

Elementary English Language Instruction: Colombian Teachers' Classroom Practices*

Enseñanza del idioma inglés en primaria: Prácticas de aula de docentes colombianos

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An in-progress ethnographic research project about teachers who are facing the complex task of teaching English to children in 7 public elementary schools in the metropolitan area of Medellín is presented in this article. First, the need for this research is outlined by researchers; second, the methodology of the project is described; third, up-to-date findings which include a profile of the 12 teachers who are participating in this study, and an analysis of their class methodology in terms of activities, materials, teacher and student roles are reported. Lastly, implications of this research project related to early foreign language instruction are highlighted.

Key words: Public Elementary-English-Language Instruction, English-Foreign Language, Ethnography-Research-Method, Teaching-Methodology

Este artículo presenta los resultados preliminares de una investigación etnográfica acerca de las estrategias metodológicas utilizadas por profesores de básica primaria que enseñan inglés como lengua extranjera en 7 escuelas públicas del área metropolitana del municipio de Medellín. En la primera parte se resalta la importancia de esta investigación en nuestro medio y en la segunda,

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se describe la metodología empleada en el proyecto. La tercera incluye un perfil de los 12 profesores participantes y un análisis de la metodología empleada por ellos con respecto a las actividades de clase, los materiales y el rol del estudiante y del profesor. Finalmente, se discuten algunas de las implicaciones de este proyecto de investigación en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras a niños.

Palabras claves: Inglés-Enseñanza-Básica Primaria, Lengua Extranjera-Inglés, Estudio Etnográfico-Investigación, Enseñanza-Metodología

INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) in public elementary schools started to be introduced in Colombia as a result of a general educational law related to early foreign language instruction. This educational endeavour would extend over five years of study—from Grades 1 to 5—and include a space for foreign language instruction in public elementary schools each year.

To date the Colombian government has undertaken efforts to help schools and teachers. Curriculum guidelines for foreign language instruction have been established and promoted by the ministry of education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional: 1999). Teachers have access to teacher education programs and professional development courses concerning early foreign language instruction. University-public elementary school partnerships through the teaching practicum have been encouraged and developed. Additionally, some schools have enriched their teaching resources to include computer-based technology and training to teachers. The government has recognized the need for curriculum design, academic

preparation of teachers, university-schools' pre-service and professional development initiatives, and technology-based instruction.

Colombian public elementary schools and teachers have responded to this exciting challenge but not without encountering difficulties. Cárdenas (2001) reports that teachers may have studied the foreign language and/or how to teach foreign languages, but they often lack specialized academic preparation for teaching children. The author recognizes governmental support but claims a lack of planning and standards in the implementation of foreign language programs at the regional and national level. This finding has also been cited by González et.al. (2001) in their study designed to assess the professional needs of EFL teachers who work in the public and private sector in Colombia. Public school teachers consider themselves lacking an adequate level of proficiency in English, background knowledge of the subject matter and previous training. In addition to the need for pre-service and professional development, inadequate funding to implement government educational policies in Latin America, Asia and North America,

has been cited by Nunan (1999) as an adverse factor affecting schools and teachers. Murphey (2003) labels this challenge for professionals as the 'cart-before-the-horse situation' where teachers are required to teach English before they are capable of doing so. Although previous studies have explored who English language teachers are in different contexts and the limitations they have, there is a need for Colombian studies which explore the reality of teaching English in the public, elementary school classrooms.

Given the above situation in Colombia, researchers proposed the following questions for their research project: How have schools assumed this educational mission? Who are the public elementary EFL school teachers in Medellín? Which methodological practices do these teachers use to teach English? How do the teachers understand their own practices? What methodological principles do they report as forming their teaching practices? Is there a relationship between the teachers' practices and principles, and the government's curricular guidelines concerning early foreign language instruction?

In order to answer these questions, a group of researchers in the School of Languages at the University of Antioquia are conducting a small-scale, particularistic ethnographic investigation with 12 EFL teachers in Grades 1, 3 and 5, in seven public elementary schools in the metropolitan area of Medellín. Researchers are carrying out field work that includes observations and teacher interviews about the teaching-learning processes in context. The data from

the teacher interviews will give researchers the teachers' points of view about their classroom and their principles which guide their actions in class. A qualitative approach to the data collection and analysis is being used in order to enable researchers to describe, understand and reflect on the teacher's classroom methodology, influenced by the class activities, the materials in class, the teacher and student roles, and the grouping arrangements.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT'S METHODOLOGY

To address the above questions raised, the project was designed with four overlapping stages. Prior to the first stage, the number and the location of schools were decided based on a preliminary list of public elementary schools where English is being taught in Medellín. The schools were chosen based on their typicality or common characteristics i.e. the schools are public and are located throughout Medellín in the north, south, and central areas. Furthermore, schools were selected based on their convenience in terms of transportation for each researcher.

In the first stage, researchers began to analyze important documents related to foreign language instruction. They read and discussed the *Lineamientos Curriculares* to find out how the Ministry of Education is promoting the teaching of English as a foreign language in public elementary schools. In addition, they started to review the literature related to early foreign language instruction.

The second stage consisted of researchers contacting the schools to give them information about the project, confirm their participation, and determine which teachers would participate in this study. At that time, researchers began to gather a profile of the teachers concerning their educational background and teaching experience with a questionnaire.

The third stage consisted of observing and interviewing teachers about their classes. Each teacher was observed 3 times in each grade reaching a total number of 63 observations. While observing, researchers wrote detailed objective descriptions of class events in a diary (see Appendix 1: Classroom Observation Format). After observing, researchers interviewed teachers in a semi-structured interview format to find out what principles guide their actions in class (see Appendix 2: Teacher Interview Format). The majority of the interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate the data analysis.

In the fourth stage, researchers are completing the data analysis of the observations and interviews. Researchers have completed the class observations but are currently analyzing the teacher interviews. To analyze the data from the observations, a thematic analysis was used. In the data gathered, researchers identified and named thematic codes using a theory-driven approach. For example, researchers categorized the data concerning class activities using a taxonomy of language teaching techniques proposed by Brown (2001), Richards and Lockhart (1996), and Vale and Feunteun (1995). To analyze the data from the teacher interviews, a data-driven approach is being used.

During the last step of the research, the findings will be shared with the participants in this study and the community at large.

FINDINGS

This section will begin with a profile of the teachers in this project. The questionnaire showed the following information which has been divided into two parts: teachers' personal information, their work and educational experience, and information about their English classes.

Concerning the Teachers' Education and Work Experience

The teachers' ages range from 20 to over 50 with the majority of teachers in the range between 31 and 50 years of age. Concerning the teachers' academic preparation, all of them hold Bachelor of Education degrees in different areas: Five teachers hold a B. Ed. in elementary, preschool or childhood education; four in areas such as mathematics, Spanish, methodology and social studies; and three in foreign languages. Seven out of the twelve teachers have completed a specialization, but not one is related to teaching English. Regarding the teachers with degrees in foreign languages, although they possess the language preparation and the theoretical and practical preparation related to the methodology of teaching English, they neither possess knowledge about pedagogical principles and procedures in teaching children nor have the background in child language development, or experience in teaching groups of children. This situation has been previously reported by Cárdenas (2001) as she questions who is

in charge of teaching English to children in Colombia. In her study, she found that the majority of elementary English teachers were lacking in pedagogical and linguistic preparation. Although Cárdenas describes the situation in Colombia, it is striking to see how similar characteristics of teachers in other countries have been found. For example, Murphey (2003: 1) has described the situation in Asian countries as follows: "The reality of the EFL situation in many Asian countries is that ministries are demanding that regular content teachers in primary schools teach English to their students with little or no training in English". Likewise, Crooks (1997: 68) has stated that "Almost all the public sector elementary FL instruction in my home state of Hawaii is conducted by untrained teachers because there are no permanent full-time positions".

Many of the teachers in our study have taken professional development courses related either to learning the English language or to the methodology of teaching English. With respect to learning English, just 1 teacher with a B. Ed. in languages, 5 elementary and preschool teachers, and 2 teachers from different areas were involved in this type of instruction. Those with a B. Ed. in languages and in other areas did not pursue any English language training.

Concerning professional development related to the methodology of teaching English, two teachers with a B. Ed. in languages and one from a different area did have this type of training. Teachers with a B. Ed. in elementary or preschool did not pursue this kind of training because of the nature of their undergraduate programs. A

few teachers have had no further academic preparation at all.

The majority of teachers have had from 10 to 29 years of general teaching experience, while only a few have been teaching for fewer than four years. Most teachers have had a least 1-to-4 years of experience teaching English at the school where they are working now. In addition to teaching English, many teachers are required to teach other subjects such as physical education, mathematics, Spanish, social studies, etc. In terms of job stability, most teachers have a permanent teaching position at their school while a few are working with yearly contracts.

Concerning the English Class Activities, Materials and Teacher and Students' Roles

As it is the case in many public schools in our country, the English classes in the schools researchers visited have approximately 40 to 49 students and the classes are offered once a week for 45 minutes. Interesting issues were identified when researchers started exploring the different ways in which teachers spend this time with their students.

The activities observed were classified according to their purpose within the framework of the class as a whole. As previously stated in the methodology section, in order to carry out such analysis, we designed a chart using and adapting taxonomies presented by various authors (see Appendix 3: Chart of Observed Classroom

Activities). The broad categories in the chart are presentation, practice, memorization, comprehension, application, affective, feedback, strategy, assessment, and organizational. Within each broad category, there is a list of different activities which teachers use in the foreign language classroom.

Based on the data analysis, other activities that were recurrent in the observed classes needed to be added to the chart such as giving instructions, praising, assigning homework, peer correction, building sentences, and translation as a strategy for presentation, etc. Even though some of them are not activities *per se*, we found that they are widespread practices among teachers and therefore need to be included in the chart.

Researchers also found that most of the class period is spent on activities that are either organizational (giving instructions or disciplinary actions), presentational (introducing the lesson topic) or affective (warm-ups). Even though giving instructions and organizing the children are paramount in the elementary school context, these are carried out in Spanish and therefore children are being exposed more to Spanish than English in class. Teachers tend to use the target language only when presenting a topic or reviewing vocabulary with children in class.

Another common characteristic of these classes is that the presentation activities, mentioned above, often take place in the middle of the class period and are not usually accompanied by practice or application exercises in the same lesson. A very common strategy for presentation of topics or related

vocabulary is the use of flashcards and translation at the same time. Translation seems to play a very important role in these classes. It is used as a strategy to present new material, to explain content, or to check comprehension.

It is interesting to note that activities we expected the teachers to use in class were either not frequently used or they were not observed in the number of classes we visited. Games and singing songs are not so frequently used by the teachers. There were only two games with an affective purpose; one as a practice activity, and another as an application activity. Singing songs were used as both practice and affective activities. Other activities that are not being used by teachers include role-plays, story-telling, referential question-answer exercises, meaningful drills, problem-solving activities, and information exchange activities, etc. This might be due to the fact that most of these activities are so specifically related to the field of foreign language teaching that probably the teachers participating in this study are not familiar with them.

Finally, if we look at the activities in terms of language skills and sub-skills, we can see that classes are focused mainly on vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Reading and writing are seen as recognition of words and copying them down. In very few cases is there comprehension of oral or written texts.

Concerning Resources

In terms of resources, although the schools have equipment such as televisions,

VCRs and tape recorders, they are lacking video or audio tapes that can be used with this equipment. Classroom materials such as worksheets and paper products are available, but books, posters, flashcards, and games are scarce in most of these schools. Teachers often have to adapt and/or create materials like flashcards, worksheets, or booklets, using their own abilities and resources. A small percentage of the schools have computers and multimedia.

Confronted with this lack of resources, teachers try to do their job mainly with visual aids like the board, classroom realia, and a few teacher and/or student-made flashcards. Vocabulary is presented through these materials and then worksheets or exercises in a booklet are used to practice the words. In some schools, even though there are audio or videotapes, listening comprehension is not developed with these aids, and it is the voice of the teacher that students listen to most of the time. It is important to note that children are exposed mainly to isolated words and not to complete sentences or texts.

In many cases, a textbook becomes the basis of the course. Teachers rely on it to establish the sequence of contents, to structure the lessons, to design activities and even to choose the interaction patterns to be used in class.

Role of Teachers and Students

According to Richards and Lockhart (1996), the roles of teachers can be considered from two different perspectives: One is the role of the teachers within the institution and the educational system in

general, and the other is their role inside the classroom. Concerning the first aspect, it is interesting to see how these teachers are alone in their duty of teaching English. School principals and even the Ministry of Education recognize the importance of including a foreign language in the regular school curriculum, but they have not promoted the establishment of clear guidelines to help teachers design syllabi, materials or activities to be used in their classrooms. The Ministry of Education published the *Lineamientos Curriculares* (general guidelines for the teaching of foreign languages) and school principals have given teachers the autonomy to make all the decisions about how English is taught at their schools. Teachers are, therefore, free to do what they consider best, but they are also alone, without any support to do their job appropriately.

Concerning the role of teachers and students in the classroom, researchers observed that the teacher is mainly the model, class organizer and class controller. Children are usually repeating individually or chorally after the teacher, answering the teachers' questions or responding to the instructions s/he gives. Individual work in their notebooks, booklets or worksheets is a general pattern.

As there are many students in the classes, the most common interaction patterns are whole-group and individual work, with little pair or group work.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research project is an attempt to become aware of our reality and understand

it in order to find ways to work with teachers to improve what they do. We recognize that our view as outsiders is important but not sufficient in this endeavor. However, our purpose goes beyond exploring and describing the reality observed. We want to work together with the teachers on the basis of what we have learned through this research experience and what they know about their own classrooms, their experience and pedagogical knowledge. Based on these aspects, we are planning to offer a professional development course for those teachers and simultaneously carry out an action research project with them.

This study is also a contribution to research in the field of teaching English as a foreign language to children that is scarce in our country where most of the literature available deals with teaching English as a second language, and/or research in this field. A brief reference to the concepts of ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) might be useful here to support this point. When we speak about ESL we refer mainly to the situation of learners who learn a second language in a country where the language is used in commerce, education and politics. A Colombian who is learning English in the United States is an example of this concept. In this scenario, learners can have varied opportunities being exposed to the language and using it out of the classroom. In Colombia, we refer to EFL because learning English takes place in formal classroom situations and is not within the target language culture. This foreign language context offers the learners very few

opportunities to be in contact with the language outside the classroom. Therefore, the concepts of ESL and EFL imply very different approaches to language teaching and learning. Even though second language acquisition and teaching have been explored, more research on foreign language teaching in Colombia and its specific characteristics is needed if our aim is to improve the quality of education we are providing our children.

This study is also an invitation to teachers, teacher educators and administrators to become more sensitive and critical towards our own reality. Educational policies should not be implemented blindly without a careful analysis of our contexts, and without knowing the real needs of our teachers and students.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that even though public elementary schools in Medellín have adopted the New Education Act, their teachers who are willing, enthusiastic and committed, require encouragement and support in this endeavor. Teachers with either limited or unrelated educational preparation, and insufficient training and target language preparation are working against all odds. Educational processes in Colombia need to be observed from a reflective perspective that will lead to a determination of characteristics of such a process, its strengths and weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement.

Exploring teachers' methodological practices through class observations and

teacher interviews can provide a starting point for this task. Several methodological issues have come to light as a result of this process. We found that the English that is being taught to children in public elementary school is rather limited, or is comprised of basic vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Also, the use of English in the classroom is restricted to affective activities, presentation of vocabulary items by the teacher, and repetition of simple words or phrases by students. Comprehension of these items is often done through translation in class. Therefore, students' exposure to English in class is reduced because of this and also a high incidence of teacher talk (for example, organizing the classroom, giving instructions, disciplining students, and assigning homework, etc.) which is carried out in the native language. This is not surprising, given the teachers' low proficiency in English. Supportive actions directed towards the teachers could focus on target language development and pedagogical enhancement related to teaching-learning strategies as well as resources, and teacher and student roles in the foreign language elementary classroom.

Even though the importance of teaching English as a foreign language in the regular elementary school curriculum is undeniable, it is also important to be aware of the broader implications that go hand in hand with this. This means that education policies should no longer come only from the analysis of literature on the topic, but also from a realization of actual needs of teachers and students. Classrooms, schools, and the education system at large need to become a community in which the voices of students,

teachers, administrators and policy-makers are heard. Thus, a process of inquiry should enlighten not only the learning processes of students inside the classroom, but also all the decisions made by schools, by municipal education boards, and by the Ministry of Education as well. Teachers cannot become reflective if they are not given the chance to participate in decision making; they cannot be agents of change if their voices are not heard. A process of critical reflection leading to principled actions is required in our schools.

In Murphey's (2003: 1) analysis of a similar situation facing English teachers in Asia, he states that we need to "develop materials and methods to acknowledge the situation of these teachers and to support and encourage them as they grow more professionally through their own learning and teaching of English. In some cases, this will require a shift in beliefs, strategies, and methods, our own as well as those of the teachers and local administrators." In Colombia, it is important for elementary school English teachers and policy makers to gain understanding of our reality if we are to attend our real needs and the specific challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in elementary public schools.

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APPENDIX 1: CLASS OBSERVATION FORMAT

Investigación: Estado de la enseñanza del inglés en la Básica Primaria del sector público del área metropolitana. Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia.

X	DATE		SCHOOL	
	TIME		TEACHER	
	GRADE		OBSERVER	

ITEMS: Activities; teacher/student roles; grouping arrangements; materials

<p><u>Interpretation/Reflection</u></p>	<p><u>Narrative</u></p>
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APPENDIX 2: TEACHER INTERVIEW FORMAT

Investigación: Estado de la enseñanza del inglés en la Básica Primaria del sector público del área metropolitana. Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de Antioquia.

Entrevista para los profesores de inglés en la escuela primaria

El propósito de esta entrevista es identificar y entender los principios que fundamentan su proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje en su clase de inglés. Nos gustaría tener información acerca de la planeación de sus clases, las actividades, materiales y patrones de interacción. Esta información será confidencial y se usará solo con propósitos investigativos. Gracias por sus comentarios y su tiempo.

A.

¿Qué razones lo llevaron a usted a enseñar inglés en la básica primaria?

¿Es importante para usted la enseñanza de inglés en la básica primaria?

Si_ No_ ¿Por qué?

¿Cuáles dificultades cree usted que tiene para la enseñanza del inglés en esta institución y por qué?

B.

¿Existe en el colegio un plan de estudios para el área de inglés?

Si_ No_ ¿Por qué?

¿Si su respuesta es positiva, cómo es ese plan?

¿Si su respuesta es negativa, cómo decide el contenido del curso?

¿Está su colegio planeando con base en lineamientos curriculares propuestos por el MEN?

¿Qué criterios tiene usted en cuenta para la enseñanza del inglés en cada uno de los grados?

¿Qué logros espera alcanzar a través de la clase de inglés?

C.

¿Cómo describiría su forma de trabajar el inglés con niños?

¿Cuáles son las actividades que usted utiliza con mayor frecuencia para la enseñanza del inglés y por qué?

¿Qué tipo de actividades le parecen efectivas y por qué?

¿Cuáles son los materiales que usted utiliza con mayor frecuencia para la enseñanza del inglés y por qué?

¿Qué tipo de materiales le parecen efectivos y por qué?

¿Qué tipos de interacción utiliza con mayor frecuencia en sus clases de inglés y por qué?

¿Qué tipos de interacción le parecen más efectivos y por qué?

D.

¿Qué estrategias usa para el manejo de la disciplina en la clase de inglés?

¿Integra usted el trabajo de unas materias con otras? (opcional)

APPENDIX 3: CHART OF OBSERVED CLASS ACTIVITIES

Investigación: Estado de la Enseñanza del Inglés en la Básica Primaria del Sector Público del Área Metropolitana.
 Registro General de Recurrencias de Actividades

ACTIVIDADES	Observación 1										Observación 2										Observación 3									
Warm-up																														
Setting																														
Content explanation																														
Role-Play																														
Demonstration																														
Dialogue/Narrative presentation																														
Brainstorming																														
Story telling																														
Question-answer/ referential.																														
Games																														
Translation																														
Copying																														
Question/Answer display																														

P R E S E N T A T I O N

