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Interrogating the social impact of English language teaching policies in Colombia from the vantage point of rural areas

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Abstract

Drawing on a larger study of the current state of affairs of English language teaching (ELT) in rural Colombia, this paper interrogates the social impact which education policies promoting English have been associated with. Informed mainly by Nancy Fraser's theory of social justice, I analyse teachers' narratives (obtained through interviews and teaching biographies) in an attempt to point at specific issues that need to be considered, in order to more truthfully account for social development through education policy. In doing so, from the angle of ELT in rural contexts, the paper examines where it is that rural regions stand in terms of cultural and socioeconomic arrangements operating in the country. It is suggested that in order to really make ELT policy socially impactful, these wider cultural and socioeconomic arrangements need to be examined, questioned and indeed integrated into policy making.

Keywords: social impact, social justice, ELT policy, cultural recognition, socioeconomic redistribution

Introduction: ELT policy and its social impact

In Colombia, English language teaching (ELT) has played a central role in education policies, especially over the last 12 years. In this period, the country has witnessed a series of initiatives and reforms oriented towards the promotion and incorporation of English in the state education system. In an era of globalisation, in Colombia—like in other so-called developing countries (cf. Coleman, 2011)—English has come to be seen as a crucial element in ensuring, among other things, the high quality of education, more opportunities to study and work, access to knowledge, cultural openness, competitiveness and economic growth (Ministry of Education [MEN, using its initials in Spanish], 2005, 2013a, 2014b).

On these grounds, there has been active political action over how best to promote this language. The last two presidents, in particular, have enacted the implementation of different ELT programs. The latest developments took place in 2015 when the current Colombia Bilingüe Programme (CBP) was initiated. Although official documentation of the nature of CBP is still limited, it has been made clear that the promotion of English is a key component of a larger project of making Colombia “the best-educated country in Latin America by 2025” (Santos, 2014). This project, according to president Santos (2014), will be fulfilled if “at least one of our universities manages to be amongst the [world] best 100 by 2025 and [if] our results in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) exams are above the other countries in Latin America” (p. 15).

President Santos has been concerned with making Colombia a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). As a result, he has framed his project of making Colombia the best-educated of the region within the scope of the requirements of this

organisation. In fact, as he explained in the launch speech of the former policy called the National Programme of English (NPE), an ELT program is also important because with it Colombia will be fulfilling one of the requests of the OECD for prospective members: to promote a second language, a condition to facilitate the emergence of an economy of knowledge in the country (MEN, 2014a; OECD & World Bank, 2012). Thus the ELT programs have served as an important strategy to pursue political agendas on the internationalisation of education and economic competitiveness.

Interestingly, these programs have also served as a platform to circulate discourses of social equality and even peace building, as I discuss below. These seem at odds with social realities. As part of the rationale for implementing ELT policies, the government has oftentimes associated the need to learn this language with social development and justice. This can be seen in the document launching the National Programme of English, where the Ministry of Education (2014b) explains that this program contributes to social equity, inclusion and homogeneity in so far as the policy makes English accessible to people from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Another example can be found on the website of the Colombian Presidency, where the president is quoted from his welcome speech on the arrival of 105 volunteer foreign English language instructors.

In the report (Presidencia-de-la-Republica, 2014), President Santos claims that “to be able to teach hundreds of thousands of Colombians to have a second language, English, in this case, is also to grow peace.” The same report also explains that, in the eyes of the president, making the country bilingual is a way to promote social justice and equity since, quoting the president, “it opens opportunities to have a better job and better future not only in Colombia but also abroad.” It is also interesting that the president has used the implementation of the ELT policy as another action connected to what perhaps can be seen as his most important political project: peace negotiations with guerrilla groups. He has, however, not explicitly explained what exactly he means by growing peace through English.

The latest remarkable move highlighting the social impact of ELT is the development of curricular guidelines in the form of learning rights (MEN, 2016a). In addition to curricular guidelines launched a decade ago, the Ministry of Education (2006) recently made available additional curricular guidelines through what they called *The Colombia Bilingüe English Kit*. One of the documents in this kit is *The English Basic Learning Rights*, which contains the descriptors of the knowledge and skills that students must learn in the English class throughout high school (MEN, 2016a).

In this article, I argue that there are several contradictions in the rhetoric on the social impact of ELT policies and that it is, therefore, relevant to point at issues that need to be considered in order to address such contradictions. For example, one question that needs to be asked is about the extent to which the policy represents real opportunities for everyone. In relation to this question, local researchers have already asserted that, although the ELT programs seem to be intended for all children at school, due to the unbalanced socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the country, the alleged opportunities for all are in fact available to only just a few (Cárdenas, 2006; Guerrero, 2008). If we compare private and state schools, for instance, we find that in the latter there are usually very limited hours of instruction devoted to English (usually 30 minutes per week in primary school and 3 hours in secondary), the number of students per classroom is often high (in some cases over 35 students), and there is a scarce use of this language in everyday interactions (Sánchez & Obando, 2008).

The contradictions are also evident in the job market, where arguments to have better job opportunities in Colombia and abroad are highly debatable, as suggested by Herazo Rivera, Jerez

Rodríguez and Lorduy Arellano (2012). Drawing on statistical data and official reports, Herazo Rivera et al. (2012) suggest that, in the labour market, the demand for speakers of English is rather low and opportunities for intercultural exchange prove to be quite limited. They also argue that, due to the fact that most of the jobs requiring English are located in the two main cities of the country, “the desired bilingualism, if achieved, would be an urban phenomenon mostly, deepening the social educational inequity between cities and rural areas” (p. 209).

Furthermore, one can wonder, if the policy is intended to make English available to everyone, why is it that the policy is currently focused on only 350 state schools (out of approximately 8200) nationwide (MEN, 2016b)? What will happen with all the other schools? What chances can institutions in remote rural areas have to be part of the focus institutions? And more generally, whose agenda is forwarded through policies that prioritise English teaching and marginalise other needs in contexts plagued with diverse forms of social and educational inequality? While there are no immediate answers to these questions, it is clear that, in these circumstances, discourses on social equality and opportunity are highly contradictory with how the ELT policy has been set up.

In short, the rhetoric on the social impact promoted in the policy still needs to be translated into facts. This paper attempts to contribute to tackling this issue by analysing how issues of social (in)equality connect with the opportunities English is supposed to offer. To develop such analysis, informed by the theoretical accounts of social justice offered by Fraser (1997, 2007, 2008; Fraser & Honneth, 2003), this study focused on rural contexts where, as discussed below, the issues of cultural and economic injustices are more prominent. The central question guiding this exploration is: From the angle of rural contexts, what factors need to be considered in ELT education policies that take the banner of social development and equality?

The Colombian rural context

As discussed, the architecture of ELT programs in the country has been heavily accompanied by political agendas on internationalisation, opportunity, economic growth and social development. However, up to now there seems to have been little awareness in academic and public discourses of how these ideas come to play in many rural regions where these discourses, through English, clash with evident issues of social inequality. To better illustrate this argument, it is necessary to provide some information about the Colombian rural context.

The United Nations Programme for Development (PNUD, using its initials in Spanish, 2011) reports that Colombia is more rural than traditionally acknowledged. The report shows that 94.4% of the physical territory is rural, 72.5% of Colombian municipalities is rural and 31.6% of Colombians live in rural areas. In spite of these facts, PNUD also explains that in Colombia what is rural is usually undervalued, since the development model of the country has conventionally been urban-oriented. For over 50 years now, the country has focused on the idea that progress and a better quality of life are more viable in urban centres. This has been detrimental to the rural society that, as a result of modernisation models oriented to urban industrialisation, has been relegated and subjected to a socioeconomic structure that has worsened issues of poverty, inequality and lack of opportunities (PNUD, 2011).

This is a phenomenon that post-development theorists such as Arturo Escobar (e.g., 2005, 2007) critique as being the result of an eclipsed western-oriented conception of development. According to Escobar, countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa have been highly influenced by a singularised conception of development that seems to be only possible by means of industrialisation, urbanism and application of imported educational models from the so-called

First World. Contradictorily, as Escobar (2005) explains, and as has happened in Colombia, the pursuit of these ideals has marginalised “the knowledge, voices and concerns of those who, paradoxically, should benefit the most with development: poor people” (p. 19).

The report by the PNUD (2011) further asserts that the current development model in rural areas, which is based on economic openness (free trade with foreign markets) aligned with neoliberal policies (deregulation of markets from the State, privatisation and decentralisation), appears to be disadvantageous for rural dwellers in several ways. For example, among other things, it is explained that this model: a) does not promote human development, but rather makes the rural inhabitants more vulnerable; b) has failed to converge rural and urban economies; c) is not democratic, and d) lacks the establishment of rural institutions which could represent the political interests of people in rural areas. All this is evident in the lack of opportunities people have to fully develop their potentials and capabilities, the restricted options available to develop profitable economic activities, the economic model benefitting powerful agricultural entrepreneurs rather than small farmers, the rural and urban socioeconomic affairs being dealt with separately, and little or no political representation of rural people’s voices and interests in public decision-making (PNUD, 2011).

As a consequence, poverty has become a pervasive phenomenon. As Perry (2010) explains, most people in rural areas make a living out of agricultural activities, which are in most cases not very profitable. Approximately 70% of rural workers earn less than a minimum monthly wage (737.717 Colombian Peso, approximately US \$256.86, as at February 2017) a phenomenon that is less frequent in urban locations where 31% earn less than this minimum.

In terms of education, the study by the PNUD (2011) and other studies (e.g., Lackin & Gasperini, 2004; López & Núñez, 2007; Matijasevic, 2014; Perfetti, 2003; WorldBank, 2007) have shown how the education system of rural areas has proved unsatisfactory. These reports suggest that insufficient and under-resourced schools, high dropout rates and low access to higher education are some of the main issues impacting on rural education in the country. As a result, only 48 out of 100 students in rural areas finish their basic education (9th grade), while 82 out of 100 do so in urban locations (Delgado, 2014). In these circumstances, it is no surprise, as Delgado (2014) also reports, that rural students are usually outperformed in all national standardised examinations.

On the other hand, it is also worth noting that the education system in rural areas has been complemented by a Rural Education Project. Its aim is to increase the coverage of education from preschool to middle school and to make it more pertinent (MEN, 2013b). According to the Ministry of Education, the Rural Education Project consists of a group of flexible and alternative educational strategies that, apart from providing further opportunities for rural students, also aims to support rural schools in processes of curriculum development, the use of ICTs, improvement of the teaching of a foreign language (English) and the design of pedagogical projects. This project has contributed to providing more chances for rural citizens. Nevertheless, as a study by the World Bank (2007) shows, since the problems of these regions are deeply serious, the impact of the Rural Education Project is still unsatisfactory. In light of all these issues, a theoretical account of the notion of social justice gains importance.

Social justice as redistribution and recognition

Nancy Fraser’s (1996, 1997, 2000, 2008; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) two-dimensional approach to social justice is concerned with both socioeconomic structures and cultural hierarchies. Fraser uses the notion of parity of participation as the guiding principle for her theory. Following this notion, justice is understood as a social state of affairs, where people—regardless of their skin

colour, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, place of origin, or economic situation—are respected and provided with the conditions to participate as peers in having access to material resources (e.g., well paid jobs, education, healthcare, infrastructure). From this point of view, “overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction” (Fraser, 2009, p. 16).

In this approach, Fraser (2009) explicates that there are two broad dimensions in which parity of participation can be impeded: economic structures and cultural statuses. She coins the terms *socioeconomic redistribution* and *cultural recognition* to refer to the issues of social (in)equality that arise in each of these dimensions respectively. Thus, in the realm of redistribution, Fraser (2009) refers to a traditional socioeconomic understanding of social justice that deals with a fair distribution of “divisible goods, usually economic in nature” (p. 3). In this realm, Fraser (1996) further asserts that social injustices can take the form of, for instance:

exploitation (having the fruits of one’s labour appropriated for the benefit of others), economic marginalisation (being confined to undesirable or poorly paid work or being denied access to income-generating labour altogether) and deprivation (being denied an adequate material standard of living. (p. 7)

In the realm of recognition, Fraser (1996; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) refers to claims for social justice that are rooted in cultural norms. Injustices of cultural recognition are caused by lesser respect, esteem and prestige assigned to particular social groups. Examples of this include:

cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one’s own); nonrecognition (being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one’s own culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions). (Fraser, 1996, p. 7)

Taking the case of Colombian ELT policies, Fraser’s (1996; 2009; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) theory is useful to examine how economic marginalisation and deprivation evident in the socioeconomic constraints of rural areas discussed above are social injustices that do not escape the ELT classroom. Similarly, regarding the sociocultural dimension, Fraser’s work (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003) serves as a point of reference to analyse the “lesser respect, esteem, and prestige [awarded, for instance, to rural communities] relative to other groups in society” (p. 14).

In the same vein, Fraser’s proposals offer theoretical grounds to analyse the misrecognition of rural classrooms and English language teachers in the implementation of national language policies as further instances of social injustice. All this is in tune with the idea that in the field of ELT it is necessary to go beyond the emphasis on intercultural matters and consider social structures built on neoliberal principles (Zotzmann & Hernández-Zamora, 2013).

The study

I am drawing on a larger study of the current state of affairs of ELT in Colombian rural areas. The study aimed to tackle the apparent invisibility of teachers and their practices in a time of active ELT policy making. The study had three main objectives:

1. provide a grounded account of what it is like to teach English in rural Colombia, a context far removed from the idealisations of policy makers;
2. explore how the policy, on the one hand, and challenging issues of social inequality, on the other, come to bear in both teachers' practices and their professional identities; and in so doing,
3. position rural teachers in the national ELT landscape.

Thus, the study focused on the social issues that more prominently have impacted teachers' practices, how those social issues are negotiated with policy demands and how, in this negotiation, teachers' sense of who they are is configured. The study followed a combination of narrative and ethnographic approaches to research the experiences of 10 teachers located in seven different schools in seven different municipalities of four different regions of the country. Pseudonyms have been used in this study to protect the identity of the participants.

Teachers' written and oral accounts of their experiences as well as in-site observations were the sources of data. Teachers were invited to write teaching biographies (TB). They were also interviewed twice. Interview 1 (INT1), conducted before field observations, largely focused on teachers' work histories, future plans and feelings towards the profession as well as their perceptions of their students and the community. Interview 2 (INT2), after field observations, focused on further probing points teachers made in the previous interview and aspects drawn from the observations. Field observations mainly worked as an ethnographic tool (Green & Bloome, 2004) that permitted me to have a feel of the participants' working environments and, thus, enrich their narratives.

Data analysis focused not only on *what* teachers said but also on *how* they said it. Thus a combination of analytical tools was used. Informed by the theoretical underpinnings of this study, I established thematic categories to analyse the different types of data and theorise across the cases that each participant represented. For analysing the form, I made use of positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothbart, & Sabat, 2009) as an analytical framework to grasp the ways in which teachers presented themselves as "observably and subjectively coherent" professionals (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48) in the storylines they produced both in written and oral forms.

In the following sections, drawing on the concepts of Fraser's cultural recognition and socioeconomic distribution, I attempt to point out some issues that are necessary to consider in order to translate into actions the rhetoric of the social impact of ELT.

A misrecognised rural context in the architecture of ELT policy

In this study, it became apparent that the evident challenges of the rural context, sketched above, seem to have contributed to the construction of negative images of rurality. A general observation is that there seems to be a widespread belief that rural students and teachers are less capable than their urban counterparts. This is reflected in the reluctance to accept a job in rural schools and in the negative preconceptions that teachers held before actually going to these schools. As shall be argued, these attitudes are the result of a misrecognition of the rural context.

As exemplified in the following excerpt, teachers had to combat the negative preconceptions that they held about what it was going to be like to work in rural regions. For instance, as Eva comments, general beliefs included the idea that schools were ugly and quite far away, with a lack of resources and, as she also said "isolated in the jungle" (Eva:TB):

My expectations before, when I finished the university were to work in a town or in a city, I did not see myself in a rural area because I thought it was far, that maybe there were not many resources, I imagined the school was rather ugly, I did not know, I did not have much knowledge of rural schools ... and when I arrived, I realised that it was a beautiful school, with a beautiful infrastructure, I liked it. (Eva: INT1)

Similar negative ideas were even held by teachers with rural backgrounds, as was the case with Maria. Once she became a professional, she thought that working in a rural environment was something hard and that she deserved better. She even described the option in pejorative terms against rural inhabitants, by saying that she deserved “not to get smeared by countryside people” (no untarse de gente del campo).

I am from the countryside ... however, when I was going to start [to work as a teacher] I thought that going to work in the countryside was very difficult, and that maybe those kids wouldn't learn, I mean one has the idea that working in a rural location is not for oneself. One wants like staying in the city, not to get smeared by countryside people, although one was raised in the countryside and knew how the countryside was like, but as one was already professional, one thinks differently ... I always speak of the teachers, spectacular, the teachers, a very kind principal and of course the students too. The students, very kind, many enthusiastic about learning, about moving forward. (Maria: INT1)

As illustrated in the following quotes, these negative ideas also include doubting the capacity of students to learn English, as some teachers supposed that it would be very hard to motivate students or that they would most probably not learn easily. Dora and Clara more specifically referred to things like pronunciation as issues that would demand a lot of effort from students:

I had the idea that they were not going to be able to do the pronunciation. But I was wrong, with practice, for example, they like very much to sing in English, so I am constantly looking for songs that they like, it has indeed changed a lot, my way of thinking has changed because they are able to do that. (Dora:INT1)

Nonetheless, these three examples also illustrate how teachers' own experiences have proved their negative preconceptions wrong. This is a point I shall return to later. For the time being, it is important to highlight that the opinions some teachers held were highly negative, before actually experiencing what working in a rural location was like. Most of them tended to associate the rural context with isolation, ugliness, ignorance and incapacity.

Therefore, as Eva and Maria state, they expected to find a job in urban locations. These negative opinions seem to be a reflection of frequent allusions to rurality in terms of backwardness and difficulty, as found in periodic news reports (e.g., “Así es Colombia Rural” [This is rural Colombia], 2012), economic rural censuses (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística [DANE], 2015) or everyday conversations. At the same time, these opinions translate into lower esteem for what is rural. As discussed earlier, these negative images of rurality have been fuelled by the urban-oriented development model operating in the country for over half a century (PNUD, 2011), under the illusion that progress and a better quality of life are more likely to take place through industrialisation and urbanism, as critiqued by post-development theorists such as Arturo Escobar (e.g., 2005, 2007).

Some of these *a priori* concerns are indeed confirmed in some of the stories teachers tell (and in my experience carrying out the fieldwork), especially in relation to issues of conflict, difficult access, and the challenge of familiarising students with English. In spite of that, and as the previous quotes confirm, what is rural is routinely denigrated, sometimes without a full appreciation of other dimensions. For instance, those preliminary negative ideas of teachers have either changed or have been outweighed by other understandings they have come to realise through their experiences.

Looking back at the previous three excerpts, we can see that Eva found that the school had a good infrastructure and was not as “ugly” as she had feared. Maria found that, in most of these rural schools, she usually came across very supportive colleagues and administrators, as well as “kind and enthusiastic students.” Similarly, Dora has realised that she “was wrong” to think that students could not get English pronunciation right. She has found that students could actually use English in their everyday life and interactions (e.g., for greeting, thanking and singing). These reconsiderations of their initial preconceptions indicate that the teachers have also gone through a process of dispelling some of the negative constructions of rural life, specifically that of less intelligent or capable students.

As Jairo notes, the difference between rural and urban students is not the capacities of students, but rather their access to information:

the things that, say, make different the city from the countryside [are] not in the sense that people from the countryside have less capacity than those in the city, I see here that the kids have much, much capacity. What happens is that maybe the technologies, the ways of accessing information are minimal but students have much capacity here. (Jairo:INT1)

Furthermore, as teachers started to know the rural context better, they began to notice that it could offer a rather comfortable environment for them to work in. Oftentimes teachers referred to feelings of professional well-being emerging from their experiences in rural work environments. In connection with this, in Maria’s quote above, she states that she has “felt much more comfortable working in the rural sector, especially for the human qualities of its people” (Maria:TB).

Similarly, Jairo explains that he feels good working in a rural area now, even though at the beginning he was reluctant to come for what he had heard specifically about the armed conflict with guerrilla groups in the area where he was appointed to work. He has come to value the fact that teachers are well appreciated and respected, and their work is cherished by parents and the community in these regions, much more than it would be in urban contexts. Other factors teachers highlighted as positive of the rural sector were a fairer amount of workload (compared to some of their former private schools), reasonable class sizes and the possibility of a stable job. These factors make the idea of working in a rural area not as undesirable as originally thought.

In a critical examination of imaginaries that tend to emphasise different sorts of linguistic and cognitive skills between men and women, the linguist and feminist Deborah Cameron (2016) uses the term *zombie ideas* to refer precisely to how these imaginaries are the product of hard-to-kill, misleading, socially constructed beliefs circulating in both the media and research reports. As happens with zombies, Cameron argues, these ideas do not seem to die and, on the contrary, are likely to infect more and more victims. As the present analysis shows so far, we can also apply the concept of zombie ideas to refer to the widespread negative beliefs about rural life in Colombia.

The evidence from this study suggests that teachers were infected by these beliefs and have only found an antidote through their own professional experiences in rural schools.

Ironically, as teachers become part of the rural communities by working with them, they also become subject to a lower appreciation and respect at the professional level. That was precisely the experience Ana had when she was transferred to an urban school after five years of having worked in a rural location. As we can see in the excerpt below, Ana experienced disrespect from the principal and bullying from her colleagues. The principal in the new school, for example, was reluctant to accept Ana into the school due to her rural background. Ana felt that the new principal did not trust her and therefore denied her the chance to participate in a teacher development program that she had successfully signed up to before.

Ana's new colleagues also made her life uneasy as they kept on bullying her with comments about her previous rural experience. They made comments like "where are your boots," "where is your gun" and, as she mentions later in the interview, they even felt the right to comment on how she should dress to come to the urban school. In these circumstances, Ana declares, she did not understand why her rural background could be a reason for being discriminated against if, in her view, rural students are just like urban students and teachers who work in rural locations should be even more appreciated.

Ana: In 2011 I was classified in B2 and they were choosing teachers for an immersion course, and I was in their list ... and the school principal did not trust me because I had just arrived at the school. She said "so, you come from a rural school, no." She said. "You come from a rural school, how come?" so she appointed another teacher from the school.

Researcher: So, the fact that you came from a rural school gave you a sort of a not very positive image at school? How was that?

Ana: Yes ... when I was transferred from [name of school], I arrived at a school in Ipiales ... and when she [the principal] looked at my administrative act, and read it, she looked at me and said "You come from a rural school, how come!" she said ... "you come from a rural area?" she said. "We have to accept what the Secretariat of Education sends us" That was my welcome ... and my colleagues at work went like "Ana, where did you leave your boots? Where is your gun? ... and I wondered: Why did they have to discriminate against me and tell me things just because I come from [name of village] if there are students over there, and they are human beings too? And perhaps a teacher who goes there has more merit than others here [in the city]. (Ana: INT1).

Fraser (1997) explains that social injustice in the realm of cultural recognition takes the form of disrespect to given groups in society. Judging from the ideas that the teachers had about rurality and Ana's experience in the new urban school, it can be said that there is a tendency to see rural students and even teachers as less capable or less worthy of esteem and, thus, of opportunities. In the specific case of this study, students might be seen as less worthy of having qualified teachers of English, and rural teachers less worthy of being appreciated and valued by other colleagues in non-rural locations, and both teachers and students as less worthy of benefitting from strategies being implemented to support ELT processes (i.e., professional development, access to available resources, being a focus institution for the development of new strategies for

ELT). These cases illustrate the variety of forms of misrecognition, which may be institutionalised formally by means of, for example, “government policies” or informally by, for instance, “sedimented social practices of civil society” (Fraser, 2000, p. 114).

As shown, however, this lesser esteem and disrespect are the products of a misrecognition of the rural sector that many times prevents the appreciation of the full potential of rural communities. As Jairo points out above, he has come to recognise that rural students are as capable as any other students in urban locations. In Ana’s case, she turned out to have one of the highest scores of the region in the periodic evaluation conducted by the Ministry of Education for teachers who wanted to be promoted. Not only was Ana promoted in the salary scale, but she was also offered a position to join a national program as a mentor for other teachers. These events highlight how misleading general biases towards rurality can be.

The discussion so far suggests that there is a need to appreciate the possibilities that the rural sector may offer and broaden the understanding of it beyond the lines of difficulty, backwardness and social struggle and a misguided belief that its people are less capable. These problems of misrecognition, as Fraser (2000) explains and as we will see in the remainder of this article, are imbricated with economic inequality as well.

The impact of unfair socioeconomic structures on ELT

Following Zotzmann and Hernández-Zamora (2013) in order to question inequality in the field of ELT, it is not enough to scrutinise cultural dimensions. It is necessary to also analyse economic arrangements in society or what Fraser (1997) calls redistribution. In fact, this study shows that some of the most salient challenging factors to negotiate when teaching English in rural schools are related to social injustices such as economic marginalisation and poverty. As discussed above, research reports point out that over two-thirds of rural inhabitants in Colombia are poor and over one-third are extremely poor (Perry, 2010; PNUD, 2011).

In this context, the economic limitations translate directly into an uncertainty to make sense of English as a vehicle for social development, opportunity and progress for Colombian rural citizens, as is stated in the ELT policy. One sign of this is the low probability of having access to higher education. Earning a professional degree is the foremost immediate connection that students can make between learning English and better work and study opportunities. It is also a precondition for being able to compete for these opportunities either within Colombia or abroad.

Despite these facts, this study confirms that factors such as the scarce availability of higher education programs in rural regions, low income and the poor performance of rural students in national examinations (Matijasevic, 2014) continue to be major obstacles for rural students to access higher education. Participants especially referred to economic difficulties. As already noted, the income of rural workers is very low, insufficient to pay for the fees and living expenses of their children, who usually have to settle in one of the main cities where the offer of higher education is concentrated. In addition, as Matijasevic also shows, mainly because of precarious schooling conditions, 82% of rural schools obtain medium or low scores in national examinations—compared to 48% in urban schools—and this reduces the possibilities for rural students to compete for places in state funded universities, where these scores are taken as essential requirements. Consequently, teachers report that only a small percentage of rural students can successfully continue their education. The other students tend to either move to a city and find a (usually) low skilled job or stay in the region doing the same activities as their parents (i.e., agriculture), under the same unfavourable conditions. All this, in turn, implies that rural students tend to see the so-called benefits of English as something rather unreachable.

Another factor that causes the low number of rural students in higher education is that it is not a goal for many families. In the view of Clara, that is certainly the case in the community where she works. She explains:

Very few students go to the university also because they [their parents] feel very proud when their child finishes high school. For them it is a pride to say that their child holds a high school degree and that's it ... very few families are interested in their children continuing to study. (Clara:INT1)

Clara explains that parents, in many cases, did not have the chance to finish high school themselves and so for them it might be sufficiently gratifying to see their children going beyond that point. In short, then, higher education appears to be something unaffordable and unreachable and, at times, something beyond the expectations of families.

Unfortunately, the impact of the unfair socioeconomic situation for rural students is not only evident in the difficulties experienced by families to support their children to access higher education. The participants of this study have also witnessed that:

1. students also see school as a place where they can obtain free food (mentioned by Lily, Eva, Dora);
2. it is quite difficult for parents to attend school meetings because they cannot afford to 'lose' a day of work (observed by all);
3. children usually have to work (reported by all);
4. on occasions, students have to take care of themselves for several days as parents undertake temporary jobs that demand being away (as explained by Dora, Clara, Ana);
5. students are likely to drop out as parents do not have a stable job and have to move away frequently (as has happened in Clara's school);
6. parents who borrow money from banks are likely to lose everything as they have to sell their products very cheaply (stated by Lily).

On this basis and stemming from Fraser's account of social justice (see Fraser & Honneth, 2003), it can be said that rural families are likely to be subjected to "economic marginalisation" and "deprivation" (p. 13). Rural workers are usually subjected to undertaking hard and poorly remunerated jobs and small farmers do not have the necessary guarantees to make their agricultural activities profitable. Therefore, thinking of the future possibilities that further education or English may open is likely not to be in the list of primary concerns for rural families. This fact may also explain the pride parents may feel solely by having their children earn a high school degree. As other findings of the wider study suggest, making English fit in the list of needs or desires of these families becomes a real challenge.

Finally, although the length of this article does not allow me to discuss in detail teachers' reactions to these problems, it is important to highlight that, as they become knowledgeable of the sorts of economic problems students have to deal with, they feel their work is affected too. Following positioning theory (Harré et al., 2009), teachers tend to position themselves as professionals with the duty to try to do what is in their reach to help students. As Ana said, "education is a life saver" (Ana:INT1) and they need to invest in it (Norton, 1995).

In doing so, teachers appear to expand their professional practice far beyond being language instructors to act as counsellors, role-models, fun providers and cultivators of aspirations. This suggests that the work of a rural teacher entails much more than training students to reach a

given proficiency level. It involves being sensitive to students' problems and attempting to—using Pennycook's (2001) term—"alleviate [their social] pains" (p. 7). Although these activities are not included in the content teachers are to cover in their lessons, the socioeconomic challenges of the context have led teachers to make them part of what their practice is about.

Discussion

This paper has analysed what it means to teach English in Colombian rural contexts, in light of issues of social inequality that affect rural communities. The analysis takes place at a crucial moment in the history of the country, where the most important political agenda in the last six years has been the negotiation of a peace agreement with Colombian guerrillas after over half a century of civil war. In light of this political context, learning English (enforced through language policy) has been put forward as an important strategy contributing to social equality, social development and peace-building. From the angle of rural contexts, it has been the aim of this paper to point out concrete issues of social inequality that need to be addressed if there is a serious intention of making English learning an instrument to pursue social development.

Drawing on the theoretical notions of cultural recognition and socioeconomic redistribution (Fraser, 1997) as theoretical bases, the previous analysis shows that, from the perspective of rural contexts, ELT education policy endorsing social justice must consider two main issues. These are:

1. a lower appreciation of what is rural, which involves disparaging images of rural life and capacities of rural students and teachers, and
2. the deprivation and economic marginalisation of rural communities.

With regards to the first, it is worth recalling that Nancy Fraser (1997, 2009) grounds her account of social justice in the notion of parity of participation of people who, regardless of factors such as skin colour, cultural background, place of origin or economic situation, are respected and provided with the conditions that enable them to participate as peers through having access to material resources. This study suggests that those living in the rural context have not been recognised as peers, primarily because rural students and even teachers are likely to have to combat a lower appreciation of who they are and what they are able to do.

As noted, doubting students' and teachers' capacities to learn or teach English can be seen as (just) one instance in which such lower appreciation comes about. It was shown that, although teachers were initially "infected" by negative ideas of rurality, they have been able to overcome these biases through their first-hand experiences at schools. However, the lower appreciation of what rural is still needs to be addressed by a symbolic cultural recognition of rural inhabitants as peers with the same potentials of people from metropolitan areas. This is not guaranteed just by setting the same education goals for everyone, or by formulating learning descriptors in the form of rights. It starts by recognising that what is rural is not subsidiary to what is urban and, thus, that the capacities of rural inhabitants are in no way inferior.

This recognition, as Fraser would argue, necessarily implies transformative socioeconomic measures (redistribution). In other words, referring now to the second issue, it is also necessary to make deep socioeconomic structural changes. A precondition for integrating English into the life of rural families is to guarantee profitable economic activities to provide adequate living standards and opportunities for children to continue their education. Only then, the promise of English (better future, more opportunities and, thus, social development) will start to make more sense for more rural (and perhaps also urban) citizens.

Following the recommendations of previous research reports (Grupo-Dialogo-Rural, 2012; Matijasevic, 2014; Perry, 2010; PNUD, 2011), for this to happen it is necessary to find long-term solutions to socioeconomic problems by, among other possible actions, converging rural and urban economies, investing more in social welfare for rural communities, improving the redistribution of productive lands, devising opportunities that benefit small farmers over big rural entrepreneurs, and increasing political representation for rural inhabitants. In short, in addition to a cultural misrecognition of rurality, the lack of ample opportunities to access higher education and the absence of guarantees for rural families to be able to reach economic prosperity and have good standards of material living, emerge in this study as some of the main factors conflicting with the social development and well-being associated with English in language policies.

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