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Real Scenarios for Teaching English in Public Elementary Schools in Colombia.

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Abstract

This literature review aims to gather information about the reality of teaching English in public elementary schools in Colombia; from what has been published, eight articles were chosen and analyzed. From the articles reviewed, three categories arose: The differences between the written law and guidelines and the reality in the classrooms, the lack of preparation of the teacher to teach English in elementary school and the lack of didactic materials. However, some teachers and pre-service teachers have made efforts to implement updated methodologies, proving that there are other possibilities.

Keywords: English teaching, Colombia, elementary schools, language teachers, teaching methodologies

Degree Requirement

This literature review is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellín, Colombia.

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Preface

This literature review is conducted to fulfill the requirements of the Bachelor of

Education in Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas,

Universidad de Antioquia, in Medellin, Colombia. As a response to this requirement, I wanted to

gain a deeper comprehension of how English is taught in public elementary schools in Colombia.

Then, through the use of matrix analysis, eight articles published in national academic journals

that dealt with the teaching of English in Colombia were analyzed. Three categories emerged

related with the English teaching in public elementary schools in Colombia, but given that most

articles did not focus on the circumstances of the English teaching in public elementary schools

and rather aimed to report about experiences using alternative methodologies with elementary

school-aged children, other category emerged regarding these methodologies that are

possibilities for the teaching of English in elementary schools, public or otherwise. This paper is

the result of this process.

Introduction

To provide some context about the teaching of English in Colombia, and especially in elementary schools, it is necessary to take into account the laws that regulate education and the teaching of English.

The General Law of Education 115 of 1994 in its article 21 dictates the specific objectives of the Basic Education, and in the m literal it mandates "the acquisition of elements of conversation and reading in at least one foreign language". It also states in articles 23 and 31 that foreign languages are part of the mandatory and fundamental subject matter that must be offered in accordance with the syllabus and Institutional Educational Project and that the same subjects must be studied at an advanced level in Middle Education. In this case, the institutions and students can intensify some of these subjects according to their interests. Reinforcing this, the decree 1860 of 1994, chapter V about curricular orientations, the article 34 states that study plans will include the subjects listed as mandatory in article 23 of the General Law 115 and in article 35 declares that the subjects will have a content, a number of hours dedicated to them, and a duration determined by the Institutional Educational Project in correspondence with this decree and other issued by the Ministry of Education. The decree commands that additional subjects can be included in the institutions´ study plan representing no more than twenty percent of the areas studied.

In 1999 the National Government also created the Curricular Guidelines or *Lineamientos Curriculares* for the different subjects of study including English. These Guidelines look to lead the teachers in the syllabus design in the context of the Institutional Educational Project, establish the goals of competence in the foreign language and create the evaluations and make the decisions to make the specific syllabus relevant and effective and the learning meaningful. In

the guidelines, they introduce the learning of a second language since elementary school as a change from previous directions from the government and argued psycho-pedagogical and global market reasons. They show concern about the proper and effective teaching and learning process they mention and explain briefly the interlingual and intercultural development processes and recommend some methodologies for the teaching of the foreign language. They recommend active and interactive methodologies that keep in mind the ludic factor, interesting and significant activities centered in the student, activities that allow the potential development of every student, methodologies that integrate the already known with the new, that are flexible, rich in cultural contents and that value affective factors. According to this, the suggested methodologies they list and describe briefly are the communicative approach, total physical response, natural approach, task-based, and project-based learning, content-based and whole language.

As a response to the needs in coverage and quality in education, in order to improve conditions of social and economic development and improve the quality of life of the population, the Ministry of Education issued the Standards of Competence (2006) as a way to improve the Educational System and to bring it to the current and future needs of the country. With them, the Ministry defines and socializes the standards for two of the formal levels of education, so the aims of the Education system are unified and coherent. The standards of Competence in Foreign Language: English, also known as Cartilla 22, as the Standards in other areas constitute a "clear and public criteria that allow establishing what are the basic levels of quality the children in all regions of Colombia are entitled to". The English standards are divided by groups of grades, from first to third grade, fourth and fifth, sixth and seventh, eighth and ninth, and tenth and eleventh grades. The Standards inform the educational community and the parents what children

should have learned at the end of every group of levels and what the children are expected to be

able to do with what they learned so they can perform effectively in the academic and labor

context. The English standards are a fundamental guideline for teachers, directives, and parents

to have a clear idea about the communicative competencies expected from children in the Basic

and Middle levels. This, in order to help them to achieve the goal set for Eleventh grade, an

intermediate level of English, equivalent to level B1 according to the Common European

Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. That level will allow them to communicate in

the language, develop the communicative competence in English, and be able to use it effectively

in real communicative situations. The standards are organized in a sequence that facilitates

gradual learning through the grades and levels and the competencies required in each of them. It

also states that given the frame of school´s autonomy, the institutions can aim for higher

language levels, if their circumstances allow it and follow the Standards. According to the

government the (CEFR) was adopted in order to be able to evaluate the advances and make

decisions at different levels such as institutions or territorial organisms.

      In 2013 the government issued law 1651, also known as the Law of Bilingualism or *Ley*

de Bilingüismo. This law modified the law 115 of 1994 adding other dispositions targeting

bilingualism. The law 1651 among other things, modifies in its second article, article number 20

of law 115 that dictates the general objectives of the Basic Education adding a new literal stating

another objective "Develop communicative skills to read, comprehend, write, listen, speak, and

express correctly in a foreign language". Article number 3 modifies article 21 of law 115 that

presents the specific objectives of Basic Education in the Elementary cycle. It modifies

specifically literal m that changes to "The development of abilities in conversation, reading and

writing in at least one foreign language". Law 115 just mentioned conversation and reading

skills. The literal l of article 22 of Law 115, which expresses the specific objectives of Basic

Education in the Secondary cycle is modified in article number 4 of Law 1651 in the same

direction changing to "The development of conversation reading and writing skills in at least one

foreign language".

In 2015 the National Government presented the "*Derechos Básicos de Aprendizaje*"

Basic Learning Rights and the "Suggested Curriculum". The DBAs were created in order to have

teachers to be clear about the suggested curricular guidelines as they were created aligned with

these and the Basic Standards of Competence, to improve the pedagogical practices in the

classroom, and to have students reach the expected level for their grade. In the case of English,

different essential topics were integrated into the education in English such as health, co-

existing, peace, environment, and globalization. This points to public institutions to contribute to

the goal to be a bilingual country. The DBA and the suggested curriculum target educational

equality and make the teaching and learning of English to be seen as a tool to strengthen the

integral and relevant education for the students in the XXI century in Colombia. The Suggested

Curriculum was created to support the DBA and materialize them in the institutions and

classrooms. The DBAs for English and its corresponding Suggested Curriculum from

kindergarten to fifth grade were created keeping into account the characteristics and needs of the

teachers from the public elementary schools adapting the material to this context.

The DBAs enable to identify the key aspects of the development of the students´

communicative competence in the foreign language and they are defined in comprehension, oral

expression, and writing comprehension skills. The DBAs allow giving an account of the

progressive development of the communicative competence in English through the school

grades. The DBA booklets have examples to illustrate and explain the abilities in terms of

communication that the students can reach by school grade. This facilitates the comprehension of the set goals by the general community. To the teachers, it provides guidelines for class planning presenting suggested activities that ideally should involve several DBAs of the same grade, but the DBAs are not an activity or a class and they are not to be covered or learned in a specific order. The DBAs are a complement to create and update the curriculum as they represent some essential components of the development of the communicative competence in English. They do not replace the curriculum as this is seen as something wider and complex that involves criteria, study plans, programs, methodology and processes, that support the integral education and the construction of local and national identities implying academic, human and physical resources to develop the Institutional Educational Project.

To promote the English proficiency among the population the different governments have presented different Bilingualism Programs formulating different goals related to the percentage of students performing on a B1 level and the percentage of English teachers in each level of performance, creating and distributing books to teach English in the different grades and campaigning about the importance of these projects. The current Program 2018-2022 affirms that the importance of learning foreign languages lies in the fact they are vehicles of communication, interaction, generation of opportunities and development for everyone. This is very similar to the previous programs. Probably the only noticeable difference is that in its presentation mentions that Colombia is a multilingual country that recognizes its native languages, and creoles while "opening the doors to the construction of a global citizenship through the foreign languages" (MEN). However, this is just in name and probably as a response to many years of criticism to the governments for ignoring the bilingualism already existing in the country.

Being the purpose of this literature review to evidence what is the situation of the English teaching in Public Elementary schools in Colombia, as found in the academic studies, below are presented the findings of two studies that pointed to draw the picture of exactly this, one in Medellin and the other one in Pasto, After that, it is presented an article that describes the children's perceptions of the English teaching and learning in their elementary schools. Finally, some experiences incorporating updated methodology in the classrooms are presented as a possibility to be implemented nationwide, that, as it is evident, does not lack limitations and difficulties. Those experiences were developed in different settings some in public schools, one involved children from public and private schools, another was done with public school children but outside the school, other two were made on private settings, one in an English institute and other one in a Bilingual private school and another one is wider because it is about the professional, pedagogical and methodological journey of three teachers than even involve teaching Mexican children in the US. A total of eight articles were chosen, first the ones that presented the reality of the English teaching and learning in public elementary schools, the others were included as possibilities for the future of the English teaching in public school in the first education cycle. To present the circumstances around the teaching of English in public elementary schools in Colombia references to legal documents and laws were also made.

Realities of the English teaching in elementary schools

Cadavid, McNulty and Quinchía (2004) conducted a study called "Elementary English Language Instruction: Colombian Teachers' Classroom Practices" about teachers teaching English to children in 7 different elementary schools in Medellin. The analysis included the teachers' education and work experience, English classes activities, materials, and teachers' and students´ roles, to understand and reflect on the teachers' classroom methodology.

In another study, Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) researching the English teaching in public elementary schools in Pasto echoes the observations of Cadavid, McNulty, and Quinchía (2004) and Cardenas (2001) about the unpreparedness of the teachers in Colombia to assume the teaching of English in elementary schools and the difficulties arosen of the education that they have related to the low command of English by elementary school teachers and the lack of pedagogical elements of the English Language teachers to work with children. The aims of this study were very similar to those of Cadavid et al. (2004), they aimed to identify the methodologies used by the English teachers, describe the teachers´ qualifications, their needs, and determine the most critical problems they faced in their practice.

Cadavid et al. (2004) found that all the 12 participant teachers hold a Bachelor of Education degree in different areas such as Bachelor of Education in elementary, preschool, or childhood education (5), in different areas (mathematics, Spanish, methodology and social studies) (4), and in foreign languages (3). Out of the 12 teachers, 7 did specialization studies but none in teaching English. Besides, the teachers with degrees in foreign languages, that bear the knowledge of the language and the methodology to teach it, lack the pedagogical knowledge to teach children neither they are familiarized with language development in children nor have experience teaching groups of children. The researchers acknowledge that this situation has been previously reported by Cárdenas (2001) noting that teachers that have studied English or how to teach it often miss academic preparation for teaching children. They also cite González et.al. (2001) who found that public school teachers regard themselves as lacking a satisfactory level of competence in English as well as background knowledge of it and previous preparation. Adding to this problem, they cited Nunan (1999) who declared that the insufficient financing to the

execution of government educational policies in Latin America, Asia and North America is a detrimental factor that affects schools and teachers (Cadavid et al., 2004).

The study carried out by Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) was conducted with 18 public schools in Pasto 13 in the urban area and 5 from the rural area. In these schools, 47% of the teachers had a B.A. in languages, 29% in other fields of study, and 24% did not have an undergraduate degree. Again, the majority of teachers teaching English were not Foreign Language teachers, but opposite to the findings of Cadavid the teachers in this study did not report to have further studies in English, 58% of them had, but in other areas. Additionally, Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) discovered that despite answering in the questionnaires made by the researchers that their schools teach English from first to fifth grade, the reality, corroborated by 78% of the teachers during the interviews, is that most elementary schools teach English just in fourth and fifth grade. They say these are the most important grades to acquire some basic elements of English, so the students can go forth to secondary school without major difficulties. Some teachers even affirmed that English is taught sporadically because they do not feel comfortable performing this "new" assignment from the government. They claim they aren't familiar with the language nor the methodology for teaching it. The number of English classes per week is one hour [1] 78% of the participant schools, and 2 hours 22%, as the authors claim, this is similar to what was found in Cadavid et al. (2004). The authors express that it is not possible to fulfill the standards of the Bilingual Program in this reduced period of time (Bastidas & Muñoz, 2011).

Still, many of the teachers in the study by Cadavid et al. (2004) have taken professional development courses related to learning English or the methodology to teach the language. The courses to learn English were taken by different kinds of teachers, but just one with a Bachelor in

Languages. The courses on methodology to teach English were the opposite; most were teachers

with Bachelor in Languages and just a few with Bachelor in other areas. Teachers with Bachelor

in Elementary or Preschool Education did not take this course because of the nature of their

undergraduate programs. (Cadavid et al., 2004)

In regard to professional development courses, Diaz, Guerra and Rodriguez (2008) after

working in these programs for elementary school teachers affirm that it is important to promote

spaces for reflection where their knowledge and experiences are validated, with relevant

learnings, so they can improve their chances of learning a foreign language hence they can make

decisions for their students, in their contexts, not having to wait for training opportunities

presented as a solution for all and everything. They are certain about empowerment to make

informed decisions working with their students, contributing to the constructions of

methodologies and theories for enriching the pedagogy and theory of foreign languages (Diez et

al., 2008).

Analyzing the classes, Cadavid et al. (2004) found that most part of it is spent on

organizational, presentational, or affective activities, that is giving instructions or taking

disciplinary actions, introducing the lesson topic, and warm-ups. They recognized the importance

of these actions in the elementary school context but at the same time they point out the fact that

given that these actions are performed in Spanish, this means that during the English class the

children are more exposed to Spanish than to English. Teachers use the target language mainly

while presenting the topic or reviewing vocabulary. Meanwhile, they also found that the

presentation of the topic and the vocabulary review often take place without practice exercises or

any other application in the same lesson. The way to present the topic or related vocabulary

frequently involves the use of flashcards and translation. The latter plays an important role in the

classes as it is the means to present the content, to explain, and check comprehension. On the other hand, games, singing songs, role plays, storytelling, referential question-answer exercises, meaningful drills, problem-solving activities, information exchange activities, or the like are not being used by teachers. This may be explained by the fact that most teachers do not have a degree in English teaching and these activities are specifically related to the field of foreign language, so the majority of the teachers may not be familiar with them. The classroom observation allowed the researchers to notice how children are exposed to isolated words, not to complete sentences or text most of the time.

Regarding the teachers´ knowledge about methodologies for learning English at elementary school, Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) found that 94% responded in a questionnaire that they did not know or use a specific theory. This is a major vacuum coming for the teachers teaching a foreign language that affects the students ' s learning not just because the flawed teaching that lacks theoretical support can make the learning process less effective but also because the teacher has it more difficult to identify and address factors that affect the language learning and can cause learning problems. In relation to the types of methods used by the English teachers, the authors reported that 12% used the Audio lingual method, and other 12% the Communicative method, 15% the Inductive method, 17% the Eclectic method, 15% named a variety of methods and 29% did not answer the question (Bastidas & Muñoz, 2011). This means that most teachers are using methods that do not fit the Communicative approach suggested by the Ministry of Education, even before the implementation of the Standards of English (MEN, 1988; 2005as cited in Bastidas & Muñoz, 2011).

However, during their observations, Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) found that most teachers used techniques based on the Audio lingual and Grammar translation methods with

activities that stress on copying and listening, with constant repetition of words or short sentences and having translations to Spanish on the board and notebooks of the words and sentences. Interactions between teacher and students or student-student were not promoted. This indicates that children at elementary school have few opportunities to perform meaningful activities using English with communicative purposes. As Cadavid et al. (2004), Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) found that the use of Spanish predominated in most part of the classes and children are taught isolated words and simple sentences without a context. They also argue that because teachers are mainly non formed as foreign language teachers, they are not familiarized with TESOL methods, additionally, they found that some teachers with Bachelor in English teaching affirmed that their English level is low and they did not receive proper training in methodology to teach children (Bastidas & Muñoz, 2011).

Cadavid et al. (2004) also noticed how frequent it was that a textbook became the basis of the course, how teachers rely on it to settle the sequence of the contents, to structure the lessons, to create the activities, and even the class interactions.

Classroom materials were another major element. Some materials like worksheets are available but books, flashcards, games, and posters are scarce. Teachers have to create or adapt materials with their own abilities and resources. Few schools have computers or multimedia (Cadavid et al., 2004).

Regarding the syllabus, Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) found that many institutions do not have a syllabus for English to be followed in an organized manner from first to fifth grade, 62% of the teachers reported that they are the responsible ones to design the syllabus for their courses and 20% that they follow school´s syllabus. They affirm to know the Ministry´s Curricular

Guidelines but only have a general idea of what is expected to be achieved by the end of elementary school. To design their syllabus 20% of teachers said they based it on English texts, 20% based it on their own experience and knowledge, 18% on their own materials and 42% mentioned other options. In informal conversations, the teachers expressed to the researchers their frustration at having to search for materials to plan their courses as the schools do not provide supporting material for the curriculum. The lack of didactic material was also found in Cadavid et al. (2004). Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) add citing Bastidas (1993) that what teachers need to know about didactic material is that they need to be adapted and modified according to the objectives, context, students´ interests and level of difficulty and that training the teachers to adapt the material would improve their condition.

In the article "The Use of Pretend Play and Drawings to Explore Children's Social Representations About Learning and Teaching English" Cadavid, Vasquez and Botero (2015) based on the research project "La mirada de los niños y las niñas sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés" "The children's outlook about the teaching and learning of English", that studied the Social Representations that children have about teaching and learning English. They had previously studied the reality of the teachers that were teaching English in the public elementary schools in Medellin but then they wanted to learn about the children's views and rethink based on the information gathered, the policies related to foreign languages and the practices used for their implementation. The participants were children of 2 public and 2 private institutions in Medellin. In each institution, they picked 5 children of each of the chosen grades (first, third and fifth). Doing research with children implied using instruments to gather data that were both appropriate to work with children and effective to provide the information needed for the research, that is how they decided to use drawings and pretend play and then having

conversations with the children that allow them to express themselves in a disinhibited manner. Cadavid et al. (2015). However, the author stated that the results gathered from this research would be discussed in another publication.

The creation of the drawings and pretend playing were guided as they were the answer to stimulus given by the researchers. In the case of the drawings, Cadavid et al. (2015) are based on a proposal made by Araya (2002) (as cited in Cadavid et al., 2015) of working with questions around the topic that is being explored. In this case, there were questions such as How is your English class? What do you do in your English class? How do you feel in the English class? among others, and the verbalization of the people from the drawings and the questions formulated for the conversation; the researcher also included in the conversation elements that were present in the drawings, for example, objects or the mood of the people in the drawing. The other instrument, role-playing, is described by the authors according to Pelegrini in Sierra, (1998) as the simulation made by children of the reality around them. As with the drawings, the role-playing was guided too, in this case, the children were asked to represent both "their favorite English class" and "the English class that they do not like" (Cadavid et al., 2015).

This research allowed the authors to learn about the teaching methods used, how the context affects the children´s social representations about English and its learning, and part of the social discourse related to English present in our context. They also were able to explore the needs, likes, recommendations, worries, and expectations of the children. Cadavid et al. (2015) hoped for a change of mind on the part of adults regarding the outlook of the teaching and learning of English in the elementary school context that encourages a reflection about what the children want or expect to find in their schools in the English classes. Doing research with children and allowing their voices to be heard could lead to improvement in the environment

where they develop and reveal ways to reach them in the school and in the teaching practice (Cadavid et al., 2015).

From the diagnosis made in the previous articles three major topics arise: the teachers' preparation, the lack of material and the law mandates versus reality.

Teachers´ Preparation

What these diagnoses clearly picture is the need to educate and train teachers for the English teaching in elementary school, teachers with advanced English level and vast knowledge in methodologies, pedagogy to work with children, and language development in the first and second language. It would be the responsibility of the Universities to educate the new generations of teachers with those capacities (according to Ley General de Educación 115 article 112), the government may also need to adjust the mechanisms to appoint English teachers in elementary schools and finally and more immediately, the professional development courses should be rethought as they do not engage the teachers that attend them. Cadavid et al. (2004) and Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) acknowledge the existence and promotion of these courses but there are some difficulties as some teachers are left out or the courses do not address the needs of the teachers, as sometimes they teach the language but not the methodology or vice-versa, having in the same class teachers with very different levels of performance in English, all of this discouraging teachers to continue with the courses.

Lack of Didactic Material

On top of that, the government, and the schools´ administration should support the teachers. Even Though some efforts have been made in designing Mallas Curriculares, which currently are known as DBA or Derechos Básicos de Aprendizaje such efforts and the books published by the Ministry of Education are helpful but not enough especially given the

characteristics of the teachers currently teaching English in elementary schools. The lack of didactic material, teaching materials and guides that are easy to use by the teachers and professional development courses that do not address the teacher's needs and do not provide the support that they are looking for, deepens the current problems and even dishearten teachers that may give up hope to the grim outlook.

Differences between the written law and guidelines and the reality in the classrooms

The methodology observed by the teachers was far from close to the methodologies suggested by the government for the teaching of English: the communicative approach, total physical response, natural approach, task-based, and project-based learning, content-based and whole language. The teachers are not familiar with these approaches nor with the kind of activities usually used in these approaches in English, as they are proper for foreign language teaching practice.

Additionally, from the material gathered by Cadavid et al. (2015) displayed in the article it is possible to observe how some children see the English class as something that is demanding and probably boring, this can be related to the use of certain methodologies that from the findings of Cadavid et al. (2015) and Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) it is known that are common among the teachers teaching English in elementary schools. The perceptions and motivations of children regarding the English class can be influenced by how their English class is developed and, of course, the social discourse about English in their close environment. Improving the teaching practices will change the views that children, families, and even the same teachers have about English for a more positive and enriching experience.

The law clearly states the mandatory character of English in Colombian education but it failed to address how to fulfill this in the elementary school, where the homeroom teachers are left to teach everything, regardless of the different modalities of education that they receive. Professional development courses were developed but they do not answer the demands and needs of the teachers and even some teachers seem not interested in those courses, maybe because of the references they may have heard from other teachers. Probably having specially trained teachers directly in the University during their undergraduate years would be a more efficient solution. The Ministry of Education may certainly make itself helpful by providing teaching materials to schools, it is not fair to leave the teachers without proper tools to do their work. The laws related with the English teaching are clear, some people may agree, some people may not, others question the reasons behind them, but the concrete problem is the lack of real and efficient solutions to assume the needed changes. A law of this kind should have offered the solutions upfront and even currently there are no solutions or plans on sight.

Other possibilities

Despite the difficult reality of the teaching of English in elementary schools, there are teachers and pre-service teachers, thinking and promoting other possibilities, below are some of these proposals.

Reading aloud

One experience implementing updated methodologies is the one recorded by Porras (2010) with a study on using stories to teach English to children in a public elementary school in first, second and third grades. The proposal came from a group of student-teachers from a University´s section located in the same city as the school, Bucaramanga. The student teachers will become elementary school teachers with a specialization in teaching English to young

children. The student-teachers were required to plan the course curriculum, create the stories in

accordance with the children's likes and interests, plan the lessons, collect, and analyze the data.

The objectives were to create the stories according to the children's interests and likes, teach

English in contexts around the stories and make learning English fun and a lifelong process for

these kids. The project was an Action Research, the author defined Action Research according to

Cohen & Manion, cited in Nunan (1990) as research that "can be utilized as a means of

remedying problems diagnosed in specific situations, or improving in some way a given set of

circumstances; as a means of in-service training, providing teachers with new skills and methods

and heightening self-awareness" (Porras, 2010, p.99). During the research the student-teachers

reflected on the practice they were carrying on and analyzed what worked and what did not,

accordingly, they made changes.

In another article, Norato (2014) presents her findings on an Action Research she

conducted in a series of sessions in "The Reading Corner" a voluntary space, supplementary to

their regular classes offered to children from 7 to 12 years old in an English teaching institute.

Porras´s students based their project on the Natural approach and its five hypotheses:

the input hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the

monitor hypothesis and the affective filter hypothesis (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) (as cited in

Porras, 2010, p.97). The input hypothesis was paramount in this case due to the level of the

children, being beginners, they start to develop receptive skills before producing language.

Norato (2014, p.85), also recognizes the importance of the comprehensible input and refers to

how Krashen explains it in Curtain, & Dahlberg, 2004. According to it, an input should be a

chunk of language that the student is able to understand plus a little more. This derives from the

input hypothesis, which asserts that the message that is conveyed to a child must be understandable by the child even if all the words are not familiar.

The students in Porras's (2010) article choice of using storytelling was also based on Krashen's theory. Storytelling creates a positive class environment as well as meaningful and comprehensive input. This, because stories activate the acquisition mechanism, making it easy for children to induce elements of the language from the input given by the stories (Krashen, 1981 as cited in Porras, 2010, p.97). Additionally, Porras (2010 p. 97) cites Rossiter (2002, p. 1) about how stories are effective as teaching tools because they are memorable, believable, entertaining and because of this activate meaning-making.

In her article, Norato (2014) also acknowledges the importance of generating a positive environment for children to learn English. This element was present in her findings, the results from the surveys she conducted revealed that 11 out of 15 students said that they liked being read to, and in the same way, 10 out of 15 said that they paid attention when the teacher read the story for them (Norato, 2014). Reading comprehension boosts motivation and being hooked to the story provokes communication to occur. Modeling positive behaviors and enjoyment of reading helped children be motivated. Norato (2014, p.97), citing Fox (2008) declared the importance of building a relationship between the adult, the child and the book with the purpose of facilitating interaction and helping children personalize what they are reading (Norato, 2014). It is important to mention that Norato states that allowing the combination of students' mother tongue and English facilitated communication.

Story reading at a beginner level requires a lot of pre-reading work in order to learn vocabulary, help the students understand the story and become familiar with the new language. After reading the story the students can be involved in different post-reading tasks and activities

seeking more comprehension and moving from receptive skills (listening and reading) to productive skills (speaking and writing) Porras (2010).   Norato, 2014 also applied pre-, while- and post-activities along with the story reading and found how these activities did more than improve comprehension. As she also aimed to promote Critical Thinking with the readings and the proposed activities around reading, development of critical thinking was observed not only during the post-reading activities children worked on, but also during the conversations in the read-aloud. Results from the general survey said that children (10 out of 15) made use of images in order to predict the meaning of the new words. Besides Predictions based on illustrations the other categories she found related to Critical Thinking were: library skills development, focus on decontextualized text, prediction based on background knowledge and story schemata.

In every case, teachers should select the appropriate methodology and didactics in order to make learning interesting and meaningful for children. The use of stories and the ludic methodology around them made the language learning process meaningful and fun for the children (Porras, 2010). In the same direction, Norato (2014) states that the teacher's challenge is to find the most appropriate material which can meet the academic needs of the students.

Regarding readings, Porras (2010) affirms that Big Books are a very good resource for reading aloud. She cites Curtain & Dahlberg (2004) who describes what a big book is:

A big book is an enlarged piece of commercial or student-made literature, intended to recreate the intimacy and good feelings of one-on-one "read-aloud" sessions with an entire class. So they are large enough so that the entire class can see and share in the experience. Most big books have a predictable storyline with strong rhythm, rhyme, repeated patterns, logical sequence and supportive illustrations.

To explain the findings, Porras (2010) developed two categories that help children learn in a fun and meaningful way and that allows children to comprehend and show comprehension. She presents two elements as key for children to learn in a fun way, stories created based on children's likes and interests as well as games and other kinds of motivating activities. Taking into account the children's interests promotes creating a connection between the new learning and their lives; it also helps the understanding of the stories as most of the characters are familiar to them, this is, they have prior knowledge. The use of games had a positive effect on children, they were more relaxed and it was used to practice the language after introducing and practicing vocabulary and to activate previous knowledge for the readings. It also promotes interaction among them and with the teachers, helping them develop their communicative, social, and thinking skills.

Regarding the second category, which allows children to comprehend and show comprehension, different strategies were used during the different stages of the story reading to boost comprehension. In the pre-reading stage, the student-teachers selected words that were key for the understanding of the reading and taught them to the children, reinforcing the understanding of the words with activities like visuals, puzzles and games. While reading the students focus on three strategies: the connection between illustrations and written text, predictions, and questions. After reading the text children did different speaking and writing production activities. In spite of the fact that the writing was guided it aided the student teacher to evaluate the students´ comprehension. Despite the children´s production being limited to words and small phrases, the student-teachers were able to observe that children could understand most of the input they received. Post-reading activities were key as they favored increased comprehension and helped the children move from receptive competence involved in

listening and reading to the productive competence necessary for speaking and writing (Porras, 2010).

On the other hand, Norato (2014) found from the surveys she conducted, that most of the children liked being read to, and reported paying attention when the teacher read the story for them. Also, more than 50% who attended these sessions felt that it helped them to learn vocabulary and believe this is a useful methodology for this.

Through observation she found that during the sessions children displayed a variety of elements of Critical Thinking: library skills development, focus on decontextualized text, prediction based on background knowledge and story schemata. Another aspect that was evidenced was how the use of different resources and didactic material such as graphic organizers helped children comprehend the stories easier and interpret the story's grammar (Norato, 2014).

The study evidenced that reading aloud gives the students opportunities to interact with others while they strengthen their English repertoire, it gives the students a space where they could improve their listening skills as well as reading strategies. Through readings, children learned vocabulary in context and developed their speaking skills using the language they had, regardless of their English level participating in the reading and the activities around it. Focus on communication rather than error correction gave students the confidence to express themselves through English and motivated them as well. The author backed this principle with the communicative language teaching theory (Richards, 2006 as cited in Norato, 2014) which asserts that language production occurs when the teacher guides students but does not control their speaking. Reading aloud develops children's thinking and triggers learning new expressions and expressing themselves while they are absorbed in the magical world of a book (Norato, 2014).

Content-Based Instruction

Researchers in Universidad de Nariño developed a case study focus on the application of a set of 4 units based on Content-Based Instruction (CBI) principles as a medium to foster the use of English in close to real common school activities and tasks, in order that students could interact in English during the whole English class time. The study was carried during one semester, the students were in contact with the CBI materials for 16 weeks, 8 hours a week. The amount of time needed to implement the 4 units. The participants were 15 children with ages between 8 and 10 years. The children were false beginners as they already had 2 years of English instruction at their schools, one hour per week. The subject-matter content included topics that children should study in fourth and fifth grade (Hidalgo & Caicedo, 2011).

Content-Based Instruction is an English teaching approach that is based on the subject matter or material that students usually study at school (Grabe & Stoller, 1997 as cited in Hidalgo & Caicedo, 2011). The subject matter content is presented in the form of comprehensible input, that is expected to be interesting for the students and provide them not just with content but also with meaning in the foreign language. Given this characteristic, the application of this approach starts with the preparation of specific programs for working in both language and subject matter´s content. It has been successfully applied in different contexts such as Canada and the United States (Genesee, 1998 as cited in Hidalgo & Caicedo, 2011). These experiences have evidenced that students learn faster in ESL classes where Content.Based Instruction and immersion activities are developed (Cummins, 1981; Ramírez, Yuen, Ramey & Pasta, 1991 as cited in Hidalgo & Caicedo, 2011). One hypothesis that can be made is that this faster learning process can be explained by the motivation experienced by students when faced with Content-Based work (Hidalgo & Caicedo, 2011).

Hidalgo and Caicedo (2011) see this approach as a possibility in our foreign language context to motivate students, attain a certain fluency level in the language and to bring a change in the monotony of the English classes in elementary schools, giving children something meaningful to work with.

The children who participated in this study were highly motivated to learn English. They were able to understand the text presented and exercises proposed as they had already studied that content in other subjects. Experiential learning, real tasks provide the children in the language class exposure to real language, having their subconscious minds strive on the processing of language while their conscious minds are focused on the task. The units were accompanied by real materials that integrated the four skills at a beginner's level to boost participation in class and motivation. This was accomplished as the content included is related to some background knowledge children already had. The creation of the units followed the principle that children learn by doing, a motivating factor for students (Hidalgo & Caicedo, 2011).

Hidalgo and Caicedo (2011) considered that children learning a foreign language should not be forced to read or write the same as older students could or need to be. The activities they designed were designed as authentic pre-reading and pre-writing tasks that favored participation in comprehension tasks. Some of these activities were sentence completion that could lead to the construction of sentences and short texts.

Authentic Communicative Performances

Other two authors, Guevara and Ordoñez (2012) presented a proposal to work with very young learners, kindergarten children. This proposal came to be as the authors were hired by a Bilingual private school as consultants to help to improve the students' level of English, given

that though attending the Bilingual school the students do not speak English easily, naturally or

willingly, (Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012). The authors created a curriculum from Kindergarten

though they declare not agreeing with children studying English from such a young age, as they

believe it is best to allow consolidation of the first language before starting learning a foreign

(Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012).

The authors declared that two principles of language acquisition are consistently

supported in their research. "First, everyone can learn one or several languages; and second, the

success of this learning depends on the real need or wish to use the new language(s) in authentic

communication" (Snow, 2007 as cited in Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012). This is the reason why

teaching and learning a second language in a largely monolingual sociolinguistic context like the

Colombian, is a major challenge (Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012). The previous assertion made by

the authors is true in the context of an urban area and in reference to bilingualism as the

performance in Spanish and English. It is true that a vast majority of the population in Colombia

is monolingual, but it is important to note that when the government refers to bilingualism

programs it refers to English, which is the only second language promoted. There are indigenous,

Rom and Afro Colombian populations with their own language, 65 different languages, that are

not counted as bilingual individuals or communities nor their languages are promoted.

Guevara and Ordoñez (2012) developed the curriculum with some of the English and

Spanish teachers appointed by the school. For them it was paramount to connect the work of

both language departments to reach the connections they wanted to generate in the development

of the children's linguistic skills in Spanish and English. They also examined the concept of

Performance (Ordóñez, 2010a as cited in Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012) and worked designing

some appropriate for real communicative contexts of their students. This ends with a new

curriculum with these characteristics: It applies constructivist principles of human learning

focusing on, "authentic communicative performances." It is bilingual, it embraces the use of

Spanish to help children to learn English and the theory of first language acquisition, linked to

the importance rendered by constructivism to previous knowledge to build new ones. It involves

three contexts of language development, daily communication and communication through mass

media; the communication necessary when approaching knowledge in different academic

disciplines, and artistic and cultural expression. The curriculum is consistent with the four

constructivist principles.

　　　　To note the four principles are: learning occurs when doing things, working with others

Vygotsky (1978), all learning occurs naturally as a process (Piaget, 1970) and all new learning is

built on knowledge previously constructed (Piaget, 1970; Ausubel, 1968), the latter accounting

for the cyclical nature of the curriculum as cited in Guevara and Ordoñez (2012).

　　　　In view of the students´ young ages and the lack of real use of English in their context

most performances were role-plays about topics proposed by the students provided with the

opportunity to learn a language repertoire they were interested in learning, they also participated

in decision making. Reading stories as well as learning and singing songs were also successful

performances. The focus on communication helped the children to develop positive attitudes

towards the English class, as the activities carried out are meaningful for them. The curriculum

rules that communication in English is just oral up to the third grade, in accordance with the

researchers' belief to advance the students´ Spanish literacy first before introducing a different

reading system (Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012).

　　　　The implementation of authentic performances led to considerable improvement of oral

skills, represented mainly in the exchange of information through questions and answers,

following instructions, interpreting songs, and talking about stories. Through all this communication, vocabulary and grammar were used in context and, so, with meaning and without actual specific lessons on them (Guevara & Ordoñez, 2012).

Whole Language

There are also teachers reflecting about their teaching beliefs, their teaching practices and other possibilities Diaz et al. (2008) did a reflection exercise that led them to found Whole language methodology. When they started, they sought a local touch to the English teaching that set it apart from the globalized world. They advocate for teachers to explore the possibilities existing in the field to create curriculums that are clear and contextualized, that reflect upon the teacher's expectations and beliefs instead of the ones being imposed and reproduced without serious consideration.

In their journey, they explored topics such as the teaching of reading and writing to children, the role of grammar in learning English, other ways to learn foreign languages and the use of these in real situations by the students. They seek for more significant interactions in their classes, coherence between what they believe about teaching and education and what they do. Critical pedagogy was an important discovery in the process of at least one of them, the concept of dialectic and the possibility of observing from different perspectives and seeing the English teaching as a construction of meaning, not as repetition or reproduction exercise was an important step in the path (Diaz et al., 2008).

Then, they met Yvonne and David Freeman in a seminar organized where the authors worked. The Freemans introduced them to the Whole Language Philosophy, an array of theories and practices that place the human being as the center of every education process. They also

studied thematic exploration and literature as opportunities to learn English. From there, they changed the guides and courses and teaching training (Diaz et al., 2008).

Later, they had the opportunity to study where the Freemans worked, they studied at the University and worked with Mexican children in a school. There they saw those children between two cultures and languages, their families and the majoritarian American culture and language. Thankfully, those children did not have to negotiate one or another culture or language, both were validated in their classroom, their teacher was bicultural and bilingual and organized the curriculum, materials and events in relation to what was important, integral, natural and real for the children. (K. Goodman, 1986: 9 as cited in Diaz et al., 2008).

In their article Diaz et al. (2008) state the Principles of Whole Language:

Language

Is a means of communication, thinking and learning that is effective when it is comprehensible, authentic and functional. It responds to the individual and social needs of people, it is developed from a personal process of "invention" and a social process of "convention" (K. Goodman, 2003: 305 as cited in Diaz et al. 2008).

It then tends to convention. Halliday (1985, as cited in Diaz et al., 2008) asserts that language is learned through it and about it simultaneously.

Learning is considered an active process in constant change. Learners are agents of their own process through experiences that help them to prove their presumptions. Those experiences can be social as learning is also social. It also happens in social interaction as explained by the zone of proximal development Vigotsky (1978: 133 as cited in Diaz et al., 2008). Learning is also as seen by Smith (1998, as cited in Diaz et al., 2008) continuous, without effort, incidental and unlimited, as the brain is always learning and constructing meaning.

The curriculum is created based on who the learners are, what they already know, and where they want to go.

The teaching is created from learning opportunities created by the students who are responsible for their own process.

Assessment should be done by teachers that are informed observers of the process of their own students. They should be constantly registering their estimations (Cambourne, 1988 as cited in Diaz et al., 2008) including some traditional evaluation tools. These inputs should be the primary material to prepare their teaching

Social construction: collaborative, democratic learning is important in this approach. Having a "learning community" enhances the learning process as students can count on social support.

As part of the authors' work developing the curriculum and the professional development, they made clear the theories in which they based the changes. One methodology that they regarded as an alternative is thematic learning (Freeman y Freeman, 1998 as cited in Diaz et al., 2008). This methodology is centered on the student who chose the topics according to their own interests with a clear purpose called the generating question (Valencia & Lipson, 1998 as cited in Diaz et al., 2008). From this, they can organize with their teacher learning activities or events. Thematic learning involves the concept of Halliday (as cited in Diaz et al., 2008) of learning through language. This has other benefits as students not just learn conversational language but also about literature and academic language (Cummins, 1981 as cited in Diaz et al., 2008) that is important for advanced studies. These methodological alternatives provide the opportunity to work the language structures in context. To do this the teacher creates mini-

lessons (Weaver, 1996 as cited in Diaz et al., 2008) that arise from the process it is being carried out (Diaz et al., 2008).

To the authors, their discovery of the Whole language, clarified them many doubts, and invited them to explore new questions. Thanks to it they had learned about new pedagogical possibilities and had had a more social and political reflection regarding education. It has encouraged them to bring forward new ways of creating curriculum according to the Colombian context. They express their thoughts about new teachers being capable of developing foreign language teaching strategies that are more critical and political and seize the linguistic and cultural possibilities. For them, given the transformation, the purpose of education requires revising the purposes, practices and discourses among teachers (Diaz et al., 2008).

Conclusions

From the articles describing the reality of the English teaching in elementary public schools in Colombia several aspects were evident.

The central government has presented many different language policies but has not described and prepared real teachers who are supposed to be the ones in charge of teaching English to elementary school children.

The government did not prepare ahead to enforce the laws it created for teaching English in elementary schools, there were not enough teachers properly prepared to be in charge of this responsibility, most teachers were not trained for this, others received some training that was far from enough and in many cases, it did not involve their needs and demands, in both language learning and language teaching methodology. Regarding the latter, very few elementary school teachers were on these courses due to the nature of their undergraduate program (elementary education, children's education, etc.). Plus, even after taking some courses,

the teachers claim they are not prepared to teach English to their students, because they do not

feel comfortable teaching English because of their own English level. The methodologies seen in

practice by the researchers in the schools did not reflect the suggestions made by the government

of approaches focused on communication, but of course, most teachers do not have knowledge of

this; their undergraduate programs did not include anything about English teaching.

Another major challenge repeatedly reported in the articles is the lack of didactic

material that sums up to the great difficulties faced by elementary school teachers thrown to

teach a foreign language that in many cases they do not know and which is assigned out of the

blue without preparation or support. It was many years after the mandate of teaching English that

the Ministry of Education started to publish some books to support the English teaching at

elementary level and to create the "Mallas Curriculares" with the same purpose. Still, this is far

from enough, teachers need pedagogical and methodological orientation, learn English

themselves and have proper materials for their work, access to multimedia and multimedia

materials, big books, class activities and other teaching materials they can use for their class and

to learn to create and adapt on their own.

Besides the needs described before, teachers also require to learn about the different

foreign teaching theories and methodologies to find the one that fits their teaching beliefs and

their students' characteristics. To learn what they can, and given the suggestions made by the

government, aspire for in their English classes.

The articles about experiences with updated foreign language teaching methodologies

offer some possibilities for the teaching of English in the elementary public schools but also in

other settings, as even some of the experiences cited were in private institutions. They are worth

to mention as they were all very positive experiences by their results in the students´ learning of

English but also for the nature of the chosen methodologies that have a very holistic vision of the

students, as they take into account their interests, their likes and the belief of learning from them

through the language and using the language. Moreover, these experiences are not just valuable

for elementary schools but also secondary schools, explore stories using another language, learn

about the students´s own interests by using English or sharing with their classmates something

that is important for them or reviewing some of the most interesting topics from the other

subjects in the English class are very appealing possibilities for teens and early teens. And of

course, there is the advantage of having competent English teachers in secondary school.

However, it is good to promote alternative methodologies in secondary school teachers too, as

some may be outdated methodologically, or just fossilized in a certain way to conduct their

classes for different educational, circumstantial,working demands or other reasons. Furthermore,

as the English targets are not being met, it is important to strengthen all possible tiers of the

process, in this case, teaching practices.

Learning from alternative, successful and inspiring experiences should make part of the

teachers´ life. Sharing the knowledge and insights from these experiences enriches a whole

community. Some teachers would embrace such practices spreading updated methodologies and

the benefits of it to the students and community. But teachers need to be empowered not just in

attitude, but also with training and tools. The government promotes laws and decrees that the

system is not capable of fulfilling, creating a huge gap between what the law, the paper says and

what really happens in the schools. The problems in foreign language teaching and education in

general are not solved by writing laws and signing them, the solution comes from giving the

importance and attention they require, that is to say, acting accordingly, seeking the advice of

experts, training and count with the appropriate human resource, and equipping them with the

tools and creating a structure where communication flows with the information of the reality of

the system and where decision making is effective and reached preferably by the people directly

involved, listening to the people facing the school´s reality first hand. Education improves with

demands to schools that are reasonable, that are made to institutions that are strong enough to

create responses that are effective for their communities and aligned with the National goals and

that have power enough to propose something different and argue in its favor in front of the

people.

Further studies

Some aspects that were not discussed in the articles but are closely related to the topic

of this literature review are: the more appropriate age to start learning a foreign language, it is

being promoted to start learning English as early as possible, but is this the most effective and

beneficial for the children? Guevara and Ordoñez (2012) said they do not agree with teaching

children a foreign language before their mother tongue is consolidated. How have been the

experiences with the teaching of English in other Latin American countries, what methodologies

are the most widely used in elementary schools, how successful have these methodologies been,

how has been the transition and the teachers´ education and training. All these questions that are

probably examined in other articles are relevant to discuss how suited are the targets set by the

government in the bilingualism program and which would be the path to take in Colombia.

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