

## Students' Beliefs About Their English Class: Exploring New Voices in a National Discussion

Creencias de los estudiantes acerca de su clase de inglés:  
explorando nuevas voces en una discusión nacional

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The main objective of this study was to identify 6<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade students' beliefs about their English class in a public institution in Armenia, Colombia. By means of interviews, drawings, and focus groups with 30 students, four beliefs were established. It was found that students' beliefs are attached to the experiences they have lived in their English class; the discipline, the monotony, the lack of interesting material, and the impact of foreign language learning are the main related aspects. Implications and recommendations for further research are proposed based on the necessity of giving students a voice in the development of current national policies of language learning and also in the debate about the effectiveness of these policies and their impact inside schools.

*Key words:* Beliefs, classroom environment, English language learners, qualitative research.

El objetivo principal de este estudio fue identificar las creencias de los estudiantes de los grados 6<sup>o</sup> y 11<sup>o</sup> acerca de la clase de inglés en una institución pública en Armenia, Colombia. Por medio de entrevistas, dibujos y grupos focales con treinta estudiantes, cuatro creencias fueron establecidas. Se encontró que las creencias de los estudiantes están asociadas a las experiencias que han vivido en su clase de inglés; la disciplina, la monotonía, la falta de material interesante y el impacto del aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera en los estudiantes son los principales aspectos involucrados. Se proponen implicaciones y recomendaciones para investigaciones posteriores teniendo en cuenta que hay una necesidad de darle voz a los estudiantes en el desarrollo de políticas nacionales de aprendizajes de lenguas y en el debate sobre la efectividad de estas políticas y su impacto en las escuelas.

*Palabras clave:* ambiente del salón de clases, creencias, estudiantes de inglés, investigación cualitativa.

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## Introduction

It has been more than a decade since a nationwide campaign was officially started in favor of English learning inside Colombian classrooms (Galindo & Moreno, 2008). Nonetheless, such a big effort appears to be ineffective according to the same Colombian Ministry of Education. It has recently been acknowledged that only one percent of high school students have reached the desired competence in English (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2014). There is a good amount of research to suggest where the problem can begin to be understood.

For instance, researchers suggest aspects like the dismissal of Colombia's actual linguistic reality in favor of a foreign language (Galindo & Moreno, 2008); lack of contextualization goals within regions and lack of articulation of all parties involved in the process (Correa, Usma, & Montoya, 2014); inadequate use of budget and human resources to guarantee a real impact of a bilingual policy (Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014); a gap between goals and the reality of schools concerning curriculum, methodologies, and the linguistic competence of teachers (Bermúdez & Fandiño Parra, 2012); the expansion of English at the expense of bilingual competence in Spanish and English besides other types of local bilingualism (de Mejía, 2011).

As can be seen, there is a tendency in recent research to show how English learning has become a sort of imposition in schools rendering any public policy an abstract endeavor. However, the theoretical arguments of this controversy take place outside schools. Inside them, the main target of all this process—students—must endure every change of policy and continue to work in their classes. What students make of all these processes is a pending task for researchers in Colombia. Since the mid-eighties there have been a number of international (Barcelos, 2003) and very few national studies interested in the understanding of students' beliefs and their implications on foreign language learning contexts.

The study of beliefs inside schools has gained research status and theoretical interest since beliefs have been proved to influence people's actions (Ajzen, 1991, 2005). According to Brown and Harris (2012), understanding students' beliefs can contribute significantly to the development of optimal learning behavior and academic achievement. Student's beliefs can become very important not only to better understand the real impact of the current policy of language learning but also to determine more effective courses of action inside classrooms. It is regrettable that there is not enough research that can inform us of the current state of student's beliefs in Colombia since the influence of beliefs inside public schools is strong and sometimes lead to undesired practices and undesired results when they are not identified and treated accordingly (Prieto, 2008).

As such, that this study sought to explore students' beliefs regarding their English classes in a public institution in the Department of Quindío (Colombia). The study is based on the assumption that students' beliefs are not only central to any learning process, they are of paramount importance to the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) and to all its actions and implications inside public schools.

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of belief can be a little slippery considering it is a general concept with deep roots in philosophy. Some authors claim that the term belief can be considered a construct or even an umbrella term for many other educational phenomena: attitudes, values, judgments, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, and so on (Pajares, 1992).

Some authors have tried to make the concept clear by establishing its differences with similar concepts. For instance, Yero (2002) affirms that beliefs are very different from knowledge in that the latter is the ultimate source of objective truth and theories while the former are the base for purposes of action. A theory uses reason and logic to establish statements of reality while beliefs

are based on information that can be factual or not (Dewey, 1933); in this way we have beliefs about things we understand and about things we do not.

A difference between beliefs and knowledge is also proposed by Abelson (1979). This author claims that beliefs are very different from knowledge since beliefs are affective, experiential, and irrational. Abelson highlights that beliefs can be related to either the actual state of the context where they are created or the ideal context in which individuals yearn to be. Finally the author stresses that beliefs do not need to be consensual as they can be shared by a group of people or they can be highly subjective. In this same respect, Ortega y Gasset (as cited in Savater, 1999) claim that when compared with ideas it is clear that we have ideas but we are our beliefs, we live in them because they give personal sense to our overwhelming reality.

The difference between knowledge and beliefs is also supported by Pajares (1992) who argues that this difference comes from the relation of knowledge with facts while beliefs are more related to personal judgment and assessment. In this sense, it is clear that knowledge is based on the use of reason and logic; it can be proved to be wrong and thus it is subject to change. Beliefs, on the other hand, depend highly on the experiences and the sense people make of them for taking decisions in future events. In this way beliefs do tend to be stable in time and more resistant to change (Yero, 2002). In the field of education this difference becomes important since a better way to understand what is going on in schools is not by analyzing theories but beliefs.

Recent studies on the issue claim that beliefs do not only belong to a cognitive dimension of people but also they give account of their social dimension (Barcelos, 2003). According to this author, from this view beliefs can be dynamic and dependent on the interactions of individuals within a given context. This implies that beliefs can be subject to change if interaction is considered. This of course requires a research approach that can give evidence of such interaction and its influence on beliefs.

Summarizing, we can affirm that beliefs are personal judgments that can be rational or irrational about our reality. Beliefs do not only give sense to reality but they guide our actions. The development of these judgments depends on the interaction of individuals within a context. Thus beliefs can become a powerful influence upon actions and discourses within any given context.

### **Literature Review**

Research on beliefs, and more specifically on students' beliefs, has increased only recently. There are some recent reports in the Brazilian context by Barcelos (2003) and Kalaja, Barcelos, Aro, and Ruohotie-Lyhty (2015) in relation to students and student teachers. Furthermore, there is some research on higher education students (see Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005 for a review) and some quantitative extensive studies on student's beliefs in New Zealand (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2007, 2008).

In relation to students' beliefs and English classes in formal contexts of education there is also some evidence from Asian schools. Through observation and discourse analysis some beliefs could be established. For example, a pervasive belief among students was the advocacy of the translation method as an effective activity for learning languages. Traditional beliefs like this are more frequent amid Chinese students, a fact explained by the author as respect for traditions and culture in the Chinese context of education (Yu, 2013).

A similar study by Settar (2012) intended to establish what the beliefs of EFL students in Iraq were and how those beliefs affected students' learning process. The participants in this research were 101 university students of EFL. The instrument used to evaluate the students' beliefs was Horwitz' (1988) questionnaire of Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). Some categories were analyzed in the study where aspects like aptitude difficulty, strategies, and motivation were measured. It could be concluded that students believe that there are certain people that can learn languages better than others but they are very optimistic that they can learn it and

have a very good performance. Students also believed that it is easy to learn English but that it depends on the time spent for doing so. It was surprising to find out that students believed that memorizing lists of vocabulary without having contact with the language or the context itself is the best way to learn. Besides, students reported a lack of motivation due to the wrong usage of some strategies while learning the target language. Finally, students evidenced a desire to learn English because they believed it important for their professional lives but the lack of possibilities to get involved in effective language learning leads to frustration.

From a South American perspective, in Brazil some researchers highlight the importance of beliefs about second language acquisition (SLA). Barcelos (2003), in a critical review, analyses some studies about beliefs in order to discuss their content: methodology, definition of beliefs, the relationship between belief and actions, and the advantages and disadvantages. First, she starts a discussion about the term *belief* and its meaning given in previous research. Secondly, she revises the research in order to place it into three different categories (The Normative Approach, The Metacognitive Approach, and The Contextual Approach). Finally, she expounds upon the advantages of each approach and the instruments used by the researchers to collect data. Taking into consideration this analysis, Barcelos concludes that:

Beliefs about SLA research has to move beyond a simple description of beliefs as predictors of future behavior to an investigation of beliefs in context. We need to understand how beliefs interact with students' actions and what functions they play in students' learning experiences in class or outside class. (Barcelos, 2003, p. 29)

Finally, in Colombia there is a mixed exploratory study of students' beliefs in two public institutions (Avella & Camargo, 2010). One university and one high school were used as contexts for the research. Through the use of questionnaires and observations the authors could affirm that the students are conscious about the importance of the language and how it can help them

to get a job or to study abroad. They also fear the fact of being mocked by their classmates: Students believe that mispronouncing words is one situation that affects their participation. The study's conclusion was that students' motivation towards several aspects of the class can affect their performance.

The studies commented on here are useful to support two facts. First, the relation between students' beliefs and their performance in the English classroom is an issue that should be taken into account by any teacher, policy maker, and institution to guide their decisions. Second, there is not enough research in public high schools in relation to the state of students' beliefs about their English class. This is another way to say that students have been mute for a long time in relation to bilingualism in Colombia. This study is an attempt to listen to what students have to say about this process.

### **Context of the Study**

The study was carried out in a public institution located in the southwest of Armenia, Quindío (Colombia). This city is considered by the Ministry of Education as one of the regions where there are "intensive efforts", meaning there are many projects being developed inside schools sponsored by the *Colombia Very Well* program, that is, textbooks, native English speakers, co-teachers, intensification of teaching hours per week, and so on. Thirty students (fifteen from sixth grade and fifteen from eleventh grade) were volunteers to participate in the data collection activities. The participation of students from these grades was an informed decision based on the findings of Harris, Harnett, and Brown (2009). These researchers found that beliefs of students finishing high school tend to be different from those of students finishing primary. In this way, five volunteer students from each grade (sixth and eleventh) were chosen at random to become part of the study. A common characteristic of the participants is that they all live in the vicinity of the school and most of them have studied at least four years in the institution.

Academically, just one student, from eleventh grade, has been studying English out of the school curriculum; the other volunteers have studied English only at school. Sixth grade students' age ranges from 11-13 years and eleventh grade students' age oscillated between 16 and 18.

## Method

As has been mentioned already, beliefs tend to be subjective and inter-subjective rather than objective because of the inner interpretations they produce within the context they arise from. If it is considered that beliefs "can vary or remain stable across time and space and eventually [become] mutually conflicting" (Kalaja et al., 2015, p. 10) a comprehensive method of research should be used to better approach such complexity.

Thus, it was necessary to develop the project from a qualitative approach. This approach allows the researchers to address the complexity of beliefs more thoroughly. Furthermore, taking into account that in Colombia research on beliefs has not been a subject of much interest, this study constitutes an exploratory case study. According to Yin (2003): "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 18). A case study provides a unique example of real people in real life situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

## Procedures

Three instruments were used in order to collect the information of the study: students' drawings, focus groups, and interviews. The main instrument to collect data was students' drawings of their English class. Drawings can be a powerful tool to approach complex information when working with underage participants. According to Diem-Wille (2001), "pictures, drawings, and metaphors show a person's emotional state of mind much better than verbal definitions or descriptors"

(p. 119). Clarebout, Depaepe, Elen, and Briell (as cited in Harris et al., 2009) argued that "drawings can be used to identify nuances and ambivalences within a person's belief system, indicating they would be useful when studying pupil conceptions" (p. 3).

Following Harris et al.'s (2009) study, each participant in the research was given a paper to draw their English class and was instructed to write a short caption of their drawing to better explain the images (Figure 1). The presentation and explanation of their drawing were done in two focus groups. Inside the focus groups students could explain their drawings to their classmates and discuss or come to agreement in relation to the particularities of their English class. Answers and interaction were video recorded. Finally, open interviews were carried out with each participant in order to have a more detailed source of information. The use of these three tools of data collection allowed a triangulation process of information giving the qualitative approach of the study an inter-subjective rigor required to have consistent results (Cohen et al., 2007).

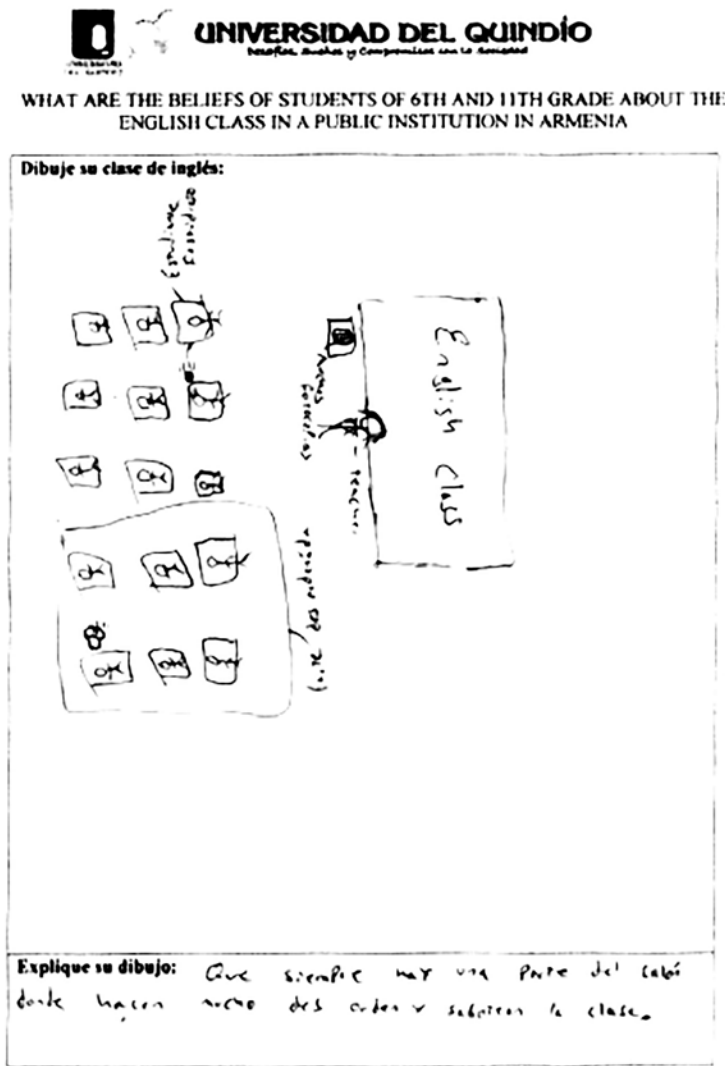
## Data Analysis

Each participant was given a numerical code to protect their identities so that their drawings and answers from the focus groups and interviews could be easily monitored. Frequency of images and words in the interviews and focus groups were highlighted for further relation. As a result, four categories emerged out of the frequency and relation of images and words. Each category was named after the same choice of words of participants and all comments related to it: The Dark Side, Always the Same, Changes, and The English Door.

### The Dark Side

Avella and Camargo (2010) reported on the importance given by students to a classroom environment: Students believe that this has direct influence upon their interaction and participation in class. Similarly, in our study it was found that students believe their English

Figure 1. Drawing of the English Class by One of the Participants



class environment is affected dramatically by a “dark side” inside the classroom. This dark side refers to a certain part of the classroom (a group of students) in which some students interfere negatively in the process of learning. This category was created because of the frequency in which some students from both 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades mentioned this event.

While analyzing the drawings, we could find that some participants mentioned this issue several times. For example, Student 2 (11<sup>th</sup> Grade) made the following comment in his drawing:

There is always a part of the classroom fooling around; they disrupt the class.<sup>1</sup>

During the focus groups, 11<sup>th</sup> graders expressed their inconformity about “the dark side”. For example, Student 2 expressed that one of his partners, specifically Student 5, belongs to “the dark side” because he and his group of partners do not pay attention to class instruction and

<sup>1</sup> All the excerpts from the students have been translated from their original language, Spanish, for the purposes of publication.

activities. Besides, when the interviewer asked them about “the dark side” all the students agreed on the interference that this group of students creates. Student 2 from the focus group emphasized that the people from this side talk loudly and a lot in Spanish, making the development of tasks and participation almost impossible.

While setting the influence that the dark side has in their English classes during the focus group, the interviewer asked: “Do you feel that the dark side influences your learning process?” The students answered:

Their voices are just unbearable (Student 2, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

Interestingly, Student 5 from 11<sup>th</sup> Grade, whom his partners in the focus groups identified as belonging to this “dark side”, acknowledges that:

Yes, of course, that noise doesn't leave anybody to concentrate

Some answers to the question “How do you feel in the classroom's environment?” during the interview from 6<sup>th</sup> graders were:

Bad, students disturb, they make noise. (Student 1)

Sometimes, the teacher has to talk them loud, they make too much noise. They stand up. (Student 2)

As has been shown, it is evident that the way students express their inconformity with this situation constitutes a belief about English class environment. A fact influencing this belief is the number of students per classroom. In this public school there are 34 students per classroom on the average. This situation makes the process of interaction, participation, and concentration difficult, allowing the creation of these “dark sides.” It is very interesting as well to see how both groups share this belief, especially the disadvantages that the dark side produces in their learning process.

### Always the Same

This category refers to the routine students live in their English class; the use of photocopies was the most reported material in the classroom by

students. Students believed that the use of repetitive activities in the class makes it uninteresting. The frequency in which students from both grades mentioned the lack of interest related to this kind of material made its categorization possible. Moreover, students' organization and the teachers' role within the classroom make up part of this category. This could easily be noticed in the drawings and comments of the students. For example, Student 1 from 11<sup>th</sup> grade expressed the feelings evoked by the materials used by the teacher (photocopies) in his drawing (Figure 2).

He explains his drawing saying:

My drawing expresses that almost all the classes are photocopies.

While answering the interview question about materials in the classroom, some students commented as follows:

Dictionary and photocopies. (Student 2, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

Photocopies and audios. (Student 2, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

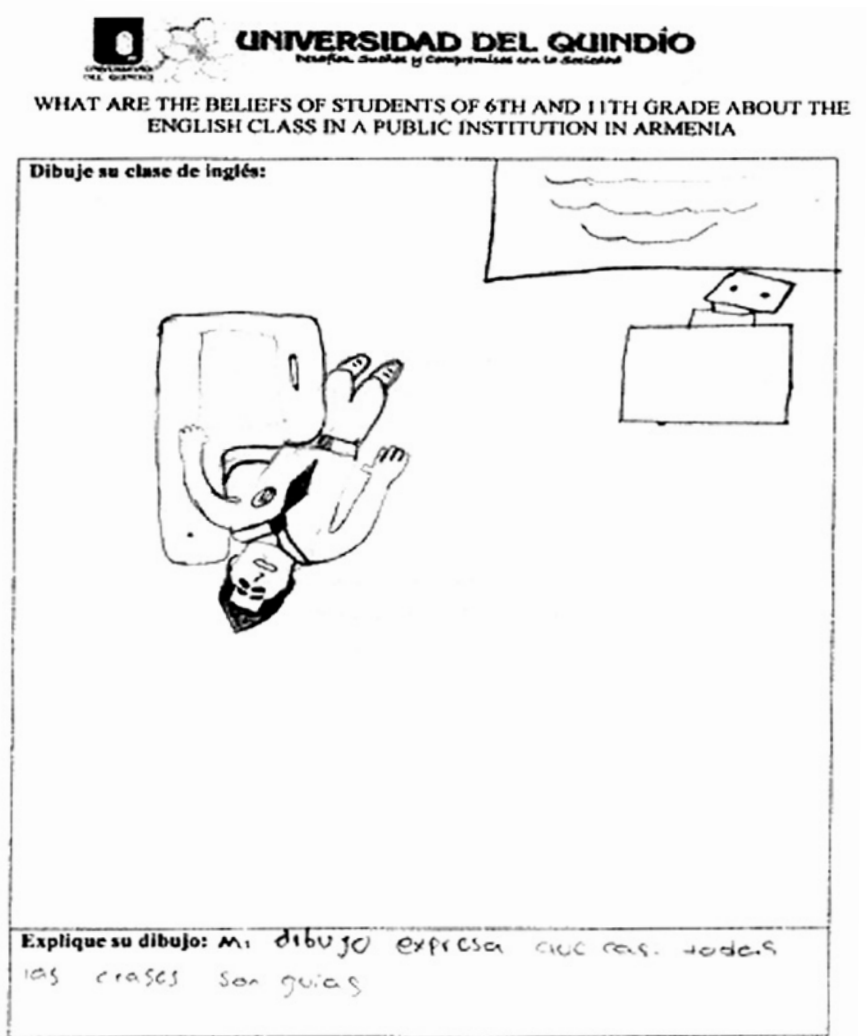
Dictionary, photocopies, and vocabulary. (Student 1, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)

Only photocopies and the notebook. (Student 3, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)

Also, in the drawings displayed in Figure 3, the students showed other aspects that made some common events and dispositions in the class evident: classroom organization with desks in straight lines, teacher's role (he or she is always in front of the classroom), individual work and a board full of instructions.

As also stated by Settar (2012), students are very perceptive about monotony. In this category, they feel that doing “always the same” is not only boring for them but also affects their performance during the class. This category evidences how traditional an English class can be, in this case, in a public institution. In fact, the influence of everyday experiences, in this case classroom experiences, affects the way beliefs are shaped (Abelson, 1979; Pajares 1992). For students, their English class is similar to any other traditional class where there is a teacher giving instructions to be developed individually and where every task is predictable.

Figure 2. Drawing of the English Class by Student 1 (11<sup>th</sup> Grade)



### Changes

According to Abelson (1979), beliefs can be related not only to the actual state of things in a given context but also to the ideal state of things in an imaginary situation. As such, it was possible to constitute a category with the comments students had about proposals to improve their English classes. This category refers to what students want to see in their English class: “changes”. This category is very informative since there is a great amount of possibilities that can be taken into account in order to improve any English class. In general terms, the lack of new material,

the same way of developing the class, the absence of oral practice, and so on, are some of the aspects that students want to change. That is why this category shows how the class can be more interesting and appealing to the ideas and possible changes that the students suggest. Some of the changes were stated as follows:

- English instead of Spanish. That English classes be taught in Spanish. (Student 3, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)
- To learn other languages. (Student 5, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)
- That the classes should become more practical not so much theory. (Student 1, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)



That new things be taught, because it is always the same. (Student 5, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

It is interesting to highlight how the beliefs students have about their ideal English class can be easily related to what researches discuss in academic contexts. For example, Galindo and Moreno (2008) argue: "Thus to promote the bilingual development of Colombian citizens in only one international language would disregard other linguistic realities of equal importance." Sixth grade students affirm something in the same respect since they want to have the opportunity "to learn other languages." Cárdenas and Miranda (2014) stress the need to promote clear actions intended to improve the performance of teachers inside their classrooms. Eleventh grade students claim that it is important "that new things be taught, because it is always the same."

On the other hand, when focus groups were done, the students expressed some clear and specific ideas

that they believe can be very useful for the English class. For example:

English games. (Student 5, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)

That we were taken to the computers' room to play. (Student 2, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)

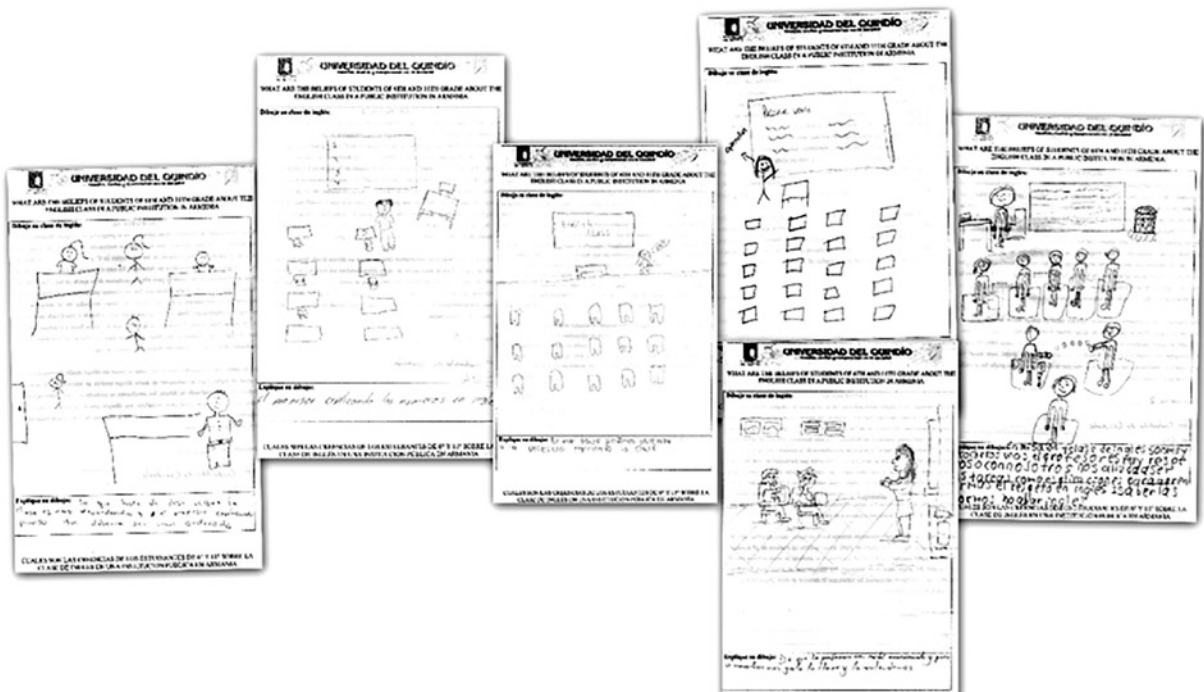
Change the traditional things, photocopies. I think that it has happened for a long time and it's so boring. It is time to change, isn't it? So, more didactic topics and be more strict with the people that disturb the class. (Student 2, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

As can be seen, students do not only talk about what they dislike but they also propose solutions. It is also evident that students demand "changes" for improving their performance and mostly for profiting their time in their English class.

### The English Door

This category emerged as a token of the frequency of answers in relation to the importance students give

Figure 3. Samples From Participants About the Organization of Their English Class



to English in their lives. This was a belief shared equally by students from 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. This category is very similar to the findings by Settar (2012) and Yu (2013). Of this category it can be said that beliefs of students in the foreign language context tend to be related to an instrumental motivation towards the learning of English. Students recognize the importance of English since they recognize they can use it for many other future activities. Then, English becomes an entrance or door to other possibilities for students.

For example, when asked about the importance of learning English, students answered as follows:

For going to other countries. (Student 1, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)

For many things, to study and to work. (Student 3, 6<sup>th</sup> Grade)

For many things, for getting a job here or abroad. (Student 2, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

To open the doors for a job. (Student 5, 11<sup>th</sup> Grade)

Students acknowledge that speaking another language, in this case, English, is very important in their academic and professional lives. According to de Mejía (2011), this kind of prestige that English has among public intuitions and the common people is evidence of how the learning of this language could be considered an imposition. For participants in this research the “use” and “advantages” English learning has in their future lives are very clear and almost unanimous, but this unanimity does not leave space for acknowledging the importance of developing competences in our mother tongue. For Galindo and Moreno (2008) the dismissal to give equal importance to both languages can result in poor outcomes in the development of English competences.

## Conclusion

The main goal of this research was to establish some students’ beliefs about the English class, specifically students from 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades. Throughout the whole paper, we have seen that this is a complex and extensive work that needs to be analyzed deeply in many other

aspects. Nonetheless, some of the most general and remarkable beliefs could be established and analyzed and grouped into four categories: The Dark Side, Always the Same, Changes, and The English Door.

In the “dark side,” students believe that this is a characteristic present inside the English class, a situation that affects dramatically their process of English learning. The evidence shows how the interference from one part of the classroom can be very harmful for the other students’ performance with the language. Besides, from “always the same,” students believe that the monotony, in terms of materials, organization of the classroom and the teachers’ role, is a factor of negative motivation.

Students also report beliefs about the ideal characteristics in their English class. In the category “changes” it can be concluded that students believe that the implementation of new materials, the use of oral tasks, and encouraging activities can be very useful for catching students’ attention. Besides, students also believe that the teachers need to be stricter with the students that do not want to work. Students believe that a good English class requires all students to be involved in the activities but such activities must be appealing and not repetitive.

As demonstrated in “the English door” category, students believe that speaking English is the best option for getting a better job and having a future abroad. This instrumental motivation towards English learning reinforces the prestige this language has in our culture. It is paradoxical then to see how a class where students firmly recognize the importance of its subject matter for their future lives (a luxury not all subjects in public school enjoy) is not developed in such a way as to turn this kind of motivation into effective learning.

Contrary to the findings by Harris et al. (2009), beliefs of students beginning and finishing high school in Colombia do not differ too much in relation to their English class. Students share common and firm beliefs about methodology, discipline, and motivation towards the class. There is evidence to support that the use of traditional methods is deeply resented by students. Thus,

the logic of action and consequences inside the English class can be established from the categories presented in this paper. The lack of appealing activities leads to a lack of involvement of all students; this in turn allows the creation of groups of students that disrupt the class and thus affect the participation of the whole class.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the relevance of students' beliefs about their classes. To be able to determine these beliefs is the first step toward addressing a complex process in public institutions. It seems that the best way to create and deal with bilingual policy in our classrooms is to consider students' voices as a reliable source of information. Our findings suggest that as long as students' beliefs are disregarded they become a more powerful and invincible force influencing all actions. An effective way to balance these forces in an English learning context is to identify and understand the beliefs supporting them.

### Limitations and Recommendations

In Colombia, it is important to start reporting systematically about the beliefs of students in different levels of education: elementary and higher education. This would allow policy-makers and teachers to establish differences and similarities and, accordingly, to design effective methodologies. This study only focused on some levels of public education but more evidence is needed to strengthen the scope of this research. It is also important to consider teachers' beliefs since their role is equally important. To establish differences and similarities in the groups of people just mentioned would be the necessary steps toward creating a framework of reference to understand a context where policy could be effective.

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