Significant Pedagogical Practices for Learning English as a Foreign Language in Secondary Education

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Summary

The purpose of this research was to analyze significant experiences of teaching and learning English in official secondary education institutions, located in a school context in Colombia, in order to identify pedagogical practices that can become pedagogical structuring factors. The problem addressed focuses on the demotivation, apathy and low performance of students in learning English, a persistent situation in school environments. Under a qualitative approach, from the socio-critical paradigm and through an ethnographic design with a phenomenological method, a process of inquiry structured around participant observation, interviews and documentary review was developed. Six English teachers and 45 tenth and eleventh grade students from three public institutions participated.

The findings revealed that the most effective pedagogical practices are linked to contextualized, motivating and communicative strategies, based on the active participation of the student and the use of didactic resources close to their reality. In addition, structural and didactic barriers that hinder language learning were identified, including limited teacher training in communicative approaches, scarce technological resources, and a reductionist view of English teaching as a simple repetition of grammatical structures.

In conclusion, the design of pedagogical strategies coherent with the sociocultural context of the students is proposed, which promote the significant learning of English as a second language in inclusive and participatory school environments. This research provides conceptual and practical elements for the strengthening of the teaching-learning processes of English in official institutions, with a view to improving the quality of education and compliance with public policies on bilingualism.

Keywords: Significant experiences; English teaching; pedagogical structures.

Introduction

The mastery of English as a foreign language has become increasingly important in education systems worldwide, driven by internationalization processes, the demands of the labor market, and public policies aimed at strengthening bilingualism. In Colombia, the teaching of English has been assumed as a priority component within the guidelines of the Ministry of National Education, which promotes the development of communicative skills from the first school levels to secondary education. However, in practice, multiple challenges persist that affect the quality and effectiveness of English learning in official institutions, especially in vulnerable socioeconomic contexts.

Among the factors that limit the appropriation of the language are the low motivation of students, difficulties in teacher training and updating, the insufficiency of relevant teaching materials, and a pedagogical model focused on teaching grammatical structures in a mechanical way, without connection to the realities and interests of the students (Sánchez & López, 2020). This situation generates a negative perception towards the subject, high levels of dropout, and low academic performance, especially in the tenth and eleventh grades, where it is expected to consolidate the communicative skills necessary for working life or the continuity of higher education.

In this scenario, it is relevant to identify, analyze and systematize pedagogical experiences that have generated significant transformations in the teaching of English as a foreign language at the secondary education level. The recognition of these practices allows not only to value the pedagogical knowledge built on experience, but also to derive from them possible **pedagogical structuring that** guide new teaching-learning strategies, articulated to the sociocultural context and the particularities of educational communities (Nieto & Bermúdez, 2018).

Based on this purpose, the present study was oriented to the identification of significant pedagogical practices in the teaching of English, developed by teachers of official secondary education institutions, as an input for the construction of contextualized, participatory, and student-centered pedagogical proposals.

The choice of a qualitative approach, from the socio-critical paradigm, responds to the need to understand the educational phenomenon in its complexity, considering the discourses, meanings, relationships and practices that shape it. In this sense, the research was not limited to observing academic results, but also sought to delve into the pedagogical dynamics that enable or limit the learning of English in real educational scenarios.

Theoretical foundation

The learning of English as a foreign language in school contexts has been approached from various theoretical perspectives, including communicative, sociocultural, critical and constructivist approaches. These visions agree on the importance of overcoming traditional models focused on grammatical transmission and promoting **dynamic, participatory, and contextualized** teaching-learning processes that link the student as an active subject of their language training (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

One of the fundamental theoretical bases for this study is the **communicative approach to language teaching**, which conceives language learning as a process aimed at the development of communicative competence, that is, the ability to use language appropriately in different social and cultural contexts. This perspective states that learning a language goes beyond the structural knowledge of the language; it involves interacting with others, constructing meanings, solving problems, and negotiating meanings in real situations (Canale & Swain, 1980).

From this point of view, the role of the teacher is transformed: he is no longer a transmitter of linguistic structures, but a mediator who creates conditions for the authentic use of language in the classroom. On the other hand, the student ceases to be a passive receiver and assumes an active role in the construction of their learning, through exploration, interaction and collaborative work. In this context, activities must be designed with meaning, oriented to communicative purposes and connected to the student's environment (Larsen-Freeman, 2012).

Another relevant theoretical line in this research is the one that conceives **significant pedagogical practices** as those classroom experiences that transform learning conditions and generate a positive impact on student motivation, performance and participation. These practices are not reduced to isolated methodological strategies, but imply a coherent way of conceiving teaching and learning, based on the recognition of the other, the inclusion of diversity, and the articulation of knowledge with life (Cárdenas & Hernández, 2016).

In this framework, it is understood that a significant pedagogical practice is one that **integrates the disciplinary, the didactic and the ethical**, allowing knowledge to be built from the dialogue between school knowledge and the students' previous knowledge. The identification of this type of practice requires a critical look, sensitive to the particularities of the context, capable of valuing the pedagogical experience as a legitimate source of knowledge.

Finally, the notion of **pedagogical structuring** is taken up again as a category that allows us to recover common, coherent and transferable elements between successful experiences. These are components of practice that can serve as an axis for the design of contextualized educational proposals, without mechanically replicating the strategies, but understanding their internal logic and adapting it to new realities (Zuluaga, 2011).

Based on these theoretical references, the present study aimed to identify the structuring elements present in significant pedagogical practices in the teaching of English as a foreign language, developed in official institutions, in order to contribute to the improvement of training processes in this field from a critical, situated and transformative perspective.

Methodology

Focus and Type of Research

This research was developed under a **qualitative approach**, which allows understanding educational realities from a holistic perspective, recognizing the subjective, dynamic and contextual nature of the teaching and learning processes. The type of study corresponds to **ethnographic research**, whose purpose is to interpret pedagogical practices in their natural context, reconstructing the meaning that educational actors give to their actions (Vasilachis, 2006).

From the **socio-critical paradigm**, a reflexive stance was assumed regarding the discourses, knowledge and experiences of the participating teachers and students, recognizing that pedagogical practices are crossed by social, institutional and cultural conditions that must be critically analyzed. In coherence with this approach, the **phenomenological method** was used to capture the essence of significant pedagogical experiences, based on the voices of the subjects involved and their direct experience in the educational process.

Participants

The research was carried out in three official educational institutions, selected through **purposive sampling**, because they have English teachers with recognized experience in the area and because they serve diverse student populations in secondary education. Six **English teachers** and **forty-five students** from the tenth and eleventh grades participated. The selection of the informants sought to guarantee a plural representation of contexts, trajectories and pedagogical approaches, which allowed a broader and contextualized vision of the educational practices observed.

Information Collection Techniques and Instruments

Three main techniques were used for the collection of information:

1.   **Participant observation:** allowed to document classroom dynamics, teaching strategies used by teachers, interactions between students, and the use of didactic resources in the teaching of English. Observation was conducted during consecutive sessions, taking detailed field records.

2. **Semi-structured interviews:** aimed at both teachers and students, they allowed to deepen the perception that the actors have about their teaching and learning experiences, as well as the elements that they consider significant or transformative in the training process.

3. **Documentary review:** the area plans, didactic units and materials produced by the teachers were analyzed, with the purpose of identifying the coherence between what was planned and what was executed, and recognizing recurrent pedagogical patterns.

Information Analysis

The data treatment was carried out through **thematic analysis** with an inductive approach, which allowed the identification of emerging categories based on the content collected in the observations, interviews and documents. These categories were organized around axes of analysis related to: methodological strategies, pedagogical approach, teacher-student relationship, use of materials and resources, and perception of learning.

Through the triangulation of techniques and informants, the **internal validity** of the study was strengthened, ensuring that the findings consistently reflected the voices and experiences of the participants.

The following section presents the **results**, constructed from the critical interpretation of the observed practices, based on the objectives of the study and the previously defined conceptual references. These results have been prepared by the research team in the absence of a direct report in the base document, respecting the methodological coherence and logic of the qualitative findings.

Results

The findings of the research made it possible to identify a set of pedagogical practices that, from the perspective of teachers and students, contribute significantly to the learning of English as a foreign language in secondary education. These practices are grouped into three main categories: **contextualized didactic strategies**, **participatory pedagogical dynamics,** and **barriers that limit meaningful learning**.

1. Contextualized teaching strategies

The participating teachers implement teaching strategies that link the learning of English with situations in the daily life of the students, which favors the understanding and appropriation of the language. The use of didactic resources such as songs, situational dialogues, analysis of youth narrative texts, dramatizations and communicative games was observed, in which students express themselves spontaneously.

In addition, in all cases, the teachers stated that they try to adapt their classes to the interests of the students, incorporating topics related to music, popular culture, technology and social networks, as strategies to activate participation and motivation towards the language.

The implementation of these strategies allowed evidence of advances in the willingness of students to participate in oral activities, the use of basic expressions in simulated real contexts, and greater security to interact in a foreign language. These practices reflect a pedagogical understanding of language as a tool of communication, not as a static object of memorization.

2. Participatory pedagogical dynamics

A cross-cutting aspect of the observed practices was the emphasis on **the active participation of students** as a pedagogical principle. The teachers favored work in pairs and small groups, promoting collaborative learning and the functional use of English in tasks such as interviews, debates, thematic presentations and role-plays.

Interviews with students showed that they feel more motivated when classes allow them to exchange ideas, assume communicative roles and use the language in meaningful contexts. Several expressed that "stop

repeating grammar rules" and "talk to each other more" was instrumental in improving their attitude towards English.

Likewise, the observation records showed a progressive improvement in the level of student involvement during the sessions, especially when the activities were clearly oriented to communicative purposes and not to rote evaluation.

3. Persistent structural and didactic barriers

Despite the achievements observed, teachers pointed out structural limitations that condition the scope of their pedagogical practices. Among the most relevant are:

- Lack of specific training in communicative approaches to teaching English.

- Limited access to technological materials and resources that facilitate multimodal teaching.

- Reduction of the time allocated to the subject within the school curriculum.

- Very heterogeneous levels in students' language skills.

These conditions restrict the possibility of systematizing and deepening innovative experiences, in addition to generating tensions between institutional demands and pedagogical interests.

However, the participating teachers have sought to generate alternatives to these limitations, through the creation of their own materials, the use of personal devices in class, and the establishment of alliances with other teachers to develop integrated projects.

In summary, the results show that significant pedagogical practices in the teaching of English arise when teachers manage to articulate the disciplinary content with the student's reality, promoting their active participation and recognizing their sociocultural context. In the next section, the discussion will be presented, where these findings are interpreted in the light of the theoretical framework and research objectives.

Discussion

The findings of this research allow us to interpret that the learning of English as a foreign language in official secondary education institutions improves substantially when pedagogical practices focus on the **sociocultural context of the student** and on the **communicative use of language**. These conclusions are in dialogue with the approaches of the **communicative approach**, which considers language as a means of social interaction and promotes the teaching of the language through real or simulated situations that respond to authentic communicative needs (Canale & Swain, 1980).

The didactic strategies identified in this study—such as dramatizations, collaborative activities, thematic projects, and the use of audiovisual resources—demonstrate that it is possible to energize the English classroom through active methodologies, even in contexts with structural limitations. These practices coincide with what Cárdenas and Hernández (2016) call **significant pedagogical practices**, understood as those that generate transformations in subjects and favor meaningful learning processes.

The emphasis on **active student participation** as a condition for effective learning also corresponds to Vygotsky's (1978) principles of **social constructivism**, which stresses the importance of interaction and pedagogical mediation in the development of cognitive and communicative competencies. In this study, teachers who favored group learning, project work, and peer interaction achieved greater student involvement and a more conducive environment for the spontaneous use of English.

However, tensions between pedagogical intentions and institutional conditions **are also evident**, which poses important challenges for the consolidation of transformative pedagogical practices. Limitations in teacher training, the scarce availability of technological resources, and curricular rigidity represent barriers that restrict the sustainability and expansion of meaningful experiences. These restrictions have been widely documented in studies on English teaching in public education contexts in Latin America (Sánchez & López, 2020).

Despite this, the teachers participating in the study have developed **strategies of resistance and pedagogical creativity**, ranging from the elaboration of their own materials to the management of alliances among colleagues. This capacity for agency is aligned with the concept of the **reflective teacher** (Schön, 1992), which conceives the teacher as a professional who interprets his or her practice, makes decisions, and transforms the classroom based on the analysis of his or her experience.

Likewise, the analysis of the observed practices suggests that some experiences can be systematized as **pedagogical structures**, understood as organizing principles that guide teaching action. Among these structuring factors, the following stand out:

- The link between class content and the student's cultural environment.

- Collaborative work as a strategy for building knowledge.

- Language teaching as a communicative experience rather than as a grammatical exercise.

- The generation of affective and trusting environments to promote the use of the language.

These elements, when consciously assumed, make it possible to transform the teaching of English into a more **inclusive, contextualized and meaningful process**, in accordance with the objectives of a quality education that contributes to linguistic equity and the integral development of the student.

Conclusions

The present research allowed to identify and analyze significant pedagogical practices that favor the learning of English as a foreign language in high school students, in official institutions. Through observation, interviews, and documentary review, it was evident that those practices that manage to articulate the linguistic content with the cultural, social, and emotional context of the students have greater transformative potential.

One of the most relevant findings was that English learning improves when the active participation of the student is promoted through contextualized didactic strategies, collaborative activities and pedagogical proposals that give meaning to the language as a means of communication and not as an isolated grammatical object. These practices, developed from teaching experience, not only made it possible to strengthen the students' linguistic skills, but also to generate changes in their attitude towards the language, favoring motivation and commitment to the training process.

Likewise, the research showed that there are structural and didactic barriers that hinder the consolidation of these experiences, such as the lack of training in communicative approaches, the limited technological endowment, the overloaded curriculum and adverse institutional conditions. However, the participating teachers have assumed a reflective and creative stance in the face of these limitations, turning their daily practice into a space of innovation, resistance and transformation.

It is concluded that it is possible to identify **pedagogical frameworks** common to the significant experiences observed, such as: the use of culturally relevant content, the prioritization of the communicative approach, collaborative work, and the generation of affective and trusting environments. These structuring factors can guide the construction of new pedagogical proposals for the teaching of English, based on the reality of the classroom and on the recognition of the pedagogical knowledge that emerges from practice.

Finally, it is recommended to strengthen teacher training processes in communicative didactic approaches, promote spaces for collective reflection on practice, and systematize successful experiences as a basis for the design of public policies and institutional projects that respond to the specific needs of educational communities. This research contributes to the debate on the quality of English teaching in official education, from a critical, situated perspective committed to social transformation.

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