

A Diagnosis of English Language Teaching in Public Elementary Schools in Pasto, Colombia

Diagnóstico de la enseñanza del inglés en escuelas públicas en Pasto, Colombia

Jesús Alirio Bastidas

jabas3@yahoo.es

Gaby Muñoz Ibarra

gabymib@yahoo.es

Universidad de Nariño – Pasto, Colombia

English teaching in Colombian primary schools became a requirement because of the promulgation of the Law of Education in 1994. Taking into account that this decision produced some difficulties in the schools, a study was conducted to diagnose the state of English language teaching in primary schools in Pasto, Colombia. Data were gathered through classroom observation, a questionnaire, and interviews. The results showed that teachers are not well versed either in methodology or in the command of the English language; there was no English syllabus; didactic materials were nonexistent; and the children's lack of motivation was the most critical problem. Teachers, institutions and the government have to take into account these findings in order to improve English learning in primary schools.

Key words: Approach, diagnostic study, method, methodology, methodological characteristics, principle, procedure, technique

La Ley General de Educación promulgada en 1994 obligó a las escuelas primarias a incluir la enseñanza del inglés. Puesto que esta decisión ha producido varias dificultades, este estudio se realizó con el propósito de diagnosticar el estado de la enseñanza del inglés en primaria. La información se recolectó a través de observaciones de clase, cuestionarios y entrevistas. Los resultados mostraron que los profesores no están bien preparados ni en metodología ni en el manejo del inglés; no hay programas de inglés; no hay materiales didácticos, y la desmotivación para aprender inglés es un problema bastante crítico. Las instituciones y el gobierno deberían tener en cuenta estos resultados para garantizar mejores resultados en el aprendizaje del inglés en primaria.

Palabras clave: características metodológicas, enfoque, estudio diagnóstico, método, metodología, principio, procedimiento, técnica

Introduction

The Colombian Government and the National Ministry of Education have promoted the implementation of English in elementary schools based on issues put forth by the General Education Law of 1994. The application of this law in public schools has been very slow, with the result that these policies are unknown in many regions throughout the country.

Some research has been carried out in Colombia in relation to the implementation of this national policy. For example, Cardenas' (2001) study indicates that elementary school teachers in the state of Valle del Cauca are neither well prepared in English nor in the methodology necessary to teach English to children and this is either because they are general homeroom teachers or because they are teachers with a Bachelor of Arts in Languages (BAL). Although general homeroom teachers have pedagogical preparation in general education, and BAL teachers possess knowledge of English and methodology, in both cases the teachers lack a theoretical foundation in psychology, pedagogy, and procedures to teach English to children.

In another study conducted in Antioquia, Cadavid, McNulty and Quinchía (2004) found that most teachers had Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees, but very few had BAs in languages. Many teachers had at least 1 to 4 years of experience in teaching English at the elementary school level, along with other subjects. English in the classroom was limited to giving instructions and to oral repetition; lessons focused on vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar, but instructional materials were scarce. In relation to the teachers' and students' roles in class, the study showed that the teacher was the person who organized and controlled the class, while the students repeated individually or chorally after the teacher. Class work was generally done individually, with very little pair or group work being used.

Some exploratory studies conducted at the University of Nariño (e.g. Chamorro & Bustos, 2003) describe and analyze teacher development, methodology and language proficiency of primary school teachers. The results show that the majority of BAL teachers neither received suitable preparation in methodology to teach English to children nor possessed a good command of the English language. They also reported that most of the primary school teachers have not taken courses or activities to update their knowledge both in language development and methodology.

These studies provide important information that helps one to understand the reality of the English curriculum in some elementary schools in some regions of our country, and motivates the need to conduct more studies in order to achieve a state-of-the-art of teaching English in Colombian elementary schools. Consequently, the specific objectives of the study were: 1) to identify the types of theories, methods and procedures used by English teachers, 2) to analyze the basis of the course design in the elementary school English curriculum, 3) to

describe the types of teachers' professional qualifications, 4) to analyze the need for teacher development, and 5) to determine the most critical problems facing teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning English. In this study, methodology refers to "the study of the practices and procedures used in teaching, and the principles and procedures that underlie them." (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992, p. 228)

On the one hand, despite the importance of requiring the teaching of English in primary school, there are many doubts about its effectiveness in relation to the children's level of learning English. On the other hand, although in Pasto some exploratory studies related to the teaching and learning of English in primary schools have been done at the Universidad de Nariño, there is a need to carry out additional systematic and descriptive studies in the area of methodology, because this is considered an important variable in the teaching and learning process of any subject, and also because this type of studies can contribute toward making a general diagnosis of the state of teaching English in Colombian primary schools.

This study is justified by practical and administrative reasons both regionally and nationally. In a practical aspect, it is important to identify the characteristics of the methodology used by the English teachers of primary schools in order to verify if those characteristics correspond to some of the methods proposed for the teaching of English at the national level and, most importantly, to realize if these characteristics can contribute to helping the students to be more effective language learners.

Administratively, this study may provide important information about the type of updating and development received by primary school teachers, so that the "Secretarías de Educación Municipal y Departamental" and the local universities can design and implement plans which may contribute to the improvement of teachers' qualifications. Additionally, this study identified some difficulties teacher face in their daily teaching practice. The previous information is important for both administrators and teachers in order to help children attain better results in English.

Method

The design used in this diagnostic study was based on both quantitative and qualitative research. From quantitative methodology we selected the descriptive design, which consists of specifying the important features of people, groups, communities or any other phenomena that may be submitted to analysis. Descriptive statistics at the level of frequencies and percentages were used to analyze the data. The qualitative methodology was used to collect data that provided thick descriptions of the methodology actually used by the teachers in their classrooms and their opinions about the reality of teaching English in primary schools.

The following techniques and instruments were used: classroom observation, interviews, a questionnaire, and field notes. Un-structured classroom observations were carried out in order to identify the general characteristics of the methodology used by elementary school teachers. An average of three consecutive classes of 9 teachers, who kindly and voluntarily accepted to collaborate in this research, was observed, for a total of 27 classes. The questionnaire was composed of two sections: personal and institutional information, and characteristics of the English teaching methodology in primary schools. This section is divided into the following parts: Approach, Curriculum Design, Procedure, Needs of Teacher's Development and Updating, and Critical Problems in English teaching and learning in primary school. The questionnaire was designed based on Richards and Rodgers' (1986) model of approach, design and procedure in order to characterize the methodology used by the primary school teachers. Throughout the observations, field notes were taken in order to write down the researchers' perceptions, comments and reflections about the teachers and students' performance and classroom reactions. Finally, in order to confirm the teachers' answers given in the questionnaire and to clarify others that were not clear or precise, a semi-structured interview was done. This way, we ensured that our study could be validated through triangulation of data collection and analysis.

This study was done in eighteen (18) public primary schools in the city of Pasto. Since there are seventeen (17) "Instituciones Educativas Municipales" (IEMs) in the urban area of Pasto (according to the Secretaría de Educación Municipal, personal communication), we chose thirteen (13) of them in order to make sure that all geographical areas of the city were covered by the study. That is, from 27 primary schools that teach English as part of the curriculum we chose 18 schools to carry out the study. The number of teachers who were really teaching English (at the time of the study) was around 83, so the population selected for the study was 34 primary teachers who represented 40.96%. The sample of institutions and teachers is representative of the whole population of teachers who work in Pasto. Pasto, the capital of the "Departamento de Nariño", is located in the south-west of Colombia and has a population of 450 thousand inhabitants. Most of the public IEMs provide education to students of low socioeconomic classes.

Results and Discussion

The following findings provide evidence of the situation faced by institutions, teachers, and children in relation to the English curriculum taught in public elementary schools in Pasto. Below, we refer to the results regarding the teaching of English in the institutions, theories and methodologies, course design, instructional materials, the role of the student and the role of the native language in the classroom. As stated in the methods section, the framework proposed by Richards and Rodgers (1986) to analyze methods of language teaching was used to identify the

main themes to characterize the methodology used by the primary school teachers to teach English. Additionally, we also refer to teachers' qualifications and needs, and finally we highlight some critical problems faced by both teachers and children.

Institutional Information

This theme refers to information about the context and the administrative decisions taken by the school staff in relation to English as a subject, which can affect the process of learning and teaching English in a school; both of these can also have implications for the effectiveness of the national policies. The data collected by means of interviews, questionnaires and observations provided the following results.

In spite of the teachers' responses in the questionnaire, where they affirm that in their schools they teach English from first to fifth grades, the fact is that in most elementary schools, English is taught only in fourth and fifth grades, and this information is corroborated by the majority of teachers interviewed (76%), who said they teach English only in the fourth and fifth grades. They say that these grades are the most important ones for the acquisition of the basic elements of English in order for the students to start studying English in high school without major difficulties.

However, when we entered the schools for the first time and asked some teachers about this, they affirmed that English is taught sporadically because teachers do not feel comfortable with the "new" responsibility the government has entrusted them with. In addition, in two or three schools, they also said that in the periods assigned for English they use this time to reinforce the knowledge of other subjects, such as mathematics. This is because they are neither familiar with the English language nor the methodology for teaching English.

Related to the number of English classes per week, the majority of the institutions participating in this study (78%) assigned only one hour per week to the study of English, and 22% assigned two hours a week; this result is similar to the one found in the study conducted by Cadavid et al. (2004). This aspect worries many of the teachers who filled in the questionnaire, because there is no possibility of achieving the objectives proposed by the National Ministry of Education (1994) and/or the institutions themselves. Also, the standards of English proposed in the Bilingual Program (MEN, 2006) cannot be fulfilled in this reduced period of time. It is well known that the number of hours per week, if used efficiently, is very important in order to attain better results in the learning of a new language (Strevens, 1977).

Theories of Learning English in Elementary School

A theory is a set of constructs, concepts or variables that relate to each other in order to explain a natural or social phenomenon. In language teaching, theories are important because they

allow teachers to describe, understand and explain the learning and teaching processes. In data taken from the questionnaires and the interviews in relation to the teachers' knowledge regarding theories for learning English at the elementary school level, ninety-four percent (94%) of the teachers affirmed they do not know or use a specific theory. This finding can be serious, because nowadays it is paramount to have at least a general understanding of theories that explain the processes of first language learning, as well as the learning of a second or foreign language. Theories also help teachers to identify a number of factors that affect language learning, and which can be the cause of the children's learning problems.

Methods Used in Primary Schools

In language teaching, a method is a set of procedures supported by theoretical principles about language learning, teaching and context in order to fulfill a series of language objectives (Bastidas, 1993; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Although a method is not the main way to get successful language learning results, it plays an important role in language teaching. In relation to the types of methods used by English teachers, 12% affirmed they use the Audio Lingual Method, 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. These results indicate that most of the primary school teachers are using a variety of methods which do not fit the communicative approach, as suggested by the Ministry of Education, even before the implementation of the standards of English (MEN, 1988; 2005).

Contrary to the previous assertions, observation in the classrooms showed that almost all the teachers use techniques based on Audio-lingual and Grammar- Translation Methods such as activities that emphasize writing (copying) and listening, with a constant repetition of words or short sentences. Also, the words and sentences written on the board and in the students' notebooks have their corresponding translation in Spanish; very few teachers promote teacher-student and student-student communication and interaction. These results indicate that on the elementary school level there is little opportunity for children to perform activities which foster the use of English as a meaningful communicative tool.

Observations also showed that the activities and organization of the classes did not promote a communicative atmosphere. The organization of classes was mainly controlled by teachers with a marked prevalence for individual and choral repetition. The content focused mainly on form rather than on function, and the development of skills such as listening, speaking, and writing was limited to listening to words or short sentences, repeating them, and writing them in their notebooks. The use of the native language (NL) predominated in the majority of classes. Sustained speech in English by the teachers was

'minimal' and by the students, 'ultra-minimal'; thus, there is no real communicative orientation in these classes because there are no activities to encourage meaningful teacher-student or student-student interaction. These results can be explained by the fact that most of the teachers do not have B.A. degrees in languages and, consequently, they are not familiarized with TESOL methods. In addition, some of the BAL teachers affirmed that their level of English was low and that they did not get appropriate training in methodology for teaching children.

Course Design

Course design refers to a set of activities, tasks and materials that teachers consider or prepare in order to plan a language course (Graves, 2000). According to Dubin and Olshtain (1986), the designer's task includes societal needs assessment, curriculum and syllabus construction and materials preparation. Richards and Rodgers (1986) refer to six components of the design of a method, namely: a) objectives, b) language content selection and organization, c) learning tasks and teaching activities, d) roles of learners, e) roles of teachers, and f) roles of instructional materials. Data collected through interviews, observations and questionnaires indicated the following results. In relation to the general objective the institutions intend to reach by the end of the fifth grade, teachers' responses are similar: The general objective is to inculcate a basic knowledge of English, so that children may start high school with a basic understanding of English vocabulary, grammar, and simple expressions. For example, some teachers stated the following:

T1: *"El objetivo es proporcionar al estudiante unos elementos necesarios para introducirlo en el aprendizaje del Inglés."*

T2: *"Que los estudiantes se familiaricen con el inglés, utilicen estructuras gramaticales básicas, así como también el manejo de vocabulario y comandos."*, and T4 said: *"Que el alumno tenga conocimientos básicos para que no tenga dificultad en el bachillerato."*

T1: "The objective is to provide students with the necessary elements needed to introduce them to an understanding of English."

T2: "to familiarize the students with the English language and the use of basic grammar structures as well as the handling of vocabulary and commands", and T4 said: "to give the students a basic knowledge in order for them not to have any difficulty in high school."

A few teachers favor teaching the four skills of listening, speaking (conversation), reading and writing. According to some TESOL experts (e.g. Stern, 1983; Krahnke, 1987), the formulation of teaching goals should be dependent upon what the individual teacher wants to emphasize e.g. listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary or grammar. To do this, the teachers need to know who their students are in terms of a priori knowledge, expectations

(needs and wants), social and personality types, number of students per class, and the time available to complete the course. Through direct observation, we affirm that vocabulary and grammar, which are taught by means of lists of isolated words and simple sentences taken out of context, are the two main components of the teachers' focus.

In relation to the syllabus, we found that many of the institutions do not have an English syllabus to be followed in an organized fashion from first to fifth grades. In addition, 62% of the teachers said they have the responsibility of designing the syllabus for their courses, and 20% said they follow the syllabus planned by the school. According to the teachers, they are aware of the basics of the MEN's Curricular Guidelines (1999), because the document is part of the general institutional curriculum, but they have only a general idea of what is intended to be achieved by the end of the elementary school curriculum.

To plan the syllabus for their courses, teachers affirmed they rely on different sources. For example, 20% said the syllabus is based on English texts, 20% said it is based on their own experience and knowledge, 18% stated it is based on their own materials, and 42% referred to other options, which included texts, experience and knowledge or their own materials, and experience and knowledge as the basis for the syllabus design. In informal conversations, the teachers expressed frustration at having to search for supporting materials to plan their courses because the schools do not provide the necessary material to support the curriculum.

An English syllabus exists in a few institutions, and the teachers know it; however, they do not strictly follow it. During our visits, we could see that none of the institutions had a person in charge of the organization of this area. On that account, the BAL teachers prepare their classes and do their best to attain the minimal objectives proposed for the primary level; on the contrary, the teachers, who were not specialized in languages, said that they did not feel comfortable or competent to deal with the teaching of this "difficult" subject matter (informal conversation, July, 2006).

Instructional Materials

In language teaching, materials are the audio and visual aids aimed at helping the students to learn a language more effectively. The role of instructional materials reflects such decisions as the primary goals of materials, the form of materials, the relation of materials to other sources of input, and the teachers' abilities (Richards & Rodgers, 1986) In relation to this theme, the teachers were conscious of the necessity of audio-visual material to foster students' motivation, comprehension, and learning. Schools need to provide various resources in the classroom to support teachers' performance and facilitate the learning process. Referring to this, some teachers said the following:

T1: "Son los soportes para ejemplificar, orientar la observación o ayuda a la escucha de sonidos."

T2: *“Sirven de apoyo para tratar de que la clase sea amena y para que los estudiantes puedan asimilar con menos dificultad los temas.”*

T1: *“they are the supports that exemplify, guide student observation or help in listening to sounds.”*

T2: *“they are a type of support that helps the class to be more enjoyable and helps the students to understand the topics more easily.”*

Unfortunately, one of the most serious problems that elementary school English teachers face is the lack of didactic resources necessary to achieve the goals of the English curriculum. For this reason, teachers depend on their own resources and activities, which are limited. To make this situation worse, requiring students to buy English textbooks is not permitted in public schools. This result differs from those of the Cadavid et al. study (2004), which found the schools to be equipped with TV sets, VCRs and tape recorders. In some schools, teachers also used textbooks for both planning and teaching.

However, what teachers need to know about didactic resources is that they need to be adapted or modified according to objectives, student interest, context, level of difficulty, etc. Training the teachers to adapt materials according to their own curriculum would help to improve the situation (Bastidas, 1993).

Role of the Students

The learners' role refers to how they are regarded, to their contribution to the learning process and to their actions in the learning and teaching process (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). In relation to this, data from the questionnaire showed that 44% of the teachers agreed that the student is an active participant in the classroom, 41% said the student is the one who receives knowledge or instruction, and 15% cited a variety of other roles. The teachers supported their ideas by adding that the student is at the center of the learning process, an active participant in the class, and a responsible person for his or her own success or failure. In relation to the students' role, some teachers said the following:

T1: *“Trabajador, participante, realizador de su propia tarea o actividad.”*

T2: *“Actores, exploradores”, and*

T3: *“Es otro autor que juega y cumple un papel activo en el desempeño de la clase.”*

T1: *“hardworker, likes to participate, completes his/her own task or activity.”*

T2: *“participants, explorers”, and*

T3: *“(the student) is another participant who plays an active role in class.”*

These ideas are supported by Bastidas (1993), Richards & Rodgers (1986) and others who state that nowadays students should be active participants, initiators and, above all, responsible for their own learning. However, the data gathered in the observations indicate that in most of the classes the participation of the students is limited to repeating words or sentences in chorus; individual participation is restricted to five or six students, and when everybody is allowed to intervene they do so by means of numbers or monosyllables. Once again, similar results were reported in Cadavid et al. (2004).

Role of the Native Language

The native language is the mother tongue of the student and, as such, will play a role in learning another language, sometimes to facilitate, but other times to inhibit language learning (Bastidas, 1993). Relating to this topic, the questionnaire data show that 95% of the teachers agree with the use of the L1 in the English classes. When we asked them about the reasons to support the use of L1 in their classes some teachers said as follows:

T1: *“Ayuda a comprender mejor las clases y poder comparar una lengua con otra.”*

T2: *“Ayuda a comprender el vocabulario y la gramática extranjera”, and*

T3: *“Es necesario explicar a los estudiantes en español y hacer una traducción simultánea. Los estudiantes no poseen las bases necesarias para omitir el español en clases.”*

T1: “it helps to better understand the lessons and enables a comparison of the two languages.”

T2: “it helps with an understanding of foreign vocabulary and grammar”, and

T3: “it is necessary to explain to the students in Spanish, and to do simultaneous translation. The students don’t possess the necessary knowledge to avoid using Spanish in the English classes”

The observations showed that the L1 is spoken throughout the lesson. Thus, the students only listen to the words or short sentences which they have to repeat. For this reason, they are not conversant with phrases or expressions in English that are commonly used in class.

Although the teachers are not using the FL in class, their opinions are for improving these conditions; in informal conversations they emphasize the fact that the teachers need to possess a good level of English and good training in methodology in order to teach English to children. The use of the native language should be restricted to having students understand the use of grammar points, or clarifying the meaning of some expressions which impede reading comprehension. Regarding this point, Bastidas (2002a, p. 155) states: “Native language can be used, especially to explain complex aspects of the English language or to

explain how to do an activity. At the early stages of reading, students can use the native language to show comprehension.”

The above observations show that when the NL is spoken throughout the lesson, students only listen to the words or short sentences they need to repeat in English. Cadavid et al. (2004) also reported similar results. For this reason, students are not conversant in the English phrases or expressions commonly used in the class.

Teachers' Professional Qualification

In this study, professional qualification refers to the teachers' professional education, teaching experience, and teaching development. Concerning professional education, the data showed that 47% of the teachers had a B.A. in languages, 29% in other fields of study, and 24% did not have an undergraduate degree. In relation to their postgraduate studies, 58% of the teachers affirmed they had a postgraduate diploma in areas such as Creative Pedagogy, Educational Administration, Literature, Human Resources and Sex Education. These results corroborated the findings of similar studies conducted both in Colombia (Zuluaga et al., 1997, cited in Cárdenas, 2001; Cardenas, 2001; Cadavid et al. 2004) and abroad (Crooks, 1997; Murphy, 2003).

It is clear from the above that the number of BAL teachers is smaller than the rest. In addition, most of the BAL teachers stated they were prepared to teach English in secondary schools, but did not receive any preparation to teach English at the elementary level. Interestingly, Cardenas' study (2001) found a similar pattern in the preparation of Licenciados of Modern Languages. Also, most teachers had experience working in elementary schools teaching all subjects except English. The reason is that many institutions recently added English as a requisite to the completion of the elementary school curriculum. The situation for the teachers, who are not specialized in languages, is more difficult because they have not had any training in either English or the methodology necessary to teach English to children.

Apart from the lack of experience and very few continuing-education and teacher development programs in the area of TESOL, the situation took a turn for the worse when some elementary school teachers refused the opportunity of being educated to teach English. This is corroborated by one of the BAL teachers who affirmed that a virtual English training program given by MEN, and addressed specifically to elementary school teachers in public schools, was not welcomed by the BAO teachers. In an interview, a teacher stated as follows:

“Estuve aborita haciendo un curso para inglés, se suponía que era para profesores del Ministerio (profesores oficiales) que no sabían nada de inglés... y tuve la oportunidad de conocer muchos profesores ..., los profesores de primaria no están capacitados para dictar inglés, así sean normalistas, miré que hay mucho rechazo a ese curso. La mayoría asistieron como cuarenta y tantos y terminamos quince y éramos ... únicamente... que los licenciados”.

“Recently, I was taking an English course; it was supposed to be for teachers who didn’t know anything about English..., and I had the opportunity to know many teachers..., the primary school teachers don’t have the professional formation to teach English, although they are “normalistas”; I saw a lot of rejection toward that course. The majority of teachers –around forty- attended, but we ended up with only fifteen... all of whom were B.A. teachers”.

Needs for Teacher Development

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (1978), a need is a “condition of lacking or wanting something necessary or very useful” (p. 729). In this study, we looked for the teachers’ needs for their academic development. The previous section noted how programs for teacher-development related to the area of elementary school English have been scarce and not so productive because of the nature and orientation of the training programs. For this study it was important to know teachers’ opinions about what types of development programs would benefit them in carrying out their jobs as English teachers. The data collected from the questionnaire showed that 62% of the teachers agreed that methodology and teaching techniques are two of the most important aspects of a teacher development program; 29% responded they needed training in everything, that is, methodology and language. Most of the teachers are unequipped to handle English in terms of pronunciation, grammar and speaking. The BAL teachers have forgotten English over time as it was not a subject they had taught in the past, and 9% gave no response.

These data support the urgent need to design and implement teacher-development programs in both English and methodology in order to teach English at the elementary school level, as observed by Cardenas (2001) and Chamorro and Bustos (2003).

Critical Problems Faced by Teachers and Students in Teaching and Learning English

The teaching of English at the elementary school level, in itself, has many problems to be dealt with; however, the purpose of our study was to identify the most critical problems faced by the elementary school teachers of English. The questionnaire data showed that 50% of the teachers agreed that teachers are not well-prepared to teach English in elementary schools. Thirty-five percent (35%) stated there is a lack of student motivation and interest to learn English, and 35% said there is no didactic materials to support the English class (the sum of the percentages exceeds 100% because the teachers named more than one problem in their responses).

Some teachers also referred to the following problems in relation to the teaching of English in elementary schools:

- Little importance is given to a second language by the school administrators and the teachers themselves.
- Reduced number of course hours per week.
- Lack of a specific syllabus for elementary schools.
- Discontinuity in the teaching of English from grade to grade.
- Poor awareness of the importance of this language. (Translated by the authors)

In our visits to the schools we came across two additional problems: the lack of attention given to this area by many principals in charge of the institutions, and the children's own low socioeconomic status. The teachers' lack of motivation in teaching English, lack of didactic resources, the lack of student interest, and lack of training in teaching English to children are all factors which prevent the attainment of the proposed goals of teaching English at the elementary school level.

Conclusions

In Colombia, authorities in education have been aware of the importance of English in our educational system and, accordingly, have issued a number of laws and decrees across time. For example, in 1994 the government issued the General Education Law, which included 4 articles (numbers 15, 16, 17, and 18) related to the teaching of English in both elementary and secondary schools. More recently, in 2004, the present government proposed and began to implement the "National Bilingual Program." On the surface, these educational policies are very important and should be welcomed by Colombian citizens. However, deeper analysis indicates serious problems with these proposals. For example, referring to the law, what we got was a "cart-before-the-horse" situation in that the government required the teaching of English in elementary schools without realizing there were no teachers prepared to teach it. And what is worse, 18 years after the implementation of Law 115, the problem still persists, and the Minister of Education has refused to appoint qualified teachers to teach English in the Colombian elementary schools mainly for financial reasons. Referring to the previous problematic situation, the results of this study corroborate the findings reported by Cardenas (2001), Cadavid et al. (2004), and Zuluaga et al., 1997 (cited in Cárdenas, 2001).

In Pasto, although we found that some 'Licenciados' [university undergraduates] in languages are teaching English in some elementary schools, they do not possess the appropriate preparation to teach English, not to mention that their knowledge of English is very low, according to their own self-evaluations.

As can be inferred from the above, the problem unleashes a series of administrative, theoretical, and practical issues, as was demonstrated in this study whose main objectives were as follows: 1) to identify the types of theories, methods and procedures used by English teachers, 2) to analyze the basis of the course design in the elementary school English curriculum, 3) to describe the types of teachers' professional qualifications, 4) to analyze the need for teacher development, and 5) to determine the most critical problems facing teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning English.

At the administrative level, many school authorities undervalue the importance of teaching English and, consequently, do not care about the persons in charge of teaching or about the role English plays in the school curriculum. Concerning this role, it is worrisome to find that most public elementary schools in Pasto teach English only at the 4th and 5th grade levels, and only one hour per week. This raises serious concerns about the possibility of reaching the objectives set out in the General Education Law, and in attaining the standards proposed in 2006.

On a theoretical level, the situation is very serious. In this study, the majority of elementary school teachers reported they have no knowledge concerning theories which support teaching English in elementary schools. In this era, where the emphasis on method has been seriously questioned by authorities in the field such as Brown (2004) and Kumaravadivelu (2003; 2005), in favor of a post-method era (where one of the most important factors is an approach to teaching foreign languages according to the teachers' own contexts), there is an urgent need to enable and update teachers in charge of teaching English in elementary schools. Bastidas (2002b), for example, refers to the following key issues to be dealt with in an approach to teaching English in elementary schools: applied linguistics foundations, second language acquisition theoretical foundations, humanistic psychology issues, and primary school education principles and practices.

At the practical level, the findings of this study refer to methods, course design, instructional materials, students' roles, and the role of the NL. They also refer to teacher qualifications and needs in regard to the main critical problems that both teachers and students face in learning and teaching English in elementary schools. Relating to methods, most of the teachers observed in the classroom use some techniques and procedures of the GTM and the ALM, that is, they are very traditional in their scholastic approach. Once again, these teachers need to be updated in theoretical and practical foundations, and in their experience teaching English to children in an EFL context.

One issue related to methodology is course design. According to the teachers' self-reports, although they are aware of the existence of the "Lineamientos Curriculares" (Curricular Guidelines), they have only a general idea of its contents and do not use it to design their courses. Most importantly, in most of the institutions, they did not show us samples of the

syllabus they followed in teaching their courses. At this point, it is important to clarify that since this study was conducted in 2006, the teachers did not refer to the standards. In fact, the first workshop to present them was held in 2007 with a group of 150 teachers, most of whom were high school teachers.

Referring to students' role and the role of the NL, the results indicate that in most classes the students were passive and limited to repeating, copying, and doing what the teachers asked them to do. In addition, the NL was used during most of the class time. These results support the necessity of enabling teachers to use more pro-active procedures and activities in order to enable the children to become more active and dynamic participants in the learning process - a condition which is part of their nature in most cases. Also, if the teachers are to use more English in class, they have to improve their command of the language.

Finally, concerning the needs of the teacher development problems faced by the elementary school teachers, the results indicate, first, that most teachers asked for teacher development programs in methodology and techniques, and English language courses. However, we also think they need to have knowledge and skills in reflective teaching (Wallace, 1991), conducting research not only in the classroom (Hopkins, 1985), but also in the school and local community setting, and in approaches and procedures to teach at an elementary school level (Bastidas, 2002b). Secondly, the findings of this study reveal the following critical problems teachers face in their daily activities, namely: 1) poor preparation both in methodology and English, 2) lack of students' interest and motivation to learn English, 3) absence of didactic materials, 4) little awareness of the importance of English, 5) reduced numbers of teaching hours per week, 6) absence of an English syllabus for elementary school, 7) discontinuity in the teaching of English from grade to grade, and 8) children's low socio-economic status.

What is interesting about these findings is that when we analyze the macro-problem of the low-level of proficiency that our students have at the end of their elementary and high school studies, the problems that emerge are not only those that refer to the teachers' knowledge of both English and methodology, but also to the national and local policies, which are the responsibility of MEN and local offices of the Secretary of Education. Furthermore, the problems also refer to the administration and organization of the local education of institutions, to the teachers planning process, to the socio-economic status of our children and parents, and to the children's motivation. Consequently, educational authorities at both the national and local levels need to implement real and effective programs and actions in order to contribute to solving the types of critical problems stated above. There is a need to go beyond issues of law, plan design, implementation of standards, and the realization of teacher development courses.

A common and similar pattern is emerging from studies conducted in Cali, Popayan, Medellin and Pasto in relation to the teaching of English in elementary schools: The problems are extremely similar in the areas of methodology, materials, teacher and student roles, the role of the NL, institutional organization and administration, teacher education and development, and national policies. We think the time has come for the academic community and teachers' organizations to voice their concerns to the MEN and university authorities in order to ask for social, educational, and financial plans, and for more effective actions to improve the conditions for learning and teaching English at both elementary and secondary school levels. It is true that teachers play an important role in the process of teaching, but let us not continue blaming them for the problem of those students who have low results in their learning of English. National and local educational authorities, universities, students and parents also play a key role in any process of learning and teaching and, consequently, they have to be involved in the search for effective solutions.

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The Authors

Jesús Alirio Bastidas Arteaga is a Professor at Universidad de Nariño, Pasto, Colombia. He holds a PhD in Language, Learning, and Literacy from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, and a Post-Doctorate in Didactics of Language and Literature from Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, España.

Gaby Muñoz Ibarra is a part-time teacher at Universidad de Nariño, Pasto, Colombia. She holds a Master's degree in Didáctica del Inglés from the Universidad de Caldas, Manizales, Colombia. Her main research interest is in the area of children's learning and teaching of English.

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