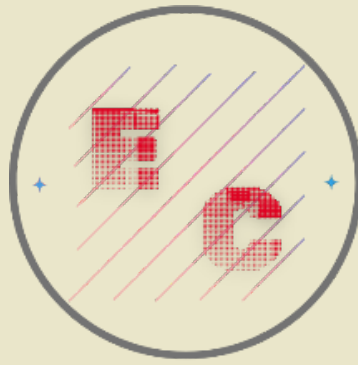




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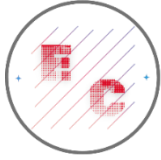
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**PERCEIVED FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH ENGLISH COMMUNICATIVE
COMPETENCE AMONG ELEVENTH-GRADE STUDENTS IN A COLOMBIAN
PUBLIC SCHOOL**

**FACTORES PERCIBIDOS ASOCIADOS CON LA COMPETENCIA COMUNICATIVA
EN INGLÉS EN ESTUDIANTES DE GRADO UNDÉCIMO DE UNA INSTITUCIÓN
PÚBLICA COLOMBIANA**

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Colombia

Perceived factors associated with english communicative competence among eleventh-grade students in a Colombian Public School

Factores percibidos asociados con la competencia comunicativa en inglés en estudiantes de grado undécimo de una Institución Pública Colombiana

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored students' and teachers' perceptions of the factors associated with the development of English communicative competence at a public school in Bogotá, Colombia. Although this subject has been widely important in Colombia's educational policies as can be observed in the country's bilingualism policies which promote the improvement of communicative competence in English, public school students have been struggling with achieving the expected level of proficiency at the end of the secondary level.

Based on this concern, this article reports the findings of an interpretive qualitative case study that examined the factors participants associated with difficulties in developing English communicative competence. Data were collected through an open-ended survey completed by fourteen eleventh-grade students and semi-structured interviews conducted with two English teachers, fourteen students and two English teachers from an eleventh grade at a public school in Bogotá, regarding their English language learning process elicited through semi-structured interviews and surveys with open-ended questions; and through the examination of previous research on the topic. The findings indicated that participants perceived English communicative development as being associated with four interconnected dimensions: student motivation; teaching methodologies; resources and school conditions; and implementation of English and Bilingual policies. Recommendations are offered regarding student engagement; communicative methodologies; teachers' training; resources; and policies that address the real contexts of public schools to improve English learning outcomes. The findings suggest a gap between the objectives of Colombian bilingualism policies and the instructional conditions available in the participating public school. The study therefore presents communicative development as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by interdependent personal, pedagogical, institutional, and policy-related factors.

Keywords: English communicative competence; English language learning; student motivation; teaching methodologies; institutional factors; bilingualism policies.

RESUMEN

Esta investigación analiza la relación entre la competencia comunicativa en inglés, la motivación, las metodologías, el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje y la baja competencia en un grupo de 14 estudiantes de undécimo grado que están a punto de graduarse de una de las instituciones educativas públicas ubicadas en Bogotá, Colombia. Basada en un enfoque cualitativo bajo el paradigma interpretativo, esta investigación utilizó la metodología del estudio

de caso, entrevistas semiestructuradas y una encuesta abierta como principales estrategias para recopilar información de los dos profesores de inglés y del grupo de estudiantes. Una vez recopilada toda la información, se realizó un cuidadoso análisis para comprender y explicar la situación actual, triangulando las visiones de los participantes con información de fuentes académicas. Se identificaron cuatro dimensiones principales como factores clave que interactúan entre sí para producir o no usuarios competentes de inglés: factores asociados a los estudiantes, siendo la motivación el más importante; factores asociados a la forma en que se enseña inglés en términos de metodología comunicativa; factores asociados a la institución y sus recursos disponibles; y, por último, factores asociados a las políticas destinadas a la promoción y desarrollo de la lengua inglesa y cómo estas se implementan en las instituciones educativas. Las implicaciones derivadas de la investigación señalan que, si bien el gobierno colombiano ha realizado grandes esfuerzos para alcanzar los objetivos propuestos por las Políticas de Bilingüismo, todavía existe una brecha entre las expectativas y la realidad de la escuela pública. Se necesitan estrategias más integrales para hacer frente a la complejidad de la competencia en inglés, integrando todos los componentes, desde la motivación hasta las políticas basadas en escenarios reales.

Palabras clave: competencia comunicativa en inglés; aprendizaje del inglés; motivación del estudiante; metodologías de enseñanza; factores institucionales; políticas de bilingüismo.

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INTRODUCTION

Communicative competence has been described as the ability to use and interpret language appropriately (Hymes, 1972) and strategically (Canale and Swain, 1980) according to context. In other words, being competent in a given language does not necessarily involve knowing its grammar and lexical features, but, most importantly, being able to produce

meaningful interactions in social settings. Based on a qualitative approach, this article explores students' and teachers' perceptions of the factors associated with opportunities to develop English communicative competence among eleventh-grade students at a public school in Bogotá, is affected by a set of personal, pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural variables. Data was collected via surveys to fourteen eleventh-grade students and semi-structured interviews with two English teachers.

Triangulating students' perceptions with teachers' views, as well as current literature on the topic, reveals that (a) the extent to which students take part in communicative events in English depends on their level of motivation and confidence towards English, which is highly influenced by previous experiences with the target language; (b) the kind of pedagogical decisions made by English teachers determines whether or not students get opportunities for meaningful communication in English at the classroom; (c) problems of continuity and a lack of material and financial resources negatively impact learning outcomes; (d) there seems to be a gap between the local reality at the research site and the goals of national language policies, especially when it comes to the country's bilingual dream. Thus, the article does not only aim to describe the notion of communicative competence from the participants' perspectives, but also shed light on the complex reality faced by English teachers at eleventh grade and the extent to which this reality shapes students' communicative competence in English. As the project was based on an interpretive paradigm, results were analyzed qualitatively; hence, statistical analyses or generalization were not within the researchers' goals.

Literature Review And Theoretical Framework

English Communicative Competence

Previously, competence has been associated with the knowledge of grammatical rules. However, Hymes (1972) claims that being competent means being able to use the language appropriately depending on the context. Based on Hymes' contribution, Canale and Swain (1980) establish a model of competence with three components: grammatical competence,

sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence refers to the knowledge of the language system, i. e. lexical items, sentence structure, morphology, phonology, etc. Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of appropriateness according to context, interlocutors, topic, social norms, and so forth. Lastly, strategic competence includes verbal and non-verbal resources which are used as compensation strategies in order to keep the conversation going when there is a lack of linguistic means to communicate.

Based on these authors' ideas, Saleh Ahmed (2018) claims that competence involves not only linguistic components but pragmatic ones. In fact, it is possible to find individuals who can demonstrate an extensive knowledge about a language but may run into difficulty when they have to interact in a given situation; meanwhile, other people who show a limited repertoire may be able to get through situations relying on strategies and negotiating meaning. Moreover, communicative problems do not always lie in knowledge but may result from limited opportunities for interaction, lack of self-confidence, limited input, and/or L1-L2 transfer.

More recently, Kramsch (2006) adds another component: symbolic competence, which deals with the relationship among the interlocutors, how they project their identities, how they relate to reality from a cultural perspective, how they create meaning beyond the exchange of information. Therefore, competence involves the system of a given language, how to use it depending on the context, strategies to cope with communicative problems, and sensitivity towards the situation. Regarding English competence among Colombian public-school students, their ability to communicate depends on different factors: willingness to participate, opportunities for interaction, pedagogical practices, educational policies about FLs, resources, among others.

Student-Related Factors and Motivation

Factors at the student-level include their motivation, attitude, confidence, prior knowledge, their participation and their willingness to communicate in class. All of them play an important role since L2 competence demands effort, continuous practice, language exposure and a certain level of tolerance to ambiguity and errors. Regarding willingness to communicate,

there must be an opportunity to do so: communicate and interact with others in order to negotiate meaning, use compensatory strategies when breakdowns occur, etc. Therefore, several factors may discourage participation and communication among students: embarrassment, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, feeling that English is not relevant outside the classroom, etc. This means that by not participating students will be avoiding practice and by doing so they will be avoiding the very vehicle that will help them gain competence.

Recent studies in Colombia have tried to understand what happens to learners inside the classroom when they are supposed to learn a foreign language. Bastidas-Arteaga and Muñoz Ibarra (2020) looked into the factors that secondary school graduates in Pasto considered important in order to learn English. These factors were classified into three groups: personal, educational, and contextual factors. Beleño Ospino (2024) conducted a study with eighth graders in order to unveil factors that could be associated with their poor EFL performance at a public school in Colombia. By reviewing these studies, it becomes clear that the so-called student-level factors are highly associated with the realities of students at the institutional-level: motivation is far from being static since it goes up and down depending on the perceived relevance of tasks, classroom climate, teachers' feedback, task difficulty, experiences of success/failure, etc. Therefore, they cannot be dealt with in isolation from pedagogical practices.

Teacher Related Factors and Teaching Methodologies

Teachers also play a crucial role as they are the ones who organize interactions, choose materials, decide on frequency of English use etc. A good approach should offer learners sufficient exposure to the target language, systematic learning of it, opportunities for meaningful practice as well as communication (Harmer, 2008). A focus on grammar rules, translations, and uncontextualised practice would allow learners to master the system of the language but might not lead to communicative competence as the knowledge thus learnt will not be used in actual communication. On the other hand, purposeful communicative activities which relate to learners'

lives such as role-plays, problem-solving tasks, presentations, discussions, group-work etc. will help learners use the language for communication.

Prabhu (1990) points out that no one approach or method is better than others, but their success depends on the way they are used. Communicative approaches have been adopted by many teachers with modifications suited to their situations, particularly, the realities of the public-school classroom with its large number of heterogeneous students, limited contact time, lack of material and technological resources etc. Hence, the CLT should be made meaningful and effective by adopting to the realities of the situation rather than adopting it in a mechanical fashion.

Often times the focus on external tests which look at knowledge of grammatical components of the language can lead teachers to de-emphasize oral communication. Teachers' beliefs about teaching, their competence in the target language, pedagogical preparation, opportunities for professional development etc. affect learning as do learners' motivation and participation in class which is a function of the kind of methodology adopted in the classroom. Motivation decreases if lessons are irrelevant whereas well-planned lessons which offer challenges which are neither too easy nor difficult and offer opportunities for communication would motivate learners and help them gain confidence. Methodology, learner, and contextual factors thus work in tandem to facilitate language learning.

Institutional Conditions and Educational Resources

Additionally, teachers and students are not the only ones responsible for Colombian ELT problems. It is fundamental to pay attention to the context where knowledge construction takes place, including the availability of materials, technological tools, the number of students, curricular flow, hours, physical space, institutional support, etc. since these may condition what happens in classrooms and impact language learners' opportunities for L2 practice and their attitudes towards English learning. Likewise, Colombian public schools seem to go through an undesirable gap between the highly challenging goals to reach regarding L2 use and the

heterogeneously available material and administrative resources. Such gap may cause frustration and loss of motivation among students, as they may not be aware of institutional factors that limit their language learning possibilities and thus, they may not appreciate their learning progress.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, developing communicative competences in L1 and/or L2 involves having sufficient and constant exposure to the language, as well as ample possibilities for interaction. Nevertheless, Colombian ELT seems to be moving against such claim, as students are limited to few English class hours, and, since English is a FL in Colombian schools, opportunities to use the target language out of the classroom seem to be scarce, which may affect vocabulary and pragmatic competence, for instance. Likewise, Colombian public schools are still struggling with overcrowded classrooms that may affect student-teacher ratios; consequently, chances for L2 production and teacher's corrective feedback become limited.

Bilingualism Policies and the Colombian Public-School Context

Extensive evidence points to difficulties in reaching expected levels of English competence throughout Colombian education. Benavides (2021) affirms that tertiary-level English competence has not changed during the last decade. He also mentions the importance of understanding what happens in Colombian higher education regarding English because of the educational processes at previous educational levels. Evidence is found through Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES, 2024) Saber 11 standardized test results, which provide a broader reference point for the challenges surrounding English achievement at the end of secondary school.

As for FL policies, Law 1651 of 2013 (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2013) represents an attempt to establish strategies to improve Colombian's foreign language competences. Other important documents such as Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2006) seek to determine

expected competences at different educational levels based on international scales. More recently, English competence was considered a priority through Programa Colombia Bilingüe 2014–2018 and Colombia Very Well: Programa Nacional de Inglés 2015–2025 (MEN, 2014, 2015). Although these documents attempt to implement strategies for ELT and establish expected outcomes regarding English use and communicative competence, it is important to notice that they do not necessarily contemplate the implications of applying such policies in Colombian public schools, including material, institutional, and training requirements. In other words, language policy is a complex and interrelated aspect which reaches language users' classrooms through curriculum, institutional projects, teacher's roles, and assessment processes.

It is also relevant to highlight that bilingualism is far from a dichotomous phenomenon; Romaine's (1999) definition of bilingualism mentioned above sheds light on the dynamic, flexible, and context-dependent nature of the phenomenon. Thus, competence in both languages depends on the domains where languages are used, the purpose of such use, the sociocultural context, the amount of exposure to each of them, etc. As mentioned above, English is a foreign language in Colombian public schools; consequently, exposure to English is reduced to few contact hours. Therefore, the analysis of Colombian's bilingualism policies may offer an approach to understand Colombian ELT from another dimension.

Integrative Framework for the Study

This study examined eleventh-grade students' perceptions about English as a Foreign Language (EFL), triangulating their point of view with that of teachers. The main objective was to explore how eleventh-grade students and their English teachers perceived the student-related, pedagogical, institutional, and policy-related factors associated with the development of English communicative competence.

For the aforementioned, it was relevant to consider communicative competence not just in terms of knowledge of English, but also regarding the strategic and appropriate use of the

foreign language in meaningful contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972; Saleh Ahmed, 2018). Thus, to understand communicative competence from a multidimensional approach, four interconnected dimensions were considered: student's factors, teachers' factors and methodologies, institutional factors and resources, and the application of the national policy for bilingualism. All dimensions were considered as interacting elements since students' motivation is a result of what happens in the EFL classroom, teaching methodologies depend on the institution's resources, and the way an institution works is a consequence of the application of a policy and the realities of each context.

Recent Empirical Evidence (2021–2025)

Although this chapter focused on classic literature to understand communicative competence in EFL, it is important to provide some of the latest evidence on this topic. Theoretical and empirical studies published between 2023 and 2025 and indexed with DOI were taken into consideration to strengthen the theoretical framework presented in the previous sections. Table 1 shows eight recent publications divided according to each of the dimensions that make up the theoretical framework of this research. It is important to underline that although recent studies have been presented to update and enrich the theoretical framework, classic literature still holds its space and provides the theoretical foundations that have been, and are (2025), the most cited in the field of communicative competence within an EFL context: Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980), and Kramsch (2006). These eight studies are presented as up-to-date empirical evidence to support and deepen the discussion of this research.

Table 1.*Synthesis of Recent Related Research on the Four Dimensions of English Communicative Competence (2023–2025)*

Title	Year / Country	Participants	Methodology	Main Findings	Implication for This Study
¿Por qué el bilingüismo en Colombia? Una revisión sistemática	2025 / Colombia	19 documents (systematic review, PRISMA)	Systematic review	National language policy centers on English, is driven by globalization and economic competitiveness, and shows a persistent gap between policy objectives and implementation, particularly between public and private education.	Corroborates the policy–implementation gap identified through triangulation in the present study and situates the participating institution within a documented national pattern.
Standardized educational policies in English teaching in primary education: A systematic review	2025 / Colombia	15 studies (systematic review, PRISMA)	Systematic review	Standardized national policies lack contextualization when applied to heterogeneous local settings, producing gaps in teacher training and institutional inequality.	Supports the finding that uniform bilingualism standards do not, by themselves, guarantee the institutional conditions required to reach them.

La realidad de las políticas lingüísticas en Colombia: hacia una configuración de enseñanza de las lenguas en clave intercultural	2024 / Colombia	Documentary/ critical analysis	Qualitative documentary analysis	Colombian language policy has prioritized English over an intercultural, multilingual vision, with limited attention to differentiated regional and institutional realities.	Reinforces the argument that policy expectations must be interpreted in relation to the specific conditions of each public institution.
Tiempo, motivación y rendimiento académico en inglés como segunda lengua	2024 / Colombia	Literature review (26 references)	Integrative literature review	Time on task and motivation jointly predict achievement in English as a second language; motivational and time-related inequities compound institutional and evaluative gaps.	Corroborates the reciprocal relationship between motivation, instructional time, and achievement discussed in the Findings and Discussion sections.

Improving EFL learners' speaking skills and willingness to communicate via artificial intelligence-mediated interactions	2024 / International	Intermediate EFL learners (quasi-experimental)	Quasi-experimental, pre-post design	Structured, low-stakes AI-mediated speaking practice significantly increased learners' willingness to communicate and reduced speaking anxiety compared with a control group.	Provides recent, controlled evidence for the affective mechanism linking low-stakes practice to willingness to communicate, reinforcing the interpretation of students' fear of error in this study.
Exploring secondary school teachers' creativity in differentiated instruction (DI) practices across Indonesian EFL classrooms	2024 / Indonesia	6 EFL secondary teachers	Qualitative case study	Teachers adapted instruction creatively to heterogeneous proficiency levels through pre-teaching sessions, task design, and materials adjustment, but professional development in this area remained limited.	Supports the discussion's argument that teachers require sustained professional development to manage heterogeneous classrooms rather than a single prescribed methodology.
Causas de las bajas competencias comunicativas en inglés como lengua	2024 / Colombia	Documentary/theoretical analysis	Qualitative documentary analysis	Identifies learning strategies, learning styles, anxiety, and motivation as	Directly parallels the four-dimensional structure of the present

extranjera:				the principal	study and is
Consideracion				factors	cited
es y				associated	throughout
reflexiones				with low EFL	the
				communicative	Discussion
				competence in	and
				Colombian	Conclusions.
				contexts.	
Level of	2021 /	National Saber Pro	Documentary/statisti	English	Situates the
English in	Colombia	results, 2007–2017	cal analysis	proficiency	eleventh-
Colombian	(included			among	grade
higher	for			graduating	difficulties
education: A	continuity)			university	documented
decade of				students	in this study
stagnation				showed no	within a
				significant	longer,
				improvement	unresolved
				over a decade	national
				despite	trajectory
				national policy	rather than
				efforts.	an isolated
					secondary-
					school
					problem.

Note. Own synthesis based on the sources cited in the References section. Search conducted across Crossref, Scopus-indexed journals, SciELO, and Redalyc;

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Approach

An interpretive paradigm and qualitative approach were adopted for this research. The former recognizes that people are knowledgeable about their own contexts and situations and can provide insights that are relevant to a research inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Quecedo & Castaño, 2002). The latter focuses on understanding and describing participants' perceptions of social phenomena instead of quantifying and analyzing variables and relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the multidimensional and contextualized nature of English communicative

competence, it is more meaningful to explore this issue from a qualitative approach. The assessment of English communicative competence can hardly be reduced to scores in language tests; thus, it is important to obtain students' views on the issue to have a truer picture of what is happening.

Research Design

A case-study design was adopted to limit the inquiry to eleventh graders' English learning in a given educational institution. A case-study design helps explore complex phenomena in real-world contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018), which is applicable to the present study that seeks to investigate the issue of English communicative competence in the local context of eleventh graders' English learning in the institution. With a case-study design, the research does not pursue generalizability and statistical significance. Instead, it provides an in-depth understanding of English communicative competence by exploring students' English learning needs, their motivation, teachers' instructional practices, the learning resources to which they have access, the impact of the bilingualism policy on their English learning, and how these factors are interrelated.

Ethical Considerations

The principles of ethics in educational research were adhered to, including those stipulated in the formal consent forms for students and verbal and written information sheets for teachers. Specifically, the following points were taken into consideration.

Voluntary participation. Students' participation was on a voluntary basis. Since they are minors, formal consent forms were sent to parents/guardians for their signatures, and assent forms were sent to students. The two kinds of documents were worded in language appropriate for the readers and explained what the research is about, their roles and tasks as participants, the expected duration of participation, how data will be used, and that they are entitled to reject participation and withdraw at any time without giving reasons and without incurring negative consequences. Participants' signatures indicated their agreement to take part in the research.

Teachers were informed about the research verbally and in writing. Participation was voluntary for them. Similar to what was explained to students and parents/guardians, teachers were briefed on the aims of the research, how it is going to unfold, what it involves, what will be done with the data, and their rights of rejection and withdrawal. Teachers provided verbally informed consent in accordance with the ethical procedure approved for the study, and, more importantly, the research does not have evaluative or supervisory implications for them.

Minimization of risks. Risks that participants may be exposed to were minimized. Participation does not entail risks beyond those they would be exposed to in normal conversations in the course of their English learning. No participant expressed feelings threatened, anxious, or upset. Confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used to refer to participants. Participants were assigned alphanumeric codes that were used in data-collection instruments, data, and analysis. Consent forms, assent forms, and other documents bearing participants' names were kept apart from research data. Audio files and transcripts were stored in a password-protected computer which is accessible to the research team only. Participants' identities were protected by removing their names from the transcripts. The name of the institution was also removed since contextual clues could help identify it, thus threatening participants' anonymity. In reporting research findings, particular attention is given to avoid disclosing information that may identify the institution and/or its staff, avoid quoting participants in a way that makes them recognizable to others who are familiar with the context, avoid reporting data at the level of individual participants, and report patterns and themes at the group level. Protection of participants' rights. Teachers' participation is independent of the school's decision on the research, so they are not under any pressure to participate in the research. Students' rights are protected through their parents/guardians' formal consent for their participation. Participants' views are presented accurately and faithfully. They can review the research findings pertaining to them if they wish to.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Furthermore, reflexivity played a critical role throughout the analytical process. The researcher kept analytic memos that recorded interpretive decisions and the rationale for coding. As the analysis progressed, the researcher repeatedly returned to the data to verify that the inductively identified sub-themes accurately reflected participants' accounts within the four theoretically informed dimensions. These steps do not remove interpretation; instead, they make the researcher's reasoning visible and auditable, which is essential for demonstrating that the results are firmly based on the data. Regarding positionality, the researcher has experience with English language teaching and teacher education, especially in Colombian public schools. Such familiarity can help interpret educational issues correctly. However, it might also impose existing views on data interpretation. To reduce this, the researcher intentionally approached the data with an open mind, concentrating on the particular experiences that the teachers and students expressed.

Context and Participants

One important methodological aspect that should be mentioned is the sample size, which, although limited, allowed for a better and more comprehensive approach to the purpose of the study. In this way, generalization was not statistically representative, but rather a case that sheds light on the main aspects of the study, providing valuable information about the topic under analysis. Data was collected in a public, urban, secondary institution. For ethical purposes, the name of the institution has been protected. However, its urban and public character is a key element that helps to understand the results. Fourteen students from eleventh grade, the last grade of secondary, and two English teachers were selected as participants. These actors provided essential information about the subject of this study from two different but complementary perspectives; the former approached the phenomenon from their own experience as eleventh graders who live the challenges of motivation and their classes, while the latter, as professionals, shared their opinions about the teaching-learning process, the

students' behavior, and other contextual and institutional aspects. The approach followed for this study is non-probabilistic and used purposive sampling. This means that participants were not chosen to be representative of the population but because they had been part of the phenomenon under analysis (Hernández González, 2021), which is common in qualitative studies.

Sample Size Rationale and Information Power

A total of 14 eleventh-grade students took part in the study. In addition, two eleventh-grade English teachers at the same urban, public educational institution in Bogotá participated in the study. This study used a non-probabilistic purposive sampling strategy to choose its participants. It meant that they were selected due to their direct participation in the context being examined. The main criterion for participant selection was their direct experience with eleventh-grade English classes. Therefore, students shared their experiences of motivation, classroom instruction, and difficulties. In contrast, the two English teachers gave professional insights into student performance, instruction, and institutional conditions. This allowed the researcher to examine the relationship between language and bilingualism from multiple angles.

It is critical to highlight that in qualitative research, sample size does not follow the same logic as statistical representativeness in quantitative research. Instead of statistical representativeness, qualitative research emphasizes the richness and relevance of information. Thus, adequacy can be discussed through the idea of information power, which considers sample homogeneity, the study's limited focus, high-quality data, well-developed analytical frameworks, and the use of a narrower rather than extensive interpretation. Applying this idea, a sample of 14 eleventh-grade students and two English teachers from a public, urban school was judged to be reasonable and pertinent for this limited, context-dependent study. In particular, the two English teachers represented the entire population of teachers of English at this specific grade during the study's duration. Accordingly, it is critical to emphasize that the results of this investigation should not be interpreted as providing an overall perspective on English language

learners in Colombia's public-education system. Rather, they should be viewed as an effort to delve into a specific educational environment and provide useful, context-specific accounts of motivation and language and bilingualism policy.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

The study used two main data-collection instruments: semi-structured interviews with English language teachers and surveys for English language learners. Semi-structured interviews with English language teachers: Two eleventh-grade English language teachers participated in audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews that were later transcribed verbatim. Participants provided their informed consent before taking part in the interview. The goal of these interviews was to explore teachers' professional perceptions of students' English-language motivation and how this is manifested in academic performance. Additionally, they discussed the methodologies they use in the classroom, the institutional and contextual elements that support or limit instruction, and their opinions of the importance and impact of the language and bilingualism policy. The interview guide was organized into four key areas: "student-related factors, teacher-related factors and methodologies, institutional resources, and bilingualism policy."

Surveys with eleventh grade English language learners: Fourteen students from the final grade of secondary education participated in an open-ended survey. The goal of the survey was to enable participants to express their experiences, challenges, interests, and perspectives on English classes and the factors that shape their motivation. Participants were encouraged to express their thoughts in their own words, without fixed response categories. Both the survey and interview questions were organized around four common areas: "student-related factors, teacher-related factors and methodologies, institutional resources, and bilingualism policy." The instruments were examined to ensure that the language was clear and age-appropriate; some wording changes were made to enhance student comprehension. It is critical to emphasize that participants' responses were not assessed according to linguistic aptitude or treated as

independent factors that could predict motivation. Rather, they were analyzed as valuable, personally held accounts that could be examined to reveal patterns and themes regarding motivation in the context of learning English as a foreign language.

Table 2.

Summary of Data Sources, Instruments, and Analytic Alignment

Participant Group	N	Instrument	Format	Analytic Treatment
Eleventh-grade students	14	Open-ended survey	Written, individually completed, organized around the four framework dimensions	Coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006); triangulated against teacher interviews and literature
English teachers	2	Semi-structured interview	Audio-recorded, individually conducted, transcribed verbatim	Coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006); triangulated against student surveys and literature
Theoretical and empirical literature	32 sources cited	Literature review and synthesis Table 1	Peer-reviewed, DOI-verified where available	Used as a third triangulation point for interpreting convergence, complementarity, and divergence

Note. Own elaboration. The literature row refers to the reference list accompanying this article, including the sources synthesized in Table 1.

Data Analysis and Triangulation

Data were analyzed through a theoretically informed thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. Initial coding was deductively guided by the four dimensions established in the theoretical framework, while sub-themes were developed inductively from participants' responses. In the first phase, familiarization, both the transcribed interviews and the survey responses were read and re-read in full to develop an overall sense of the data before any coding began. In the second phase, initial coding, segments of text from both data sources were labeled descriptively in relation to the four dimensions established in the

literature review, allowing additional, unanticipated codes to emerge inductively where participants raised considerations not fully anticipated by the theoretical framework. In the third phase, searching for themes, related codes were grouped into candidate sub-themes within each of the four dimensions, for example, within the student-related dimension, codes referring to fear of error, perceived insufficiency of vocabulary, and avoidance of spontaneous speech were grouped into a broader sub-theme of confidence-related avoidance. In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, candidate themes were checked against the full data set to confirm that they captured a coherent pattern rather than an isolated response, and themes that did not hold across multiple participants were merged or discarded. In the fifth phase, defining and naming themes, the four principal dimensions and their sub-themes were refined into the structure presented in the Findings section. The sixth phase, producing the report, is represented by the thematic narrative developed below.

Triangulation was integrated throughout this process rather than applied only at the end: for each theme, the analysis compared how it appeared, or did not appear, across three sources, students' survey responses, teachers' interview accounts, and theoretical and empirical literature, including the recent studies summarized in Table 1. Convergence occurred when students and teachers identified similar conditions consistent with the literature; complementarity occurred when the two groups emphasized different aspects of the same issue; divergence was also analytically significant, revealing how responsibilities or institutional conditions were understood from distinct positions. The literature served as a conceptual and empirical point of comparison rather than as evidence to validate or invalidate participants' experiences.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Rather than relying on the post-positivist criteria of validity and reliability, which assume a single, measurable reality, this study assessed its quality against the four trustworthiness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and subsequently refined in recent qualitative methodology literature (Ahmed, 2024): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The scope of the study remained contextual and interpretive throughout. Because the research examined a specific group of participants at one institution, its purpose was not statistical generalization, and findings must be considered in relation to the participating institution and the experiences reported by the participants involved, while remaining, as Table 1 and the Discussion demonstrate, consistent with patterns documented in comparable recent research elsewhere.

Credibility Whether findings are true representations of participants' realities. Triangulation was applied throughout the research, constantly comparing student and teacher perceptions through survey and interview data, and comparing these with literature.

Transferability Whether the research's findings can be applied to other situations. Thick description is provided regarding the research's context, a public, urban, secondary-education institution, enabling readers to determine the extent to which they can apply its results to their own contexts.

Dependability Whether the research can be repeated in the same way with similar results. This report outlines the analysis process through coding and clustering of data, offering a complete picture of how data led to the four dimensions that are reported.

Confirmability Whether data are sufficiently documented for other researchers to follow the same paths and processes. All identified themes are grounded in empirical data from participants' comments. Comments are also reported alongside interpretations to make it clear what is said by participants and what is interpreted by researchers.

To increase data trustworthiness and account for multiple perspectives on the researched topics, triangulation was a core part of the research. Triangulation was not merely applied after data collection; rather, data were constantly compared and contrasted during analysis to identify points of convergence when survey responses by students and interview data from teachers were similar and confirmed literature reports, complementarity when data from the two groups shed light on different facets of the same topic, and divergence to understand institutional realities and roles from different perspectives. Triangulating interview and survey data with the literature meant that findings were interpreted in the context of the literature. However, the literature was not used to validate or invalidate participants' perceptions; instead, it was used as a point of comparison to see if similar findings emerged in similar contexts.

To enhance data quality and increase confidence in the research's validity, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness were adopted, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The rationale behind adopting these criteria is that validity and reliability are considered inappropriate because they stem from a post-positivist paradigm. Table 1 describes the four criteria and outlines the ways in which they were operationalized in the present study. The four criteria helped the research maintain an inductive, bottom-up approach to analyzing interview and survey data. Nevertheless, the identified themes were checked for commonality with literature findings regarding the researched topics. Therefore, while interpretation took precedence, contextualizing the four dimensions with literature allowed us to affirm that similar perceptions are widespread in contexts resembling ours.

Methodological Coherence

The paradigm, the approach, the research design, and the techniques are coherent with each other since the researcher is interested on finding out and understanding participants' perceptions on why eleventh grade students show a low English communicative competence, and not in measuring them. Moreover, open-ended surveys to students and semi-structured interviews with teachers are suitable techniques to deal with this kind of qualitative data.

Findings and triangulation

The findings were organized thematically across four dimensions: student-related factors, teaching methodologies, institutional conditions, and bilingualism policy implementation. Nevertheless, instead of presenting results for each source separately, the researcher preferred to organize the data thematically, as shown in Table 2, to display the main themes that came up in the survey and in the interviews, as well as in the literature reviewed. The table also shows to what degree each of the sub-themes was mentioned by participants. Thematic display of findings and its source(s).

Once the results were analyzed, participants' perceptions about eleventh graders' English communicative competence pointed out the role of a set of factors pertaining to four different dimensions: those related to students, to teachers' practices, to institutional resources, and to the way in which the National Bilingualism Policy is implemented. Factors related to students, specially motivation and participation, received a great importance. Once all of this information was triangulated from literature and participants' perceptions, some agreements, complementary visions and disagreements were detected. Four themes emerged from this process, which coincided with the aforementioned dimensions, each of them containing two or three sub-themes that were recurrently addressed.

Table 3.

Thematic Structure of the Findings, by Dimension and Source of Convergence

Dimension (Theme)	Sub-themes Identified	Reported Mainly by	Convergence Pattern
Student-related factors	Fear of error and confidence-related avoidance; perceived insufficiency of vocabulary and grammar; uneven engagement beyond minimum requirements	Students (primary source); confirmed by teachers	Convergent both groups independently identified motivation and confidence as central
Teacher-related factors and methodologies	Preference for understandable, appropriately pitched tasks; need to manage heterogeneous prior knowledge within one class; relevance of feedback style to willingness to speak	Both groups (complementary emphases)	Complementary students focused on task experience, teachers on instructional demands
Institutional resources and conditions	Limited weekly instructional time; scarcity of materials and technology for oral practice; heterogeneous proficiency levels within the same grade	Teachers (primary source); reflected indirectly in student accounts	Complementary teachers named structural conditions students experienced but did not label institutionally
National bilingualism policy	Gap between expected proficiency outcomes and available resources; difficulty following uniform progression given heterogeneous levels; limited visibility of policy at the student level	Teachers (primary source); students experienced consequences indirectly	Divergent in framing, convergent in substance teachers named policy explicitly; students described its practical effects

Note. Own thematic synthesis derived from the six-phase analytical procedure described in the Methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006), applied to the fourteen student surveys and two teacher interviews.

Student-Related Factors: Motivation, Engagement, and Confidence

Language learning is a process that demands considerable effort and commitment and practice on the part of the student. It was found that nine of the fourteen students identified speaking as one of the most difficult aspects of learning English. The explanations provided by the subjects focused primarily on difficulties with sentence formation, vocabulary retrieval, and pronunciation. One student articulated the challenge of verbal communication by stating, "The act of speaking presents significant difficulties, as I continue to encounter challenges in formulating complete sentences or sustaining a coherent conversation" (S1). In addition, another participant asserted that effective communication necessitates not only a rich vocabulary but also precise pronunciation (S14). These responses indicate that students primarily associated their limited oral participation with perceived linguistic difficulties rather than with a lack of interest in English.

It was evident that students recognized the personal and professional relevance of English. Ten of the fourteen participants explicitly associated English proficiency with employment, professional development, or enhanced economic opportunities. It was evident that motivation was not exclusively instrumental in this context. Indeed, students cited a range of factors that contributed to their engagement with the English language. These factors included travel, viewing films in their original language, participation in games, and the development of a personal interest in English. One student articulated their long-standing aspiration to pursue English studies and attain a high level of proficiency, stating, "Since seventh grade, I have wanted to study English and reach a very good level" (S12). Another participant explained that "games that require me to use English motivate me" (S6). The responses thus obtained indicate that motivation is characterized by the presence of both future-oriented goals and positive classroom experiences.

Teacher Related Factors and Teaching Methodologies

Both teachers described instructional practices intended to connect English learning with meaningful and engaging contexts. Teacher 1 reported using “an effective communicative approach” in which students were exposed to situations requiring the use of English according to the course content (T1). Teacher 2 emphasized the inclusion of “dynamics and games” based on contexts that attracted students’ attention (T2). These responses indicate that both teachers sought to promote contextualized language use, although one emphasized communicative exposure while the other focused more explicitly on ludic activities and student engagement. However, it should be noted that teachers’ choice of methodology is not only an individual matter. Methodological decisions are affected by contextual issues including available resources, time, heterogeneity of the class, goals, etc. Teachers should not necessarily be blamed for their approach to pedagogy; instead, teachers’ comments should be analyzed within the broader contexts in which they teach. For example, if a class involves a lot of repetition and error correction, little attention may be paid to the pragmatic and meaningful uses of language. This type of class may suggest that English is a subject that needs to be learned, not a vehicle for communication. Overall, the comments from the two teachers about adapting to learners’ needs were very similar. These accounts indicate adaptive teaching practices but do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that differentiated instruction was implemented systematically. Their comments suggest coping strategies and improvisation to address challenges in the moment, not necessarily conscious implementation of DI. Based on these comments from the two teachers, training on how to implement DI appears to be an area of need.

Students reported that classroom activities frequently included reading, listening exercises, pronunciation practice, and group work. Nine of the fourteen participants recommended incorporating more dynamic, participatory, or speaking-oriented activities. One student suggested, “more participatory and dynamic activities” (S14), while another expressed a preference for classes in which “English is spoken more than it is written” (S10). These

responses suggest that students valued the existing activities but expected more opportunities for active participation and oral language use. Teachers need to be aware of the range of learners and be flexible. Prabhu (1990) cautions against adopting a method or an approach based on the assumption that there is one best way to teach.

Students generally perceived the teacher's use of English as beneficial because it increased their exposure to the language and supported listening development. However, comprehension difficulties sometimes interrupted their engagement. One participant explained, "There are parts that I do not understand, and from that point on I get lost" (S10). Another stated that increased use of English was helpful when the teacher was willing to repeat and explain what students had not understood (S14). These findings indicate that using English as the main classroom language can support communicative development when it is accompanied by repetition, clarification, and appropriate scaffolding.

Institutional Resources and Educational Conditions

Therefore, from this idea, it can be inferred that the concept of restricted hours, materials, and resources is understood differently depending on the reality of teachers and students. From teachers, restricted hours, materials, and resources refer more to the number of hours they have per week to develop their classes, the number of students in the classroom, and the number of resources, be they technological, audio, among others. Both teachers reported that eleventh-grade students received four hours of English instruction per week, and both considered this amount insufficient. Teacher 1 stated, "They receive four hours, and I maintain that there should be at least six. Clearly, the less exposure students have to the language, the poorer their performance" (T1). Teacher 2 similarly explained, "With only four hours to reinforce knowledge and prepare students for external examinations, it is not enough" (T2). These responses indicate that the available instructional time restricted opportunities for sustained practice, reinforcement, and communicative language use.

However, from students, this term refers to those situations where activities are carried out in a hurry, listening to activities that cannot be repeated, and opportunities to speak that are reduced. This idea of reality shows us how participants perceive the context where they live the EFL process from different angles and positions. Thus, this does not mean that what is mentioned above are contradictory ideas, since, in fact, they complement each other. Only two of the fourteen students explicitly reported some form of additional contact with English outside school, including one participant who used Duolingo. The teachers also identified weaknesses in the continuity of English instruction. Teacher 1 emphasized that language learning “must be a continuous process beginning in primary school” (T1), while Teacher 2 described the integration of English across other subject areas as “almost nonexistent” (T2). These findings suggest that students’ exposure was concentrated mainly within the four weekly English lessons rather than being sustained across educational levels and learning environments. Six students requested computers, tablets, internet access, headphones, or interactive platforms to support their English learning. One participant proposed having “more computers to practise English on a platform, especially speaking, because it is very difficult for the teacher to do this with thirty or forty students” (S9).

Developing communicative competence also involves many factors related to the context, such as time for instruction, educational materials, technological resources, physical space, composition of the class, institutional support, among others. On the other hand, Benavides (2021) affirms that low competence in English is still an issue for Colombian higher education. Likewise, the Saber 11 test applied to Colombian students when they finish their secondary education has documented persisting difficulties, they must learn English since their results are not satisfactory; ICFES (2024). Regarding the previous idea, when frequency or number of classes is limited, language learning is affected since vocabulary may not be fixed, and automaticity is not achieved, especially when opportunities to use English outside school are rare. In addition, a heterogeneous group of students that have received different previous

instructions on English generates a gap between proficiency levels in the classroom. In this sense, teachers must cope with a wide range of levels attending to curriculum demands, which implies that activities may not reach deeper purposes. Finally, CLT demands a space of interaction and constant feedback that may be affected when working with restricted hours and resources. All the aforementioned is a burden for participants that prevents them from overcoming challenges related to language learning and teaching; therefore, difficulties are not only related to the actions carried out or the investment of effort, but also to the structural conditions where learning takes place. Consequently, context should be considered as a factor that influences communicative competence and not just a space where action takes place.

National Bilingualism Policies and Local Implementation

All this indicates that teachers find themselves in situations where the challenges they face to implement national plans and standards are extremely difficult to reconcile. National plans to strengthen FL competence have been in place for a few years now (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2013; MEN, 2006, 2014, 2015) and English proficiency continues to be a high priority. However, bilingualism objectives cannot be achieved through policy mandates alone: Romaine's (1999) point about bilingualism as a function of opportunity and need seems to apply to Colombia, and the situations that could potentially promote bilingualism, such as time on task, qualified professionals, adequate materials, continuity in curriculum, and opportunities for use, were lacking at the school that is the focus of this article. Further, since learners are extremely heterogeneous with regards to competence in each classroom, it becomes very difficult to have all of them move forward in a homogenous way towards national goals.

Both teachers perceived the results of Colombian bilingualism policies as insufficient within the public-school context. Teacher 1 stated that “the policies have been insufficient” (T1), while Teacher 2 maintained that “they have not been effective because the established goals have not been met” (T2). These responses reflect the teachers’ perceptions of a gap between national proficiency objectives and the conditions available for achieving them locally. each 1

emphasized the need to monitor teachers' English proficiency, increase the number of instructional hours, and ensure continuity in English education from primary school. Teacher 2 similarly identified teacher preparation as a central factor and highlighted the need to restructure institutional educational projects so that English could be integrated across different subject areas. Their responses indicate that policy implementation was perceived as dependent on sustained institutional planning, qualified teachers, and greater exposure to English.

With regards to institutional will, one might argue that teachers are not really committed to national language policy since they view the goals as incompatible with their realities, however, neither teacher voiced disapproval of the goals themselves. Yet, teachers perceived the goals to be unrealistic given the reality of the classes they work with. Thus, there is an important gap between language policy and its implementation; however, this gap is more of an implementation problem, not necessarily a problem of policy, nor a problem of will.

To implement language policy in ways that make sense to learners, certain conditions need to be met, conditions that are not always feasible. Language policy should perhaps be implemented with these considerations in place. The role of opportunity and need in developing bilingualism seems very relevant here; bilingualism is socially mediated, so contexts and opportunities to develop bilingualism are fundamental. Thus, the extent of learners' bilingualism depends on context of use and opportunity.

Integration of the Triangulated Findings

Three main findings arise from the triangulation. Firstly, the analysis of the information provided by students and teachers converges to show that English communicative competence cannot be attributed to one particular element. Both types of actors agree on the influence of motivation, participation, teaching practices, and educational conditions in this competence. Secondly, the information about confidence and participation provided by students complements the interpretation about institutional and pedagogical elements proposed by teachers. At the same time, the information obtained from the literature contextualises the relationship among

these four categories in the framework of Colombian policy on bilingualism and communicative competence.

Finally, it can be argued that interactions among categories were more explanatory than each category analysed on their own. Together these finding suggest that English communicative competence in this context is influenced by a chain of elements, starting from the possibilities and limitations posed by policy and the conditions of the institution for its implementation, which in turn determine teaching practices, classroom dynamics, and opportunities for interaction. Such conditions have an impact on motivation and participation and opportunities for using English, which, in turn, condition communicative competence in English.

At the same time, the relationship among these elements should not be interpreted in a completely linear fashion: teachers may make pedagogical decisions based on the behaviour of their students. Similarly, changes in classroom dynamics may have an impact on the motivation of learners. All things considered, low levels of communicative competence should be interpreted as a multidimensional product, which calls for changes on the part of students in participation and motivation, teachers, the institution, including time for English, adequate materials, and professional development, and, ultimately, on the part of policy and its implementation in terms of communicative competence.

Such relationship among policy, institution, teachers, and students in relation to communicative competence has been reported by a great deal of research not only within Colombia, but also in other countries. For instance, Garzón León et al. (2024) provide meaningful insides about the main factors that influence communicative competence in EFL reports the importance of learning styles, learning strategies, motivation, and anxiety as main factors behind low levels of communicative competence in English. Such finding resonates with the importance this study attributes to motivation and participation, as anxiety may be considered as a variable that impedes participation.

Thus, the four-dimensional relationship among policy, the institution, teachers, and learners put forward in this study does not constitute an idiosyncratic interpretation of the reality of a single institution. Instead, it echoes previous research on EFL in Colombia, thus contributing to an explanatory chain about communicative competence in English within Colombian public institutions.

DISCUSSION

Results also revealed that communicative competence in the EFL classroom is the product of multiple intersecting variables, including learner motivation, teaching approaches, school resources, and national language policies. This confirms that communicative competence is a multidimensional construct (Hymes, 1972; Canale and Swain, 1980; Saleh Ahmed, 2018). Difficulties were not necessarily related to grammar or vocabulary but rather confidence for participation, pragmatic application, and the capacity to use the available linguistic resources effectively. The results of this research in a public institution in Colombia also contribute to the discussion around the contextual dimension of motivation. Indeed, although motivation is a learner-oriented construct, it is heavily dependent on context. As such, this research confirms the ideas of Bastidas-Arteaga and Muñoz-Ibarra (2020) and Beleño Ospino (2024), according to whom motivation does not only depend on the learners but is also the product of the educational context.

Motivation as an Individual and Contextual Condition

Regarding the relationship between communicative competence and motivation, teachers are aware that language acquisition depends on the learner's motivation. However, motivation and willingness to participate depend on the difficulty of the task, previous experience with similar tasks, fear of error, and even the learners' perception of their competence. Thus, those who feel less confident tend to participate less when they must speak in class; this, in turn, negatively impacts the opportunities to interact in English, which is

fundamental for developing communicative competence. This factor is especially relevant in oral production because it is the modality in which gaps in communicative competence are more likely to become apparent. Speaking in front of others makes learners aware of their own limitations, which might discourage participation. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that a learner's reluctance to participate orally might not necessarily be related to indifference but might reflect insecurity, insufficient development of communicative competence, or an accumulation of gaps.

Furthermore, the negative impact of lack of motivation and insufficient time on academic achievement evidenced in Hernández-Otálora's (2024) study was also seen in the research presented here, especially when analyzing the interdependence of both factors, that is, lack of motivation aggravated the effects of insufficient class hours and vice versa. As seen above, the discussion about motivation entails the notion of competence and confidence. Thus, strategies to increase motivation should be oriented to give learners an opportunity to experience success through challenging but attainable communicative objectives with adequate scaffolding, engaging topics and contexts, and an atmosphere that considers errors a normal and necessary part of language learning. Regarding the relationship between speaking anxiety and willingness to participate, Fathi et al.'s (2024) quasiexperimental research provides empirical evidence of the effect of speaking anxiety on willingness to participate through the analysis of the effect of structured, low-stakes speaking tasks on willingness to communicate in comparison to a control group. All of this confirms that this is still an issue that has a reciprocal dimension of anxiety and participation and is present in different EFL contexts nowadays.

Teaching Methodology and Opportunities to Communicate

Based on the above discussion and participants' data, it can be concluded that English contact time dedicated only for language form explanations or language practice does not enhance the development of communicative competence. On the other hand, a communicative task without linguistic support may not lead to meaningful language production and participation.

Nevertheless, the role of explicit teaching of form and meaning cannot be ignored since it has shown positive effects on improving communicative ability by preparing the learners to put their interlanguage to a communicative purpose (Harmer, 2008). Thus, an ideal CLT practice should integrate teaching of linguistic support with encouraging learners to be independent in using the target language for completing relevant, often open-ended tasks in pairs or small groups. Further support in CLT classes includes extensive scaffolding and corrective feedback with a communicative focus. In addition, minor mistakes that do not interfere with communicative success should be ignored.

The effectiveness of integrating "traditional" and "communicative" techniques mentioned above depends on how sensitively the techniques are applied. Prabhu's (1990) assertion that no method is universally superior, thus, may raise doubts as to whether there is a definite distinction between CLT and traditional approaches. In light of such views, this study attempts to argue that the dichotomy between CLT and traditional approaches can be overcome if language teaching techniques are context-sensitive and applied to address the needs of the learners. To realize this argument, English language teaching approaches are required to be implemented with sensitivity to context, including the learners' levels of English and motivation. Therefore, EFL teachers at the participating institution have been accommodating these realities. As revealed by their responses, the classes are heterogeneous; the number of students is large; and the instructional times are limited. However, teachers' adaptations to heterogeneous classes have been made informally, not supported institutionally. Similarly, Hidayat, Basthomi, and Afrilyasanti's (2024) research on the application of differentiated instruction in heterogeneous classes reports that secondary EFL teachers in Indonesia are creative in differentiating materials and designing pre-teaching and task for mixed levels. Nevertheless, these teachers lack professional development about differentiated instruction. Thus, this study suggests that instead of looking for which approach is more effective, CLT or traditional, a more

important solution lies in how to train EFL teachers to apply differentiated instruction creatively and sensitively.

Institutional Conditions and Accumulated Learning Gaps

Likewise, Benavides's (2021) research about English learning in Colombian higher education showed that poor performance is not limited to eleventh graders; English learning has been stagnant for a while, corroborated also by ICFES (2024) in their report about the results of a national-level exam: Saber 11. Thus, although the scope of the aforementioned studies is broader than this case-study, making it impossible to claim its findings as representative of the English-learning experience of Colombian students at large, they do contextualize the participants' struggles within a broader and more comprehensive framework.

Apart from contextualizing the current research within a broader one, Tique-Estrada's (2025) PRISMA-guided review of fifteen different research studies focused on English-learning policies implemented in Colombian primary schools. It thus addressed a pivotal aspect that has been mentioned throughout this discussion: institutional conditions define what is and is not possible for students to learn. Building communicative competence requires sustained exposure to the target language (among other things) and dedicating only a couple of hours per week to it, with little to no exposure outside school hours, impedes automatization and consolidation of the target language, slows down the process of addressing all curricular content, and prevents educators from providing ample and personalized speaking practice. At this regard, Cely Betancourt and Osorio de Sarmiento (2024) reported that many Colombian public schools lack enough qualified English teachers and that secondary students frequently receive only two to four hours of English instruction per week. The authors also noted that some primary schools do not have specialist English teachers, leaving generalist teachers without specific preparation in English language teaching to assume this responsibility.

However, arguably more important, eleventh grade is the product of everything that has been learned or failed to be learned during previous years. As expectations become higher,

discrepancies between learners' knowledge become more salient and harder to bridge; shortcomings in basic speaking practice, vocabulary, and grammar knowledge cannot be mended easily. Tique-Estrada (2025) highlights how Colombian policies regarding English have been implemented on a national-level without adequate planning for local contexts, which entails problems regarding access to materials, regional disparities, and inadequate teacher education. In short, Tique-Estrada's findings suggest that eleventh graders' shortcomings started way earlier than their final year of secondary education and cannot be mended with isolated, idiosyncratic efforts; curriculum planning and implementation must be revisited systemically to adequately attend to learning needs across all basic education stages.

The Policy Implementation

Similarly to what happened with the four dimensions, the triangulated voices of students and teachers regarding their reality at the participating public institution allow us to affirm that the results obtained through this study resonate with those of previous investigations. According to these voices, it seems that the identified problems with the implementation of foreign language policies at their institution are not representative of a single failure of the participating school. Instead, their voices seem to indicate that the problems with foreign language education in Colombia can be found from their genesis, that is, from their planning and design at the national level to their implementation at the local level. The importance of including participants' perceptions regarding bilingualism and foreign language education at the participating institution allows us to go beyond standardized test results. It also enables us to contextualize and make sense of them by unveiling that persistently low performance in foreign language tests cannot be understood independently of the advances in educational policies, legislation, programs, and projects concerning foreign language education in Colombia (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2013; MEN, 2006, 2014, 2015). It also reminds us of Romaine's (1999) call to include local contexts, participants' realities, and, we add, their voices as fundamental for language

planning and policy decisions. These voices also unveil an English-only policy which neglects interculturality and participants' contexts.

Previous research has characterized Colombian bilingualism policymaking as predominantly top-down, with limited participation by English teachers in policy formulation (Usma, 2009). In an exploratory study involving 40 Colombian English teachers, Cely Betancourt and Osorio de Sarmiento (2024) found similar results, identifying limited teacher participation in policy construction and uncertainty resulting from successive bilingualism programs being introduced and overlapping. These findings help to contextualize the implementation gap identified in the present study, in which teachers perceived national expectations as being difficult to reconcile with their institutional realities.

Additionally, results suggest that the participating institution is still missing basic requirements to achieve the goals and purposes of the Colombian foreign language policy, for example, enough spaces and class hours, adequate materials, a well-articulated curriculum, etc. We argue that bilingualism cannot be reduced to economic and competitive purposes. We also posit that language cannot be reduced to school contexts only. Nonetheless, since opportunities for English exposure seem minimal outside of school for the participants of our study, the number of hours devoted to English at the participating institution seems a key aspect for students' bilingual competence. Similarly, results reveal the plurality of bilingualism in terms of the opportunities that participants had throughout their lives to use the language. This highlights the relevance of a closer look at each institution to identify strengths, needs, and possibilities for foreign language education in relation to the expectations of the MEN's bilingualism program, which, to some extent, has already been done by Reyes-Galeano (2024).

Convergence with Recent Regional and International Evidence

Although generalizations are not a feature of case-study research, the identification of four dimensions that account for problems with the implementation of national foreign language policies, as well as the main features of each dimension, resonates with those of recent research in foreign language education. Specifically, all four dimensions were found in recent (2023 to 2025) studies using different research designs, approaches, and methodologies carried out at different geographical locations. More information regarding these studies is presented in the following subsections.

The affective dimension has been confirmed in previous controlled research such as Fathi et al.'s (2024) meta-analysis which confirms the relationship between foreign language anxiety, willingness to communicate, and, we add, confidence. Likewise, Hernández-Otálora (2024) found a reciprocal relationship between motivation and instructional time. As confirmed in the studies of Reyes-Galeano (2024), the motivational aspect is indeed a key factor. However, Hernández-Otálora's (2024) research also explores the impact of hours of instruction, highlighting the correlation between the duration of English instruction in schools, students' performance on standardized tests, and, as we contribute, motivation.

The heterogeneity dimension was explored by Hidayat et al. (2024) study carried out with EFL students. Both studies report challenges associated with dealing with heterogeneous classrooms. Finally, the last dimension has been explored in recent systematic reviews carried out in Colombia by Reyes-Galeano (2024) and Viana Astaiza and Gómez Medina (2025). Although different methodologies were followed, all of them explore the gap between Colombian foreign language policies and reality. Given the extent to which the findings of the above-mentioned studies resonate with ours, we posit that, to some extent, the proposed dimensions seem to transcend our case and apply to different contexts. In other words, it seems that these dimensions have explanatory potential to account for problems with the implementation of

national foreign language policies beyond our particular case. Nonetheless, more research needs to be done in order to confirm these initial findings.

Theoretical Contribution

Although the participating students' grammatical competence appeared to be lacking, which may have played some role in their difficulties, their lack of sociolinguistic competence cannot be explained by Canale and Swain's (1980) three-part model alone. Rather, strategic competence seems to be contingent upon having a positive affective attitude, such as tolerance of error and low anxiety, and motivation to communicate using L2. Moreover, the ability to do so, that is, to be presented with tasks that are achievable and meaningful, appears contingent on an enabling institutional context. As such, sociolinguistic and strategic competences may be seen as products of what students know and how well they can use language appropriately (Hymes, 1972), as well as products of the extent to which their immediate institutional and affective environments allow them to demonstrate their sociolinguistic and strategic knowledge.

In other words, it may be that learners may well know how to communicate in contextually appropriate ways, but do not have an institutional context where they can and are encouraged to demonstrate their knowledge. Moreover, shortcomings that may be considered deficiencies in sociolinguistic or strategic competence may be more adequately considered performance constraints that arise from an institutional context characterized by large/heterogeneous groups of students, little teaching time to work with, and expectations on the part of language policies that do not always match realities on the ground. A summary of the institutional factors identified in the analysis is presented in Table 1. Further exploration of communicative competence in contexts like the one in this study, an under-resourced public education context, may benefit from paying attention to performance constraints in addition to grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences. Along similar lines, further exploration of symbolic competence as socially and institutionally situated (Kramsch, 2006) may be helpful.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that participants perceived the implement of English communicative competence as being shaped by the interaction of student-related, pedagogical, institutional, and policy-related factors. The evidence does not support explanations that assign primary responsibility to a single group; instead, students' performance reflects the cumulative influence of motivation and confidence, classroom opportunities to communicate, teaching methodologies, prior learning experiences, institutional resources, and the conditions under which national bilingualism objectives are implemented.

Student motivation was an important factor, particularly because sustained engagement is necessary for language development; however, motivation was not independent of the educational context, and motivational difficulties should therefore be addressed through attainable tasks, supportive feedback, meaningful interaction, and opportunities for students to experience progress. Teaching methodology also influenced communicative development: grammar and vocabulary remain necessary, but students need opportunities to apply this knowledge in listening, speaking, and interaction. The findings support flexible methodologies that combine explicit instruction, scaffolding, guided practice, and meaningful use, rather than the assumption that a single method can respond to every classroom condition.

Institutional circumstances affected what teachers and learners could accomplish: limited exposure to English, differences in prior knowledge, and restrictions on instructional practice reduced the opportunities available for sustained communicative development, demonstrating that English achievement cannot be improved solely through greater individual effort. Finally, the study identified a gap between the proficiency objectives established by Colombian bilingualism policies and the conditions experienced within the public-school context; improving English competence depends on aligning policy expectations with the actual opportunities schools can provide.

The study's principal contribution is a contextualized explanation of English communicative competence as a multidimensional and interdependent phenomenon, emphasizing the need for coordinated strategies involving students, teachers, school leadership, and educational policymakers.

In summary, the level of engagement that eleventh-grade students reach is the product of the sum of the relationship among motivation, confidence, previous learning, and the possibilities of use provided within the educational experience. Although motivation is a personal element, the context has a strong influence on it. In order to keep them motivated, students should be challenged with tasks they can accomplish, provided with support and helpful feedback, given opportunities for meaningful interactions, and presented with evidence of their own progress.

However, regardless of how much effort is made, certain elements such as limitations on teaching practice, little exposure, and different learning experiences and knowledge can hinder the development of communicative competence. Thus, an important gap was found in relation to what is expected by the national policy regarding bilingualism in terms of English level and what is provided by public schools. Then, it is important to bear in mind that increasing the level of communicative competence in English among the participants of the present study requires a concerted effort by teachers, students, leadership, and educational policy makers to make sure that expectations and teaching practice match each other.

Although there is no unique approach for language teaching, it is important to promote the practical use of English by providing opportunities for listening and speaking. Nevertheless, grammar and vocabulary should not be neglected, as these constitute the bases of the target language, and interaction should be introduced and scaffolded to facilitate the task. In short, blame cannot be assigned to a single element; communicative competence in English is a product of an intricate relationship among a great variety of elements that work in harmony or discord.

Limitations

These results should be interpreted in terms of the scope of this study. Since only 14 eleventh grade students and two teachers from the participating school were involved, the results should not be generalized to a statistical inference. The results are limited to the perception of English as a subject of study through semi-structured interview and open-ended survey and not an actual measure of competence in English. Nevertheless, by limiting the scope to a particular grade-level cohort, a deeper and more context-based understanding of the research problem can be achieved. Moreover, the views of the participants provide valuable information of their perceptions regarding the factors that may affect their level of competence in the English language. Furthermore, the perceptions of the two English teachers provide professional insight which complements the perspective of the students. Although limited in terms of scope, the study can serve as a starting point in improving English education and serve as basis for future and more extensive studies on this research problem, including those with a longitudinal approach.

Statement of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest related to this research.

Declaration of authorship contribution

The author carried out the conceptualization of the study, the methodological design, the data collection and analysis, as well as the writing, review, and editing of the manuscript.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

No artificial intelligence (AI) tools or generative AI systems were used in the development, analysis, writing, or preparation of this work. The content was developed entirely by the authors, who are solely responsible for its originality, accuracy, interpretation, and conclusions.

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