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Breaking down english writing barriers: a student-centered approach for a special needs case in colombia

Rompiendo barreras en la escritura en inglés: un enfoque centrado en el estudiante para un caso de necesidades especiales en Colombia

Artículo de investigación

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Resumen

La escritura es una actividad compleja que implica habilidades cognitivas y lingüísticas. Para los estudiantes con necesidades especiales, la escritura es también una de las

habilidades más difíciles de desarrollar en una lengua extranjera (inglés). Objetivo: el objetivo de este estudio fue analizar el impacto de las estrategias de andamiaje y el pensamiento visual en un estudiante de primaria con dificultades de escritura en un colegio bilingüe de Colombia. Metodología: esta investigación siguió un enfoque cualitativo con estudio de caso único. Se utilizaron evaluaciones, diarios de campo, observaciones y análisis de errores con un enfoque centrado en el estudiante para superar los errores de omisión y sustitución. Se utilizó la codificación abierta y selectiva para analizar los datos en matrices. Resultados:

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Los hallazgos de este estudio revelan que un enfoque centrado en el estudiante puede ayudar a los alumnos con necesidades especiales a mejorar el aprendizaje del inglés a través de la inclusión educativa y a superar las barreras de la escritura. Conclusiones: Este proyecto de investigación destaca la necesidad de comprender los numerosos factores que influyen en el proceso de escritura, incluida la formación del profesorado para estudiantes con dificultades de alfabetización en el contexto colombiano.

Palabras clave: Andamiaje, Dificultades, Errores, Escritura, Inglés.

Abstract

Writing is a complex activity that involves cognitive and linguistic skills. For students with special needs, writing is also one of the most difficult skills to develop in a foreign language (English). Objective: The objective of this study was to analyze the impact of scaffolding strategies and visual thinking on a primary school student with writing difficulties in a bilingual school in Colombia. Methodology: This research followed a qualitative approach with a single case study. Tests, field journals, observations, and error analysis were used with a student-centered approach to overcome omission and substitution errors. Open and selective coding was used to analyze the data in matrices. Results: The findings of this study reveal that a student-centered approach can help students with special needs improve their English language learning through educational inclusion and overcome writing barriers. Conclusions: This research project highlights the need to understand the many factors that influence the writing process, including teacher training for students with literacy difficulties in the Colombian context.

Keywords: Scaffolding, Difficulties, Errors, Writing, English.

Introduction

English has become a global language thanks to its widespread use in many fields (Crystal, 2012; McCrumb, 2010; Todorova & Todorova, 2018). In Colombia, like many other countries in Latin America and around the world, English has been a dominant foreign language for decades. Both public and private educational institutions have included English in their curricula as mandatory to reach the proficiency levels stated in public policies due to globalization processes. In Colombia, the Ministry of National Education (2004) has considered English learning as a goal for the economic and social development of the country based on a conceptualization of quality education through a significant number of national public policies on bilingualism from 2004 to 2025. However, the conditions in which bilingualism takes place in our country vary from public to private institutions and from urban to rural areas (Gómez, 2021). In addition, the implementation of public policies about bilingualism in Colombia has gone through difficulties and misconceptions about what bilingualism is and what it entails (Cobo et al. 2021).

One of Colombia's greatest challenges is improving students' oral and written abilities in a foreign language. Although the bilingualism policies created by the Colombian government aim at reaching upper-intermediate levels of English proficiency, students depict low levels of English oral and written skills according to the national standard exams (Saber 11 and Saber Pro). As a result of the appropriation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), Colombian educational institutions had to adjust their curricula and assessment systems to achieve the competencies described in each of the language proficiency levels presented in it (Valderruten & Ramos, 2014).

In 2023, a study by Universidad Javeriana showed that almost 50% of Colombian students

reach A- in the CEFR. English language learners in Colombia have demonstrated some difficulties in all skills, especially writing, since it is a complex activity that requires cognitive and linguistic abilities. Ramos (2024) states that one of the reasons for students having a low English proficiency level in Colombia derives from the need to strengthen teacher training on more innovative methodologies. Teacher development in Colombia requires an integral and ongoing process of contemporary teaching strategies, unlike passive and repetitive forms of teacher training (Gonzalez et al., 2018; Ramos, 2019).

Background studies and theoretical framework

Several studies confirm the need to find ways to improve students' writing skills in both native and foreign language learning through different intervention approaches (Bereiter, 1980; Berninger, 1994; Kroll, 1981; McCutchen, 1988; Sánchez & López, 2019; Singer, 1995; among others). In addition, developing writing skills in a foreign language can be even more difficult for a learner with special needs. For decades, many international organizations like UNESCO (2007) have insisted on the necessity to offer equal learning opportunities for students with learning difficulties. In Colombia, different laws and programs have been passed to promote educational inclusion (Law 2216, 2022). Nevertheless, most Colombian English teachers do not have the pedagogical knowledge to teach a foreign language to a child with learning barriers (Pizarro & Cordero, 2017). Furthermore, to our understanding, there is also little research at the national level on the strategies to improve English writing skills for students with learning deficits in the Colombian context.

This research presents an intervention by two pre-service English teachers and their research director in an educational institution in Colombia. The purpose of this research was to design and

implement a didactic unit based on scaffolding strategies to help a third-grade student overcome omission and substitution difficulties in English writing. Scaffolding strategies provided a richer experience for the students who participated in the current research. This study sought to answer the following question: How does the design of a didactic unit based on scaffolding strategies in English influence the development of writing skills in a student with omission and substitution errors in a bilingual school in Colombia?

Developing writing skills in a foreign language

Writing is an active process in which learners use their mental and linguistic abilities to express their feelings, thoughts, and ideas (Crystal, 2006). Several authors have defined writing as a productive skill focused on organizing the sentence structure to get textual cohesion and coherence (Nunan, 1999; Widdowson, 2001). In addition, Hyland (2002) states that coding needs to be considered so that meaning can be understood, whereas Cassany (2011) considers writing as an act in which words are put together to build meaning by using the language correctly and coherently. Writing can take multiple forms, from a shopping list to an essay, and each text follows specific features according to the discourse genre (Grossman, 2009).

Writing in a foreign language can also be a demanding task. Raimes (1993) explains that there are two types of writing foreign language learners should master: writing for learning (WFL) and writing for display (WFD). Both types of writing include some level of language proficiency and willingness to revise, reorganize, and reflect on the written piece. Moreover, writing is considered a communicative activity made up of graphic expressions that imply complex cognitive processes (Crystal, 2006; Olshtain, 1991; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). According to Rao (2019), writing in a foreign language also denotes students' mastery of vocabulary and

grammar. The role of teachers is to provide a learning environment that promotes the development of literacy skills by giving extensive feedback on the learners' production. Several authors confirm that feedback helps learners develop certain metalinguistic awareness to revise and correct their written production (Raimes, 1998; Ferris, 2002). Finally, Shin and Crandall (2014) state that learners transfer their skills and strategies from their native to the foreign language.

From traditional to contemporary approaches to language teaching

Language teaching and learning have evolved throughout the centuries. From the traditional methods of grammar-translation to the post-method era, different approaches have led the way to language teaching and learning worldwide. However, recent theoretical assumptions on language teaching have shaped a new form of conceptualizing language teaching and learning focused on the context and culture where these processes take place. For instance, Kumaravadivelu (1994) stated that no method or approach could be considered successful since language teaching and learning depend on the context in which both processes take place. Also, the role of materials has changed throughout time with the post-method era (Dwi, 2020). Teachers can decide what method and materials they want to use according to the context's reality (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Also, Sánchez Vega and López Pinzón (2019) explain that learners benefit from cross-curricular activities in which subject content and a foreign language are integrated. In addition, interculturality can be fostered by taking advantage of topics and languages across cultures.

Scaffolding strategies

The concept of scaffolding appeared some decades ago. One of the pioneers in the conceptualization of the term scaffolding is

Bruner (1978), who defines scaffolding as "the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom taken in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill s/he is in the process of acquiring" (p. 19). According to Bruner (1978), teachers help students get higher levels of skill and understanding by breaking down tasks into manageable steps. Some steps may be more challenging and require additional intellectual and emotional support.

The person or tool aiding the learner assists in tasks that he/she cannot yet perform independently. Scaffolding often involves collaborative efforts, leading to successful outcomes that gradually empower learners to engage in activities independently. When adults scaffold students' learning, they model processes, enabling learners to enhance their competence and execute the processes autonomously.

Language teachers have used scaffolding strategies to give learners help to perform or understand a task. Scaffolding strategies can also be used outside the educational setting. Parents and peers can utilize scaffolding strategies to support other peers collaboratively. Scaffolding strategies are temporary, and once the learner develops the required skills to complete a task, teacher support can be withdrawn (Yildiz & Celik, 2020).

A variety of scaffolding strategies are used in the language classroom. Bradley and Bradley (2004) proposed three scaffolding strategies to support language learning: simplify the language, ask for completion, and use visuals. For instance, supportive techniques might involve helping a child generate ideas for writing, phonetically spell words, or correctly form letters (Kaderavek et al., 2009). According to Shin and Crandall (2014), language is learned by children through social interaction, and the appropriate scaffolding strategy to be used by teachers needs careful selection.

Walqui (2006) presents six types of scaffolding strategies (modeling, bridging, contextualizing, schema building, re-presenting text, and developing metacognition). Modeling and contextualizing are the strategies that best fit the students' learning conditions in this study. The first strategy consisted of a practical demonstration from the teacher of any new concept or task. Learners first observe the teacher and then imitate what they have done to accomplish the task. One of the benefits of this strategy is that learners gain confidence and reduce anxiety and any other negative emotions in the learning process.

Contextualizing is a strategy teachers use to help learners understand language through gestures, pictures, realia, etc. (Anderson & Risor, 2014). Contextualization in the writing process takes the form of a variety of strategies applied in a specific context that help learners understand how language works, and its functions, select appropriate vocabulary and grammar, activate prior knowledge to connect ideas, and include cultural elements (Auer & Di Luzio, 1992; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Jonson, 2002; Walz, 1989).

Visual thinking

Visual thinking is a strategy developed more than three decades ago by psychologist Housen (1997) to promote visual, cognitive, and social competencies in the arts field. Visual thinking takes the foundations and principles of developmental psychology, constructivism, visual perception, and aesthetic development (Bachman, 2022). Visual thinking in language learning helps children to think and understand complex relationships (Flammer, 2008). By using visual elements (images, graphs, maps, photos, etc), learners can relate and reflect upon the text more easily. Students develop an ability to read images (Doelker, 1997). For instance, teachers can use visuals as icebreakers to ask questions,

activate prior knowledge, and predict information in any lesson.

Method

Since this study aims to analyze the incidence of a didactic unit based on scaffolding strategies in English to develop writing skills in a student with omission and substitution errors, an interpretative paradigm was chosen.

This research followed a qualitative approach defined by Creswell (2014) as a method of inquiry in which researchers collect data in natural settings to study a phenomenon by using multiple sources of data as interviews, observations, documents, recordings, and narratives, among others. One of the features of the qualitative approach relies on its holistic view of the research problem under study. In addition, a case study design with a descriptive scope was selected. According to Stake (1995), case studies allow for a detailed description of individuals followed by data analysis to determine treatment results. A detailed description of the findings is presented after the intervention conducted by the researchers.

This case study followed the four stages stated by Yin (1989). The first stage consisted of the selection of the case, the second step was to collect and analyze data (including the diagnostic test and the implementation of the didactic unit), and the third stage was the definition of categories and data analysis. Finally, results and discussion were reported.

Population

A nine-year-old girl was the single case study selected for this study. She is a third-grade student in a bilingual school in a small town in the southwest department of Colombia. The girl needs special support from the teacher to perform simple tasks in the classroom. She has been diagnosed with a learning disorder that makes her confuse phonemes and morphemes in both

L1 and EFL (English as a Foreign Language). She has developed this difficulty throughout her years of schooling. Besides, she has attention issues that make her understanding of complex topics even more difficult. Her mother signed an informed consent to protect the girl's identity.

Instruments

The instruments used to collect data were: a diagnostic test and a post-test adapted by the researchers from the sample papers exams from 2018 by Cambridge English Assessment at the level A1. The student's writing level was identified with a diagnostic test. The test was divided into three sections, with a maximum score of 35 points. Questions in the test included: unscrambling the letters to write words (accompanied by an image), reading the definition, writing the word corresponding to the definition, and answering questions according to an image. The first section consisted of scrambling the letters to write the correct word for each picture. The second part was a matching activity in which the student had to read a definition and write the corresponding word to each concept. In the third section, the student had to look at an image and answer questions. Also, a field diary was used to describe the progress and the situations that arose in the classes during the implementation of the didactic unit.

The intervention was planned based on scaffolding strategies, including vocabulary, short readings, videos, and contextualized activities aligned with the Colombian Ministry of Education English Syllabus. The didactic unit was implemented for six sessions. Scaffolding strategies were implemented as modeling, visual aids (flashcards, pictograms, and videos), and teacher-researcher temporary support in each session (pronouncing words and using gestures). Lessons included engaging activities such as completing words with the correct phoneme, listening and identifying a specific sound, writing and identifying words from a picture, and using

a dictionary. All these activities gave the student more autonomy and confidence in learning the foreign language. However, the interference of the mother tongue with the pronunciation of the vowels was an issue in the first sessions. For instance, the student confused the phoneme "j" in English with the Spanish letter "ll" because of their similar sounds. Observations on the student's behavior and written production in the foreign language were registered in a field diary.

Data analysis process

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract information. This inductive process illustrates working back and forth between the themes and the database until the researchers have established a comprehensive set of themes. It may also involve collaborating with the participants interactively so that participants have a chance to shape the themes or abstractions that emerge from the process.

Error analysis was done considering the frequency of both errors in the student's written production, and the implementation of a didactic unit based on scaffolding strategies and globalised materials. A comparison of the student's English written production was done through the diagnostic test results and results from the final test after a six-week intervention. For the design and development of the didactic unit, the vocabulary selected was taken from the modules of the "Mallas de Aprendizaje" Module 3 entitled: Environment and Society: I Take Care of My City from the Ministry of Education in Colombia (2006).

Field diaries with observations were analyzed following the three phases of content analysis: grouping, coding, and quantification (Flor & Hernández, 1955). The first phase consisted of grouping collected data from the pre- and posttest and the implementation of the didactic

sequence. The second phase involved coding the data gathered into the matrix for data analysis. As a result of this process, three emergent categories were named: Difficulties and progress in writing skills, reactions toward materials and lessons, and attention and participation in the English class. The last phase consisted of quantifying the number of students' omission and substitution errors to compare the results of the pre- and posttest. Also, an analysis of the emergent categories was made.

Results

According to Leacock et al. (2002), the most common mistakes made by writers, whether they are native speakers or language learners, are spelling errors and grammar mistakes. The interference between the native and foreign language is another issue addressed in the writing process. Observing and analyzing the student's written performance, it was found that she makes two types of errors: omission and substitution. Omission is the absence of an item or morpheme that must appear in a well-formed utterance (Dulay et al., 1982). The omitted graphemes were /r/, /o/, /h/, /m/, /i/, /t/, /o/, /l/, /n/, /a/, /g/. On the other hand, substitution is replacing letters with incorrect ones (Cook, 1999). The student's written production substitution mistakes in both her native language (Spanish) and the foreign language (English) were found in words like objects/objects; mearure/measure; chocoley/chocolate; radib/rabbit; doc/dog; odegá/oveja; vated/voted; gusana/gusano; gato/gota; candego/cangrejo; didlioteca/biblioteca; brillate/brillante; didian/vivian; dedé/bebé; silcol/circle; silinber/cylinder.

In table 1, the results of the diagnostic test are presented. The student's level of proficiency in the target language (writing skills) is A- according to the Common European Framework of Reference. The following table shows the type of error and frequency.

Table 1. Student's results of the pretest.

Type of error	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	7	46,6%
Substitution	8	53,4%
TOTAL	15	100%

Note: Own elaboration, 2025.

The student confuses various phonemes (b/v, ll/y) because she associates and uses the sound of the letter (grapheme) in her native language (Spanish) when writing words in the target language (English). To address these errors, a didactic unit called Carnival of the Animals using scaffolding strategies such as modeling was implemented. Modeling strategies required the teacher to demonstrate a task visually and verbally, so the student could perform the activity after the teacher's example.

The effectiveness of the didactic unit implementation was evidenced in the students' final test results. Only one omission mistake was made by the student. She wrote "elphant" instead of "elephant", she omitted the vowel "e". The student reached an A1.2 level in her writing skills according to the Common European Framework of Reference. The following table shows the student's errors and frequency in the final test results.

Table 2. Student's results of the post-test.

Type of error	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	7	46,6%
Substitution	8	53,4%
TOTAL	15	100%

Note: Own elaboration, 2025.

The progress made by the student after the implementation of the didactic unit derives from the use of visual aids (flashcards and pictograms), allowing the student to become familiar with the foreign language vocabulary. Also, the teacher's temporary support for the

different activities (modeling) increased her autonomy and confidence in each of the tasks given. These strategies had a positive influence on the development of her writing skills since they were planned according to the activity and the girl's needs. Scaffolds were gradually removed as the student progressed by reducing spelling errors in her written production.

Table 3. Field diary analysis (emergent categories).

Category 1: Difficulties and progress in writing skills	Category 2: Reactions toward materials and lessons	Category 3: Attention and participation in the English class
Class 1: The student had difficulty when writing the names of the animals since this student writes the word in English as it sounds.	Class 2: She was calm and relaxed, which allowed her to complete the task successfully	Class 3: The student is more confident thanks to the support given by the teacher-researchers.
Class 2: The student confused the letters "b", "d", "c", "q", and "k" She still needs more help to identify the graphemes.	Class 3: The student showed more confidence in writing words in English.	Class 4: She actively participates in each activity.
Class 3: The student confuses the endings with "k" or "g," like in the words duck and dog. It was necessary to help her differentiate sounds through gestures.	Class 4: She actively participates in the class and can write words correctly.	Class 5: She is aware of the sounds being pronounced, also she doesn't need any teacher support when reading
Class 4: She listened to the words syllable by syllable, which helped her write the words correctly.	Class 5: The student didn't recognize most of the sounds. It was necessary to explain how letters sound by making gestures and pronouncing the words many times.	Class 6: She talks and she pays attention to the mouth of the person so she can understand better which letter is being pronounced. She is more autonomous in her process. She does the exercises by herself. If necessary, she repeats the sounds before writing words.

Class 5: The student can differentiate the correct spelling of words studied previously. She spent some time doing the exercises.	Class 6: The student demonstrated progress in the phonemes she showed difficulties with. She identified the graphemes, so it was easy for her to complete the words correctly.	Class 7: She participated and enjoyed the class.
Class 6: The student made progress thanks to the strategies implemented: modelling and visual aids.	Class 7: The student read aloud without hesitating. She can recognize the sounds “b” and “d”.	
Class 7: In this session, the student needed the lowest support from the teachers.		
Class 8: She didn’t make any mistakes in the writing as omission or substitution. She was aware of the writing process when she made a mistake, she easily recognized that she was doing it wrong. She was able to improve her writing and recognize the sounds of the phonemes in English.		

Note: Own elaboration, 2024.

After the implementation of the didactic unit, the girl could identify the vocabulary in English and write the words correctly; however, support from the teacher was necessary for her to make some corrections. During the intervention, the student showed enthusiasm and confidence doing the activities and took time to think before writing the words. It was evident that the student could understand and recognize the differences between English and Spanish thanks to the scaffolding strategies used. Following Shin and Crandall (2014), learners who actively participate and interact during scaffolded activities can develop writing skills faster. At the end of the

intervention, omission and substitution mistakes were reduced to a minimum, as evidenced in the post-test results.

Discussion y conclusions

This study unveiled that a student-centered approach using scaffolding strategies can help learners break down writing barriers. Azar (1992) states that omission, addition, wrong choice of words, and interference with the mother tongue must be overcome to develop writing skills in a foreign language. In the same line of thinking, Zamora and Ramos (2019) found in their study that syntactic interference

in students' written production comes from structure transfer from L1. Other authors found similar results to the current study on the use of scaffolding strategies for improving student literacy skills in Bali (Padmadewi & Artini, 2018). Using scaffolding strategies such as problem-solving activities and process-based techniques like practicing words, connecting words and sounds, and imitating sounds helped students develop writing skills and positive attitudes toward literacy. Also, Kaderavek et al. (2009) confirm the benefits of scaffolding strategies on the betterment of specific writing issues such as spelling, word order in a sentence, and spelling words phonetically. Benítez-Velásquez (2011) got similar results in her research by using strategies, especially scaffolding, as the most effective one for elementary students with writing issues in bilingual schools.

The findings of this research present not only the benefits of using modeling and visual aids as scaffolding strategies to overcome writing issues of a student with special needs but also shed light on the necessity to broaden research on inclusion in the foreign language classroom in the Colombian context. Overall, this study strengthens the idea of introducing innovative and nouvelle pedagogical strategies in the English classroom that foster inclusion of those learners with particular issues (in this case writing difficulties), as well as aiming at improving students' performance in the foreign language through personalized types of assessment and greater expected outcomes (Valderruten & Ramos, 2014; Salcedo Mosquera et al., 2024).

The main goal of the current study was to determine the impact of a didactic unit based on scaffolding strategies and visual thinking to improve the English writing skills of a third-grade student with learning difficulties. The findings indicate that children benefit from the support given by a teacher, a parent, or a peer by simplifying and dividing tasks. Besides that,

scaffolding strategies promote cooperation to empower learners gradually and become more independent. This study has been one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine the benefits of a student-centered approach to overcome omission and substitution errors in the Colombian context. However, the analysis of the implementation of other strategies and factors that influence foreign language learning needs to be done in further studies. The effect of the critical period, age, social class, learners' previous experiences, and other individual and universal factors that affect language learning are crucial for understanding the implications of those elements in foreign language learning (Cobo et al. 2020). This research project highlights the necessity to understand the many factors that influence the writing process, including teacher education for students with literacy difficulties in the Colombian context.

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