

## Teaching English in the Colombian Rural: Normalistas Superiores Challenges and Experiences

### Enseñanza del Inglés en la Colombia rural: retos y experiencias de normalistas superiores

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\* Original Research Article

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## Abstract

This qualitative study focuses on the challenges and experiences faced by *normalistas* in-service educators who teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in rural contexts in Colombia without the training to do so. Data were analyzed using grounded theory, through instruments such as interviews, real-life episodes, and a focus group. The participants were two *normalistas* educators who have taught English in rural areas for years, and the study was conducted in remote rural communities in Colombia with limited resources and connectivity. The results evidenced the teaching English practices outlook in rural communities, the adaption to an experimental learning and teaching method as part of the *normalistas'* limitations in terms of English knowledge and instruments to teach the foreign language and, finally, the impact on rural learners as a result of *normalistas'* performances in English classes.

**Keywords:** learning, normalista superior, rural education, teaching English as a Foreign Language.

## Resumen

Este estudio cualitativo se enfoca en los desafíos y experiencias que enfrentan algunas normalistas que enseñan inglés como lengua extranjera en contextos rurales en Colombia sin la capacitación para hacerlo. Los datos fueron analizados utilizando la teoría fundamentada, a través de instrumentos como entrevistas, episodios de vida y un grupo focal. Los participantes fueron dos educadores normalistas que llevan años enseñando inglés en la ruralidad, y el estudio se llevó a cabo en comunidades rurales remotas de Colombia con recursos y conectividad limitados. Los resultados evidenciaron el panorama de las prácticas de enseñanza del inglés en comunidades rurales, la adaptación a un método experimental de aprendizaje y enseñanza como parte de las limitaciones de los normalistas en términos de conocimiento del inglés e instrumentos para enseñar la lengua extranjera y, finalmente, el impacto en los estudiantes rurales como resultado del ejercicio de las normalistas en las clases de inglés.

**Palabras clave:** aprendizaje, educación rural, enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, normalista superior.

## Introduction

This study focuses on the challenges and experiences faced by two *normalistas* educators who have worked for more than five years with the Ministry of National Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional - MEN) in rural areas of Colombia, such as Cundinamarca and Boyacá. From the beginning, they have been told to teach English despite not having a bachelor's degree in English teaching. Thus, this study seeks to know how this process has been faced by the participants, and it aims to provide a real scenario where some educators do not have the accurate academic preparation. Therefore, this research highlights the role that *normalistas* educators play in the education of children and youth in rural communities of Colombia in the teaching English matters. Despite the rural conditions, lack of resources and suitable training, these educators strive to provide their best in order to educate rural children properly. Besides, the purpose is to recognize and value their work and to understand how they face challenges and carry out their teaching practice in the aforementioned scenario.

Correspondingly, the contribution of this study is intended to provide insights about how the EFL teaching practices are carried out in some scenarios that lack of sources, connectivity and suitable methods. Moreover, this helps to understand the challenges faced by non-English speaker teachers when finding strategies to teach the target language to their students. Therefore, this highlights the importance of English education in rural areas and provides information about the real teaching conditions in these communities, and how they are trained in foreign languages not

from a negative critical perspective, but from the reality faced day by day. Likewise, the study shares the information gathered from *normalistas*, who are currently studying for a degree in basic education. Although they do not have a bachelor's degree in English, neither are they studying languages; teaching English is only part of their job, and they are required to manage this professional aspect. Some of these educators have a basic English knowledge and are told to teach it, so they have encountered a double challenge: to learn it in order to teach it.

As a matter of fact, the information presented in this study shows the reality for many educators who are in the same situation, since this is not an isolated fact. Actually, according to Revista Semana (2019), 22 % of Colombian inhabitants (11 million) live in the rural area. As this is a case of two *normalistas* educators, the results cannot be generalized, even though some rural communities have their specific difficulties. In this particular study, the context of the students is framed in the mining, and this has some specific implications which might change, depending on the productive activity that works as a source of income. However, the reality for many educators who work in the rural area is similar, and there are certain situations that need to be identified, because they are highly possible to happen.

The data support the facts, challenges and experiences shared by educators and some students in this paper. Likewise, these educators are forced to try different ways to teach, since not only were they not educated to teach EFL, but there are also well-identified difficulties in the rural areas, such as the lack of connectivity or

sources. Additionally, they have to deal with students' personal situations, like family backgrounds that interfere with the motivation towards learning. In the same way, this study was conducted under a case study approach to share the results found, which can contribute to understand how some English learning and teaching processes in this regard have been building up daily.

### **Research Question**

How do two *normalistas* in service experience the EFL teaching challenge in the Colombian rural context?

### **Objective**

- To analyze the EFL teaching challenges and experiences faced by two *normalistas* in the rural area.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Normalistas Superiores**

Initially, it should be pointed out that Decree 2903 of 1994 (Decreto 2903 de 1994), according to the Law 115 of 1994 or Law of General Education (Ley 115 de 1995), focuses on the restructuring process of *normales superiores* schools, which were regulated with the support of the Secretary of Education and the MEN. Currently, these schools offer an in-depth study of the field of education for tenth and eleventh grades, followed by a complementary cycle of teacher training, which lasts two years, plus the training of high school graduates. Finally, those students who complete this cycle are known as *normalistas superiores* (Montoya, 2013).

Therefore, according to Montoya (2013), the teaching process in basic education has been significantly influenced by general education. The role of regular schools in education and educators training continues to be emphasized as a demographic and imagined reality. Some students who graduated from *normales superiores* schools –originally called *normales* and, then, *bachilleres pedagógicos*– were placed at the elementary school level, while those who passed the education or pedagogy faculties in universities were sent to teach in secondary schools. Currently, the main schools that have benefited from the accreditation process are known as *superiores*, so these teach elementary school programs with the title of *normalistas superiores*, and their secondary school students must complete four semesters of higher education in addition to what they acquired in tenth and eleventh grades. The emphasis for these semesters is placed on pedagogy, as the law states:

*The normal schools, restructured and approved, are authorized to train educators at the preschool level and in the basic education cycle. These will operate as academic support units for the initial training of teachers and, through an agreement entered into with higher education institutions, they will be able to offer complementary training that leads to the granting of the normalista superior title. (Ley 115 de 1994, article 112, paragraph)*

According to the DANE (2020, as cited in Orozco, 2023) by 2019 there were 21 651 *normalistas* registered in the teaching staff of the Secretary of Education, without considering that a higher number of those who currently register as graduates joined these steady jobs because they were *normalistas*. It should be highlighted that many of these *normalistas* are working in the rural areas.

However, the relationship between teacher training schools and educators is no longer presented in the form of an administrative contract that contains costs and other institutional formalities, but as the recognition of knowledge between communities of pedagogical knowledge, so that those who have graduated from teacher training schools with higher education can teach preschool and primary school, and continue with their studies in post-graduate studies (Gélvez, 2010). Undoubtedly, *normales superiores* schools still have an important role in educators training, even when their peak position was in the middle of the 20th century. However, these have allowed a two-folded access to education for rural communities in Colombia, that is, the preparation of people to teach two main core fields: preschool and elementary school (Lache et al., 2019).

Consequently, this study tackles the *normalistas'* performances, experiences and challenges when teaching EFL in the rural context. Thus, the MEN considers it important for the future of the country to improve the quality of education as well as teachers training for these educational institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to provide some insights in this regard. Consequently, strengthening plans are implemented, which consist of improving the premises, as well as providing didactic material and training teachers in the English language field and its teaching methods, information and communication technologies; and in the pedagogical knowledge necessary to teach specific information (MEN, 2001).

## Teaching EFL in Colombia

Teaching EFL refers to teaching English to non-native speakers in a country where English is not the first language. In Colombia, EFL has become increasingly important, due to the globalization of the economy and the need for English language proficiency in academic and professional contexts (Echavarría et al., 2019). Besides, Echavarría et al. (2019) explained that EFL teaching in Colombia requires a contextualized approach that considers the specific linguistic and cultural characteristics of the country. Due to the policies issued by the Colombian educational system, one of its main goals is that eleventh grade students can reach level B1 of communicative competence in English according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2020).

Likewise, different language education policies have been issued with the purpose of contributing to the EFL teaching improvement in Colombia. According to Valencia (2013, as cited in Del Toro et al., 2019), the policies issued are the English Syllabus (MEN, 1982), Law 115 of 1994, Decree 180 of 1997 (Decreto 180 de 1997), the attainment targets (1999), the educational revolution (2000), and the National Bilingual Program (2004-2019). Also, the MEN renamed the Foreign Languages Competencies Development Program in 2012 to acknowledge Colombia's *de facto* bilingualism. However, the Colombian educational system at the primary level allows professionals to be trained in all areas and become responsible for teaching all subjects included in the curriculum. Therefore, in Colombia, the National Bilingualism Program points out that the training provided



becomes a means by which teachers develop their communicative skills in English and didactic strategies (Sierra, 2020), which demonstrates the importance and relevance of continuous training for language teachers in the country.

In the case of *normalistas*, Law 115 of 1994 challenged them to face the English teaching without the training. Consequently, based on the laws and rules issued, the EFL teaching practices have been transformed and conceived from a different perspective. Also, Torres (2019) suggested that new EFL teachers should be included in order to balance the external and internal factors that affect the Colombian EFL teaching practices incorporation and their implications. Besides, it is necessary to adapt theoretical perspectives and research approaches that help to understand the language as a subjective and biased construct, as well the culture to have decolonial EFL teaching practices, as stated by Fandiño (2021).

In terms of the rural areas in Colombia, EFL teaching is often taught by non-specialized teachers who may lack formal training in English language instruction. According to Rodríguez and Suárez (2020), these teachers face unique challenges when teaching English in rural contexts, such as limited access to resources, language barriers, and cultural differences between students and teachers; and, also, the local community should be considered when teaching. A study conducted by Cruz (2018) revealed four personal theories regarding teacher knowledge in EFL teaching: EFL teaching prayers, translanguaging, locally suited materials design, and multimodal literacy practices with students and teachers' resources. Some authors, such Ramos and Aguirre (2016), affirmed that some difficulties

encountered in EFL teaching in rural areas in Colombia are: “isolation, cultural adaptation, misconceptions that rural families have about education, motivation, infrastructure, and violence are some of the shortcomings which inhibit English teachers from working in rural areas” (p. 213).

### **Colombian Rural Education**

The National Administrative Department of Statistics [DANE] (as cited in Soler, 2016) defined rural education as the one that is guided in schools outside the municipal head. It should be noted that the education in Colombia has been issued as a constitutional right. Actually, education has been classified as formal, non-formal and informal, among others. In the same way, rural education has been ruled as:

*The national Government and the territorial entities will promote a peasant and rural education service which will especially include technical training in agricultural, livestock, fishing, forestry and agro-industrial activities that will contribute to improving the human, working and quality of life conditions of the inhabitants, farmers and increase food production in the country. (Law 115 of 1994, article 64)*

Likewise, models of rural education in Colombia are flexible, they are framed as new school, tele-secondary school, and post-elementary rural school (Galván, 2020). However, the rural context in Colombia has faced difficulties in terms of education. According to Ramírez et al. (2013, as cited in Martínez et al., 2016), only 32 % of men and 36 % of women in rural areas, between 18 and 24 years old, have finished high school or were enrolled in higher education by 2013 (p. 3).

However, the MEN has worked in the implementation of the rural education program in two phases: phase I (2002-2006) and phase II (2008-2015). Some of the good results identified include: the rural education investigations; the improvement of the professionalization of teachers and principals' model consolidation; the possibilities to access the education for a low percentage of rural students who enroll; and the education, support and consideration for some indigenous and afro communities in the construction and implementation of educational plans related to their lifestyles (Parra et al., 2018). Even the final agreement for the termination of the conflict and the construction of a stable and lasting peace in Colombia stated that rural education should:

*[...] Provide comprehensive early childhood care, guarantee the coverage, quality and relevance of education and eradicate illiteracy in rural areas, as well as promote the productive permanence of young people in the countryside, and bring regional academic institutions closer to the construction of rural development (Gobierno Nacional de Colombia, 2016, article 1.3.2.2)*

However, the difficulties in this regard have been presented and, nowadays, the rural educators face a lot of challenges to carry out their job. Therefore, a comparison by region was developed, it can order to see that the scores of rural institutions were below the national average, but higher in the cities. When it comes to the classification by sectors, it is found that jobs belonging to the formal sector received an average score of 8 points below the national average, and informal jobs got more than 30 points above the national average (MEN, 2022). Therefore, the Colombian government recognizes the quality of education between

rural and urban areas in a special plan for rural education. According to the DANE (2017), more than 80 % of the country's territory live in rural areas; and, in addition, this population lives in great poverty in terms of education, health, working life and housing conditions, and the lack of opportunities and government support make it difficult for hundreds of children and young people to learn and understand a new language, such as English (MEN, 2018).

Nevertheless, even though that the MEN (2001, as cited in Echavarría et al., 2019) proposed strategies to improve, in terms of education, the coverage, quality and relevance, as well as efficient and equitable protection of resources, there has not been an investment in infrastructure and teaching staff; therefore, one of the complaints is the lack of these aspects.

To emphasize academic scenarios in this context in Colombia, it is common to find rural areas with only one teacher per school who is responsible for teaching all courses at diverse levels, including English, with no suitable training (Buitrago, 2017). Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the MEN has issued different policies in order to improve the rural education, but the reality is that this matter has taken many years of implementation, and there have been some difficulties.

### **Research Design**

This study included a qualitative research that seeks to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it. According to Creswell and Creswell

(2017), qualitative research focuses on the "lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings of individuals in their natural settings" (p. 4). For that matter, this study was developed under a qualitative approach, since some *normalistas* shared their experiences and perspectives based on their natural setting; in this case, their job as educators. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, as cited in Aspers and Corte, 2019), "qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials –case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts– that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 142); and some of those materials were presented in this study, such as the life story, some interviews and personal experiences.

Additionally, this investigation was framed in a case study. According to Yin (2014) and Ridder (2017), a case study inquiry into a real-life or an in-depth contemporary phenomenon in an environmental context aims to report findings from individual cases or groups, problems, situations or events. Particularly, in this study, the approach is helpful, since this contributes to investigate the case of two *normalistas* in their EFL teaching performances and experiences in Colombian rural scenarios.

Therefore, the participants of this study are two *normalistas* educators. In order to keep the confidentiality, the first one was named as *normalista* A (NA) along the paper; this one is studying for a degree in Spanish Language and Humanities, and

she has nine years of experience as a *normalista*. She started by working in a multi-grade primary school in a village in Boyacá, where the nearest urban area was three hours from the school, approximately. On the other hand, *normalista* B (NB) is also studying for a degree in Basic Education with Emphasis on Mathematics, Spanish Language and Humanities. She has six years of experience as a *normalista* educator in the rural area, she works in a multi-grade school in Cundinamarca, and her school is 20 minutes from the nearest town by car. They were both informed about this study and they agreed to participate voluntarily; and, given the aforementioned, they also signed a consent form to authorize the use of the data gathered.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

The instruments used to collect data were an interview, a focus group and some real-life episodes. An interview is a widely used qualitative research method that involves a conversation between a researcher and a participant, according to Kvale and Brinkmann (2018), and the researcher asks open-ended questions to gather information about the participants' experiences, beliefs, attitudes and opinions about a specific topic in order to understand their behavior. According to Rubin and Babbie (2018), interviews can also help the researcher build a rapport and gain some of the participant's trust, leading to more honest and detailed responses. This was the purpose of this semi-structured interview with open and closed questions. Each interview consisted of nine questions that inquired about the

experience of teaching English in rural areas, the challenges faced, the teaching methods and strategies used, and the evaluation of students' progress.

In the same way, the real-life episodes were used in this study. This concept has been explored by several authors, such as Alea and Bluck (2018), who argue that these are important units of memory and play a critical role when shaping the way individuals understand and construct their life stories. This refers to the subjective experience of one's own life as a series of distinct episodes, each with a beginning, middle and end; and these are organized around a specific theme or event that, in this particular case study, are connected to the objective of the research. Besides, life episodes charts were designed based on the experiences of *normalistas* when teaching English in rural contexts in Colombia. Each episode consisted of questions that aimed to learn about their level of English proficiency, knowledge of language, certifications, experiences, achievements, resources, difficulties and benefits encountered in the field.

In addition, a focus group was applied. According to Morgan and Krueger (2018) and to Gundumogula and Gundumogula (2020), a focus group is an extended way of the interview method used to collect data in social researches that involves group in-depth interview discussions facilitated by a researcher. The group typically consists of individuals who share a common interest that is relevant to the research question in an organized and structured way. These people guide the design of the research question and become participants who conduct the sessions, in order to

analyze the data and topics explored. This focus group was conducted through the Zoom platform, and the open-ended questions were asked to collect information that would help to understand the problem statement. Therefore, the focus group used in this study consisted of 10 questions for each teacher to obtain a complete picture of their experience and perspectives.

After the instruments were applied, the grounded theory was used to analyze the data; that is a research method that implies an inductive approach to develop a theory from data. Although grounded theory has been widely used for qualitative research purposes through diverse techniques or methods, Vives and Hamui (2021) highlighted it is a way to understand and interpret data. In this case study, the grounded theory used a codification process that followed three steps: open, axial and selective codification. Likewise, Glasser and Strauss (1967, as cited in Vivar et al., 2010) stated that, in a way, the information gathered allowed the emerging of three core categories that explain the findings. These are shared in the next section.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Category 1: Teaching in Rural Contexts, Outlook and Experiences**

Teaching English in rural contexts faces many negative aspects, such as the lack of resources and limited connectivity. The exploration of *normalistas'* experiences, who teach English in the Colombian rural context, helped to collect different information regarding the understanding on how these educators have faced the



challenge of EFL teaching. When they were asked about their English knowledge, they stated:

*Initially it was obligatory because it was part of the school curriculum in high school, then in the educational practice as a teacher it became necessary to review and enlarge the knowledge of it. Because of my degree, as a requirement for graduation I need to certify B1 level, so it was necessary to take courses in order to meet this requirement. (NA, LifeEpis, May of 2023)<sup>1</sup> Some at school, some at university, and much more in practice as a teacher [...] I do not hold a certification. (NB, LifeEpis, May of 2023)*

The first point related to the English mastery of the language showed that the participants of this study were not trained in EFL teaching. Then, they just took some additional courses, but not as a professional training. Similarly, NA argued that, when studying their English, teachers focused on transcribing sentences, but the English skills were not developed, as they did not have any former practice with this subject. Meanwhile, NB said that they focus on just teaching vocabulary, because it was the head teacher's command in the practice. For that matter, at first, it was the way they were teaching English, because these were the methods they got. At the beginning, these educators were doing what they were told or taught; however, they needed to change their method and adapt it based on factors presented in the classes, such as students' ages and multi-grade factors. Nevertheless, their experiences in the aforementioned scenario were quite appealing: working with a rural school that most of time is multi-grade as well, teaching all subjects and, at the same time, teaching a subject in different grades.

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<sup>1</sup> LifeEpis: Life episode, Int: Interview, FG: Focus group

*It is complex because, in a classroom, there are students from different grade levels since they are in a multi-grade school, in my case, there are six grades I'm in charge, we have to adapt the work to the different needs, progress, experiences, knowledge that students have throughout each school year. (NA, Int, April of 2023)*

*It was too hard at the beginning, you know? In the rurality sometimes the students have problems because they don't even speak Spanish well, can you imagine how hard is it to teach English? Having six different courses in a classroom it complicated, at the end, we have to adapt different topics, strategies, learning styles to the students in the classroom. (NB, Int, April of 2023)*

The *normalistas* have to deal with the adaptation of methodology to teach different topics at the same time, because not all the learners in the classroom have to learn the same. Moreover, it is really hard when they need to teach a foreign language when students are still learning their mother tongue properly, so they feel like they are teaching two languages simultaneously.

On the other hand, it is known that the lack of resources in these schools is not something new, and it turns out to be a challenge for teachers; therefore, they have looked for different strategies to use in English classes to make them fun for their students. "Lack of material and resources, many things have had to come out of our own pockets to reach the student. There are institutions that are very much forgotten by the state" (NB, FG, 2023). These educators know that they need several resources to teach English in an assertive way; however, they must be creative to achieve the learning objectives, since the schools where they work sometimes do not have the minimum resources.

*We have to be recursive if option A does not work, we can use option B and C, unfortunately, we have not a lot of sources, I make use of the resources that the environment provides us with. (NA, Int, April of 2023)*

*Children in rural areas do not have access to technology [...], in addition to the lack of resources and aids that can facilitate the learning of English. Lack of internet connection, lack of technological devices and material that can support teaching practice. (NB, LifeEpis, May of 2023)*

The *normalistas* educators highlight a lot regarding the lack of physical resources at schools; and, even so, they have to create these materials to make their classes fun: if they did not, they would have to overcome this challenge differently.

*If we are going to work on parts of the house, we elaborate the house with the material we have surround, and we name its parts by labeling them in English, go out and observe and name animals and recognize them in a second language. Represent the silhouette of the body, identify the parts of the body, pasting it where it corresponds. (NA, FG, June of 2023)*

The *normalistas* have adapted an experiential teaching methodology in EFL because they argue that they have to use the sources they have to allow their students learn in that way, experiencing their own environment. Thus, these educators feel committed and enthusiastic about teaching English, and they feel challenged with this language, but the lack of connectivity often hinders innovation in the classroom, although in one of the schools there is internet availability already: “the internet has recently been installed in the population centers program, which helps support the process by using videos of songs, vocabulary, and simple videos in a second language, I do what I can” (NA, Int, April of 2023). The *normalistas'* experiences suggest that, although technology has advanced and it is nowadays important, in rural areas they do not have this benefit, and this often interferes when it comes to using new strategies to teach English, an essential language in the world. This, because they do not have enough knowledge to teach it as they would in high schools or in urban schools, where there is a specialized teacher to teach the language.

## Category 2: Challenges When There is no Training to Teach English

EFL teaching in rural areas has remarkable challenges, particularly for teachers who may not have received specialized training in this regard, and they sometimes feel frustrated, because it is not easy to get to a place where they do not have all the resources at hand and the distance from the schools can affect them emotionally as well.

Therefore, the main challenge that teachers have encountered is teaching the language in an improvised way, because they report not to have enough preparation to teach English as it might be done in urban areas. When they were asked how their teaching practices have changed since they started working until now, they said:

*Many times, it's the students and I creating our own world of knowledge, I say creating our own world because I am also learning something new, exploring new words in a language that I don't like, when I was a student I didn't care and now I have to teach something I never wanted to learn. (NB, LifeEpis, May of 2023)*

*English was not my core, so I have had to learn to be able to teach it, I took a course with an institute to enlarge my knowledge, at some point I joined to the extended days in English, I have paid courses, and learn by myself, using YouTube. (NA, Int, April of 2023)*

These educators are aware of the fact that they do their best to teach the target language, but their lack of preparation is another factor that hinders the process; they recognize that they do not have a degree in English and their knowledge is limited. However, and despite the fact that *normalistas* did not study to teach this language, they have had to take actions in order to overcome this gap of

knowledge. Then, the lack of interest on this language is something they have had to deal with, because they are told to teach this subject, as it is part of their job and they cannot just skip it. In turn, they have to face this challenge by studying. In addition to these difficulties, they try to do their best to make learning successful, but they feel that it is not enough. These educators have limitations with the language and this generates frustration, but they try to improve themselves to teach English classes in the best possible way:

*I am always afraid of making mistakes and not being able to answer questions from my students. Nowadays I am much more confident and what I don't know, well I am honest with them and tell them that I don't know, that we will investigate so that together we can learn. (NB, FG, June of 2023)*  
*I have not been able to overcome the lack of knowledge of English because I have not been able to train myself good enough as I should to teach English, it is known that in rural schools English is something very basic and for this reason [...] little by little as I am teaching and learning with them, and for them it is something evident that I do not know English as it would be expected. (NA, Int, April of 2023)*

Likewise, they recognize that English educators have more facilities in EFL teaching since they have been trained to do so:

*In the urban area they sometimes have a teacher with an English degree who can emphasize and deepen the pronunciation and writing, using correctly all the grammar, while in the rural area, they only have the experience and knowledge that the teacher has. (NB, FG, June of 2023)*

The *normalistas* mention the fact that there are some gaps in languages issues that make their job more difficult and they perceive it as their main challenge. Nevertheless, facing aforementioned challenges daily, they have found a way to overcome their limitations in terms of language proficiency:

*The groups are divided, the fourth and fifth graders are learning more vocabulary, asking questions, and dialogues, and when giving instructions in English they recognize what they are referring to. The second and third grades are reviewing and advancing in vocabulary, creating sentences, and simple presentations. Transition and first-grade advance acquiring and practicing vocabulary, colors, family, transportation, animals, greetings, commands, clothing [...] through pictures (they decorate them), videos, songs. (NA, Int, April of 2023)*

However, the only advantage found in this study is the pedagogy that these *normalistas* have to work with children; they are creative and look for ways to design dynamic classes, so that the little they know can be learned successfully, and they make up for the lack of good use of the language with fun classes.

### **Category 3: Impact on Rural Students**

The impact of teaching English to students in rural areas can be significant. English is the international language of business, education and culture, and learning English can give students in the rural context a competitive advantage in the global economy (Smith, 2020). Whereas the impact is measurable in scores or specific tests, in rural schools, the impact has a special meaning, since learners sometimes are taught by their families to work on the land and the rural activities, so English learning can be challenging from this perspective.

*Rural students are very grateful for the activities that are carried out or the material that is brought to them for classes, in this way it is a little easier to motivate them to learn English, for example, through videos, songs, rewards, they see that there is something from the rural areas else. (NB, Int, April of 2023)*

Although it can be something common to talk about motivation, it is not when they are told from a very early age that they need to make money. "People's thinking, education is not given much importance, since due to the mining issue they are

more focused on 'enguacarse', and getting money overnight" (NA, EpisLif, May of 2023). Therefore, motivating students to learn English is a valuable act, since they sometimes are raised to work, and not to study. Similarly, NA and NB expressed a deep sense of commitment to their students, as well as a desire to have a positive impact on their English language learning, so everything that they can do in order to make their students learn is important:

*I think what I have liked the most is being able to reach remote communities despite the roads, guiding learning processes. (NA, FG, June of 2023)  
Providing students with new ways to learn English, other than just writing and repeating words 5 or 6 times, carrying materials like stamps, is something new for them. (NB, LifeEpis, May of 2023)*

Likewise, these educators argue that there is a positive result for their students when these have to go to other schools; this, because they must put into practice what they have learned in primary school: "Some students continue their high school education in the town or go to other places and make use of what they have learned" (NB, FG, June of 2023). In rural areas, all of this effort that educators provide is meaningful for the context and the students:

*Three processes are evaluated: attitudinal, procedural, and cognitive. Taking into account the students' interest in a second language, the development of activities, in the cognitive part it can be oral or written and the knowledge on the subject that the student has managed to advance is recognized. (NA, Int, April of 2023)*

According to Misión Rural (2015, as cited in Lozano, 2019), by 2013, 15-or-more-year-old rural inhabitants had 5,5 years of education, and an illiteracy of 4,1 %, which implies that not all rural learners continue their studies or go to the universities; actually, only 5,1 % of 17-year-old rural learners reached a degree of

higher technical, technological or higher education by 2013 (National Planning Department, 2015, as cited in Lozano, 2019). Consequently, many of this population just received the education not only in English language, but in general, given by these educators. So, it can be affirmed that the job performed by them is quite valuable for this particular community, since this is the only education that some of them can receive in their lives. To demonstrate their achievements and good results, their job can be measured by simple but meaningful actions taken in this context:

*It is not as successful as we would like, but the little they learn they value it and practice it to be up to date compared to urban children. It is known that as teachers we must improve and prepare ourselves every day to undertake new methodologies for teaching English. (NB, Int, April of 2023)*

These *normalistas* argued that using strategies can be seen as basic in an English class; however, these are remarkable for both students and educators, since their limitations for teaching and learning are increasingly challenging. Besides, they recognize their effort is not enough, but everything they can give to the context is important. In short, all actions count positively.

## Conclusions

It should be highlighted that these *normalistas'* practices in EFL teaching are related specifically to what they were told or taught to do in the practice scenarios. Besides, as their major was not English, they did not have a suitable methodology to follow English lessons, especially considering the gap regarding their English knowledge. Also, their methods for English lessons have suffered some changes lately, as a result of factors such as the students' different ages in multi-grade schools, and the training they have



been taking. As a matter of fact, these *normalistas* have had to learn English by themselves, so they are able to face specific challenges that have their origin in rural areas: lack of sources and connectivity, and knowledge in the target language. Therefore, their EFL teaching practices have been modified as a consequence of the knowledge they have acquired in English. However, even when their knowledge in this regard is better than before, they expressed that it is not good enough yet to guide these classes properly as educators who have a degree in the target language. In that sense, their practices have improved, but the challenge is still shown in this context.

On the other hand, the only advantage for these *normalistas* is their pedagogy knowledge to work with children. Hence, these educators know that they can adapt these classes with fun activities to take advantage and engage the different actors in the learning process, in order to have successful classes. These educators have adapted their methodology to teach in an experimental way, yet they need to use the resources available, which implies to use their own environment. In short, it is a way to make up for the lack of resources in order to reach the learning objectives.

Another challenge identified in this study was the effort that *normalistas* have to do, since students' motivation is not the best, because of several reasons: the parents' perspective about life and an easy way to earn money, the students' personal background, and the way they are raised to face life. Motivation is key in this context, because the learning guided by *normalistas* is the only education that some rural learners might get in their lives, especially those who do not have the

opportunity to continue with their studies. The previous argument is based on the statistics, which show that there is still illiteracy in the rurality.

Finally, it can be affirmed that, even though, the MEN has issued different laws for rural education, there are still some gaps in said scenario. For instance, the gaps between the laws and the reality are something that these educators have been dealing with since forever. However, *normalistas* are striving by themselves to perform in the best way possible, because, although there are laws, these need to be put into practice, so that the English learning is not negatively affected.

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