

## Opportunity to Teach and Learn Standards: Colombian Teachers' Perspectives

Estándares de oportunidad para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje:  
perspectivas de profesores colombianos

**Rosalba Cárdenas Ramos\***  
**Fanny Hernández Gaviria\*\***  
Universidad del Valle, Colombia

The aim of this article is to present the outcomes of an exploration of in-service teachers' perspectives in relation to an opportunity to teach and learn standards in English. A workshop for English teachers from Cali (Colombia) and the neighboring rural sectors was designed and carried out in order to collect the information. Teachers' perspectives about the topic were explored in terms of three aspects: general considerations that underlie opportunities to learn; standards and conditions in educational institutions (work aspects) and other institutional factors such as human and material resources.

*Key words:* Equity, opportunities to learn and teach, standards.

Este artículo tiene por objetivo presentar los resultados de una exploración acerca de las reflexiones de un grupo de docentes en ejercicio, respecto a estándares de oportunidad para la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. Con este propósito se diseñó y ofreció un taller a profesores de Cali (Colombia) y de la zona rural aledaña. Allí se estudiaron las perspectivas de los docentes en cuanto a tres aspectos: consideraciones generales que subyacen la oportunidad de aprender, estándares y condiciones en las instituciones educativas y otros factores tales como recursos materiales y humanos.

*Palabras clave:* aprender, enseñar, equidad, estándares de oportunidad.

---

\* E-mail: rosalcardenas@gmail.com

\*\* E-mail: fanny.hernandez@correounivalle.edu.co

This article is based on a workshop carried out with teachers from Cali and Jamundí at Universidad del Valle (Colombia). The purpose of the workshop was to explore in-service teachers' thoughts in relation to an opportunity to teach and learn standards, an idea that became a goal after visiting schools within the research project about the conditions of implementation of the National Bilingual Program (NBP).

This article was received on January 13, 2012, and accepted on June 12, 2012.

## Introduction

Historical trends towards social and economic integration have consolidated the English language as a *lingua franca* in international communications. English has evolved as a required tool for communicative purposes in different economic, commercial, political, cultural and academic contexts. In Colombia, the effects of this historical trend have also materialized in our educational policies; the international use of English has generated requirements in terms of standards, which should help to determine levels of language proficiency. In the formulation of the standards, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) was adopted as the principal source and the basic standards for foreign languages -English- were designed and published in Colombia.

The Basic Standards for Foreign Languages, English (Ministerio de Educación Nacional - MEN, 2006), was issued as the most visible part of the National Bilingual Program (NBP) 2004-2019. This program states that, by 2019, all students and teachers at the different educational levels should reach a predetermined level of English, according to the CEFR scale, which should be as follows: C1 for professionals of foreign languages; B2 for professionals of any area; B2 for English teachers at the elementary level, B1 for students who finish the secondary level, and A2 for teachers of other areas at the elementary level. However, reaching these goals within the expected time is not an easy task. The achievement of these goals could be hindered by different aspects, such as the status of English as a foreign language in our country, the current level of English proficiency among students and English teachers, and the lack of appropriate conditions for improving the foreign language learning process in public and private educational institutions of low socioeconomic strata.

Having in mind the language proficiency goals to be reached and the presumed difficulties to attain them, we thought of the importance of investigating the real opportunities students and teachers are being offered by their institutions in order to reach these standards. Based on Navarro's study (2004) on schools and their learning and teaching conditions, in which he argues that there are some baseline factors ('Primary goods') that people require to be free and equal citizens in a society, and on everyday knowledge, it is not difficult to understand that many countries fail to offer the basic opportunities to learn a foreign language and that many factors need to be developed in order to build firm bases for Opportunity to Learn (OTL) Standards. One might reasonably suppose that a study which shows crucial aspects of work in schools as well as teachers' experiences could help to provide information leading to the identification of elements in order to create opportunities to learn in a specific context. At the same time, such a study would make interventions designed to improve the learning process of the foreign language possible.

The University of California, Los Angeles' (UCLA) Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (2003, p. 1) defines Opportunity to Learn (OTL) as "a way of measuring and reporting whether students and teachers have access to the different ingredients that make up quality schools." The OTL standards movement has balanced the last educational reforms in the USA, which dealt mainly with performance and content standards without providing the conditions to reach them; the movement has lately expanded to other countries. The implementation of the NBP in Colombia has raised questions and concern regarding the conditions of education, equity, opportunity and social imbalance. Cárdenas and Hernández (2011, p. 252) argue that there is a need to construct the framework for the improvement of English Language Teaching

(ELT) in Colombia: "...it is urgent to demand the betterment of conditions for the achievement of goals in the NBP, that is, the assurance of Opportunity to Learn (and teach) Standards, from Colombian educational authorities."

The previous thoughts and what we have witnessed in a two-year research project about the conditions of implementing the NBP, which involved 58 schools from strata 1 to 4 from the public and private sectors, gave rise to the idea of designing and offering a workshop for English teachers from Cali and the neighboring rural sectors, with the intention of exploring in-service teachers' thoughts in relation to the opportunities for teaching and learning. The workshop session started by building a basic theoretical foundation for the OTL concept in order to ensure a common conceptual ground and, after that, focused on the exploration of teachers' perspectives about OTL. Outcomes of the workshop carried out with teachers provided the following information:

- General aspects that underlie opportunities to learn: worth and personal competence, healthy choices, decision-making, the teacher as an agent that transforms society.
- Standards and conditions in the institutions teachers represented: work-related aspects (teachers' attitudes, interests and reasons for them; difficulties of different kinds; foreign language teaching methodologies; content clarity; evaluation, etc.) and institutional factors (infrastructure; human and material resources, support, etc.)
- Human development. Personal aspects: dependability, productivity, career choices, attitude, resistance to change and responsibility.

This paper discusses the results obtained after exploring the views about OTL standards among the group of teachers who participated in the workshop. The teachers' perspectives in relation to OTL

standards gathered in the workshop are valuable contributions in the process of building opportunities to teach and learn standards in English in Cali and, hopefully, in the wider national context.

### **Building up OTL Standards**

The initial workshop was attended by 62 English teachers, mainly from the public sector, from Cali and Jamundí. They represented approximately 17 schools. The workshop lasted four (4) hours and was held on a Saturday.

The content of the workshop was organized in four sections that dealt with: 1. definitions (standards, opportunity, development, Opportunity to Learn standards); 2. general aspects that underlie Opportunity to Learn standards and conditions in the institution teachers work for (worth and personal competence; healthy choices; decision-making; exercising social responsibility, plus other aspects the participants consider relevant); 3. human development issues (Dependability, productivity, career choices, attitude, resistance to change, responsibility and other aspects); and 4. the impact of the implementation of standards on teachers, students, school administrators, parents and the school community.

In dealing with parts two to four of the workshop, we used a questionnaire organized in sections which teachers could answer individually or in groups; theoretical support was provided when needed (see Appendix). The questionnaire was made up of four group discussions and two plenary discussions. Both group discussions and plenary discussions had guiding questions. Other explanatory elements were also included in the questionnaires.

Group discussion one enquired about teachers' opinions on the role of aspects such as worth, personal competence, healthy choices, decision-making and social responsibility regarding their

students' and their own opportunities to develop as individuals and members of society.

This was followed by the first plenary discussion, which explored the opportunities that might contribute to the professional development of teachers.

The second plenary discussion aimed at identifying the role *and responsibility* of educational authorities as providers of opportunities for teachers and learners within the NBP. Notes and recordings of teachers' answers were made.

Group discussion two focused on standards and institutional conditions.

Group discussion three addressed human development issues and personal aspects. Participants were asked to evaluate their dependability, attitude, responsibility, productivity, and resistance to change, among others aspects. Finally, group discussion four asked teachers to reflect upon the impact that establishing these standards could have on their institutions.

The Vermont Department of Education (2000) section on Personal Development Standards provided some of the topics used in this questionnaire. To this source, we added questions concerning the teachers' institutional context and the foreseeable impact of the implementation of standards in their schools. The information was then analyzed qualitatively; it was read and re-read, transcribed, organized, color-coded and categorized; charts were created to visualize it better. Finally, it was analyzed and relevant examples were selected. The first three major categories had been pre-established according to the sections in the questionnaire, as well as some of the sub-categories of the second column. Major category four and its associated subcategories, in addition to the entire third column of subcategories, emerged from the data. Because of space limitations in the discussion, subcategories are not fully expanded and exemplified.

## Discussion of the Findings from the Workshop

Teachers' contributions in the workshop gave rise to a great number of subcategories (see Table 1) which were organized following the structure of the main categories. Nevertheless, not all subcategories are developed in the analysis; instead, it focuses on those of higher occurrence in the two plenaries and four group discussions: general aspects underlying Opportunity to Learn standards; OTL standards and their relationship with conditions in schools; human development and impact on students and parents.

In terms of general aspects underlying Opportunity to Learn standards and conditions in the schools teachers work for, we found that all remarks teachers made are oriented towards themselves and most of the time giving a very positive view of themselves and of the work they do. Teachers feel they do well because they need to set an example; as one of the teachers states: "It's important that the teacher be a model for the student, showing values with his attitude and reflecting professionalism" (T4)<sup>1</sup>. It is, however, necessary to state that teachers who participated in this workshop are highly motivated and many of them have attended Teacher Development Program (TDP) courses for some years. It is possible that this fact explains their positive self-image. They see themselves as individuals with high self-esteem and self-confidence, positive attitudes towards progress and change. They think they are ready to interact with other school members to pursue their development with determination and are eager to use self-evaluation. They realize the importance of interacting with their peers in order to construct common bases for working together; they consider interactions with more experienced colleagues as strategies to face change: "Some colleagues that work in primary are studying English by themselves and we help them teaching English in their groups" (T10).

<sup>1</sup> Teachers have been given a number in order to make reference to their opinions and viewpoints.

**Table 1.** Elements Emerging from Teachers' Perspectives in the Workshop

Major Categories	Initial sub-categories	Emergent sub-categories
1. General aspects that underlie opportunities for learning	Worth and personal competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Self-esteem, confidence and motivation</li> <li>b. Setting personal goals</li> <li>c. Self-evaluation</li> <li>d. Being promoters of change</li> </ul>
	Healthy choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The teacher as a role model</li> <li>b. Socializing healthy practices</li> <li>c. Influence of socioeconomic factors on students' learning habits</li> <li>d. Teachers' lack of awareness concerning physical and mental health</li> </ul>
	Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Individual decision-making</li> <li>b. Life project</li> <li>c. Teachers as decision-makers</li> <li>d. Orienting students' decision-making</li> </ul>
	Social responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The teacher as an agent that transforms society</li> <li>b. The relationship between classroom and real life</li> <li>c. The promotion of ecologically responsible practices</li> <li>d. Teacher responsibility</li> </ul>
2. Standards and conditions in the schools teachers represented	Work-Related Aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Teachers' attitude towards English</li> <li>b. Number of students per group</li> <li>c. Others: Infrastructure, methodology, content clarity, evaluation, lack of appropriate use of resources, lack of connection and regulation for English teaching</li> </ul>
	Institutional Aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Time aspects</li> <li>b. Human and material resources</li> <li>c. Physical conditions of schools' classrooms</li> <li>d. The role of administrators</li> <li>e. Opportunities for professional development</li> <li>f. Meetings and curricular planning in the area</li> <li>g. The status of English in the institution</li> </ul>

Major Categories	Initial sub-categories	Emergent sub-categories
3. Human development	Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Trusting teachers because of their education and knowledge</li> <li>b. Trusting teachers because of their work in the institutions</li> <li>c. Trusting teachers because of their autonomy, leadership and capacity to be critical</li> <li>d. Difficulties found in teaching</li> </ul>
	Productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Importance of being prepared for productivity</li> <li>b. Productivity as reflected in the teaching methodology</li> <li>c. Difficulties</li> </ul>
	Career choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Career satisfaction and love for the profession</li> <li>b. Vocation and community service</li> <li>c. Learning to love the profession</li> <li>d. Wishing to increase knowledge in the English teaching area</li> </ul>
	Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Positive attitude towards their own learning</li> <li>b. Positive attitude towards teaching</li> <li>c. Keeping a positive attitude in spite of difficulties</li> </ul>
	Resistance to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Need for change</li> <li>b. Positive aspects of change</li> <li>c. Acceptance of change in spite of its inconveniences</li> </ul>
	Responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Establishment of a link between responsibility and being life-long learners for their students' sake as well as their own</li> </ul>
4. Impact of establishing standards in such schools	Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Changes required</li> <li>b. Opportunities for improvement</li> <li>c. Lack of impact of standards</li> </ul>
	Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Motivation, interest, and positive attitude towards English</li> <li>b. Impossibility of creating awareness about standards</li> </ul>
	School Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Commitment with English teaching</li> <li>b. Support for teachers</li> <li>c. Proficiency level of teachers and students</li> </ul>
	Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Comprehension of the importance of English</li> <li>b. Need of information about standards</li> <li>c. Negative impact</li> </ul>
	School Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Possibility for interacting with native speakers of English</li> <li>b. Participation of the community in the educational processes</li> <li>c. Need of raising awareness in the community</li> </ul>

Regarding the idea of teachers as role-models (subcategory 'healthy choices'), teachers feel they need to provide students and their families with all the available information and options for a healthy life through curricular activities. The idea that schools and educational communities must take a comprehensive approach to student health and social service needs is supported by many researchers in the context, as shown in Schwartz (1995). Unfortunately, at times those goals are very demanding for schools and, of course, for teachers. Teachers can also lack an appropriate level of awareness concerning the importance of a healthy lifestyle because they experience the same limitations their students have; after all, they are often immersed in the same culture and are a product of it.

Among the factors that teachers reported and emphasized as hindering learning are the cultural, social and economic limitations encountered in the social environment they and their students are immersed in. Navarro's analysis of the Chilean situation calls attention on this issue (2004):

At school, the complexity of the children's life demands competences teachers do not have: drug addict parents, unstable parents with variable composition, poverty and delinquency are new variables which demand new conditions for teaching. To face this situation, teachers need to assume roles considered to be parents' roles: dialogue with children about their everyday experiences, puberty changes, health and eating habits. The school starts to be more like home. (p. 128)

The social and economic limitations teachers mentioned in this section about 'healthy choices' are definitely connected to the absence of equal conditions and social differences. Rawls (1999, in Navarro 2004), also, stresses the role of these aspects in the presence or absence of equity and quality in education. For him, income and riches as well as the social bases for self-respect and dignity

are part of the '*bienes primarios*' all individuals are entitled to. For Raczynsky (2002), also cited in Navarro, the improvement of 'material conditions' are important elements for the quality of the life we live; however, he argues that poverty is the product of intangible elements such as attitudes, values and behaviors, all of which are cultural elements. Working only on material conditions without taking into account cultural and environmental factors will not yield lasting improvement in people's conditions and their handling of opportunities.

Paes de Barros, Ferreira, Molinas and Vega (2008) in their study on the inequality of opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean, stress that the circumstances people face early in life, including race, gender, place of residence and, especially their parents' income, account for the inequality of opportunities they face in adulthood. Concerning education, Darling-Hammond (2007) extensively discusses the role of socio-cultural and economic limitations of minorities in the type of education they get and the results they obtain. This feeds a 'catch twenty-two' situation, a vicious circle that feeds poverty, lack of accomplishment, neglect and rejection. In order to determine limitations of any kind Darling-Hammond finds it necessary to evaluate whether or not schools have adequate resources, deploy them effectively, or if they provide equal educational access for all students.

It is clear that inclusion and equality are important aspects which should be taken into account in the formulation of language policies such as the National Bilingual Program. In reality what usually happens is that policies and government programs usually make claims of equity, democracy and inclusion, but often ignore or overlook realities, probably in their desire to show results. González (2009, p. 186), discussing Shohamy's views on language policies (2006, p. 143), claims that "language policies often ignore their connection to actual

language learning because they do not have a basis in reality, and thus, remain as good intentions on paper.” This seems to be the case with the NBP.

Along the same lines, Fernández (2003) asserts that inclusive education is a human right and that the conception of inclusive education, as an effective means for improving efficiency in educational processes, involves the need to revise the concept of educational needs. Here is a summary of what this author considers are the advantages of inclusive education: It offers equal opportunities for all; personalizes education; fosters participation, solidarity, and cooperation within students; improves quality in teaching and promotes efficiency in the whole educational system; values individualities; maximizes resources for the benefit of general educational, individual and special needs.

On the issue of inclusion, Machin (2006) carried out a study which explored how social disadvantage affects the learning experiences of learners with fewer economic resources. Much of the work draws upon longitudinal data sources that follow children as they grow up. It also includes information on their parents and the area where they were raised. The results of the study show that:

Education and social disadvantage are closely connected and that people from less advantaged family backgrounds acquire significantly less education than their more advantaged counterparts. This translates into significantly reduced life chances...This includes poorer labor market outcomes, significantly worse health, higher crime levels and lower levels of social capital. (p. 27)

Concerning the relationship between opportunity to learn standards and the conditions in the institutions they work at, teachers are, in general, less positive; they focused their contributions on the aspects that would need to be changed in order to foster OTL, such as the full integration of the elementary level in ELT; the introduction of changes in

ELT in order to make it an area with interdisciplinary links and not a one- or two-hour a week course, and the need for an institutional policy designed to improve the proficiency level of teachers. They consider it important to have a positive attitude and be ready to change practices. On the negative side, or factors that affect OTL, teachers mention the reluctance of some of them to change. Teachers insist on methodologically ‘safe’ practices and do not use the English language in class because they are probably afraid of revealing deficiencies in their competence. This is not a new situation: Cárdenas (2001, p. 2) surveyed primary English teachers six years after this language was introduced at the elementary level and found a very similar situation to the one found today.

Lack of time is also a common hindrance: Teachers do not have time for meetings, for planning, revising, delivering contents, or participating in institutional activities and they consider teamwork and planning to be important elements in their professional growth. Teamwork is an element also considered important by researchers (Tochon, 2009) when researching teacher education. Participatory Action Science (PAS) used by Tochon as methodological orientation is characterized by being respectful of the positioning of different partners; promoting dialogue and the capacity to learn from others’ experiences while influencing the ability of teachers to shape social outcomes with the aim of building a more just society. In any case, teachers in the workshop expressed their disappointment for not being able to rely on sustained spaces for pedagogical discussion, and for not having been listened to about the importance of assigning a better status to the English area. Besides, teachers consider that in order to reach standards in ELT, it is essential to offer this area as a fundamental one; they said that it is necessary to make an impact on general teaching and learning



conditions and, as a result, improve students' achievements. In this respect Denbo, Grant, and Jackson, (1994) argue that:

It is time for schools, local education agencies, and state and federal governments to ensure that no system of testing or student assessment be used except in the context of educational approaches that are based on standards for equity in educational resources and processes. (p. 47)

Although this reflection stems from a different context, it is similar in nature to our national context: Learners from all regional, geographical, cultural, economic and social contexts are being evaluated on the same bases although they are learning under different circumstances and unequal possibilities.

Furthermore, in relation to time for the area, teachers manifested that the number of weekly instructional hours is 1 at the elementary level and two (exceptionally 3) in high school. With so little time, little access to resources, crowded classrooms and high standards to achieve, the situation is difficult to handle. Teachers express that even with good resources and all the Development Programs they have access to, it is extremely difficult to meet the standards because of poor conditions. Based on research findings it can be said that time is one of the most influential factors in school and student success. In Chile, for example, as part of the implementation of *El inglés abre puertas* (English Opens Doors), the curriculum was modified to strengthen all areas, especially those that develop "*habilidades de orden superior*." To establish such a curriculum, the school day was expanded, and ELT weekly instructional time went from 11% to 27% of the time. Most schools went into *jornadas completas* (full-time) (UNESCO report, 2004).

Indeed, Gillies and Jester-Quijada in the USAID document (2008) consider time the most influential factor in school and student success. They

mention the experiences of Ghana and Peru and their efforts to improve their educational systems; the two experiences are relatively successful stories in terms of access to the English language, but both have shown poor outcomes in terms of learning. The phenomenon is explained in the document arguing that the basic elements for creating opportunities to learn are overlooked, and that time is one of the elements which marks the difference between accessing a language and learning a language.

These authors also stress that a longer school day, more hours of instructional time a year (they propose a minimum of 850 to 1,000 a year), a more effective use of time at schools, which means fewer interruptions, less absenteeism, less tardiness, and more time-on-task are the key elements in OTL. If we analyze the situation in our schools we find that there are striking differences in the way time is assigned and used in different types of institutions. Besides, public institutions are affected by the need to maximize the use of facilities, which makes the school hours very short. There are also more interruptions to deal with due to social and economic factors; there is usually more absenteeism and tardiness. The document also mentions a study carried out in six developing countries (Bangladesh, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Peru, and Uganda) which shows teachers' absenteeism is at an average of 19%. In Colombia there are very few studies about absenteeism and they do not focus on teacher absenteeism; however, in our experience as researchers who visited urban schools in Santiago de Cali, we recognized this as an issue of common occurrence. As a result of absenteeism and of low assignment to ELT, sometimes weeks elapse without the students having a single lesson.

Gillies and Jester-Quijada (2008, p. 17) make distinctions among several uses or misuses of time and analyze how they affect students' OTL:

time-on-task, teacher and student punctuality and absenteeism, official instructional time and number of hours per subject. They complain about how little is known about time-related issues in schools and express that “No one is held accountable for a failure to provide the basic opportunity to learn” as far as time is concerned. Another aspect teachers in the workshop mentioned was the proportion of students per teacher. In both public and low and medium strata private schools, teachers usually manage groups of 38 to 50 students, and this fact reduces considerably the time they can devote to each student. It has been proven that reduced class size improves students’ achievement (Heros, 2003, in Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008). He suggests that the appropriate class size for students to benefit is from 15 to 20, and indicates that class size, as well as other elements, is a cause for students’ absenteeism:

Student attendance must start with using attendance as a management tool, and in understanding the underlying causes of absenteeism. To some degree, there is a circular influence with other OTL factors – if the teacher does not regularly show up, little learning is taking place; and if the class size is unmanageable, students may not be motivated to attend (Heros, 2003, p. 10, in Gillies & Jester-Quijada, 2008).

Darling-Hammond (2007) mentions high student-teacher ratio as a common feature of underprivileged schools. Also, the USAID document extensively discusses the incidence of student-teacher ratios in the performance and satisfaction of teachers and students. “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, p. 11). In our context, with very few exceptions, classrooms in public schools are overcrowded, which reduces time for interaction in the language class.

Another element teachers who attended the workshop mentioned as an impediment for good student OTL is the lack of resources, both human (not enough teachers, crowded classrooms) and material. Small classrooms without the minimal conditions of light, ventilation, facilities for using equipment and which have poor acoustics do not facilitate the task. Finally, some teachers mentioned the fact that there is little or no monitoring from school administrators of the results of PD; they are not asked to share, replicate, or even put new knowledge or ideas into use. In other words, they are not made accountable for improving teachers’ teaching or students’ results based on the opportunities they, as administrators, are given. This element is part of what Aguirre-Muñoz (2008) calls leadership and supervision, not always present in our schools because of many reasons that arise from the lack of time of principals who have to divide their time and attention among four or five institutions, to the lack of interest in some areas.

In the category ‘Human Development’, teachers declared that trust from their supervisors in their work because of their preparation and responsibility is one of the factors that favor the OTL of their students: “I think that in my school my coordinators, principals and administrative [personnel] have confidence in me because I try to make an effort to be better day by day.” (T1). Other elements that show the positive side of teachers and undoubtedly contribute to their students’ OTL are that they are proactive and seek and take all opportunities for PD, using every chance to put into practice what they learn. They take pride in what they do: “My institution has confidence in what I learn to be shared with my students and colleagues” (T5).

In revising the theory we find that almost all models mention teacher capability (preparation and expertise) as a key aspect of OTL; however, other important elements concerning teachers such as

a positive attitude, a strong sense of self and a sense of job satisfaction in spite of limitations and problems are omitted; these factors are mentioned only in Schwartz' model (1995), but they are considered basic by this group of teachers; the great majority of teachers feel satisfied with their career: "This role is the most important for us because we are helping our students and ourselves grow as human beings in order to contribute [to] and build a better future." (T<sub>3</sub>)

Within the same category, the elements that according to teachers have a negative impact on OTL are usually related to two areas; one concerns teachers and includes the difficulty for them to find a balance between their professional and personal lives, the lack of time to do their job well, the low salaries they receive and the lack of sustained efforts on the part of educational authorities to offer continuous PDP, although they recognize that the offer of PD courses has greatly improved in the last three years. The other factor that affects students' OTL depends mostly on students, and is manifested in their lack of interest and involvement in class and in other academic activities.

The time factor has been under discussion and study in countries where there is worry about poor results in education. Of the first three elements mentioned by teachers, one considered as a crucial ingredient in all models is time. Limited time on the part of teachers affects planning, preparation, exploration, innovation, assessment, and ability to get to know students and to lead them into learning. Time limitations have several sources: little time allocation in timetables and curricula, little time-on-task, holidays, planned and unplanned meetings, special events and celebrations at schools, strikes, 'attitudinal slow-downs', etc.

In several states of the USA there have been studies that try to determine the effect of Expanded Learning Time (ELT) on student achievement. Teachers and researchers find 180 school days a

year is about the same amount of time devoted to school in Colombia and they state that it is too short to guarantee good results. For example, Marcotte and Hansen (2010) studied the incidence of shortened school time (due to closings for bad weather) in students' results in national exams in the areas of mathematics and reading; they found that students received lower scores when the number of weeks of the academic year was shorter. Other studies reviewed by Marcotte and Hansen (2010) –Lee and Barro (2007), Eren and Millimet (2007), Marcotte (2007), Hansen (2008), and Sims (2008)– show evidence in the same direction after implementing ELT programs and studying their results. As Marcotte and Hansen (2010, p. 1) conclude, "This new body of evidence... suggests that extending time in school would in fact likely raise student achievement", and that "differences in instructional time can and do affect school performance". ELT is not only about more school days a year, but also about longer hours (between 7 and 8 a day), and meaningful and optimal use of time in school. Silva (2007) recommends that schools analyze the way time is spent so they can decide the kind of time they need to extend; she classifies school time into four categories: allocated school time, allocated class time, instructional time and academic learning time. In Colombia the school day in private schools usually goes from 7:00 a.m. (sometimes earlier) to 3:00 p.m. Public schools usually work from 7:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. or from 1:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. because buildings are used by more than one school or body of students. At present, the government has acknowledged the importance of time in the improvement of education and the creation of more inclusive conditions for all; steps have been taken in the country's capital to extend the school hours for children who attend public institutions. Some other major cities are considering implementation of the same action.

Lastly, but not less important, the teachers mentioned the issue of low salaries: “I feel free to do my job, and I like it. I studied for being an English teacher, and I’m doing my best. The only thing I have to complain is the so poor salary.” (T12). Indeed, teachers’ income do not usually correspond to the time spent studying to become a professional; the teachers’ salaries are probably among the lowest paid in any profession, and the contractual conditions that many teachers have assure them a salary only for a few continuous months, making their situation even more difficult. In many cases, this factor affects motivation and the likelihood of putting enough time or extra time into their work. Darling-Hammond (2007) finds a direct relation between low salaries for teachers and schools in deprived or difficult areas, where students do not have many opportunities for success. This may be the case of many of the teachers involved in this study; most of them work in schools of the public sector, and some in deprived urban or rural areas.

In closing the discussions in the workshop, teachers socialized what they thought was the most remarkable impact of the implementation of standards in their institutions (main category four). They highlighted the effects of changing the nature of English teaching. According to their perception, presenting English as an area and not as a course amounts to assigning it a higher status and, therefore, requires other changes. According to them, developing English teaching and learning as an area requires the revision and adaptation of the teaching methodology, as well as the planning and curricular execution; it also demands the reevaluation of teachers’ roles and pedagogical knowledge, cooperative work and opportunities to grow professionally. The importance of improving the area of English teaching with more contact hours, methodological innovations, student exchanges, materials and bilingual bibliography is also considered crucial.

All the revised models for OTL standards include curricular conditions as one of the elements to improve or revise; these improvements or revisions usually include integration with other courses (also mentioned by the teachers in the workshop), adaptations in order to meet standards, as well as contextualizing content in order to deal with real life problems. The curriculum also needs to be flexible to cater to different groups of students.

The establishment of standards has opened the door for teachers to get updated as new opportunities for professionalization in the language and in methodology have emerged. Teachers who have been attending the courses think they are improving and feel more confident teaching the language. This feeling of increased capability necessarily involves motivation that favors the development of the area; this fact is highlighted by Rodrigo Fábrega, leader of the Chilean program “*Inglés Abre Puertas*” (*English Opens Doors*), who expressed in an interview for *Palabra Maestra* (Fundación Compartir, 2009, p. 3-4) that “it is not enough to speak the language; teachers need to feel comfortable using it.” Teachers confessed that they feel more at ease in their classrooms, while those who have not gotten involved in these processes or who have just initiated them confess lacking confidence. That is why most of them stress the importance of permanent updating in topics related to language proficiency, methodology and technological advances, which they recognize they have to analyze and adapt before adopting.

The standards movement has generated motivation not only among teachers but also among administrators. At the same time, teachers feel that they are now involved in a new educational dynamic, although some of them would appreciate principals who show more commitment to the development of the English area. In general, teachers highlight the importance of having more

support for education not only from their principals, but also from the government and from other professionals in order to strengthen the teaching and learning processes. They also state they would benefit from more exchange programs in order to get a real taste of English speaking cultures.

In relation to the impact of standards on students, teachers say very little; however, it is clear that their opinions are divided: On the one side, there is a group of teachers who think students are gaining motivation for learning English because they understand the importance of speaking a second language. They believe students are more enthusiastic because learning is no longer oriented towards developing contents or learning only grammar, but rather towards developing competences. They also believe that programs are better organized and, as a result, students are also motivated and demanding. However, there is another group of teachers who think students are not aware of the importance of learning a second language and that their attitude hinders progress in the learning process. This group finds it really difficult to overcome this barrier. As for parents, they are receiving this piece of news with great expectations; they consider this knowledge to be a useful and extra tool for their children to become more competitive in life.

### **Final Considerations**

In presenting English teachers' views of the way they are working, the attitudes they have and the challenges they face in the process of establishing the NBP, we have found enough evidence to demand the establishment of OTL standards in order to address the issue of equality of educational opportunities and as a way to ensure the attainment of the goals proposed in this national policy.

We are well aware that there are many aspects involved in the design, formulation and issuance

of OTL standards; however, not all of them belong to the sphere of influence of teachers, teacher educators, students or their families. There are, nonetheless, two main aspects of OTL standards that we could concentrate on, and these are, on the one hand, teachers providing their students with opportunities to learn; and, on the other hand, educational authorities providing teachers with opportunities to teach and students with opportunities to learn.

How can teachers provide their students with real opportunities to learn? By getting to know and understand their present situation and the situation the policy has created; by initiating and maintaining actions to continue TDP work, by being aware of their strengths and deficiencies and autonomously working on them, by creating collaborative groups in their institutions, by using time responsibly, by showing progress in their work, by creating pressure groups to pursue the betterment of conditions for teaching and for facilitating teachers to learn and provide their students with opportunities to learn. A good number of the teachers participating in the seminars expressed that they were already undertaking actions of this kind and exercising responsibility in their work, although they also mentioned a not so generous or responsible attitude on the part of some of their colleagues or supervisors.

What do teachers feel needs providing in order to create opportunities to teach? An analysis of the information shows that conditions for attaining the goals of the NBP are far from being appropriate or fair, despite the evident efforts on the part of educational authorities towards fostering teachers' improvement through TPD programs. Teachers and students alike are facing cultural, social and economic challenges which have multiple local causes and are aggravated by present-day global trends. All over the world demands are

being made for the need to provide educational access under equal conditions for all; inclusive education is claimed not only as a human right but also as an effective means of improving efficiency in educational processes. Unfortunately, Colombia occupies a shameful second place in Latin America concerning inequality<sup>2</sup> and the implementation of educational policies reflects this situation: Most private institutions have longer hours, better resources, better conditions and teachers with the adequate profile to implement the NBP. But, other aspects as well are highlighted by teachers as elements to be revised in order to achieve standards: Time allocation and management, that would provide more exposure and opportunities for skills development among students as well as better chances for teachers to do a good job and continue to develop professionally; teacher-student ratio that would allow more teacher-student interaction and closer attention to individual student needs and difficulties. Finally, other elements mentioned by teachers and analyzed in the revised models for OTL standards that would guarantee equity and opportunities for all are as follows: better resources, both human and material; improved physical conditions of schools and classrooms (lighting, ventilation, acoustics), and last but not least, the improvement of teachers' salaries, which are among the lowest paid to professionals in the country.

In an attempt to gather teachers' thoughts in relation to OTL standards and with the intention of opening up discussions on the topic, we can conclude that a serious revision of the elements mentioned above is necessary. Changes that take into account teachers' voices are also a must if Colombia is to achieve these standards. Striving

to accomplish these standards does not mean responding uncritically to a policy that we know has advantages and drawbacks; above all, in order to reach higher levels of proficiency in English or in any target language means giving our students better cultural and academic possibilities. It also means giving language teaching professional recognition and its due importance.

## References

- Aguirre-Muñoz, Z. (2008). *Cátedra Bloom: Estándares de oportunidad de aprendizaje: una estrategia para promover equidad escolar*. Ciudad de Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos. Retrieved from [http://www.proyectodialogo.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=291&Itemid=112](http://www.proyectodialogo.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=291&Itemid=112)
- Cárdenas, R. (2001). Teaching English in primary: Are we ready for it? *HOW, A Colombian Journal for English Teachers*, 8, 1-9.
- Cárdenas, R., & Hernández, F. (2011). Towards the formulation of a proposal for Opportunity to learn standards in EFL learning and teaching. *ÍKALA*, 16(28), 231-258.
- Colombia. Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN]. (2006). *Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: inglés. Serie Guías No. 22*. Bogotá: Author.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2007). The flat earth and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future. *Educational Researcher*, 36(6), 318-334.
- Denbo, S., Grant, C., & Jackson, S. (1994). *Educate America: A call for equity in school reform. Opportunity to learn standards. American youth policy forum; Mid Atlantic Equity Consortium & National Educational Association*. Retrieved from <http://www.maec.org/Old/pdf/edam.pdf>
- Department of Education State of Vermont. (2000). *Vermont's framework of standards & learning opportunities*. Montpelier, VT: Vermont Department of Education.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dinero.com/actualidad/economia/articulo/colombia-campeon-desigualdad-america-latina/120728>; <http://www.agenciadenoticias.unal.edu.co/detalle/article/aunque-bajo-la-pobreza-en-colombia-hay-mucha-desigualdad.html>

- Fernández, A. (2003). Educación inclusiva: Enseñar y aprender entre la diversidad. *Revista Digital UMBRAL* 2000, 13, 1-10. Retrieved from <http://www.inclusioneducativa.org/content/documents/Generalidades.pdf>
- Fundación Compartir. (2009, Septiembre). Maestros de inglés: los alquimistas de la educación en Chile. *Palabra Maestra*, 9(22), 3-4. Retrieved from [http://www.premiocompartiralmaestro.org/PDFP/maestra/PALABRA\\_MAEISTRA22.pdf](http://www.premiocompartiralmaestro.org/PDFP/maestra/PALABRA_MAEISTRA22.pdf)
- Gillies, J., & Jester-Quijada, J. (2008). Opportunity to learn. A high impact strategy for improving educational outcomes in developing countries. *United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Working paper*. Retrieved from [http://www.equip123.net/docs/e2-OTL\\_WP.pdf](http://www.equip123.net/docs/e2-OTL_WP.pdf)
- González, A. (2009). On Alternative and additional certifications in English language teaching. *ÍKALA*, 14(22), 183-209.
- Machin, S. (2006). *Social disadvantage and education experiences. OECD social, employment and migration working papers*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/13/60/36165298.pdf>
- Marcotte, D., & Hansen, B. (2010). Time for School? When the snow falls, test scores also drop. *Education Next*, 10(1). Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/time-for-school/>
- Navarro, L. (2004). *La escuela y las condiciones sociales para aprender y enseñar. Equidad social y educación en sectores de pobreza urbana*. Buenos Aires: Instituto Internacional de Planeamiento de la Educación UNESCO.
- Pabón, C., Wills, E., & Salas, S. (2011). "Colombia es el campeón de la desigualdad en América Latina" *Dinero.com*. 2011-06-05. Retrieved from <http://www.dinero.com/actualidad/economia/articulo/colombia-campeon-desigualdad-america-latina/120728>.
- Paes de Barros, R., Ferreira, F., Molinas J., & Vega, J. (2008). *Midiendo la desigualdad de oportunidades en América Latina y el Caribe*. Washington, D.C.: Banco Mundial.
- Schwartz, W. (1995). Opportunity to learn standards: Their impact on urban students. *ERIC/CUE Digest Number 110*, 1-9. doi: ED389816. Retrieved from [http://iume.tc.columbia.edu/i/a/document/15460\\_Digest\\_110.pdf](http://iume.tc.columbia.edu/i/a/document/15460_Digest_110.pdf)
- Silva, E. (2007). *On the clock: Rethinking the way schools use time*. Washington D.C.: Education sector reports.
- Tochon, F. V. (2009). The role of language in globalization: Language, culture, gender and institutional learning. *International Journal of Educational Policies*, 3(2), 107-124. Retrieved from <http://ijep.icpres.org/2009/v3n2/fvtochon.pdf>
- UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, & Access. (2003). *Opportunity to Learn (OTL) Does California's school system measure up?* Retrieved from <http://just-schools.gseis.ucla.edu/solution/pdfs/OTL.pdf>
- UNESCO. (2004). *La Educación Chilena en el cambio de siglo: Políticas, resultados y desafíos*. Santiago de Chile: Oficina Internacional de Educación.

### About the Authors

**Rosalba Cárdenas Ramos**, BA in Philology and languages, Universidad del Atlántico, Colombia. MA in Linguistics and FL education, University of Louisville, USA. Research attachment in testing and evaluation, University of Reading, England. Teacher development, Thames Valley University, England. Professor of FL methodology and applied linguistics, Universidad del Valle, Colombia. Coordinator of Teacher Development Program at Universidad del Valle.

**Fanny Hernández Gaviria**, BA in Modern Languages and MA in Linguistics, Universidad del Valle, Colombia. Assistant professor. Member of the EILA research group. Teaches English and Classroom research at Universidad del Valle. Director of the Licenciatura Program. Participates in the research project on conditions of implementation of the PNB in Cali, Colombia, describing English teachers' profiles.

## Appendix: Workshop on Opportunity to Learn Standards

**Universidad del Valle**  
 Facultad de Humanidades  
 Escuela de Ciencias del Lenguaje

### Group Discussion 1: General aspects that underlie opportunities to learn

- What is, in your opinion, the role, if any, of these elements in you students' and your own opportunities to develop as individuals and members of society?

In groups of four, read the following items and decide whether or not and to which extent they have an influence on opportunities to learn. Then, complete the table below.

General aspects	Influence on opportunities to learn
Worth and Personal Competence	
Healthy Choices	
Making Decisions	
Exercising social responsibility	
Other aspects you consider relevant	

### Plenary Discussion 1

Based on your own experience as an individual and as a teacher, what kind of opportunities have contributed to your development?

### Plenary Discussion 2

In your opinion, what is the responsibility and role of educational authorities as providers of opportunities for teachers and learners within the Programa Nacional de Bilinguismo (National Bilingual Program - NBP)?



**Group Discussion 2**

**Standards and conditions in the institution I work for.**

In the next chart, list all the factors that would affect the implementation of standards in your institution. Work, if possible, in institutional groups.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Work aspects</b></p> <p>These involve factors related to your colleagues, access to study and research; time for meetings; access to materials; number of students per group; interpersonal relations (colleagues, administrators, parents and students).</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Institutional aspects</b></p> <p>These are related to decisions made by the institution and resources: number of hours dedicated to English, available human and material resources, institutional support, curriculum; opportunities for professional development; support for professional development; physical conditions of the setting.</p>

**Discussion 3: Human development/ Personal aspects**

These include emotional factors such as fear, disappointment; attitudinal aspects (expectations, resistance to change, willingness to work with standards & personal responsibility)

<b>Personal Aspects</b>	
Evaluate yourself as regards the following aspects. Be honest and as objective as you can be in your judgment.	
Dependability	
Productivity	
Career Choices	
Attitude	
Resistance to change	
Responsibility	
Other aspects	

**Group Discussion 4**

What impact will the implementation of standards have in your institution?

<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Teachers	
Students	
School administrators	
Parents	
School community	
Other	