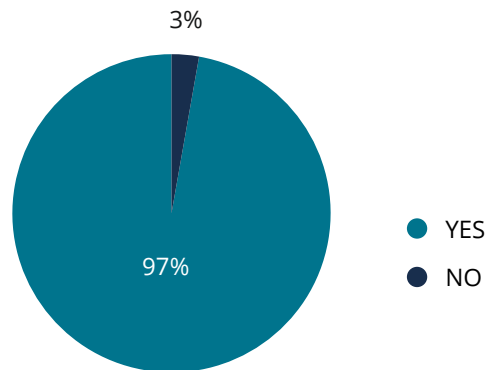
In Uruguay, there is a common English **curriculum** for all secondary students receiving a three-year technical degree. The curriculum covers three hours of instruction per week for all three years of studies. Because the curriculum is not tailored to any specific technical field, the content is focused on more general skills. The curriculum for those who complete a shorter, two-year **professional** degree does include more technical English for some students, while leaving it out of the study plan for others. For example, automotive and refrigeration students only study English in the second year of their program from the same general curriculum. Students in administrative and hospitality programs, however, study “Applied English” in both years of their program.

For technical degrees offered at the higher education level, there is an English **studies plan** for students specializing in hospitality or tourism. The requirement is divided into three tracks, based on student proficiency as measured in an initial diagnostic test aligned with the CEFR. Although the studies plan suggests that students, even those beginning at an A2 level or below, receive a B1 certification at the end of their first year and a B2 certification by the end of their second, it also recognizes that this is an ambitious goal, and these remain suggestions.

Just because a country does not have a national curriculum for English at the technical and professional level, does not mean that individual institutions do not include English instruction or have their own curricula. For example, survey results for this paper from Colombia showed that 97% of responding institutions included English in their curriculum, although most institutions reported that the curriculum documents were designed by the institution or individual professors (see

Graph 1). Few institutions mentioned using external curricula, although many referenced using online resources as teaching and learning tools. In higher education institutions where there was an English department, those faculty were often in charge of designing the English curriculum for the entire institution.

Graph 1: Colombian Technical and Professional Education Institutions with English in the Curriculum



Source: Authors' calculations based on survey data

A 2020 [study](#) of English for employability in Peru found similar results: although English was integrated into the curriculum at higher education technical training institutes (IESTs), since students are expected to graduate with a B1 level, there was a significant amount of variation in terms of how much instructional time students received (both hours per week and total semesters). While some IESTs offer general English instruction for all students, the study found it more likely for students in specific technical tracks (such as tourism, hospitality and secretarial studies) to receive more intensive English instruction, while students in other tracks had less exposure to English.

In **CETPROs**, professional training centers that reach students across multiple different education levels, English instruction was even more varied, with some institutions including it in the core curriculum, others as an optional elective and, in some places, excluding it altogether. In CETPROs that did offer English instruction, however, it was more likely to be technical in nature and closely tied to a student's field of study with fewer examples of general English classes for all students.

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The question of how to establish student proficiency standards and evaluate language abilities is an important one, especially in situations where English is critical for job performance. If students are expected to complete a specific certification or degree program with a certain level of English knowledge, it is imperative for employers to be able to count on the validity of that language certification when making hiring decisions.

At a national level, countries also need to be able to measure progress towards established goals or policy objectives and determine the quality of the education that students receive. This is especially important in the context of technical and professional education, which has **historically** been seen as less prestigious than general education tracks, and where, in some cases (such as Peru and Ecuador), national policies still set lower English proficiency goals for students in technical programs than for those in non-technical or arts and sciences study programs.

All countries studied in this report have some English proficiency requirement at the secondary level, (or foreign language) although the specific level that students are expected to reach varies quite a bit. Additionally, depending upon the structure of the technical and professional education program, in some instances, students are able to complete their proficiency requirement while still in general education classes before entering the technical education track. Only a few countries evaluate student performance in English in technical and professional tracks nationally, as this tends to be more general English. Given that the CEFR is a tool to measure general English abilities and not specific technical knowledge, countries that do have a technical English requirement tend to rely on less internationally-recognized standards of measurement.

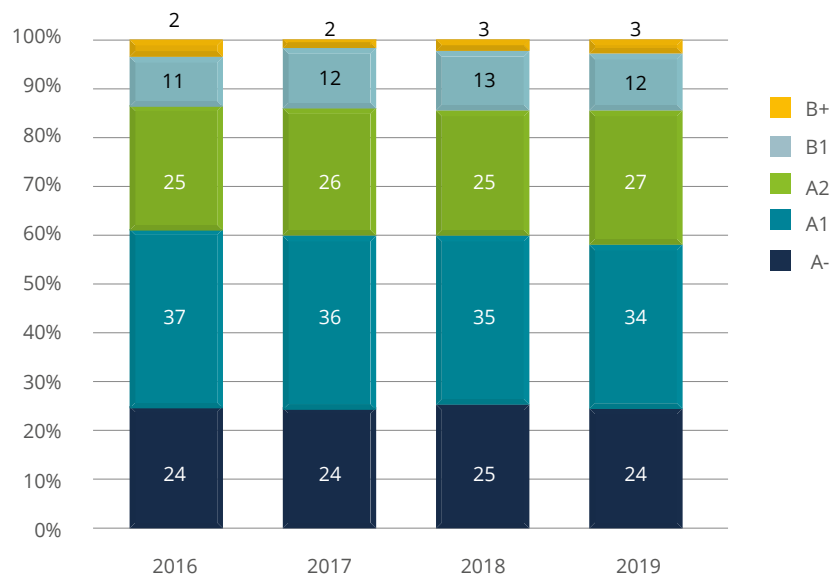
Costa Rica and Colombia both evaluate the English proficiency of all their secondary students, regardless of education track, and report out results according to the type of institution (technical or general) where students study. These results can be an important tool for ensuring that students, regardless of their education track, have access to high quality English instruction.

The Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES in Spanish) is responsible for all educational evaluation at the national level. In order to receive a technical professional or technological diploma, students must complete the **Saber TyT**

exam, which is administered by ICFES. The exam includes a combination of core academic subject tests, including English, as well as a set of thematic modules, which correspond to the technical degree that the student is pursuing; but for the English exam, there is not any specific proficiency level or score that students need to achieve in order to pass. Instead, they are only required to complete the exam.

Results from recent exam applications (see Graph 2) show that most students score at or below an A1 level on the CEFR, and only about 3% manage to score above a B1 level. Additionally, published results from 2016-2019 show student performance levels to be fairly steady over time. In comparison, the results of the **Saber Pro** exam, which is administered to university students who have completed at least 75% of their program of study, show that less than half of students are performing at or below an A1 level, and almost 10% are scoring above a B1 level. These results also show a slight upward trend in student proficiency levels over the same 2016-2019 time period. Although not strictly comparable, both the Saber TyT and Saber Pro exams measure student English proficiency at the higher education level.

Graph 2: English Proficiency Levels, Saber TyT exam (Colombia)

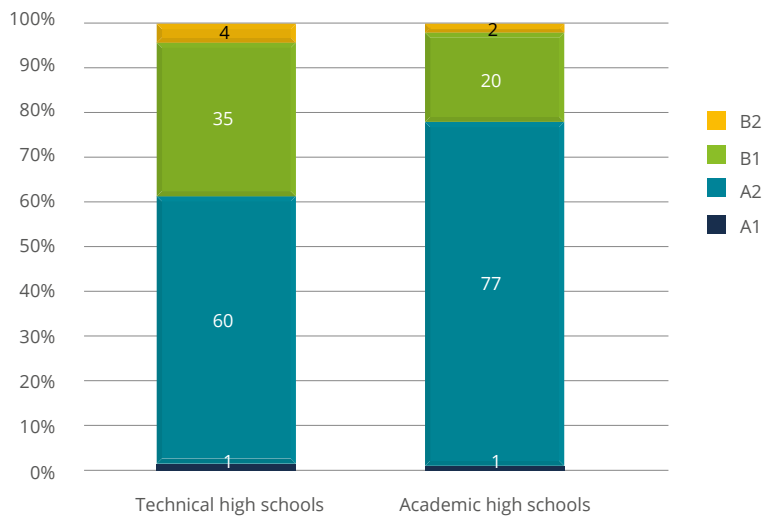


Source: Ministerio de Educación Nacional. Icfes. 2020

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In Costa Rica, all secondary students must pass an English exam as a graduation requirement, and in some technical specialties they are required to complete an additional proficiency certification. The test is designed and administered by the Directorate of Quality Management and Evaluation within the Ministry of Education. Results from **2019** showed 60% of students in technical high schools with an A2 level of proficiency and 35% with a B1 level (see Graph 3) (the test was **not administered** in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic). In comparison, 77% of students completing academic secondary programs received an A2 level, and only 20% showed proficiency at the B1 level.

Graph 3: English Results, Language Proficiency Exam (Costa Rica, 2019)



Source: Cordero Parra, 2019.

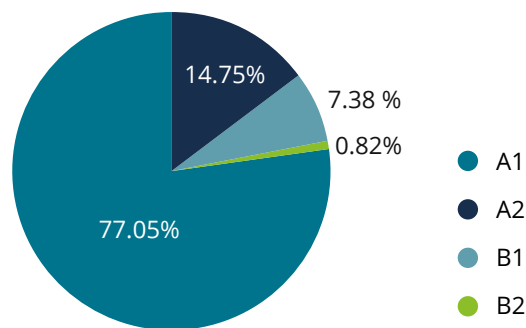
This data is interesting because it would seem to contradict the stereotype that technical and professional education programs are generally less rigorous. Instead, Costa Rican students in technical high schools showed, on average, a slightly more advanced level of English proficiency than their peers.

In Ecuador and Peru, there is not a national evaluation of English proficiency that includes students in technical and professional programs. Ecuador’s national exam for high school graduation, in both technical and general education

tracks, does not include English, although there has been **discussion** about adding it as a subject area in the future. Ecuador does require students from technical and technological post-secondary degree programs to provide certification of A1 or A2 proficiency levels in order to graduate. Unfortunately, without a national assessment, it is impossible to know if some students have even higher proficiency levels.

A 2020 **study** of English language learning in Peru's technical and professional education system asked students to self-evaluate their proficiency level. The survey of nearly 350 students studying for post-secondary technical degrees found that 77% of them believed they had an A1 proficiency level while less than 1% self-evaluated their abilities at a B2 level (see Graph 4). Although these results are not verified in any way against the actual certifications of the CEFR, they do give a strong indication that Peruvian technical and professional students generally feel that lack proficiency in English.

Graph 4: Student Self-Evaluation of Language Proficiency (Peru)



Source: British Council, 2020.

Chile's **National English Plan** establishes a B1 level proficiency as the standard for all secondary graduates, regardless of whether they are in the humanistic-scientific track or study technical and professional education. There is no English exam for students completing their secondary education nor are there specific language exams once students complete the technical training part of their degree. The only **exception** to this is the aeronautical specialty, which does require candidates to pass an English proficiency test, but the results are only reported individually to students and not shared in any kind of public document.

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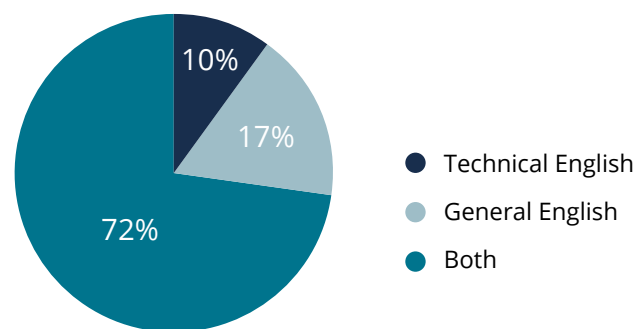
Chile, however, does have another evaluation instrument, the SIMCE exam, which is the national assessment for evaluating education quality in Chile, although it does not report results for students in technical and professional education specifically. The most recent SIMCE English results for upper secondary education are from 2017—another iteration of the exam was **planned** for 2020, but has not yet been administered due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The **results** from the 2017 evaluation, from a statistically representative sample of students across Chile, revealed that less than a third of students had a basic (A2) competency or above, while over two-thirds had not even reached the minimum proficiency goal for eighth grade students even in their penultimate year of secondary education. Because the data is not disaggregated by education track, it is impossible to say how students in technical and professional education fare in comparison to their peers in general education. The results do, however, show that student performance is highly **correlated** with socioeconomic standing; while 85% of students from the highest income quintile scored either an A2 or B1 on the exam, only 9% of students from the lowest income quintile reached that benchmark. Furthermore, technical and professional secondary education in Chile is more likely to attract students from vulnerable backgrounds; on **average**, schools that offer technical programs score 82% on Chile's Education Vulnerability Index (IVE in Spanish). Therefore, although it is impossible to know the exact proficiency level of students in technical and professional secondary education, it seems safe to say that the majority are not meeting the government benchmark, and may even be performing more poorly than their peers.

Where countries do have large-scale, standardized evaluations to measure student proficiency in English, they tend to measure only general English proficiency, often aligned with national curriculum documents, rather than specific, technical English abilities. Even in a situation like Colombia, where the evaluation itself is specific to students studying technical and professional degrees, the English component is still a more general assessment of competency aligned to the CEFR. Looking at curriculum documents, graduation profiles and certification requirements, however, it is also clear that many institutions do teach a more technical English in order to prepare their students for the specific demands of their chosen field.

Results from the survey conducted for this report show that the vast majority (almost three quarters) of institutions reported offering both technical and general English instruction to their students, and just 17% offered only general English instruction, while 10% offered only technical English instruction (see Graph 5). The specific technical courses varied widely, from courses for broad professional contexts (“English for Business,” “English for Engineers”) to more specific career tracks (accounting, customer service, cosmetology, table and bar service, multimedia production and maritime transportation, among many others). Several survey respondents mentioned that, even in general English classes, there is still an effort to ensure that the content students learn is relevant to their chosen field.

Graph 5: Technical vs. General English Instruction in Technical and Professional Education



Source: Authors' calculations based on survey results

Previous **studies** have revealed important gaps in the English language teaching force in Latin America, including the level of training or professional education that teachers have, the (lack of) English proficiency of many teachers, and the need to evaluate and certify the language abilities of English teachers in order to ensure that they meet the basic requirements for their role. Additionally, there is an important distinction between being proficient in a language and actually being able to teach that language to others; these pedagogical skills are just as critical in determining teacher quality as a strong foundation in their subject area. In the case of technical and professional English instruction, the picture can be

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complicated even further by the fact that teachers may need to be highly skilled in both English language proficiency and a technical specialty.

In the countries studied for this report, there were no special requirements to teach English in technical and professional education beyond the national requirements to be an English instructor at the secondary level. At the university level, since higher education institutions in Latin America generally have a high degree of autonomy, this carries over to their ability to set their own hiring requirements and policies for English instructors. This is perhaps not only due to a lack of policy in establishing more specific criteria for English teachers in technical and professional education, but also to the fact that there are no training opportunities for teachers in more technical English areas. None of the countries reported having specific initial teacher training programs for technical and professional English instruction, although the National University in Costa Rica has recently opened up a Master's degree program dedicated specifically to Teaching English for Specific Purposes.

Part of the basic English teacher qualifications in all countries was a minimum language proficiency requirement, varying from B2 (Ecuador, Peru) to C1 (Colombia, Costa Rica, Chile) or C2 (Uruguay). Although these minimum proficiency requirements are an important first step for improving teacher quality, in **cases** (such as Costa Rica and Uruguay) where there is large-scale data on English teacher proficiency levels, the results have shown that many teachers do not meet these standards. While not specific to English teachers in technical and professional education tracks, these gaps reinforce the need to not only set standards for teacher proficiency, but also to monitor and evaluate progress towards those standards.

Survey evidence for this report indicates that, at least within technical and professional education fields, there may also be a significant amount of teaching across disciplines, especially in technical English courses. In other words, there are also instructors from other subject areas who teach English classes even though they are not formally certified in that area, as long as they can demonstrate a minimum proficiency certification. Over 40% of surveyed institutions reported that teachers from technical disciplines could also give classes in English. On the other hand, only 10% of institutions reported that English teachers taught other content areas. This indicates that

there is a greater flexibility for teachers who have a technical specialty, and also speak English, rather than vice versa. For teachers in other subject areas who also taught English, about 50% of responding institutions required a B1 or B2 level certification, while about a quarter of institutions did not have a specific English requirement for these teachers.

Within technical and professional education in Latin America, there is a great deal of diversity in terms of the English instruction that students receive. This is driven in large part by the differing ways that technical and professional education itself is structured across countries. For example, in Chile and Ecuador, where there is a common secondary curriculum for all students with an optional technical track in the final years, technical and professional education students receive general English classes with the rest of their peers. In other instances, such as Colombia and Peru, where there is a robust post-secondary technical and vocational offering, there is less likely to be a common English curriculum, and individual institutions generally have more freedom to establish their own standards and guidelines.

Although some countries, such as Colombia and Costa Rica, have general standardized examinations for students at the secondary level, which may include an English component, and others, such as Chile, have, in certain moments, evaluated the English abilities of secondary students, there are no examples of large-scale standardized tests of technical English or English for Specific Purposes. This may be an important gap in capturing students' English skills for employment, since large-scale information on technical and professional students' English abilities is only available in a few countries, and not tied to their actual career tracks.

In Colombia and Costa Rica, where there is comparative data on English proficiency for students in technical and general education classes, students in technical education are either scoring higher (Costa Rica) or only slightly behind (Colombia) their peers in other education tracks. Given the limited data and these weak trends, it is difficult to say whether these tendencies are broadly true across the region and throughout the variety of technical and professional education programs.

Teachers play a critical role in determining education quality. Within the technical and professional education systems studied here, there are not any specific qualifications to be

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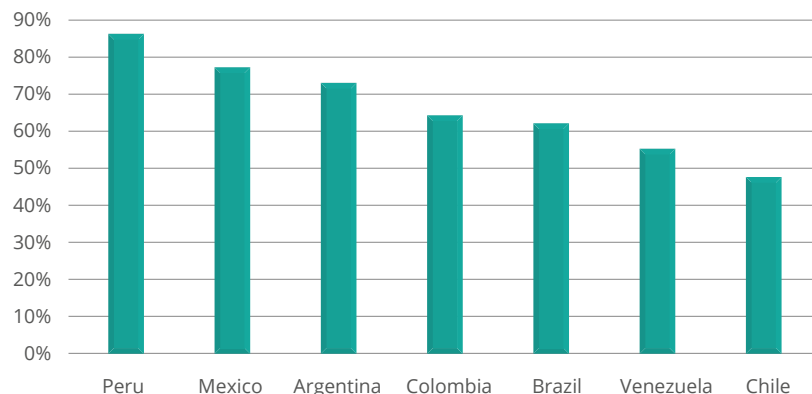
an English instructor beyond those required for general English teaching. This is certainly attributable in part to the fact that there are no initial teacher education programs that offer specialties in technical English instruction. Survey results for this study show that, in practice, this produces a situation where technical English classes are sometimes taught by instructors in other content areas who happen to speak English and may or may not have any specific training or certification in English instruction.

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The efficacy and quality of English instruction for employment is only as good as the labor market results that it is able to produce. In other words, if students are gaining English skills in order to improve their competitiveness in the job market, the type and level of English that they study should translate into a more competitive profile and better employment options. Unfortunately, no country in this study reported having a specific system to measure or evaluate the impact of English language learning on employment outcomes for their students. This represents a challenge for technical and professional training institutions to measure the efficacy of their English instruction.

While any employment decision is naturally complex and involves many different factors, of which language abilities are only one component, there is also strong **evidence** for the particular importance of English competencies in the Latin American labor market. A 2016 **study** of English in the workplace that included several Latin American countries found that, while there were significant differences in demand across countries (see Graph 6), at least half of employers in all countries (except Chile at 48%) said that English was significant for their organization. Perhaps even more importantly, the same employers also said that they will offer better employment packages (including higher starting pay, options for promotion and more senior roles) to candidates with strong English skills (see Graph 7). English is undoubtedly an important skill in the workplace, and one that can produce substantial benefits throughout someone's career, not just in the early hiring process, but also in their professional growth and advancement over time.

Graph 6: % of Employers That Said English Is Significant to Their Organization

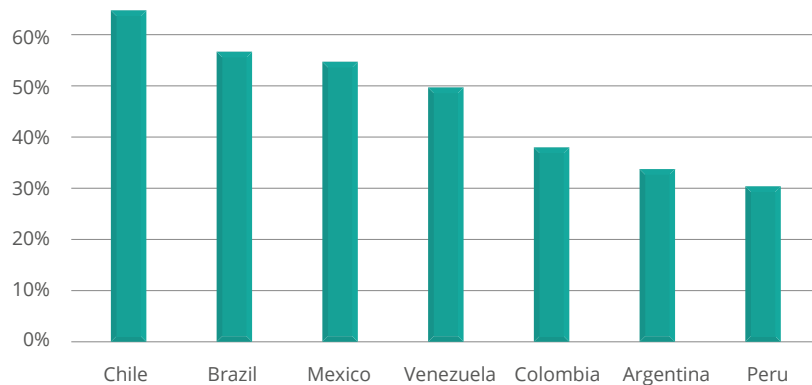


Source: Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2016

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Graph 7: % of Employers That Offer Better Packages to Applicants with Good English Skills



Source: Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2016

The third section of this report focuses on the demand for English specifically within the hospitality and tourism sector through a supply-side lens. Although English is an important skill in a variety of different fields, it is unquestionably critical in a sector that, by definition, requires interacting with people from other countries and cultures. The same 2016 **report** on English in the workplace found that 75% of employers in the hospitality and tourism sector from non-English speaking countries rated English abilities as significant for their organizations. A 2015 **study** of English language learning in Ecuador reported 7.1% annual growth in the tourism industry during the previous year, with accompanying demand for qualified candidates with strong English skills. In **2017**, Peruvian estimates showed that up to a third of tourists in the country either spoke English as their first language, or used it as a lingua franca for getting around. In **2019**, Costa Rica, a country of just over 5 million people, received over 3.1 million foreign tourists, almost half of whom were from the United States and Canada alone (see Table 3).

In order to include a demand-side understanding of the need for proficient English language speakers in the tourism and hospitality sector, research for this study included a series of interviews with experts and private-sector employers from the tourism and hospitality industry. These interviews focused on the gaps, challenges, coordination and action linking the technical and vocational education system and the tourism and hospitality sectors. In particular, they sought to understand how important English language abilities are in making hiring decisions, whether different English competencies are required for different roles and functions,

what challenges or gaps they see in the English abilities of current graduates, and what spaces (either formal or informal) exist for offering feedback to ministries of education and technical and professional education institutions to strengthen existing programs.

Table 3: Incoming Tourists, International and English-Speaking (2019)

Country	Population	Incoming Tourists (2019)	Incoming Tourists from English-speaking countries
Costa Rica	5,048,000	3,139,008	1,665,018
Chile	18,952,000	4,517,962	397,144
Colombia*	50,339,000	3,211,876	868,097
Ecuador	17,379,000	2,043,993	996,013
Peru	32,510,000	4,370,000	806,356
Uruguay	3,462,000	3,220,602	N/A

*Colombia is only air travel. "Incoming Tourists from English-speaking countries" based on authors' calculations. Peru does not list foreign tourist arrivals by country, so totals instead calculated using "Anglo-Saxon" and "Oceania (Australia and New Zealand)" regions.

Source: Instituto Costarricense de Turismo, 2019; Subsecretaría de Turismo de Chile, 2021; Centro de Información Turística de Colombia, 2021; Ministerio de Turismo del Ecuador, 2021; Comisión de Promoción del Perú para la Exportación y el Turismo – PROMPERÚ, 2019; Ministerio de Turismo de Uruguay, 2019. Population Data: World Bank, 2019.

The strongest and most consistent message in all interviews was the critical importance of English language skills in the hospitality and tourism industries. All interviewees agreed that English abilities are among the primary skills considered when making employment decisions and, for some, can be a deal breaker as to whether or not a candidate is offered a position.

This finding is not surprising given the need to interact with non-Spanish speaking foreigners in almost all areas of the hospitality industry as well as the global prevalence of English as a shared language for communication. Additionally, it aligns with what other, similar studies have revealed. For example, a **study** in Peru determined that "Employers in the majority of sectors do not currently require high levels of English. The exception to this is graduates involved in the tourism sector, whether in accommodation and restaurants, or in travel agencies and reservations where English demand is high." Interviewees for this report also emphasized that the demand is only increasing as international tourism grows and more English-speaking tourists come to Latin America each year.

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What is certainly notable is the unanimity of agreement among interviewees, across countries and roles, in affirming the critical importance of English in the tourism and hospitality sector. As one Colombian interlocutor expressed, *“English is a differentiating factor.”*

In spite of this unanimity, interviewees also noted important nuances in how English is used in different positions and different interactions. For example, in the hotel industry, interlocutors expressed that “front-of-house” roles, in other words, those that have the most direct and sustained contact with guests, needed to have the strongest English skills. These included front desk receptionists, concierges, bartenders and wait staff and hotel management. On the other hand, “back-of-house” staff, such as cleaning and janitorial personnel and kitchen staff, did not need nearly the same level of fluency, although being able to engage in basic interactions with guests in English was still important.

Outside of hotels, less proficient English skills might be required for transportation drivers or other logistical roles, but tour guides frequently need the strongest and most technical English language abilities, given their extensive face-to-face interactions with tourists and the need to explain complex ideas and respond to potential questions from English-speaking visitors. As one Costa Rican expert put it, *“For people who enter the ecotourism or tour guide [field], a strong command of English is essential.”* Not only that, but the Costa Rican Tourism Institute publishes **guide lists** on their website, allowing visitors to sort certified tour guides by the language they speak. In other words, if there are guides who do not have an English qualification with the national tourism institute, they can lose out on potential jobs when English-speaking tourists use basic search filters to identify a qualified guide.

Although national English policies and curriculum documents consistently use the CEFR as a reference for language proficiency, within the hospitality and tourism sector, there was less consistent reference to requiring a specific proficiency certification. For example, while a Colombian interlocutor emphasized that a B2 level was what the sector demanded for front-facing roles, in Chile, a hotel manager reported that he conducted a section of the job interview in English himself to determine the language abilities of each candidate. Several other interviewees also reported knowledge of English interviews during hiring processes either in place of or in

addition to a formal language certification. This aligns with a **survey** in Peru that reported that “a number of jobs require English: waiters, managers, and in particular receptionists and those working a front-of-house or front desk position... [Survey respondents also claimed to] conduct part of their entry interview in English and that, in some cases, this is undertaken by multiple staff at senior management level.” The use of English-language interviews, rather than just relying on internationally recognized certifications, may be in part because specific language skills or technical knowledge may be more relevant than a general language proficiency. For example, although a tour guide may need a very high proficiency in speaking and listening, it is less likely that they will need to write long, technical documents or communications in English in the way that a hotel manager may be required. Because the CEFR evaluates all skills, it may be less useful for some hiring decisions.

Among the challenges most frequently cited by interviewees was the need for more job candidates with strong English skills. They emphasized that the supply of graduates leaving tourism and hospitality careers with strong English skills is not sufficient to meet the demand of an expanding and increasingly global tourism market. Several experts, notably in Costa Rica and Colombia, did express that there has been positive progress towards increasing the English competencies of candidates in recent years and that, while English proficiency continues to be a challenge, candidates do generally have stronger English abilities now than they did a decade or so ago. The enormous **investment** of financial, human and policy resources in strengthening English instruction across the region shows the impact for students who began their schooling ten or fifteen years ago, when many national English policies were first being implemented, and who are now graduating and beginning to enter the workforce.

The insufficient supply lack of trained candidates with strong English abilities can create complex bottlenecks and increase inefficiencies within the technical and professional education system. For example, all of the interviewees reported instances of job candidates who are hired solely because of their strong English proficiency, even though they are not officially trained or certified in their specific role. As one Colombian interviewee put it, “*Many roles are filled by people with a high level of English proficiency, but who are not formally trained.*” In other words, even though there may be candidates who have

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the accredited qualifications and training to work in the hotel and tourism industry, if their English skills are weaker than those of another candidate, the one with the stronger English skills may get the job. Another expert from Chile commented that, when evaluating candidates and making hiring decisions, it was more important for him to see experience living or studying abroad in an Anglophone country than an English proficiency qualification. Situations such as these ones suggest that, even though students and the technical and professional education institutions where they study are investing significant time, resources and energy in preparation workforce, this investment can be undercut by candidates with more advanced English skills.

However, not every position within the tourism and hospitality industry can easily be filled by someone just because of their English language abilities. In addition to roles that require lower English proficiency, especially those without formal front-facing client responsibilities, there are some positions where technical knowledge is more important than language skills. For example, interviewees in Colombia and Chile emphasized that tour guides, especially in the ecotourism industry, must be experts in their given field, whether that is geology, ornithology, history or culture. Experts in Uruguay also emphasized that different regions within the country may, in practice, have different language requirements for certain roles. Foreign tourists are highly concentrated in urban, coastal areas where English proficiency is critical, but tourism in the interior of the country still largely favors Spanish-speakers.

Beyond the different levels of English proficiency required for different positions in the tourism and hospitality sector, there are specific English skills that interviewees emphasized. In particular, tourism sector experts consistently declared a need for stronger oral communication skills in English among employees. Given the verbal nature of most interactions, interviewees stressed that fluent oral expression can go a long way towards making tourists feel comfortable and understood, even in an unfamiliar context. Interviewees in multiple countries emphasized that many candidates, especially those who feel unsure of their English abilities, are often hesitant or timid to speak with guests in English, which can create further challenges. As one Costa Rican expert expressed, *“If [candidates] do not overcome the fear and frustration with the [English] language, they may end up [...] leaving the sector.”* Rather than a focus on technical vocabulary or formulaic learning,

private sector interlocutors stressed the importance of employees being able to have basic conversations with guests or tourists in plain, fluent English.

The demand from employers for students in hospitality and tourism programs to develop stronger spoken and communicative English skills aligns with the challenges that training institutions themselves identify in their own programs. When asked about the greatest issues they confronted in their English programs, many respondents mentioned the need to strengthen students' oral communication skills and give them frequent opportunities to practice their English abilities in real-world settings outside of the classroom. Another frequent challenge that technical and professional training institutions reported was the low English levels that students had upon entering their programs, which made it difficult to get them up to speed with the curriculum. In both cases, it is clear that students need not only more exposure to English, but also more chances to apply what they learn in school to meaningful professional interactions.

Beyond the importance of English for one's specific job responsibilities, the lack of English skills can also be a limitation for other professional opportunities, such as international trainings or collaborations, where courses are only offered in English. One example of this comes from a Colombian interviewee who discussed trainings that are offered by top hospitality schools and training programs in the U.S., such as the American Hotel and Lodging Educational Institute and the Cornell University School of Hotel Management. Although both offer a wide catalogue of courses, the vast majority are in English, and Spanish-language offerings are much more limited. Employers therefore find themselves in the position of either having to limit participation only to English-speaking employees or paying additional costs to translate materials into Spanish.

One of the key ways to strengthen and formalize the relationships between the tourism industry and professional and technical education programs, especially when it comes to English abilities, is through creating dedicated spaces for feedback and collaboration. Interviews for this section showed that there are multiple spaces for formal collaboration between the education sector (and often the labor ministry as well) and the private sector, although many are dedicated to the tourism and hospitality sector more generally, and not

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strengthening English skills specifically. Even so, given the key nature of English in the hospitality and tourism industry, language proficiency naturally becomes an important focus.

Many countries have involved key industries and sectors in consultative processes to develop curriculum and exit profile documents. For example, in Chile and Peru, collaboration between education experts, ministry officials and the private sector was important for developing national qualifications frameworks or advising on English instruction in technical and professional education. However, it was not always clear that these relationships are ongoing, with space for feedback and reflection once a curriculum or other project has been officially adopted. These efforts are also likely to bring together only a small group of representatives from the sector, and so several interviewees, if they had not been invited to participate in these high-level processes, did not have any first-hand experience in offering feedback directly to education programs.

One notable example of sustained collaboration between technical and professional education programs and industry is Colombia. Within SENA, the national training service, there is a “sectoral roundtable” for each sector that links employers, government and academia to provide feedback and guide policy decisions on a continuous basis. They not only offer feedback on the level of English that employers require, but also on the type and number of vacancies that can be expected so that SENA can plan its programming accordingly. Trade representatives who sit on the roundtables use surveys or other instruments to gather information from business leaders and identify key topics or issues to raise.

Beyond these formal collaboration spaces, several interlocutors, notably in Chile and Costa Rica, mentioned the importance of programs such as internships or personal relationships with universities and training institutions for strengthening connections with the education sector and building stronger recruitment pipelines for students in technical and professional education programs. Although these programs, where formalized, are not necessarily designed for collecting and channeling feedback towards larger policy changes, they can be important at a local level, where specific English skills and knowledge may be required (for example, in Chile’s Patagonian national parks, Ecuador’s Galapagos Islands or Costa Rica’s ecotourism industry), and where hiring decisions are routinely made.

Recommendations

Many of the technical and professional education programs studied in this report have a long history and decades of expertise under their belt. The question of English language learning, and particularly technical English or English for Specific Purposes, however, is still a work in progress. While some countries have developed for technical English curricula or learning objectives their technical and professional education programs, many others have not and still offer only general English instruction to all students, regardless of career track or specialization. In other instances, while there has been progress towards developing more technical and specific English skills, there are still important gaps in the teaching force that could allow these objectives to be met. From a demand-side perspective, especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors, there is clearly a strong need for English speakers, and particularly candidates with strong oral fluency. This aligns with observations from schools and training institutions as well, but limited instructional time and low student proficiency make it difficult to build these skills. The following set of recommendations seeks to offer proposals for these challenges:

1. Create relevant, specialized curricula and learning objectives for English proficiency in technical and professional education.

All of the countries studied in this report include English instruction in their curricula from an early grade. This means that, in theory, students should arrive at the technical and professional education level with some familiarity with the language. Although survey results and national evaluations suggest that many students arrive already behind in their learning goals, given the career orientation of technical and professional education programs, curricula and programs of study should both focus on strengthening general skills where necessary and providing more tailored instruction for specific career goals. For example, tourism and hospitality experts interviewed for this study emphasized that, although it was important for all employees to have at least some familiarity with English, high-level fluency is not necessary for all roles. For some students who enter their technical and professional training at an A2 level and plan to take back-of-house roles (such as chefs or facilities management), it may be a more productive and efficient use of resources, given their already basic fluency, to offer classes on oral

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communication to strengthen their familiarity and comfort in basic English interactions rather than try to develop their general skills to a B1 or B2 level.

2. Develop training or certification opportunities for teachers to certify their language and content knowledge simultaneously

Even in countries such as Uruguay, Costa Rica and Chile where there have been efforts to develop English learning objectives for specific career paths or create curricula following an English for Specific Purposes model, there is still not a clear career pathway for instructors to build the expertise necessary to meet those goals. Survey results show that most English teachers have no specialized training in a technical field and, while some technical instructors can offer classes in English, there are no ways to certify their abilities formally, and there are no initial teacher training programs that could prepare additional English teachers for technical fields. Building out these programs will not only increase the quality and relevance of English instruction, it will also create opportunities to increase students' exposure to English, since they could potentially receive technical courses in English.

3. Assess students' English abilities—both their general fluency and their content-specific skills

Given the high demand for English in the workforce and the increased focus on English language instruction through national curriculum documents, language policy plans and English programs, it is notable that there has not been a commensurate emphasis on evaluating student proficiency towards learning objectives. As previous studies have revealed, English language evaluation across the region continues to be a weak point for many countries, and is not limited to technical and professional education programs. The importance of evaluation at this level is unique, however—strong English proficiency results can lend credibility to technical and professional education programs and increase their prestige. Additionally, students who perform well on these evaluations can use their scores as an important credential in their job search. Unfortunately, there is currently very limited large-scale evaluation of students' English proficiency in technical and professional education, let alone through evaluations tailored to different

career specialties or content areas. In countries where there are comparable results between technical and general education programs, such as Costa Rica and Colombia, there is evidence that technical students are doing as well as or better than their peers. These promising results in general English instruction can be further leveraged to assess and certify the English For Specific Purposes skills that students acquire in their training, whether in certain specialties or for all technical tracks.

There are also several useful examples of general professional English curricula that could be incorporated into technical and professional education programs. For example, Pearson, the international textbook and education company has developed a Global Scale of Learning Objectives for Professional English, a language proficiency scale aligned with the CEFR that focuses specifically on English use in the workplace. By evaluating student proficiency using such a scale, technical and professional education institutions could both identify language proficiency according to the CEFR and, at a more granular level, their ability to operate effectively in an English-speaking work environment. (Full disclosure, Pearson generously provided funding for this report).

4. Strengthen dual education and internship programs to provide students with opportunities to build necessary English skills, and to give employers space for feedback.

Both industry experts and technical and professional education institutions saw dual education and internship programs as a potential space for collaboration that could build critical English skills for students. Given the need to strengthen students' oral communication and fluency skills, practicum experiences give them a chance to use their English in real-world settings and develop confidence in their language skills. These programs are only worth the time and investment, however, if they can lead to real job opportunities for students upon graduation. Given the current reality, where employers may be more inclined to select a candidate with strong English skills over one with a technical background, internships and on-the-job training should also give employers the opportunity to offer feedback on what they require from potential candidates.

5. Build public-private partnerships in strategic sectors to develop initiatives focused on English for employment

Beyond internship or apprenticeship programs, employers can also play an important role in providing feedback and insight on how to strengthen English language education in technical and professional education programs. This is particularly true in certain sectors that require high levels of English proficiency, such as tourism—studied in this report—, sales or aviation and maritime studies. By bringing in private sector employers as key partners in strengthening English-language programs, ministries can validate the relevance and quality of their programs and build stronger career pathways for their graduates. In many cases, this will involve building upon existing collaborations with the private sector that may be focused on only one component of English language learning (such as curriculum standards or on-the-job training) or lack sustained support (for example, a business roundtable that supports the launch of the national English program, but does not have any larger role or objectives). A combined focus on strategic sectors and long-term partnerships could provide transformative English-learning experiences for students and give them the skills and confidence needed to succeed in the workplace.

Methodology Note

The methodology and research instruments for this report were developed in close collaboration with our national-level partners, without whom this research would not have been possible. In addition to reviewing the original proposal and survey instruments and providing access to key contacts, both within the technical and professional education system and with experts in the tourism sector, they were critical in providing the initial tranches of background information on the technical and professional education system in each country and policies and programs in place to guide English instruction in that sector. Our country partners also reviewed and provided feedback on early outlines and later drafts of this report. In short, they were critical partners and allies throughout this process.

The research for this report was conducted in three main stages:

1. The first stage consisted of gathering general information on technical and professional education in each country as well as understanding how English was incorporated into the curricula, evaluating student proficiency, teacher qualifications, and formal spaces for collaboration with the private sector to ensure that English instruction met the demands of the labor market. For this information, we relied on our country partners to respond to a set of general questions as well as provide us with relevant documents and references to develop a clear picture for each country.
2. The second stage consisted of surveys sent to technical and professional training institutions to better understand English instruction at the school or institutional level. Again we followed our national partners' lead in distributing the surveys, which was sometimes done directly via the Education program at The Dialogue, while in other cases we relied on them to distribute the link to the survey. Despite follow-up efforts and reminders, the response rates were inconsistent across countries with highest response levels in Colombia and Chile and minimal responses in Ecuador and Peru. It is important to note that none of the survey data should be taken as representative of the situation in an entire country, given the non-representative samples and selection bias among respondents.

Methodology Note

3. The final stage of the research involved interviews with experts from the tourism sector regarding the use of English in their profession and the current gaps, challenges and bottlenecks that must be addressed in order to strengthen English language proficiency among technical and professional education graduates. Again, we relied on country partners to provide us with the names and contact information for these industry experts. Unfortunately, in the case of Ecuador and Peru, we were unable to complete the interview process. Given the qualitative nature of these interviews, this data in particular should be understood as representing only the perspectives and experiences of our interlocutors in each country rather than the tourism or hospitality sector as a whole.

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