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ENGLISH TEACHING IN COLOMBIAN RURAL SCHOOLS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES¹ LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS EN LAS ESCUELAS RURALES DE COLOMBIA: RETOS Y OPORTUNIDADES

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiple case study reports the perceptions of education stakeholders about English teaching in rural areas of one of Colombia's regions: Quindío. The participants of this investigation belong to the academic community (teachers, principals, coordinators, the bilingual coordinator of the region, and pedagogical staff) of different institutions in rural areas. Through in-depth interviews, observations, and focus groups, it was possible to identify the challenges that still persist in rural contexts regarding language teaching and

¹ This article makes part of an investigation financed by the University of Quindío, project 959 Currículo sugerido para la enseñanza del inglés en el context de escuela nueva: una propuesta didáctica mediada por la tecnología para potenciar los estilos de aprendizaje

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the opportunities this region has had, thanks to the introduction of new initiatives whose main goal is to strengthen English learningteaching processes. Amongst the challenges, rural institutions still need major investment in resources and training; and there is a call for continuity of the projects being implemented. As for the opportunities, it is evident that better progress can be reached in all processes when education stakeholders' voices are heard.

KEYWORDS: English teaching, Escuela Nueva, perceptions, rural areas.

RESUMEN

Este estudio de caso múltiple cualitativo reporta la percepción de la comunidad educativa sobre la enseñanza del inglés en áreas rurales de una de las regiones de Colombia: Quindío. Los participantes de esta investigación corresponden a la comunidad académica (profesores, rectores, coordinadores, el coordinador de bilingüismo de la región y guías pedagógicos) de diferentes instituciones de áreas rurales. A través de entrevistas a profundidad, observaciones y grupos focales, fue posible identificar los desafíos que aún persisten en los contextos rurales cuando se trata de la enseñanza de idiomas y las oportunidades que esta región ha tenido gracias a la introducción de nuevas iniciativas cuyo propósito principal es el fortalecimiento de los procesos de enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés. Entre los desafíos, las instituciones rurales aun necesitan mayor inversión y capacitación; y hay un llamado para la continuidad de los proyectos que se vienen adelantando. Considerando las oportunidades, es evidente que cuando se escuchan las voces de la comunidad académica, hay mayor progreso en todos los procesos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: áreas rurales, enseñanza del inglés, escuela nueva, percepciones.

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that globalization has given importance to second and foreign language learning worldwide (Galindo, Loaiza & Botero, 2013). For the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN, 2006), learning a foreign language gives people better opportunities, improves communication and interaction between cultures, and contributes to the development of the country in all of its spheres (social, political, economic, educational, and cultural). By recognizing the advantages of bilingualism, the Ministry of Education of Colombia, since 1994, has carried out several policies and strategies to develop communicative competence in English⁴ , and there are more and more initiatives to deal with foreign language learning. Although there has been criticism towards the way in which the bilingual policies have been implemented (De Mejía & Fonseca, 2009), the poor English level Colombian citizens have reached in standardized tests (Sánchez, 2012), and the misconception of the term bilingualism in the country (De Mejía, 2006), among others, the initiatives of the governments to improve the English level have not stopped.

Considering English teaching in rural areas, there have also been some strategies. For example, the ECO (English for Colombia) program⁵ was specially created for teachers in rural areas

⁴ Some of these policies and strategies are: Colombia Very Well (2015-2025) and the National Program for Bilingualism (2004-2019) (Fonseca et al, 2016), where strategies are included, such as My ABC English Kit, PFDCLE, Bunny Bonita. Recently, the English Suggested Curriculum is the guide for primary and secondary teachers to develop their English lessons.

⁵ ECO (English for Colombia) was a strategy launched in 2011 with the main aim of contributing to English learning through audio-visual materials designed based on the levels proposed by the Common European Framework (A1 level).

so that they could reach a basic English level and teach this language to students following certain accepted methodologies (MEN, 2011). More recently, and specifically in Quindío⁶, the program "Quindío Bilingue y Competitivo"7 (2018-2019) offered English language and methodology training to primary and secondary teachers in fifty-four institutions, where rural teachers also participated. But what are teachers' and stakeholders' perceptions about these programs? What are their reactions to those initiatives? One of the main criticisms regarding the plans launched by the Ministry of Education and the government in power is that there is an omission of teachers' voices (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Correa & Usma, 2013; Pelaez & Usma, 2017). Thus, investigating teachers' and stakeholders' perceptions toward the teaching of English is a starting point to understand the real impact of these initiatives in the rural context.

Several studies in Colombia have dealt with English teaching in rural areas (Suárez, Del Pilar and Parra, 2014; Roldán, 2015; Carrero and González, 2016). These investigations have pointed out some pitfalls regarding bilingual education when it comes to teachers' English level and training, lack of resources, students' lack of interest in different languages and cultures and generally, the lack of local government support in this regard. Research on English teaching in rural areas in Quindio's region is scarce; this affirmation can be made after a thorough literature review considering the prisma declaration⁸. What can be noticed in the literature is that, since 2014, the research focus in this context is not gaining interest. In the region, the study of Montoya and Valencia (2014) reports the weaknesses that until then prevailed in the context: lack of resources, low English level, and poor training, among other factors. What matters now is recognizing the voices of teachers and education stakeholders belonging to this context so as to understand how English is being taught and learned in these zones; and, in this regard, create initiatives that can improve (if necessary) the teaching of English in "escuela nueva" (see Literature Review section for a definition of this term) context. . 4 3

Thus, the research question underlining this study is: what are Quindio's teachers' and education stakeholders' perceptions regarding English teaching in "escuela nueva" context? Addressing the following objective: Analyze the perceptions of teachers and educational stakeholders in Quindío's region regarding English teachings in rural areas.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to understand how English teaching is perceived in Colombian rural zones, it is important to recognize the pedagogical model underpinning this context. This section explores "Escuela Nueva," the Suggested Curriculum, and the policies that have impacted rural education in Colombia.

"ESCUELA NUEVA"

At the end of the 19th century, different ideas that helped shape what is currently known as Escuela Nueva emerged in Europe and the United States in response to the traditional teaching model. Fröebel, Pestalozzi, Montessori, and Decroly made a lot of contributions to change the traditional view of education (Villarroel, 2015). Fröebel created the first early childhood education center known today as kindergarten; in his foray into education, he highlighted the role

⁶ Being this region a touristic one where foreign language learning is learning even more importance (Chaparro & Santana, 2011)

⁷ Translation: [Quindío: Bilingual and competitive] 8 The prisma declaration is a protocol to develop systematic reviews. (Hutton, Catalá y Moher, 2016) It is a protocol also used in Educational sciences (ver <u>https://</u> redipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Libro-Tomo-VII-v5. <u>pdf</u>. El artículo La conciencia metalingüística: estado del arte. Botero, Loaiza & Carrasco, 2019)

of the teacher in child development. On the other hand, Pestalozzi suggested infant education as one that must follow a natural course. Montessori, on her part, noted the environment as the main characteristic for a child to succeed in learning. Decroly, in the same fashion, suggested creating a motivating environment taking into account aspects such as globalization, nature, and active school.

These ideas aimed to counteract the vices of traditional education such as passivity and superficiality and focus on aspects such as the child and his/her relationship with the environment, content, and methods. That is to say, the infant is totally taken into account in his/ her context, skills, attitudes, and aptitudes. The role of the teacher changed, and the lessons were seen in a more student-centered setting. The previous should be perceived as one that interests the student regarding the content. Therefore, the content related to their everyday life is usually the one that meets these needs. In other words, there is significant learning when the content is relevant to the student's cognitive structure (Ausubel, 1983); that is to say, when the ideas studied are and essential to the individual.

Rural education systems in the 1970s in Colombia began to adopt these ideas and created the "Escuela Nueva" pedagogical model, thanks to the work developed by Vicky Colbert. Initially, this model began to be used in one of Colombia's regions located in the Northeastern part of the country, Norte de Santander, and it was later implemented in various parts of the country, especially in rural areas. The main characteristics of this model can be summarized in three main aspects: multilevel classrooms, flexibility, and active learning (Suárez Díaz, Liz, & Parra Moreno, 2015). Regarding the first characteristic, having a multilevel classroom allows students of different ages to cooperate and challenge teachers to be knowledgeable

of cultures and learning styles. On the other hand, flexibility prompts teachers to understand the difficult situations students have to face and show a variety of possibilities to learn efficiently. Finally, active learning strives for a collaborative and participatory environment where autonomous learning also occurs. When the Colombian Ministry of Education published the guidelines for the implementation of Escuela Nueva in 2010, they proposed a series of booklets that helped teachers carry out their classes. They focused on four main areas: language, natural sciences, social sciences and mathematics; however, there was not a specific booklet directed to English teaching. 4 4

Different investigations have been researched this model and have contributed to the analysis of this context. Carrero and González (2016) state that the rural school is accompanied by basic needs such as teaching resources and optimal learning environments to achieve a meaningful learning process. The authors also state that there are technological deficiencies in different Colombian rural institutions since rural educational establishments have been subjected to isolation and have lacked economic investment.

Cardona (2012), also describes some of the shortcomings of "escuela nueva" contexts, focusing her interest on the teachers' role. She states that teachers in rural institutions have limited their role to one clearly instrumental; this is because they have limited to the observation of what can be achieved from the activities proposed in the learning manuals, leaving aside a more holistic view of education.

Now, considering English teaching in this context, studies have reached different conclusions; Roldán and Pelaez (2017) and Suárez et al. (2015) reported that the linguistic

policies regarding the teaching of English in rural contexts have little relevance and are somehow unrealistic in their construction since they do not involve all the actors in the process. Some other studies highlight the active role of many rural teachers who devote their time to cope with English teaching in the best way. This is the case of González (2013), who highlights the work of teachers who teach from projects and promote social development seeking a change in students' social and educational dynamics.

ENGLISH TEACHING POLICIES

SUGGESTED CURRICULUM

Along with the Basic Learning Rights (DBA), the Colombian Ministry of Education has created the Suggested Curriculum of English (MEN, 2016). In the document issued by this State institution, possible methodological routes that are intended to help teachers in their planning are presented. The curriculum focuses on specific suggested thematic axes and other aspects that determine the scope and sequence, that is, what the student must achieve and the complexity it takes as the student progresses through the modules and grades. The parts of this scope and sequence of the suggested curriculum are the four modules that correspond to the periods of the year course, goal, language functions, and objectives. Another relevant part of the suggested curriculum is that it provides activities, tasks, projects, and types of assessment with which teachers can have a basis to carry out their lessons.

This document is intended to be used by rural and urban teachers in public institutions, and it is a guideline to cope with English teaching. As evidenced in this study, some participants did not know about this tool though; that is why some current policies and strategies have aimed at the recognition of these pedagogical resources so as to better English teaching processes (as in the case of the project "Quindío Bilingüe y competitivo", described below)

ECO

As mentioned before, ECO is a project created by the Ministry of Education of Colombia for the learning of English as a foreign language in the first levels of primary education. It is aimed at the communities of the different rural sectors of the country. This program has a purely communicative focus, which is why its implementation aims at strengthening basic communication skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing at the A1 level established by the Common European Framework. What is intended with this program is the improvement of learning strategies that will help to strengthen the student's prior knowledge and ensure the development of cognitive skills that provide the greater linguistic understanding and meaningful learning. This is expected to be achieved by using a student-centered pedagogy, using audiovisual tools and learning through task solving, facilitating familiarization and handling of the English language in the first years of schooling.

ECO has an audiovisual material of 90 lessons that provide rural communities with strategies to cope with the acquisition of new knowledge of English as a foreign language. The program may be implemented at different school grades and ages. This adjusts to the needs of the most vulnerable communities, reinforcing the relationship between school and community and promoting active, participatory, and cooperative learning. (MEN, 2011)

QUINDÍO BILINGUE Y COMPETITIVO (2018-2019)

Quindío, one of the thirty-two regions in Colombia located in the western central region of the country, has been implementing initiatives to better students' and teachers' English levels. The

program called "Quindío Bilingue y Competitivo" is an inter-administrative agreement (Local government and Universidad del Quindío). Its main purpose is the strengthen linguistic competence in English and methodology for the teaching of English. The strategy impacted around seven hundred and fifty-five teachers (basic and secondary level) belonging to the 54 main institutions and 268 branches (urban and rural) of Quindío. During a year (2018-2019), there were twenty-five (25) meetings-six hours each-(150 hours in total) and 50 hours of online training. These sections had both: English learning and methodology training. In the process, the teachers who had a BA. in Modern Languages received actualization regarding the current methods to teach foreign languages.

Another strategy implemented under the frame of this project was the permanent guidance provided by a group of "bilingual tutors," mainly in the rural context. The program counted with pedagogical facilitators who accompanied teachers in the process of lesson planning and developed observations so as to guide them in the teaching process. Along with the program, several resources were given to the participating schools: tv sets, didactic materials, and books.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is framed within qualitative studies since they tend to be flexible and

holistic (Hernández et al., 2014). Thus, through observations, interviews, and other qualitative techniques and instruments, it is possible to have a closer approach to the educational reality that is intended to be studied. Furthermore, qualitative studies are of a very unique and open nature; they are " naturalistic because it studies objects and living beings in their natural contexts or environments, and it is interpretive as it tries to find meaning in the phenomena in terms of the meanings that people give them" (Hernández et al., 2014)⁹. 4 6

For the methodological development of this research, the proposal of Yin (1989) will be taken as the basis. In this regard, Yin proposes "case study" as a tool that facilitates answering research questions of "how" and "why" when the context of the research is presented in a specific group. Some of the most notable characteristics of a case study (or, as in this case, multiple cases) are that their particular nature allows the data collection techniques to be concrete and precise, and the results to be an exhaustive descriptive explanation of the specific situation studied.

The framework underlying this research followed the following stages, represented in the figure.

Excerpt translated for publication purposes.

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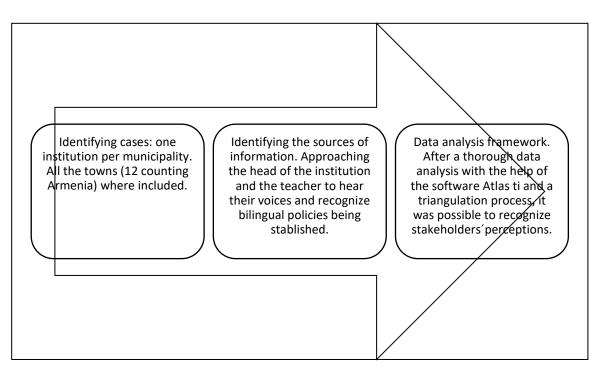
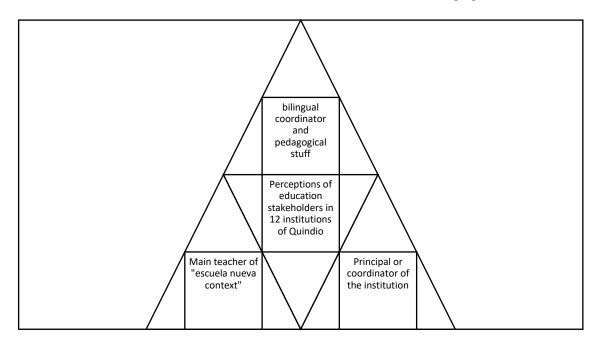


Figure 1. Research framework

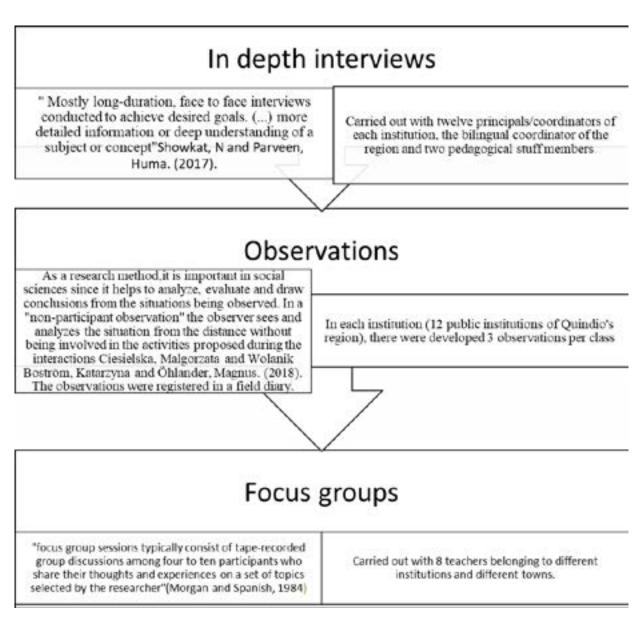


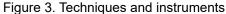




The participants were 12 principals/coordinators, all of them with different education degrees who (as they expressed it) have little to no English level. As for the eight teachers participating in the focus groups, they are all professionals in other areas rather than English, and they also express having a low English level (they have to teach English thought, given the escuela nueva context). The bilingual coordinator and his pedagogical staff are all modern language professors.

The techniques and instruments developed are also summarized in the next figure.





RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Considering the research question, what are teachers' and education stakeholders' perceptions regarding English teaching in "escuela nueva" context? This section reports the results obtained from the different techniques and instruments grouped into aprioristic and emergent categories obtained with the help of the software Atlas.ti

Perceptions toward bilingual policies

Teachers in Quindío still strongly criticize the policies emanated by the Ministry of Education since they consider that their voices and reality are not taken into account. During the in-depth interviews and the focus groups, the education stakeholders expressed¹⁰:

In-depth interview, participant 8: Translation: "I don't know the "ECO" project; I even don't know the design of the initiative to teach English specifically related to escuela nueva context."

In-depth interview Participant 1: Translation: "the policies are done from behind a desk, they don't consider the real situations inside the classrooms; that is why they don't know the context well, and they design initiatives that are not adaptable to our needs."

Focus group minute 30 of the transcription: Translation: "sometimes we don't have the materials, or most of us do not have the language level expected."

These comments are closely related to the findings also established in some other contexts by Gomez (2017), Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-

10 The original excerpts were in

Spanish and they have been translated for

publication purposes.

Sánchez (2016),and Quintero Polo (2009), who highlighted pitfalls like the lack of resources, language proficiency, and the tough conditions that a rural teacher has to go through. Ayala Zárate and Álvarez, (2005), Cárdenas (2006), Cárdenas (2001), and Maturana Patarroyo (2011) also emphasized these aspects and made a call for awareness from local governments, so that rural areas receive more attention. Pelaez Usma (2017) also reported how the policies emanated do not consider the direct "actors," arguing that "teachers should be placed at the center of language policies, as they are the final arbiters of what happens inside classrooms" (p 131). 4 9

During the focus groups and observations, the following situations could be evidenced:

- a) The program ECO was unknown to rural teachers. Although this program was designed mainly for this population, none of the teachers participating in this research knew about it. This situation can be analyzed from two main perspectives.
- The program was launched in 2011; nine years have passed, and, perhaps, the program has been forgotten. This can be due to a phenomenon described by Gonzalez (2017) which is "the lack of continuity and consistency." As the author mentioned, the creation of policies-one overlapping the other one- hampers their meaningful development.
- 2) The program's communicative focus mismatches reality. Even though along with the strategy, there were provided lots of pedagogical resources to teach, they are all in English, and they do not provide a step by step explanation on how to use them; considering teachers' English levels and the hard conditions that during years rural areas have gone through, the program might not fulfill teachers' expectations. This situation can be explained if we consider what

Gonzalez (2017) establishes in this regard: "(...) this uniformity neglects important differences between the Colombian and European contexts (...)" pag 12.

- b) The recent strategy, "Quindío bilingüe y Competitivo 2018-2019," had a positive impact on teachers' perceptions. As for all the teachers interviewed, there were no policies in the past that have brought so many benefits to their practices as this one.
- Extract from the transcription of the discussion with the focus group (25:00): Translation: the secretary of education started with the project Quindío Bilingüe, and it has facilitated a lot of our job, not only because we now have tutors but also because they have planned (*the classes) considering what kids should know in the early years".
- One of the advantages reported is that, with this program, they could recognize and use some strategies they did not consider before, such as the suggested curriculum, which, as mentioned in the strategy, considers the local and social context of students. They also highlighted the importance of guidance while designing lessons and putting them into practice. Even though some teachers still feel reluctant to learn the language, most of them value the fact that they have been supported and do not feel alone in the process. There is an urgent call for the continuity of these strategies.

PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS RESOURCES

During the observations and considering the answers retrieved from the focus groups and the in-depth interviews, between the years 2014-2018, many institutions did not count with appropriate materials to teach English.

Focus group extract (35:00): Translation: "Before we did not have materials to teach

English, there were few but we did not know how to use them because they were in English or we did not have a guide to follow" . 5 0

Some notes taken from the observations and annotated in the diary:

NOTE 1: (one institution) there are not computers; there are tablets but the teacher does not know how to use them, therefore, some of them are not even working.

NOTE 2: the connection is unstable. The contents in the platform "integratic"¹¹ are sometimes stocked buffering.

There is no doubt, as mentioned by Suárez, Del Pilar y Parra (2015), that the lack of didactic resources and technological equipment impedes the development of successful English lessons. Although it has been claimed that "bilingualism plans and policy have boosted a process of commercialization more than a process of equity" (Gomez, 2007) the truth is that bilingualism, being a current need in society, economic investment should be done. As evidence in literature, specifically in regard to Quindio's region, no bilingual programs-mainly designed for rural areas-were carried out in the period 2014-2018, and before those years, only negative criticism about English teaching was highlighted. Most of the institutions in the region have benefited with programs such as "Computadores para Educar"12, which have provided them with technological resources (tablets, computers, smart boards); and "RaicesQ"13, in which an initiative created by some professors called

¹¹ This initiative is created under the framework RaicesQ with the main purpose of sharing curricular content of all the subjects. (taken from http://olimpiadasquindio.ddns. net/#no-back-button)

¹² A governmental strategy created on March 15, 2001 with the main purpose of providing institutions with technological equipment that will create a better learning environment. (taken from <u>https://www.</u> computadoresparaeducar.gov.co/)

¹³ A local proposal released in 2006 with the aim of providing internet connection to the institutions and creating a "net of collaborative knowledge" (taken from http://www. sedquindio.gov.co/sala-de-prensa/noticias/385-proyectoraices-q)

"integratic"¹⁴ has provided teachers with resources in all the areas (English as well), so as to make content more accessible to all. As for today, and under the framework of the program "Quindío Bilingüe y competitivo 2018-2019", many resources have been acquired: tv sets, didactic materials (bingo, puzzles, crosswords, posters, etc), and books, and as mentioned by the participants, these materials would not be useful if they had not count with the pedagogical help they have received so far.

Extract from in depth-interview (bilingual coordinator): Translation. "Within the framework of this project, Quindio's region considers the 54 main branches and the 268 urban and rural institutions and will provide them with resources: tv sets, books to teach English, didactic material-games, puzzles, etc"

It is worth noting that some rural institutions in Quindío are now acquiring routers and intranet connections where they can download content to develop their lessons; internet connection is not the rule in many rural institutions, though (as evidenced through the observations).

PERCEPTIONS TOWARD LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Considering that a rural professor is a multitasking person who has to deal with multiple grades at the same time Brown (2003), and analyzing the fact that rural professors should be qualified to teach multiple subjects, but "they are qualified only in one or two" (Ramos & Aguirre, 2016), having a high level of English proficiency would not be the norm. In fact, all of the teachers interviewed reported low levels of English proficiency, and few of them reported having studied English courses that have helped them to improve their English knowledge. However, as it was evidenced through the observations, rural teachers devote their time to prepare lessons in which they can transmit what is proposed in the "suggested curriculum"; what is more, in most the cases, their high level of motivation and compromise towards their profession, make them create very dynamic English classes, with a lexical approach though¹⁵. As reported by Cruz (2018), teachers in rural areas "intuitively tend to make the most of their expertise, the limited resources available, and the local lingua-cultural repertoires in an attempt to help students make sense of English" (p 1). As evidenced in the interviews, the most recent strategies have provided them with pedagogical support that helps them transmit their English knowledge in a better way.

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CONCLUSIONS

Research in Quindio's region towards the teaching of English has shown three realities: 1) it is scarce, 2) it has reflected more flaws than advancements 3) there is no space for the people involved in the process to speak up. Therefore, those three main reasons guided the purpose of this research. In this regard, analyzing stakeholders' perceptions about English teaching/ learning in the Escuela nueva context is a starting point to diagnose the current situation of bilingual practices in the region and, thus, a beginning standpoint for new research ideas and pedagogical proposals that will continue helping the development of English skills.

As evidenced in the results, and considering the general objective of this study "analyze educational stakeholders' perceptions regarding English teaching in rural areas," the reality of English teaching in the region has changed in several aspects if we make a parallel of the findings in Montoya and Valencia (2014). Right then, it was evidenced the lack of training, *15 More research analyzing teachers (methods used by rural teachers to teach English is necessary.*

¹⁴ This initiative is created under the framework RaicesQ with the main purpose of sharing curricular content of all the subjects. (taken from http://olimpiadasquindio.ddns. net/#no-back-button)

resources and guidance when teaching English; however, the current policies emanated by the local government has tackled those inconveniences and has reached positive reactions among education stakeholders.

Now, considering the specific objectives from this study: 1) identify teachers' bak (beliefs, assumptions, knowledge) towards English teaching in rural areas. 2) Recognize educational stakeholders perceptions towards past and current policies related to English teaching in the region. The participants consider that the recent policies carried out has given better opportunities for the teaching of English in the region. Thus, as suggested by Gomez, (2017) the programs emanated by the Ministry of Education and the local governments should have continuity and consistency; no program or strategy can overlap the other one, instead, they should complement each other and last longer.

Besides, and as participants remark, technological resources in today's world are a great help to improve pedagogical practices; then, more investment is needed. It is worth noting, though, that economic investment should be seriously adjusted considering the real academic context. That is to say, in order to generate ideas that will provide institutions with materials, they should consider that most institutions do not count with an internet connection-so the creation of platforms or applications that only work online would be useless-. Furthermore, the materials provided should also consider teachers' level (so that the written material-instructions-should be in Spanish). Thus, after acquiring any service, a thorough analysis should be made so as to avoid what Usma (2009), González (2007), and Álvarez (2008) state in regards to bilingual plans just seen as a lucrative business.

Let us remember that the voices of the people involved in the situations is the starting point to ensure progress in any given situation. As stated by Gomez (2017) and (Ramos, B & Aguirre, J (2016).

"(...) teachers [should] have more participation in the decision-making process and evaluation of the plans as they are the ones implementing the methodologies and strategies in the schools of the country". Gomez (2017)

"It is fundamental to listen to the needs, beliefs and experiences expressed in teachers' voices (...)" (Ramos, B & Aguirre, J (2016).

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