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COLOMBIAN ENGLISH TEACHERS' USE OF TEXTBOOKS AND THEIR APPROPRIATION OF POLICY SUGGESTIONS

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Abstract: Designing and implementing English language education policies, programs and curricula has emerged as a top priority of various Latin American countries. This qualitative study focuses on the particular case of Colombia and two textbooks, *English Please!* and *Way to Go!,* which were issued by the Ministry of Education as a means to improve English language teaching and learning in public schools. The study aims at determining the extent to which a group of teachers appropriated Colombia Bilingüe policy suggestions for English language education when using the aforementioned textbooks. Based on class observations, questionnaires and interviews, it was found that while participants appropriated the textbooks' emphasis on transversality and their connection with the government curricular guidelines, they encountered challenges to enhance their students' professional and employment chances through the books. Partial appropriation of the policy pedagogical suggestions involved fostering students' cultural and intercultural learning, their development of communicative ability, 21st century and transferable skills.

Keywords: Language education policy, English textbooks, Colombia Bilingüe, language policy appropriation

Profesores de inglés colombianos, su uso de libros de texto y apropiación de sugerencias en política educativa

Resumen: El diseño e implementación de políticas, programas y currículos para la enseñanza de inglés se ha convertido en una prioridad de varios países

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Latinoamericanos. Este estudio cualitativo se enfoca en el caso particular de Colombia y dos libros de textos, English Please! y Way to Go!, los que fueron publicados por el Ministerio de Educación para mejorar el aprendizaje de inglés en colegios públicos. El estudio explora qué tanto un grupo de profesores se apropió de las sugerencias de la política "Colombia Bilingüe" para la educación en el idioma inglés al emplear estos textos. Utilizando observaciones de clase, cuestionarios y entrevistas, se determinó que, si bien los participantes se apropiaron del énfasis en la transversalidad curricular y la conexión que los libros promueven con los lineamientos curriculares gubernamentales, tuvieron dificultades para apoyar las oportunidades laborales y de empleo de sus estudiantes a través de los textos. Una apropiación parcial de las sugerencias de la política involucró el fomento del aprendizaje cultural e intercultural de los estudiantes, su desarrollo de habilidades comunicativas para el siglo 21 y transferibles.

Palabras clave: Política educativa en lengua extranjera, libros de texto para inglés, Colombia Bilingüe, apropiación de política lingüística.

1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen Latin American governments invest substantial efforts and in many cases resources into the development and implementation of language education policy, programs and curricula designed to increase their citizens' English language abilities (Barahona, 2016; Kaiser, 2017; Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016; Solino, 2012; Usma, 2009; Vargas, 2017). Using leverage from ideologies that depict English learning as means to gain access to commodities in today's globalized world (Batista, 2020; Guerrero, 2008; Kaiser, 2017; Vargas, 2017), English has not only become compulsory in secondary and tertiary levels of public education, but more recently has established itself in elementary institutions' curricula. Simultaneously, expected ambitious achievements have generally been established, often grounded in imported standards to control the progress of these national initiatives (Barahona, 2016; Guerrero, 2008; Kaiser, 2017; Sevy-Biloon, Recino & Munoz, 2020).

In the case of Colombia, scholars have looked closely at the aggressive English language educational policies implementation in order to examine their nature and conceptions (*e.g.*, Guerrero, 2008, 2010; Sánchez Solarte & Obando Guerrero, 2008; Usma, 2009), their overall impact (*e.g.*, Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014; Urrea Cortés, 2018) and their appropriateness in specific contexts (*e.g.*, Cruz Arcila, 2018; Mora, Chiquito & Zapata, 2019; Roldán & Peláez, 2017). Their findings expose the myriad challenges that these policies face and their shortcomings. These shortcomings, which are framed within the previously depicted situation in many Latino American countries, are mostly related to the disconnection between the ideal proposals of policies and contextual school realities, and oftentimes are the result of the lack of input from stakeholders' whose voices are essential in shaping these educational plans.

Despite the growing interest in the study of foreign language educational policy, there has been a call for more studies looking at stakeholders' appropriation of these plans since as Peláez & Usma (2017) posit: "we have not necessarily examined the connection between local actors' perceptions of these reforms and the role they

play in policy appropriation" (p. 212). In answer to that call, this study sought to explore to what extent teachers in public schools appropriated the suggestions that the Colombia Bilingüe policy (CBP) has made for English education through the use of the textbooks *English Please!* and *Way to Go!* These textbooks were issued by the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN, 2016a, 2016b) as part of the strategic actions to reach the Colombia Bilingüe (2014-2018) policy objectives. Being part of the aforementioned policy, the textbooks in our study might not be exempt from the shortcomings scholars have identified in their policy analysis. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the different policy suggestions reflected in these textbooks to understand whether those general critiques made about policies also affect these educational resources and to elucidate possible alternatives to tackle problematic issues when first-line stakeholders, in this case teachers, attempt to enact those recommendations through their use of the books.

Regarding the textbooks as elements that the government uses to operationalize underlined policy suggestions, we argue that they should be designed, introduced, made available and monitored in a way that teachers can appropriate such guidelines. However, what the teachers claimed, in an initial diagnosis conducted prior to this study, seems to contradict this argument. Most teachers questioned the books length, students´ low level of English vs. the advanced level required to use them successfully and the availability of extra resources to optimize their use. In addition, some teachers underlined the lack of education required to effectively use these pedagogical resources. Finally, contrasting views were exposed in terms of the extent to which the books embrace the Colombian cultural context. These contradictions and limitations that teachers put forward confirm that indeed there is a need to examine in detail how they work with these books.

2. Foreign Language Education Policy and its Appropriation

Foreign language educational policies in Colombia can be framed within Levinson and Sutton's (2001) definition of what educational policies are: "a complex social practice, an ongoing process of normative cultural production constituted by diverse actors across diverse social and institutional contexts" (p. 1). Accordingly, various other scholars, *e.g.*, Arzoz (2007); Correa & Usma (2013), concur with the bureaucratic nature that is currently ingrained in these reforms. Arzoz (2007), for example, posits that such policies are actions taken by governments and enforced through various means to establish expectations about language use, foster language ability or determine people's right to employ or preserve language.

The bureaucratic agenda of foreign language educational policies implies that stakeholders at the bottom of the power design structure, usually teachers, students and parents, do not influence policy design. Although they are construed as policy consumers by governments, teachers are not passive implementers of these plans (Johnson, 2012; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Menken & García, 2010); instead, they are able to react to them, appropriating what is more convenient in their various

environments. This is possible because policies are open to educators' interpretations and their understandings can affect how they enact reforms in classrooms.

In the case of teachers who are required to use textbooks in classes with policy goals to accomplish, appropriation can be affected by diverse emerging factors from their particular circumstances (Johnson, 2012). They might implement this policy in different ways by aligning themselves with or diverging from the government's expectations. The notion of appropriation is used here ''as a form of creative interpretive practice necessarily engaged in by different people involved in the policy process'' (Levinson *et al.*, 2007: 768).

3. Colombia Bilingüe Foreign Language Education Policy

In this study, we refer to Colombia Bilingüe (2014-2018) as the policy through which the textbooks *English Please!* and *Way to Go!* were published and delivered to public schools in Colombia. Colombia Bilingüe guidelines (MEN, 2016c) are substantially based on 'Basic Standards of Competence in English' (BSCE) (MEN, 2006) and have perpetuated previous foreign language educational policies. The policy's overarching objective was: to increase the number of students with a pre-intermediate level B1 from 2% to 8% and from 7% to 35% of learners with a basic level A2 when graduating from 11th grade by the year 2018. Achieving this improvement in English language ability was seen as an opportunity for students to gain access to better professional and employment opportunities (MEN, 2015: 66).

To reach these objectives, a first strategic policy line aimed at improving teachers' English levels. A second strategic line sought the construction of general curricular guidelines: 'Suggested Curriculum Structure' (SCS), 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016d) and 'Basic Learning Rights' (BLRs): English 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016e). The third strategic line encompassed the distribution of materials and pedagogical resources for primary and secondary school. This included *English Please!* and *Way to Go!* textbooks, their associated online resources, training workshops and support in the classroom to educate teachers in the use of the textbooks.

The textbooks were designed to promote, firstly, the inclusion of the Colombian context in English language education content seeking to increase students' national identity. Secondly, the development of transferable skills[1] through the series *English Please!* and 21st century skills[2] through the series *Way to Go!* was also a key objective. Thirdly, the books were expected to encourage teachers' use of a communicative approach seeking to enhance students' communicative language abilities by means of task-based, project-based and topic-based learning methodologies. *English Please!*

[1] Transferable skills, which specifically refer to team work, communication skills, problem solving, and analytical skills, are some of the key principles supporting the pedagogical approach of the textbook series *English Please!* (MEN, 2016a).

[2] The textbook series *Way to Go!* (MEN, 2016b) seeks to contribute to the development of Colombian public school students' 21 century skills. These abilities comprise critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, information and communication technologies literacy, initiative and self-direction, leadership and responsibility, among others.

and *Way to Go!* claim they foster the development of intercultural competence involving the understanding of global diversity and dialogue with other cultures. Books' contents are supposed to be adaptable to schools' contexts and easy to be connected with transversal curricular areas such as environment, health, democracy, among others. The policy also purports to increase students' opportunities for better access to employment and professional opportunities and for the achievement of level B1 at the end of secondary school.

The textbooks reflect pedagogical principles proposed by a group of ELT experts in order to substantiate the teaching and learning of English according to the Ministry's overall policy objective. In this sense, it is considered that the Ministry of Education has upheld these ELT guidelines and they have become policy suggestions for educational institutions' stakeholders.

Studies examining English language educational policy within the timeframe of Colombia Bilingüe (2014-2018) detected that these policies have failed to implement bilingualism in a globalized environment. This downfall might be caused by a lack of English teaching starting in childhood, native foreign trainers' lack of full-time teaching at schools and the need for better educated teachers and university prospective teachers (Urrea Cortés, 2018). Likewise, Hurie (2018) claims that instead of achieving "English for Peace", as it had promoted, Colombia Bilingüe reflects the neoliberal capitalism framework that structures linguistic ideologies of English in demand.

When examining factors affecting the appropriation of English education policies, Peláez & Usma (2017) found that although teachers recognized the importance of English, they experience unfavorable conditions in the work context. Among others, the researchers highlight the disconnection between teaching methods and students´ needs, and the mandatory nature of English leading to resistance on the part of school stakeholders. Roldán & Peláez (2017) concluded that because the government's language policies are homogenizing, they do not meet the needs of rural communities. Similarly, Cruz Arcila (2018) found that factors such as teachers' values, resources, school conditions and social issues guided teachers to adapt policies and adopt other strategies that suit their students and contexts' needs.

4. Textbooks in foreign and second language learning

Textbooks have universally been adopted as tools to teach English. Their advantages include their provision of essential resources for language courses and their support for educators' lesson planning and test preparation (Tomlinson, 2010). However, as Cruz Rondón & Velasco Vera's (2016) study warns, although textbooks are useful instructional materials, it is necessary for teachers to be effectively prepared or trained on how to implement them properly in classrooms. Using textbooks can also bring disadvantages which are oftentimes traced to their inflexible nature and their biases since they ultimately reflect the pedagogic, psychological and linguistic preferences of their authors (Allwright, 1982). In order to avoid these limitations, Brown (1995) affirms that textbooks should not necessarily determine the aims themselves or become the aims, but they should always be at teachers and learners' service. Teachers can

become optimal agents to confirm whether textbooks are suitable or not for their practices since they have direct contact with them and their use of these materials might help determine, among other issues, how they are appropriating underlying language educational policies.

English Please! and *Way to Go!* are textbooks promoted by MEN (2016a, 2016b), not only to regulate language instruction in public schools, but also to improve pedagogical practices in the classroom. Table 1 below describes these textbooks' main features.

Way to Go!		English Please!, Fast track Edition
Publication	Issued by the Ministry of Education and published by Richmond	Issued by the Ministry of Education and published by Richmond
Year	2016	2016
Target Grades	6th, 7th, 8th	9th, 10th, 11th
Resources	Student's book, workbook, teachers' guide, audio tracks, digital version of the material, pacing guides. www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/colombiaBilingüe	Students` book, teachers' guide, audio CD`s activities, interactive version of the students` book and workbook, pacing guides. www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/colombiaBilingüe
Approach & Curricular Links	Task based and project based learning. Integration of 21st century skills. These textbooks are aligned with BLRs and SCS. They promote transversality, adaptability and flexibility.	Topic based and project work approaches. Integration of transferable skills and four language skills. Alignment to national and international standards.

Structure	4 modules, 3 units in each module. Units 1 and 2 have 3 lessons, unit three has 4 lessons. It includes from 7 to 10 speaking, writing, reading, reading, teamwork, and pronunciation practice activities per lesson. In addition it integrates: chants, reviews, final tasks or projects and evaluations.	4 modules, 3 units per module, 3 lessons in the first unit, three lessons in the second unit and two lessons in the third unit. Includes 7 to 20 speaking, writing, reading, vocabulary practice activities per lesson. In addition it integrates project work and self-assessment.

Source: *English Please! and Way to Go! Series (MEN, 2016a, 2016b).*
Table 1. *Characteristics of Way to Go! and English Please! Textbooks*

Research on foreign and second language textbooks in the last decades has prominently centered on the role of textbooks in cultural and intercultural education. In this regard, Tajeddin and Teimournezhad's (2015) study suggests that neither the international nor the local ELT textbooks they analyzed included the learners' home culture. Gómez Rodríguez (2015) concludes that teachers need to seek and adapt materials based on culture and assume a critical stance, "deep culture", in terms of realities that should be transformed. On another note, examining textbooks' potential to support students' language ability development, Gómez Rodríguez (2010) suggested that the ones he analyzed could not entirely foster these skills because of the scant activities they included to engage students in meaning negotiation. Similarly, textbooks focused on grammar practice and did not include authentic tasks.

Studies involving *English Please! and Way to Go!* are scant. Cordero Gutiérrez (2019) suggested that for students to better assimilate the methodologies of *English Please!* 2, it was necessary to make important changes starting from the hourly intensity allotted to work with the book, if expected goals were to be achieved. Large classes were also an obstacle to working with practical activities. Likewise, the activities proposed by the modules needed to be reduced and more videos rather than audios should be integrated into the textbook. A second inquiry on *English Please!* found that the few activities purported as potential precursors of intercultural awareness in the textbook were helpful in the development of general skills. However, these tasks did not help in the promotion of intercultural understanding and awareness as they were focused on traditional language skills (Henao *et al.*, 2019).

5. Research Design

Within a qualitative research framework, this inquiry was configured as a case study (Stake, 1995). In this vein, a holistic, naturalist, descriptive and interpretative approach was employed to examine the phenomenon of interest concerning the participating teachers in three different schools. Each school was a unit, a case, and information from each teacher and her or his context contributed to illustrate common issues in connection with potential answers to the research question guiding this study.

The investigation took place in Huila, a departament in the southwest part of Colombia. The first school, Institución Educativa El Cafetero[3], located in a rural area in the Center of Huila, had an emphasis on agriculture. The second institution, Institución Educativa El Paraíso, north of Huila, included programs to help visually-impaired students. The last school, Institución Educativa Las Palmeras located in the urban area north of Huila, had an emphasis on arts. English was taught for three hours a week in each institution.

This study involved a male and three female English teachers who used either *English Please!* or *Way to Go!* textbooks (depending on the grade*)* on a regular basis with their students. Table 2 summarizes participants' profiles.

Teacher	Age	Education	School	Type of School	Textbook used	Grade taught	Time of using the textbook
1	31	Master of Arts	Las Palmeras	Public-urban	Way to Go! English Please!	8th 9th	3 years
2	51	Master of Arts	El Paraíso	Public-urban	English Please!	10th 11th	2 years
3	29	Master of Arts	El Cafetero	Public-rural	Way to Go!	6th	1 and half years
4	56	Specialization	El Paraíso	Public-urban	Way to Go!	7th	2 years

Table 2. *Participants' profiles*

Although the main participants were the teachers, we also required some information from their students in order to corroborate educators' use of the textbooks. There were, on average, 30 students per grade (6th to 11th grade); there were female and male students ranging in age from 11 to 17 years. In order to become a participant in the study, each teacher signed a consent form. Likewise, students´ parents were

[3] In order to protect the real name of institutions, we are using pseudonyms.

sent consent forms which they were asked to return if they agreed on their children's participation in the study.

6. Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

An observation chart was employed by researchers to gather general information about the context of classes, the use of textbooks within the lessons and how teachers connected textbooks with policy suggestions. There were a total of 31 observations; each one was about 50 to 60 minutes. One participant was observed 9 times, another 8 and the other two 7 times each one. In addition, each participant was interviewed three times, once each month during the data collection process, at her or his place of work. The one-hour interviews, which were recorded by using a phone voice recording application, sought to examine teachers' views about the connection between the target language policy and their textbooks use, their answers in the initial questionnaire, and their teaching work with the books when they were observed. Participants also answered an initial questionnaire that included 26 multiple-choice and open-ended questions related to their history with the textbooks, how they used them and the implementation of policy aspects in their classes while using the books. This questionnaire was administered online by means of a Google application. Finally, students answered a questionnaire with the purpose of corroborating what teachers expressed about their focus on specific aspects of the policy when working with *English Please!* or *Way to Go!* textbooks. There were 180 questionnaires, 30 per grade observed (6th -11th grade). Students answered printed versions of the questionnaires administered by researchers at the schools. The questionnaires included 15 multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

As part of the data for this study, an adapted checklist (Lawrence, 2011; Sheldon, 1988) was employed to assess the textbooks. This exercise provided information about whether and how the different aspects promoted by the policy, as officially reported by the MEN, were reflected in the textbooks content.

7. Data Analysis and Findings

This study employed thematic coding which is "a way of indexing and categorizing the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it" (Gibbs, 2007: 38). With the support of the software Atlas Ti for qualitative data analysis, potential fragments perceived as answers to the research question guiding this study, were codified in the information gathered from observation charts, interviews and teacher questionnaires. Due to low return of parents' consent forms and students' submission of incomplete questionnaires, only 60 student questionnaires, 10 per class, were considered for analysis. Subsequently, by means of constant comparison, contrast and reduction, codes were grouped according to their similarities. Finally, these clusters of codes were named and became the findings described and discussed below.

8. Expected Comfortable and Easy Walks vs. The Real Feeling of Stones in One's Shoes

In general, a metaphor illustrates the overarching finding in this study: the contrast between ideal expectations for teachers to appropriate the policy pedagogical suggestions with no difficulties and what they really seemed to appropriate given schools' realities. This metaphor refers to the fact that teachers experienced ups and downs while trying to appropriate the recommendations promoted in the textbooks. Although there were some suggestions that teachers found achievable, 'comfortable and easy walks'; there were some other issues that were not completely attainable, 'stones in one's shoes'. This notion might be associated with what Sánchez Solarte & Obando Guerrero (2008) affirm: "it must be clarified that the problem in Colombia is not the adoption of foreign language policy and standards, but the learning and teaching conditions which the government seems to overlook" (p. 189). Three subcategories specifically describe participants' policy appropriation level as shown in the following lines.

9. The Teachers' most Comfortable Walk in the Appropriation of Policy Suggestions

The first suggestion teachers appropriated the most was to connect the BLRs, SCS and BSCE (MEN, 2016e, 2016d, 2006) with their use of the books to teach their students. The introductory pages of the *English Please!* series explain that the book aligns with guide 22: 'Basic Standards of Competence in English' and that the textbook takes as a reference the pedagogical and methodological principles of 'Suggested Curriculum Structure' (MEN, 2016a: 5). To illustrate the previous statement, in *Way to Go!* 8th, module 1, unit 1, page 10, the topic refers to environmental concerns. This topic is also included in the SCS for 8th grade and we could identify *Rights* 3 and 4 from the BLRs for 8th grade that best match the activities proposed.

It was the BLRs, the one curricular guideline that the teachers found most present and useful when using the textbooks:

> *One of the advantages that the book has is that the book is already aligned with BLRs, curricular guidelines, it means the book is aligned with the Ministry's demands, so basically what one does is to select what activities perhaps could be more useful or meaningful for the students depending on the topics (**p1-in** October 01, 2019)*[4] [5].

In this excerpt, this participant recognizes that the fact that the book is aligned with the curricular guidelines demanded by the Ministry of Education is an advantage

[4] Henceforth, abbreviations will be used to refer to the participants (e.g., ***p1, p2***) and the instruments in the different excerpts (Observation Chart, ***ob***; interviews, ***in***; teachers' questionnaire, ***t.q***; students' questionnaire, ***s.q)***.

[5] Participants´ answers taken from different instruments, as well as researchers' observation notes in charts were translated by the authors from Spanish into English being as faithful as possible to the original comments.

that is allowing her to go straight into the selection of the activities according to students´ needs.

Other participants' remarks demonstrate that despite their robust appropriation of this suggestion regarding connections with MEN curricular guidelines, there were also some critical views:

> *when one sees the book it proposes the BLRs and one evidences that yes, I am working on that (...) I really want to work with the BLRs but there are some things…very difficult to achieve in reality and some others are easier (**p3-in** September 30, 2019).*

Another participant expressed:

> *Something new about the books is that they are taking into account the 'BLRs'... even the new planning has to be done taking into account the BLRs. For us that has pros and cons in the sense that they are a lot broader…but obviously the book includes that and where can we see it?, in the different activities, it takes into account the different linguistic skills…ehhh…grammar, vocabulary and all these necessary things(**p2-in** December 5, 2019).*

These teachers understand they are expected to work with the BLRs in connection with the textbooks and in fact they have been doing it. They seem to find coherence between the book content and what the Ministry has been promoting; however, they highlight the existence of challenging issues at the level of BLRs amplitude and complexity.

The second policy recommendation participants comfortably adopted was the call for transversality, the connection of English with other areas to facilitate its learning. When examining the book, it was concluded that the textbooks indeed promote and integrate such a transversal connection. For example, in *English Please!* 3, the module called *Global Citizenship* (MEN, 2016f: 60-62), emphasizes Social Studies: citizenship, human rights, conflicts and participation seeking to guide learners to reflect upon issues such as wars, countries and disagreements.

In regards to the significant level of appropriation exhibited by participants concerning the connection of English with other areas, an observation in a 7th grade class shows how basic Geography was integrated into the lesson:

> *Before starting the listening exercise in the book, the teacher tells her students about her city Sincelejo-Sucre…then she asks: what´s my town? Where is it? How is the weather? Students answer and the teacher keeps talking… Then she plays a listening exercise called: "Pablo from Popayan-Cauca **(p4-ob** November 05, 2019).*

Similarly, Table 3 below shows that students ranked "connection with other areas" as the number one aspect mostly promoted by teachers in classes:

3. ¿In which aspects do you think your teacher focuses when using the book?		
Ranking order	Aspects	*n*=
1	Connection with other areas	46
2	Grammar	45
3	Communicative competence	43
4	Communicate with people from other cultures	26
5	English varieties	14
6	Other	1

Table 3. *Students' questionnaire answers regarding teachers' focus when using the textbooks*

Finally, one of the participants explained in an interview:

> *In the way it is addressed, interdisciplinarity is well focused with topics like environment; though, sometimes there is a lack of time to go more in depth. The book has different topics even economy, some graphs with percentages, so… I take advantage of it to demonstrate how English works with any subject because it is simply a language* ***(p3-in*** September 30, 2019).

Despite her perceived lack of time for the study of topics in connection with other subjects, this pedagogical approach seemed to help the teacher to promote English learning through meaningful content so that students could comprehend that English functions as a vehicle to discuss themes from different fields.

10. Teachers' Unsteady Walk to Appropriate Policy Suggestions

The expression "*unsteady walk"* means that teachers could not completely appropriate several policy recommendations despite their intention to adhere to these suggestions. This also constitutes evidence of aspects that teachers might regard as flaws in policies, which are reflected in these textbooks intended to improve English teaching and learning.

Firstly, teachers could partially appropriate the promotion of 21st century and transferable skills. From the analysis we conducted of the textbooks, we agreed on the fact that the textbooks included some activities related to the 21st century and transferable skills; however, not all the activities promoted in the books reflect these skills constantly and ICT literacy and innovation were the least evident skills of all.

In regards to what teachers expressed about their fractional appropriation of the aforementioned policy suggestion, Participant 3 affirmed:

> *Due to the students' English level and the level that the book proposes, it is difficult to develop all the 21st century skills (…) the part of developing ICT…I don´t see it*

> *anywhere… We tried to use the tablets and the computers but Way to Go! doesn´t have digital material as English Please! does, so, it falls short* (***p3-in*** November 29, 2019).

Similarly, participant 2 regarding innovation expressed:

> *What is different for me is that the book is not the typical American book but I don´t see innovation…the other day I was talking about that...that it would be nice if the book was innovating with digital platforms and that the book had that plasticity…yes it talks about projects, but it is not innovating…it is well developed and takes into account a lot of things but it´s not the t latest innovating thing (…)* (***p2-in*** December 05, 2019).

Although teachers are encouraged to start working with these current trends through the use of the books, these materials are regarded as limited, either in the conception of some of the skills or the resources to make the work with these abilities viable.

Secondly, participants' partial appropriation involved their connection of interculturality, global context and Colombian context in the teaching and learning of English supported by these books. Regarding interculturality and global context, the books attempt to guide teachers to focus on the integration of global diversity and the promotion of deep dialogue and respect among local and other cultures (MEN, 2016a, 2016b).

Nevertheless, in our own analysis of the textbooks, we found that they do not include sufficient elements to foster this policy recommendation since although there are some activities contained in the textbooks that include relevant cultural knowledge and information of some other countries, this is not highly represented throughout the books, but it corresponds to a small portion of what could be addressed in terms of cultural traditions, beliefs, deeper understanding of our and others' behaviors and ways of thinking. Additionally, the rich linguistic diversity that we as Colombians have and which is not very widely illustrated in the books may also represent the policy inconsistency regarding interculturality through the textbooks. This limitation seems to align with what Hurie (2018) claims: "The limited definition of Bilingualism in Colombia Bilingüe contradicts its apparent purpose of interculturality" (p. 341). The following observation account in a 9th grade class illustrates the previous topic:

> *Students open the book on page 115, the readings about Nepal, Japan, and Ethiopia start…everyone reads and stops to understand, they talk about curiosities in Nepal. Now they read about Japan and its food: breakfast, lunch and dinner… students make comparisons with Colombia…the reading about Ethiopia starts and they continue with similarities and differences* (***p1-ob*** October 22, 2019).

Although there is inclusion of other countries for teachers to guide instruction concerning a global context and make comparisons with those countries, there is scarce evidence, for instance, of deeper dialogue among local and global cultures that could truly allow students to respect and value their culture in relation to others. This limited contribution to interculturality while using the textbooks in class may

also be related to teachers' lack of knowledge and basis on how to approach what is proposed by the books with a more intercultural view. The notion of intercultural learning is still superficial as promoted by textbooks and enacted by teachers; this finding matches results in a study conducted by Gómez Rodríguez (2015), who concluded that due to the limitations in books cultural content teachers need to seek and adapt materials based on culture and assume a critical instance focusing on "deep culture" in terms of realities that should be transformed. Similarly, a study of the book series *English Please!* conducted by Henao *et al.* (2019) determined that although the activities proposed in the books to enhance intercultural abilities are helpful in the development of general skills, they do not help substantially in the promotion of intercultural understanding and awareness.

In regards to the idea of connecting the Colombian context with the teaching and learning of English by means of these books, our analysis found that there is a wide inclusion of the Colombian context throughout the materials. For instance, *English Please!* 1, module 4, unit 1, lesson 1 has 11 activities and all of them are related to the Colombian context**,** its places and natural ecological parks.

Our participants expressed that the textbooks represent a good inclusion and attempt to show our Colombian context in general while learning the target language. Nonetheless, one of them, for example, highlighted the lack of more insertion of what is embraced in local Colombian regions and especially in the rural setting which differs in a number of ways from the urban context, even within the same country:

> *The book was designed for the whole country, but the whole country does not have the same characteristics and the same knowledge, some readings talk about traffic signals when in rural contexts the only signals they see are on the road saying "turn right", "turn left" (...) the book should be adapted to rural contexts with information from the outside (**p3-in** September 30, 2019).*

For teachers, it is quite positive to be teaching using textbooks made specifically for the Colombian context; however, the lack of inclusion of rural regions, for example, seems to limit their opportunities to employ the type of pedagogical resource that would broaden spaces to promote national identity holistically among students. In this case, the teacher in her pedagogical practice tried to adapt what is proposed by the book focusing more on the rural context and her students´ knowledge:

> *I´ve had to plan specific activities where students can use information of their town and get closer to their communities. In the third term we worked with "how to give directions and names of places in a city"; they don´t live in a city, therefore, their closest place is the town...so, I had to do an activity in which they could know about the location of places in the town… (**p3-in** November 25, 2019).*

Thirdly, teachers' fractional appropriation of the policy suggestions was related to the development of students' communicative abilities by employing task-based, topic-based and project-based teaching methods (MEN, 2016d). Evidence of the books' connection with the methods mentioned above, which sought to involve

students in meaning negotiation and the contextualized use of language over their focus on grammar aspects, can be found, for example, in activities promoting the elaboration of projects and tasks at the end of each book module. A revision of the books showed that in addition to communicative tasks they also include grammar exercises which are rooted in explicit teaching and mechanical practice, although in very small proportion, as in *English Please!* 3, module 1, unit 1, lesson 1, page 13, where there was a short grammar task with conditionals (limited to 1 exercise) and then other activities were presented.

Concerning teachers´ appropriation of this policy recommendation, it may be said that although the books propose communicative-ability-development-based projects and tasks to be carried out at the end of each module through different topics, teachers commented that they were not really able to achieve this goal as they worked with these materials. In this vein, Gómez Rodríguez (2010), when studying the potential of English textbooks to support learners' chances to become communicatively competent suggests that "English teachers must be conscious of the importance of complementing and enriching communicative practice... Definitely, textbooks are not enough to enhance real communicative competence" (p. 339).

Factors such as insufficient time, students' English level, diverse student conditions and lack of confidence were reasons teachers used to explain their partial appropriation of this policy recommendation. This finding concurs with Cordero Gutierrez's (2019) study of the *English Please! 2* book. The researcher suggests that for students to better assimilate the methodologies of *English Please!* 2, it is necessary to make important changes starting with the number of hours allotted to work with the book.

As an illustration of the claims made by teachers, the following excerpts show how the projects or tasks that students were expected to present at the end of each module were reduced to simple and short activities: "…*Everything is short and simple according to their level…also short projects… the communicative purpose…let´s say we can´t see the product like a dialogue or that they can talk, but it´s contributing a little to those gaps they have…"* (***p3-in*** November 25, 2019).

Equally, when observing participant 2 in a class in which students were expected to interact with peers orally, the researchers wrote: "…*The students seemed to be feeling insecure and shy. The teacher helped them with some expressions to say what they wanted to convey but they said a few words in English and switched immediately to Spanish*" (***p2-ob*** November 5, 2019).

As a final remark, it is important to underline that teachers claimed that they had seen the necessity to reinforce some grammar aspects; in this regard, participant 2 expressed:

> *The book tries not to focus so much on structures and that is good, it´s not based on grammar (...) anyway I need to teach grammar because students don´t acquire grammar just by listening...So, I need to reinforce and bring some other worksheets and exercises to practice(...)* (***p2-in*** November 28, 2019).

This participant agrees with the book's encouragement of communication as a goal, but he exhibits a competing personal theory which rejects the option of

grammar learning from inferential or interactional means and acknowledges formal practice as the means to acquire structures. Teachers' view of a focus on grammar being as relevant as a focus on communicative purposes is corroborated by students' questionnaire answers showed in Table 3 above. Those responses showed that the number of students who perceived their teachers' emphasis on grammar when using the book (n=45) was close to those who consider their teachers' emphasis was on communicative competence (n=43).

12. The Teachers' Rockiest Road to Walk in the Appropriation of the Policy

The Colombia Bilingüe Policy has promoted the idea that by enabling students to communicate in English, they can gain access to better employment and professional opportunities (MEN, 2015: 66; 2016b: 3). Participants' answers in regards to this policy expectation imprinted in the introduction of the textbooks indicated that they assumed it as a recommendation to search for pedagogical strategies which could provide students with specific knowledge and abilities to perform successfully in the work field. Nonetheless, teachers viewed this perceived recommendation as not achievable in their practices with the textbooks and it became the most challenging suggestion.

By analyzing the textbooks, we concluded that merely in *English Please! 3,* a life project is considered to involve students in discussing their future ideals and employment. In relation to the data collected, when the teachers were asked concerning their view on the aforementioned issue, one of them responded:

> *The material helps them to improve their English level, but (...) eehhh it does not focus on the professional development; in the agricultural school approach we have, we always have to adapt it [the book] in order for students who graduate in eleventh grade to know a bit more of the technical English that they need for their careers (**p3-in** November 29, 2019).*

For this participant, the books do not align with the occupational focus of the school. In her case, her institution's agricultural vocational focus is not considered by the material which means that the textbook does not contribute to students' preparation for potential job opportunities in rural areas where it is most likely that a good number of students will be employed. Another participant expressed:

> *A professional approach and all of that…it is a bit more, a bit more ambitious… yes, ehh, ehh the books talk about professions and all of that but they don´t have this as a main goal, their purpose is not to motivate the student to look at themselves in a professional manner to do something (**p2-in** December 5, 2019).*

The underlying ideology in the policy purports that students' English level can ensure their achievement of better access to employment and professional opportunities. In this vein, several scholars, for instance, Guerrero (2010) and Bonilla

Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez (2016), have criticized these policies as they claim to be objective about the opportunities English learning can create for people, but in reality, there is not a direct connection between learning English and obtaining a better job.

13. Conclusions and Implications

This study sought to explore to what extent teachers in public schools appropriated the suggestions that the Colombia Bilingüe policy (CBP) has made for English education through the use of the textbooks *English Please!* and *Way to Go!* Data discussed in the prior section illustrated that participants showed three levels of appropriation concerning pedagogical suggestions in the CBP. To begin with, teachers substantially appropriated the notion that curricular guidelines such as *BLRs*, *BSCE* and *SCS*, key elements in the *CBP*, needed to be aligned with the teaching and learning practices generated through the books. In addition, teachers adopted the transversality approach recommended by the policy through the textbooks as they thought this approach facilitated students' learning by contextualizing English and making the language communicative purpose more meaningful. Despite participants' tendency to embrace the Ministry's recommendations in regards to the two aforementioned issues, they were critical about what they perceived as challenges due to the scope of top-down curricular guidelines and insufficient time to deepen in transversality.

Secondly, elements such as the development of 21st century and transferable skills, communicative language ability in association with related teaching methodologies, the inclusion of Colombian as well as global contexts, and the development of interculturality were policy recommendations that teachers partly appropriated while using these materials in class. Participants' explanations point to various reasons that might be the underlying cause for this partial appropriation, among them, lack of time, students' low English level, the textbooks limited scope to address the full extent of some of the notions underlying the aforementioned skills and insufficient inclusion of strategies to promote these abilities within the books.

Finally, the policy perceived recommendation that teachers struggled the most to appropriate while working with these books emerged from the promotion of English learning as a facilitator of access to employment and professional opportunities for students. A first issue is that the books in themselves do not really seem to include substantial help for students to prepare for the job market. Consequently, teachers need to supplement these materials with others that reflect the potential employment opportunities of learners regarding their actual context and reality. Another issue was teachers' belief that learning English was not necessarily an indicator of future opportunities for students who, in any case, were still far from reaching the expected government language level.

Bearing in mind that in the initial questionnaire and follow-up interviews teachers expressed the need for more education regarding their use of the books and related materials, it is suggested that the MEN should offer more instruction to teachers. Thus, teachers can fully understand, not only the scope of policies promoted by the Ministry

through these books, but also how to use these materials and associated resources to make the most out of them in connection with the government's expectations.

New editions of these textbooks should take into account specific regions in the country where schools are located, for instance, rural and urban areas or particularities in regards to specific interests of schools based on the nature of their context, for example an agricultural or arts emphasis. Likewise, more and clearer emphasis on intercultural and communicative abilities, as well as on 21st century and transferable skills should be integrated into upcoming versions of these textbooks. Book designers and the MEN can also obtain more substantial data concerning how English can support users' employment and professional opportunities. Beyond promoting these occupational opportunities as an unfounded ideology, the books should incorporate strategies to involve students in exploring their vocational profiles and acquiring knowledge to be concretely employed in future jobs.

Lack of time and students' English low level were key factors that challenged the appropriation of the books' underlying policy. Therefore, to carry out and achieve the best from the policy proposed, it is recommended for school administrators to incorporate more hours of English language teaching per week, so teachers could have a better chance of accomplishing what is expected. As suggested by Sánchez Solarte and Obando Guerrero (2008), "Instead of pushing standards that are difficult to achieve with this schedule, a reorganization of curriculum that gives English teachers more space for their professional practice should take place" (p. 191).

Finally, results in this study show that teachers are critical stakeholders whose contribution to operationalizing the government's language educational policies is essential. Consequently, teachers' views about reforms that come from the top down should be heard since they are the ones enacting the proposed reforms. Many Colombian English teachers, as our participants, have achieved high levels of education and most certainly, they will have substantially relevant ideas related to improving and modifying policy aspects which are not functioning.

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