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# Implementing a Standards-Based English Curriculum: The Case of Public Secondary Schools in Medellín

**La implementación** de un currículo de inglés basado en estándares: el caso de las Instituciones Educativas Públicas de Medellín

**A implementação** de um currículo baseado em inglês com base nos padrões: o caso das instituições educacionais públicas de Medellín



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## Abstract

This case study explored Medellín's secondary English teachers' perspectives, practices, and experiences related to English curriculum design and implementation in public schools. Data were collected using a survey sent to all secondary schools' English teachers, analysis of school curriculum documents, and focus group interviews at five purposefully selected schools. Data indicate that there is a gap between the teachers' preconceived notions of curriculum as holistic and integrative, and the notion of curriculum implied in the curriculum development process they implement (a more technical one). This gap is also evident in the schools' general curriculum documents (that state the institution's educational, holistic goals), and the English syllabus, (that tend to focus on language structures or communicative functions). Data also revealed the many challenges teachers face when designing and implementing the curriculum, including lack of preparation on curriculum development, collaborative work among teachers, and time to develop the contents. In conclusion, English teachers in public secondary schools need more significant and sustainable support in the analysis of contexts, as well as in the adaptation of curriculum guidelines.

### Key words

curriculum; syllabus; public schools; standards; standard-based curriculum

## Resumen

Este estudio de caso exploró las ideas, prácticas y experiencias de los maestros de inglés de secundaria, de la ciudad de Medellín, en relación con el diseño y la implementación del currículo de inglés en las instituciones educativas públicas. Los datos se recolectaron a través de una encuesta enviada a los profesores de inglés de los colegios de secundaria, del análisis de los documentos curriculares de los colegios y grupos focales en cinco instituciones seleccionadas con propósitos específicos. Los datos indican que hay una brecha entre las nociones de currículo en las que creen los maestros, más integrales e integradoras, y la noción de currículo que está implícita en el proceso de desarrollo curricular que ellos implementan (una visión más técnica del currículo). Esta brecha también es evidente en los documentos curriculares de los colegios (que establecen los objetivos educativos) y los programas de curso de inglés (que tienden a enfocarse en estructuras lingüísticas y funciones comunicativas). Los datos también muestran que los maestros enfrentan muchos desafíos en el diseño e implementación del currículo, incluyendo la falta de preparación en desarrollo curricular, falta de trabajo colaborativo entre los maestros y falta de tiempo para desarrollar los contenidos. En conclusión, los maestros de inglés de las instituciones públicas de secundaria necesitan un apoyo más significativo y sostenible en el análisis de los contextos, así como para la adaptación de las pautas curriculares.

### Palabras clave

currículo; colegios públicos; estándares; currículo basado en estándares

## Resumo

Este estudo de caso explorou as idéias, práticas e experiências de professores de inglês do ensino médio na cidade de Medellín, em relação ao desenho e implementação do currículo de inglês em instituições públicas educacionais. Foram utilizados vários métodos de pesquisa que incluíram levantamento, análise de documentos curriculares das escolas e grupos focais em seis instituições selecionadas para fins específicos. Os dados indicam que existe uma lacuna entre as noções de currículo em que acreditam os professores, mais abrangentes e inclusivas, e a noção de currículo que está implícita no processo de desenvolvimento curricular que eles implementam, o que é uma visão mais técnica do currículo. Essa lacuna também é evidente nos documentos curriculares das escolas, onde são estabelecidos objetivos educacionais e programas de cursos de inglês, que tendem a se concentrar em estruturas linguísticas e funções comunicativas. Os dados também mostram que os professores enfrentam muitos desafios na concepção e implementação do currículo, incluindo falta de preparação no desenvolvimento do currículo, falta de trabalho colaborativo entre os professores, falta de tempo para desenvolver conteúdo, entre outros. Em relação aos documentos sobre padrões de suficiência e currículo emitidos pelos governos nacionais e locais, os professores consideram que, embora sejam claros e coerentes, não correspondem ao contexto e às condições que enfrentam em sua prática cotidiana.

### Palavras-chave

currículo; escolas públicas; normas; currículo baseado em padrões

## Introduction

With the status of English as an international language, more and more countries around the world adopt educational policies and programs to foster the teaching and learning of the language, as a key strategy to further economic and social development (Gómez-Sará, 2017). In Colombia, the government has exerted significant pressure in the educational system by putting forth a series of educational reforms to set the stage for the strengthening of a more competitive country in the context of globalization (Usma, 2009). This includes the implementation of a series of initiatives to increase the number of proficient users of English nationwide; such actions include the “National Plan of Bilingualism 2004-2019” (in Spanish, PNB), the “Program for Strengthening the Development of Competences in Foreign Languages 2010-2014” (in Spanish, the PFDCLE), the “Law of Bilingualism” (2013), the “National Plan of English: Colombia Very Well! 2015-2025”, and lastly, “Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018” (Gómez-Sará, 2017).

All of the above initiatives take as a basis the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which was adopted in 2004 by the Colombian Ministry of Education. Following this framework, proficiency attainment standards were established to measure students’ competence and were assigned for different grade levels, as published in 2006 in a booklet called *Guide 22: Basic Competence Standards in Foreign Language: English*. The standards are organized taking into account proficiency levels (novice: A in the CEFR; basic 1 and 2: A2, and preintermediate 1 and 2: B1) and grades (novice for 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> grades, basic for 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup>, and preintermediate for 8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>). Following the precepts of the CEFR, every set of specific standards organizes into comprehension and production standards; likewise, each one is identified with a particular communicative competence (linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic).

This publication has become the reference for English curriculum design in Colombia since a wide variety of textbooks, and curriculum guidelines

have been derived from it, including *Expedition Curriculum: Plan for the area of Humanities—Foreign language—English* (2014), an initiative from Medellín’s Secretariat of Education. It contains the English syllabus from first to eleventh grade; the selection and organization of content criteria follow those of *Guide 22: Basic Competence Standards in Foreign Language: English*.

Despite the application of these guidelines is not mandatory, English teachers either are pressured by school administrators to implement them or do so voluntarily, given the fact that the job of designing curriculum is already done for them, and it provides an easier path to preparing students for the national standardized tests, as these are all aligned. However, drawing on international standards to design and implement curriculum locally is not a process free of challenges—these have been amply discussed in the Colombian literature. In such a context, focusing on the study of curriculum development in schools, in the face of the new standards-based curriculum guidelines is a must. Policy makers, curriculum designers, researchers, school authorities, and educators need to understand and critically reflect about the process of curriculum development to overcome challenges, propose innovative solutions, and reclaim the local context for developing relevant curricula that will hopefully lead to meaningful learning.

English curriculum development still is an underdeveloped topic in Colombia. Even though it is possible to find many research reports that deal, at least tangentially, with the curriculum (given the intricate relationship between language teaching and learning and curriculum), only a few relate in particular to curriculum design and development. In a review of the research published in the last decade in Colombia, in five of the most well-known indexed journals in the field (*Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura; PROFILE, Issues in Teachers’ Professional Development; HOW Journal; Revista Folios; and Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*), we found studies that reflect this trend.

For example, we found articles that relate to curriculum development to foster learner autonomy

(Cabrales and Cáceres, 2013); developing an interdisciplinary curriculum (Bachelor, 2015; Méndez and Bonilla, 2016; Rodríguez-Boncos, 2017); curriculum development experiences intended to articulate students' contexts and/or needs (like Buitrago-Campo, 2016; Gerriet, Nausa, and Rico, 2012; Ordoñez, 2013; Ramos, Aguirre, and Hernández, 2012; Rodríguez-Bohórquez and Hine, 2009); and Aguirre (2018) whose focus was on teacher collaboration for curriculum development.

It was evident in the literature review that most studies reported experiences where the curriculum was treated as a means to address, implement, or develop something else (autonomy, communicative competence, among others) or as a process whereby teachers and curriculum designers should integrate students' context into language content. None of the articles in the reviewed literature referred to curriculum development as the study focus or discussed the implementation or appropriation of the national standards-based curriculum or any curriculum guidelines.

The case study we present here is an exploration of Medellín secondary teachers' perspectives about the curriculum as well as their practices and experiences when designing and implementing the English curriculum in their schools. We used a variety of research methods to collect information that included a survey, analysis of school curriculum documents, and focus groups at five purposefully selected schools. Data indicate that there is a gap between the teachers' believed notion of curriculum as a goal and the notion of curriculum implied in the curriculum development process they implement. This gap is also evident in the schools' general curriculum documents that state the institution's educational goals and the English syllabus (*mallas curriculares* and *plan de área*), that tend to either focus on language structures or communicative functions. Data also show that teachers face many challenges when designing and implementing the curriculum, including lack of preparation on curriculum development, lack of collaborative work among teachers, and lack of time to develop the

contents prescribed for the grade, among other things. Teachers positively assessed the guidelines released by the national or local government, though they considered that they do not necessarily align with the public schools' context.

This paper organizes as follows: first, we present an overview of the theoretical framework on which we based the research. Second, we describe the research method used and lastly, we discuss the findings and present some conclusions for curriculum development and research.

## Theoretical Framework

In this section, we briefly summarize some traditions in curriculum development and their application in the field of ELT. These traditions enlightened us in this research to characterize the perspectives, practices, and experiences of English teachers in the process of curriculum development in their schools.

### Traditions in Language Curriculum Design

Pennycook (1990) argues that because second language education (SLA) has been historically influenced by applied linguistics and cognitive theories of learning, the focus of language program design has been the selection and organization of linguistic items. However, as SLA becomes more influenced by educational theories, the concept of language program or syllabus design—that refers to the specification of the content to be taught as part of a course of instruction (Richards, 2001)—has shifted to curriculum development, which is more comprehensive than syllabus design, as it encompasses

the processes that are used to determine the needs of a group of learners to develop aims or objectives for a program to address those needs, to determine an appropriate syllabus, course structure, teaching methods and materials, and to carry out an evaluation of the language program that results from these processes. (Richards, 2001, p. 2).

One can identify an array of traditions in curriculum design and development. However, we based our study on two grand, general perspectives:

One that we are going to call “traditional” and another more ample, comprehensive notion of the curriculum.

From a traditional perspective, curriculum is a set of objectives, activities, and resources that schools and teachers need to transmit information to students (Tyler, 1949). This technical orientation of curriculum is limited and utilitarian because it promotes a curriculum that aims at the command of certain abilities and competences; it sees knowledge as compartmentalized into different subjects as if it were something that exists outside the human mind. This traditional view of the curriculum entails the setup of a series of procedures and steps to follow. Those who follow this concept of the curriculum are not necessarily interested in understanding or explaining the meanings and interactions that mediate educational processes.

By contrast, a more ample, non-traditional view of curriculum treats it as the way to organize a set of educational practices that take place in a specific time and space (Grundy, 1987), and that takes place within actual contexts and real people. Advocates of non-traditional views of curriculum call for “reconceptualiz[ing] the nature of curriculum and see it not as previously fixed plans or defended ideologies, but as an image that gravitates over the educational process” (Doll, 2002, pp. 23-24). This means changing from a notion of curriculum as a simple noun (courses, plans, teaching methods, and evaluation) to thinking of it as acting; it comprises the learning experiences and the meanings that we attribute to those experiences system of inter-dependent relationships, a performative act that takes place within real contexts. To think about the curriculum from this perspective means to give it back its historical, social, cultural and subjective character, as well as its quality of social construct (Goodson, 2003).

A more holistic view of curriculum contrasts to a traditional, more technical one that reduces it to a course of study—a syllabus with its corresponding methods of teaching and evaluation, and teachers as mere curriculum technicians. Teachers and scholars

need to transcend the vision of curriculum as a linear and fixed document and as a set of premises and assume it as a network of dynamic and complex interactions that transform into more varied and complex connections. Thus, syllabi, course contents, methods of teaching and evaluation are parts of a system, not the system in itself (Doll, 2002). Some authors go even beyond and state that curriculum is everything that happens as part of the educational process (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman, 2004), while critical theorists see it as a project that introduces individuals to specific narratives and ways of living. They argue that social structures are not as rational and fair as they seem and that schools may play an essential role in either reproducing or countering those structures (Kemmis, 1993).

### Curriculum Planning

One may establish a difference in curriculum planning examining curriculum traditions. For example, Posner (1998) compares the technical approach influenced by Tyler’s work and the critical perspective. The first relies on a means-end mechanism whereby the ends determine the means to achieve them and, at the same time, the means should guarantee that the ends are met; therefore, the fact that the ends are determined before the means makes this a fundamentally linear perspective. Curriculum planning focuses on prescribing the goals, the selection, and organization of learning experiences, and evaluation. Under this perspective, decisions concerning educational processes must be taken objectively by experts.

By contrast, as Posner (1998) argues, the critical perspective emphasizes the critical reflection of concrete situations. It considers the curriculum as a collaborative construction where teachers and students participate in a dialogical relationship as co-researchers. The curriculum is not neutral; its origins and ends are political and ideological. For critical theorists of curriculum, power, knowledge, and education connect with the curriculum in a close and complex manner. Learning is understood not as a product of educational processes, but as a



process of co-construction of knowledge and the critical reflection and transformation of reality.

Posner (1998) puts forth that the people in charge of curriculum work not only should develop and use different models but also should be aware of the implications of their use; that is to say, the choice of approaches and their implications. What is crucial is not to establish the procedures and steps for curriculum development. Instead, what is important is how people conceive the steps and procedures, the deliberation and awareness in the selection of perspectives, the theoretical framework, and the experiences that support decisions and choices. Also, how they make the analysis of the purposes underlying the curriculum proposal and the question about its implications for education; the effects that these will generate, and the practices of those who promote them.

### Planning the EFL/ESL Curriculum

Despite the more recent developments in curriculum theory, the view of curriculum that dominates the field is the technical perspective, following the classic model from Tyler (Pennycook, 1990). Under this perspective, the language curriculum is a series of prescribed plans to accomplish a specific goal; for example, the correct use of a language structure, or the effective performance in a communicative situation. Authors like Richards (2001), and Nation and Macalister (2010) recommend starting the curriculum development process with a needs analysis and a situation analysis (to characterize language learners and define the kinds of goals, activities, and evaluation that will be part of the curriculum). Nevertheless, it is common to find that the job is already done for language teachers since the curriculum is the textbook.

Richards (2001) explains that there are different levels involved when planning a language course (or textbook, or syllabus), including developing a course rationale (the nature of the course and the principles that support it), describing entry and exit levels, and choosing, sequencing and organizing the content into instructional blocks. Instructional

blocks or units may be grammar or lexical items, communicative functions or topics, depending on the theoretical framework or the approach upon which the curriculum is based. Reagan and Osborn (2002) who come from a critical pedagogy perspective, recommend designing units that are interdisciplinary and problem posing (around questions, issues, concerns, and puzzles related to language).

Since language proficiency standards taken from the CEFR have become the basis of curriculum guidelines in Colombia, we may call it a standards-based curriculum. Lund and Tannehill (2014) define a standards-based curriculum as,

a curriculum that is developed looking at the standards (district, state or national); identifying the skills, knowledge and dispositions that students should demonstrate to meet these standards; and identifying the activities that will allow students to achieve the goals stated in the standards. (p. 7).

Since the CEFR privileges a communicative approach, the contents suggested in Guide 22 are formulated in terms of communicative functions, with their corresponding language content and competences. These characteristics have prevailed in the different plans and guidelines published so far.

### The Study

This case study used mixed methods for the collection of data. According to Yin (2013), a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 7). Yin explains that case studies may use both quantitative and qualitative data.

We focused our research on the case of English curriculum development in secondary schools. Thus, the question we addressed was *What are the perspectives, experiences, and practices of secondary school teachers when designing and implementing the English curriculum in their schools?* We intended to answer this question through the achievement of the following goals:

- To identify teachers' beliefs and practices about the English curriculum and curriculum development.
- To characterize secondary schools' English curricula, following the literature on English curriculum development.
- To explore teachers' opportunities and challenges when designing and implementing the curriculum.

### Context

This study was located in Medellín, the capital of the province of Antioquia and Colombia's second largest city. As of 2015, its population was near 2.5 million. The city counts on more than 228 public schools or *instituciones educativas oficiales* (<http://medellin.edu.co/secretaria/educacion-en-cifras>) with about 610 English teachers in the elementary and secondary levels. Seventy-six of them participated in this research through a survey, and later on, in a second and third stage, the English teachers of five purposefully selected schools took part.

According to the data provided by the survey, most of the participating teachers come from Antioquia (75%), followed by Chocó (17%) and other provinces (8%). Most of them are females (60%), with ages ranging between 30 and 39 years old (30%), 40 and 49 (37%), and 50 and more (28%). 60% of the teachers identify themselves as mestizo, while 22% identify as Afro-descendants. In terms of their educational level, 42% of the teachers hold a Bachelors' degree in language teaching, 38% hold a License of Specialization, and 9% hold a Master's degree. Seventy percent reported having more than ten years of teaching experience.

In terms of preparation to teach English, 80% learned English in their undergraduate program while 33% did so in English courses; their reported levels of proficiency, according to the CEFR, are A2 (7%), B1 (32%), B2 (38%), and C1 (16%). Many attributed their teaching preparation mostly to their undergraduate studies (84%). Concerning preparation on curriculum development, teachers expressed that this is gained to a great extent thanks

to experience and training courses (80%), not the undergraduate or graduate education.

The context where we developed the second and third stages consisted of five schools located in different areas of the city:

*School 1* was located North East Medellín (*Comuna 3*); it had 4500 students and more than 100 teachers.

*School 2* was located East Medellín (*Comuna 4*); it had about 2.200 students and about 60 teachers.

*School 3* was located South of Medellín (*Comuna 15*); it had 1400 students and 45 teachers.

*School 4* was located West Medellín (*Comuna 12*); it had 2400 students and 78 teachers.

*School 5* was located East Medellín (*Comuna 5*); it had 1089 students and 37 teachers.

Almost all these schools placed in neighborhoods hit by violence and poverty; many families there are in situation of displacement, as a result of the armed conflict.

### Data Collection

As mentioned above, data was collected in three stages:

#### First Stage

It consisted of the application of a *survey* to all secondary English teachers in Medellín. The questionnaire was designed and applied using Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) and was sent via email to school principals, using a database available at the Secretariat of Education's web page. The questionnaire contained 42 questions that asked about demographics, beliefs about curriculum and curriculum design, as well as practices and experiences related to curriculum and curriculum design. Besides, the survey was intended to provide baseline data to select the schools participating in the following stages and to conceive the subsequent instruments of data collection.

#### Second Stage

Having completed a preliminary analysis of the quantitative data, we proceeded with the selection



of five schools, where we would observe, in greater depth, our case. The criteria to select the schools was the higher number of teachers who participated in the survey, diversity in their geographic location, and access (schools where there was previously established access, either because they were part of previous research projects with our university, or because they were practicum sites of our Foreign Language Teacher Education program). Once the schools were selected, and school administrators gave consent, we conducted a *document analysis*, where we examined the schools' curriculum documents. The documents analyzed were:

- *Proyecto educativo institucional*, which is a document that contains the educational project of every school and should be written down with the collaboration of the school community. It should respond to the learners', the local community, the region, and the country's situations and needs. It should be concrete, feasible and evaluable.
- *Malla curricular*, which is a document that gives an account of the way contents will be addressed in a particular school, across all grade levels. It integrates subject areas to establish a holistic and interconnected approach to articulate subjects into areas.
- *Plan de área* is a subject area's syllabus. It is often designed following the national curriculum guidelines (Retrieved from <http://www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/html>).

The purpose of the document analysis was to characterize the school curriculum in general and the English curriculum specifically in terms of goals, principles, and values.

### Third Stage

During the last phase of data collection, we conducted *focus group interviews* with the schools' English teachers in every institution. Between three and five teachers participated in each focus group. The purpose of the focus group was to expand the information provided in the survey and school documents. We wanted to more deeply explore

teachers' beliefs about curriculum and curriculum design, practices and experiences related to curriculum and curriculum design, as well as the teachers' training on curriculum development.

### Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. First, in the application of the survey, teachers were informed that their participation was voluntary. For the second stage of the research, the administrators of the selected schools received consent letters, and in the third stage, during the focus group interviews, the participating teachers received and signed consent forms. In both cases, they were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time during the research, and that the information they delivered was confidential. The data collected has been accessed and managed only by the researchers. In the writing of reports, we used pseudonyms to protect the institutions and the teachers' identities.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data was firstly analyzed using Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>), while qualitative data from the curriculum documents and the focus group interviews were systematized and later analyzed using NVivo. Content analysis was used to establish preliminary and final categories. According to Patton (2002), *content analysis* is the analysis of text data to interpret meaning. That is, once the data was systematized in NVivo files, we thoroughly read the qualitative information several times to identify patterns across the different sources of data, which in turn helped us establish initial codes. Focusing on meaning and using our research question and specific objectives as a point of departure, we defined a list of preliminary categories that we used to organize and reorganize information in NVivo.

We triangulated the data in terms of participants and instruments (Patton, 2002). In other words, we compared and contrasted data obtained from

the different sources and participants and through various tools and procedures of data collection. While some of the data obtained in the survey were used to describe the context, most of it provided a general glimpse into the English teachers' experience in curriculum development; later, the information collected through the document analysis and the focus groups was used to confirm or complement these data. The process as mentioned above resulted in the categories described next.

## Findings

Data indicate that teachers across the participating public schools face similar experiences and challenges in the development of English curricula. In this article we present three of the categories that emerged from the information collected, once we triangulated the data: 1) *Teachers' perspectives about curriculum and ELT*, which refers to the notions of curriculum and English teaching, expressed by the teachers. These notions were confronted with the reported practices of curriculum design and implementation. 2) *Designing the English curriculum based on standards*, which indicates curriculum design practices at the schools, as reported by the participants, as well as the resulting English curriculum. 3) *Implementing a standards-based curriculum*, which describes the practices followed at the participating schools to implement the designed or adapted curriculum. This category also includes the teachers' reactions to the implementation of Expedition Curriculum, the local curriculum guidelines that were circulating in the schools at the time of the study.

### Teachers' Perspectives about Curriculum and ELT

Half of the teachers participating in the survey identified with a definition of curriculum as an educational project to transform individual and social reality. This view coincides with the theoretical referents discussed in the schools' curriculum documents, particularly the Institutional education project (PEI, in Spanish). For example, these documents referred to humanist theories,

social developmental approaches, constructivist epistemologies, or competency-based learning, as the baseline for the whole education of students. In other words, even though schools' curriculum documents are based on a diversity of theoretical frameworks, they focus on one common goal: the full development of human beings and student agency to strive for the transformation of the environment and society at large.

In the focus groups, teachers identified with a non-traditional view of the curriculum; however, they did not explain how it is possible to reflect the educational goals established for the school in the English subject goals and contents. Some did not give concrete examples of what exactly the transformation of social and individual reality is. Nor did they explain how, in practice, they combine the teaching of the language with the education of whole, critical citizens; although they acknowledge that doing so is a must, they separate holistic education from English teaching. A teacher from School 3 explained:

[...] what schools propose to do is idealistic and yes, very beautiful. But transforming reality, not even the Ethics teachers [can do it] who teach in Spanish, and teach values. Now to think about us, English teachers doing it... it would be nice, though.

However, a teacher in School 1 mentioned that it is possible to foster whole education through the English curriculum, by including materials, like readings, that deal with students' lives and issues they face, but that this should be done in an integrated manner, across all subjects.

We found out that teachers in the schools located in contexts where violence and poverty are more evident justified the separation between what some called their "social work" and the teaching of English. That is, building trust with students through dialogue about their problems, teaching them values, but separately from the teaching of English contents. In those schools where the conditions of violence and poverty are *not* so remarkable (like School 3), the teachers tend to focus more on the teaching of the language.

Data show that in some of the schools the teachers related the transformation of social and individual reality to the possibility that the students become more motivated to learn English as a vehicle to better prepare for professional life and thus, to improve their quality of life. One of the teachers mentioned,

if through the teaching of English we can talk about what is happening to you, about what you are doing right now, then you get to help students see a use in the language; otherwise they will never get the chance to contextualize it...

In contrast with teachers identifying with a non-traditional view of the curriculum, there were 22% of them who identified with a more technical definition of curriculum, according to survey data. For them, the curriculum comprises a set of learning goals, contents, activities, and evaluation. This definition coincides with the process the teachers follow to design the curriculum, which includes a needs analysis, structure (based on the standards), implementation, and evaluation, at least as reported in the survey and described by the teachers in the focus groups.

### **Designing the English Curriculum Based on Standards**

According to survey data, in most schools (75%) it is the teachers who design the English curriculum, specifically the area plan. Even though all the surveyed teachers consider it is they who should plan the curriculum, 39% expressed that experts from universities should also participate. Others think that students (39%), school administrators (29%) and parents (22%) should participate as well. Data from the focus group corroborated that the teachers are responsible for designing the curriculum, though they do so by adapting the guidelines provided by the local or the national government, or other educational institutions; they also take into account educational policies, like the General Law of Education. Consequently, teachers see themselves as both *implementers* and *designers* of the curriculum. One of the teachers from School 3 commented:

“When you adapt [the curriculum], you are modifying someone else’s work. It is in attention to the context needs that you do those adaptations”.

However, at two schools (School 3 and 4), the teachers reported having participated in research projects with university scholars and one of them with student-teachers; the research included to some extent curriculum design initiatives, following the Ministry’s guidelines. Given that in these two cases the participation of teachers in curriculum design was more active, they expressed a greater sense of satisfaction with the curriculum proposal because it was better articulated to the schools’ contexts.

In the participating schools, curriculum planning takes place in January of every year, before school starts; this coincides with the answers of 60% of the surveyed teachers. Only in one of the schools (School 1), the teachers say that they do not meet because there is not a sense of collegiality among them; although the school administration schedules a time for collaborative curriculum design, they decide to spend the time on other activities they do individually. Concerning the syllabus planning for every term, based on the already designed English curriculum for all grades, most of the surveyed teachers (42%) expressed that they plan their course curriculum individually, and a total of 86% of the teachers plan their lessons by themselves.

According to data from the survey, the process most teachers follow to develop (or adapt) the curriculum is diagnosis – design – implementation – evaluation. Teachers in the focus groups confirmed this sequence and explained that during the retreat they have in January, they discuss what contents should be modified; also take into account the syllabus from the previous year as well as students’ language needs, like in School 5, to determine what they do or don’t know. In this and some of the other schools the contents relate to those that students need to know to pass the national standardized tests. In some cases, the teachers talk with their fellow teachers to inquire about how much students advanced in terms of contents in the previous grade to make the necessary changes in the materials.

When asked to further elaborate on the *diagnosis or needs analysis* and the kinds of needs they assess among students teachers offered a variety of responses. In School 5, for example, teachers do a diagnostic test or activity at the beginning of the year to establish what language contents still need to be covered. In School 2, one of the teachers expressed he did not do an analysis of students' interests because they never agreed with the contents they wanted to learn about, and another one replied that the students' expressed wants should align with their needs. In terms of needs, he said, the most important is foster *coexistence* among school community members and in the neighborhood. At School 4 teachers explained that the syllabus should consider the context; the population in the school's neighborhood had very particular needs since their students were "the children of postconflict" many of them do not find any purpose in schooling. Teachers in School 3 explained that they try to integrate content from other areas to English and adapt content regarding students' interests.

After inquiring about the topics covered in the previous year and about students' needs and interests, teachers strategically select contents from a variety of referents to design the area plans (which include both Spanish and Foreign language subjects) or the *mallas curriculares*. In the case of School 3, they use the curriculum already prepared by the National Learning Service (SENA, in Spanish). However, the document that 80% of the surveyed teachers and all participants in the focus groups used was the Ministry of Education's *Guide 22: Basic Competence Standards in Foreign Language: English*—they adapt the goals, competences, contents, and performance descriptors established in the document. At School 5 one of the teachers explained:

The guidelines and the standards are the same for all, but every school designs their own formats. Then we select the cybergraphy and the bibliography for every one of the topics and decide if a particular topic from the previous year should be expanded.

Teachers from School 3 and 4 also take into account the syllabi they created with university researchers, as mentioned earlier.

At the time of data collection, the document *Expedition Curriculum* had been recently released and circulated already in some schools; teachers at two of the participating institutions were familiar with the document because some of them had attended meetings where the material was introduced. Meanwhile, in the other three schools, teachers had just received it from the school administration, so at the moment of data collection, they had not had the time to implement it. Some of them, though, had the chance to read and analyze it; therefore, they had already made an opinion about it. This fact will be discussed in another category.

Concerning who oversees the follow up of the curriculum development process, results from the survey show that 30% expressed it is the English teachers, 36% expressed it is the schools' academic coordinator, and 20% said it is the English coordinator. In the focus groups, the teachers shared varied opinions. For example, at two of the schools, teachers complained that no one verifies whether the curriculum plan is being implemented or not, or how. They also complained that they do not have support or tutoring from the school administration, the Ministry of Education, or the local government. At two other schools (School 2 and 5), the teachers reported having support from the coordinators and principals through strategies previously established by them, and they make sure that the area plans are implemented and revised regularly. In School 3 teachers mentioned that the institution was in the process of certification by The Colombian Institute of Technical Norms (Icontec in Spanish); therefore, they should follow a specific audit process whereby auditors visited the school, observed classes, and compared students' notes against the syllabus. Lastly, in this same school, teachers reported that they did not have any pressure to implement the syllabus in a particular way because school administration assumed that they were responsible teachers and would do things well.



The process of designing the English curriculum in public schools was not void of challenges. In the survey, teachers reported that the most significant challenges included lack of teamwork (47%), lack of time (42%), lack of clear guidelines (30%), and lack of school support (26%). In the focus groups, the challenge they prioritized was lack of teacher preparation to structure the English curriculum. Some teachers explained that because they were novices in curriculum design, they had resorted to area plans from other schools. A teacher from School 2 mentioned that because they were new to *mallas curriculares*, they looked for referents they had at hand; for example, since she previously worked at a private school, where the syllabus was the textbook, she used it and made a similar syllabus in her school. Another teacher from the same school said that she did not know about curriculum design; that they were given the prescribed curriculum and did not have a clue about what to do with it. She did not know how to do a needs analysis, or what curriculum their school needed to strengthen the teaching of English. She said that she was about to retire, so she expected the new generations to figure it out and the universities to analyze if they were adequately preparing pre-service teachers to design curriculum.

Another difficulty mentioned in the focus groups was the lack of commitment to working collaboratively and of sufficient space and time to do so. A teacher from School 1 expressed:

We do not work as a team, not even secondary teachers work as a team. There are some groups of teachers who get together because we empathize, but there is no teamwork. Much less with elementary teachers, but I know this happens in many schools [...] sometimes we have meetings, now they are rare, and we share a little.

In schools where teachers were willing to work collaboratively, they often lacked the time, even though the administration schedules spaces to do so. A teacher from School 5 explained, “time could be very limited [...] we are provided with the space for one thing, and then it conflicts with another activity.”

### *The Resulting English Curriculum*

In the document analysis we found out that, in general, the English curricula constituents follow the *Guide 22: Basic Competence Standards in Foreign Language: English*. All the schools, except one, adapt to such standards to determine course contents. Overall, the area plans do not make substantial changes in the standards or the contents derived from them. For example, we found excerpts that were copied literally while others have only a few changes in the grammar or vocabulary matters.

At School 3 and 4, the selection and organization of contents considered themes related to students' lives (these are the schools that participated in research projects with University faculty). At four of the participating schools, the instructional units were sequenced in terms of grammar and vocabulary, though topics and competences are also part of the syllabus. At School 1 and 4 the instructional units were formulated in terms of themes of daily life like “Jobs”, “The School”; in School 3 they are expressed as communicative functions; and Schools 2, 3, and 5 include “problematizing questions”, like “Why are there spelling norms in different languages?” (School 5), or “Who am I? What do we have?” (School 3). In the survey, 34% of the English teachers expressed that their syllabus is organized in terms of grammar structures; 22% around communicative functions and 14% say that units are subjects of daily life.

According to the participating schools' curriculum documents, three of them explicitly subscribe to a communicative approach. The other two schools (School 1 and 5) follow different perspectives, like semantic-communicative or meaningful learning.

### **Implementing a Standards-based Curriculum**

In the focus groups, we found out that even though the methodology proposed in the Ministry of Education's guidelines fosters the communicative approach and thematic contents (following the CEFR), in practice the teachers are more inclined to emphasize linguistic contents, especially vocabulary and grammar. They explained that, as we mentioned



earlier, this is because it is what students are tested on in the national standardized exams. A teacher in School 5 told:

We are grammar-based here, there is no way to deny it [...] that is what the [national standardized] tests focus on [...] that is what students are required in the tests. If you take the ICFES test, they won't give you a listening exercise, they ask you about grammar.

A teacher in School 2 explained that when the standardized tests time approached, she focused on grammar through reading, translation, and speaking exercises.

In Schools 3 and 4, the teachers developed contents related to students' lives. For example, during a soccer world cup, a teacher in School 3 assigned a country playing in the cup to teams of students so that they researched and presented information to the class. Teachers mentioned including other topics that interested students like the environment, means of communication or celebrations. However, some of them acknowledged a certain emphasis on language structures. A teacher in School 3 expressed:

I think there is a contradiction between the ICFES test and the Ministry's demand for a communicative [approach] [...] Then I think that, in a way, the grammar is fundamental so that they [students] do well in the ICFES test.

Actually, in School 5 teachers explained that although they developed a syllabus based on students' needs and interests, from grades 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> they followed SENA's guide as it is because it aligns with the national standardized tests.

We may say that teachers do follow what proposes the area plan, but most focus on the vocabulary and grammar portion of the unit contents because it is what students are going to be tested on, as long as the time provided and students' background language knowledge allows them to do so. Besides, a teacher in School 4 explained that English teachers would do as they were taught: if they received instruction based on grammar structures, that is, likely to be their teaching focus. He said, "I used to teach grammar

because that was the way a teacher taught me at the university and also in high school" and explained that he now tries to teach English by playing.

The teachers implement the curriculum through a variety of activities, usually depending on the contents or approaches they identify with or that they find more suitable to their syllabus, their knowledge, and resources. Among the activities mentioned in the focus group, there are exercises in copies, vocabulary games, reading comprehension exercises, and role-playing games.

In the implementation of the curriculum, the interviewed teachers identified a series of obstacles and challenges. For example, among the challenges, the teachers from Schools 1, 2, and 5 explained that the socio-economic context and conditions of violence affect the development of the curriculum. One of the cases to highlight is that of a teacher in School 1, who expressed that she often left aside the teaching of the curriculum to address the issues students faced:

[T]o be honest, after doing an analysis of the reality of the school, more than once I have thought that the teaching of English is not a priority [...] the priority here is coexistence, and I think the school needs to address more assertively [...] how could I work in an area [of the city] where there is so much violence [...]

She added that the situation becomes even more problematic with the presence of several drug dealers right next to the school. "To me it is more important to dialogue with students, with the conflict actors, listen to them [...] try to make them a little happier." To this, another teacher from the same school replied that she agreed that an English teacher is an educator and that she thought it was possible to address students' lives through English "then you make them see that the language is useful, otherwise they will never learn it".

Among the obstacles that teachers mentioned, there is a small number of hours per week assigned to English, in addition to the high number of activities scheduled by the school administrators during class hours. Also, teachers occasionally have to invest their

class hours in solving discipline issues and conflict resolution. The loss of class time does not allow teachers and students to cover the contents, within the scheduled time. This situation also affects the continuity in the process students have from the previous or the following grade.

Another obstacle secondary English teachers face is the lack of preparation among students who just entered secondary education. Probably this is because there are not enough elementary school teachers who are prepared to teach English to children. The teachers also mentioned that the high number of students per class negatively affects the implementation of the curriculum. This condition, in addition to the low academic level and the lack of motivation on the part of students, constrains the attainment of learning goals. Teachers also mentioned the lack of sufficient and adequate resources and teaching materials, which go from the lack of paper to make copies to the lack of technological resources, like computers.

We found various factors that affect the implementation of the curriculum at some of the participating institutions. For example, the mobility of students between schools, the income of new students during the entire year, nutritional deficiencies among students, the hiring of teachers who do not have an EFL teaching degree, and teacher mobility. However, perhaps the most significant difficulty faced by the teachers is the lack of preparation in curriculum development. When teachers lack this preparation, they often appeal to prepackaged curricula provided by the government or other institutions —although this practice has become a requirement of many school administrators<sup>1</sup>.

#### **Reactions to Expedition Curriculum and National Standards**

Teachers expressed diverse ideas concerning the changing language policies put forth by the national and local government, which in the case of some of the teachers becomes a requirement in the school, while in others teachers are free to adapt them in

attention to the characteristics of the particular school contexts. In the focus groups, the participating teachers referred to the National Program of Bilingualism and Expedition Curriculum. At two schools the teachers also mentioned the prepackaged curriculum provided by SENA and *Instruimos*, a private institution dedicated to the preparation for Colombian public universities' entrance exams.

The teachers agreed that the current national language policies are very ambitious, given that the proposed levels of attainment are very high for the students they have. Concerning Expedition Curriculum, the teachers stated that the document is a good project; that it is easy to adapt to different school contexts. However, teachers also expressed it is not realistic and ambitious, because in their context it is not possible to achieve the standards. This happens because of the little time they have to accomplish these goals and because students do not come well prepared from elementary schools (precisely because most elementary teachers are not sufficiently prepared to teach English). Besides, they expressed that even though some teachers were called to attend to the meetings where the Expedition Curriculum was introduced, their opinion was not considered. Some teachers said that they merely received the booklet from their directives and coordinators.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Unlike other school subjects across different educational levels in Colombia, the English curriculum today is based on a conceptual framework borrowed from Europe, the CEFR, that includes standards for foreign language proficiency. The Ministry of Education, through different projects but especially the document *Guide 22*, assigned such standards for different grade levels. International and national publishing houses, as well as the national and local governments, have created curriculum guidelines with the purpose of guiding schools and teachers in the planning of English curricula that align with international standards and thus with standardized tests.

The study we present here encompassed different layers or dimensions of English curriculum

<sup>1</sup> Because of the complexity of this issue, we will address it in another article.

development, namely perspectives (ideas and beliefs), practices and experiences of teachers and schools — as reflected in schools' curriculum documents, and the opinions expressed in a survey and focus groups at five purposefully selected public schools. More than adding to the evidence extensively discussed in the Colombian literature to illustrate the challenges faced by schools and teachers in the implementation of the current National Plan of Bilingualism (see, for example, the recount made in Usma, 2009), we rather focused on the design and implementation of a curriculum based on standards.

One of the topics we were interested in exploring was teachers' perspectives about the English curriculum. In this respect, we found that there is a gap between the schools' and the teachers' ideal notions of curriculum, inspired in educational goals of self and social transformation (more aligned with a critical view of the curriculum, following Posner, 1998); the English curriculum structured with fellow teachers based on standards and other referents (like that defined by Lund and Tannehill, 2014), and the curriculum they can actually implement (which aligns better with what Posner, 1998, identifies as the technical curriculum). We observed that teachers ponder their educational goals to guide their relationship with students. They acknowledged their role as educators of citizens who engender personal and social transformation, especially with the harsh conditions of violence and poverty that dominate their schools. However, in practice, it was easier for teachers to implement a given curriculum.

In addition to teachers' perspectives, we also explored their practices in the process of curriculum design and implementation. We found out that although teachers were very critical of educational policies and the standards that became the national curriculum for the teaching of English, they may adhere to the curriculum they are provided with (by the government, by school administrators). They are driven by the instrumentalist motivation that inspired the very standards on which the guidelines are based: learning English is essential for global communication, cultural exchange, and economic

and technological development. That is why, for students in low income neighborhoods, it may be an instrument for social mobility. It makes sense then that teachers want their students to do well in standardized tests and think this may help them in the construction of a better future for themselves. The fact that they receive a prepackaged curriculum based on standards facilitates this enterprise.

In the process of designing and implementing the curriculum, we learned that perhaps one of the most significant challenges teachers' face is implementing a standards-based curriculum while paying attention to context and student preparation for standardized tests. On the one hand, they cannot neglect the problems students face, that directly affect their performance at school —and here, it is more likely to identify with a non-traditional view of curriculum as a response. On the other hand, they find themselves in a conundrum when deciding whether to help students develop communicative competence (as proposed by the standards and other curriculum guidelines), or teaching to the test —in the latter it is easier to identify with a technical perspective of curriculum and language education for instrumental purposes, e.g., pass a test or get a good job.

Providing English teachers with a curriculum that is already set (that they can adapt or adopt, if they want, given their teaching contexts), definitely aids in having schools pursuing similar goals, developing similar curricula. Today, we have more and more schools in Medellín focusing on communicative functions rather than on isolated and grammar and vocabulary units. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily result in students performing equally well: we have already mentioned the many factors that come into play. Likewise, a prepackaged curriculum, with the corresponding list of performance descriptors may save time and effort to teachers; however, as critical theorists of the curriculum (like Kemmis, 1993) argue, it ends up in the de-skilling of teachers, as they act as curriculum technicians. We conclude that English teachers in public secondary schools need more significant and sustainable support in the analysis of contexts, as well as in the adaptation of

curriculum guidelines (going beyond the adaptation of grammar and lexical contents, the formulation of problem posing questions, among other).

Also, as mentioned by the participants, universities need to prepare pre-service teachers in curriculum development better. Evidence shows that when teachers, through a dialogical relationship, participate in research, they become more aware of their curriculum design choices, as explained by Posner (1998), engendering a more relevant curriculum and this is what we need to foster meaningful, lasting learning.

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