

Editorial

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14483/calj.v18n1.aa00>

English teaching in the elementary school: Some critical issues

Although for the last 10 years Colombia has proposed a National Plan for Bilingualism in different stages, the education of young children in Colombian public and private schools in relation to English language learning evidences some critical issues regarding the preparation of future teachers, the professional development of in-service teachers, and the national standards for foreign language teaching.

The preparation of future teachers of English focuses mainly on delivering theoretical perspectives of English grammar, linguistics, traditional and decontextualized approaches to EFL teaching, second language acquisition theories, and research methods to mention some of the general content in English language education. The study carried out by Cardenas (2009) investigating the tendencies in language teacher education in Colombia reported that “transmission and language skill oriented models of teaching still exist at universities; educational perspectives that view the person as a social individual and promote a critical model of education are rarely found” (p.100). However, most programs fail to address the challenges and teaching realities that classrooms in public schools face every day. With a single and isolated experience in the practicum in elementary school, an absence of in-depth discussions about critical approaches to teaching in today’s challenging times, and a lack of innovative and creative practices that articulate content from the disciplines in the curriculum, future teachers remain unprepared for teaching in classrooms full of children with diverse cultural and socioeconomic needs and literacies.

Similarly, national educational policies have mistakenly given elementary school teachers not necessarily certified as English teachers the responsibility of teaching English to elementary school children. This decision seems to be based on a limited vision that learning another language is learning isolated and decontextualized vocabulary or, administratively, making a simple curricular adaptation instead of having well qualified teachers to teach English to children.

In my professional opinion, this political decision not only delays the expected outcomes for English proficiency of school students to perform successfully as citizens, but it places elementary school teachers in an awkward and unethical professional position. By doing so, the government fails to provide opportunities for new English teachers who can be prepared and fully qualified to teach children. My qualms are that teachers who know how to teach children, but do not know how to teach English, will not be able to educate children as users of the language. In contrast, teachers learning about ELT methodology only from a theoretical perspective will not make them necessarily better teachers of the language.

Furthermore, if the Colombian government were to implement a coherent linguistic policy for foreign language learning to achieve the goals of the National Bilingualism Plan, it would have to offer quality EFL education to children from early elementary grades to 11th grade. Putting in place a strong educational initiative for public schools would require hiring a good number of English teachers who are professionally qualified to teach in the elementary grades. It is

equally important to take into consideration the immediate need for professional development for in-service teachers. Practicing teachers would require qualifying their practice through more social and culturally contextualized pedagogies of EFL that lead to innovative teaching using their educational realities and concentrating less on knowing about decontextualized theories. Teachers currently teaching in the secondary grades would need to renew their pedagogical practices to respond to the new demands of more competent students in English whose English would have been learned in the five previous elementary grades.

An example of a content based approach to teaching EFL to young learners is presented in this issue in the article titled “It’s the same world through different eyes”: a CLIL project for young EFL learners” by Eleni Korosidou and Eleni Griva. The authors define CLIL as a dual-focused educational approach which aims at education through construction, rather than instruction. Thus, their pedagogical innovation focused equally on EFL (English as a foreign language) and content development. In their study, students were provided with opportunities to express themselves verbally and nonverbally, and to participate in a variety of creative activities in a multimodal teaching context. The findings of their project evidenced students’ improvement regarding both their receptive and productive skills in the target language, and the development of children’s citizenship awareness, and their sensitivity towards diversity.

Lastly, the Colombian national standards for foreign language learning—in contrast with the standards for any other discipline—display a very limited range of linguistic competences and insist on focusing on the grammar of the language. This emphasis on learning about the language and not the language itself poorly connects with the life and realities of the learners who need to use English to fully participate as critical citizens.

References

- Cárdenas, R. (2009). Tendencias globales y locales en la formación de docentes de lenguas extranjeras. *Íkala, revista de lenguaje y cultura*, 14(22), 71-105.
- Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). *CLIL: Content and language integrated learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Korosidou E., & Griva, E. (2016). “*It’s the same world through different eyes*”: A content and language integrated learning project for young EFL learners. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 18(1), pp 116-132.

Amparo Clavijo Olarte PhD
Editor