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Coping with English Learning and Teaching Challenges in a Public Primary School

Afrontando los retos del aprendizaje y la enseñanza del idioma inglés en una escuela primaria pública

Original Research Article

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a biographical-narrative study, which shows how nineteen female preschool and primary teachers with the coordinator researcher of a public school located in southern of Bogotá, Colombia have experienced the teaching of English. Pair conversations were video recorded, transcribed, and converted into stories. Emotional and recurring narrated events were grouped and the interpretation focused on the stories' content. Findings revealed that we are afraid of teaching English, so, we either avoid or take charge of teaching English depending on the grade. We acknowledged our needs when teaching English; highlighted the profiles of English teachers; questioned state policies on methodologies; recognized the barrier posed by language proficiency exams to obtain a transfer or to continue our studies; and provided plan alternatives and teach English lessons. This study could broaden perspectives on English teaching in preschool and primary education of the public sector.

Keywords: personal epistemologies, public primary schools, teaching English to young learners.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los hallazgos de un estudio biográfico-narrativo, que muestra cómo diecinueve maestras de preescolar y primaria junto con la investigadora coordinadora de una escuela pública ubicada en el sur de Bogotá, Colombia, han experimentado la enseñanza del inglés. Las conversaciones en pareja fueron grabadas, transcritas y convertidas en historias. Se agruparon los eventos emotivos y recurrentes narrados; y la interpretación se centró en el contenido de las historias. Los resultados revelaron que tenemos miedo de enseñar inglés, por lo tanto, evitamos o nos hacemos cargo de enseñar inglés dependiendo del grado. Reconocimos nuestras necesidades al enseñar inglés; destacamos los perfiles de los profesores de inglés; cuestionamos las políticas de Estado en materia de metodologías; percibimos los exámenes de inglés como una barrera para traslados o para continuar nuestros estudios y ofrecimos alternativas para planificar e impartir clases de inglés. Este estudio podría ampliar las visiones sobre la enseñanza del inglés en la educación preescolar y primaria del sector público.

Palabras clave: epistemologías personales, educación pública, enseñanza del inglés a niños.

Introducción

In Colombia, kindergarten and elementary school teachers do not need to have a degree specifically for teaching English; however, they are required to teach this language. According to the Law of 1994, within article 23 (7), the teaching of a foreign language is mandatory in the country, and in 2013 the National Bilingual Law made English a compulsory subject in primary school. In contexts where I have worked, discussions about policies regarding English teaching, or the underlying ideas behind these policies are seldom initiated due to being considered taboo. Questioning policies or simply discussing them often triggers concerns associated with socialism or communism.

Moreover, during the process of profiling this area of study, I found that little has been said about public school teachers' perspectives on English language teaching even though most of them do not hold a professional degree in English language teaching. In contrast, I found that most studies focus on English at a higher level. Additionally, the research has been mostly based on what teachers know in terms of methodology and language in English, whether from a deficient perspective or from a training perspective aimed at fostering teachers' and students' language skills.

Finally, but no less important, we as teachers rarely discuss our emotions within our teaching scenarios, often relegating this dimension to the background. However, as Benesch (2007) points out "English language teaching connects affect and intellect, body and work, passion and rationality, and that it is intimately and intricately influenced by power relations" (p. 12). Consequently, it is paramount to engage in dialogue with kindergarten and primary school teachers of the school recover and comprehend our relationship with the English language in

terms of pedagogical strategies, challenges and coping mechanisms when teaching English in a public primary school where there is no licensed English teacher.

The teaching of English to children has spread throughout the world without much criticism or resistance, so creating spaces to talk about, reflect on, and share our stories regarding the English language in our personal, academic, and professional lives could make us aware of how English teaching works in this public primary school. Thus, I learn from, with, and among our stories about English language, its learning, and its teaching. As previously noted, there has been a limited discussion concerning the daily experiences of teachers at primary school while teaching English even though most of them are educated to teach children but lack formal qualifications as English language teachers. Thus, the general aim of this study was to co-narrate stories about English teaching to children in our public school. To achieve this purpose and supported by our stories, we explored our contexts to multi-signify English teaching; we mapped out our academic and professional trajectories in relation to English and its teaching; and we narrated together how we have coped with the teaching of this language at the school

Education has propagated the idea that the only valid knowledge regarding science and technology is rooted in Europe and the USA (Dussel, 2018; Maldonado Torres, 2007). Even more, Guerrero-Nieto and Quintero (2021) posit that "the adoption of neoliberal models in education are here to stay. Day by day, those discourses and practices become more and more naturalized which makes it harder to problematize" (p. 38). In other words, "neoliberalism has succeeded in colonizing the habitus of many people, including those of educators and educationalists" (Van der Walt, 2017, p. 6). These ideas marginalize the other as schools and universities promote beliefs in progress and the benefits of neoliberalism (Mignolo, 2014).

Moreover, the English language curriculum predominantly centers around the global north and inner circle countries such as the USA and Great Britain. Thus, the voices of those

who live English teaching in public schools are seen as subalterns. Spivak (2003) proposes that "the subject does not occupy a discursive position from where s/he can speak or respond to. […] Being silenced does not mean that s/he does not exist" (p. 298 – my translation). In contrast, we advocate for a paradigm shift where "love educates because when we love we welcome the other; we let her/him be, and we listen to what s/he says without denying the person with a prejudice, a supposition, or theory" (Maturana, 2017, 52', my translation). Therefore, the heart, brain, and spirit are complementary (Fals Borda, 2017; Guerrero Arias, 2010; Meyer, 2013). Consequently, Santos (2010) suggests a construction of epistemologies in constant growth, that is shared daily. Similarly, Ortiz -Ocaña´s (2017) perspectives advocate for research, life, and reflection as indivisible and revolve around the core of this study. Hence, "stories help us understand our commonalities and bonds with others as well as *our*[1]differences. Stories foster a sense of community" (Atkinson, 2002, p. 122). Accordingly, throughout this document, our voices are prominently represented. The quoted excerpts include our names or pseudonymous, allowing readers to cite them accordingly. We were also the first ones to know about the findings of this study (Rivas, 2019, p. 53 -my interpretation) as we actively participated in understanding our narratives.

In the following section, the path followed to understand our stories on how we have experienced the learning of English and how we have coped with the teaching of this language in our school is presented.

[1] I use the pronoun *we* in italics, and its possessive forms when referring to collaborators (19 teachers and I) in this research journey.

Methodology

Nineteen homeroom teachers from preschool and primary of the morning shift, and I have worked since 2012 in a public school with two branches, which are situated in two low-socio-economic-status neighborhoods of Ciudad Bolívar in the southern part of Bogotá, Colombia. I wrote individualized invitation letters to be part of this study and all of them accepted to accompany me (coordinator-researcher) in this fascinating and intricate journey to charting our personal, academic, and professional lives concerning English learning and teaching.

This is a biographical-narrative study (Benson, 2005; Bolívar, 2012; Corman, 2013; Rivas, J. I., Hernández, F., Sancho, J. M., Núñez, C., 2012; and Rivas, 2019), we conversed in pairs[2], through the Microsoft Teams conference tool because of the pandemic, and the agenda was arranged between September 2020 and November 2021. Conversations were recorded, transcribed, and transformed into twenty stories[3]. I decided to write stories based on our conversations because as Walsh (2017) points out "thinking comes from conversations and dialogues, […] writing the conversation makes it more alive, more human, and with more capacity to convene" (Walsh, 2017-my translation). Afterwards, we had lunch together in small groups, read our stories, and commented on them as a group. As Rivas et al. (2012) cogently put "It can be said that through research with life stories and narrative research, a public construction of knowledge takes place, from dialogue and intersubjective relationship" (p. 17). Each one of my companions read their own stories and provided feedback. Then, stories were compiled, and

[2] Our conversations were in Spanish. Hence, all the contributions are my translation. To keep the flow of the reading I will not use the phrase my translation next to excerpts of the stories.
[3] See annex 1 that contains our names, the title of each story with a brief description of its origin.

an edition process was followed until the book ¡El inglés entre nos…! - English among us! was published and launched in a special event to honor companions involved in this journey.

The title of each story compresses the most relevant event or idea concerning English, its learning, and its teaching. It can be said that through story writing the resulting texts became avenues of self-interpretation (Bolívar, 2012, p. 18). Primarily, the focus was on finding recurrent and emotive narrated events, which were impressive, memorable, and meaningful to us concerning English throughout phases of our lives, they were grouped and their contents were interpreted (Barkhuizen, 2011; Bolívar, 2012). Our stories are households of co-theorization, because when we co-narrated our stories, theories about the learning and teaching of English are situated within them, as suggested by Mignolo (2011, p. 251) who posited that "theories are where you can find them"; and Maturana's (2007) idea that everyone engages in theory creation as an expression of intelligence.

I want to conclude this section by emphasizing that this research approach embodies a de-colonial perspective towards doing research, because "decolonial thinking is not a method to apply but a way of being in and thinking about the world" (Mignolo, 2014, p. 62). Accordingly, I wrote invitations acknowledging the personas involved in the process, their knowledges, and experiences as significant assets in the construction of the research process. We met together as equals through conversations that provoke horizontal relationships, which tell us about the action of accompaniment and active listening (Rivas et al., 2012, p. 12). Even more, my companions have made it possible for the entire research process to be completed, because "Stories are our theories…stories are not separated from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimated sources of data and ways of being" (Brayboy, 2006, p. 430 as cited in Shirley & Angulo, 2019, p. 65). We shared pieces of our existence, which is why we can

appreciate our ways of being, knowing, and doing concerning English learning and teaching and mutually agreed on what we wanted to make public.

The following section presents the findings generated by the interaction with each story by constant reading to comprehend the hidden layers interwoven on what they portrayed about English learning and teaching,

Findings

This intricate path to uncover how we have coped with the learning and the teaching of English parallels the quest to explore the hypogea[4]. Each conversation was a step to access the hypogeum and our stories served as pictures to be interpreted alongside the multiplicity of knowledges, voices, and epistemologies converged in companions, researchers, theories, previous studies on the field, personal background, and tutors' advice.

The form of a hypogeum called our stories was used to present the findings where the conjunction of our learning and teaching paths create our epistemologies about how English is taught (see figure 1). This language has shaped our ways of knowing, being, and doing when playing our roles initially as English learners and subsequently as teachers in preschool and primary. On the one hand, when tracing back our trajectories as learners it was discovered that during primary school, having English classes was a privilege reserved for students attending private institutions; in high school, we resorted to cheating, studied diligently to pass or face remedial exams, memorized the conjugation of the verb 'to be', and engaged in arts and crafts. Some of us were not good at English, but others excelled and could get the monitor's place. On the other hand, as English teachers at school, we felt nervous, embarrassed, and incapable of

[4] The subterranean area in ancient buildings

learning; outside the classrooms, we felt powerless and fright. In our postgraduate pursuits, English became a requirement that posed a barrier if we wanted to continue studying with the government's support. Similarly, we have struggled to learn English, despite several language courses we have enrolled many of us felt there has not been any advance. Some of us pointed out that while English classes were enjoyable, tests often undermined the confidence and joy for learning that had been built in those classes. Thus, we have invested time and money in learning English aiming to make the dream of sounding like native speakers come true, though we have not achieved this goal yet.

Figure 1. Hypogeum of Our Stories: learning and employment trajectories that build epistemological paths.

There are three distinct moments in our employment trajectories: initially, some of us worked for simulated bilingual schools; in the second moment, class distribution at the smaller

school was based on informal agreements, while at the larger school, teachers' suggestions went often unheard; in the third moment, teaching English can be likened to the 'boogey man' who frights children. We fear mispronunciation, teaching mistakenly to pupils, and/or not being exemplary role models for our students. Most of us, have taught English lessons to preschoolers, first and second graders, but we have tended to avoid teaching this language to third, fourth, and fifth graders. Despite our fears, all of us have taken the responsibility, often construed as a burden, of teaching English. We have resorted to using strategies such as searching in Google, which is often considered the all-knowing saint; exploring YouTube videos; following our secondary school teachers' model; enrolling in language courses; studying autonomously with apps; and seeking assistance from friends.

Our ways of knowing, being, and doing when teaching English are conveyed in our epistemologies: The combination of our learning and teaching views with our personal experiences when facing English uncovered four key aspects about English teaching in our school. The first issue addresses our thoughts and feelings regarding what teachers, students, and ourselves need for effective language learning. It includes meaningful language practice, content creation and fostering interdependence in classes. The second element outlines teachers' profiles including their capacities to being motivators, who empower students to learn the language; experts in the language, who can effectively communicate and have been prepared to teach children. The third component corresponds to the uncertainties regarding English teaching methodologies. It underscores the potential to establish 'support' communities to learn and practice the language. Finally, the implementation of English teaching to children in public primary schools is critically examined, highlighting challenges such as unequal access to higher education opportunities, shortages of qualified English teachers, and the state's goal of fostering bilingual (Spanish/English) proficiency among students in our school. Finally, there are actions

we can implement to improve our teaching such as reviewing curricular units, designing lessons together, and creating meaningful spaces to practice listening and speaking skills in English.

.Discussion

We shared *our* academic and working trajectories in relation to English, its learning, and its teaching. This research journey explored *our* personal epistemologies concerning this language. The study revolved around real people living English teaching language in real classrooms with real students, where coloniality and neoliberalism have institutionalized teachers' subservience and homogenized knowledge. Acknowledging teachers' potential derived from their constructed knowledge implies that "Ways to know other-wise are present in our daily practices" Santos (2010, p. 56.-my translation). Thus, epistemological diversity is under permanent construction by the subjects who share their stories within their knowledge(s). Therefore, each of *us* is a "Valid interlocutor in the field of pedagogical knowledge" (Suárez, 2011, p. 399) as every teacher has something to say and share about pedagogy.

We aim to elucidate the hypogeum represented by *our* stories, because this metaphor illustrates how *our* open and confident conversations have shed light on the prodigious hypogeum of English teaching to kindergarten and primary school teachers at the school without a teacher with a formal degree in English teaching. *Our* stories require your interpretation, dear readers, as their significance is inherent upon the meanings you derive from them. The insights, feelings, thoughts, and interpretations drawn from *our* narratives are presented in three sections: our views as learners, as teachers, and as individuals.

From *Our* Views as Learners

Our stories reveal that most of *us* did not receive English classes during *our* childhood between the 1970s and early 1990s. Attending English classes was a privilege, typically accessible

only to children enrolled in private institutions. In other words, English classes became commodities to attract clients. Consequently, English language was almost nonexistent in the curricula of public primary schools at that time. In Emary's story, she emphasized the fact that she received English language classes only when she was a student in a private school.

> *In first grade, in the private school, I had an hour of English class: the teacher taught us to say the colors, and the numbers. I had a little book; I completed the exercises and colored drawings; the class was very didactic. […] In 1988, when I entered the District School, I did not have any English language classes, this disappeared. […] In 1993, my father did better financially and enrolled me to study fifth grade in the private school called Miguel Ángel which was near my home, and I had English classes again. (Emary, 2022, pp. 81-82).*

On the whole, English language class was not included formally in the schedule of public primary schools. Conversely, in private institutions, there was a dedicated time allocated for English classes for children in fifth grade. Thus, having English language lessons at primary school was a privilege. As referenced by Enever (2016, p. 355) receiving English classes was a signal of prestige to people. This led to politicians in India including this language in the curriculum making this school a commodity (Ordoñez 2004; Guerrero 2010; Enever, 2016; Ennser-Kananen et al., 2016). English was accessible primarily to wealthy families that could afford their children's tuition in private institutions. This situation appears in Bogotá as well, as seen in Emary's description of her education in private schools. Consequently, English was a privilege.

Moreover, Ordoñez (2004) enunciated that in Colombia "early bilingual education has been an urban, middle-class, private school phenomenon due to social and political pressure to access English partial immersion" (p. 450). Additionally, for most of *us,* teaching English to children lacked a clear reference as this language was not taught in *our* early years. English classes were advantages, commodities, and privileges that children who studied in private schools could have.

Between 1974 and 2001, spanning three decades, *we* pursued secondary education. Most of the activities *we* remember from learning English language in high school involved memorizing long lists of verbs, reciting short dialogues in front of the class, filling in blanks, and copying sentences from the board without understanding their meaning. Studying the conjugation of the verb "*to be"* was a tedious task, as encapsulated in Maru's story titled "*I was fed up with verb To Be*". This highlights how our English teachers predominantly focused on grammar, structural rules, verb list memorization, and especially the conjugation of the verb "to be.". While we often resorted to cheating, we also put in significant effort, studying hard and sometimes hiring private English tutors to help us pass remedial tests. However, there were insufficient opportunities to practice speaking, listening, and creative writing skills. In this regard, Díaz et al. (2023) reported that pre-service teachers during their practicum found

> *a noticeable gap shown by teachers was related to the traditional methodologies used by their mentors, which they echoed in their classrooms. At the beginning of their teaching practice, their classes emphasized learning grammatical structures and isolated vocabulary lists. At times, this focus lasted long until they realized the emphasis should be on communication (p.71).*

Some of *our* English teachers were memorable as they used popular songs with their lyrics into language teaching, promoted theater plays in English, and tailored their lesson plans to align with their students' interests. They also developed supplementary material such as primers, booklets, and word puzzles. For instance, Jeimmy's story called "*I imitated what I liked*" because she replicated her high school English language teacher's classes. Similarly, Maispin's first English lesson mirrored her own high school learning experience. These teachers not only incorporated elements of popular culture (Giroux & Simon, 1988) and the cultural world (Dussel, 2012) into their teaching but also engaged with their students' everyday lives. This is an excerpt of Patricia's story to illustrate:

> *When I was in tenth grade, our group had to perform based on the song 'Thriller'. A friend´s boyfriend spoke English well, so he created all the scripts for us. We danced, and dressed up; the play*

> *was recorded, it was impressive! I played the role of Michael Jackson's girlfriend! I had to talk a lot, I knew what I was saying; we rehearsed, and we practiced a lot, for two months. We did a great job and we got good marks in English class! (Rincón, 2022, p. 269)*

Claudia Patricia, Maispin, Rubiela, Sandra Milena, and Sandra Patricia had the impression that the English lessons during high school years had more practical applicability over the ones offered at the university. In other words, they all expressed a preference for their classes at secondary school over the ones at university. For instance, Rubiela's story is titled "*I have always managed my way around with no more than what I studied at the Normal school."* Additionally, Yami highlights the influential role of teachers in shaping classroom dynamics through their actions and behaviors, serving as role models for students and Caro further emphasizes that teachers can make their students love or hate a school subject.

Many of *us* studied the career that *our* families could afford, often opting for the most affordable options in the market, rather than *our* dreamed degree. Marketization of education was introduced in the education of future preschool teachers. Aura Aleida, Caro, Emary, Jeimmy, Jenny Viviana, Maispin, Marlen, Maru, and Nidia studied this career in private institutions. To finance *our* education, many of *us* worked while attending classes at night or through blended and distance learning formats. During this time, English did not hold a prominent role in undergraduate curricula; in some programs, it was offered as an elective rather than a mandatory subject required for graduation. Thus, English in *our* tertiary education was in the buds, this excerpt of Sandra's story illustrates:

> *At that time, English was not important, it was not a compulsory subject, it was an elective, and one selected what one wanted. One semester I chose English thinking: 'It is time to study some English because how are we going to teach a second language to children?' the classes were a reinforcement of what I had studied in school: the verbs, the verb TO BE, some conversation; although they were not that significant because I do not remember them. Later, when they did the new curricular project, I supposed they understood the importance of English for the education of the little ones and included English as a compulsory subject (Camargo, 2022, p. 261).*

Seventeen teachers involved in this research journey are employed under the regulations of Decree 1278 of 2002, to be promoted they must hold a master's or doctoral degree, their promotion is subject to budgetary availability. Most of *us* have enrolled in graduate studies to be better prepared to teach *our* pupils, be promoted, or increase *our* incomes. English has colonized graduate studies: Some of *us* had to study English as part of the program to get a degree as this was a compulsory subject. For others, achieving a certain score on an English placement test was required to access the master's program, and for some no English certification or coursework was necessary.

In the same train of thought, within the landscape of graduate studies, proficiency in English became a widespread requirement, prompting teachers to seek out programs that either waived this requirement or facilitated the acquisition of English certification. Five of *us* opted for a blended modality as the core of the master's, with face-to-face English classes scheduled Saturdays. Notably, neither the language course nor the English proficiency test fees were included in the standard tuition. This dynamic underscored how graduate education increasingly pressured educators to achieve at least a B1[5] level of English proficiency. The English language test, as a requirement to admit teachers for graduate courses, spurred teachers to carefully select universities that offered training, and 'guarantee' to finish their studies successfully. Sometimes, it implied sacrificing their preferred options or accommodate their teaching praxis according to

[5] *The Common European Framework for languages: learning, teaching, assessment*, determines six levels of proficiency in English language: A1 and A2 corresponds to basic user or basic level, B1 and B2 to independent user or intermediate level, and C1 and C2 to proficient user or advanced level.

students' needs. This strategic adaptation reflects a survival strategy: pursuing studies aligned with market demands to achieve personal objectives or waiting until finding a graduate program that does not require English certification. This is how neoliberalism has established in public schools and in teacher's quotidian lives (Maldonado Torres, 2007; Ennser-Kananen et al, 2017;Van der Walt, 2017; and Guerrero and Quintero, 2021). Consequently, passing an English language standardized test has been a significant obstacle that teachers must overcome to obtain their degrees, regardless of the time, money, effort, emotional investment, and personal sacrifices involved in this pursuit.

When prioritizing studies, Otilia discusses that English language is not a subject that she wants to prioritize as her commitments with students, school, and work are far more important than complying with a requisite to access to doctoral studies. Her narrative titled "*It was not possible right now either*" reflects her decision to give up the idea of enrolling in a doctoral program funded partially by the State as it is more significant what she could teach her students than investing.

From *Our* Views as Teachers

These findings are grounded in *our* stories regarding English teaching emphasizing in the period of time between 2012 and 2021 marking *our* collective journey since the moment *we* met together at UE School. To elucidate how meanings emerged from the stories about English teaching figure 2 was designed and named *our stories matter*. It symbolizes our ways of being, knowing, and doing: a heart represents our ways of being, a brain signifies our ways of knowing, and a mandala embodies our ways of doing. *Our* stories are told with these three components at the same time, because the heart, brain, and spirit are complementary (Fals Borda, 2017; Guerrero Arias 2010; Meyer, 2013). These three pieces intersect and each one has as its core *our* human essence represented within *our* stories.

Figure 2. Our stories matter.

Teaching English in kindergarten, first, and second grades is often perceived as a rather simple task, involving basic vocabulary lists and simple expressions for greetings and farewells. However, despite this approach, there is a lingering wondering whether these efforts may be sufficient. The dynamic changes drastically when faced with teaching English to third, fourth, and fifth graders. Many of *us*, including Emary as depicted in her story titled "*English is the boogeyman*," express fear and apprehension towards teaching English at these higher levels. This fear stems from concerns about inadequate language proficiency, the risk of making mistakes, damaging one's professional image, delivering ineffective lessons, or redundantly covering material already known to students and these concerns have resulting in the request for qualified English teachers in *our* school. Additionally, it was found that "low levels of confidence were detected among primary teachers about their readiness to teach English in primary schools in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan" (Butler, 2004 cited in Pinter, 2011, p. 148). This study shows how *we* try to overcome fears of facing ELT by enrolling in courses to learn English.

In navigating the challenges of teaching English, *we* have resorted to strategies such as exchanging classes with workmates to avoid teaching English. For instance, Caro preferred to relinquish math classes, which were her favorite ones, in exchange for avoiding her task of

teaching English to her students, which inspired the title of her story is "*Give me what you want, but English classes.*" In contrast, when teaching English teachers engage in finding strategies, materials, and assistance to plan classes. YouTube videos have emerged as a particularly valuable resource for creating interesting and informative classes. Claudia Patricia's story, titled "*On Holy Google, I look it up!"* illustrates this reliance on the internet to resolve pronunciation doubts and discover resources for preparing English lessons. Figure 3 corresponds to actions/doings when facing English teaching. Each box contains the ideas drawn from *our stories* accompanied by *our* names.

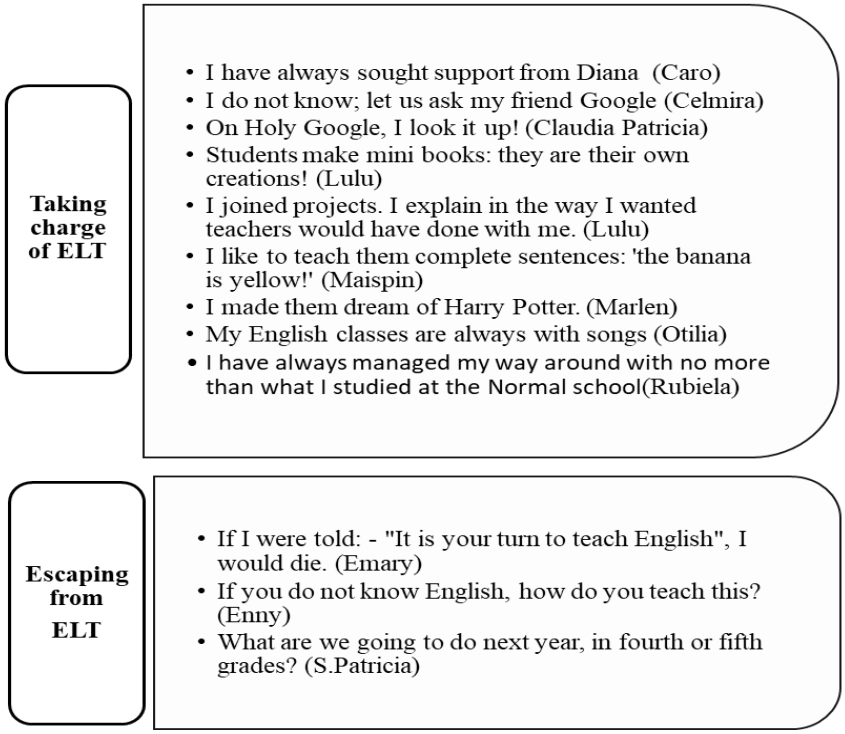

Figure 3. Actions when facing English Language Teaching.

Even among teachers who prefer to avoid teaching English but are assigned to do so with first and second graders, they acknowledge that teaching formulaic expressions and isolated words is not aligned with an effective language learning process. Teachers who take on the challenge of teaching English to third, fourth, and fifth graders often rely on resources like

YouTube and seek assistance from others for materials. They recognize their limitations while striving to do their best for their students. However, despite their efforts, the lack of opportunities to practice English in authentic communicative settings poses a significant challenge. For all of *us* practicing the language frequently is a key factor in the learning process.

The following excerpts illustrate some of the strategies used by Caro to cope with the teaching of English:

> *For the English class: I check the curricula, look for a support video, an activity that complements the content of the video, and then do a closing activity with the vocabulary we learned. I look on the Internet for activities that fit the program because at school there are not many English books and, in my house, either, ha, ha, ha. I find varied activities on the Internet. In class, the first thing I do is the dynamics of the greeting, and the introductory part, all in English. Then, I play the video […]*
>
> *I have always sought support from Diana to prepare for my English classes. She explains the resources of the British Council. That webpage is very advanced for me, she tells me what each activity is for, where there is material to print, and the videos with interactive activities. She designed some primers to teach English in primary school and gave me one for third grade and one for fourth grade, I share them with Lulu, and I have them in the school (Caro, 2022, pp. 46 - 48).*

In Marlen's story there is an example of how the classroom atmosphere can be changed to promote learning:

> *I know they like Harry Potter, so I told them we were going to see a Harry Potter movie in English for a period, every eight days. On the day of the movie, we were carrying popcorn; they had to copy what they could from the film, it had English subtitles, nothing in Spanish. If they did not finish it, I would allocate some time to the next class to understand because they had to tell me what had happened in that little piece (Galvis, 2022, p.182).*

Lulu puts her whole self into teaching (English in this case), combining both her knowledge as a teacher and her practical knowledge in the classes. She describes her practice stating that "*I try to make the whole course understand; […] I try to make everyone understand, if someone does not understand I call her/him and explain personally. I wish [teachers] had explained me like this!*" (Lulu, 2022, p.148) She recalls her high school experience to validate her current actions as a teacher.

Another practice when teaching English involved Otilia's emphasis on two main goals. On the one hand, she sought her pupils to enjoy singing a song and, on the other hand, that they could understand the main ideas present in the lyrics. She asserted:

> *It seems important to me that children conceive themselves as capable beings of learning other languages which is why my English classes are always with songs. I do not work on an English notebook and when I do activities in English, I do not work with isolated words, but I use songs. It works for me because children like this, sing, and they capture structures (Otilia, 2022, p. 244).*

Otilia uses songs to make students understand messages in English and to make easier the process of building up self-confidence on her students. At this stage of life feeling that one is capable to understand and to communicate in another language is essential in learning development.

Overall, English is perceived as boogeyman for some of *us* in the context of teaching this language. *We* experience anxiety about mispronouncing words, potentially harming pupils due to inaccurate pronunciation, and not being a teacher who has the enough knowledge or skills to teach one's students. While *we* take on the responsibility of teaching English in preschool, first, and second grades, many of *us* tend to avoid teaching this language in third, fourth, and fifth grades. This is due to *our* perception of lacking the necessary tools to offer quality education in this area, despite *our* studies and efforts to learn this language. Strategies to cope with the teaching of English deal with looking for ways to teach this language effectively what Cárdenas et al. (2010) call "professional knowledge which include personal epistemologies of teachers refers to all those personal theories defined as the beliefs, values, understandings, and assumptions that a teacher constructs and materializes in his/her pedagogical practice" (p. 59) combined with "body and emotional knowledge" (Castañeda-Londoño, 2023). In other words, *we* have constructed ways of being, knowing, and doing when playing the role of teachers of English.

From *Our* Views as Persons

Personal aspirations play a significant role in *our* lives, reflecting our spirits and ambitions. In *our* stories, aspirations such as speaking English fluently like a native speaker and understanding films are evident. In this sense, Jordao (2016) warned that English has become "the language of internationalization – it's in the papers, in academic research, on TV, in the social mind…. inescapable" (p. 191). For some of *us* being bilingual implies sounding like a native speaker, there is a prevailing sentiment that a good English language teacher must meet this standard, Gonzalez & Llurda (2016) disapproved the idea supported by the Colombian Ministry of Education that native speakers are "a quality factor that guarantees access to the

original or the best language and culture content for students; and […] a response to the alleged insufficient language proficiency of local Non-Native Speaker of English language teachers" (p.98).This aspiration has not been a feasible task in spite of efforts made, four stories explain this circumstance: Jenny Viviana's story titled "*I always wanted to be bilingual",* Maispin's "*I am not bilingual, and I believe that I will no longer be*", Marlen experience "*I studied bilingual secretarial, although I never learned to speak English*", and Yami's "*I have never felt English as my top skill!".*

When *we* need to use the language in contexts different from classrooms, *we* had the opportunity to reflect upon *our* process - what *we* really know about the language, and what *we* can use to be able to communicate or understand in real conversation with genuine objectives. Enny's story called "*I suffered my first anxiety attack with English*" vividly illustrates her stressful experience when attending a parents' meeting with her son and not understanding a word.

Personal epistemologies to teach English in *our* School

We are also uncertain about the most appropriate methodology to teach English. For instance, the role of translation in the classroom remains a debated topic. *We* Suggest creating a community focused on practicing speaking and listening from a sociocultural perspective outside the classroom setting.

> *We* are also concerned about *our* students' future, given their poor performance on State tests that assess English proficiency, because National standardized tests that include English language components pose challenges and disadvantages for students aspiring to enter public universities. It should be noted that since 2009, through Law 1324 and Decree 3963, all undergraduate students are required to do a national exam[6], which

[6] In Colombia, the National Institute for the Promotion of Higher Education (ICFES by its initials in Spanish) administers different tests to ensure the quality of education in the country. Students in universities must take the Saber *Pro* exam at the end of their education. The exam includes components of mathematical reasoning, text analysis, social sciences, and English.

includes an English proficiency test to get the degree. This requirement can perpetuate inequalities, particularly for students who lack access to resources or support for English language preparation. Moreover, the implementation of the Law of Bilingualism in public preschool and primary schools raises critical questions. *We* wonder about the incorporation of qualified teachers to implement the Law of Bilingualism in *our* public preschool and primary schools. Despite the advice of scholars who suggest "hiring English teachers who are professional qualified to teach in the elementary grades" (Clavijo, 2016, p. 7) the government has largely ignored these recommendations. As Bastidas and Muñoz (2011) note "the Minister of Education has refused to appoint qualified teachers to teach English in the Colombian elementary schools mainly for financial reasons" (p. 107). This situation persists despite the issuance of the Law of Education 115 (1994), the National Standards for English Learning (2006), and the Law of Bilingualism (2013), highlighting the lack of progress over the past three decades. Thus, this process of introspection has left *us* puzzled about the implementation of the law of bilingualism and the programs aiming at teaching English to preschoolers and elementary students at *our* school. *Our* narratives prompt significant questions and uncertainties about policy effectiveness and the resources needed to ensure equitable access and quality education for all students.

We propose the creation of spaces for English practice outside traditional classrooms. English clubs and similar community-based initiatives provide opportunities to learn the language within a sociocultural framework, where cultural diversity is valued, as advocated by Palermo (2015) and López Gopar (2014). Accordingly, the experience when learning the language and teachers' ways to be, to know and to do are keys to proposing other-wise, emergent, and located pedagogies.

Conclusions

The perspectives on English teaching within *our* school have been articulated through the voices of those involved. These narratives have provided a comprehensive and insightful

view of the experiences, sentiments, and reflections surrounding the practice of English language instruction.

Our diverse ways of being, thinking, and doing regarding English learning and teaching underscore the importance of meaningful practice, content creation, and establishing interdependent roles in the classroom for both students and teachers. *We* believe that the 'ideal' English language teacher for primary pupils should be a 'persona' who has the required qualifications in language, has passion for teaching young learners, and is capable of conveying this passion to students.

Combining *our* learning and teaching, it is evident that while learning English is not a priority for none of *us*, the lack of certification in this language has posed a barrier to pursuing further studies funded by the government in areas *we* believe would improve *our* teaching and benefit *our* students. *Our* teaching priorities are on reading and writing in Spanish, math, and coexistence. Thus, while English proficiency may not be *our* personal priority, we value its impact on our students' educational development and future opportunities

Ethical implications

Participants of this study signed consent forms (invitations).

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Conflicts of interest

I do not have any potential conflict of interest to declare

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Annex 1

Titles of *our* Stories	
Aura Aleida's story: *"That saved my homeland"* refers to friends' help during her learning of English process in an informal language program.	**María Emma's story**: *I never had to teach English* refers to the fact that she did not have to teach English, because she was the social studies teacher in private primary institutions where she worked.
Caro's story*: "Give me what you want, but English classes"* refers to a critical event at the beginning of her working trajectory at MC school, when she decided to exchanged her favorite Math lessons to avoid teaching English.	**Marlen's story**: *"I studied bilingual secretarial, although I never learned to speak English."* This title refers to her belief that in spite of her studies she cannot speak English.
Celmira's story: *"There comes 'whatywhere'"*. This is the English teacher's nickname at high school, because she taught the WH questions: What and Where.	**Maru's story**: *"I was fed up with the verb To Be!"* She studied the verb To Be every single class in high school. So, this was a boring activity.
Claudia Patricia's story: *"On Holy Google, I look it up!"* Searching on the Internet is one of the strategies that Claudia Patricia uses to prepare her English lessons.	**Nidia's story**: *"Bugs Bunny"* This refers to what she understood in her first English lesson in sixth grade.
Emary's story: *"English is the boogeyman."* She expressed along her story the fear she feels of teaching English.	**Otilia's story**: *"It was not possible right now either."* Talking about her doctoral studies and the requirement of studying English her conclusion was that at this stage of her life her priorities are focused on her role as a preschool teacher.
Enny's story: *"I suffered my first anxiety attack with English."* This refers to a familiar critical event when she could not understand important information in an American University where her son was going to study.	**Rubiela's story**: *"I have always managed my way around with no more than what I studied at the Normal School."* Rubiela thinks that the English she learned at the Normal school was enough to teach to their students in primary school.
Jeimmy's story: *"I imitated what I liked!"* This title refers to the fact that Jeimmy taught English in a private high school and her model was her teacher of English.	**Sandra Milena's story**: *"I had to teach English There!"* Sandra Milena´s first job at a public school was as an interim teacher of English.
Jenny Viviana's story: *"I always wanted to be bilingual."* She enrolled in courses of English, but she gave them up. So, she could not fulfill her dream of being bilingual.	**Sandra Patricia's story**: *"Neither forward nor backward."* She enrolled in many courses of English, but she could not see any advance.
Lulu's story*: "Teacher, English is part of the program".* This was one of the tasks that the school head mentioned to Lulu.	**Yami's story**: *"I have never felt English as my top skill!"* She has studied English in many places, but she feels that she is not good at speaking or listening in English.
Maispin's story: *"I am not bilingual, and I believe that I will no longer be."* She has studied English, but she feels she cannot speak in English fluently.	**My story**: *"I failed the year with you."* During my first year at school as a coordinator I could not share some tips for classes of English with my companions.