FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' EFL WRITING PROFICIENCY IN CALI

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to both of my parents. My father, Pablo Biancha who did not only raise me, and nurture me but also supported and accepted me unconditionally in every single decision I have made. My mother, Luz Dary Ramirez, for her endless love, support and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

"Good writers are good readers…good reading is the key to becoming a good writer" (Rodriguez Kessler, 2006:5-6). The integration of reading and writing in L1 and L2 teaching is not new. However, little attention has been directed towards the teaching of EFL English writing in the Colombian context. This paper reports a research carried out with 125 students and 19 teachers from low strata public and no-bilingual private schools in the city of Cali, Colombia. First, the results of this study reveal what are the principal teaching practices and factors that negatively influence high school students' EFL writing proficiency and second I explore the possibility of integrating reading activities with writing activities as a possible solution for some of factors found.

Key words: EFL writing, reading, integration, learning, teaching

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Chapter 1: Introduction:

As reading and writing are both language processes, one would assume a lot of research has been carried out on the effects their integration may have in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. However, it is only until recently that researchers and teachers have given enough attention to the reading-writing connection in the teaching of L1 and L2 academic circles (Musthafa, 1994; Hirvela, 2004; Farahzad & Emam, 2010).

A quick review of the literature reveals that in the last decade researchers have been extremely interested in examining the relationships between the processes involved in the comprehension and production of texts from different fields of study; included the teaching of English as a foreign language (Gernsbacher, 1990; Parodi, 1998; Brem, Russell, & Weems, 2001). However, in Colombia, reading and writing have traditionally been considered individual skills that can be taught independently regardless of the context.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the advantages of connecting reading activities when teaching EFL writing in public schools in Santiago de Cali from a discourse and cognitive perspective adopting a communicative approach (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Cummins, 1981; Tierney & Mosenthal (1983); Zamel & Spack 2002).

The present study has two objectives. The first one is to identify and analyze current teaching practices and factors that influence the development of EFL writing proficiency and second, to characterize the benefits of reading activities in the teaching of EFL writing by documenting data provided by studies with the same research scope and similar teaching context.

It was assumed from the beginning that there are valuable advantages from connecting reading when teaching EFL writing, but I want to identify what advantages would be the most valuable in the context in which English is taught currently in public and private high schools in Cali-Colombia

Three main conclusions emerged. First, EFL writing in high school public and private, no-bilingual schools in Cali must no longer be taught through sentences' translation and repetitive patterns as it has been done for many decades now. Second, teaching practices have big effects on students' motivation and EFL writing proficiency. Third, significant benefits are found when connecting writing with reading activities, especially from a communicative point of view where writing is a creative and not a repetitive process.

In order to achieve the two objectives of this study, two different surveys were designed and applied to both students and teachers separately. Then focus groups were carried out with students and interviews were done to teachers from both public and low social strata private schools.

Chapter 2: Background of the Study

In 1996 The Ministerio de Educacion Nacional (MEN) decided to promote the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language in Colombia. Since then, a number of programs and projects have been developed in order to improve Colombian students' English proficiency level in the four basic skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, almost two decades have passed and it seems there have not been significant results especially when it comes to written communication.

Discussions of how to teach EFL writing have usually focused on it as an independent skill. This perspective has led to extensive research of techniques and methods that usually concentrate on legions of grammar exercises, translating sentences, repetitive patterns, workbooks and textbook activities that seen from a communicative perspective provide significant "practice".

I will argue here for a different focus when teaching EFL writing. Based on the analysis of the data collected in this study. Rather than focusing on specific activities, I wish to focus on the process of writing as a creative process and the need of a constant and valuable in-put (Krashen, 1985).

Krashen's understandable input hypothesis plays an important role in this study, due to the fact that it has been researched and proved that as long as input is understood, students will be exposed to linguistic, pragmatic and cultural information which can be used as tools and resources to embark on the development of a foreign language proficiency.

Even though, criticism has been made towards Krashen's understandable input hypothesis due to the fact not all learners can be at the same level of linguistic competence at the same time, studies have shown that input provides more than a linguistic component, it also offers ideas and models of language use.

From this perspective and in this study, reading is proposed as the main source of available input, due to the fact that the context in which EFL writing is taught in public and low social strata private schools limits the use of other sources of available in-put or might not be as advantageous. Krashen's theory plays an important role since it is used as foundation to explain some of the reasons why students' EFL writing proficiency is affected due to the lack of available input.

This model of learning to *write by reading* is based on different studies of how EFL students learn successfully to write (Alderson, 2000; Hirvela, 2004; Goldman & Trueba, 1987; Grabe, 2003; Lewis, 2001, Nation, 1990) as well as a longer and more extensive research history on the topic (Stotsky, 1983; Smith, 1984; Tierney, 1992; Beck & Olah, 2001; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

Rather than trying to recast all of the past research studies that have been carried out. I will summarize and provide some updates of the major points of what has gone before when it comes to the relations of reading and writing in the field of L1, L2 and foreign language teaching.

To start it is important to mention that many researchers and studies have found out that reading and writing are not independent skills on the contrary they depend upon another. Krashen, S.D. (1984) and McQuillan, J (1994) both agree on the notion that from a cognitive point of view reading and writing share a very similar set of abilities that affect short and long-term memory. Ellis (2008) and Freeman, Y & Freeman, D (1994) state that anything that improves one of these skills may have implications for the other.

In a study, Shatil, Share & Levin (2000) affirm reading and writing correlate with each other since the beginning of literacy. Their study with kindergartners showed students' writing behaviors were a predictive base for subsequent reading achievements and vice versa.

In a study which involved children learning to write, Smith (1984) found out that reading enhances writing, in his study he states reading is a collaborative learning process during which the reader is not reading alone but reading like a writer. And, in L2 acquisition with advanced learners, it is probably Cummins

(1981) the one who expresses the solidest feeling for interlingual transfer of literacy skills with his Interdependence hypothesis.

The second notion which, has recently received great attention from researchers, explores the idea that writing has to be based on domain knowledge, in order for people to write about something, they need information to base and clarify their ideas. Reading is from a cognitive point of view a verifiable source of domain knowledge needed to develop the ability to infer, organize and remember information (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000).

One could say the role of reading in learning content or information is evident since people often learn new things by reading. Fitzgerald & Shanahan (2000) explore this idea with a wider scope stating there are several categories of knowledge and the one that is provided by reading deals with the functions and purposes of reading and writing and their interaction.

Fitzgerald & Shanahan (2000) provide valuable information on how being a writer can influence the process of being a reader, they explain that if readers are given insights about the intentions of the writer or vice versa, this could help the process of becoming a writer by learning how to anticipate misunderstanding, confusion or loss of information.

A third and last major area of investigation deals with the statement that reading and writing share common linguistic features including phonemic,

orthographic, morphological, lexical, syntactic and discourse elements (Brown, 2007; Breland & Jones, 1984; Bamford & Day,1997). MacArthur, Graham and Fitzgerald (2006) affirm in past studies that typically the amounts of linguistic variance shared across reading and writing hardly ever exceed 50%, but since the late 90's there have been studies which have shown reading and writing shared linguistic characteristics up until 85% for word factors and 65% for text factors.

Berninger, Abbott, Graham, Richards (2002) add a linguistic feature relationship that accepts reading and writing are bidirectional skills. He explains that not only can word recognition abilities of reading influence writing fluency, but also that learning to write influences the abilities of learners to recognize word patterns when reading.

From a pedagogical perspective, these relevant theories and research findings show how important it is to correlate reading and writing since they are interrelated. However, the first part of this study identified that EFL writing instruction is being taught through sentences' translation and through the use of repetitive patterns, which in turn has led to poor writers who focus more on letters and structures than meaning.

Some of the reasons claimed for making such assumption on the EFL writing teaching in public and low social strata high schools were based on the data collected, students' perceptions and experiences on their English classes from

different public and private, non-bilingual schools. Three main patterns were identified in the research study:

- Students expressed EFL writing in schools is taught merely through sentences translation and isolated personal question assignments.
- Students said there is not enough usage of meaningful input in EFL classes.
- Students emphasized reading activities are completely carried out independently from writing assignments.

Taking into account the theories and research findings provided by different studies and the information obtained during the first part of this study, I strongly believe EFL writing should not be taught in such way since writing should be taught as a process in order to convey meaning and sense (Oviedo, 2009). This situation has interested me and consequently prompted me to choose this topic and to write the present thesis on EFL teaching with its focus on EFL writing proficiency.

Chapter 3: General and Specific Objectives

General

To identify and analyze current teaching practices and factors that influence EFL writing proficiency in high school students.

Specific

To describe and analyze the effects current teaching practices have on high school students' proficiency EFL writing.

To characterize the benefits of reading activities in the teaching of EFL writing.

Chapter 4: Significance of the Study

According to El Programa Nacional de Bilinguismo, since 2000 the Colombian government has been investing in developing programs to teach teachers how to teach English in a communicative and effective way. The current study contributes with an insight of the current teaching model used to teach EFL writing in public and low social strata private schools in Cali.

Additionally, this could be used as a reference to redesign school programs for teachers in both low strata private and public sectors, as well as for future teacher training programs.

Chapter 5: Literature Review

The following literature review analyzes key concepts within the communicative perspective of teaching a second or foreign language as a way of conveying and communicating sense and ideas. I will start first by eliciting different viewpoints about the role of input in EFL learning and second by providing evidence on the advantages of using EFL reading as comprehensible input to develop EFL writing proficiency. All for the purpose of showing that the best way to develop EFL writing proficiency is through EFL comprehensive reading teaching.

The role of Input in Teaching EFL Writing

According to Krashen (1958:2) "input is the language data which the learner is exposed to". This data comes as any type of information students can internalize, comprehend, retain and/or reject. There are a vast number of well-known researchers that recognize the importance of input as a key factor in language learning and acquisition. For example, Ellis (1985) who points out that for second language acquisition to take place there must be L2 input available to the learners and Widdowson (1978) that acknowledges the same by stating learners are able to communicate or generate sense by negotiating input through interaction among others.

When it comes to EFL writing learning and teaching, there is abundant literature indicating that comprehensible input is necessary. Take for instance; Nation (2009) who proposes four main principles for teaching to bring experience and knowledge into the class through input or Brown (2007), who provides valuable information on the issue by suggesting teachers could help students build the writing habit by providing sufficient and interesting input.

"…we must make sure that we give them enough information to do what we have asked. We will want to make sure that they have enough of the right kind of language to do the task… we need to be ready with enough models and ideas to make sure they can never say I can't think of anything to write…"

Krashen (1984) and Ferris (2004) also add valuable information claiming "…reading is what gives the writer the feel for the look and texture of reader-based prose", and explaining reading contains messages and clues that can be used by in-development writers.

Nunan (1999) and Hirviela (2004) also substantiate this necessity by explaining and stating that in order for students to understand that "writing is a complex and cognitive process, which requires sustained intellectual effort over a considerable period of time", they need to be exposed to sufficient comprehensible input. Finally, Carson and Lek (1993:1) demonstrate that in academic settings "reading nearly always is, the basis for writing".

Although there is abundant literature that confirms comprehensible input is necessary, there is also abundant literature that suggest comprehensible input alone is insufficient (Swain 1985, 1991; Halliday & Hasan 1989). However, it is important to mention, there is not a single theory or approach to second and foreign language teaching that does not recognize the importance of input as a key factor in the learning and acquisition process of a second language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

EFL literature shows that comprehensible input is an essential factor in the learning and teaching of a foreign language. However, as Swain (1981) and Halliday and Hasan (1989) estate input alone is not enough if there is not interaction, besides exposure to comprehensible input students need to have plenty of practice with the language also.

One could say, this information allows us to come to the conclusion that comprehensible input is a key factor that must be taken into account when teaching EFL writing. In the following section, this literature review will explore the reasons why reading should be the main source of comprehensible input when developing writing proficiency in EFL classes in public and low social strata high schools in Cali.

The Positive Influence of EFL Reading on EFL Writing

Theories and researchers in the field of EFL have lately recognized the importance of reading in developing writing fluency. (Moffett, 1983; Scarcella &

Oxford, 1992; Carson & Leki, 1993; Tierney & Pearson, 1994; Rosenblatt, 1994; Allred, 1994; Oxford & Leaver, 1996; Flower and Hayes, 1994; Oxford, 2001; Tsung-Yuan & Oxford, 2002;Hirvela, 2004).

Researchers acknowledge reading is the basis of writing for different reasons. The first well-known reason has to do with the fact that writing and reading have long been considered to be related activities. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982) explain this relationship by stating that reading is the background knowledge, text and context for learners to develop writing processes which turn out to be more elaborated with the increase of reading exposure.

Research shows that as early as the 1960's numerous studies carried out by the center for Cognitive Studies at Harvard regarded writing and reading as related language processes. In his study with 4th, 6th and 9th grades Loban (1963) found important longitudinal relationships between reading and writing as measured by test scores. He affirms students who read well, write well.

Another reason has to do with the number of scholars who have contributed towards a growing conception that reading offers multiple advantages to the process of writing.

For example, Ferris and Hedgcock (2004) who state reading helps learners become aware of print-encoded messages as well as clues about how grammatical,

lexical, semantic, pragmatic and rhetorical elements are combined in order to generate sense.

Yoshimura (2008) who found out in a quasi-experiment with two groups of college students that connecting reading tasks with writing activities leads to positive effects on students' writing proficiency in different levels. Through a checklist with questions for EFL reading instructions the author discovered that students react positively to writing activities when a reading task has been developed previously and vice versa. It was also observed that students agree on how reading before writing seems to have had positive effects on their writing behavior and that reading before writing provided students with enough ideas to start and improve their writing.

A third reason is the fact that reading comprehension has also been found to be one of the most important factors in the process of writing expressions of emotions, thoughts, desires and schemes since as Hammer (2007) explains writing sometimes requires skill rather than knowledge.

In a study that was carried out with the purpose of finding out the relationship between writing achievement and levels of using reading comprehension strategies with 4th and 5th grade primary school children, Kirmizi (2009), concluded that reading for comprehension helps learners' experience with summarizing information, concluding and stating on the text written form. The author also

suggested that due to the importance of using and developing learning strategies for improving writing skills approaches such as the reading-to-write conduct should be implemented in the early years of children education.

According to Hammer (2007) learners go through a negotiation process when reading for information and to write about, since this allows them to enlarge their knowledge and provide topics to write about consciously or unconsciously. Min (2012) found out through a case study that peer written feedback is easily developed when students read each other's journal, learning logs and written comments that reflect their beliefs and practices. A quantity analysis showed and demonstrated that there was an increase of self-awareness and peer-correction knowledge on self-correcting at the end of the semester which reflected students' improvement in their EFL writing proficiency.

Taking into account the information provided, one could conclude the following; in order to develop and improve writing proficiency in Cali's public and private, non-bilingual schools it is necessary, first, to expose students to available and comprehensible input and second, reading should be the main source of comprehensible input to develop writing proficiency since it has been demonstrated by different studies that it offers learners and teachers a positive effect on skills' and ideas' development.

By using reading as the main source of available input in schools, teachers could provide students with enough data to come up with ideas to avoid the struggle when writing as Hammers (2007) proposes, also it will help students by providing messages and data that could be used later in writing.

It is important to mention that even though there are authors such as Widdowson (1978) who believe any kind of input could be used in order to develop writing proficiency, I firmly believe the best way to develop writing proficiency is through EFL reading. This is because this context has specific characteristics that require students to be exposed to a solid and available input, context which shares similar characteristics with the studies presented by Min (2012) and Kirmizi (2009).

Chapter 6: Methodology

Participants

The first phase of this study involved one hundred and twenty five college students under the age of 22, they came from different public and private schools in Cali and none of them came from a bilingual school. All of them had previously taken a placement exam in which they attained a level of English equivalent to A1 according to the Common European Framework. The students all study at the same university and at the time they were taking English level I and II with different college teachers.

Students were asked to answer a survey and take part in different focus groups. Focus groups were formed based on practical purposes only, to produce groups of manageable size and to accommodate the schedules of available resources, researchers and participants. Each focus group lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, every session was recorded for research purposes only.

The second phase of this study involved a total of nineteen primary and high school teachers. The age range was between thirty and sixty-five years of age, they came from a total of three public schools and one private school and none of them came from a bilingual school. All of them had at least 15 years of experience

teaching English as a foreign language and were currently teaching when the study took place.

Teachers were asked to answer a survey and eight of them were willing to participate in a 10 questions short interview. Three institutions allowed researchers to observe and take pictures of the material used in the English class with academic purposes exclusively and in one of the institutions it was possible to observe three different classes, with three different teachers.

Instruments

As stated earlier participants belonged to two different phases of the study. Therefore different instruments were designed and implemented to fit the needs, requirements and context of the research in each one of its stages. For the first phase of the study, I designed a 10 minutes survey that included multiple choice questions.

The first part of the survey included structured questions mainly, these questions included descriptive multiple choices questions which were included with the purpose of identifying valuable information such as parents' education, resources at school and more related to students' context. The second part of the survey included questions related to the participants' experiences during their primary and high school years.

After students had finished with the survey, focus groups were carried out and recorded in a Gesell room provided by the university. Focus groups were made up of 15 students in order to provide enough time and space for each participant to talk.

Every focus group started with a group of friendly questions in order to set up a much more relaxed environment among the participants who were present at the time. I continued with a group of experiences and behavior questions to find out what interviewees thought about EFL writing teaching in their first formal educative years. Focus groups ended with a formal farewell and a deep sincere thank you present.

For the second part of the study, a second survey was designed. Taking into account the questions used in the first survey, a new format which facilitated data collection was implemented as well as a new set of questions which looked for more specific information related to the teaching practices of EFL writing.

After the participants from the second part of the study answered the survey some of them were willing to participate in an interview with me. The interview started with an explanation of the study as well as with a short explanation of the questions included during the interview. Most of the questions set up a hypothetical situation in which I manifested cultural unawareness. A field diary was kept in each of the interventions with the purpose of taking notes for the study.

Procedures

The work carried out involved, examining in detail the educational practices used by primary and high school teachers when teaching EFL writing, as well as identifying students' perception towards these practices.

In order to achieve this, the study was developed in two different phases. Phase one took place during September of 2014. Based on my intentions and motivation as well as the information already available in the university's data base, the first group of participants was identified and selected.

The designing of tools and planning of schedules took place two weeks before the 10 focus groups and 125 surveys were carried out.

Once the data was collected, it was carefully analyzed in order to identify patterns which showed how EFL writing had been taught, how students felt about those teaching practices and what could be used to improve this situation making use of the same resources and time schools currently have.

The second phase of the study was carried out from February to April. The data collected in the first part of the study allowed new improvements to be made in the format as well as the questions included in the survey. This phase involved visiting five schools from which the majority of participants in phase one came from.

Formal written communication asking for permission to visit the schools and to carry out this part of the research were necessary. Schools are of considerable size, they hold an average of 2000 students and they are located in different areas around the city.

A total of nineteen surveys were carried out and eight interviews took place during one month. Once the data had been collected, it was analyzed and corroborated with the information obtained in the first and second phase of the study. This with the objective of having a much bigger picture of the educational practices used by these teachers to teach EFL writing in schools.

Chapter 6: Research Findings

EFL Writing Current Context and Teaching Practices

Current teaching context

As previously mentioned, this study involved two different phases in which a total of 125 students and 19 public and private teachers in Cali agreed to participate in different surveys, interviews and focus groups. These included specific questions related to the context where EFL writing is being taught.

The information obtained will be described in this section in order to provide a descriptive examination on the current situation in which English writing is being taught. Information, which will be later, analyzed in the following chapter of this thesis report.

To start it is of extreme importance to describe where the English classes take place and whom they are directed towards. Through a series of visits to schools, it was observed that; in most public and private, non-bilingual institutions. English classes have more than 38 students, classrooms only provide teachers with a board, markers and some posters, there are no cd players or TVs available for the class.

As it was also uttered and expressed by some teachers during the focus groups; classrooms are usually crowded and lack enough space and air to feel comfortable during the morning hours.

- "…El problema aquí con esa sala de computadores, es que es muy buena y todo si, el espacio es el problema, siempre está llena…"
- [1][…The issue with the computer room is that it is well-equipped…yes but it is always busy…]

Institutions do not provide internet access to students nor to teachers, in fact it is evident schools lack computers, tablets or any technological facilities that could offer students some contact with technology. There are video rooms, but as it was expressed during the focus groups by teachers it is almost impossible to book multiple classes during a school year due to the overwhelming number of users.

As students are not able to afford textbooks, books or dictionaries in English, teachers provide students with the material in order to develop their classes. In some occasions, teachers use their students' production as posters and provide an English class setting.

From this, it is possible to state the following; first schools lack technological resources to expose students to different sources of comprehensible input. This affects teachers' practices by not providing a wide range of varieties to

[1] Author's own translation June 15th, 2015.

develop activities, tasks or projects which could be used to improve students' writing proficiency.

Current teaching context: the students

The results obtained showed that the big majority of students from the public sector come from a low social strata, they usually have not been in contact with the language and they lack interest and motivation for learning English since they consider it difficult to learn and purposeless.

The majority of the students from the private sector belong to a low–intermediate social strata, their only contact with the language has been through radio and TV. They have been exposed to the language through bands, singers and movies and it seems they do not lack interest or motivation to be exposed to English as such.

Students are not asked to buy textbooks or dictionaries since schools do not want to impose extra expenses for their families. Students are only asked to bring a notebook and pens to the class. According to the information provided in the surveys, the majority of students have internet access from home or computer arcades.

Participants were asked to answer honestly about their English proficiency level in regards of their writing. It was found 70 % of them agreed that their English writing proficiency was low. 16 % of participants said their English writing was

really low and the other 14% said their English writing level was ok. 0 % of the participants expressed their English writing proficiency was good.

Participants were also asked about how well they read in English; 63% of them answered their English reading proficiency was low, 28% answered they read well, and 9% of them answered they read ok. Students' present at the university teachers were also questioned about this, they expressed students come to level I and II without any real basis for writing, students struggle to write texts since they are used to writing isolated sentences.

Out of this information, it is possible to assert the following; students at high school are not exposed to the target language as such. So they are not very motivated to learn English at school, they find it difficult to understand and learn. So they are not very eager to participate in class activities and projects.

Once they get to the university, their motivation is mainly intrinsic, and once they get more into the language, their perception changes, as well as their motivation.

Current teaching practices: the teachers

During the interviews with teachers and the visits to schools, it was confirmed that both public and private high school teachers have a degree in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Their ages vary from 30 to 57 and they usually teach from 9 to 12 different groups. Most of them have at least 7 years of

experience teaching English and they have not taught any other school subject areas before.

Teachers were asked to answer honestly about their level of English writing and reading proficiency, almost 60% of participants answered they do not write very well in English and 40 % answered they write ok in English. According to these data, teachers are not very confident about their writing skills in English, writing is considered as one of the weakest skills.

They expressed they found difficult to write long texts or stories, since they usually were too busy to practice and they consider practice to be the number one reason for their disadvantages presented in this skill. They state writing needs time and dedication, that writing requires continuous practice.

- "…Si uno no practica…no mejora…aquí es, es el punto…uno necesita practicar para poder escribir bien en inglés"
- [2][…If you do not practice, there is no improvement…that's a fact… you need practice to write in English…]

When asked about this situation in the interviews, teachers answered they did not practice enough because they usually have too many groups in charge and they lack time. The surveys provided information related to this issue, since teachers were asked when was the last time they participated in a program to improve their

[2] Author's own translation June 15th, 2015.

English language proficiency to what some of them answered they had not participated in one for a couple of years now.

Teachers were asked about their motivation towards teaching English to what they answered;

- "…pero si se dan esas oportunidades, yo las tomaría, tomaría cursos de capacitación, especializaciones, maestría…"
- [3][…if opportunities were given, I'd take them, all of them courses, training programs, masters…]

They are passionate and willing to keep improving their methodological knowledge in order to improve the quality of their classes, however they are fully aware of the financial factors preventing them from achieving this.

A section was also dedicated to ask about their students' reaction towards their current teaching practices, teachers expressed students struggle during their high school years, since some of them do not really want to be there, but there are occasions in which they can be engaged.

In conclusion, the collected data shows that, even though all teachers are qualified to teach EFL writing in high school, they are not confident enough about their writing proficiency in English. They understand that in order to improve their English proficiency they need to practice and dedicate it time. However, as

[3] Author's own translation June 15th, 2015.

expressed by some of them, it is really difficult to improve their practices through programs and courses, since they have no time.

Current teaching practices: The methodology

The first part of this study identified current teaching practices by asking students about the kind of activities they used to carry out in class.

The following chart provides information about a section from the first survey which contained a list of activities taken from Los Estandares para la Enseñanza del Ingles. Students had to check what activities they did during their high school and primary years.

As it can be observed the table shows the percentages of students who were exposed to these kinds of activities. According to the data, students are mostly required to write down isolated sentences and there is no really writing production when it comes to writing paragraphs or larger texts.

Activities	Percentages
Paragraph Writing	0%
Argumentative Essays	0%
Letters Writing	25%
Email Writing	56%
Short Stories Writing	43%

This information was later correlated with students during the focus groups, according to what was expressed, the participants explained that during elementary years, they exclusively wrote sentences in a card format, when asked about the teaching practices before, during and after these activities, participants said teachers provided an example which they had to replicate.

During their high school experience, almost all writing activities they had to carry out in class were sentences translation. According to the information provided, these activities were carried out in the following sequence; first teachers write several sentences on the board which contain a specific grammar instruction, students write those sentences on their notebook, and then students must translate one by one to be later corrected either in groups or individually.

The data collected clearly shows, EFL writing is mainly developed by grammar exercises and sentences translations. This is confirmed when in the interviews teachers expressed the importance of practice and structure memorization. Unfortunately at no time was the role of process writing mentioned as part of their practice.

This clearly shows the lack of awareness from teachers on the subject. Teachers were also asked about the kind of methodological exercises they would like to be able to implement in order to improve their EFL writing teaching practice. Different answers were provided however, the one that stood out the most was the

use of workbook exercises. As mentioned, according to the data teachers lack resources at school, they do not use a book and they usually use workbook exercises to practice sentences' structures.

In relation to materials and resources it was found out that teachers make use of workshops which include reading comprehension exercises, these reading workshops contain quality texts which students are exposed to, students have to read and answer workshops in different grades and from different levels

Participants were also asked if they had ever had a task which involved one of the reading activities the teacher proposed with an after writing activity, students said they never connected reading activities with writing activities.

Participants stated most activities were checked but not corrected since most activities were planned to be finished within a weekly two hour class. Finally students were asked what they would change if they could improve their English writing fluency, students answered they would like to have more variety of activities, time to practice and some model or help since they find the process of writing extremely difficult.

To conclude the following assertions can be made; first the teaching of EFL writing is heavily influenced by the grammar translation method, students are basically asked to translate sentences from the target language to their own and vice versa. One could assume, this practice has its foundations in the belief EFL writing

can be achieved through structure memorization due to the lack of constant methodological updates. Second, writing and reading are being taught independently with no correlation with the other.

Chapter 7: Analysis and Discussion

EFL writing current teaching issues

The data and information collected clearly shows that the teaching of EFL writing is heavily influenced by different factors. In this section, these factors will be analyzed and discussed in order to find the implications of teaching EFL writing and a possible solution for some of these issues.

Writing needs time

"Teachers that achieve exceptional success in teaching writing recognize the importance of frequent and sustained writing" (Graham and Perin, 2007, p.5)", as it was described before, the English class is no longer than two hours a week in private and public schools. This does not allow teachers to develop writing activities in class which provide enough time to plan, write, and revise, as required by the process.

It seems the context in which EFL writing is currently being taught does not favor students' internal writing process. If students do not have enough time to develop their internal processes, not much can be expected from them as it was found out in the focus groups. Based on what was observed, heard, evidenced analyzed, and obtained reading could provide a solution which somehow can help with this situation.

As reading and writing are currently being taught separately, activities which, involve both of them, can reduce the time spent if they were to be taught intertwined. For example, the workshops which are currently being used to improve students' reading skills can be integrated with a set of questions that requires students to use the information provided in the reading such as; writing an opinion, suggestion or personal statement.

Carson and Lek (1993) point out that if students use reading as the basis for the writing, much progress is expected in less time. This, of course, involves teachers to be willing to incorporate step by step the integration of these two skills in well-planned activities where previous work is expected from students, such as reading before coming to class and preparation for teachers to provide clear and well directed instructions.

Due to the reasons previously mentioned, the integration of these two skills could provide a solution to the issue of time which, is currently affecting the development of writing class activities in these institutions.

Writing needs motivation

As it was possible to observe in the focus groups writing is disliked and avoided by students because they find the activities proposed by teachers boring and frustrating;

- "…Sentarse y tener que hacer lo mismo cada semana es aburrido…yo lo que hacía era adelantar trabajo de otras materias…"

- [4][…Sitting and having to do the same activity over and over is boring… what I did was to work on other school subject areas…]

The fact that students are not in contact with the language, makes understanding difficult for them, especially when it comes to understanding. Also not presenting the language within a specific context makes the writing activities look an unnatural activity with no real purpose, which does not impress students during tasks and activities.

Raimes (1985) states learners need to feel that it is possible for them to generate ideas when writing without feeling the constant necessity of correction or approval. If teachers keep asking students to translate sentences from their native language to the target language, students will not be able to feel the purpose or the need to communicate through writing in English.

Literature says reading provides students with enough information to generate ideas at their own rhythm, avoiding frustration and negative feeling towards writing tasks. Rob, Ross and Sutherline (1986) concluded that when it comes to writing if enough reading input is provided, students are more likely to

[4] Author's own translation June 15th, 2015.

become self-sufficient writers. Self-sufficiency or autonomy in writing avoids frustration and negative attitudes towards the process.

Based on the observations, this could be a solution to improve students' motivation towards EFL writing. According to students the fact they are not in contact with the language generates frustration and anxiety, therefore short stories and interesting articles could offer students the opportunity to be exposed and more important to connect with the language.

Writing needs knowledge and ideas

As it can clearly be seen from the research findings teachers do not have the technological resources to expose their students to comprehensible input. According to Krashen (1958), EFL and SL students need to be exposed to language data in order for them to internalize, comprehend, retain and/o reject information.

Richard Peck once said "Nobody but a reader ever became a writer" and in this context this cannot be truer. According to the data collected, one could affirm EFL teachers might not be the best source of in-put for students to develop a high fluency in English writing. First because they are not very confident of their own writing skill and second because schools do not provide new technologies and resources to help solve this situation.

However, Segal (1997) presents a study in which an Israeli girl, who had serious problems in English writing, was not able to overcome these issues until her

instructor suggested her to read books during summer vacation. Segal (1997) explains the importance of available comprehensible input for L2 learners through reading. Taking this into account, one could assume that if enough input is provided through reading, students might be able to improve their EFL writing proficiency.

However, under the circumstances of the context in which EFL writing is being taught, there is something that can still be done. If teachers integrate reading with writing, they can still provide valuable and sufficient input.

Task-based activities which require students to identify ideas from texts, could allow students to be exposed to verifiable and comprehensible input. Based on the information provided by this study, three type of texts could be included in the development of the EFL writing activities. The three types of text already being used by teachers and which could be included in the development of the EFL writing activities are: Literature, online texts and essays, as well as articles from books, newspapers or magazines.

These texts could be incorporated into reading activities, which could provide enough in-put for learners to acquire grammatical structures, and discourse rules within a context instead of isolated sentences and patterns. Spandel & Stiggins (1997) assert there is no better way to learn how to write than reading what a good writer has to offer. Students can actually experience from firsthand what good

writing is all about. Reading and writing are intertwined processes, which means the practice of one contributes to the success of the other.

Writing needs more than structures

The Grammar-translation method is derived from the classical method of teaching languages such as Greek and Latin. The observations and surveys conducted in this study allow us to assert that EFL writing is mainly developed by the teaching and learning of grammar rules as well as the translation of sentences to and from the target language.

Students are required to learn grammar rules by rote and then practice these grammar rules by doing different exercises such as grammar drills and translation of sentences. Teachers provide examples through students' experiences and daily activities. However, it is clear that no suitable context is provided in order to allow any free practice or creative thinking, since these exercises are isolated and free-from-context examples.

In order to develop these activities teachers make use of materials such as workbooks, textbooks and lists of words. According to the information obtained in the surveys students' reaction towards these activities is not positive, as they find them boring and dull. However, public and low social strata high school teachers still believe they are needed in the teaching of EFL writing.

As it was possible to analyze one can assume, teachers still believe the teaching of grammar is the most important component in the teaching of EFL writing. According to the data collected the majority of participants in the study have not taken any recent methodological updates which could have allowed them to have a different perspective on the issue.

Teaching writing has always been a controversial issue in the field of Foreign Language Teaching. And while there are a vast number of approaches and techniques for teaching writing in English as a foreign language or English as a second language, according to Alsamadani (2010) there are no recent studies which advocate for the use of the Grammar Translation Method on the issue of writing or any other skill.

Richards and Rogers (2001) state the Grammar-Translation Method has been rejected as a legitimate language teaching method since it has no advocates, there is not a theory or literature behind it and it does not offer any rationale or justification for its practice. Still, they affirm the grammar translation method is still one of the most commons methods in the teaching of English around the globe.

The surveys conducted in this study assert that students firmly believe their English writing proficiency is very low even after years of practice. Teachers were also asked about their English writing proficiency which they labeled as one of their main weaknesses when communicating in English.

An effective writing method, approach or technique should allow students to understand different forms and purposes of writing in an EFL context, Graham (2008). The translation of sentences and memorization of grammar rules does not allow students to fulfill such objective, on the contrary it deeply affects students' motivation and attitudes towards the writing in English as it was expressed in the focus groups

To achieve this goal, a method, approach or technique should provide students with different models of writing, let them know how writers can manipulate different texts in order to provide sense and meaning. Grammar can do so much if accompanied by the right tool or asset, without it may be completely useless as it seems it has been in the case of the 125 participants of this study.

Chapter 9: Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

After years of EFL instruction, it is clear students do not improve their English writing proficiency level since they are only capable of writing isolated sentences. As it was possible to observe, several factors influence in the way EFL writing is currently being taught, and because of these factors the process of teaching writing is affected.

Traditionally, Colombian teachers of English as foreign language have tended to teach reading and writing separately from each other negatively affecting students' writing proficiency. However, as it was possible to explain the integration between reading and writing could provide a solution for some of these issues, this could be achieved.

First, incorporating reading and writing activities that could provide a solution for teachers' regarding time. If teachers are willing to incorporate these two skills into activities and tasks that require students to read and come prepared to class, there will be more space and time to review their writing.

Second, providing students with comprehensible input could ease students' negative feeling towards the process of writing. Students expressed they felt stressed and anxious since they find it difficult to write in English. The lack of

comprehensible input as it was demonstrated is one of the main reasons why students take so long getting ideas for writing. The more exposed students are to comprehensible input, the more ideas they can generate for their writing.

Third, being exposed to comprehensible input guarantees students will be exposed to ideas and structures, which facilitates the process of writing. Reading and writing are both cognitive processes, which share similar properties; therefore students could translate chunks of language.

Finally, reading could be used as a method, a technique and a tool allowing students to find their own language as a process even if teachers are not very confident of their own English level. Reading can ease this problematic if it is used as a main source of available input.

However, it cannot be assumed that by providing students with readings, they will automatically start writing. It is vital teachers understand, this is a process which takes time and requires preparation. That everything is connected and that grammar and structures are just one part of this process.

Second, teachers need to learn to design tasks, which effectively integrate reading and writing activities. They need to think clearly about their class' objectives and well as their intentions with reading and writing activities. This can only be carried out through training programs in which didactics and methodology

courses could provide teachers enough information about class planning and curriculum design.

Third, even though teachers could use reading activities to provide students with real and meaningful comprehensible input, it is necessary teachers improve their own proficiency level in English. In order to select and design reading activities teachers need to really comprehend and understand what their students are going to be exposed to.

Finally, schools need to provide some kind of assistance in order to help teachers find materials and resources that can be adapted and used daily in the English class. This support from schools must be available if methodological changes are to take place in order to reach the objectives of the Estandares para la Enseñanza del Ingles set by the MEN.

To conclude, it is important to mention that the implications mentioned above lead to the following questions. What kind of training courses should be developed in order to help teachers self-reflect about their teaching practices? How could teachers improve their current proficiency level? And what kind of reading and writing integration tasks should be implemented in the English class?

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Apendix A

Students' Survey

Información general
Nombre: _____
Edad: _____
Tiene hermanos o hermanas: Si __ No__
Numero de hermanos o hermanas: _____
Edad de los hermanos o hermanas: _____
Estudian: __ Donde: ____ Que grado: ____

Marque con una X, usted…

	Bastante Bien	Bien	No Muy Bien	Nada Bien
Lee En Español				
Escribe En Español				
Comprende El Español Hablado				
Habla Español				
	Bastante Bien	Bien	No Muy Bien	Nada Bien
Lee En Ingles				
Escribe En Ingles				
Comprende El Inglés Hablado				
Habla Ingles				

Cuando empezó a estudiar inglés:
Menos de un año: __ 1-2 años: __ 3-4 años: __ 5-6:__ Mas: __
Ha estudiado inglés en un espacio diferente al colegio:
Si: __ No:__ Donde:__

Marque con una X, sus padres…

	Bastante Bien	Bien	No Muy Bien	Nada Bien
Leen En Ingles				
Escriben En Ingles				
Comprenden El Inglés Hablado				
Hablan Ingles				

Acceso a Internet

Donde tiene acceso a internet
Casa: __ Colegio: __ Universidad: __ Cabina de internet: __ Casa de familiares o amigos: __
Cuanto tiempo usa el internet al día:
Menos de una hora: __ 1 - 2 hora: __ 3-4 horas: __ Mas: __
Para que usa el internet:
Tareas: __ Investigación: __ Entretenimiento: __ Correo electrónico:__
Noticias: __ Otro: __ Cual: _____ _____ _____
Visita páginas en inglés:
Sí__ No__
Para:
Consultar información: __ Estudiar inglés: __ Entretenimiento:__

Información general de estudios previos realizados

Nombre de la Institución Primaria:
_____
Ubicación (barrio):_____
Sector: Privado: __ Publico: __
En qué años de la primaria le enseñaron inglés:
Primero:__ Segundo:__ Tercero: __ Cuarto:__ Quinto:__
Por cuánto tiempo se estudió el inglés como segundo idioma:
1 año o menos __ 1 - 2 años__ 3 - 4 años __ 5-6 años __
Cada cuánto:
Una vez a la semana __ dos a cuatro veces a la semana __ cinco o mas __
Duración de la clase:
30 minutos__ 45-60 minutos__ 90 minutos __ Mas __
Usaba un texto guía:
Si__ No__ Cual:_____

Marque con una X las actividades realizadas en la clase de Ingles

Lectura Cuentos Cortos	Historias Cortas Contadas	Recital O Canto De Rimas	Escritura De Invitaciones Sencillas
Uso De Ilustraciones O Dibujos	Cuentos Cortos Contados	Recital O Canto De Poemas	Escritura De Pequeñas Historias
Lectura De Historias Sencillas		Recital O Canto De Trabalenguas	Escritura De Tarjetas Con Mensajes
Lectura De Textos Narrativos Cortos		Juego De Palabras	
		Memorización De Textos Cortos	
		Memorización De Dramatizaciones	

Nombre de la institución bachillerato: _____
Ubicación (barrio):_____
Sector: Privado: __ Publico: __
Por cuánto tiempo se estudió el idioma:
1 año o menos __ 1 - 2 años__ 3 - 4 años __ 5-6 años __
Cada cuanto:
Una vez a la semana __ dos a cuatro veces a la semana __ cinco o mas __
Duración de la clase:
30 minutos__ 45-60 minutos__ 90 minutos __ Mas __
Cuantos alumnos en el salón aproximadamente: ___

Marque con una X las actividades realizadas en la clase de Ingles

Lectura de Textos Literarios O De Interés General	Escucha De Descripciones Orales	Exposiciones Ensayadas	Escritura De Mensajes Cortos
Lectura De Textos Narrativos	Escucha De Conversaciones	Juegos De Rol Improvisados	Escritura De Párrafos
Lectura De Textos Argumentativos	Escucha De Textos Orales	Presentaciones Cortas	Escritura De Notas
Lectura De Textos Informativos		Narración De Hechos O Historias	Escritura De Cartas

Teachers' Survey

INFORMACIÓN GENERAL	
Edad:	**Años de experiencia como docente:**
Grados en los que enseña inglés:	**Años de experiencia como docente de inglés:**
Institución educativa en la que trabaja actualmente:	
Fecha:	

Por favor marque con una X su respuesta.

	Muy bien	Bien	Regular	Mal
Lee en español				
Escribe en español				
Comprende el español hablado				
Habla español				

	Muy bien	Bien	Regular	Mal
Lee en inglés				
Escribe en inglés				
Comprende el inglés hablado				
Habla inglés				

CONOCIMIENTO DEL IDIOMA

PREGUNTAS	RESPUESTAS (Por favor marque (donde se requiere) con una X sus respuestas)
1. ¿Cuándo fue la última vez que estudio inglés?	Hace 6 meses a 1 año ( ) 2-3 años ( ) 3-5 años ( ) 5 años o más ( )
a. ¿En dónde?	
b. ¿Por cuánto tiempo?	1 a 3 meses ( ) 3 a 6 meses ( ) 6 a 12 meses ( ) más de 1 año ( )
2. ¿Le gusta el inglés?	Si ( ) No ( )
a. ¿Cuál cree usted que es su fortaleza en inglés?	Lectura ( ) Escritura ( ) Escuchar ( ) Hablar ( )
b. ¿Cuál cree usted que es su fortaleza en inglés?	Lectura ( ) Escritura ( ) Escuchar ( ) Hablar ( )

FORMACION ACADEMICA EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLES

PREGUNTAS	RESPUESTAS (Por favor marque (donde se requiere) con una X sus respuestas)
1. ¿Ha tomado algún curso sobre la enseñanza del inglés?	Si ( ) No ( )
a. ¿Cuando?	Hace 6 meses a 1 año ( ) 2-3 años ( ) 3-5 años ( ) 5 años o más ( )
b. ¿En dónde?	
2. ¿Ha asistido a alguno de estos, con relación a la enseñanza del inglés, en el último año?	Taller ( ) Seminario ( ) Congreso ( ) Conferencia ( ) Charla ( )
3. ¿Cada cuánto considera usted que un profesor de inglés o que enseñe inglés, debe tomar cursos de actualización sobre la enseñanza del inglés?	Cada 6 meses ( ) Cada 2 años ( ) Cada 5 años o más ( ) Cada año ( ) Cada 3 años ( )
4. ¿Le gustaría tomar un curso sobre la actualización de la enseñanza del inglés?	Si ( ) No ( )

ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLES

PREGUNTAS	RESPUESTAS (Por favor marque con una X sus respuestas)
1. Le gusta a usted enseñar inglés?	Si ( ) No ( )
2. ¿Si su respuesta a la pregunta 4 es No, Cual es o ha sido su punto de referencia para enseñar inglés?	Como enseño español ( ) Como enseño las otras materias ( ) Como me enseñaron ingles a mí en el colegio ( ) Como me enseñaron en el último curso de inglés que tomé ( ) Otro ( ) ¿Cuál?
3. ¿se siente satisfecho con la forma / metodología como enseña usted inglés?	Si ( ) No ( )
4. ¿Cree usted que sus alumnos disfrutan su clase de inglés?	Si ( ) No ( )
5. ¿Toma usted en cuenta el tipo de actividades que a sus alumnos les gusta hacer en clase de inglés?	Si ( ) No ( ) algunas veces ( )
6. ¿Qué tipo de tareas para casa suele usted dejar a sus alumnos, con mayor frecuencia?	Lectura ( ) Escritura ( ) Escuchar ( ) Hablar ( )
7. ¿Lee usted detalladamente las tareas de inglés de sus alumnos para corregirles?	Si ( ) No ( ) algunas veces ( )
15. ¿Qué tipo de retroalimentación le da usted a sus alumnos en la clase de inglés?	Escrita ( ) Oral ( ) Escrita y oral ( ) Solamente las correcciones sobre sus tareas ( )

Por favor marque con una X las actividades que usted realiza en clase de inglés

Cuentos cortos contados	( )
2. Escritura de cartas	( )
3. Escritura de correos electrónicos	( )
4. Escritura de invitaciones sencillas	( )
5. Escritura de mensajes cortos	( )
6. Escritura de notas	( )
7. Escritura de párrafos	( )

8. Escritura de pequeñas historias ( )	
9. Escritura de tarjetas con mensajes ( )	
10. Historias cortas contadas ( )	
11. Juego de palabras ( )	
12. Juegos de rol improvisados ( )	
13. Lectura cuentos cortos ( )	
14. Lectura de historias sencillas ( )	
15. Lectura de textos argumentativos ( )	
16. Lectura de textos informativos ( )	
17. Lectura de textos narrativos ( )	
18. Lectura de textos narrativos cortos ( )	

RECURSOS

¿Qué material usa usted para desarrollar sus clases de inglés?

MATERIAL	
1.	**5.**
2.	**6.**
3.	**7.**
4.	**8.**

¿Usa un texto guía? Si ( ) No ( ) **¿Usa fotocopias?** Si ( ) No ( )

DIFICULTADES Y NECESIDADES

¿Cuáles son sus mayores dificultades para enseñar escritura en inglés?
Por favor marque con una X sus respuestas

1. Recursos disponibles ( )	**4.** Desarrollo de la clase ( )
2. El apoyo administrativo ( )	**5.** Conocimiento didáctico y metodológico ( )
3. Conocimiento del inglés ( )	**6.** Otro ( ) ¿Cuál?

¿Metodológicamente qué actividad y / o ejercicio propondría usted para enseñar la escritura del inglés en la institución donde actualmente trabaja? ¿Por qué?

¿Para usted que es la escritura?