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Contreras Avendaño, Jeesson Stiven; Malaver Duarte, Alejandro;
Morales Vargas, Juan Esteban; Castellanos Jaimes, Judith
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REPORTE DE CASO
 LENGUAJE, SOCIEDAD Y ESCUELA

Challenges of English Language Teaching: The Case of a Public School

Retos de la enseñanza del inglés: el caso de un colegio público

Desafios no ensino da língua inglesa: o caso de uma escola pública

Jeesson Stiven Contreras Avendaño ¹, Alejandro Malaver Duarte ²,
 Juan Esteban Morales Vargas ³, Judith Castellanos Jaimes ⁴

Abstract

This article presents a case study conducted at a public school, focusing on the English language proficiency of tenth-grade students. The study aimed to assess student performance in English while considering national policies like Colombia's National Bilingualism Plan. The data collection methods included field notes, interviews, and diagnostic tests to analyze language proficiency levels. The findings revealed some factors hindering the development of proficiency, such as student disinterest, the lack of independent learning, and a focus on receptive skills over productive ones. The students relied heavily on memorization and translation tools. This study emphasizes the importance of creating engaging educational environments to motivate students, and it calls for the active involvement of different stakeholders such as school administration, parents, and teachers in the implementation of language policies.

Keywords: case study, bilingualism, English language teaching, language policy, public education

Resumen

Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso realizado en un colegio público y centrado en el dominio del inglés de estudiantes de décimo grado. El estudio tuvo como objetivo evaluar el rendimiento de los estudiantes en inglés, considerando políticas nacionales como el Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo de Colombia. Los métodos de recolección de datos incluyeron notas de campo, entrevistas y pruebas diagnósticas para analizar niveles de dominio de idioma. Los hallazgos revelaron algunos factores que obstaculizan el desarrollo de la competencia, como la falta de interés de los estudiantes, la falta de aprendizaje independiente y un enfoque en las habilidades receptivas por sobre las productivas. Los estudiantes dependían en gran medida de la memorización y las herramientas de traducción. Este estudio enfatiza la importancia de crear entornos educativos atractivos para motivar a los estudiantes y aboga por la participación activa de diferentes actores como la administración escolar, los padres y los maestros en la implementación de políticas lingüísticas.

Palabras clave: estudio de caso, bilingüismo, enseñanza de idioma inglés, política lingüística, enseñanza pública

- 1 Estudiante de la Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en la enseñanza del inglés. Universidad El Bosque, Colombia. Correo electrónico: jcontrerasa@unbosque.edu.co.
- 2 Licenciada en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en la enseñanza del Inglés. Universidad El Bosque, Colombia. Correo electrónico: amalaverd@unbosque.edu.co.
- 3 Estudiante de la Licenciatura en Bilingüismo con Énfasis en la enseñanza del inglés. Universidad El Bosque, Colombia. Correo electrónico: jmoralesv@unbosque.edu.co.
- 4 Magister en Lingüística Aplicada a la enseñanza del inglés. Universidad El Bosque, Colombia. Correo electrónico: jcastellanosj@unbosque.edu.co.

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Resumo

Este artigo apresenta um estudo de caso realizado em uma escola pública e centrado no domínio do inglês de estudantes do décimo ano. O estudo teve como objetivo avaliar o desempenho dos estudantes em inglês, considerando políticas nacionais como o Plano Nacional de Bilinguismo da Colômbia. Os métodos de coleta de dados incluíram notas de campo, entrevistas e testes diagnósticos para analisar os níveis de domínio do idioma. Os achados revelaram alguns fatores que dificultam o desenvolvimento da competência, como a falta de interesse dos estudantes, a falta de aprendizagem independente e um foco nas habilidades receptivas em detrimento das produtivas. Os estudantes dependiam fortemente da memorização e das ferramentas de tradução. Este estudo enfatiza a importância de criar ambientes educacionais atraentes para motivar os estudantes e defende a participação ativa de diferentes atores, como a administração escolar, os pais e os professores, na implementação de políticas linguísticas.

Palavras-chave: estudo de caso, bilinguismo, ensino de inglês, política linguística, ensino público.

Introduction

UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning defines *language policy* as the "official government decisions regarding the use of language in the public domain, including courts, schools, government offices and health services" (UNESCO, n.d.). According to Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), "a language policy is a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in the societies, group or system" (p. xi). Language policies and initiatives in Colombia include the National Bilingualism Plan (2006-2010, hereafter PNB), the Program for Strengthening the Development of Competencies in Foreign Languages (PFDCL), and the 'Colombia Very Well' National English Program (2015-2025). Regarding the PNB, there is a lack of clarity regarding the definition of *bilingualism* (MEN, 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2015). Therefore, it has not been applied adequately to the different bilingual programs (English and Spanish) proposed by the national government. This article discusses the teaching and learning process in the context of English education, despite the government's focus on bilingualism as being limited to Spanish and English. It highlights the misconception that bilingualism only involves Spanish and English, neglecting the broader concept of using any two languages for communication. This narrow view has negatively affected the country's linguistic diversity, which

includes Spanish, indigenous languages, sign language, and minority languages.

Since 1994, the Colombian government has assigned utmost importance to the teaching of English (Gómez Sará, 2017). The challenges of English education in Colombia include limited resources, an unequal program distribution, insufficient teacher training, the need for intercultural perspectives (Tejada-Sánchez & Truscott, 2020), and student overcrowding in public institutions. Changes to government policies and social realities have affected the sustainability of English programs in Colombia. In this vein, it is crucial to have a comprehensive approach that considers diverse social and linguistic contexts, in order to effectively implement linguistic programs and plans. Despite the challenges, there have been positive advancements in English education, e.g., some schools in Bogotá have established partnerships with international institutions such as the British Council and the Fulbright Program. Additionally, initiatives like teacher training programs and language proficiency assessments have been introduced to enhance the quality of English education. Bogotá's Secretary of Education has also implemented English programs in public schools offering bilingual pathways, where students receive instruction in both Spanish and English. According to the Secretary of Education in Bogotá, there is a bilingualism plan in alliance with United Way, which is focused on learning English and includes work teams from 20 official and private schools. This plan seeks to

promote bilingual education environments, classroom practices, and institutional plans. There are at least 19 public schools that have an emphasis on bilingualism in Spanish and English (Vargas, 2023).

This article presents the findings of a case study conducted by three preservice teachers/novice researchers and a moderator in a public school in Bogotá. They observed English teaching practices in tenth grade for two months, aiming to investigate the reasons behind the low English proficiency levels indicated by the results of the 2022 and 2023 SABER 11 tests (a state test in Colombia that measures students' educational levels). This study suggests using contextualized teaching materials and strategies to enhance communicative skills and elevate proficiency levels.

The research problem was established by analyzing SABER 11 data, specifically focusing on English proficiency. The results showed that the students who took the test in 2022 and 2023 were at an A1 level. Interviews with the school's coordinator and English teacher revealed an overall low English proficiency, particularly in reading, grammar, and vocabulary. The teaching and assessment methods primarily targeted reading comprehension and grammar knowledge. The data indicated a need to enhance all language skills in the school.

A level test was administered to assess the English proficiency of tenth-grade students, with 41 out of 53 students participating. The test was conducted in two rounds, with 15 students in the pilot round and 26 students in the second round for analysis. Adapted from *lingua.com* and the National Geographic placement test, the exam comprised four sections (grammar, reading, writing,

listening) and lasted one hour and forty minutes. The exam consisted of a grammatical section with 15 questions (five per level), a reading section with 15 questions (three passages with five questions each), a writing section with three questions (one per level), and a listening section with 18 questions (six per part). The speaking test, conducted separately, had five questions. The students were advised to answer thoughtfully and leave unanswered questions blank if unsure.

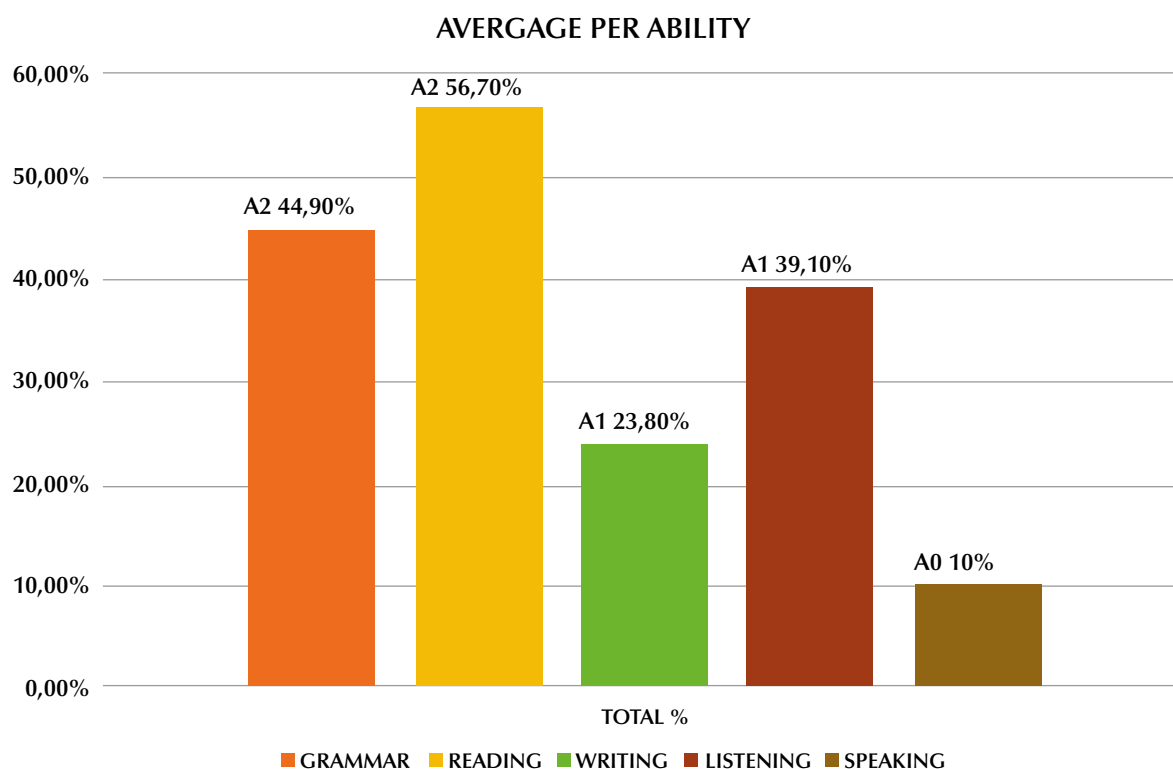
The grammar results revealed an overall student score of 40% (averaging 44%), equivalent to an A2 proficiency level. The reading scores averaged 56%, also at an A2 level, falling short of the expected B1 for tenth-graders. The listening scores averaged 39%, indicating A1, and the writing scores averaged 23%, at A1. Speaking was the weakest area, with most students scoring 0 (no proficiency). Reading and listening were the strongest areas, with higher scores compared to writing and speaking. The students generally performed at an A1 level across all skills, with production skills posing the greatest challenge. This indicates potential deficiencies in vocabulary and grammar, as evidenced by the blank responses in the exams. These findings suggest a need to enhance English teaching by improving both receptive and productive skills. Emphasizing speaking and writing practice, vocabulary, and grammar can enhance students' English communication skills.

Once we established the research problem, we formulated the following research questions: Which factors affect the low English proficiency of the studied tenth-grade students? What suggestions can be made to the institution as an improvement plan for the teaching and learning of English?

Table 1

Number of students per level of performance

Percentage	Level	Number of students
0-10%	A0	4
10-40%	A1	18
40-70%	A2	4
70-100%	B1	0

Figure 1*Results of the level test*

Conceptual framework

Communicative competence and proficiency

Communicative competence was first coined by [Hymes \(1972\)](#), who suggested three categories encompassing speakers' understanding of language rules, their capacity to apply these rules in interactions, and their actual language usage during social interactions. Over the past 50 years, the idea of communicative competence has developed divergently. [Canale and Swain \(1980\)](#) revisited the model and added the strategic competence, which allows speakers to overcome issues arising from an incomplete mastery of grammar. [Celce-Murcia \(2008\)](#) proposed a final model of communicative competence – with language teaching in mind – including linguistic, strategic,

sociolinguistic/socio-cultural, formulaic, interactional, and discourse competencies. For the author, *communicative competence* involves the capability to understand and create written and spoken language to effectively express oneself and ensure mutual understanding. Achieving this requires knowledge of the language and an understanding of the pragmatic and sociocultural factors that facilitate communication ([Celce-Murcia et al., 1995](#)).

On the other hand, [Gharbavi and Mousavi \(2012\)](#) assured that proficiency means to have the ability in language for a specific purpose. Contrary to common belief, it is not only related to conversational fluency; it “is defined as an individual's skill in language use for a specific purpose, and it can be evaluated through the application of a proficiency test” (p. 111). Although proficiency and competency have to do with the utilization of learned skills to execute tasks, there is a difference

between these two concepts. *Competency* refers to the essential skills required, whereas *proficiency* implies a certain mastery of them. Thus, to develop such competence and achieve a high level of proficiency in contexts where English as a foreign language (EFL) is learned through instruction in classrooms, the role of methodology (Richards, 2010) and the role of materials (Tomlinson et al., 2004) are key; EFL teachers must provide opportunities for practicing all language skills by means of different teaching and learning strategies and resources aimed at improving English proficiency.

National policies and professional development

The Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) prioritizes the development of linguistic competencies in foreign languages, particularly Spanish and English, through national policies and bilingual programs. The focus is on English Language Teaching (ELT) rather than on bilingualism. Initiatives like the PNB and Colombia Bilingüe aimed to enhance English education in public schools, and subsequent programs like the PFDCLE and the 'Colombia Very Well' National English Program built on these efforts, showing a commitment to improving English language education through standardized assessments and international collaboration.

Institutions are managing their English programs to enhance language learning across academic stages. The challenges include large class sizes with varying proficiency levels, which hinders the overall language development. This results in high-school graduates with differing English proficiency levels due to inadequate classroom conditions. As proposed by the national bilingualism policy, high-school students should finish their academic stage with a B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2020). However, this is hardly achieved, as evidenced by Miranda (2021). Some common constraints to develop ELT in public schools in Colombia include few hours of instruction,

which are usually reduced by other activities such as school meetings, extra-curricular activities, teacher strikes, or simply disruptions by people coming in during class.

The national bilingualism policies structured teacher training through academic models proposed by foreign language frameworks and designed by the British Council. Two training models were elaborated by the MEN: *Inspiring Teachers* and *Talkative*, a conversational intercultural English club. Nevertheless, these policies neglected diverse scenarios and challenges. Gal (2018) found that ELT in Colombia heavily depends on foreign technologies, expertise, and influence with regard teacher training and methodologies. Miranda and Valencia (2019) contended that the MEN and the local authorities have invested resources in curriculum guidelines, textbooks, and teacher development, albeit with some limitations. Moreover, the study by Enciso Monsocua et al. (2021) concluded that, in order to ensure a B1 proficiency level in eleventh-grade students, the MEN should develop training strategies for teachers to improve their English language competencies. Thus, students' exposure to English would be aligned with the established teaching processes and objectives. It is evident that the different economic advantages of students in private schools impact their outcomes in standardized tests when compared to those in public schools, and that students in private schools achieve higher scores, reaching B1 or even B+ levels (Mejía, 2016; Usma, 2015; Alonso et al., 2017).

Material adaptation and development

The MEN has provided Colombian public institutions with a reference material for English teaching called the *Basic Skills Standards of Language* (2006), which is sequenced by school grades. This material has been designed for public school students from ninth to eleventh grade using *English, Please!* 1, 2, and 3 (2013), and it is intended to develop language skills up to B1. Teachers must adapt or create their own materials, as these standardized books may not

consider diverse educational contexts and limited resources. In this regard, [González \(2007\)](#) asserted that teachers should have access to a training that guides them in the use of materials, particularly in schools with fewer technical and non-technical resources than others. Indeed, materials are essential for effective teaching and learning, helping students to acquire a better comprehension of a foreign language in class.

Teaching materials play a crucial role in class development. Teachers must assess students' needs and consider goals, language content, interests, and skills to create effective materials. These materials serve as tools for directing lessons, explaining content, providing practice, and assessing progress. Furthermore, creating materials is part of teachers' professional development ([Tomlinson, 2001](#); [Núñez et al., 2012, 2017a, 2017b](#)). When developing materials for language learning, it is important to consider Tomlinson's material principles (2011), *i.e.*, impact, learner context, and learning styles (auditory, visual, analytical, kinesthetic). This author asserted that learners should be exposed to rich, meaningful, and comprehensible input of language in use, and that materials achieve impact when the tasks challenge the learners.

Methodology

Research approach and type of study

Our study followed the guidelines of qualitative research, which focuses on the way that people respond and are linked to their environment. The premise of qualitative research is that "meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world" ([Merriam, 1998, p. 3](#)). Moreover, qualitative researchers are oriented toward understanding the meaning people have constructed ([Merriam, 2009](#)). In accordance, we chose the case study as our methodology, as it involves an in-depth and comprehensive investigation of a particular individual, group, organization, event, or phenomenon. To carry out a case study, the researcher

must propose some guiding questions, which may evolve as they engage with the context. Afterward, the researcher selects a unit of analysis, such as a group of students. Data are collected using various instruments over a defined period until sufficient information is obtained. The researcher then presents the case study, using a narrative style that provides a detailed description of the case ([George & Bennet, 2004](#); [Hancock et al., 2021](#)). The events in our case were a teacher's pedagogical practices and ELT methods, the materials used to instruct tenth-grade students, and their learning behaviors during English class. Therefore, our research is a qualitative case study that seeks "meaning and understanding" and relies on "the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive" ([Merriam & Tisdell 2016, p. 37](#)). In our study, we were novice researchers and non-participating observers who sought to identify the reasons affecting the English proficiency of tenth-grade students.

Context and participants

We carried out our research in a public school located in Bogotá, Colombia, and examined its high-school students' English proficiency using their 2022 and 2023 SABER 11 scores, which indicated an A1 level. We obtained permission to carry out our research from the tenth-grade English teacher and her students. The English teacher had a bachelor's degree in bilingual education and 12 years of teaching experience. The students were between 14 and 16 years old. Some of them had enrolled in sixth grade and had three hours of English a week. Others had transferred from schools with similar English class hours. English proficiency might be crucial for these students' future endeavors in higher education and the job market. The participants learned about the study and signed a consent form, which made it clear that their participation was optional, confidential, and would not affect their school grades. This was based on the

National Law on the Protection of Personal Information ([Congreso de la República, 2012](#)), so full confidentiality was ensured regarding the personal data of the participants, and the information collected remained private and was only used for academic purposes.

Data collection instruments

Level test. There are six levels of language proficiency (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2), grouped into three broader levels: A1-A2 (basic user), B1-B2 (independent user), and C1-C2 (proficient user). Level tests measure a language user's comprehension and production against a rating scale such as the CEFR scales (Language Testing International, n.d.). The level test had five sections (grammar, reading, writing, listening, and speaking), covering the levels A1, A2, and B1. It was applied as a needs assessment instrument to support the research and as a source of information about the students' skills.

Field notes. Field notes allow researchers to record and provide insights on observations, surroundings, actions, and nonverbal signals ([Sutton & Austin, 2015](#)). We designed a checklist with columns: the first listed 13 items related to the management of the teaching and learning process, the second allowed for yes or no responses, and the third was meant for writing comments. We wrote descriptive field notes to elaborate on the aspects that were tallied in the format and the observations that accompanied each item. We observed four English classes and wrote down field notes, and we collected photographs of the materials that the students used in class and made notes about them, too. These field notes were written in English.

Interviews. According to Turner and [Hagstrom-Schmidt \(2022\)](#), interviews gather detailed insights and opinions from individuals on specific topics for data collection purposes. [Ñaupas et al. \(2014\)](#) define an *interview* as a formal conversation between researchers and participants, aiming to gather research-related information. Accordingly, our semi-structured interviews combined a

predetermined set of open questions to prompt discussion, with the opportunity to further explore the responses. We interviewed the English teacher, focusing on her use of materials, methodologies, strategies, and syllabi, as well the challenges she has faced regarding the students' processes. We interviewed the students on their behaviors in English class, their opinions about their academic performance, their daily language interaction, and the relevance they give to learning English both in school and autonomously. We transcribed those interviews, which were conducted in Spanish, and the excerpts presented later in this document were translated to English.

We were three novice researchers and an experienced moderator, whose purpose was to eliminate biases and ensure the authenticity of the data collected, free from personal expectations, thereby enhancing the instruments' validity. We refined the instruments and tested them with the 28 students in group 1001 to gain confidence and skill in observing, writing down field notes, and interviewing. The actual data were gathered with group 1002, consisting of 25 students. Likewise, we revised and refined the questions after interviewing four students of class 1001. Consecutively, we interviewed six students in class 1002, who were selected through convenient sampling, *i.e.*, students who regularly attended the English classes that we observed.

Data analysis

We then coded the data, a key process in grounded theory ([Bryman, 2012](#)). This was done to break down the data from the different instruments into component parts, which were given names. We reviewed the field notes and the transcript of the interview, assigned labels (names), and used color coding to easily identify patterns and reduce the names into emerging categories. Then, we compared the patterns against the test results, aiming to make sense of and explain the phenomenon that we wanted to understand. To find the relationships

between categories, we organized the information in a matrix, classifying the main categories and subcategories that would allow us to determine the factors affecting the English proficiency of the tenth-grade students in this institution. We divided each subcategory, represented by a color as follows: *pink*: lack of interest in the second language (L2); *purple*: poor independent work; *blue*: receptive skills > productive skills; *green*: memory and repetition emphasis; and *yellow*: dictionary dependency.

To validate the analysis, we resorted to triangulation, which refers to a researcher's use of various methods to gather the necessary information and thoroughly analyze the results (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021). We used diverse data sources to validate our findings and offset any weaknesses by leveraging the strengths of other data. The researchers' varying viewpoints at different times helped to reach consensus on the analysis patterns and the categories used to explain the phenomenon.

Findings

Student behavior

Lack of interest in L2. According to the information collected in the field notes and the interviews with the English teacher and the students, we could identify the first subcategory, which is related to the student behaviors affecting English proficiency. In this case, it was the lack of interest in L2. To develop this subcategory, we considered what the teacher reported during the interview.

Interview transcription

Researcher 1: *In general terms, what is the English level in high school at this institution?*

Teacher: *It is a challenge for the students to start handling a rich vocabulary because I think that it is the main path to start appreciating the subject [English]. Obviously, when they do not understand anything at all, this is a cause of their lack of interest.*

A limited vocabulary is a major concern, as a strong vocabulary enhances communication skills when listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Likewise, vocabulary plays an important role in the development of oral language (Hill, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016).

In the level test, some of the students did not respond to most of the questions and some tests were left almost blank. Likewise, we noticed that, when the teacher tried to promote opportunities to communicate in English, the students did not use them very often.

Field notes, April 11th

Classroom management. *However, some students didn't want to participate and omitted the question.*

Some students were distracted and were not connected regarding what the teacher was explaining. Students' attention and concentration decreased after some minutes. [sic]

Material. *Teacher tried to boost opportunities for communicating in English, although students did not use it too frequently. Some students exposed they were not doing the activity due to the fact that they were not interested on it. [sic]*

Table 2

Categories and subcategories for data analysis

Category	Subcategory
Student behavior	Lack of interest in L2
	Poor independent work
	Receptive > productive skills
Teacher behavior	Memory and repetition emphasis
	Dictionary dependency

The field notes agree with the students' answers in the interview. When the students were asked why they behaved in that way, the general response was that, because they had few opportunities to use English, it was not worth it for them to learn it. Moreover, based on this information, there was little agency in engaging with L2 activities like listening to music, watching movies, or using apps to learn English outside the classroom. One student's answer was the following:

Interview transcription

Researcher 1: *Why do you think you developed that feeling of alienation towards English? Did you perhaps have an experience that went wrong with English or is it a matter of preferences?*

Student 4: *Well, actually, it is a matter of preference, [English] is not something that grabs my attention.*

Another student asserted:

Interview transcription

Student 3: *I used [English] before.*

Researcher 2: *Before? How did you use it?*

Student 3: *Only with Duolingo.*

Students struggled to maintain attention during class because they found the teacher's explanations uninteresting, despite her efforts to engage them with debates and games.

Poor independent work. This subcategory is directly related to the first one, as the students explained that they did not engage in independent work due to their lack of interest in English. For example, we instructed them to take the test individually, but some of them asked their peers for the answers or left some of the questions unanswered. This was also confirmed during our observations in class: most of the students got in groups to complete tasks and only a few of them worked by themselves, even though the task did not demand group work. Thus, we observed the poor independent work in class, and it was mainly because students preferred not to work on their own, but in groups; if they were not working

in groups, they would rather not do anything. Likewise, during the interview, the students mentioned that they are used to working in groups, which leads to relying on only one or two students for the task.

Field notes, April 11th

Classroom management. *The sum up activity, before starting the class, was developed with the whole group. [sic]*

Material. *The teacher had to implement more listening skill and practice the speaking skill in groups. The teacher also carried out more group activities because students explained they felt more comfortable. [sic]*

The teacher explained that the institution is not sufficiently equipped, since there are no tools and sources to provide further assistance during the English learning process.

Interview transcription

Researcher 1: *Concerning English, do you like to do other activities outside school that are related to learning [English]?*

Student 4: *No, I don't like it. I don't feel like it.*

Researcher 1: *In school, do you follow any type of textbook [or] platform for the English class that the students use autonomously?*

Teacher: *No, autonomous work is not assigned, we [teachers] use a recommended textbook, and it is up to each teacher [to use it] according to their class... Some activities are developed in class, and at home there is no tool that supports or contributes to that textbook or to the strategy that we are following with them in class.*

Teacher behavior

Receptive skills > productive skills. Regarding receptive skills, the interviews revealed that some students find it easier to read, so they can understand the main ideas of the texts, as mentioned by one of them: "reading was easier for me, the ones that were to write no, not because I didn't know the words" [sic].

Audio transcription

Researcher 1: *Does the teacher speak to you only in Spanish or in English?*

Students 2 and 3: *No, in English.*

Researcher 2: *All the class is in English?*

Student 1: *In English, but, if we don't understand, [the teacher] says it in Spanish.*

Researcher 2: *Do you understand the first time, when she says something in English, or does she have to say it in Spanish?*

Everybody: *Yes, in Spanish.*

This idea is supported by the results of the diagnostic exam, in which in the receptive skills average score (listening and reading) was 39-56%, whereas, for the productive skills (speaking and writing), the average score was 10-26%.

Students averaged at A1 across all skills, with production skills being the most challenging. This indicates that they lack the necessary vocabulary and grammar for effective expression. Many test responses were left blank, especially in writing, as the students were instructed to skip the questions they felt unsure about. Finally, we noticed that, in class, it is more common to perform activities related to receptive skills than those involving speaking or writing. The teacher usually brought listening activities, such as playing audios from the textbook.

Field notes, April 18th

Classroom management. *The opportunity was given for students to comprehend the audios proposed during the activity and for them to try to answer the questions related to it. [sic]*

Material. *Teacher used material and activities for getting students' attention about linguistic features for using those topics in real situations and common phrases.*

It is necessary to practice in real situations for developing all the linguistic skills. [sic]

These findings highlight the need to enhance English teaching by improving both receptive and

productive skills. To enable effective communication, it is essential to provide more speaking and writing practice, along with a stronger focus on vocabulary and grammar instruction.

Memory and repetition emphasis. Regarding the emphasis on memory and repetition, the class observations showed recurrent activities aimed at the memorization and repetition of new vocabulary.

Field notes, April 18th

Classroom management. *The class allowed the students to practice the grammar and remember general aspects of the subject to work on in this way they could carry out the practice activities more easily.*

In this class there was not an approach to all the skills, it only started with an activity of vocabulary. [sic]

Material. *The proposed activity really has a key point of repetition and memorization. It can be concluded that the activities developed in the students' notebooks are effective in helping them put into practice the topics explained in class. [sic]*

Furthermore, in the interview, the students mentioned the teacher's emphasis on memorization. For instance, one student explained:

Interview transcription

Researcher 3: *How is the class introduced? I don't know... for example: "today, we are going to talk about vocabulary, about the parts of the house".*

Student 2: *Then, she draws the house and starts selecting the parts of the house, and we must memorize them.*

Dictionary dependency. The last subcategory that we identified as related to teacher behavior was a dependence on the dictionary during class. This was evident in the observations: for a good portion of each class, the students used the dictionary as the main resource to answer the tasks assigned by the teacher.

Field notes, April 11th

Classroom management. *The teacher requests students to show the dictionary since it is the main resource in his English class.*

Students are governed to use it to perform each task of the activities proposed in class. [sic]

Material: *The dictionary is used excessively as a tool.*

The teacher provides a part of spelling, where the usage of the dictionary is necessary. [sic]

This was identified when the students asked to use the dictionary during the level test in order to answer some questions and understand the vocabulary in the reading comprehension or writing sections. We noticed that some of them felt insecure about their productive skills and were highly dependent on the dictionary. They said the following:

Interview transcription

Researcher 3: *Well, can you tell us about how the class goes? How does it start, for example?*

Student 2: *First, the prayer. Then, we say the date in English. As a matter of fact, the prayer is in English.*

Student 2: *[Then,] she takes roll and asks for the dictionary.*

While dictionaries are valuable, reliance on them should be minimized, since they are not practical in real-life situations. Additionally, it is essential to connect vocabulary to its grammatical functions, rather than just focusing on translations.

Interview transcription

Researcher 3: *How are the students' outcomes assessed? Are exams, projects, presentations, and oral defenses used?*

Teacher: *Each teacher decides their own assessment style. Generally, I do not use applied evaluation, writing evaluation, or only one way to evaluate; instead, we do workshops. In these workshops, they can use their notes, check the structures, even use the dictionary to learn about the topic, and, obviously, to prevent vocabulary from*

becoming a hindrance to approach the topic or to be able to say things appropriately.

To answer the main research question, the factors hindering English proficiency include the students' lack of interest and poor independent study, which stall their progress. Additionally, the teacher tended to focus more on receptive skills like listening and reading, neglecting the development of productive skills such as speaking and writing. The focus was primarily on using dictionaries and memorization, instead of fostering understanding. The emphasis leaned heavily toward grammar, leaving little attention for pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and cultural aspects. The teacher found that the government-provided materials (*English, Please!* 1, 2, and 3) were too challenging for A1-level students. To address this, the teacher selectively chose topics from the books, planned lessons that suited the students' abilities, and adapted the materials accordingly. This approach has both pros and cons: while it allows students to understand and produce language effectively, it may also hinder their overall advancement in learning. In this regard, Tomlinson (2011) asserted that learners should be exposed to a rich, meaningful, and comprehensible input of language in use, and that materials achieve impact when the tasks challenge the learners.

Likewise, classroom management needs to be improved, and instructional materials and learning assessment must be diversified. Classroom management needs to foster active learning and participation. There was a lack of effective organization, logical sequencing, scaffolding, wrap-up activities to assess whether the students met the objectives, and opportunities for metacognition and reflection. While the resources, strategies, and teacher discourse were somewhat relevant, they fell short of creating an optimal learning environment. The classroom dynamics often felt imposed, limiting students' ability to express themselves freely. These findings have similarities with the issues affecting classroom management in the foreign language classroom presented by Macías (2018) in an

exploratory review. Moreover, although the study conducted by [Quintero-Corzo et al. \(2021\)](#) involved novice teachers, the teacher faced similar challenges with her tenth-graders, evidencing a need for reflection, critical thinking, and assertive solutions informed by present-day international theories and national education policies.

Despite the teacher's solid knowledge, she did not encourage student agency or active communication. Her words and actions failed to encourage students to act independently or take responsibility for their learning outside the classroom. She did not assign homework, projects, or presentations that could foster the students' agency, which is understood as motivation to achieve their goals ([Rojas & Escobar, 2023](#)). As for the instructional materials, they were limited and did not add significant value to the learning process. We evidenced a need for creativity and skill in the implementation of strategies that promote comprehension or interaction using English. Other stakeholders showed little involvement in the students' learning process and did not provide the teacher with tools, resources, or training support. The English teacher discussed classroom autonomy, where each teacher decides on content, procedures, and evaluation. However, this autonomy can result in a lack of direction and common goals in English teaching.

Concerning the second research question, we recommend enhancing teachers' skills with effective classroom management, instructional material development, and diverse methodologies. However, these should be implemented within a clear foreign language policy, supported collectively by all English teachers, and involve parents to generate a cohesive approach to English language learning.

While memorization aids vocabulary and grammar learning, there are alternative methods that do not rely on rote learning. Teachers can create various instructional materials, such as posters, pictures, and charts, with the purpose of enhancing the acquisition of vocabulary. These visual aids effectively present information in an accessible format, supporting retention and catering to visual

learners. We also suggest calligrams that tell a story and putting the drawings in the classroom or making collages. Research has shown that visual materials significantly enhance learning, encouraging teachers to explore new strategies for class development ([Benavides, 2009](#); [Novawan 2010](#)), exercise creativity when developing their own material, and improve classroom management ([Núñez et al., 2012, 2017a](#)). Cognitive and metacognitive strategies for vocabulary development include tools like picture cards, flashcards, graphic organizers, and word webs, along with word lists, glossaries, and learning journals. These methods effectively broaden vocabulary and enhance recall abilities ([Díaz, 2015](#); [Pérez & Alvira, 2017](#); [Arcila Cardona et al., 2022](#)).

Secondly, diversifying teaching methodologies can enhance classroom management. For example, the CLIL approach, based on a constructivist practice that is pragmatic and contextualized, bridges the gap between language learning and contextualization ([Muñoz-Luna, 2014](#)). This approach integrates subjects like science, geography, and math into activities beyond grammar, fostering connections across topics. Research indicates that this method positively influences student learning ([Núñez Asomoza, 2015](#)) and teachers' affective dimension ([Belmonte Carrasco & de la Maya Retamar, 2023](#)).

Moreover, classroom management is improved by addressing various learning styles and enhancing understanding and communication through multimodal integration. [Álvarez Valencia \(2016\)](#) suggests incorporating a multimodal approach in language classes by creating activities and materials that combine various communication modes and genres, offering diverse inputs related to the topic or language function being studied. Developing instructional materials allows teachers to engage with students by introducing novel activities that are useful and creatively presented. This innovative approach can greatly affect students' views on the class and boost their interest in the subject. [Collard and Looney \(2014\)](#) suggest that learning

environments that encourage openness lead teachers to focus on creativity, promoting innovation and risk-taking, which in turn nurtures both their own and their students' creative abilities. Thus, to encourage interest in L2, the way the content is delivered is as important as the content itself. In addition, understanding students' interests is crucial for implementing creative activities. Teachers should collect information on students' hobbies and preferred topics in order to make English learning relevant and engaging. There are apps and platforms that both teachers and students can use to create content, e.g., Genially, Canvas, Flipgrid, Nearpod, Podtoon, Prezzi, Pictochart, Nearpod, Visme, Pixton, and Emaze.

Additionally, gamification is a very good alternative. Teachers can use apps and platforms for gamification and evaluation that promote interest in English. Some of these platforms are Kahoot, Quizizz, Edpuzzle, Classcraft, Wordwall, Poll everywhere, Educaplay, Pickers, H5P, Live Worksheets, Mentimeter, Peach deck, Socrative, and Quizzlet. The study by [Batlle and González \(2023\)](#) revealed that gamification is viewed by teachers as a motivating and collaborative strategy. However, teachers face challenges with gamification due to the significant time required to create gamified lessons. This process often demands training, support, and collaboration, especially for those not well-versed in technology. Moreover, cooperative learning (CL) ([Johnson & Johnson, 1999](#)) is an effective alternative, as students enjoy group work. This approach provides structure and defined roles, enhancing skills like motivation, interaction, and communication as well as cognitive abilities. It also helps teachers to improve their classroom management skills. CL can help to improve social skills, attention, the acquisition of knowledge, involvement, and application. [Parga Herrera \(2011\)](#) and [Contreras León and Chapetón Castro \(2016\)](#) claim that implementing CL in high schools leads to improved social interactions between students by establishing clear rules, roles, and structures for collaboration. This

creates a better classroom environment and results in positive changes in classroom practices, fostering personal growth and enhanced social awareness among participants. Teachers can enhance students' receptive and productive skills in English by using CL activities like role-playing, performance, group discussions, literature circles, writing workshops, and movie forums.

Conclusions

This research experience was valuable for us as novice researchers and future English teachers, allowing us to observe classroom dynamics and identify the obstacles regarding English language teaching at a public school. We proposed contextualized improvement ideas that could help this school and others facing similar challenges to enhance their English education. English teaching at this public school needs improvement, as students showed low confidence and motivation but were eager to explore new teaching methods. It is crucial for teachers to foster a curious and motivating classroom environment. Continuously monitoring educational policies and keeping up with relevant academic research in Colombia is essential for progress. Nonetheless, data collection at the institution was brief, which highlights the need for longer processes in the future, not just here, but also in other public schools that require proper academic and governmental support. There is a need for further research that includes other stakeholders, such as administrators and parents, in data collection and analysis. This exploration could reveal additional factors influencing students' proficiency levels, highlighting the importance of involving the school's educational community. As [Bastidas and Jiménez \(2021\)](#) said, the educational landscape reflects the community's socioeconomic status, which is influenced by institutional management and the government at various levels. This is rooted in Colombia's social inequality, armed conflict, and legacy of ineffective policies. Unfortunately, there is a disconnection between policies and

the realities of Colombian society. While making teacher training mandatory for improving English skills is well-intentioned, it poses challenges for teachers who struggle with affordability and time constraints to attend courses. The PNB provides unclear definitions of *bilingualism*, leading to inconsistent application across various government-proposed programs in English and Spanish. Conducting extensive fieldwork in both public and private schools is essential to understand their unique pedagogical dynamics. This analysis can help to create tailored strategies that reflect the specific realities of each educational context while considering the influence of government policies and other factors.

On the other hand, based on our analysis, we proposed methodologies and strategies to transform the identified opportunities into strengths, aiming to enhance the English performance of tenth-grade students. This approach aligns with Colombian government policies, and, while the improvements will be gradual, we anticipate a notable increase in the students' proficiency and interest in learning English. Finally, in achieving improvement, the MEN plays a crucial role, as the existing bilingualism policies fail to consider the diverse contexts that can impact academic performance, student interest, overall classroom dynamics, and varying English proficiency levels among students.

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