





## Towards the Formulation of a Proposal for Opportunity-to-Learn Standards in EFL Learning and Teaching<sup>\*1</sup>

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This paper focuses on the need to formulate and implement a proposal for opportunity-to-learn standards (OTL) in the field of language learning and teaching in Colombia, with the aim of ensuring the necessary conditions for the implementation and achievement of the performance standards, issued by the Ministry of Education as part of the National Bilingual Program in this area. First, it reviews the concept, origins, composition and models of OTL standards, and then it examines the Colombian situation to make a case for OTL in this country.

**Key Words:** standards, opportunity to learn, conditions, equity, inequality, education.

Este artículo se enfoca en la necesidad de formular e implementar estándares de oportunidad en el campo del aprendizaje y la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en Colombia, con el fin de asegurar las condiciones necesarias para la implementación y el logro de los estándares de desempeño en el área, planteados por el Ministerio de Educación como parte del Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB). Se inicia con una revisión del concepto, orígenes, composición y modelos de estándares de oportunidad, para luego examinar la situación colombiana y poner en evidencia la necesidad de plantear e implementar este tipo de estándares en el país.

**Palabras clave:** estándares, oportunidad de aprender, condiciones, equidad, desigualdad, educación.

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Cet article cherche à montrer le besoin de formuler et mettre en œuvre des normes d'opportunité dans le domaine de l'apprentissage et de l'enseignement des langues étrangères en Colombie, afin d'assurer les conditions nécessaires pour l'établissement et l'accomplissement des normes de réussite conçues et présentées par le Ministère de l'Education Nationale faisant partie du Programme National de Bilinguisme (PNB). En commençant par une révision du concept, des origines, composition et modèles des normes d'opportunité et puis examiner la situation colombienne et souligner le besoin de mettre en œuvre cette norme dans notre pays.

**Mots-clés:** normes, opportunité d'apprendre, conditions, équité, inégalité, éducation.

## 1. BACKGROUND TO OPPORTUNITY-TO-LEARN-STANDARDS

Carlos Eduardo Vasco, a Colombian educator and writer in the field of education, defines standards as “clear and public criteria that allow to judge if a person, institution, process or product fulfill some social expectations of quality” (2004: 1).<sup>2</sup>

In the same direction, one of the standards documents issued by the Colombian Ministry of Education defines standards making reference to their characteristics and purpose:

Standards are clear and public criteria for Colombians to know what is to be learnt. They are a frame of reference of what a student may be able to know, and do, according to a given area and level. They are guidelines for all schools in the country, being either urban or rural, private or public to offer the same quality of education. This propitiates equity of rights and opportunities for all (National Ministry of Education —MEN—, 2003: 5).

In both definitions, we find a reference to the fact that standards are issued with quality and equity in mind; these two elements are necessarily bound to conditions and opportunities in all educational contexts where standards are to be implemented and achieved. As the standards issued by Colombian educational authorities stress on performance—which is one of the three types of standards we usually find in the educational context, together with content and opportunity standards—it is necessary to take a closer look to

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2 This and other quotes from Colombian educational documents have been translated from the original sources in Spanish.



this last category of standards, which are not usually issued or regulated by governmental sources, but are implied in definitions and documents.

Opportunity-to-learn standards are not usually regulated and issued as official documents, But they make part of the Colombian constitution<sup>3</sup> and the General Education Law (Colombia, Congreso de la República, 1994).<sup>4</sup> They have been defined as follows:

[...] equitable conditions or circumstances within the school or classroom that promote learning for all students. It includes the provision of curricula, learning materials, facilities, teachers, and instructional experiences that enable students to achieve high standards. This term also relates to the absence of barriers that prevent learning (Schwartz, 1995: 1).

The ERIC/CUE digest (1995: 2) indicates that OTLs have been used to indicate overall educational quality, and, more specifically, the availability and use of education resources. Hence, opportunity-to-learn standards refer to the necessary opportunities and conditions that need to be guaranteed for the fulfillment of content and performance standards, because the level of knowledge and instructional development, and students' performance depend greatly on the conditions in which the learning and teaching develop. Elements such as the time devoted to learning, exposure to language in the case of language learning, the quality and quantity of information and opportunities to develop competences, the challenges that educational processes offer, the quality and quantity of resources and the use that teachers and students make of them, the quality of the teachers and their attitude towards their job, the conditions of the institutions where teaching and learning take place are all contributing factors to the achievement of standards.

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3 "El estado colombiano promoverá las condiciones para que la igualdad sea real y efectiva y adoptará medidas a favor de grupos discriminados o marginados" (Colombia, Congreso de la República, 1994: Artículo 13, p. 2).

"El estado tiene el deber de promover y fomentar el acceso a la cultura de todos los colombianos en igualdad de oportunidades, por medio de la educación permanente" (Colombia, Congreso de la República, 1994: Artículo 70, p. 18).

4 "Las autoridades educativas tomarán medidas tendientes a establecer condiciones que permitan el ejercicio pleno del derecho a la educación de cada individuo, una mayor equidad educativa, así como el logro de la efectiva igualdad en oportunidades de acceso y permanencia en los servicios educativos" (Colombia, Congreso de la República, 1994: Artículo 32, cap. 3).

Stevens claims that: “Opportunity to learn the designated curriculum for a grade level or age group is a major equity issue for students who are at risk of not developing academically to their fullest potential” (1993: 1). She emphasizes the teacher’s role in determining opportunity to learn by “implementing instructional models and programs that will promote access to learning for poor and minority students” (p. 3).

Opportunity-to-learn standards have also been used to determine whether the distribution of resources among schools is adequate and equitable for them to offer quality education and lead their students to achieve national standards (Venezia & Maxwell-Jolly, 2007).

## 2. ORIGINS OF OTL STANDARDS

In the 1960’s, John Carroll expressed that equality of Opportunity to Learn required increasing the amount of instructional time for the least prepared students to enable them to master the curriculum (Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008).

The concept of OTL was firstly introduced in the USA by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). Its purpose was to describe aspects of the educational process because studies in the area showed the need for educational indicators. They were created with the purpose of measuring both classroom and school environment.

During the Clinton and Bush administrations, OTL standards were part of heated discussions whether or not they were to be officially included in the programs their administrations launched. Goals 2000 passed in 1994 (GOALS 2000/TheAct/) and No child left behind, passed in 2001 (Public Law 107-110-Jan.8, 2002) —which were educational programs implemented in the USA with the purpose of improving the quality of education, inclusion and equity—, brought about constant debates between assessment experts vs. teachers and researchers on the academic side, and the Senate vs. the House of Representatives on the political side.

The two movements mentioned above, especially the discussions in the Clinton administration and the contributions of researchers and teachers, focused on availability of optimal conditions provided by governmental agencies and society in general to make it possible for students to meet content and performance standards. In a document produced in 1991, called *Educate America*, there is the following claim for OTL:

[...] strong voices are insisting that standards must include Opportunity to Learn Standards that take into account educational *inputs and processes*, not simply content and outcomes. These advocates recognize a responsibility to provide schools with access to knowledge, training, technical assistance, consulting and other forms of support necessary to develop local and state capacity (*Educate America*, 1994: 1).

Ravitch mentions that in the arguments pro and against the formulation of OTL standards, “proponents believed that students should not be expected to meet high standards unless their schools had adequate resources” (1995: 13). She adds that

Even critics of OTL standards agree that schools must meet fundamental standards of safety, healthfulness and physical comfort and that students cannot be expected to learn or excel unless they have well-educated teachers, a sound curriculum, appropriate instructional materials and a well-maintained environment for learning (p. 14).

Those who opposed OTL standards argued that they would bring lack of independence, more state control (The more they give, the more they will try to control), intrusion over schools (professional discretion will be reduced). Finally, OTL standards were not officially included in either educational program.

In other parts of the world the importance of OTL standards was also being considered at the time. The Fundamental Quality Level (FQL) approach implemented in a number of African countries in the 1990’s sought to establish standards of inputs and infrastructure necessary to provide equality of school conditions. The FQL program provided a basis for dialogue about investment in education infrastructure (*Educate America*, 1994: 1).

In summary, even if they have not gained official acceptance, the debate on OTL has served to increase public awareness about the relationship between opportunity to learn strategies and achievement.

### **3. WHY WOULD OTL STANDARDS BE NECESSARY IN COLOMBIA?**

In order to make a case for the need of OTL standards in the Colombian context it is necessary to make a brief exploration of the educational situation in different regions of the world, supported by studies carried out both by international organizations and individual researchers.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in its first article expresses that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (United Nations Human Rights webpage). In article 26, the same document states that “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” This declaration is the best reason why we would want to have education that really provides all human beings with the possibility of having the same opportunities in life.

The *Informe regional sobre desarrollo humano para América Latina y el Caribe*, 2010, which was issued in July, presents an extensive discussion on inequality, after declaring that Latin America is the most unequal region in the world. Inequality is produced by a combination of elements. According to the report, these are the main causes of inequality: Poverty and all its concomitant elements, such as lack of income or high differences in it; lack of or low socioeconomic mobility between generations; lack of opportunities and, in general, lack of possibilities to *be* or to *do*. In relation to this, *El Espectador* (July 23, 2010) stresses that salary, education and health are the main reasons of inequality in Latin America, with Bolivia, Haiti, Brazil and Colombia ranking in the first four places.

The *Informe regional sobre desarrollo humano* mentions in second place the initial conditions of children at home, which include the socioeconomic



characteristics of the family, the educational level of the parents and their beliefs about education; the health conditions of the family, which need to be prioritized over investment in education, and the lack of options for people of low strata. A recent article in *El Espectador* (February 28, 2011), based on a study carried out by intelligence agencies in the USA, claims that one of the main causes for socioeconomic limitations in Colombian families is unemployment (11,2%) in which Colombia ranks first in Latin America, scoring 123 among 200 countries in the world.

Finally, the report claims that together with social reasons, political and historical reasons also explain and maintain inequality. They also claim that to overcome it, individuals need to have positive starting conditions at home or these have to be provided early in an individual's life.

Benavot and Amadio (2004, in Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008) in A Global Study of Intended Instructional Time and Official School Curricula, 1985-2000, state that "pupil achievement increases when students are given greater opportunities to learn, especially when 'engaged learning time' is maximized." Investment in teachers, materials, curricula, and classrooms is wasted if it is not used for a reasonable period of time.

USAID, with the sponsoring of the World Bank carried out a study in 2008, in which they compared the opportunities to learn in developed countries of Europe and North America and developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin-America. One of the main arguments in the study was that

[...] the basic opportunity to learn does not exist in many countries and that a concerted management focus to assure that schools provide these basic elements of an opportunity to learn could potentially yield big improvements in learning (Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008: 3).

Navarro (2004) argues that the relationship between education and social equity is not necessarily a cause-effect, unidirectional one; there are many factors that need to be explored as part of a firm basis for OTL. Navarro (2004: 37) mentions "*bienes primarios*" (primary goods, as referred by Rawls, 2002), referring to things that people require as free, equal citizens,

able to be cooperative members of a society. Among these five “primary goods” the author mentions basic rights and liberty, freedom of movement and free choice; power and prerogatives that accompany positions of responsibility, income and richness and the social bases of self-respect and dignity.

In his discussion about Rawls’s thesis, Navarro also cites Meller (1999), when he stresses that in an equitable society all children have to be ensured a similar availability of resources at their command to face life; Rawls’s view of social justice entails equal opportunities for all “to make it to the top” (Navarro, 2004: 33). School and the social conditions to learn and teach are a part of this.

Darling-Hammond (2007) makes reference to many studies that, in spite of having been carried out to compare different populations in the USA, and how the USA scores in comparison to other developed countries, show startling resemblance with our situation in Colombia. Schools that served minority groups and less privileged sectors of the population have been found to have less challenging curricula, less control, lack of teachers who could teach courses with high-level contents, overcrowded classrooms, shortened school days, among other deficiencies that explained why these students obtain poor results in national-level examinations. This description pictures with surprising resemblance the situation of many of our official schools and that of many of the low-strata private ones.

The Colombian situation, concerning education, has been the topic of recent publications in our newspapers; they have analyzed, among other aspects, the poor results and dismal conditions it shows, despite the efforts made by educational authorities. Journalists Arango (December 9, 2010), Sarmiento (December 18, 2010), Gómez Giraldo (January 30, 2011), and Montenegro (December 12, 2010: 47) who write for *El Espectador*, refer to our poor results in international tests (*Pruebas PISA* for reading, mathematics and sciences), which in the last two editions, in 2007 and 2009, have shown that Colombia has scored 52 in reading comprehension, 58 in mathematics and 54 in sciences among 65 countries. These results, ac-

According to Sarmiento, are directly related to the distribution of income in these students' families. The columnists argue that the poor quality of our educational system, which mostly "reproduces and perpetuates ignorance, poverty and inequality in Colombia" (Montenegro 2010: 47), and is both a cause and a consequence of social inequality (Sarmiento).

Ricardo Gómez Giraldo, vice chancellor of *Universidad de Caldas*, cites other columnists (Gómez Buendía, *La Patria* 21/11/2010, García Villegas, *El Espectador* 28/11/10) who have referred to our educational system as an "educational apartheid", and the first cause of social division in the country. They argue that it does not contribute to social mobility, it is not thought as a factor that contributes to equity, it transmits and widens inequality and, in general, it places official schools significantly below private ones. The columnists he mentions base their appreciations on reports by the MEN (*Pruebas Saber*). Gómez Giraldo argues that the country has come to the time of implementing measures that avoid the widening of social segregation. Arango argues that, since education is a fundamental right, it should be guaranteed as a "condition of possibility for all"; he goes on saying that "private education for the poor, as acquired in the market, is, in general, of very poor quality, while public education could be of excellence if the children of the rich had to use it [...]". Unless educational reforms tackle the discrimination generated by the existence of two educational systems which offer services of diverse category and quality, the source of social inequality will persist, Arango says.

A recently published research report (García, Fernández & Sánchez, 2011) focuses on student desertion and its main reasons. It found out that 10% of students leave school before they are 15 years old, mostly in first grade. This fact, the researchers claim, has a direct incidence in the development of literacy and is also linked to the absence of skills usually acquired at the preschool level. Besides, deficiencies in the family and social environment of the students, the level of education of parents and the economic difficulties at home are directly related to school permanence.

Andrés Oppenheimer, columnist of the Miami Herald, interviewed by *El Espectador* (February 23, 2011), says that Latin American countries need to

accept the fact that most of them face a crisis in education that affects their development; he argues that our countries “suffer from excessive optimism and indulgence” and that “one main difference between countries that reduce poverty and those that do not is that the latter lack humility”. We have to recognize, he continues, that (in education) we are not fine. Finally, he mentions the efforts our country has made in the last years to improve the quality of teachers —although they have done that late—, he says, and that “it is necessary to recognize teachers as the spinal cord in society, a well prepared and well-paid professional”. Oppenheimer’s comments contrast (and prove) with those expressed by Hugo Nopo, an expert of the BID (Supelano, 2010: 10. *El Espectador*), who referring to the same PISA tests discussed earlier in this section, declares that there was progress between the results Colombia obtained in the last editions of the PISA test (an increase of 13 to 14 points, although, he concedes, there were countries with greater increase), and that “we are on the right track [...] that we have to continue making efforts [...]” so the results do not change for the worse. He also refers to the poorer results being associated with lower socioeconomic strata and public education.

In the light of this reality, a standards-based focus which, in principle, should equalize opportunities and quality of learning is, and will continue to produce results that will find these underprivileged schools, students and teachers unable to be up to the standards in national evaluations, university entrance and job opportunities. It is, as Darling-Hammond states it, a “collision of new standards with old inequities” (2007: 1).

In the Colombian context, regulation of performance standards (MEN, 2006) does not take conditions to do the work in different types of institutions (regional/urban/rural; community; private /public; strata.) into account. The standards document does not mention investment or the way to handle differences in diverse regions, populations and communities. This being the state of things, evaluation associated with standards is bound to produce poor results in less privileged schools, and, as a result, more social division and stratification, as well as more frustration and lack of social justice.

Nowadays there are many governmental efforts and strong investment to back up the standards movement in Colombia, but they mainly focus on teacher development (TD). Although many studies have shown a direct correlation between teacher qualification and student achievement, as shown, among others, by the review Darling-Hammond (2007: 5-6)<sup>5</sup> presents, it is not the single indicator of good results. Besides, TD efforts in our country are not unified or organized among the Ministry of Education, departments, and municipalities; and this may cause confusion, saturation and waste. The USAID study also showed that investment alone does not guarantee success in education, but a more complex conjugation of factors/variables involving resources (both human and material), attitudes, the regulation of organized actions to implement policies nationwide and in different regions, the organized use of resources offered by private enterprises, among other factors.

As a result of the way standards and the PNB have been issued and implemented in Colombia, there is a lot of pressure on educational institutions, teachers and students to produce results. However, it is well known that there are many differences in the conditions in which educational institutions, teachers and students have to work. Good, equal conditions for all (or at least more effort to achieve a higher level of equity) would be the appropriate complement to investment in order to achieve better results in the implementation of standards.

A report published in *Plan Decenal de Educación 2006-2016*, an on-line site, on November 13, 2007, mentions how English was the cause for most students to fail the National Exams (ICFES) shows that in 2007, most students did not reach basic levels of English in the ICFES, and only a 5% could understand basic information in texts and interact in basic situations; only 1% of students reached B1. Lack of interest in language learning, few contact hours and failure (not passing courses) were considered by teachers interviewed by *El Tiempo* as the culprits for the situation.

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5 Ferguson (1991), Boyd et al. (2006); Darling-Hammond (2000); Darling-Hammond et al. (2005); Hawk, Coble and Swanson (1985); Goldhaber and Brewer (2000); Monk (1994); Betts, Rueben and Danenberg (2000); Fetler (1999); Fuller (1998, 2000); Goe (2002); Strauss and Sawyer (1986).



Likewise, some statistics published in 2009 (Van de Putte, 2009: 6-8) show that there are important variations in the number of teachers that had reached B-1 level of English per *departamentos* (Colombian provinces); they ranged between 3 in places like Amazonas, Casanare, Meta and Norte de Santander to 159 in Cundinamarca. Another newspaper, *El País* (August 22, 2010), says in one article that bilingualism is far from being a reality in Cali, and that most students in public institutions do not have the level for going beyond greetings and the first phrases in a conversation. The publication offers evidence from the Secretary of Education of the city, who explains that most teachers in public institutions have proficiency levels around or below A2, in a scale from A1 to B2, adopted in the national standards, although he concedes that there is no precise diagnostic about the quality of ELT in the department. Some of the reasons the secretary of education and other people related to the research and promotion of ELT offer to explain the situation are, again, deficient conditions for teaching and learning, especially in the public sector, which include inadequate level of proficiency in teachers, lack of importance of English in school curricula, little time devoted to it, absence of material resources, and, in the case of private institutions, lack of interest on the part of students.

In ELT, the situation described above is bound to change in a positive direction after more than six years of the implementation of the PNB, as some statistics and some information from official and independent sources show: From official sources, 120 teachers are involved in the *Valle bilingüe* program in Cali, with the aim of completing 450 hours of English instruction in two years; their results, so far, show that 40,5% of these teachers have reached the A2 level and 35,6 % have reached the B1 level, with a lower percentage reaching level B2 and higher. Most of these teachers participate in ELT methodology courses at Universidad del Valle. Universidad de la Sabana in Bogotá reports 225 English teachers participating from 2007 to 2008 in TDP involving English language and methodology. The teachers belong to 19 districts and more than 100 schools in Bogotá. *Secretaría de Educación de Antioquia* (Antioquia Secretary of Education) also carried out diagnostic tests to 429 English teachers using the QPT in 2005. They found that 3,5% of these teachers were in the - A1 level; 27,9% where in

the A1 level, 47,7 were in the A2 level; 17,4 were in the B1; and 3,5% were in levels B2, C1, and – C2. Together with these initial statistics, they carried out a study about the “opportunity index”, in which they diagnosed the conditions in which English teaching happens in the department of Antioquia. Based on this document, they created an action plan including 180 English teachers, to improve their level of English and their knowledge and use of ELT methodology and ICT. Manizales, Barranquilla and other cities have also worked on TDP, although results are not easy to obtain for consultation. In 2009-2010, Universidad del Valle in Cali offered courses ranging from 150 to 350 hours to 70 English teachers from Valle del Cauca, under the sponsoring of the MEN. Courses included English language and methodology at the basic and intermediate levels. Moreover, public universities in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, among others, have offered TDP programs for decades, including English, methodology, culture and research as main components and reaching hundreds of teachers.

Nonetheless, elementary education is still a wide area to cover, especially in the official sector, in order to establish the appropriate bases for English language teaching and learning at the secondary level; it is evident that little has been achieved in official elementary schools since 1994, when the teaching of a foreign language- basically English- was introduced at the elementary level in public education. Besides, the emphasis the Ministry of Education has placed on in-service teacher opportunities to improve their level of proficiency needs to be accompanied by the improvement of working conditions, more commitment on the part of principals and academic coordinators and a positive change in attitude in some of the teachers.

Based on the information in this section, we can argue that in Colombia there is a need to inform or remind organizations in charge of educational planning and funding of the disparity of conditions in educational institutions all over the country, and this needs to be done timely (before 2019). There is an urgent need for research projects that rigorously provide updated information about the disparity of conditions in which the PNB is being implemented in urban and rural areas, so provisions are made and omissions are corrected in order to have more equitable conditions and, as a conse-

quence, better results in the accountability processes for public institutions and private ones which serve strata 1 to 4. This would also protect students' right to quality education.

#### **4. WHAT WOULD BE THE MAKE-UP OF OTL STANDARDS?**

As it was mentioned in the first section, many strong voices from different sources, including governmental agencies and society in general, made it possible to evidence that standards must include Opportunity to Learn Standards, and to create public awareness of the relationship between opportunity to learn and achievement. Under these beliefs, several groups of researchers, test administrators and teachers in the USA started in the 1990s, to design and propose models for OTL standards. In the last decade, other countries have designed their own standards (Chile, Guatemala), by taking into account their own experiences and possibilities. Educational opportunities provision should consider a number of elements which must be designed and assessed on the bases of Opportunity to Learn Standards. A careful design of these elements will surely bring benefits to the educational system and to all students.

With the purpose of initiating the process defining OTL standards for our national contexts we have explored five models which are similar in their make-up and objectives. One of the models is presented by Schwartz (1995), in the frame of the studies led by ERIC/CUE Digest; initially its purpose was to determine whether cross-national differences in students' achievements were caused by differences in their learning experiences rather than in their ability to master the subject. Nowadays, they have been used to indicate overall educational quality and the availability and use of education resources. A second model was developed by Educate America (Denbo, Grant and Jackson, 1994) and had its origins in the belief that guidance, support and school assistance could foster systemic change which leads to equity as a believed characteristic of educational excellence and for ensuring opportunity and protection to all students. A third model, the product of a study sponsored by USAID and carried in sixth countries (Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008), has as its purpose to determine the reasons why there was

such a low impact of national and international donors in basic education. A fourth model is the one proposed by Aguirre-Muñoz (2008) for Guatemala, also with the sponsoring of USAID; finally, the last model we reviewed was developed by Boundy (1999), as part of a project of the Federation for Children with Special Needs in Boston, MA. We will explore three of these models in detail, given that the Aguirre-Muñoz model, although adapted for the Guatemalan reality, is very similar in its structure to Gillies, and Jester-Quijada's. Boundy's model is also made up of elements included in the other models we review.

#### **4.1 Schwartz' model (1995)**

This model considers the following elements:

1. *Access to courses:* High level courses should be provided for all students, so that they meet performance and content standards, and are able to reach good career opportunities.
2. *Curriculum:* The curriculum should be built having in mind content standards, integration with other courses, and contextualized and real life problems. Besides, it is relevant to think about the degree of curricula flexibility of to allow offering different options to adapt to different needs and groups of students (Fernández, 2003: 2).
3. *Time:* Regarding time, it is important to take into account the time available for the development of the area, for covering contents in class, for learning contents individually, and for attending classes.
4. *Teacher competence:* Teachers should master course contents and a variety of teaching techniques and strategies for reaching all students, according to their learning styles. Teachers' mastery should include knowledge and skills.
5. *Resources:* Educational institutions should provide enough physical space for all students, enough teachers and classrooms, educational facilities such as textbooks and libraries, enough physical space for teachers to prepare classes and to grow as professionals, and enough staff for supporting teachers and students.
6. *Culture and environment:* School and classroom environment should conduct to student thinking and individual initiative development. Also, schools should be clean and in good state, ensure students' well-being,

promote respect among all academic participants, no matter race, gender, ethnicity, language characteristics, or socioeconomic status.

7. *Ancillary services*: School staff should work together to ensure physical and mental students' health, and to empower families to make it possible for them to become involved in their children's education as well as in the school reform process.

#### **4.2 Denbo, Grant and Jackson's model (Educate America, 1994)**

Opportunity to Learn Standards under this model focus on three general basic areas and other three areas of school context management. These areas should ensure that a vast majority of students achieve the established standard. The basic areas proposed by this model are:

1. *Resource Standards*, in which elements such as offering equitable financing, health and human services support, and providing opportunities to local resources and services are of paramount importance. They include establishing adequate facilities in schools, providing a safe, orderly, drug-free environment, providing support to assist in achieving equal access to schools' educational benefits, providing ongoing training necessary to assure teacher competency in the cognitive and affective domains and providing equal access to curriculum materials, technology and data.
2. *Curriculum Delivery Standards*, which consider the need for state, district and local alignment of curriculum, instruction, assessment and staff development, for this has proven to be effective with children of both genders and with diverse linguistic and cultural groups. Challenging content coverage, content emphasis for individual students or groups of students (e.g., expectations of students' capacity to learn); equal access for all students to schools' most challenging programs of curriculum, the use of appropriate and varied teaching techniques and strategies. The development or selection of instructional materials and technology are also stressed. Finally, teacher knowledge of subject matter content and pedagogy, including subject credentials, certification and professional experiences complete the elements of these standards.
3. *Outcome and Capacity Building Standards* include multiple-forms of continuous curriculum-based assessment. One strand considers student



assessments that are free of gender, culture and language bias; as well as the collection, interpretation and usage of data which allow segmentation by grade, race, gender, ethnicity, language characteristics, and socioeconomic status, and measures student's opportunity to learn and its resulting outcomes —participation, attendance, test and assessment outcomes, and graduation rates—. The other strand takes into account continuing access to educational research and pedagogy information; continued assessment of bias in all institutional and classroom practices, including textbooks and materials, assessment procedures and instruments. Yet another strand wants to ensure cyclical district and school improvement processes based upon measuring of opportunity to learn, technical assistance to schools, funding of school in-service professional training and development that familiarizes teachers and parents with standards, the monitoring of district and school improvement processes, timely identification and corrective assistance for schools that fail to meet standards and recognition and reinforcement of school successes. Finally, this group of standards seeks to guarantee the existence of organizational structures that permit and encourage staff to learn from experience and from each other.

Concerning the specific areas of school management, the elements included are the following:

4. *School Management*: These standards reinforce most of the standards included in the other groups; they involve external and internal dissemination of ongoing and multiple forms of school-based assessments that evaluate a student's opportunity to learn, ensuring that assessments are tied to curriculum and instruction and that they are used for the purpose of improving teaching, learning, and educational planning. They also take into account inter- and intra-district articulation among schools, agencies, business and institutions of higher education, the articulation for families and agencies serving mobile students, the assurance that decisions regarding students' movement toward standard are made closest to the learner, the creation of integrated and coherent approaches to recruit and retain minority teachers, the establishment of benchmarks and timelines

for improved student performance and progress, and the implementation of actions to improve schools not meeting state content standards.

5. *Learning Environment*: School and classroom environment may be conducive to student thinking, initiative development and individualization, including coherent, multicultural gender-fair, interdisciplinary curricula and instruction. Besides, they include the existence of quality and quantity multicultural and multilingual instructional and support materials. Students should have the opportunity of having a flexible class size, grouping and scheduling. Besides, the existence of instructional and curriculum standards for mobile and limited English proficient students should be guaranteed.
6. *Community Support and Involvement*: These standards address the assessment of the characteristics and needs of students, community and staff, including the languages spoken in the community; they also focus on public and private community resources on prevention and early intervention, trying to utilize school to empower families through coordinating access to social services and providing a necessary health, nutrition, and human-services safety net to ensure that all students are ready to learn. They also work on the link between students and the community on ways that provide experiences with museums, colleges and universities, businesses and agencies. Finally, they seek to provide information and support to students' families in ways that make it possible for the latter to become involved in their children's education as well as in the school's reform process.

#### **4.3 Gillies and Jester-Quijada' model. USAID document (2008)**

Gillies and Jester have built their model on Elements of a Foundational Opportunity to Learn. It is argued there that a minimum level for each element can create a basic opportunity to learn. The elements are organized in two groups: six foundational elements for inputs and management and two foundational elements for pedagogy. In addition to these eight elements, the model opens the possibility to consider other elements which Gillies and Jester consider to be relevant for all countries, but these elements do not really capture the key factors that are most immediate relevant for developing countries. Gillies and Jester support this statement with the results

from different studies which have shown significant weaknesses in students coming from countries where billions of dollars have been invested in programs and reforms to improve access to quality education.

### Factors affecting Opportunity to Learn:

1. *The school is open and located near the student.* No matter the type of school or how simple the premises are, proximity is a crucial element to ensure OTL.
2. *Minimum Instructional Time.* The model states the need of regulating minimum instructional time, taking into account factors that undermine schedules. Some of the factors mentioned in the model are: strikes, holidays, weather, in-service teacher training, bureaucratic demands, cancellations, school days split, among others. The 2005 Global Monitoring Report proposes that quality education must start with at least 850 to 1000 hours of instructional time per year (p. 6).
3. *Teacher absenteeism and tardiness.* Absenteeism in teaching, as in any other job, is natural in some degree but high levels of absenteeism affect students' achievement of standards negatively. Normal absenteeism might occur because of different reasons such as family problems, health, pregnancy, or emergency leaves. However, many other situations are registered when monitoring this factor. These situations include limited monitoring and discipline by school directors, infrequent school inspections, and distance from Ministry of Education's branch office, according to Rogers, et al., 2004 (in Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008: 9).
4. *Student Absenteeism and Tardiness.* Almost everywhere in the world there is evidence of the growth in student enrollment, but unfortunately, students' absenteeism and tardiness necessarily affect learning as it is a result of attending school irregularly. In addition, it is clearly stated that arriving on time assures to listen to initial instructions, while late arrival entails difficulties to follow class assignments.
5. *Appropriate class size and student-teacher ratios.* This factor is related to other OTL in so far as it influences them positive or negatively. If the teacher does not attend class regularly, little learning is taking place, and if the class size is too large, it turns unmanageable and this influences

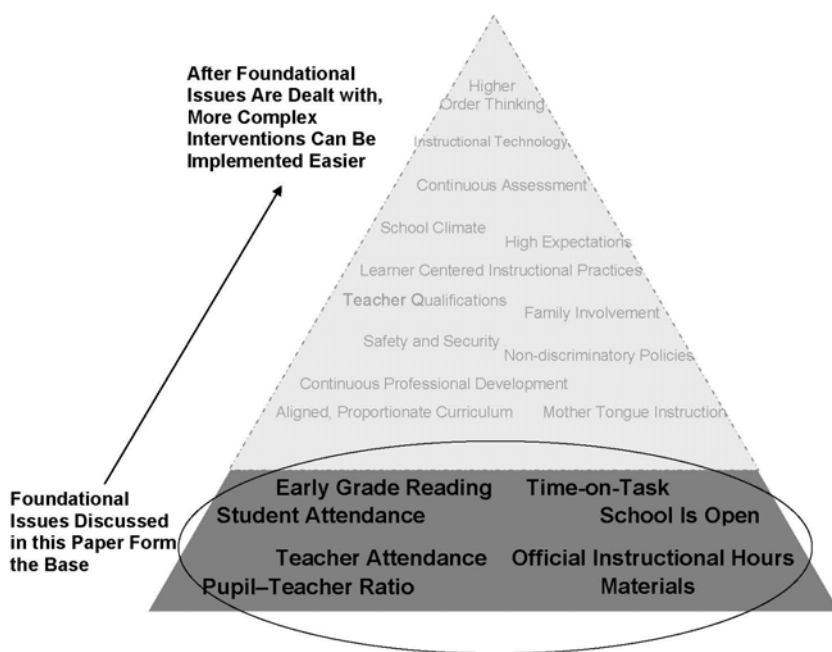
student's motivation to attend. Evidence shows that "having fewer children in class reduces the distractions in the room and gives the teacher more time to devote to each child." (Mosteller, 1995, in Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008: 10).

6. *Learning materials are available to every student and are regularly used.* Learning materials constitute an important input that increases classroom efficiency and opportunity to learn. The category includes textbooks, instructional guides, workbooks, practice exercises, activities, tests, audio-visual materials, and supplementary readers.
7. *Time-on-Task.* A critical factor is how time is utilized during the school day, and how much of the time is spent on instructional and learning activities. We are referring here to quality of time, which is an aspect that is basically managed by the teacher. Maximizing the relationship between these two variables must be an educational priority (Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008: 13).
8. *Learning to Read.* A recent study shows that, in many countries, students are failing to master even fundamental reading skills (EPDC, 2005). This is a problem that needs to be solved as weak skills in reading hinder improvement in any area.

Other possible factors for assuring students the fair opportunity to achieve knowledge and skills include standards that address the following areas:

- Curricula and materials
- Teacher capability
- Continuous professional development
- Alignment of curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments with content standards
- Safety and security of learning environment
- Non-discriminatory policies, curricula and practice, and
- School financing.

This model framework is said to address common sense elements that, according to studies, have not been well managed yet. The model is well illustrated in the shape of a pyramid that shows a progression of issues in different levels for effective education. The model, however, focuses on the



**Figure 1 Opportunity-to-learn pyramid**

Source: Gillies & Jester-Quijada (2008: 5).

bottom level. The elements in the other levels could be considered as complementing the bases. See figure 1.

This study states that the elements that form the base of the pyramid have been overlooked, producing poor OTL standards — insufficient school hours, too often closed schools, low teacher and student attendance and punctuality, insufficient instructional materials for home or school use, minimal time-on-task in the classroom. With such a situation, children cannot be provided with basic opportunities to learn (p. 3).



## 5. MAKING A CASE FOR OTL STANDARDS

After reviewing some of the existing models for OTL standards, and the Colombian situation regarding the conditions of education, equity, opportunity and social imbalance, we want to argue now for the need to construct the framework for the improvement of ELT in Colombia, with the contribution of grassroots elements, including teachers, teacher educators and the community of students and parents. At the same time, we think it is urgent to demand the betterment of conditions for the achievement of goals in the PNB, that is, the assurance of Opportunity to Learn (and teach) Standards, from Colombian educational authorities.

The OTL models we reviewed share some of their constituent elements such as the emphasis on curriculum aspects, time allocation and use of time, resources, teacher competence, learning environment and community support. All these aspects have been debated in with reference to our Colombian situation: school curricula, especially in the official sector, have undergone little or no modification to account for PNB provision. Time allocation continues to be poor, ranging from one hour at the elementary level to two, exceptionally three, at the secondary level. Use of time is one of the most crucial issues: not only there is little time devoted to English teaching and learning, but actual time-on task is poor due to multiple factors such as planned or unexpected meetings, holidays, absenteeism and tardiness, waste of time to get to the classroom, waste of time in classroom organization, discipline control and roll calling, teacher development activities, accreditation activities, etc.

Resources is another Cinderella story: visits to schools show how dismal this aspect is in many official and some private, low-strata institutions: only traditional boards and chalk, few tape recorders, some aged “*salas de bilinguismo*” [bilingualism rooms], no updated printed materials, poor visuals (videos, DVDs or even posters) can be found. Exceptionally, some institutions have language labs or classrooms to be used only for language teaching.

Regarding teacher competence, efforts by educational authorities are focused in this area, especially in improving language proficiency, as it was mentioned in section II. There is still a lot to be done if we compare the total English teacher population in the country and the coverage TDPs have had. In analyzing teacher competence, we necessarily have to refer to the levels of proficiency expected by the PNB and the levels teachers actually achieve (also discussed in section II). The case of elementary schools is even more dramatic, for English teaching is one of the duties homeroom teachers have. Most of the time, these teachers do not have the preparation in ELT or EL methodology. Unfortunately, this situation has not shown much improvement since it was recorded by Cárdenas (2001), Cadavid, McNulty and Quinchía (2004), and Cadavid, Quinchía and Díaz (2009), Sánchez and Obando (2008), among others.

The environment in most of our classrooms does not facilitate learning: classrooms are usually overcrowded (mostly 40-45 students in average), students have different levels of proficiency, they show low motivation and, many times, teachers struggle with indiscipline.

Teachers' voices can be heard in several studies, one of them carried out by Hernández and Faustino (2006), which describes and analyzes the methodologies implemented by foreign language teachers in elementary and secondary public schools in Santiago de Cali. Teachers insist on their wish to interact with students in English but, according to their opinions, they lack the appropriate conditions to do so. Little time assigned to the area, large heterogeneous groups, insufficient resources and low motivation on the students' side are some of the elements hindering students' success in learning the language according to teachers. This was the picture at the beginning of the implementation of the PNB.

In regards to community support, it is necessary to promote community involvement, from parents, to the academic community, private enterprises and media. Although there is little evidence on research about the implementation and development of the PNB, which would give academic validity to experiences which are usually shared, projects that intend to profile

English teachers and describe the conditions under which the PNB is implemented are being currently carried out at Universidad de Antioquia and Universidad del Valle. The project at Universidad del Valle involves institutional physical and administrative conditions, resources, teachers' and students' profiles, as well as teachers', students' and parents' attitudes and expectations.

The unsolved question is, however, who will provide for OTL standards? Usually, OTL standards are thought to depend on governmental investment (state, region, department, city, school districts or zones), and there is not much control we, as individuals and as teachers, can exert on the assignment of the necessary budget for education. This would be a task for locally elected MPs to appropriate and defend in Congress and Senate. There is a role for private investment too. In Colombia, private enterprises such as Fundación Carvajal, Fundación Julio Mario Santodomingo, Carulla, Éxito, Cámara de Comercio Colombo-Americana, and many others are contributing to improve conditions and opportunities for some deprived sectors of the population. Some TV News, TV programs, as well as newspapers have also started broadcasting and including sections in English.

However, if we take studies such as the presented in the USAID document and Rawls' views on the factors that propitiate equity into account, there are other elements (attitude, involvement, planning, responsible execution, pressure and reasonable demands to educational authorities) that could be pursued from grassroots' efforts. The community in general, parents, teachers, educational institutions and school districts could help creating a bottom-up movement. Fullan, 1999 (in Navarro, 2004) expresses that it is necessary to combine the pressure and support provided by educational policies with energy from the grassroots to succeed. According to him, it is the combination of external exigency and the development of internal capacities that ensures success.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

In the three sections of this article we have firstly explored the background for OLT standards; secondly, we considered reasons why OLT standards are necessary in the Colombian context, presenting arguments from authorized sources from Latin-American and Colombia. Finally, we reviewed models of OLT standards and pointed out which of them would contribute relevant elements to our situation, because of their adequacy to our context. Generally speaking, the implementation of the standards has awakened feelings of different kinds in a not negligible percentage of the members of the academic community. This fact must be recognized as a positive effect and coincides with perceptions presented by Mejía: “Bilingualism is nowadays a term used by a lot of people, and it has created, to a point, a grade of sensibility in front of different forms of bilingualism and multilingualism [...]” and “though imaginary and mistaken, it is good for bilingualism to be a topic of conversation in many places” (2009: 8). However, positive attitudes are not enough; in order to succeed in the project, OTL standards need to be created, as it has been claimed by many researchers on the topic. As stated by a group of teachers who participated in a workshop on standards: “even if we are provided with good materials and resources, standards cannot be accomplished” and “we cannot change things in spite of our professionalization efforts.” Teachers, students and educational administrators’ thoughts and feelings need to be heard and OTL standards need to be designed by taking the needs and interests of particular communities, built in their contexts, into account. The standards movement may be creating expectations that the present conditions will not allow to meet, because policies and documents without supportive conditions do not lead to the results policy makers seek and/or) the community expects.

In summary, creating and implementing standards require willingness and commitment from all participants in educational interactions, from those regulating and administrating educational projects and from those carrying out activities and tasks to achieve the project’s objectives. Mejías’ recommendation on the matter —to establish an open and constructive dialogue among all the available sources of knowledge and experience—, is fully

relevant. Only the presence of adequate opportunities will ensure that the balance of the Bilingual National Program in 2019 is a favorable one, even in the absence of the statistics and coverage the program seeks. The presence of these opportunities will also ensure that the final picture not be, in the words of Pagliarini and de Asiss-Peterson (2008: 131), when referring to more than 30 years of English teaching in Brasil, “a black, pale, color-faded and dismal photo album”, in contrast with the expectations the policy raised among students, parents, some teachers and school administrators.

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