

Review of English Teaching in Rural Areas in Colombia: Challenges, Setbacks, and Lessons Learned

Revisión de la Enseñanza del Inglés en Zonas Rurales de Colombia: Retos, Retrocesos y Lecciones Aprendidas

Yamith José Fandiño Parra¹

Andrea Muñoz Barriga²

Sandra Patricia Barbosa Hernández³

Universidad de La Salle, Bogotá, Colombia

¹ He is a Ph.D. candidate who works at the school of educational sciences at La Salle University in Bogotá, Colombia. He has more than 20 years of teaching experience at language centers and universities, with an interest in decolonial studies, teacher education, and language policy. yfandino@unisalle.edu.co
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5567-5465>

² She is a Ph.D. who works at the school of educational sciences at La Salle University in Bogotá, Colombia. She has more than 20 years of teaching experience at Colombian universities, with an interest in interculturality, teacher education, and language teaching. amunoz@unisalle.edu.co
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0275-6528>

³ She is a Ph.D. student who works at the school of educational sciences at La Salle University in Bogotá, Colombia. She has more than 20 years of experience at language institutions and universities, with an interest in ICT, teacher education, and language instruction. sabarbosa@unisalle.edu.co
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0892-5329>

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of English teaching in rural areas in Colombia. Drawing on insights gleaned from scholarly literature, it will critically examine the transformative journey of English teaching and learning in these regions. The initial discussion will delve into a historical overview of rural education and the teaching of English in rural areas. The discussion seeks to identify how educational policies and classroom practices have evolved concerning working with foreign languages in Colombian rural areas. This will, then, be followed by an analysis of the current challenges and opportunities of English teaching in educational institutions based on a review of recent academic studies. This review aims to provide a set of theoretical and methodological findings learned by Colombian foreign language teachers when investigating educational policies and language programs in rural areas. Finally, the paper proposes plurilingualism, interculturality, and situated teaching and learning based on service to the community as frameworks to transform and improve the teaching of English in rural schools.

Keywords: English as a foreign language, rural education, language instruction, language policy

Resumen

Este artículo explora la evolución de la enseñanza del inglés en zonas rurales de Colombia. Basándose en los conocimientos obtenidos de la literatura académica, examinará críticamente el viaje transformador de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés en estas zonas. La discusión inicial profundizará en una reseña histórica de la educación rural y la enseñanza del inglés en áreas rurales. En este apartado se busca identificar cómo han evolucionado las políticas educativas y las prácticas de aula en relación con el trabajo con lenguas extranjeras en las zonas rurales colombianas. A continuación, se analizarán los retos y oportunidades actuales de la enseñanza del inglés en esas instituciones educativas, a partir de una revisión de estudios académicos recientes. Esta revisión busca proporcionar un conjunto de hallazgos teóricos y metodológicos aprendidos por los profesores colombianos de inglés como lengua extranjera al investigar las políticas educativas y los programas de lenguas en las zonas rurales. Finalmente, el artículo propone el plurilingüismo, la interculturalidad, la enseñanza situada y el aprendizaje basado en el servicio a la comunidad como marcos para transformar y mejorar la enseñanza del inglés en las escuelas rurales.

Palabras clave: inglés como lengua extranjera, educación rural, enseñanza de idiomas, política lingüística

Introduction

On the international scene, the field of English teaching has evolved significantly, adopting pedagogical approaches that, among other things, emphasize new literacies and multimodality to recognize the diversity of forms of communication in the digital age (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012). In this context, international organizations such as the Council of Europe and the British Council have promoted teaching practices with a shift towards more interactive and student-centered teaching methods, which aligned themselves with Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theories, Byram's (1997) model of intercultural communicative competence, and Kumaravadivelu's (2006) postmethod condition.

In terms of methodological advances, tools such as mobile applications, online platforms, and augmented reality resources have been increasingly used, allowing for more personalized and autonomous learning. These technological innovations are combined with methodological approaches such as Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL), which focuses on using language to perform meaningful and relevant tasks for learners (Ellis, 2003); Problem-Based Language Learning (PBL), which “incorporates social, cognitive and professional development of a learner through the projects, collaboration, motivation, and learner autonomy” (Mouni, 2022, p. 92), and Content Integrated Language Learning (CLIL), which is assumed as a dual-focused educational approach in which two languages are used for the learning and teaching of both content and language (Coyle et al., 2010).

In the Colombian context, language policies have influenced discourses and practices of English as a foreign language (EFL). These policies have strived to improve the English proficiency of Colombian students to align with the demands of the global market (Ministerio de Educación Nacional - MEN, 2014). However, their implementation has faced significant challenges, especially in remote and low-income regions, where access to resources and teacher education is limited.

In terms of education programs, Colombia has seen an increase in the undergraduate and graduate offerings. These programs have proposed guidelines and documents to enable teachers to face the challenges of growingly diverse classrooms, promoting strategies that favor meaningful learning and critical thinking (Cisneros-Estupiñán & Mahecha, 2020; Fandiño & Bermúdez, 2016). In addition, the influence of decolonial theories (Mignolo, 2000), critical theories (Norton & Toohey, 2004), and post-structuralism (Norton & Morgan, 2013) have also begun to impact the mission and vision of English language programs in Colombia, particularly in the schools of education of public universities.

Now, despite the apparent advances in ELT and EFL, this paper argues that English teaching in rural areas of Colombia is an issue that requires academic attention. Concretely, this paper delves into discussing the challenges, setbacks, and lessons learned in English teaching in Colombian rural areas because of the profound contextual inequalities and cultural particularities that characterize our country. These inequalities and particularities make it imperative for the Colombian ELT academia to go beyond implementing curricular guidelines and following study plans aligned with international frameworks. Instead, this academia should commit to modifying and transforming guidelines and plans, so they are more apt for the local realities, situated practices, and sociocultural dynamics of rural schools and communities. The next section, aligned with the HOW's special issue's aim on the evolution of Colombian ELT over the past 60 years, offers a historical review of rural education and the TEFL in Colombia to comprehensively document its transformation.

Evolution of Rural Education and TEFL in Rural Areas in Colombia

Studying the evolution of rural education and TEFL in Colombia is essential to understanding the historical and sociocultural challenges facing the country in the field of language education. Rural education, often neglected in national policies, has been a battleground for reducing the educational gap between urban and rural areas, which still faces significant challenges in terms of coverage, quality, and inclusion (ColombiaAprende, 2022). In this context, the TEFL becomes relevant, as it is a key competence in a globalized world that promotes social mobility and access to employment and academic opportunities (de Mejía, 2004).

Rural Education in Colombia

Rural education in Colombia refers to the teaching and learning processes that take place in the country's rural areas, which are characterized by low population density, geographical dispersion, and the predominance of primary economic activities. In other words, rural education in Colombia deals with the educational processes that take place in areas where agricultural, livestock, and forestry activities predominate. Carrero and González (2016) argues that rural education has historically sought to adapt to the characteristics and needs of these communities, which differ significantly from urban communities in terms of geography, access to services, and cultural and economic dynamics.

During the colonial period, education was virtually nonexistent in rural Colombia. The Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church concentrated their educational efforts in the major cities and the formation of local elites. As Helg (1987) points out, rural education during the colonial period was limited to basic religious instruction given by doctrinal priests during their sporadic visits to indigenous and peasant communities. Accordingly, rural areas received little attention, and their education was limited to evangelization and the teaching of basic trades (Castro-Gómez, 2010).

With the independence and the establishment of the republic, the first attempts to create a national education system began. The Organic Decree of Public Instruction of 1870 marked a milestone in the attempt to formalize education in Colombia by establishing rural schools, although many lacked resources and qualified personnel (Vélez, 1988). Despite this attempt at formalization, rural education was restricted as educational policies were scarce and unsuccessful. According to Jaramillo Uribe (1980), during much of the nineteenth century, rural education was characterized by its precariousness and the lack of a coherent policy on the part of the state. For their part, Ramírez and Téllez (2006) argue that the educational

reforms implemented during the nineteenth century produced only marginal effects in rural contexts, largely because of scarce resources and opposition from conservative groups.

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that specific projects aimed at improving the coverage and quality of education in rural areas began to be implemented. Thus, the twentieth century brought the first significant steps for the implementation of rural education in Colombia. For example, Decree 1522 of 1958 sought to strengthen rural education through the creation of specific programs by promoting technical and agricultural education (MEN, 1994). For Correa Pérez and Pereira Burgos (2023), the creation of the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform and programs such as the Basic Rural Education were attempts to adapt the curriculum to rural realities, but the lack of political continuity and funding hindered these efforts.

The introduction of the Escuela Nueva model in 1975 was an important advance in rural education. According to Colbert (2006), Escuela Nueva was developed as a pedagogical approach to address long-standing challenges in Colombia's rural education system, including high rates of absenteeism and school dropout, as well as consistently low levels of educational quality. This model aims to improve the quality and relevance of education in rural areas so that it can be adapted to the needs of children and their communities (Colbert & Mogollón, 2003). Among other features, Escuela Nueva is characterized by (a) multigrades, in which a single teacher attends several classes simultaneously, particularly useful in rural schools with few students; (b) adaptive curriculum, in which learning guides and activities are designed to allow students to progress at their own pace according to local characteristics; and (c) active learning, which encourages students to learn by doing, investigating and collaborating, with the participation of their communities.

For its part, Law 115 of 1994 (General Education Law) marks a turning point in the educational system as well as in Colombia's rural education policy. Perfetti (2003) explains that Law 115 marked a significant shift by formally acknowledging the particular conditions of rural education and by requiring that curricular designs be adjusted to respond to the social, cultural, and educational realities of rural contexts. Among other things, the law points to (a) the recognition of the specificity of rural education, since Article 64 establishes that a rural educational service should be promoted, subject to the respective development plans; (b) teacher education that prepares professionals capable of diagnosing, analyzing, evaluating, and innovating practices and processes under the realities of rural areas; and (c) curricular flexibility that allows for the adaptation of content and activities concerning the needs and interests of the rural environment.

Since the end of the 20th century and especially in the 21st century, there have been significant advances in the implementation of rural education. One of these advances was the National Rural Education Policy of the Ministry of National Education, which sought

to improve rural education’s coverage, quality, and relevance (MEN, 2002). In 2009, the MEN launched the Rural Education Program (PER, by its Spanish acronym) with the purpose of increasing educational coverage and strengthening the quality of preschool, primary, and secondary education in rural and geographically isolated contexts (MEN, 2012). A special plan for rural education was developed within the framework of the 2016 Peace Agreement. According to MEN (2018b), this plan seeks to bridge the rural-urban divide and promote inclusive rural development and peacebuilding.

In terms of challenges, Millán-Torres and Montoya-Jiménez (2020) claim that rural education in Colombia faces multiple difficulties, including a lack of adequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, limited access to technological resources, and problems adapting the curriculum to local needs (Mismatch between national standards and local realities, sociolinguistic and cultural barriers, and limited resources and teacher education). Geographic dispersion and armed conflict have exacerbated these challenges and hindered equitable access to education (Galvis, 2021). Table 1 summarizes these challenges from the voices of Colombian authors.

Table 1. Challenges of Rural Education in Colombia

Challenges	Authors
Infrastructure	The Ministry of National Education (2018b) acknowledges that insufficient and unstable educational infrastructure in numerous rural regions remains a significant barrier to the effective realization of the right to education.
Teacher Education	According to Ávila (2017), the absence of teacher training programs specifically designed for rural contexts negatively affects the quality of education in these areas
Digital Divide	Rodríguez et al. (2007) argue that limited access to information and communication technologies in rural contexts contributes to the widening of educational disparities between rural and urban areas
Lack of Curricular Adaptation	Perea and Mora-Delgado (2023) contend that the inflexibility of curricula in Colombian rural education goes beyond limiting students’ learning opportunities, as it also undermines the value of rural cultures and encourages migration to urban areas. From this perspective, a curriculum that is responsive to rural contexts is positioned as a key strategy for fostering rural development and sustaining local identities.

Source: Own work.

Regarding opportunities, there are also significant possibilities for developing rural education. Decentralization and educational autonomy policies make it possible to adapt educational strategies to the specificities of each region. According to Ramos Holguín et al. (2012), effective implementation of policies hinges on local endorsement. To achieve this, communities must be thoroughly informed about the English programs, fostering widespread support. Teachers are critical agents in ensuring these policies are effectively adapted to the needs within the community. In addition, the incorporation of digital technologies and the promotion of teacher education programs for rural areas open new opportunities to improve the quality of education (MEN, 2018a). Initiatives such as “Luces para Aprender” and digital literacy programs have shown promising progress in the last decade (Organization of Ibero-American States -Organización de Estados Iberoamericanos -OEI, 2021). Table 2 presents several opportunities suggested by Colombian authors.

Table 2. Opportunities of Rural Education in Colombia

Opportunities	Authors
Articulation with Rural Development	Perfetti (2003) argues that rural education has the potential to foster local development when it is meaningfully aligned with the productive capacities and cultural resources of each region.
Peacebuilding	The Ministry of National Education (2018a) emphasizes that rural education is essential for fostering peacebuilding and reconciliation processes in territories that have been most affected by the armed conflict.
Pedagogical Innovation	Colbert (2006) maintains that adaptable educational approaches, such as Escuela Nueva, reveal how pedagogical innovation can emerge in response to the particular demands of rural educational settings.
Incorporation and Dissemination of ICT	According to Hernández et al. (2014), the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in rural education in Colombia can help address geographical isolation by broadening access to educational resources and contributing to improvements in teaching quality. In this sense, ICTs create opportunities such as access to digital materials, interaction with experts and other educational institutions, greater flexibility in educational provision, and the development of distance-based teacher training initiatives.

Source: Own work.

TEFL in Rural Areas in Colombia

The TEFL in Colombia has undergone a complex and heterogeneous evolution, especially in rural areas, where educational and linguistic policies and curricular programs

have been influenced by the historical and socio-political dynamics of each period. During the colonial period, education focused on basic skills, and the learning of foreign languages was not considered. In this context, English teaching in Colombia was practically nonexistent. In fact, foreign languages, especially English, were perceived as a threat to the hegemony of the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church. In this regard, Ordóñez (2011) explains that during the colonial period education in New Granada was largely controlled by religious orders and oriented toward evangelization, with instruction centered on Spanish for Indigenous populations; consequently, foreign languages such as English were absent from the curriculum, particularly in rural contexts. For her part, García Sánchez (2005) maintains that during the colonial period, education was characterized by elitist and restrictive practices that hindered the inclusion of languages beyond Spanish and Latin.

The period of independence marked the beginning of significant changes in Colombia's educational policy, although these changes were slow to reach rural areas. There was an incipient opening to the teaching of foreign languages, driven by the interest in establishing diplomatic and commercial relations with English-speaking countries. However, rural areas continued to lag in terms of access to education. According to Safford (2014), the period following independence was marked by a renewed interest in foreign languages—particularly English and French—because they were seen as gateways to scientific knowledge and Enlightenment thought; however, this interest was largely limited to urban elites.

The consolidation of the Republic brought with it greater concern for educational modernization. During this period, reforms were implemented to strengthen public education. The emphasis was on strengthening Spanish as the national language, with little attention paid to the teaching of other languages in rural areas. As a result, access to foreign language instruction remained limited to the cities and the elite. As stated by Pérez (2019), education in rural areas during the nineteenth century was marked by limited resources and a shortage of qualified teachers, conditions that largely prevented the inclusion of foreign language instruction in these contexts. Subsequently, during the Republic and the nineteenth century, the TEFL in rural areas was reduced to a few private schools or foreign missions.

During the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, there has been a growing interest in teaching English, largely because of globalization policies and the influence of international organizations such as the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In rural areas, however, progress has been restricted. The National Bilingualism Program attempted to promote the teaching of English throughout the country, but the disparities between urban and rural areas remained significant. As Cárdenas and Miranda (2014) point out, while the National Bilingualism Program has marked progress in encouraging the teaching of English, its execution in public as well as in rural contexts has been constrained by limited resources, a shortage of qualified teachers, and challenges related to accessibility.

In 1994, the General Education Law made English compulsory in primary and secondary education, but practice in rural areas has lagged in urban areas. This means that official primary and secondary curricula include English as part of the curriculum, but in rural areas, the effective implementation of these programs has been limited by the lack of infrastructure and teacher education. Usma Wilches (2009) argues that the General Education Law enacted in 1994 represented a turning point in Colombian education by mandating the teaching of a foreign language from basic education onward and, together with later initiatives such as the National Bilingualism Program, sought to extend English language instruction across the entire national territory, including rural areas. For their part, Gallego-Tavera et al. (2020) argue that the implementation of the English curriculum in rural contexts is constrained by structural conditions, particularly insufficient infrastructure and the limited availability of teachers with specialized training.

The National English Program 2015-2025 has attempted to address structural factors, with mixed results. In this respect, Bonilla and Cruz-Arcila (2014) contend that, notwithstanding the implementation of national language policies, English teaching in rural areas remains constrained by persistent challenges, including shortages of qualified teachers, limited educational resources, and minimal exposure to English beyond the classroom context. For their part, Roldán and Peláez (2017) argue that, despite some advances, there remains a considerable disparity between urban and rural contexts regarding both the quality of English instruction and access to it.

To conclude this section, we highlight that a historical overview of the evolution of rural education and TEFL in Colombia emphasizes the significant challenges faced by rural areas, including a lack of infrastructure, inadequate teacher training, and curricular adaptation, which are particularly exacerbated by geographical and socioeconomic barriers. Amid these challenges, the Escuela Nueva model, General Education Law, and the National Bilingualism Program have been attempting to improve education quality in rural areas. However, disparities between urban and rural education persist. English teaching, though prioritized in recent policies, still encounters difficulties in rural areas due to resource shortages and a lack of trained teachers. Nevertheless, opportunities such as virtual learning and cultural preservation through English offer potential for improvement. The next section of this paper discusses the current state of TEFL in rural areas in Colombia.

Current State and Criticism of TEFL in Rural Areas in Colombia

In 2024, Duran Estupiñán provides a comprehensive analysis of the development of English language teaching in Colombia from a historical, theoretical, and practical perspective. The author analyzes the ways in which educational policies and curricular reforms have

shaped the teaching of English over time, arguing that in Colombia this field has largely been guided by an instrumental orientation aligned with political and economic objectives. For Duran Estupiñán, this approach has led to the adoption of methodologies that prioritize memorization and mechanical learning, often to the detriment of the development of authentic communicative competencies.

In terms of practical implications, Duran Estupiñán (2024) explores how contemporary learning theories have begun to influence English teaching in the country, particularly in the context of public education. She underscores the need for a more critical and reflective orientation to English language teaching, arguing that meaningful learning depends on the integration of intercultural perspectives and the contextualization of curricular content in relation to local realities. In addition, she discusses examples of innovative practices implemented in some rural areas of Colombia, such as the integration of community projects and the use of digital resources.

Similarly, Murcia-Yalí (2024) explores the challenges facing English teaching in rural schools in Colombia. The author identifies several key obstacles, including a shortage of trained teachers, a lack of educational resources, and adverse socioeconomic conditions that limit access to quality education. According to Murcia-Yalí, continuous teacher training is essential to ensure that teaching methodologies respond appropriately to the specific conditions of rural contexts. In addition, he stresses the importance of adapting national curricula to make them more inclusive and relevant to rural realities, suggesting that these should incorporate local cultural elements and native languages.

For their part, García and Reyes (2022) present a complex and challenging picture of English teaching in rural Colombian schools. The authors highlight the disparity in educational quality between urban and rural areas, evidencing a series of obstacles that limit access to quality language education in rural contexts. Among these obstacles are the shortage of trained teachers, insufficient or inadequate teaching resources, and deficient educational infrastructure. However, García and Reyes (2022) emphasize that, although recent progress, it seems that insufficient specialized teacher training constitutes one of the main obstacles to the effective implementation of pedagogical practices in rural schools. This lack of specialized teachers translates into difficulties in designing and implementing activities and materials that promote the development of communicative competence tailored to the needs and interests of rural communities.

Despite this adverse scenario, García and Reyes (2022) also point out the existence of significant opportunities for improving English teaching in these regions. These include using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), implementing active methodologies, and collaboration with educational institutions and local communities. Besides, they claim

that, with adequate investment in teacher education and the development of contextualized teaching materials, it is possible to transform the reality of English teaching in rural Colombia.

Likewise, Monroy-Ramírez and Patiño-Agudelo (2022) offer a critical analysis of the implementation of public policies and methodologies for English teaching in rural Colombian education. Among other things, the authors point out that the effectiveness of language education policies in rural contexts is limited by insufficient infrastructure and the limited availability of didactic resources specifically designed for English teaching. In addition, they discuss the methodological adaptations that various teachers have made to address these challenges, such as the use of community activities and the integration of local culture into English lessons. Monroy-Ramírez and Patiño-Agudelo conclude by indicating that the success of English teaching in rural areas depends largely on teachers' ability to adapt educational policies and innovate their teaching practices to their local realities.

In opposition to the previous authors, Alonso et al. (2022) present a critical analysis of the implementation of English teaching in Colombian rural schools. They mention the case of teachers who do not have the necessary training to teach a foreign language and are forced to improvise activities. They also call attention to the lack of adequate teaching materials and students' difficulties accessing technological resources to facilitate English learning.

More specifically, Alonso et al. (2022) question the relevance of prioritizing a foreign language in contexts where students' basic needs, such as access to teaching materials, adequate infrastructure, and trained teachers, are not met. They argue that, in many cases, English teaching becomes a symbolic project that does not respond to the realities and needs of rural communities. Concretely, they point out that the enforcement of a standardized, English-focused curriculum overlooks local knowledge and contextual specificities, leading to a gap between school practices and students' everyday lived experiences.

In a similar vein, Sánchez Vargas (2022) examines the specific conditions and challenges faced by teachers and students in the process of teaching and learning English in rural areas. She argues that limited access to material and technological resources, together with inadequate specialized teacher training, significantly influences the quality of English language teaching in these regions. In addition, she highlights the disparity between educational policies designed at the national level and local realities, resulting in ineffective implementation of English programs in rural schools. She, then, maintains that the lack of access to technologies and libraries limits the opportunities for rural students to practice and improve their English skills.

In 2017, Roldán and Peláez analyze the relevance of English teaching policies in a rural area of Colombia to unveil the tensions between national educational policies and local needs. They maintain that English language teaching policies are largely shaped by urban-centered assumptions and therefore tend to overlook the cultural, economic, and

geographical particularities of rural contexts. In many cases, rural teachers lack the training and resources necessary to implement these policies effectively, leading to English language instruction that is perceived as irrelevant to students. For example, the authors mention the lack of contextualized teaching materials and the inadequacy of curricular content for the rural setting.

As stated above, rural areas in Colombia face numerous difficulties in English teaching, including a lack of access to technology, a lack of trained teachers, and distance from urban centers, which hinders ongoing teacher training. In addition, English teaching in rural areas is often limited by socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and limited access to educational resources (Ortíz García & Contreras Pinilla). More specifically, it is possible to state that the main difficulties are:

1. Lack of qualified teachers in rural areas.
2. Limited infrastructure and technological resources.
3. Low exposure to English outside the school context.
4. Mismatch between standardized curricula and rural realities.
5. Lack of continuity in educational policies.

That said, it is important to note that, in terms of opportunities, there has been an increase in virtual and distance learning initiatives in recent years, which opens the possibility of bringing resources and training to rural areas. In addition, the resilience and desire to excel of rural students are aspects that can be leveraged to promote English language learning. National and local programs have begun to implement strategies to improve access and quality of English language instruction in rural areas (Velasquez, 2020). The main opportunities of TEFL in Colombian rural areas are:

6. Strengthening cultural identity through linguistic contrast.
7. Possibility of preserving and promoting local cultures through English.
8. Implementation of innovative methods adapted to the rural context.
9. Access to global education and employment opportunities.
10. Potential for the development of rural tourism and ecotourism.

As a conclusion of this section, we can affirm that a critical overview of the current state of English teaching in rural areas of Colombia highlights several challenges, including a lack of qualified teachers, inadequate educational resources, and the disconnect between national curricula and local rural realities. Colombian authors have critiqued the instrumental approach to English teaching, which often prioritizes political and economic goals over

authentic communicative skills. To overcome such approach, some have proposed adapting methodologies to include intercultural and community-based elements, integrating local cultures and languages into the curriculum. Colombian authors have also discussed opportunities for improvement, such as the use of ICTs and innovative, contextualized teaching practices. Nonetheless, for these opportunities to become a reality, there is a need for more focused public policies and teacher education programs that respond to the specific needs of rural areas to reduce the gap between urban and rural education. The next section develops these claims.

Pathways to Improvement for TEFL in Rural Areas in Colombia

As discussed above, teaching English in rural areas of Colombia has historically been challenging due to structural inequalities in resources, infrastructure, and teacher training. However, there are opportunities for improvement if more targeted public policies are implemented and teacher education programs are designed to address the specific needs of these regions. In this context, we suggest that education policies promote plurilingualism and interculturality, while teacher education programs focus on situated teaching and community-based service learning.

Plurilingualism and interculturality are fundamental pillars for meaningful English teaching in rural areas of Colombia. The former term is defined by Byram et al. (2013) as “the capacity to successively acquire and use different competences in different languages, at different levels of proficiency, and for different functions” (p. 3), whereas the latter is understood by Duque Salazar et al. (2024) as “a cornerstone in creating a pluralistic environment that promotes understanding, knowledge exchange, empathy, and integration among individuals” (p. 200). Based on this, public policies must move away from homogeneous approaches, focused exclusively on English, and promote the coexistence and valorization of local languages with English. From this perspective, Velásquez (2020) argues that the imposition of a standardized, English-centered curriculum overlooks local knowledge and contextual particularities, resulting in a disconnection between schooling processes and students’ everyday lives. To address this disconnection, public policies must allow for the adaptation of curricula to the plurilingual realities of rural areas, recognizing and strengthening indigenous and local languages, while teaching English as a tool for global access.

In addition, interculturality must be a central axis in educational policies since it promotes respect and integration of the cultural knowledge of rural communities in the educational process. According to Durán Estupiñán (2024), meaningful learning depends on incorporating intercultural perspectives and adapting educational content to learners’ local contexts. Including the cultural heritage of rural communities in English teaching facilitates

language acquisition and promotes a sense of identity and belonging in students. In this way, education policies must be designed to be flexible and adaptable, allowing rural schools to incorporate intercultural and plurilingual approaches that respond to local needs and realities.

In this way, public policies aimed at improving the teaching of English in rural areas must recognize and value Colombia's plurilingual and intercultural contexts. de Mejía (2004) argues that plurilingualism in the Colombian context should be understood not merely as an existing condition, but as a key requirement for fostering social equity and recognizing linguistic and cultural diversity. In this regard, language policies should promote an approach that integrates the teaching of English with respect for and promotion of indigenous languages and regional linguistic varieties. An example of a focused policy is the ECO: A strategy for the formation of English teachers in rural areas proposed by MEN (2014b), which sought to implement strategies that are culturally sensitive and that promote intercultural dialogue. This type of initiative recognizes that English teaching should not be a process of cultural imposition, but an opportunity to enrich rural communities' linguistic and cultural heritage.

On the other hand, a critical aspect to improve English teaching in rural areas is the formation of teachers capable of contextualizing their pedagogical practice. Situated teaching, which considers the specific context in which it is taught, is key to achieving this. As Monroy-Ramírez and Patiño-Agudelo (2022) point out, the effectiveness of English language teaching in rural contexts is largely shaped by teachers' capacity to reinterpret educational policies and transform their pedagogical practices in response to the specific conditions of their local environments. An effective teacher education program should provide teachers with tools to analyze and adapt their teaching methodologies to rural communities' socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic conditions.

Teacher education programs must therefore adopt a situated teaching approach that recognizes the particularities of the rural context. As Díaz Barriga (2022) argues, situated teaching is "a multidimensional process of cultural appropriation, as it is an experience that involves thought, emotion, and action... and it is recognized that school learning is above all a process of enculturation through which students gradually integrate into a community or culture of social practices" (p. 19). In the context of English teaching, this could translate into creating teaching materials that reflect rural realities and use examples and situations relevant to students in these areas. A concrete example of this approach can be found in the English for Rural Colombia program developed by Quindío University (2023), which focuses on preparing teachers to design didactic units that connect English language teaching with locally relevant areas such as agriculture, ecotourism, and traditional craft.

Additionally, community-based service learning represents a promising approach to connecting English teaching with local needs. This approach allows students to learn English while participating in community projects, strengthening language learning and social

engagement. García and Reyes (2022) contend that establishing collaborative relationships between educational institutions and local communities plays a key role in strengthening the quality of English language teaching in rural contexts. In this way, teachers not only teach the language, but also facilitate learning experiences that are deeply linked to the values and needs of the community. Teacher education programs must therefore include service-based learning strategies that enable teachers to integrate English into projects that directly benefit rural communities.

Community-based service learning thus offers a valuable opportunity to contextualize English teaching in rural areas. This approach, as defined by Tapia (2020), is “a teaching methodology whereby students gain a better understanding of academic content by applying skills and knowledge for the benefit of society” (p. 14). In the context of English teaching, teacher education programs could include projects where teachers and students use their language skills to benefit the community. For example, the rural education implemented by the MEN in The Altiplano Cundiboyacense (Ortíz-García & Contreras-Pinilla, 2023) has identified positive results such as “teacher trainees adapt an experiential teaching methodology in EFL because they argue that they have to use the sources they have to allow their students to learn in that way, experiencing their own environment” (p. 19).

As mentioned above, we emphasize the need for English teaching in rural Colombia that values the systematic and strategic interplay among plurilingualism, interculturality, situated teaching, and community-based service learning. Educational policies should therefore promote the coexistence of English with local languages, and teacher education should integrate pedagogical contextualization. Such promotion and integration can not only strengthen English language learning but also contribute to the cultural and social development of rural communities, ensuring a more equitable and relevant education.

Conclusion

The study of the history and present of rural education and English teaching in rural areas represents an invaluable area of research for the academic community of English language teachers in Colombia. This approach allows understanding the contextual particularities that have shaped pedagogical practices in rural areas, which are often marginalized in dominant educational discourses. By examining the historical trajectories and contemporary dynamics of these practices, teachers can identify patterns of inequality, resistance, and adaptation. These patterns have characterized the implementation of language policies in rural areas. This knowledge not only enriches Colombian understanding of the sociocultural dynamics that influence English teaching in diverse contexts but also provides a solid foundation for designing more inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogical strategies. In addition, this type of study can highlight successful local initiatives and persistent challenges, thereby

informing the development of more equitable and effective education and language policies for Colombian rural communities.

On the other hand, improving English teaching in rural areas of Colombia requires a comprehensive approach that combines targeted public policies with innovative teacher education programs. By addressing topics such as plurilingualism, interculturality, situated teaching, and community-based service learning, an educational environment can be created to improve rural students' language skills and contribute to their communities' sustainable development. In a similar line of thinking, Ramos Holguín and Aguirre Morales (2016) sustain that

English teachers must have a proper introduction to the teaching techniques in rural areas and also to the pedagogical models that have been proven to be most effective in that zone. Teachers must be introduced to the community's relevant ethnographic information in order to smoothly enter into the community, avoiding conflicts that could arise by not having cultural information about the group in question (p. 215).

This article argues, then, that the opportunities for improvement in English teaching in rural areas of Colombia are evident if public policies and teacher education programs are tailored to the needs and interests of rural communities.

Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence

While developing this article, the authors used ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude to search for and identify academic sources relevant to the topic of study. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and modified references and content to ensure validity and quality. As such, they assume full responsibility for the content and quality of the publication.

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