

English in the Dark. Learners, Parents, and Teachers' Perspectives of English Language Teaching and Learning in a Rural School in Boyacá

Inglés en la Oscuridad. Perspectivas de Estudiantes, Padres, Madres y Docentes Sobre la Enseñanza y Aprendizaje de Inglés en una Escuela Rural en Boyacá

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Abstract

This article reports on research conducted at a rural school located in Boyacá, Colombia, as part of an ethnographic exploration in which learners, parents, and teachers presented their perspectives about English Language Teacher/ Teaching (ELT) evolution, progress, and challenges within teaching and learning practices and community dynamics. Results offer a landscape of how English has been taught in a rural context, as well as the way English teaching and learning have changed in the last 60 years, concerning information access and institutional organization. The community acknowledges changes in terms of teachers' qualifications and didactic strategies; they also point to challenges regarding material and technological resources in rural contexts. The case of the rural school illustrates how ELT education has evolved in Colombia along an ever-changing/challenging trajectory in the territories.

Keywords: Education, English language learning, English Language Teacher/ Teaching, rural education

Resumen

Este artículo reporta una investigación que se desarrolló en una escuela rural en Boyacá- Colombia, como parte de una exploración etnográfica en la que estudiantes, madres, padres y docentes presentan sus perspectivas sobre la evolución, progreso y retos de la enseñanza y el ser docente de inglés en relación con prácticas de enseñanza y aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera y dinámicas propias de las comunidades. Los resultados ofrecen un panorama de la enseñanza del inglés en un contexto rural, y las formas en que su enseñanza y aprendizaje ha cambiado en relación con el acceso a las tecnologías de la información y la organización institucional. El caso de la escuela rural ilustra cómo ha evolucionado la enseñanza y docencia de inglés en Colombia, en medio de trayectorias dinámicas y retadoras en los territorios.

Palabras claves: Educación, aprendizaje del inglés, enseñanza de inglés, educación rural

Introduction

This paper details a research process conducted at a rural school located in the province of Ricaurte, Boyacá, Colombia. The focus of attention was learners, parents, and teachers' perspectives regarding their English Language experience during their school years. The information they provided, through group and individual interviews, pointed to the modification of the educational infrastructure in their rural areas throughout the last 60 years. Participants also related changing factors in the conditions to access information for educational purposes. The points this rural community highlighted draw a landscape of English Language Teaching/ Teachers (ELT) in Colombia in the middle of challenges associated with geographic location, economic and human resources for education.

A participant in the research process stated that learning in the 1970s and 1980s was like being in the dark, with no access to information and educational resources. Those two elements are less scarce today but still represent inequities and asymmetries in rural territories. Although there have been historical developments in terms of educational infrastructure and access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the rural areas, including artificial intelligence (AI), today English teaching and learning in Colombia experiences new challenges and conditions inherent to global and national dynamics. Consequently, the educational policies regarding the maintenance and adaptation of schools' infrastructure and their technological resources, including English materials that come to the rural learners' hands, have played a major role in their learning experience.

The ethnographic approach used in this research process generated several insights into students', parents', and teachers' perspectives when learning and teaching English in Colombia. The gathered and analyzed information portrayed how the process of being a child and learning in a rural country has been since the early implementations of ELT in an Andean South American country. Within a national framework, after the mid-1950s, Colombia implemented neoliberal developments that accentuated the division of urban and rural areas. Industrialization was an indicator of economic success and received the government's attention, increasing the contrasts between urban industrialized sectors and rural contexts. On the opposite side of industrialization, there was a population living in rural contexts where electric light, drinking water, and educational services were luxury resources.

Learner's conditions in rural areas mirror national tendencies in terms of historic economic, cultural, and educational policies and projects. In that regard, 'Learning in the Dark' portrays a rural community seeking knowledge and information while pursuing goals associated with being educated, having more opportunities, and pursuing a better lifestyle. Although challenging, rural and learning communities in Colombia are involved in educational processes, pursuing improvements for their lives. This includes learning a foreign language, such as English, and the possibilities it brings for social justice in education in rural contexts.

The following section refers to previous works and papers exploring ELT in Colombia and discusses relevant theoretical elements of ELT and rural education throughout history.

Theoretical Framework

There are several works exploring English Language Teaching and Learning in Colombia over the last 60 years. This section discusses the state of the art related to ELT and rural education. ELT in a country located in Latin America, such as Colombia, implied theoretical developments and field innovations in challenging contexts. English Teachers in Colombia have, historically, proposed ways to address language teaching and learning based on trending or traditional methods or approaches, and using adaptive abilities to transform, create, and propose innovative and contextualized elements for education.

Bastidas (2017), for instance, reflects upon the 2015 ASOCOPI (Asociación Colombiana de Profesores de Inglés) conference and half a century of history of ELT in Colombia. This author defined the historical studies in the field as scarce, nationally and internationally (Bastidas, 2017). The history of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in Colombia is connected to multiple elements such as national policies regarding learning and teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), instruction conducted by private and public organizations or institutions, teaching practices, and research in the discipline. ELT in Colombia, then, includes a broad sweep of actors such as policymakers, international and national public/private organizations, teachers, learners, and local communities.

Following the author, Durán Estupiñán (2024) presents a historical revision of ELT in Colombia, asserting that around the 1950s, English teaching emerged and initiated a path of consolidation in Colombia through institutions such as Fulbright, Instituto Colombo Americano, and ASOCOPI. Some research and academic discussions proposed and questioned elements associated with language, culture, interculturality, gender, and bilingualism. For instance, being bilingual in Colombia, according to national plans and policies, means proficiency in using, mainly, English as a foreign language, as stated by Guerrero (2008). Such a statement allowed a critical revision of the concept and its implications in a pluricultural and diverse country.

Within that perspective, the idea of bilingual education in Colombia omits other languages in the country and only focuses on English. A key idea about a bilingualism plan promoted by the government in Colombia is related to the prevalence of English as an alternative to Spanish, the official language (Guerrero, 2008). This assumption aids a symbolic power hegemony in favor of the English language and English language speakers in Colombia. Such tendencies promoted the development of public policies, plans, and organizations, as

well as academic and teaching discussions in a growing field of study in Colombia in the 20th and 21st centuries.

In Boyacá, works and authors in the field of language education included rurality as a research interest to contextualize teaching materials and practices. The attention of such papers connected rural education and ELT, focusing on intercultural understanding and cultural belonging after the implementation of contextualized curricular units (Ramos-Holguín et al., 2019), or materials development for enhancing EFL speaking skills (Ramos-Holguín et al., 2018).

Language teaching and learning occur amid social, cultural, political, and economic factors. Le Gal (2018), for instance, states that ELT includes not only pedagogic and technological activities but also interconnections of sociopolitical and sociocultural issues. The author expands on topics such as technologies and teacher certification in Colombia, according to the national government's policies and guidelines, and highlights a tendency towards "marketization" of education while implying the need for a bottom-up pedagogical approach focused on contextualized constructions regarding ELT (Le Gal, 2018).

In terms of general tendencies in ELT, universities and language teacher training centers produce academic and pedagogical developments in the field. Fandiño-Parra (2021) encapsulates works in ELT within sociocultural constructivism and reflective hermeneutics, and states that universities have produced projects that explore methodological approaches within phenomenological interpretivism and emancipatory social criticism. ELT research in Colombia innovates and connects to areas and disciplines that complement the understanding of language teaching and learning processes, contexts, and power relations.

Colonialism implicit in ELT is another discussion gaining space in research and academic communities. Fandiño-Parra (2021), Granados-Beltrán (2022), and Nuñez-Pardo (2022) address how ELT is a component of a sociocultural, economic, and political landscape where inequalities and forms of domination belong to global and local dynamics. Approaches such as this within the TESOL academics evidence a sweep in research interests that connects pedagogical to social, political, and humanistic considerations. ELT researchers positioned as decolonial authors are one face of an academic community reconstructing knowledge in the field.

ELT in Colombia is a political act immersed in complex social, cultural, and economic elements. In a dialogue with Canagarajah's (1999) statements, English offers possibilities to resist and construct contextualized practices benefiting communities. Resistance and local constructions of knowledge in rural contexts in the Global South face challenging conditions and barriers to access education and information on equal terms, compared to urban areas and other privileged locations. In this direction, Laboratorio de la Economía de la Educación (LEE) from Universidad Javeriana stated that rural contexts have fewer educational opportunities compared to their urban counterparts (LEE, 2023).

The report mentioned refers to a country in which 26,7% of the educational population lives in rural contexts. Rural areas are part of complex cultural, economic, political, and social dynamics. Educational practices are the result of the national and local interpretations of the above-mentioned elements. ELT for rural contexts is a field of opportunities to expand communities' knowledge and perspectives, and their historical transit amid international, national, and local conditions. In the following section, we present elements regarding research methodology, context, and participants belonging to a rural school located in Boyacá, Colombia.

Methodological Approach

This article reports a qualitative research process in which, with ethnographic elements, learners, parents, and teachers presented their perspectives regarding English language teaching and learning in a Colombian rural area. The participants were five adults between 25 and 70 years old, ten primary and secondary students between 8 and 16 years old, and two teachers between 40 and 50 years old. The research took place in a rural school located in Boyacá, Colombia. Boyacá has been labeled as one of the most rural regions in Colombia (Cataño, 2018). Within Boyacá, the delimitation of provinces is based on economic and sociocultural features and affinities in territories. The province where the school is located is named Ricaurte.

As researchers, the process included immersion in the community (Ocejo, 2018) and seeking dialogue and conversation about how people from the context experience or have experienced ELT education. Without seeking causality (Draper, 2015), the dialogues shed light on local dynamics sparked by the emergence of ELT in the rural community. Maintaining a historical line in the participants' interventions, group and individual interviews were the main instruments for data gathering. Knott et al. (2022) offered guidelines and considerations to plan and organize the interviews, which included the selection of the participants, the type of interview, and ways to maintain communication.

By conducting semi-structured interviews with five parents, ten students, and two teachers from a school located in the Ricaurte province in Boyacá, Colombia, the information about their experiences when teaching and learning in a rural context outlined two main constructs in coincident narrative lines. Those two elements are 1) the development of educational infrastructure in the rural context, which includes material and human resources in the specific area of study, and 2) the emergence and transformation of ICTs in the rural ELT experience. Within these two elements, in-depth discussions and components appear in the following section.

Data Analysis and Findings

The participants presented insightful perspectives about their learning experiences and the conditions under which schools worked in the last 60 years. The information outlines, mainly, two analysis categories. One relates to the development of educational infrastructure for rural areas and its impact on teaching and learning processes in rural contexts. The development of educational infrastructure implied the addition of human resources to lead English Language processes at a newly created rural secondary level. Additionally, the dynamics between urban and rural areas and the exponential development of ICTs permeate the experiences of rural learners to the extent of including the use of AI tools in the school's daily dynamics.

The coming titles expand on the participants' interventions, recreating the English Language Learning experience of parents and current students, as well as teachers' perspectives on the educational processes in their contexts. The first section presents a discussion related to being a student since the second half of the 20th century in Colombia, evidencing a conjunction between drive and the possibilities available in the context. Being in the dark did not imply the renunciation of participating in learning processes. Even immersed in difficult conditions, rural learners did experience and invest in their education and became agents of social transformation.

Being in the Dark. Learning English in a Rural Context

Pedro, an adult who studied at a rural school in the Ricaurte province in Boyacá, characterizes his context as distant and compares the lack of information to being in the dark. In his case, he studied in a rural primary school and later went to study secondary school in an urban school. Back then, there was no rural secondary school in his context, and that impacted his educational experience, as referred to in the following excerpt:

“Cuando yo perdí séptimo hicieron un paro indefinido y entonces yo vivía aquí en la vereda y muy distante, medios de comunicación eso era a ciegas, a gritos; ni a señas porque estábamos muy lejos. Entonces yo me iba los domingos por la tarde y al primer chino que me encontraba le decía bueno, ¿qué dijeron los profesores, que van a hacer clases? Si no, a oscuras. No recuerdo si ya había luz; No lo recuerdo; creo que no”.

[When I failed seventh grade, there was an indefinite strike, and back then, I lived here in the countryside, it was very distant, with no means of communication, it was like being blind, yelling, not a signal because we were far away. Then, on Sunday afternoon, I wandered and asked the first kid I found, well, what did teachers say about classes? If I did not do that, it was like being in the dark. I do not remember if we had electricity. I do not remember; I think we did not.] (Pedro, personal communication, June 12, 2024)

Because of how distant the urban school was, Pedro did not have information about classes or news about a teachers' strike happening at that time. In his intervention, he adds

the fact of not having electricity, even in the urban room his mother booked for him. A look back at the time when he studied at school contextualizes different conditions in terms of access to information and basic services. Those issues, according to Pedro, caused his failure in that year's course. From his perspective, studying during the seventies and eighties was difficult because of economic and material resources, as referenced in the following excerpt:

“El estudio era con las niñas. ¿Por qué lo hice yo? Porque pues me consideraba y me consideré que fui buen estudiante y quería ser diferente a los compañeros aquí en la vereda. ¿Por qué? Porque uno con el estudio es otra persona en la cual cambia. ¿Cambia por qué? Porque aprende uno la convivencia con los compañeros, pierde el miedo, pierde muchas cosas; tiene una oportunidad más adelante”.

[Studying was very difficult. Why did I do it? Because I considered myself a good student, and I wanted to be different from my partners here in the countryside. Why? Because you change when you study. Change how? Because you learn how to live with your partners, you lose fear, you lose a lot of things; you have an opportunity further.]
(Pedro, personal communication, June 12, 2024)

Pedro's desire to study, because he wanted to be different and better than other people living in the rural context, contrasts with an expression he uttered to imply the difficulties involved in studying under constraining conditions. Both elements add to a sense of self-image, a line of research explored by Ramos-Holguín et al. (2021). One of the restraining conditions is the absence of foreign language instruction in the rural context. García Botero and Reyes Galeano (2022) had similar considerations in other regions in Colombia when they state that teaching English in Quindío's region is scarce and “has reflected more flaws than advancements” (p. 51). Certainly, the coincidence describes conditions shared in different rural contexts and a general tendency of ELT in Colombia.

English was not included among the subjects taught. In this direction, Elsa, a woman from a rural context, references what she studied in the eighties and what she recalls about school dynamics:

“En primaria, le enseñaban a uno cinco materias que eran Ciencias Naturales, Sociales, Matemática y Español, Religión. Me iba bien, pues un poquito en el Español sí... pues no es tan difícil, pero creo en todas me iba bien. Le exigían a uno bastante. Uno aprendía mucho porque le exigían y le exigían a uno harto”.

[In primary school, they taught five subjects: Science, Social Sciences, Math, Spanish, and Religion. I did alright, a little bit in Spanish, yes... it is not that difficult, but I think I did well in all of them. It was very demanding. One learned a lot because it was very demanding.]

(Elsa, personal communication, June 12, 2024)

The participant mentions the five subjects she studied in primary school, including

Science, Social Science, Math, Spanish, and Religion. English was not part of the studied subjects. According to Guía 34 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2008), until

the mid-1980s, the educational system in Colombia was centered on the Ministerio de Educación Nacional's decisions. From this administrative national organization, elements such as curriculum, textbooks, topics, and programs were designed and implemented with a top-down perspective. Thus, national guidelines experienced problems in terms of local articulation in rural areas. As an example, in the participants' experience, more than forty years ago, English was not an area of exploration. In the studied rural context, foreign language instruction appeared with the addition of basic and middle school services.

That happened until 2009 when the Secretaría de Educación de Boyacá enabled the school to provide educational services for basic and middle school, as issued in the corresponding operating license. This is an example of how isolated rural centers of education merged into rural schools throughout decades and generations. The installation of a rural school that included English in the school curriculum transformed how the community moved in the territory and the experiences in a subject taught in the context for approximately 15 years. The development of school infrastructure for foreign language teaching shows the evolution and impact of efforts for gaining equity in the rural educational offer.

English, in this context, bridges the gap between the type of education in urban and rural schools. English language teaching, as well as other social sciences and humanities, appeared in the rural context to broaden the experience of education and to approach knowledge from other areas of study. Adding middle school instruction changed the dynamics of the context related to education access. Before that, the highest common grade was fifth. Elsa recalls that “back then, the person who completed fifth grade was uncommon. It was very advanced” (personal communication, June 12, 2024). Broadening the scope of the academic levels and including other middle school subjects, such as English, implies gaining opportunities within education and expanding academic and cultural opportunities for the rural educational community.

Having a dedicated English language teacher in the rural school helped to maintain and stabilize Foreign Language (FL) instruction in the context. In contrast, Elsa narrates her experience in a context where the rural educational infrastructure was not constant or stable:

“En ese tiempo todo era a pie, el que llegaba pues como que no le gustaba, de pronto venía por allá de la ciudad. No le gustaba el campo dictaba clases de 8 días, o sea se estaba la semana y decía que no, que él no volvía, que esperaran a que le enviaran a otro profesor. Y uno ahí espere, entonces finalmente pues no nos dictaron clase. Ese año pasaron muy pocos niños como de 40 y pico que éramos del curso, pasaron como 3 más”.

[At that time, everything was on foot; the teacher who arrived did not like it, maybe the person came from a city. He/she did not like the countryside, taught classes for eight days, stayed the week, and said no, that was not coming back. We had to wait for another teacher to be sent. And we, there, were waiting; in the end, we did not have classes. That year, very few children approved, 3 out of 40-something.]

(Elsa, June 12, personal communication, 2024)

The participant narrated how difficult it was to have a teacher in the context in 1981, and how the teaching and learning schedule was unstable. That situation caused the failure of most of the students and led them to repeat the same course the next year. In such conditions, even the lessons were not happening at the usual rate, compared to urban schools. In terms of ELT, learners in the studied rural context say that instruction in the foreign language did not exist, although conditions changed generationally, as referred to in the following excerpt:

“Ni siquiera lo básico de decir: buenos días, o gato, o perro, o lápiz. Que yo recuerdo que cuando ya estudió mi hermana la menor, a ella sí ya empezaban a enseñarle, por ejemplo, que lápiz, que cuaderno, que gato, que perro. Ella empezó en la primaria como en el 87, 88. Sí, pero entonces en ese tiempo sí ya empezaban a enseñarles como lo más, pues digamos que ya cuando ella estaba como en tercero, cuarto de primaria. O sea, como ya en el 90. Entonces ya les empezaron a decir que sí ya les empezaron a enseñar como palabras, digámoslo así. Pero como tal inglés no, a mí sí no me alcanzaron a enseñar nada”.

[Not even the basic vocabulary: good morning, or cat, dog, or pencil. I remember that when my younger sister studied, they started to teach her, for example, pencil, notebook, cat, and dog. She started primary school in 1987- 1988. Yes, but at that time, they started to teach them more, as when she was in third or fourth grade. In the 1990s. Then they started to teach them words, let's say it. But about English, they did not teach me a thing.]

(Elsa, personal communication, June 12, 2024)

The participant described English language learning processes that were different from her sister's. Elsa says she learned nothing when she studied in the late 1980s, whereas her younger sister had instruction related to English Language vocabulary. This contrast shows that ELT has evolved in the last 60 years in Colombia, mainly visible in an educational infrastructure aiming to bridge inequalities in the territories. Such evolution offered a more complete educational program that included English Language Teaching and Learning as a subject, enacting social justice in the territories.

Nevertheless, despite organizational efforts supported by the community and government policies, the development of an educational infrastructure that includes ELT still presents challenges in rural contexts. As mentioned by Ramos Holguín and Aguirre Morales (2016), one of those challenges is that English language teachers avoid working in rural schools; besides, teaching programs fail to insert pre-service teachers in a rural context education, and explore possibilities or advantages linked to an English Teaching position in a rural school.

This study describes a rural context that had two basic primary teachers in the central head office. Due to a low number of students, one of the teachers was removed. That implies a reduction of the educational infrastructure represented in the presence of teachers in the contexts. Rural schools and ELT undergo conditions of evolution and challenge at

the same time. Such scenery reflects social, cultural, and economic elements that affect the educational offer in rural schools. The described ELT historic evolution developed from being in the dark, having no teachers, electricity, and educational material; it then led towards more democratic access to information, not completely available and free in the rural context, and the addition of basic and middle school programs.

Those elements concur in a thriving and dynamic rural community more immersed in English language teaching and learning processes. The following section discusses the access and use of ICTs for ELT, including AI. Globalized technologies in rural schools represent another dichotomy of evolution and challenges for English language teaching and learning in Colombia. From electric light, booklets, and dictionaries to AI assistance in different tasks, rural communities explore, use, and transform their practices and experiences when learning in their context.

Luzia and AI. Access to ICTs in Rural Contexts

Currently, ELT in the rural context, even in the first years of basic education, faces new conditions associated with the use and access to ICT. About the presence, modifications, and evolution related to ELT in the rural context, a shift in foreign language teaching is evident in what primary teachers currently do. Illustrating this, teacher Arturo described the way he approaches English in multigrade classrooms:

“El inglés, por ejemplo, este año, lo que es tercero y cuarto trato de manejarle los mismos temas, ¿sí? Los unifico. Y a veces hay temas que son igual para todos. Pero entonces, la dificultad es diferente ¿sí? Entonces, es diferente. Entonces, pues ahorita sí gracias a Dios, a la tecnología hay videos, entonces manejo ahí el video beam”.

[English, for example, this year, for third and fourth grade, I try to work on the same topics. I unify them. Sometimes, topics are the same for everyone. But the difficulty level is different. It is different. Now, thanks to God, there is technology and videos. I use the video beam.]

(Arturo, personal communication, July 9, 2024)

The teacher implies English is being taught as part of a group of subjects. They include “all of them, the basics: Math, Spanish, Social Science, Biology, Technology, English, Religion, Ethics, Physical Education” (Arturo, personal communication, July 9, 2024). The strengthening of an educational infrastructure throughout time in Colombia includes teaching and learning practices incorporating the English language as a subject not only for basic secondary school but also for basic primary school. For basic primary school teachers in rural areas, who commonly have multigrade classrooms, English is not generally their area of specialization. Nevertheless, initiatives from Secretaría de Educación de Boyacá propose teacher development workshops. Teacher Arturo highlights the material he received and the experience of having support and being able to share with colleagues:

“El último que estuve que fue antes de pandemia, bueno. Una experiencia muy bonita y aprende uno muchas cosas. Uno eso, de los grupos, por ejemplo, ahí fue donde empecé a interactuar con esos grupos de trabajo donde comparten. Inclusive hacían como los jueves era, en la tarde, hacían un meet. Y uno compartía, bueno cómo le fue con tal actividad. Nos dejaban unas actividades a realizar y uno tenía que compartir con los compañeros [...] Y tantas cosas que uno aprendió ahí. Por ahí todavía tengo material”.

[The last one I attended was before the pandemic, good. It is a nice experience, and you learn a lot. That is one thing, about the groups, for instance, it was there where I started to interact with those work groups, where they shared. They even had a meeting on Thursday afternoon. There, you shared how you did with the activity. They assigned activities to do, and you had to share with your partners [...], and so many things I learned there. I still have material.]

(Arturo, personal communication, July 9, 2024)

Instances for teachers’ training and quality access to ICTs and teaching material are some of the recommendations arising in the participants’ statements:

“De pronto sí hace falta aquí, la otra vez yo le decía al rector, material manipulable en el aula. Y eso se puede adquirir por el CONPES, pero entonces no sé... Fichas, eso hay bastante material. Yo creo que más que todo fichas, así material manipulable. Eso hay como bingos. En las instituciones tienen bingos de inglés... bueno. Hay bastante material bueno para trabajar. De pronto si allí mejorar lo de un televisor, algo así, que hace falta en el aula”.

[Maybe what is missing here, I told the principal, is handouts for the classroom. And you can acquire that through CONPES, but I do not know. Cards, there is a lot of material. I think that most of all, cards are a material that can be used with your hands. Bingos. Schools have English bingos... well. There is a lot of good material to work with. Maybe a TV set, something like that, things that are not in the classroom.]

(Arturo, personal communication, July 9, 2024)

Currently, learning English involves the use of technological devices. For instance, Angélica, a student who underwent all the different learning stages in the rural educational system, got to the University and brought her teachers’ advice: “I remember my university teacher said: No, start with Duolingo. She told me to start with Duolingo because I was lost. Believe me, English is very difficult for me. I mean, a lot” (Angélica, personal communication, June 14, 2024). On her way through the different stages of education, she acknowledges it is a subject that has not been easy for her. At the university, her teacher’s advice was to use Duolingo, an app focused on languages, vocabulary, and oral and written production.

The contrast of the material suggested to Angélica at the university and the one she remembers from her school reveals a change, as she mentions in the following excerpt:

“Yo me acuerdo, en ese tiempo, nos ponían, eran cartillas. Estaba como el desafío, creo que era, que eran matemáticas. Había inglés, en la Santillana había inglés. Pero pues no era así como tan... Habían [sic] como cuentos en inglés y así cosas, pero profundo, profundo, no me acuerdo bien”.

[I remember, back then, they gave us booklets. There was a challenge, I think, in Math. There was English in Santillana, there was English. But it was not that... there were like tales in English and things like that, but in-depth, I do not recall well.]
(Angélica, personal communication, June 14, 2024)

While Duolingo was one of the alternatives proposed by the university teacher, Angélica used booklets at school and remembered seeing some storybooks. The change in the way to access the English language resides in a shift towards using phone apps and spending more time learning through a screen device. In a rural context where information access, including contact with the English language, was through the teacher, booklets, and other members of the community or students, the use of technological devices presents a new set of practices and a turn towards ICTs, even in rural contexts where connectivity has not developed greatly.

In this line, Angélica remembers her experience in the English classroom where board and notebook use prevailed during the lessons: “Everything was on the board and things we did on the notebooks, exercises. She asked us to go to the board. Or we had to learn things in English and go to the front of the class” (Angélica, personal communication, June 14, 2024). Now, her son, a five-year-old boy studying in a rural school, has experienced English differently. She describes how YouTube videos impacted his language development, in which the English language played a major role:

“Cuando él nació, a mí me recomendaron unos muñequitos que se llaman Dave y Ava. Están en español y están en inglés. Pues yo se los colocaba y la mayoría se reproducían era en inglés. Casi todos cantan canciones en inglés. Él empezó a hablar hace muy poquito, como a los cuatro años y medio. Pues normalmente uno le habla en español. Y él decía palabras en inglés. Por ejemplo, él no decía sí, sino ye, ye. O sea, cosas así. Cosas, palabras. Palabras la mayoría en inglés?”.

[When he was born, people recommended some cartoons named Dave and Ava. You find them in Spanish and English. I watched the cartoons, and most of them were in English. He recently started to talk when he was four and a half years old. Normally, one speaks Spanish to him. And he said words in English. For example, he did not say “sí” but ye, ye. I mean, things like that. Things, words. Mostly English words.]

(Angélica, personal communication, June 14, 2024)

English learning in Colombia evolved throughout generations. The recent COVID-19 pandemic impacted the need and use of screen devices to communicate and participate in the educational system, even in rural contexts. In the following excerpt, a 12-year-old student presents the way the pandemic introduced him to AI as a tool to complete activities while studying from home. He narrates when he started using AI apps for his school assignments:

“Cuando hubo la pandemia. Porque era virtual las clases. Entonces como ninguno tenía un celular así táctil, mi papá me compró uno. Empecé desde tercero a utilizar. Como en Naturales y Matemáticas más, y en Inglés también.”

Yo, en este momento estoy utilizando totalmente casi la que sale con Zapia. Aunque a veces, otras veces utilizo Google, porque no me da las respuestas que no tiene”.

[During the pandemic. Because classes were online. So, as no one had a touch-screen phone, my father bought me one. I started to use it from third grade on. In Science and Math, and in English too. At this moment, I am using exclusively the one that comes with Zapia. Sometimes I use Google because it provides answers Zapia does not have.]

(Gustavo, personal communication, July 18, 2024)

About the way students learned about AI chats and apps, Lorenzo, also a 12-year-old rural student, states that it was through TikTok, a video social network, that he learned about AI engines: “ChatGPT, AI apps. Several such as Zapia, Luzia, Pi. Because they help me with school assignments, it is better. Gemini. I learned about them through TikTok” (Lorenzo, personal communication, July 18, 2024). Students are making more constant use of AI as a tool in their learning processes compared to an increase in the same direction by teachers. Teaching practice by a current teacher reflects the use of technology and his perceptions towards ELT materials for a group of rural students:

“Pues aborita sí, gracias a Dios, a la tecnología. Hay videos, entonces manejo ahí el video y se le ponen los videos, canciones. Y mucho material que baja uno de internet. Sopas de letras, cuadros mágicos. Bueno, tantas cosas que consigue uno en la red. Pues uno siempre guiándose por el plan de estudio. De acuerdo al tema”.

[Now, thanks to God and technology. There are videos, I work with the videos, I play videos, and songs. And there is a lot of material you can download from the internet. Crossword puzzles, magic boards. Well, there are a lot of things you can find on the net. Always guiding oneself according to the study plan. According to the topic.]

(Arturo, personal communication, July 9, 2024)

While the participant teacher states that he makes use of technology to plan and work during classes, there are some constraints related to the rural area where the school is located. The teacher argues about difficulties in establishing an internet connection inside the school. The strategy he uses is to previously download the material at his house, “you must download it at home. And then you bring that already downloaded because here, sadly, the internet connection is not good. So, it is better to prevent it and not to cry later over it” (Arturo, personal communication, July 9, 2024). ELT in a rural context presents challenges to access technologies, although currently there are more devices.

A discussion regarding the use of technological devices, ICTs, and AI in ELT rural education raises the question of purpose and pedagogical implementations. The participant teacher states that using WhatsApp to maintain communication with students and parents facilitates the work. Tech devices help to share material with vocabulary and to prepare events such as the School’s English Day, as mentioned in the following excerpt:

“Por ejemplo, los chiquitines de primerito, les va muy bien. Hay unos pues más avanzados porque dicen que allá en la casa les ponen que en el celular, que aprenderse los nombres de los animales, de los colores. Con los mismos juegos que les bajan en las aplicaciones del celular. Entonces pues más bien les va como bien en Inglés. Los grandecitos a veces sí traen, pero aborita los que tengo, por ahí los de cuarto. El año pasado que tenía quinto ellos casi todos traían su celular, y también eso me facilitaba. Porque yo les compartía en WhatsApp entonces los videos, las canciones, entonces las cogían rápido. El año pasado hicimos lo del English Day con la profe que estaba antes y por ejemplo se aprendieron la canción fue por eso”.

[For instance, the little ones in primary school do very well. Some are advanced because they use cell phones at home to learn the names of animals and colors. With the games, they download them to the phone apps, too. So, they do well in English. The big ones sometimes bring their phones, the ones I have in fourth grade. Last year, in fifth grade, they all brought their phones, and that made the work easier. I shared videos and songs through WhatsApp, and they learned fast. Last year, for the English day with the previous teacher, they learned the song because of that.]

(Arturo, personal communication, July 9, 2024)

The discussion about ways to use ICTs and AI in ELT, especially in rural contexts, is still a possible line for future research initiatives. For now, the participant teacher perceives that technology generates parents' involvement in their children's learning practices and improves English learning. In this direction, he made a call for parents' more active role in the rural school educational process, as mentioned in the following excerpt:

“Comprometer a los padres de familia. Que se hagan activos en la enseñanza y aprendizaje de los niños. Y pues por ejemplo eso, mucho utilizando los celulares, tecnología. Y lo que decimos, en el medio ya aborita esto es muy fácil bajar un video, un tema relacionado con inglés, ¿sí? Para que lo practiquen”.

[Trying to involve parents. Make them more active in their children's teaching and learning processes. And that, using phones, technology. And what we say, in our context now, it is very easy to download a video on an English-related topic. For students to practice it.]

(Arturo, personal communication, June 17, 2024)

Globalized technologies appear in rural contexts to be part of the educational offer and foreign language teaching and learning practices. Screen devices and internet access represent a variation of technologies and experiences in rural contexts. In a transition where the absence of English teachers and materials was the common point, now global social networks, ICTs, and AI are part of learners' knowledge and communication practices. Still immersed in challenging conditions where even basic public services are not constant, the internet is part of a new way to approach ELT in Colombia, even in rural contexts. Next, we present the conclusions related to these aspects and to the historical development of an educational infrastructure that includes English Language Teaching and Learning.

Conclusions

In the last 60 years, ELT in Colombia has experienced changes and adaptations enacted by public and private organizations, teachers, and learners. The partial development of educational infrastructure has brought human and material resources to the context. Regarding rural education, the development rate is not the same as compared of urban schools. Rural contexts went from having scarce or non-existent materials/teachers to facing the incursion of technologies and screen devices in daily school activities. The educational community adapted the available resources and persisted in participating in EFL teaching and learning processes.

ELT has been part of progressive expansions of the educational offer in the Colombian territory. Experiencing English Language Teaching and Learning in rural contexts implied both a connection to global sociocultural/political conditions and more equal access to education. In such a complex scenery, English represents the presence of a Global North interpreted from local perspectives. Rural communities and rural education are part of national and international dynamics since ELT represents an evolution of educational infrastructures and technological developments in the 20th and 21st centuries. Additionally, English Language instruction in Colombia portrays the available resources in the contexts and the ways communities use them.

Currently, the development of ELT outlines several steps towards equity in the educational offer and information access in rural contexts. Colombia, being a rural country located in Latin America, gained reach in terms of the organization of a national educational system with equal conditions across the territories. Nevertheless, historical asymmetries in diverse and pluricultural territories present contexts where ELT and general education need more support to bridge social and economic gaps. The support mentioned should foster the same lines presented in this article: educational infrastructure that includes material and human resources for the contexts and access to information and communication technologies, even in places that are distant from urban areas.

Some future research could reflect the ways AI is being used in rural contexts/multigrade classes and how it is aiding or affecting English Language Learning. Some other considerations could include connections or disconnections between AI and critical thinking/literacy, gender issues, and interculturality. In terms of the educational infrastructure, some further analysis could consider the quality and conditions of rural education and how communities construct, adapt, and question the provided educational services.

Finally, in the research reported in this text, the participation of the community and their perspectives illustrated a context built of life stories, experiences, and forms of resisting violent conditions. Rural learners and schools have faced difficult challenges transitioning

from having no or little access to information and education in their contexts to building an educational infrastructure that includes ELT. Although the English Language has been addressed mostly in its grammar and vocabulary dimensions, it represents possibilities and tools for Colombians to participate in a national and global dialogue.

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