

Chapter 1

Research Problem

1.1 Problem Statement

One of the main challenges that EFL students in rural areas face is that the content of the material in textbooks are usually not relevant or do not generate high interest in the students that belong to rural schools. Frequently, English textbooks used in Colombia address topics which are far away from the students' realities and ordinary life. Topics about metropolitan areas and big cities, conversations taking place in trade business centers, pictures of world icons are just some of the examples which are not close to the students' lives in rural schools. Images of farm animals, conversations of trading products in farmer markets are not included in those textbooks, for instance. Evidently, many of those textbooks were not intended to be used with the rural schools in Colombia. Neither were they thought nor were they written based on the needs the students' in Boyacá have. What is evident is that they are the kind of textbooks and material teachers have access to. This is so because this is the material teachers used to study with, the ones used in public schools in the cities, and the ones the EFL textbook market offers.

Besides the aforementioned issues, students in rural schools faced challenges in terms of the learning of the English language since they are in kindergarten. According to the Ministry of Education of Colombia (MEN, 2014) there are almost 2.5 million students in rural areas in Colombia. Among the many challenges the rural schools have to face every day, there are two issues that outstand. One has to do with lack of foreign language teachers in rural areas. Teachers working in the rural

sector graduated from diverse areas of education but few teachers hold degrees in EFL. It is common place to find teachers of Social Studies, Mathematics, Ethics, as well as many other areas of education, in charge of teaching English. It is mandated for teachers to schedule two or three hours of English per week to accomplish the EFL curriculum. A second challenge is that there are not enough material for teaching English, and the few material teachers have access to is not designed or intended for rural schools students in Colombia.

In 2014 the Ministry of Education in Colombia making an effort to better the education in the EFL field implemented a project called English for Colombia, (ECO), which derives from a larger project named Strengthening the Development of Foreign Language Competences (Fortalecimiento al Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras), PFDCLE from its acronym in Spanish. This project aimed at training teachers who do not know English but they want to master a basic level in this language and improve their EFL teaching practice in rural zones with students from first to third grade (MEN, 2014). However, as Cruz-Arcila (2017) suggested, there is not real evidence that ECO for Colombia was available or knew by teachers.

The characteristics of rural schools in Boyacá are quiet similar to other rural schools in Colombia. Students live in rural areas and they have to walk long distances back and forth to attend school. Usually, elementary school teachers in rural areas are in charge of all students from Kindergarten to fifth grade using the *New School Pedagogy* model to serve their students.

This means all students are in one classroom and they are grouped by school grade level. Teachers provide instruction and support to their students to one group level while other students are developing their classroom assignments. Then the teacher moves and interacts with other groups inside the classroom. In this way, all group grade levels have access to teacher and the school system can serve the students. There are one to six students by grade level in each classroom. Therefore one teacher in an elementary school in a rural institution in Boyacá could have almost

thirty students all in multiple grade levels from kindergarteners to fifth graders in one classroom. *The New School Methodology* also emphasizes on a knowledge construction more than on a knowledge transmission because it is not based on teacher center class but on learner oriented sessions. Also this model mixes cooperative and collaborative work among students. All this situation, the amount of students per grade level, the methodology use for teaching, plus the diverse tasks teachers have to accomplish outside the classroom, creates a great challenge for teachers, adding to this that they have to teach English, school subject in which they do not have much expertise.

Because of the previous facts, students who enter secondary education are not confident enough in the English language. In the case of the population we worked with, eleventh graders, they suggested they were afraid and unmotivated to use the English language in class. Besides that, as it was mentioned before almost one third of the students in Colombia attending public education goes to rural schools, but there is not an equivalent amount of EFL material developed for this specific population.

The EFL material created for this target population in Colombia is very few. On the contrary, there is vast majority of EFL material designed for city schools and urban areas. A great amount of the population in Boyacá attends rural schools. As consequence teachers in rural areas lack the opportunity to integrate and use in the curriculum EFL material with certain characteristics that better suited the specific needs of the students in rural schools. According to Kumaravadivelu (2016), one of the causes is that EFL/ESL material promoted by publishing houses is mostly teacher center based material. The same author claims that this material is not developed by local teachers who better understand their students' needs and know the curriculum in each of the local areas they work.

In sum, and accounting specifically for eleventh graders realities regarding their English classes, we found that the lack of contextualized resources for teaching English Language at schools is one of the challenges

that teachers in Boyacá face out. Some educators claim that the available resources they have do not include the genuine academic needs students have in rural schools. Teachers usually select materials that, in many instances, are not created for rural school conditions. Accordingly, there is a huge distance between materials producers and users. Consequently, from one place to another there are some variations in terms of cultural and socio-linguistic norms. Because of this, those materials lack of relevance and engagement for the users (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2010). In this sense, it was necessary to develop relevant material that responds to users' local needs.

In our experience, providing support to teachers in rural areas, we found that students in rural areas did not have any contextualized material that included local background information for learning English that responded to their needs and preferences. The material that is available for sale, in many cases is focused on presenting a foreign culture which is not acquired by students because they do not have the opportunity to live those daily experiences. In this case, the workshops we designed accounted for students' voices and preferences when learning English. The workshops included information related to daily activities they do at the countryside when they are inside or outside the school. This means they could find information related to agriculture, local festivals, local sports and music, among others. In this sense, they had previous experiences and knowledge regarding the topics which were approached in the workshops and it motivated, fostered, and facilitated students' oral skills development in English.

One of many reasons to design contextualized workshops was because the material used by teachers at rural schools was usually limited to copies taken from Google TM at random and those copies were designed for grammar learning only with no emphasis on speaking. Likewise, there was a need to use more humanizing materials in the EFL classes, so contextualized workshops were a possible strategy to engage students in a social and meaningful learning process. Another motive was because students stated the necessity to use materials that favored learning English communicatively. Students felt the material selected

by teachers did not account for activities that promoted oral language skills and it relates to what Derakhshan, Khalili, and Beheshti (2016) asserted regarding speaking, “one of the obstacles of learning speaking is contradiction between class materials and courses, so that most of the teachers do not facilitate situations for real practice in speaking” (p. 178).

In addition to this, among many of the characteristics that distinguishes people from Boyacá, one is that they are not very talkative. Noticeably, people from this part of the country are more reserved and shy while socializing with others. This situation is transferred into the foreign language learning environment in classroom setting in which students have to play diverse roles for practicing speaking. This condition does not favor much the development of the speaking skill. If students have to play roles in conversations far away from their daily life and experiences, like those provided in regular textbooks, students are less motivated and less willing to perform conversations which are odd for them.

Any effort that helps students keep motivated would eventually reduce the dropping out numbers from schools attendance. Including speaking activities that engage students in their roles keep them motivated. For this reason, the topics of the contents for these workshops are more inclined to highlight activities students, in general people from Boyacá do, on a daily basis. In this way, we, as teachers, recognize and worth students' lives and acknowledge their culture values, by incorporating common activities for them in the curriculum. Bringing speaking activities and topics for developing skills more connected to their lives enhance not only the development of English as foreign language, but also it aims at having a more integrated curriculum.

Thus, we proposed the following research question to guide this study:

What do the design and implementation of workshops, based on rural students' needs, reveal about their speaking skill development?

To answer the previous question, we also wanted to address the next inquiry:

What is the role of the workshops in the enhancement of the speaking skill?

Based on the questions we posed, the main objectives of this study were: to analyze what the design and implementation of workshops, based on rural students' needs, reveal about their speaking skill development and to describe the role of the workshops in the enhancement of the skill of speaking.

The following section accounts for the state of the research in regards to this study.

1.2 State of the Research

The analysis of the state of research in regards to English language teaching (ELT) rural education in Colombia has shown that it is still an emerging category. As a matter of fact, according to Cruz-Arcila (2017), "up to date there is very little empirical evidence of how ELT practices have come about in rural contexts" (p.2). Nevertheless, there are basically two strong tendencies in relation to ELT rural education. On the one hand, there is the tendency to see how Colombian English education policies do not account for the rural context. On the other hand, there are some reports about empirical studies carried out to improve English language teaching conditions in rural areas.

Because of the interest of this research study lies on the fact that eleventh graders in two rural schools do not have contextualized materials to learn the English language, the next paragraphs will account for those empirical studies that are related to English language teaching in rural institutions. What is presented here is the report of those studies that are already published. However, we understand that there might be many more research studies related to ELT and rural education but they have not been presented to the academic community.

In this sense, Ramos, Aguirre and Hernández (2012) shared a pedagogical experience which was carried out in a rural school in Guavatá, Santander,

Colombia. The students involved in this study were eleventh graders. The main purpose of this experience was to integrate eleventh graders' rural context through the design of curricular units. After implementing the curricular units, information was collected through a journal, a semi-structured interview, and students' surveys. The outcomes of the experience showed that aspects such as students' sense of cultural belonging and intercultural understanding were enhanced.

Equally important, Pinzón (2014) conducted a research at a rural public school in Boyacá, Colombia which was focused on project based learning method to enhance eighth graders' English language skills. The research interest emerged from the lack of motivation to learn English students exhibited in that rural school. The researcher explained that students' demotivation was based on the previous experiences they had regarding the inappropriate correction of mistakes from teachers and the negative perception they had towards English as the classes were focused on both grammar and translation. The data collection instruments included semi-structured interviews, group interview, and artifacts. The results revealed that the activities were crucial to motivate students, and make them feel confident to speak in English. Likewise, students remained motivated to learn English when they addressed issues related to their context and they held in their mind the vocabulary when associating it with pedagogical activities in which they are involved.

Another study worth mentioning is the one conducted by Velandia (2016). Her study analysed how the oral interaction in tenth graders at a public semi-rural institution in Funza, Cundinamarca, Colombia, was enhanced through worksheets based on intercultural topics. The author implemented effective strategies and resources that improved students' oral interaction. In this action research, data were collected through field notes, video recordings, artefacts and a focal interview. The findings of this study enabled to conclude that worksheets helped students enhance their oral interaction in an embryonic way, thanks to the material developed.

In the same line, López (2017) carried out an exploratory and descriptive qualitative study in one of the branches of a public rural school located in the south east of Bogotá. The participants were fifth graders. This research aimed to describe the home-school connection, co-constructed, when the significance of both spaces is valued through the incorporation of the mother tongue (L1 henceforth) and the foreign language (L2 henceforth) literacy practices as complementary processes. In this way, she decided to conduct a research study based on the necessity to connect home and school.

The instruments used to collect data were field notes, interviews, students' artifacts and reflective journals. She found out that literacy practices based on the aforementioned principles, guided a connection that was born between both milieus corresponded to the possibilities of finding spaces for self-expression. In such a way, students recognized the valuable roles of their parents, as well as the community in their lives and in their English language learning.

After describing some research studies conducted or related to this specific area, in the following section, we present and discuss the main theoretical constructs underpinning this research study.