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# Foreign Language Education in Colombia: A Qualitative Study of Escuela Nueva

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY  
OF ESCUELA NUEVA

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

by

Daniel Ramírez-Lamus

2015

To: Dean Delia C. Garcia  
College of Education

This dissertation, written by Daniel Ramirez-Lamus, and entitled Foreign Language Education in Colombia: A Qualitative Study of Escuela Nueva, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

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Hilary Landorf

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Eric Dwyer, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 20, 2015

The dissertation of Daniel Ramirez-Lamus is approved.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION  
FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN COLOMBIA:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ESCUELA NUEVA

by

Daniel Ramírez-Lamus

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Eric Dwyer, Major Professor

Since 2004 the Colombian Ministry of Education has been implementing the Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB) with the goal of having bilingual high school graduates in English and Spanish by 2019. However, implementation of the PNB has been criticized by English Language Teaching (ELT) specialists in the country who say, among other things, that the PNB introduced a discourse associated exclusively with bilingualism in English and Spanish.

This study analyzed interviews with 15 participants of a public school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva, a successful model of community-based education that has begun a process of internationalization, regarding the participants' perceptions of foreign language education and the policies of the PNB. Six students, five teachers, and four administrators were each interviewed twice using semi-structured interviews. To offer a critique of the PNB, this study tried to determine to what extent the school implemented the elements of Responsible ELT, a model developed by the researcher incorporating the concepts of hegemony of English, critical language-policy research, and resistance in ELT.

Findings included the following: (a) students and teachers saw English as the universal language whereas most administrators saw English imposed due to political and economic reasons; (b) some teachers misinterpreted the 1994 General Law of Education mandating the teaching of a foreign language as a law mandating English; and (c) some teachers and administrators saw the PNB's adoption of competence standards based on the Common European Framework of Reference for languages as beneficial whereas others saw it as arbitrary.

Conclusions derived from this study of this Escuela Nueva school were: (a) most participants found the goal of the PNB unrealistic; (b) most teachers and administrators saw the policies of the PNB as top-down policies without assessment or continuity; and (c) teachers and administrators mentioned a disarticulation between elementary and high school ELT policies that may be discouraging students in public schools from learning English. Thus, this study suggests that the policies of the PNB may be contributing to English becoming a gatekeeper for higher education and employment thereby becoming a tool for sustaining inequality in Colombia.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION .....	1
Context .....	1
Conceptual Framework .....	4
Statement of the Problem .....	8
Purpose of the Study .....	11
Research Questions .....	11
Contribution .....	12
Overview of Methods.....	14
Definition of Key Terms and Abbreviations.....	15
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	19
Purpose of the Literature Review.....	19
Responsible English-Language Teaching (ELT) .....	20
Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB) .....	30
Colombia's Context of Foreign Language Teaching up to the Implementation of the PNB .....	30
A Comparison of Colombia's Estándares and Brazil's Parâmetros.....	34
The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).....	55
Colombia's Escuela Nueva (EN) .....	60
Synopsis .....	65
METHODS .....	67
Purpose of the Study .....	67
Participants and Setting.....	71
Research Questions .....	82
Data Collection.....	83
Data Analysis .....	84
Trustworthiness .....	86
FINDINGS .....	90
Students' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education .....	90
Teachers' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education.....	99
Administrators' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education .....	118
Teachers' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB .....	141
Administrators' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB .....	181
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	223
Conclusions .....	223

Perceptions of Students, Teachers, and Administrators of a School of the Colombian Escuela Nueva Regarding Foreign Language Education .....	223
Perceptions of Teachers and Administrators of a School of the Colombian Escuela Nueva Regarding Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB .....	229
Discussion .....	240
Recommendations .....	254
 LIST OF REFERENCES .....	 258
 APPENDICES .....	 262
 VITA .....	 264

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	PAGE
1. Approaches to language-policy research and their relationship to English-language teaching paradigms.....	6
2. Relationship between previous studies and the research questions.....	14
3. Timeline of important dates in foreign language education in Colombia.....	34
4. How standards are described in the document Estándares.....	38
5. Adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels by the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN).....	39
6. Comparison of the Colombian document Estándares and the Brazilian document Parâmetros.....	55
7. Timeline of Colombia's Escuela Nueva (EN).....	62
8. Relationship between research questions and the elements of Responsible ELT.....	66
9. Relationship between research questions and the elements of Responsible ELT.....	242

## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
Estándares	Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELT	English-language teaching
EN	Escuela Nueva
ESL	English as a Second Language
FEN	Fundación Escuela Nueva
FLE	Foreign Language Education
ICFES	Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior
MEN	Colombian Ministry of Education
OC	Institución Educativa Octavio Calderón Mejía
Parâmetros	Parâmetros curriculares nacionais—terceiro e quarto ciclos do ensino fundamental—língua estrangeira
PNB	National Bilingual Program
SENA	Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje

## INTRODUCTION

### Context

#### **Colombia's National Bilingual Program**

Since 2004 the Colombian Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, MEN) has been implementing the National Bilingual Program (Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, PNB) with the help of the British Council in Colombia. The major goal of the PNB is to make students bilingual in Spanish and English in accordance with international standards by the year 2019 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006). The year 2019 was determined because in that year Colombia will commemorate its 200 years of independence. During the presidency of Álvaro Uribe Vélez many objectives were set for that year in many different areas, including education, in a document called *Vision 2019 – Education (Visión 2019- Educación)*. In order to help students reach the goal of becoming bilingual in Spanish and English by 2019, the Ministry of Education (MEN), in partnership with the British Council in Colombia, published the document “*Basic standards for competences in foreign languages: English*” (*Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés*).

In the document “*Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés*,” heretofore referred to as *Estándares*, the MEN describes the standards to measure student progress towards becoming proficient in English. At the heart of the structure of *Estándares* is its adoption of the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR: Council of Europe, 2014) and its reorganization of these standards according to Colombian notions of grade levels. As the

CEFR is increasingly used across Europe in the reform of national curricula and by international consortia for the comparison of language certificates (Council of Europe, 2011), the levels named in *Estándares* are also used to evaluate and compare Colombia's foreign language outcomes in an internationally comparable manner. Thus, a radical reform of foreign language teaching and learning has been taking place in Colombia in the sense that: (a) a foreign framework of standards has been adopted and (b) it has been adopted for competences exclusively in English.

The implementation of the PNB has not been free of controversy. For some, the adoption of a foreign model such as the CEFR is seen as a unilateral and arbitrary decision with little discussion prior to its adoption (Cárdenas, 2006; González, 2007). Some recurrent themes in the criticism of the PNB are: (a) the redefinition of the field of foreign language teaching in the country by the introduction of new discourses associated exclusively with bilingualism (Cárdenas, 2006; Usma, 2009); (b) the reduction of the concept of bilingualism to being bilingual in English and Spanish thus ignoring the speakers of languages different from Spanish inside the country who become bilingual once they learn Spanish (Guerrero, 2008, 2009; Zárate, 2007); and (c) the program's top-down approach, which neglected local knowledge, efforts for school improvement and professional development, and suggestions from Colombian teacher educators (Cárdenas, 2006; González, 2007; Quintero, 2007). Other themes in the criticism of the PNB, although not as common, include: (a) the connection of the PNB to official and unofficial economic, political, and cultural agendas that shape national policy (Usma, 2009); and (b) the implications of the program's policies for language minority speakers in Colombia (Gómez, 2007; Mejía, 2006).

## **Colombia's Escuela Nueva (EN)**

The Colombian Escuela Nueva (EN) is a model of community-based education that started in the 1970s as a very small scale experiment in Colombian rural schools. From 500 schools in the 1970s the Escuela Nueva spread to 8,000 schools in the mid-1980s and by 1987 it had reached 24,000 rural schools in the country. Due to its organic growth, the model was declared by the government as the standard model for rural schooling in the country.

In 1987 the *Foundation Escuela Nueva* (FEN) was created to adapt the EN model to urban contexts under the name of *Escuela Activa Urbana*. In 1989 the EN was selected by the World Bank as one of the most successful reforms to impact public policy in the developing world. In 1992 the EN became one of the five pillars of Colombia's National Development Plan to eradicate poverty. From 1994, with the help of international agencies such as UNICEF, USAID, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Bank Development Bank, among others, the EN started a process of internationalization. The EN model has since been taken to countries as diverse as Brazil, Chile, Salvador, Philippines, Guyana, Timor, Uganda, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico; countries where it has adopted different names and has reached more than 5 million children.

In 2001 the FEN created a program called *Círculos de Aprendizaje – Escuela Nueva Activa* to assist the needs of displaced children in the country becoming the national educational policy for displaced children by the MEN in 2008. More recently, in 2012 the FEN was included in the top 100 best world Non-Governmental Organizations by Switzerland's Global Journal (Escuela Nueva, 2012).

In evaluations carried out by national and international agencies throughout its existence, EN students have scored higher than students in traditional schools in standardized tests of subjects such as Spanish language and mathematics. EN students have also showed lower repetition and dropout rates and usually have higher levels of self-esteem and more developed civic values (Farrell, 2008). EN has been included among the most successful educational initiatives in Latin America. The Colombian journal *El Tiempo* described the model thus<sup>1</sup>:

In Colombia the project Escuela Nueva was created by the civil society to offer a complete elementary of high quality especially to rural areas. The model guarantees active and collaborative learning in institutions linked to their communities, having a mechanism of flexible promotion, which suits the conditions of vulnerable childhood.  
(*El Tiempo*, Oct. 2011)

### **Conceptual Framework**

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) has referred to the spread of English in terms of two main paradigms: the “diffusion of English” paradigm and the “ecology of languages” paradigm. The “diffusion of English” paradigm has to do with unknowingly perpetuating what some have called the hegemony of English (Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003; Tsuda, 1994, 1997), that is, the dominance of English as an international language due to its uncontested status among languages. The ecology of languages paradigm (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Tsuda, 1997, 2008), on the other hand, has to do with becoming critically aware of linguistic hegemony and with the fact that linguistic hegemony may lead to linguistic oppression and “linguicism” (cf. racism, sexism, classism) (Phillipson, 1992) or

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.

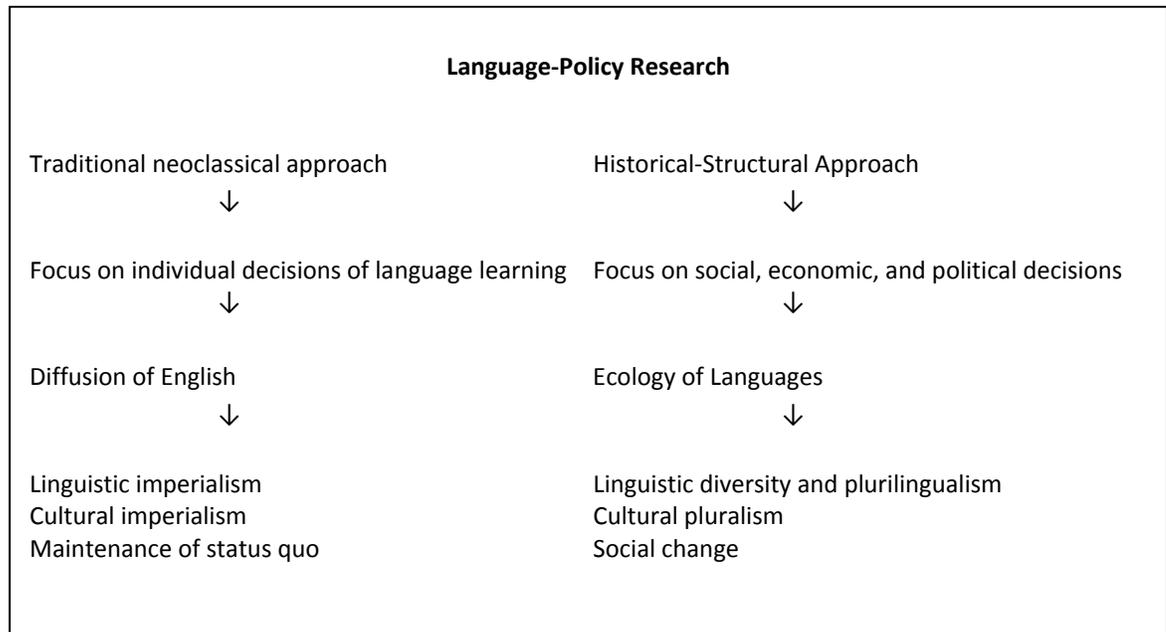
“linguoracism” (Macedo et al., 2003). Among other things, the “diffusion of English” paradigm ultimately leads to monolingualism, linguistic genocide, and linguistic and cultural imperialism. The “ecology of languages” paradigm, on the other hand, advocates for multilingualism, linguistic diversity, and cultural pluralism.

How can language research and, more specifically, language-policy research adopt an “ecology of languages” paradigm and put the “diffusion of English” paradigm to question? In other words, how can language-policy research contribute to linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism rather than to linguistic and cultural imperialism?

Tollefson (1991) refers to two main ideologies of language-policy research: the neoclassical approach and the historical-structural approach. The neoclassical approach is the traditional approach to language-policy research. It places all variables of language acquisition and learning on individual linguistic decisions. In other words, language learning within this approach is determined by individual factors such as age, language aptitude, motivation, attitude towards the target language, etc. The historical-structural approach to language-policy research, on the other hand, emphasizes constraints on individual decision making. In other words, it considers the social, political, and economic factors that constrain language learning and use. The major goal of the historical-structural approach to language policy research is “to examine the historical basis of policies and to make explicit the *mechanisms* [emphasis added] by which policy decisions serve or undermine particular and economic interests” (Tollefson, 1991, p. 32). In other words, works of research that show how ideology plays a fundamental role in the design of language policies are oriented by the historical-structural approach to language-policy research.

From a description of these two approaches, we can clearly see (a) how the (traditional) neoclassical approach to language-policy research may contribute to the “diffusion of English” paradigm as questions regarding the hegemony of languages such as English are never taken into account; and (b) how the historical-structural approach to language-policy research may contribute to the “ecology of languages” paradigm as questions regarding the status and ideology of languages and its implications on language users are raised due to its focus on social, economic and political factors. Table 1 below may help us visualize the two approaches more clearly and their relationship to the field of English-language teaching and learning.

*Table 1: Approaches to language-policy research and their relationship to English-language teaching paradigms*



research, a more specific kind of research within the historical-structural approach. CLP is a field of critical applied linguistics that includes critical discourse analysis, critical

literacy studies, and critical pedagogy. The term “critical” in language-policy research has three interrelated meanings: (a) it is critical of traditional approaches to language policy research; (b) it is aimed at social change; and (c) it is influenced by critical theory (Tollefson, 2006).

In contrast to the traditional approach to language-policy research, CLP research “acknowledges that policies often create and sustain various forms of social inequality, and that policy-makers usually promote the interests of dominant social groups” (Tollefson, 2006, p. 42). Thus, a critical view of language policy research would try to answer questions such as the following: How do language policies in schools create inequalities among learners? How do policies marginalize some students while granting privilege to others? How are local policies and programs in language education affected by global processes such as colonialism, decolonization, the spread of English, and the growth of the integrated capitalist economy? (Tollefson, 2002).

As a means to integrate some of the concepts of CLP research into the English-language teaching (ELT) profession, I have developed a model called “Responsible ELT,” which I will be describing at length in the following chapter.

## Statement of the Problem

With this spectrum in mind, I then pose these questions: Are the policies of Colombia's PNB as presented in the document *Estándares* contributing to the "diffusion of English" paradigm, as it ignores (a) other types of bilingualism within the country and (b) other foreign language learning options within the country? For instance, aren't the efforts of linguistic minorities who learn Spanish as their second language in Colombia another instance of bilingualism to be considered when developing policy or talking about bilingualism? In other words, what will happen with the native language of linguistic minorities if bilingualism policies are dictated only in relation to Spanish and English?

On the other hand, isn't having Brazil as a neighbor country that speaks a different language something to consider when dealing with foreign language teaching policy in Colombia? Couldn't Colombian citizens benefit from learning Portuguese and from interacting with Brazilian people as much as it is said they will benefit from learning English? By looking at these scenarios we may be able to see how the policies implemented by the MEN in its PNB may be blindly supporting the "diffusion of English" paradigm.

Although most of the Colombian population speaks Spanish, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) has reported that between 200,000 and 250,000 people in Colombia speak 79 of the 98 American Indian languages classified for Colombia (Grimes, 1988, cited in Vélez-Rendón, 2003). To this date, SIL reports in its official website that ethnic groups in Colombia speak some 80 languages (<http://www->

[01.sil.org/americanas/colombia/show\\_lang.asp?by=langname&Lang=eng](http://01.sil.org/americanas/colombia/show_lang.asp?by=langname&Lang=eng)). In other words, a high percentage of native groups living in very isolated areas of the country are likely to become bilingual in their native language *and* Spanish. As a matter of fact, Colombian law following the new Colombian Constitution of 1991 mandates that in regions where people speak indigenous languages schooling be bilingual in the indigenous language and Spanish. Why, then, isn't this instance of bilingualism also considered in the discourse of the PNB?

In addition, Colombia has Afro-Caribbean communities that speak languages different from Spanish: (a) the Afro-Caribbean community in the town of Palenque de San Basilio, in the country's northern state of Bolívar, speaks Palenquero, "the only Spanish-based Creole language which has survived in the Caribbean" (Dieck, 1998, cited in Mejía, 2006, p. 52); and (b) people living in the country's islands of San Andrés and Providencia speak a variety of English "said to be the same as Jamaican Creole" (Grimes, 1988, cited in Vélez-Rendón, p. 186). Thus, one might ask how the policies of the PNB regarding bilingualism could affect these and other linguistic minorities within the country.

The push for English as the foreign language of choice has been backed by arguments regarding how the learning of English will contribute to students' social mobility and placement within the labor market. In the letter which introduces the *Estándares* the Minister of Education at the time, Cecilia María Vélez White, wrote:

Having a good level of English facilitates access to working and educational opportunities that help improve the quality of life. Being competent in another language is essential in the globalized world... Being bilingual increases the

opportunities to be more competent and competitive. (*Estándares*, p. 3, my translation)<sup>2</sup>

However, it remains to be seen if the current policies of the PNB in Colombia actually contribute to students' social mobility or if, on the contrary, they may be reinforcing social inequality. In other words, though the English language is seen as a tool for social mobility and the main objective of the PNB is to get students to become bilingual in Spanish and English, what actually may be happening is that students in Colombian public schools turn away from English and become resistant to learning it because of the way English is enforced and taught. As Tollefson (1991) points out, "when language is a gatekeeper for employment and higher education, it may become a powerful tool for *sustaining* inequality and hegemony" (Tollefson, 1991, p. 136, emphasis added). Thus, the policies of the PNB may not be as well intentioned as they may initially appear.

Colombia's Escuela Nueva (EN) has developed as a successful model of community-based education initially in Colombia and later in various countries, mostly throughout Central and South America. EN students in Colombia have scored higher than students in traditional schools on standardized tests of subjects such as Spanish language and mathematics; they have also shown lower repetition and dropout rates, higher levels of self-esteem and more developed civic values (Farrell, 2008). On the other hand, the Colombian Ministry of Education has developed the PNB with the help of the British Council in Colombia in order to have students graduating in the year 2019 become bilingual in Spanish and English at an intermediate level. Such begs the following

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<sup>2</sup> All translations from the Colombian document *Estándares* are mine.

question: How do students, teachers, and administrators of the Colombian EN see, interpret, or implement the policies set by the PNB? No studies have been carried out to explore how students, teachers, and administrators of this very successful community-based education model in Colombia see the policies set by Colombia's PNB. That is precisely what this study intended to do examining one specific school of the Colombian EN.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The objective of this study was to explore how students, teachers, and administrators of a school of the community program known as Escuela Nueva see foreign language education in Colombia. Within this exploration the study also analyzed how the policies of Colombia's PNB are perceived and implemented by teachers and administrators of this school.

### **Research Questions**

In order to explore how students, teachers, and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva see foreign language education, the questions posed by this study were the following:

1. What are the perceptions of students of this school regarding foreign language education?

2. What are the perceptions of teachers of this school regarding foreign language education?
3. What are the perceptions of administrators of this school regarding foreign language education?

In order to analyze how teachers and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva perceive and implement the policies of the PNB, the questions posed by this study were:

4. What are the perceptions of teachers of this school regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB)?
5. What are the perceptions of administrators of this school regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB)?

### **Contribution**

In her sociolinguistic profile of English in Colombia, Vélez-Rendón (2003) mentioned the need for empirical research to more clearly define the socio-cultural milieu of English in Colombia in order to “create pedagogical responses that are more appropriate for the country and... better address the real needs of all learners at all levels” (Vélez-Rendón, 2003, p. 196). The tendency in Colombia has been to rely on imported models such as the CEFR, and to emphasize conformity to standards of language competence. This study intends to advance the research on how students, teachers and

school administrators view English in a specific community program school in Colombia in order to shed some light on what they expect from English-language education policies.

The authors of a phenomenological study of schools in Medellín, Cadavid, McNulty, and Quinchía (2004), suggest the use of research as a way to begin to understand and transform the context of foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia. One of the main contributions of this study is to bring teachers and students' voices to the discussion of foreign language education and policy in Colombia. It is my belief that by bringing these views to the discussion, the guidelines developed for foreign language teaching policy in the country will one day have a common ground with the reality and the experience of the country.

There have been several studies that critically examine the document *Estándares* issued by the Colombian Ministry of Education to implement its National Bilingual Program (Guerrero, 2008, 2009; Vargas, Tejada, & Colmenares, 2008). However, there are few studies exploring the views of students, teachers, and school administrators regarding the PNB in specific settings such as the Escuela Nueva. This study will not only offer an account of how students, teachers, and school administrators at this specific school implement the policies set by the PNB, but will also voice their views on foreign language education.

Table 2 below shows how previous studies in the literature relate to the research questions of this study.

*Table 2: Relationship between previous studies and the research questions of this study.*

Previous studies	Research questions
Cadavid et al. (2004) suggested the use of research as a way to begin to understand and transform the context of foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia.	What are the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva regarding foreign language education? (Questions 1-3)
Vélez-Rendón (2003) mentioned the need for empirical research to more clearly define the socio-cultural milieu of English in Colombia.	
There have been several critical analyses of the document <i>Estándares</i> (Guerrero, 2008, 2009; Quintero-Polo, 2012; Vargas, Tejada, & Colmenares, 2008) but there are no studies showing how specific schools implement the policies of the PNB.	What are the perceptions of teachers and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of the PNB? (Questions 4-5)
Guerrero-Nieto (2009) mentioned the importance of considering teachers' suggestions in the process of determining what foreign language learning policies should demand.	
Canagarajah (1999) called for micro-social perspectives in ELT, initiated and conducted by periphery scholars <sup>3</sup> such as myself.	

## Overview of Methods

The theoretical framework of this study is critical language-policy (CLP) research within a historical-structural approach to language-policy research. The theoretical framework of this study will help to explore some of the social and political mechanisms that may have led to the implementation of Colombia's PNB and to the institutionalization of English as the foreign language of choice in the country. This means that the study also explored: (a) the adoption of standards for the teaching of English as a foreign language; and (b) the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as the framework on which to formulate those standards.

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<sup>3</sup> Also referred to as “Non-native” English speakers

## Definition of Key Terms and Abbreviations

*Bilingualism*: The ability to perform in two different languages. The term *bilingualism* in Colombia within the discourse of the PNB has become synonymous with learning English and being able to perform in English and Spanish. That concept of bilingualism is precisely the one that this study intends to avoid in order to restore the meaning of bilingualism as being able to perform in any two different languages.

*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*: a document originally published in 2001 by the Council of Europe, used as a tool to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (CEFR, 2001, p. 1).

*Competences*: As defined by the Colombian document *Estándares*, *communicative competence*, which is the goal to be achieved by students learning a foreign language, includes *linguistic competence*, *pragmatic competence*, and *sociolinguistic competence*. A more complete definition of these competences according to the *Estándares* is given in the next chapter (p. 32).

*Elementary*: Direct translation of the Colombian Spanish term “primaria,” which refers to Colombian Grades 1 to 5. High school in the Colombian educational system (“secundaria” or “bachillerato”) starts in Grade 6 and goes until Grade 11.

*English as a Foreign Language (EFL)*: Learning English in a context where English is not used for communication. In Colombia, English is learned as a foreign language because Spanish is the official language used for communication.

*English as a Second Language (ESL):* Learning English in a context where English is used for communication. In the U.S., English is learned as a second language by speakers whose first language is not English.

*Escuela Nueva (EN):* A successful model of community-based education that started in rural areas of Colombia in the seventies and that due to its growth was declared by the Colombian government as the standard model for rural schooling in the country in 1987. The Escuela Nueva with the help of the *Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN)*, has since been taken to countries such as Brazil, Chile, Salvador, Philippines, Guyana, Timor, Uganda, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico; countries where it has adopted different names and has reached more than 5 million children.

*Estándares:* Short form to refer to the document *Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés* (“*Basic standards for competences in foreign languages: English*”) published by the Colombian Ministry of Education as part of its National Bilingual Program, with a description of the standards that measure student progress towards becoming proficient in English.

*Foreign language teaching/learning:* The teaching/learning of any foreign language in Colombia, as opposed to learning *English as a Second Language* (see above).

*Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN):* A non-governmental organization founded in Colombia in 1987 “to adapt EN to urban contexts and new populations ... and to promote its expansion nationally and internationally.” In 2012 FEN was included in the top 100 NGO’s by the Global Journal (Switzerland), where it ranked number 42.

*Hegemony of English:* the uncontested high status of English as an international language.

*ICFES Exam:* A test in several areas (including English) administered to students in all Colombian schools prior to graduation, similar to the SAT in the U.S.

*Learning guides:* Carefully developed self-guided learning materials developed by scholars of the Escuela Nueva, which children can work through themselves, at their own pace, and with help from other students and teachers as necessary (Farrell, 2008).

*Parâmetros:* Short form to refer to the document *Parâmetros curriculares nacionais—terceiro e quarto ciclos do ensino fundamental—língua estrangeira* (“*National curriculum parameters—third and fourth cycles of elementary school—foreign languages*”) published by the Brazilian Secretary of Education in 1998 to guide foreign language teaching policy in the country. This study considers *Parâmetros* a sort of equivalent to the Colombian *Estándares*, although *Parâmetros* offers general guidelines for the teaching of *any* foreign language in Brazil and not only for the teaching of English as is done in *Estándares*.

*PNB: Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* or National Bilingual Program. A foreign language policy program started in Colombia by the Colombian Ministry of Education together with the British Council in 2006, which has as its major goal to make students bilingual in Spanish and English in accordance with international standards by the year 2019 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006).

*Periphery:* A term borrowed from Phillipson’s (1992) distinction between *core English-speaking countries* and *periphery-English countries*. People in core English-speaking countries speak English as their first language. People in periphery countries

learn English as a second or foreign language. I am aware of the relationship of dominance that the metaphor core-periphery implies and actually want to stress that relationship as expressed in the spread of English as a foreign language.

*Standards:* As defined by the Colombian document *Estándares*, *general standards* are “a general description of what Colombian girls, boys or youngsters should know and know how to do by the end of each grade level” (*Estándares*, p. 14). In addition, *specific standards* refer to what students should know and know how to do regarding their comprehension skills (listening and reading) and their production skills (writing, monologues, and conversation).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Purpose of the Literature Review**

The objectives of this literature review are: (a) to critically view Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB) through the lens of a model I will call "Responsible English language teaching (ELT)" and (b) to describe the community-based model known as Escuela Nueva (EN). In order to do so, this review of the literature will be organized in three main sections: (a) a description of the model of Responsible ELT; (b) an account of Colombia's PNB; and (c) a description of the EN model.

The first section, Responsible ELT, will include three main components: awareness of the hegemony of English, critical language-policy research, and resistance to linguistic imperialism. The second section, Colombia's PNB, will include three main components: (a) a short history of foreign language teaching in Colombia up to the implementation of the PNB; (b) a comparison of Colombia's PNB main document, *Estándares*, with its Brazilian equivalent, "National curriculum parameters—third and fourth cycles of elementary school—foreign languages" (*Parâmetros curriculares nacionais—terceiro e quarto ciclos do ensino fundamental—língua estrangeira*) (Secretaria de Educação Fundamental, 1998) heretofore referred to as *Parâmetros*; and (c) an account of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages, the framework adopted by the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) in the document *Estándares* for the implementation of the PNB. The third section, the description of the EN model, will include two main components: (a) a description of the EN model with a timeline of its development; and (b) a description of the main components of the EN model.

## **Responsible English-Language Teaching (ELT)**

I have tried to show how many of us in the English language teaching (ELT) profession may unknowingly contribute to the diffusion of English paradigm mentioned in the first chapter and therefore to the hegemony of English as a foreign language. ELT professionals have usually asked themselves questions regarding *how* to teach English effectively but have seldom asked themselves questions pertaining to *why* they teach English. Being unaware of the interests they serve and of ways in which English could be taught to engage students in a process of empowerment in which they can further *their own* cultural, social, and educational interests, ELT professionals have contributed to the spread of English and to issues of cultural and linguistic invasion.

In order to prevent a situation in which English becomes a hegemonic language and the cultural patterns of English-speaking cultures are set as models to be emulated, I propose a model called “Responsible English-Language Teaching (ELT).” Responsible ELT has three main components: (a) awareness of the hegemony of English (b) critical language-policy research, and (c) resistance to linguistic imperialism. A description of each of the components follows.

### **Awareness of the Hegemony of English**

Pennycook (1995) commented extensively on how English language teachers have fallen prey to viewing the spread of English as natural, neutral and beneficial. Many in the ELT profession see the teaching of English as a good thing, a positive force in the search for peace and understanding. In most ELT conferences their role as English language teachers is never questioned. However, if English teachers are to contribute to

an “ecology of languages” paradigm thus becoming aware of the hegemony of English (aware of the uncontested high status of English as an international language) and if they want to foster their students’ sociopolitical consciousness of this fact, they will have to take a radical turn.

Teaching English as a foreign language in periphery countries, such as Colombia, can no longer be a means of cultural imperialism, i.e., a way to set the cultural characteristics of English-speaking cultures as the model to be followed and reproduced by students learning English as a foreign language. On the contrary, teaching the language of such cultures should be an opportunity to critically question many of the beliefs and characteristics of English-speaking cultures and to critically question many of the beliefs and characteristics of *our own* culture. For instance, the study of English-language expressions such as “wasting/spending time” could be a wonderful opportunity to contrast cultural characteristics and to critically resist some of those cultural practices, rather than just assuming that these ideas are natural, neutral and beneficial suggesting then that students learning English as a foreign language should subscribe to them.

This comparison time is actually one of the features discussed in the Brazilian language-policy document *Parâmetros* (presented in the next section of this chapter) in what the document calls “transversal themes.” Discussions in terms of thematic choices in the teaching and learning of English could include themes such as: “awareness of the dangers of a society that favors consumerism in detriment of personal relationships; respect of human rights (including cultural and linguistic rights); [and] protection of the natural environment” (*Parâmetros*, p. 44). In other words, the teaching and learning of a foreign language can be seen as a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between

language and society and to examine social practices according to how these are understood by discourses not only in other social contexts and languages but also in our own social context and language.

Unfortunately, the prescriptive, aseptic view of language that according to Quintero-Polo (2011) permeates the Colombian document *Estándares*, giving the impression that the target language exists in a vacuum, gives little (if no) space at all for teachers to develop awareness in students of the hegemony of English. In other words, in a prescriptive view of language, it is difficult to discuss how the Colombian culture may be replicating some cultural aspects of English-speaking cultures and how the teaching of English may actually be contributing to this phenomenon.

How aware or not teachers of English are, then, of the unequal distribution of benefits that result from the spread of English is a big question. As Macedo (2006) put it, ESL (and EFL) teachers are seldom aware of their political role:

Most ESL teacher training programs emphasize the technical acquisition of English, and most ESL teachers, even those with good intentions, fall prey to a missionary zeal to save their students from their “non-English-speaker status.” They seldom realize their role in the promotion and expansion of English-language imperialism and racist policies. (Macedo, 2006, p. 210)

According to Macedo, there isn't a single project within the field of ESL (and EFL) which questions the present English hegemony that most ESL teachers reproduce. No project has, for instance, “[incorporated] ethnic and racial diversity and the celebration of languages other than English” (Macedo, 2006, p. 210).

The concept of *linguoracism* (Macedo et al., 2003), which recalls Phillipson's *linguicism*, should be of help when trying to understand why ESL and EFL teachers may be taking such a passive role. By naïvely ignoring their political role in the diffusion and

the spread of English, ESL and EFL teachers may have fallen prey to the idea of the linguistic superiority of English and to their responsibility in “saving” English language learners from their “non-English-speaker status,” a kind of “charitable racism,” according to Macedo, Dendrinos, and Gounari (2003):

[Linguoracism] most accurately names the insidious racism involved in all forms of linguistic imperialism... It entails discursive practices that first construe some languages and communicative behaviors (not necessarily one's own) as superior to all others and then assert that linguistic and cultural purity are a prerequisite for the development and even the survival of a culture. Linguistic hybridity, pluralism, and difference are portrayed as dangerous. (Macedo, Dendrinos & Gounari, 2003, pp. 91-93)

In the first chapter of their book *The Hegemony of English*, Macedo et al. (2003) examine English language education policies in the U.S. by more specifically looking at the English-only movement. An understanding of the English-only movement in the U.S. – what Macedo (2006) has called “the tongue-tying of America” – may help us understand what may be happening in periphery countries such as Colombia in terms of their EFL policies.

In the same vein with Phillipson (1992) and Tollefson (1991), Macedo et al. (2003) have tried to emphasize that language, and therefore language policies, must be analyzed within the social, political, and economic context. In other words, the assumption that language is neutral, that its main function is to allow human beings to communicate, and that language is independent of ideological or political issues, is simply unacceptable. In the context of the U.S. the idea of language neutrality is accompanied by the simplistic ideas of “common culture” and “common language.” Supporters of the view of a common culture in U.S. society argue that the medium by which U.S. citizens gain access to their common culture is the common language, and

that the common language is “standard” English. What supporters of this view fail to see is how this idea of a common culture is actually a means of cultural and linguistic invasion. In the process of having to adjust to a “common” culture and language, cultural and linguistic minorities are forced to cut their cultural and linguistic roots. According to Macedo et al. (2003):

The proposition “common culture” is a euphemism that has been used to describe the imposition of Western dominant culture in order to eliminate, degrade, and devalue any different ethnic/cultural/class characteristics. It is a process through which the dominant social groups attempt to achieve cultural hegemony by imposing a mythical “common language.” (Macedo et al., 2003, p. 38)

Some of the EFL teaching policies in countries from the periphery such as Colombia are supported by the idea of having a “common culture” with economically developed and politically dominant cultures such as the U.S. Learning English, according to the Minister of Education at the time *Estándares* was published, “facilitates access to working and educational opportunities that help improve the quality of life... increases the opportunities to be more competent and competitive” (*Estándares*, 2006, p. 3). Learning English within this view is usually seen as a means of becoming competitive at the global level, as some sort of passport to better quality life.

Through this idea of English acting as a passport to higher cultural, political and economic levels, countries from the periphery may be replicating the false assumption of an ideal “common culture” and may be ignoring their own cultural and linguistic diversity. What about, for instance, the languages (and cultures) of those 80 different ethnic groups in Colombia? Macedo et al. (2003) comment on the false idea that the English language works as a passport which gives access to higher cultural, political, and economic levels of society. As Macedo et al. (2003) have well pointed out: the

association of English with success is misleading. Even inside the U.S., “the fact that approximately 30 million African-Americans speak English as their mother tongue did not prevent the vast majority of them from being relegated to ghetto existence, economic deprivation and, in some cases, to the status of sub-humans” (Macedo et al, 2003, p. 16).

Conversely, if foreign language education in periphery countries is equated exclusively with the learning of English, what guarantees that low socioeconomic students or students in impoverished regions of those countries will use English as a passport to higher cultural, political, and economic levels of their society? Instead, couldn't these EFL policies that privilege English over any other foreign language be understood as a more sophisticated, contemporary form of linguistic colonialism and cultural invasion? Given the high-status of English, couldn't these efforts to enforce the teaching of English as a foreign language in periphery countries be contributing to some sort of cultural invasion in which English is a privileged tool “with its monopoly of the Internet, international commerce, the dissemination of the celluloid culture, and its role in the Disneyfication of world cultures” (Macedo et al., 2003, pp. 16-17)? There are, as we can see, many important questions that ESL and EFL educators should contemplate if they are to become aware of their imminently political role and want to foster their students' sociopolitical consciousness regarding the hegemony of English.

Walsh (1991) has referred to “critical bilingualism” as “the ability to not just speak two languages but to be conscious of the socio-cultural, political and ideological contexts in which the languages operate” (Walsh, 1991). Teachers and students' awareness of the hegemony of English would definitely consider the socio-cultural,

political and ideological contexts in which English operates. Thus, “Responsible ELT” aims for critical bilingualism.

### **Critical Language-Policy Research**

The second component of Responsible ELT is adapted from Tollefson’s (2006) concept of critical language-policy research. According to Tollefson, a critical language-policy approach to language-policy research would ask questions such as the following:

- How do language policies in schools create inequalities among learners?
- How do policies marginalize some students while granting privilege to others?
- How are local policies and programs in language education affected by global processes such as colonialism, decolonization, the spread of English, and the growth of the integrated capitalist economy? (Tollefson, 2002).

Unfortunately, not all ELT specialists are prone to asking themselves these questions.

Teaching English while taking into account the concept of “critical language-policy research” means being informed of the language policies within the teaching context. In the case of the Colombian context, there has been a tendency of Colombian teachers and administrators to misinterpret the policy dictated by the 1994 General Law of Education (which mandates the teaching of *a foreign language* starting at the elementary level) as a mandate to teach *English*. It must be said that nowhere in that law does the word “English” appear.

The law states, under Article 21, the specific objectives of basic elementary education. Among these objectives, we find: “the acquisition of elements of conversation and reading in at least one *foreign language* , [...] the understanding of and ability to express oneself in a *foreign language* “ (1994 General Law of Education, pp. 7-8).<sup>4</sup> Teachers and administrators who, like many Colombian teachers and administrators, are misinformed of language teaching policies in a specific context are misleading students by feeding the myth that English is *the* “universal language.”

What I argue in this case is that *the way* in which the teaching of English is implemented in Colombia, by ineffectively getting students to reach certain proficiency standards, has little to do with students’ actual experiences of English, with their attitudes towards it, and with their use of that language as a means of empowerment. On the other hand, the way English is enforced as the only foreign language option in the country may actually end up turning students away from their critical engagement in learning English. If, as Tollefson (1991) argues, language can become a gatekeeper for employment and higher education and thus a powerful tool for sustaining inequality, we may realize the actual harm that language-policy disinformation (and deformation) may end up causing: Learning English is crucial in order to pursue a higher education or to get a better job. However, because it has been mandated (and we’re not sure by whom?), students may end up not wanting to learn it. Thus, the result may be that social inequality and the hegemony of English are maintained.

A critical language-policy lens to ELT in the Colombian context would ask questions such as the ones presented in this study:

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<sup>4</sup> My translation and emphasis.

- Why were standards developed for the teaching of English as a foreign language in Colombia (and only for the teaching of English)?
- Why was the Common European Framework of Reference for languages chosen as the framework on which to formulate those standards?
- What exactly is the Common European Framework of Reference for languages and what exactly was used in the document *Estándares*?

In other words, responsible EFL teachers in Colombia would ask themselves questions regarding whose interests are served by the language policies that they are helping to implement. Here, again, asking ourselves *why* we teach English is more important than *how* we can teach it more effectively and, in my opinion, a very important pre-requisite.

### **Resistance to Linguistic Imperialism**

The third component in the model of Responsible ELT, resistance to linguistic imperialism, is an adaptation of the concept of “resistance” developed by Canagarajah (1999) in his ethnographic study of English teaching and learning in Sri Lanka called *Resisting Imperialism in English Teaching*. Canagarajah’s (1999) resistance model of English teaching, as opposed to reproduction models, which see students conditioned to serve the dominant social institutions and groups, has two main characteristics: (a) it calls for micro-social perspectives in English language teaching (ELT) and (b) it is carried out (initiated and conducted) by periphery scholars.

These two characteristics constitute a critique of Phillipson’s (1992) macro-social perspective, as described in Phillipson’s *Linguistic Imperialism*. Although Phillipson’s

book is a critique of the global spread of English and ELT, according to Canagarajah, Phillipson's critique is too deterministic. On the one hand, the dominance of English is maintained by pre-existing structural inequalities. ELT is, in this sense, situated in the macro-societal theoretical perspective. Canagarajah (1999), on the other hand, sees the dominance of English not only as a *result* of political and economic inequalities between the center and periphery, but also as a *cause* of these inequalities. Thus, Canagarajah's model emphasizes a micro-social perspective that looks at the individual, the local, the particular:

It is important to find out how linguistic hegemony is experienced in the day-to-day life of the people and communities in the periphery. How does English compete for dominance with other languages in the streets, markets, homes, schools, and villages of periphery communities? How does English infiltrate the hearts and minds of the people there? What is missing, then, is a micro-social perspective – the lived culture and every day experience of periphery communities. (pp. 41-42).

On the other hand, says Canagarajah, the analysis of the hegemony of English carried out by Phillipson is developed from interviews with personnel and agencies from the center who implement this domination. The question in this second aspect of the resistance model is this: How can one find out about linguistic imperialism in the periphery from the very personnel and agencies from the periphery?

Canagarajah (1999) sees the ESL classroom itself as a site of resistance against the values and pedagogical practices from the center. Another important question for a resistance model such as the one proposed by Canagarajah is how English can “be learned and used to empower the local communities, or to further their own cultural, social, and educational interests” (p.42). Thus, teaching English as a foreign language taking into account the concept of “resistance” means giving students the sociolinguistic

tools to engage them in a process of empowerment in which they can further *their own* cultural, social, and educational interests.

In line with Canagarajah's resistance model, which calls for micro-social perspectives in ELT and is carried out by periphery scholars, I will, in the analysis of the data in the following chapter, try to determine to what degree the school where this case study was carried out implements the three aforementioned elements of Responsible ELT.

### **Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB)**

#### **Colombia's Context of Foreign Language Teaching up to the Implementation of the PNB**

The following account of the foreign language teaching context and, more specifically, of the English-language teaching context in Colombia is mostly based on Vélez-Rendón's (2003) article "English in Colombia: a sociolinguistic profile" as it is probably the most complete historical description of the role of English in Colombian society. According to Vélez-Rendón, the early twentieth century marks the beginning of the hegemony of the United States in Latin America (and, as a result, of American English in Colombia, as well) with President Roosevelt's announcement to the Europeans in 1904 that the region was uniquely part of the U.S. sphere of influence. The dominance of American English in the country was accentuated after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 when the Alliance for Progress and the Peace Corps were established. Until then, Latin and French had enjoyed an undisputed position in school curricula, but they began to be displaced by English in the subsequent decades (Vélez-Rendón, 2003).

The sixties, seventies and eighties saw the growth of the English language in Colombia, and the nineties saw its heyday. The globalization of communications and the information revolution have contributed to the spread of English in the country and to the growing consensus that the English language has a role to play in Colombia's advancement in the international arena. Therefore, educational policies and programs give a prominent position to English in the school curriculum. The English language teaching industry has also grown with the proliferation of English teaching centers that offer an alternative to the traditional Colombo American Center (Centro Colombo Americano) located in the major cities.

The study of a foreign language in Colombia is mandatory at the secondary and university levels and, after the 1994 General Law of Education, it has been extended to the elementary level. English is the most widely taught foreign language followed by French. Although schools have the autonomy to decide which language to teach, English has been the language of choice for most schools. At the university level, most programs require at least three semesters of foreign language instruction. Although the range of languages includes French, German, Italian, or Japanese, among others, most universities offer only English. Some private universities have recently established an English language requirement for graduation in which students must demonstrate a minimum proficiency level through tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Michigan Test.

Vélez-Rendón (2003) has commented on how the 1994 General Law of Education, which mandates the teaching of a foreign language starting at the primary level, has been interpreted by many as teaching only English:

Although the decree literally reads ‘Understanding and being able to express oneself in a *foreign language*’ (Ley 115 de 1994: 28; my translation and emphasis), teaching a foreign language in Colombia has come to mean teaching English to most people involved in the language teaching profession. (Vélez-Rendón, 2003, p. 190)

Statements such as (a) “Now that the teaching of English has become mandatory in the school curriculum...” (Escorcia de A, et al., 1995, cited in Vélez-Rendón, 2003); (b) “The General Law of Education emphasizes the importance of English and mandates its teaching starting at the elementary level (Silva, 1996, cited in Vélez-Rendón, 2003); and (c) “the need to train non EFL major teachers to teach English in the elementary school level, as required by a new national law” (Gonzalez, 1996, cited by Vélez-Rendón, 2003) are examples of how the 1994 General Law of Education has been misinterpreted regarding the teaching of a foreign language in elementary.

Vélez-Rendón (2003) refers to the partnership that the Ministry of Education started with the British Council in 1991. The COFE Project (Colombian Framework for English) that resulted from this partnership set out to survey the state of the art of language teacher education in Colombia in 29 of the 31 universities offering teacher education programs in the country (Vélez-Rendón, 2003). Although a 1997 evaluation of the project reported significant improvements in language teacher education programs, one of the main criticisms was that the focus of the project was on pre-service programs and that in-service training was neglected.

Another area of concern regarding foreign language education in the country is the widening gap between private and public education. After the 1994 General Law of Education mandated the teaching of a foreign language at the elementary level, public schools have had to rely on general subject area teachers who may not know English to

teach it whereas private schools have hired specialists for the job long before the law was passed. Thus, as Vélez-Rendón (2003) explained, students in public schools “are exposed to methodologies emphasizing rote learning, repetition and memorization, which inevitably result in students’ failure to cope with a simple communicative situation after several years of classroom instruction” (Vélez-Rendón, 2003, p. 191). In other words, the level of proficiency achieved by students in private schools is very different from the level of proficiency achieved by students in public schools.

Another project started by the Ministry of Education to improve the situation of English-language teaching in the country was the Program of Bilingualism and Information Technology. Launched in 1997, this program aimed at integrating English-language teaching with the use of technology and thus improving the field of English-language education. The program targeted 1,600 public and technical high schools providing them with computer labs for English-language development. It also provided three-month training courses for 1,600 English teachers in the United States and Canada, where they would develop not only their language skills but also their technological skills.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education together with the British Council in Colombia formulated the National Bilingual Program (*Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo*, or PNB) to improve the context of English-language teaching and learning in the country. In 2006 the document *Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés*, or “Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English” was published. The document adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for languages as the framework used to describe the standards of competences in English. The PNB

established that by the year 2019 students graduating from Colombian schools will be bilingual in Spanish and English at the intermediate level. The year 2019 was determined as part of a series of objectives in a document called “Visión Colombia 2019” in which objectives were set in several areas including education for the year in which Colombia will celebrate its 200 years of independence from Spanish rule.

Table 3 below shows some of the most important dates in the development of foreign language education in Colombia.

*Table 3: Timeline of important dates in foreign language education in Colombia*

<b>Year</b>	<b>What happened</b>
<b>1991</b>	The new Colombian Constitution establishes Spanish as the official language of Colombia and the languages and dialects of ethnic groups as official languages in their territories. The law also mandates that in regions where people speak indigenous languages, schooling be bilingual.
	The Ministry of Education and the British Council in Colombia start their partnership in the COFE Project (Colombian Framework for English).
<b>1994</b>	The General Law of Education mandates the teaching of a foreign language starting at the primary school level.
<b>1997</b>	The Program of Bilingualism and Information Technology is launched to integrate English-language teaching with the use of technology.
<b>2004</b>	The Ministry of Education and the British Council in Colombia formulate the National Bilingual Program ( <i>Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo</i> , PNB) and adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as the framework used to improve the context of English-language teaching and learning in the country.
<b>2006</b>	The document “Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English” is published to introduce the standards of competences in English.

### **A Comparison of Colombia’s *Estándares* and Brazil’s *Parâmetros***

There are several reasons why I decided to compare the Colombian document *Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés* or “Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English” heretofore referred to as *Estándares* and

the Brazilian document *Parâmetros curriculares nacionais—terceiro e quarto ciclos do ensino fundamental—lingua estrangeira* or “National curriculum parameters—third and fourth cycles of elementary school—foreign languages” heretofore referred to as *Parâmetros*. First, Brazil is the largest country with the greatest number of native speakers of a language different from Spanish in South America: Portuguese is spoken in Brazil, whereas most countries in South America speak Spanish (with a few exceptions such as Suriname, French Guiana and Guyana). Second, Portuguese is the sixth most spoken language in the world and the second Romance language with the most number of native speakers (203 million) after Spanish (414million) (<http://www.ethnologue.com/statistics/size>). Third, Brazilian language policy, maybe due to the influence of critical theorists in the field of education within the country, has highlighted the *discourse* aspects of foreign language teaching and learning as opposed to the purely *grammatical* (“neutral”) aspects of foreign language teaching and learning, as we will see in the document *Parâmetros*.

Thus, on the one hand, I examined the policies described in a document from a country in South America that speaks a different language from Spanish with a significant population of speakers. On the other hand, I was able to compare and contrast the policies dictated by the Colombian and Brazilian documents. After my analysis, I could determine that the policies of the Colombian document focused on the achievement of standards of competences in English whereas the policies dictated by the Brazilian document conceived foreign language teaching and learning as a process that (a) highlights the role of language in the construction of citizenship, and (b) gives the opportunity to discuss the relationship between language and society. Through the

analysis that follows I will demonstrate how the policies described in the *Parâmetros* are more in tune with the model of “Responsible ELT” described in the first section of this chapter.

The comparison that follows will examine the two documents in terms of their views of (a) language, (b) foreign language, (c) foreign language learning, and (d) foreign language teaching.

### **View of Language.**

*Estándares*. The complete title of the Colombian document is “Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English – Teaching in foreign languages: English, the challenge!” (*Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés – Formar en lenguas extranjeras: inglés ¡el reto!*). At least two comments should be made after this title. First, from the actual title, language is seen as a competence, a skill to be developed. The goal, according to the document, is “to develop communicative competence [which includes]: linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, and sociolinguistic competence” (pp. 11-12).<sup>5</sup> Second, such a title would suggest that there are other documents dealing with standards of competences in other foreign languages in the country. However, this is the only document dealing with standards of competences in a foreign language, thereby implying that English is the foreign language of choice in the country.

In *Estándares*, each of the communicative competences is defined, as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> All translations from the Colombian document *Estándares* are mine.

Linguistic competence refers to the knowledge of the formal resources of language as a system and to the ability to use them in the formulation of well-formed and significant messages. (p. 11)

Pragmatic competence comprises, on the one hand, a discursive competence... the ability to organize sentences in sequences in order to produce textual fragments. On the other hand, a functional competence, in order to know not only the linguistic forms and their functions but also the way these are joined in real communicative situations. (p. 12)

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the knowledge of social and cultural conditions which are implicit in the use of language. For example, [language] is used to deal with norms of courtesy and other rules which determine the relations between generations, genders, classes and social groups. (p. 12)

Section 5 of the document, *La estructura de los estándares* or “The structure of the standards,” explains how the standards should be read horizontally and vertically. This section highlights that there are two kinds of skills: comprehension skills and production skills. Comprehension skills are divided in listening and reading skills. Production skills are divided in writing, monologues, and conversation skills. After the description of the standards on each of these skills, there is a number: 1, 2, or 3. These numbers refer to each of the communicative competences mentioned before: linguistic competence (1), pragmatic competence (2), and sociolinguistic competence (3). A standard may refer to one or a couple of these competences and thus one or two numbers may appear after each standard.

Table 4 below offers an example of how the standards are described horizontally and vertically<sup>6</sup>:

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<sup>6</sup> My translation.

Table 4: How standards are described in the document *Estándares*

Listening	Reading	Writing	Monologues	Conversation
I notice when I'm spoken to in English and react verbally and non-verbally. 2,3	I identify related words about familiar topics. 1,2	I copy and transcribe words that I understand and use frequently in the classroom. 1	I recite and sing rhymes, poems and tongue-twisters that I understand with the appropriate rhythm and intonation. 1,3	I respond to greetings and goodbyes. 2

1=Linguistic competence; 2=Pragmatic competence; 3=Sociolinguistic competence

The collection of standards is organized according to grades, which correspond to a certain level of English proficiency: First grade to third grade is beginner's level; fourth grade to fifth grade is basic 1 level; sixth grade to seventh grade is basic 2 level; eighth grade to ninth grade is pre-intermediate 1 level; and tenth to eleventh grade is pre-intermediate 2 level. As it has been said, these levels were adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2014).

Table 5 below is presented in the document *Estándares* showing how the Ministry of Education adopted and named the different levels of the CEFR for the Colombian population. A more detailed examination of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) is offered in the next section of this chapter.

Table 5: Adaptation of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels by the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN)

CEFR level	Name of the level in Colombia	Grades in which the level will be developed	Educational goals for 2019
A1	Beginner	first to third grade	
A2	Basic	fourth to seventh grade	
B1	Pre-intermediate	eighth to eleventh grade	Minimum expected level for high-school graduates
B2	Intermediate	higher education	Minimum level for English teachers and other career professionals
C1	Pre-advanced		Minimum level for graduates of language teaching programs
C2	Advanced		

Álvaro Quintero-Polo (2012), president of the Colombian Association of Teachers of English (ASOCOPI), addressed the view of language held by *Estándares* in his presentation called “English as a Neutral Language: A Dominance and Exclusion Instrument” at the 2012 TESOL International Conference. Quintero-Polo refers to the view of language as neutral expressed in *Estándares* as (a) a prescriptive approach to language use, (b) a denotative function, and (c) supportive of uniformity (as opposed to supportive of social/individual variety).

First, the approach to language use, he said, is prescriptive because language is seen as a “set of fixed rules.” The subtitle of the document indicates that these basic standards of competences in English are “what we need to know and know how to do.” Second, he noted that the view of language held in this document has a denotative function. English is used to refer to the world in the “unproblematic way,” which is characteristic of textbooks published by the English industry detached from the local reality of the country. A denotative function of language privileges form over content and imposes, with the help of the ESL/EFL industry, an “aseptic portrayal of English,” according to Quintero-Polo. Finally, he noted that the view of language held by *Estándares* supports uniformity because the language variety that Colombian students would learn is conceived in a vacuum, in a pure state, free of influences. According to Quintero-Polo, the variety of English to be learned by Colombian students is seen as residing in the ideal speaker represented in textbooks published by the English teaching industry. Moreover, the linguistic uniformity of this language variety perpetuates a view of the world in which students are consumers of information and rules, and in which there is no critical examination of social practices, said Quintero-Polo.

In short, the view of language expressed in *Estándares* perpetuates the vision of language as neutral. As I have mentioned in my description of the model of “Responsible ELT,” such view of language as neutral and of the spread of the English language as natural, neutral, and beneficial has been contested by scholars like Pennycook (1995). According to Pennycook, such view of language has been a disservice to people in the English language teaching profession: “most people in English language teaching have been poorly served by academic work that fails to address a far more diverse range of questions that might encourage a reassessment of our role as teachers of English in the world” (Pennycook, 1995, p. 38).

*Parâmetros*. The introduction of the Brazilian document expresses a different view of language from that of the Colombian document. The view of language in the Brazilian document is a “socio-interactional” view of language:

Two theoretical issues anchor the Foreign Language parameters: a socio-interactional view of language and learning. The socio-interactional view of language indicates that when people engage in discourse, people consider those to whom they address (or those who addressed them) in the social construction of meaning. In this process, a key issue is the positioning (*posicionamento*) of people in the institution, in the culture, and in history. (p. 15)<sup>7</sup>

According to *Parâmetros*, the socio-interactional view of learning has to do with the social nature of cognitive processes that arise from the interaction between a student and a more competent partner. The document points out how in the classroom this interaction has an asymmetrical quality which may pose difficulties in the construction of knowledge: “Thus, it is important that the teacher learn to share his/her power and give

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<sup>7</sup> All translations from the Brazilian document *Parâmetros* are mine.

the student a voice, so that the student can become a subject of discourse and, therefore, a subject of learning” (p. 15).

In the section called *Caracterização do Objeto de Ensino: Língua Estrangeira* or “Description of the Object of Learning: Foreign Language”, under the headline “The socio-interactional nature of language,” the social construction of meaning through language, and more specifically through *discourse* is mentioned once again: “All meaning is dialogical; i.e., it is constructed by the participants in discourse” (p. 27). Discourse is defined in a footnote: “*Discourse* is a conception of language as a social practice... which considers not only the conditions of production, but also the conditions of interpretation” (p. 27). There is in this document, as we can see, an emphasis on how people interpret language and how meaning is constructed:

The process of the construction of meaning results from how people use language and is determined by the moment lived (the history) and the spaces in which people act (cultural and institutional contexts)... Therefore, meanings are not in texts: they are constructed by the participants in the social world: readers, writers, listeners, and speakers. (p. 32)

There is, finally, an awareness of the political nature of language: “the political projects, the beliefs, and the values of the participants in discourse are intrinsic to processes of language use... Being aware of those processes is the first step in the construction of a more egalitarian society” (p. 28).

The importance of language seen as participation in (socio-interactional) discourse seems to determine the moment in which a foreign language is learned. In contrast to the Colombian document, in which the teaching and learning of English starts in first grade, the Brazilian document suggests that the process of learning a foreign

language should start in fifth grade. There is a reason given, which has to do with learners being aware of their belonging to different “discourse communities”:

In fifth grade, the child is already a competent speaker of his/her native language in the discourse communities in which s/he participates at home or at play with friends outside the home and in other discourse communities.... In short, the student already knows a lot about his/her mother tongue and about how to use it. In other words, s/he knows a lot about language. (p. 28)

Phillipson (1992) refers to the idea that “the earlier English is taught the better the results” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 199) as one of the tenets of the English language teaching (ELT) profession. According to Phillipson, many of the ELT tenets were established in the conference report of the Commonwealth Conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language, held at the University of Makerere, Uganda in 1961. Among others, the Makerere conference report spread the idea that English could provide equality of opportunity and access “to what a wider international society has to offer” (Makerere Report, 1961, cited in Phillipson, 1992, p. 201). Actually, Phillipson traces the neutral view of the English language held by many in the ELT profession to that seminal report.

The criticism of Phillipson to the idea that “the earlier the English is taught the better the results” is based on the fact that the report seems to dichotomize between “English and technologically based progress on the one hand, and other languages and traditionalism on the other” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 202). Says the report:

Where a community has decided to participate as speedily as possible in the technological and other advantages of a wider society, a decision to use English as a medium is likely to be inevitable, and the pressure to introduce it fairly early may well be heavy. A society which lays more stress on the preservation of a traditional way of life will not introduce English as a medium until later in the school life of the child. (Makerere Report, 1961, cited in Phillipson, 1992, p. 202)

What the report seems to ignore, according to Phillipson, is the fact that students with a solid grounding in their mother tongue, who have already learned to use the language for analytical and critical purposes, may be well prepared to learn English at a later stage. This is precisely what the Brazilian document seems to emphasize and what the Colombian document overlooks on the push to have English be taught from first grade at the elementary level.

***View of Foreign Language.***

*Estándares.* As discussed earlier, although the name of the Colombian document, “Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English,” would suggest that this is one in a series of documents devoted to the standards of competences in foreign languages, this is *the only* document published by the MEN regarding foreign language education and, thus, we could say that English is the only option of foreign language addressed by the MEN. As a matter of fact, as the subtitle of the document clearly indicates, the teaching of English is seen as the big challenge: “Teaching in Foreign Languages: English – The Challenge!”

In the section regarding key concepts in the PNB, called *Algunos conceptos clave en el Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* or “Some key concepts in the National Bilingual Program,” English is seen as the “universal language” and therefore teaching it as a foreign language in the Colombian context is justified:

In the Colombian context and for the purpose of this proposal, English is a foreign language. Given its importance as the universal language, the Ministry of Education has established, as one of its policies, improving the quality of English teaching in the country, in order to achieve better levels of performance in this language. (p. 5)

The section which discusses why it is important to teach English in Colombia, *¿Por qué enseñar inglés en Colombia?* Or “Why teach English in Colombia?” starts with a translation into Spanish of a quote of Crystal (1998) from his book *English as a Global Language*, which reads: “There has never been a time in which so many nations have needed to talk with each other. There has never been a time in which so many people have wanted to travel to so many places... And the need for a global language has never been as urgent”<sup>8</sup> (p. 7).

In the same section of the document, some of the main objectives of the General Law of Education in Colombia are quoted: “The acquisition of elements of conversation and reading in at least one foreign language” and “The understanding and ability to express oneself in a foreign language” (p. 7). Again, as stated earlier, I have shown how these statements have been misinterpreted by many as the requirement to teach *English* at an early level. *Estándares* may have actually contributed to the widely held notion that English is the foreign language of choice in the country. According to the document, most of the educational institutions in Colombia have opted to teach English as a foreign language: “Based on the law [the General Law of Education] and in exercise of their autonomy, the great majority of Colombian educational institutions *have opted* to offer their students the opportunity of learning English as a foreign language” [emphasis added] (p. 7).

*Parâmetros*. The Brazilian document contains a section called *Papel da Área de Língua Estrangeira no Ensino Fundamental diante da Construção da Cidadania* or “The Role of the Foreign Language Area in the Construction of Citizenship in Elementary

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<sup>8</sup> My translation.

School”. This section begins by referring to how the Brazilian law called *Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional*, finally passed in 1996, made the teaching of a foreign language obligatory from fifth grade onwards. According to *Parâmetros*, it is no longer the *inclusion* of a foreign language that is discussed in the law but, instead, the *choice* of a foreign language:

It is understood that “within the possibilities of the institution” refers to the choice of language (in the hands of the community) and not to the inclusion of a foreign language, now that the teaching of a foreign language is mandatory in the school curriculum. (p. 37)

In the same section of the document, after the subsections “Educational Perspective” and “Pragmatic Perspective” (of the inclusion of a foreign language in the curriculum), there are three subsections that clearly reveal a critical view of the role of a foreign language in the school curriculum: “Foreign Language and social exclusion,” “Foreign Language as liberation,” and “English as a hegemonic foreign language.” The following are some quotes from each of these subsections:

At the same time that language can perform the role of progress and development promoter, it can affect the relations between different groups in a country, valuing the abilities of some groups and devaluing the abilities of other groups. (“Foreign language and social exclusion” p. 39)

Learning a foreign language enhances perception and, in opening the door to the world, it not only fosters access to information but also turns the individuals and, consequently, the countries, more well-known in the world. This is a vision of the teaching of a foreign language as liberation of individuals and countries. (“Foreign language as liberation” p. 39)

As long as there is *critical awareness* of the hegemonic role of English in international exchanges, learning English can help in the formulation of counter-discourses in relation to the inequalities among countries and social groups. Thus, individuals turn from mere passive consumers of culture and knowledge to active creators: using a foreign language is a way of acting in the world to transform it. The absence of this *critical awareness* in the process of teaching and learning

English, however, contributes to maintaining rather than transforming the status quo. (“English as a hegemonic foreign language” p. 40, emphasis added)

The section called “The Role of the Foreign Language Area in the Construction of Citizenship” ends by briefly stating the relationship between foreign language learning and the construction of citizenship:

Learning a foreign language involves a complex process of reflection on the social, political and economic reality in the process that leads to liberation. In other words, learning a foreign language is part of the construction of citizenship” (p. 41).

As it has been said, what is more important for Brazilians after the new law of 1996 is the choice of foreign language to be taught. The section called *Cr terios para Inclus o de L nguas Estrangeiras no Curr culo* or “Criteria for the Inclusion of Foreign Languages in the Curriculum,” determines the ways in which that choice is to be made:

One issue that needs to be discussed is which foreign language, or languages, is/are to be included in the curriculum. At least three factors should be considered: historical factors, factors related to local communities, and factors related to tradition. (p. 22).

In the explanation of the historical factors it is mentioned how the learning of a certain language is more relevant according to the moment in history. This relevance, the document says, is “frequently determined by the *hegemonic role* [emphasis added] of that language in international exchanges” (p. 23). The examples given are the influence of English from World War II on to the globalized and technological world at the end of the twentieth century and the growing influence of Spanish due to the economic exchange among the nations of Mercosul, the free trade agreement among Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

The factors related to the community have to do with situations in which local communities live together with immigrant or indigenous communities. The coexistence of these groups “can be a criterion for the inclusion of a certain language in the school curriculum”

(p. 23). Finally, the factors related to tradition have to do with “the role that certain foreign languages have performed in the cultural relations among countries” (p. 23). The example given in this case is the role that French has performed in cultural exchanges between Brazil and France.

In sum, in the Colombian document there is no choice of foreign language in the school curriculum. English is seen as “the universal language” and the teaching of English is seen as “the challenge.” Therefore, English is usually the foreign language taught in schools. In the Brazilian document, on the other hand, the choice of foreign language is in the hands of the community and is determined at least by three criteria: historical factors, local community factors, and tradition factors. In other words, in the Brazilian document there is critical awareness of the hegemonic role of English as a foreign language, which is essential in the teaching and learning of English if individuals are to take an active role in the transformation of the status quo. This critical view of English is totally absent from the Colombian document, which unknowingly supports the hegemony of English by never questioning the universality of English.

### ***View of Foreign Language Learning.***

*Estándares.* As said before, the Colombian document sees language as a series of skills and competences that should be learned. The subtitle of the document reads: “What

we need to know and need to know how to do.” Thus, for the purpose of learning a foreign language standards are described for groups of grades: first grade to third; fourth to fifth; sixth to seventh; eighth to ninth; and tenth to eleventh. Each group of grades corresponds to a proficiency level determined by the Common European Framework. The process for the organization of the standards is described in the section called *Fundamentos que subyacen a la organización de los estándares* or “Fundamentals underlying the organization of the standards”:

We started with the different **proficiency levels** that must be reached along the process of learning and then established the **required competences**... What students must know and must know how to do in the language by the end of each group of grades has been established. A specific level of proficiency, homologous to the goals of the Ministry of Education and the levels of the Common European Framework, has also been defined.  
(p. 10)

The purpose of learning English as a foreign language is defined in *Estándares* in an introductory letter from the Ministry of Education at the time, Cecilia María Vélez White:

Having a good level of English facilitates access to working and educational opportunities that help improve the quality of life. Being competent in another language is essential in the globalized world... Being bilingual increases the opportunities to be more competent and competitive. (p. 3)

According to this letter, the standards described in the document constitute a fundamental orientation to

reach the goal established in the *Documento Visión Colombia 2019*, [which] establishes that students in eleventh grade should reach an intermediate level of competence in English (Level B1, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*), which allows them to communicate in the language, possess knowledge and use it effectively in real situations of communication. (p. 3)

The rationale for learning English in Colombia is clearly defined in the section of the document called *¿Por qué enseñar inglés en Colombia?* or “Why teach English in Colombia?”:

The current world is characterized by intercultural communication, the growing rhythm of scientific and technological advances, and internationalization processes. These circumstances pose the need of a common language that allows the international society to have access to this new globalized world. (p. 7)

In the same section, in the subsection called *El aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera y su relación con el desarrollo personal* or “Learning a foreign language and its relation to personal development,” some of the benefits of students learning a foreign language are listed. Some of the listed contributions to students’ personal development are:

- [Learning a foreign language] diminishes ethnocentrism and allows individuals to appreciate and respect the worth of their own world while developing respect for other cultures.
- [Learning a foreign language] helps students in the practice of social interaction and the negotiation of meanings.
- Individuals are more aware of how they learn.
- Individuals develop linguistic and metalinguistic awareness. (p. 8)

In the same section, more specific reasons of why English should be learned are listed:

- English is the most widespread international language.
- [English] stimulates the student to open his/her mind and accept and understand new cultures.
- [English] allows access to scholarships and internships outside the country.
- [English] offers more and better job opportunities.
- [English] allows the exchange of knowledge and experiences with other countries whose official language is not English, because English allows people to communicate through a common and widespread language. (p. 9)

*Parâmetros*. In the section of the *Parâmetros* document called *Apresentação* or “Introduction”, signed by the Brazilian Secretary of Education at the time, it reads:

Learning a Foreign Language is a way of increasing the student’s self-awareness as a human being and as a citizen. Therefore, learning a Foreign Language should

focus on the learner's engagement in discourse, i.e., in the student's ability to engage himself and engage others in discourse in order to act in the social world.

In order for this to happen, learning a foreign language should be guided by the *social role* of such knowledge in Brazilian society. Although different communicative skills according to the specific role of some foreign languages and to the existing conditions in the school context may be considered, such purpose is mainly related to the use of Foreign Language in reading. Besides, within a policy of linguistic pluralism, three factors should be considered in order to guide the inclusion of a specific foreign language in the school curriculum: factors related to history, local communities, and tradition.

(p. 15, emphasis added)

As we can see, *engagement in discourse* is prioritized in this document as opposed to the language *skills and competences* prioritized in the Colombian document and the social role or use of the foreign language is what guides its inclusion in the school curriculum. Reading a foreign language seems to be the main use of a foreign language in Brazilian society. The section called *A justificativa social para a inclusão de Língua Estrangeira no ensino fundamental* or “Social justification for the inclusion of a Foreign Language in Elementary School” explains the main use of foreign languages in Brazilian society:

The inclusion of any area in the school curriculum should be determined, among other things, by the role performed by the area in society. In regards to a foreign language, this requires some reflection on the actual use of the foreign language by the population. In Brazil, with the exception of Spanish in the context of national frontiers and of some languages in communities of immigrants (Polish, German, Italian, etc.) and indigenous groups, only a small portion of the population has the opportunity to use foreign languages for oral communication inside or outside the country.

Therefore, focusing the teaching of a foreign language on the development of oral skills does not take into account the criterion of social relevance for learning a foreign language. The use of a foreign language seems to be, in general, related to the reading of literature for technical purposes or for leisure. The only formal exams in Foreign Language (...) require knowledge of reading in a foreign language. Therefore, on the one hand, reading a foreign language has to do with the student's formal education needs and, on the other hand, with the student's use of the foreign language in his/her immediate social context. (p. 20)

Some of the benefits of learning a foreign language are mentioned in the document:

In general terms, learning a Foreign Language will:

- Increase the student's knowledge of his/her mother language through comparisons in different levels with the foreign language;
- Allow the student to become a discursive being in the use of a foreign language by involving himself/herself in processes of meaning-making in that language. (pp. 28-29)

As mentioned earlier, learning a foreign language in Brazil is seen as a key component in the construction of citizenship. In the section called *Papel da Área de Língua Estrangeira no Ensino Fundamental diante da Construção da Cidadania* or "The Role of the Foreign Language Area in the Construction of Citizenship in Elementary School," in the subsection called *Perspectiva educacional* or "Educational perspective," the benefits of learning a foreign language are summarized:

Learning a Foreign Language contributes to the educational process as a whole, going far beyond the acquisition of a series of linguistic skills. It provides a new perception of the nature of language; it increases understanding of how language works and develops awareness of how the mother tongue functions. At the same time, while promoting an appreciation of other cultures' customs and values, it contributes to develop the perception of one's culture through the understanding of foreign culture(s). (p. 37)

### ***View of Foreign Language Teaching.***

*Estándares.* In the "open letter" that the Minister of Education at the time writes to introduce the document, she is aware that the goals established by the PNB can only be reached "if we have convinced teachers who are able to bring students to communicate in English" (p. 3). The main goal of the PNB is "to have citizens who are able to communicate in English with international standards, so that they can introduce the country in the processes of universal communication, the global economy and cultural openness" (p. 6).

In order to reach that goal, the document speaks of the need “to adopt a common language that would establish the goals in terms of proficiency levels in English throughout the different stages of the educational process” (p. 6). Thus, the document says, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was adopted. Table 5 above (see p. 37 of this dissertation) shows how the Ministry of Education adopted and named the different levels of the CEFR for the Colombian population. As we can see, one of the main goals for the year 2019 is to have high-school graduates in that year reach the intermediate level of English proficiency, which corresponds to level B1 in the CEFR.

*Parâmetros.* The letter where the parameters are introduced by the Brazilian Secretary of Education at the time points out the main themes of the proposal to have foreign language parameters: citizenship, critical awareness of language, and sociopolitical aspects of foreign language learning. These three themes are described and highlighted throughout the document.

The section called *A justificativa social para a inclusão de Língua Estrangeira no ensino fundamental* or “Social justification for the inclusion of a Foreign Language in Elementary School” stresses how the main criterion to consider the inclusion of a foreign language in elementary school is “the social relevance of learning it” (p. 20). Reading in the foreign language seems to be emphasized socially:

With the exception of a few specific touris regions or plurilingual communities, the use of a foreign language seems to be generally linked to reading for technical purposes or for leisure. Also, the only formal exams of foreign language proficiency require reading proficiency. Therefore, reading in a foreign language

serves the needs of formal education on the one hand, and on the other hand, it is the skill that the student can use in his/her immediate social context. (p. 20)

Using the metaphor of focus and lenses, the section called *Os focos do ensino: A metáfora das lentes de uma máquina fotográfica* or “The focuses of teaching: The metaphor of the lenses of a camera” explains how although the main focus is on teaching and learning how to read, there are wide angle lenses that will give an opportunity to have significant communicative experiences in the foreign language:

The focus on reading does not exclude the possibility of having spaces in the program to provide the student with an understanding and memorization of song lyrics, of idiomatic expressions (for instance “*Ça va?*” “*How do you do?*” “*Que bien!*” “*Wie gehts*” “*Va bene*”), of short poems, tongue-twisters and dialogues. These resources are useful to offer awareness of the sounds of the language, of its esthetic value, and of ways in which languages carry rules of use (formality, intimacy, greetings, classroom language, etc.). They also allow contact with playful aspects of oral language that increase the affective side of learning. (p. 22)

One interesting feature of *Parâmetros* is that it sees the teaching of a foreign language as an opportunity to examine the relationship between language and society. In what the document calls “transversal themes” (p. 44), students examine social practices according to how these are understood by discourses in other social contexts and, at the same time, think critically about the social practices in their own social environment. According to the document, the linguistic choices that people make in order to act in the social world can be analyzed in several ways: thematically, systemically, textually, and linguistically:

The analysis of oral and written interactions in the classroom is a privileged way to treat transversal themes when dealing with the linguistic choices that people make to act in the social world. This [analysis] can be done according to: thematic choices (what people talk, write or read about); systemic choices (on syntactical, morphological, lexical-semantic, or phonetic-phonological levels); textual organization or kinds of text; and linguistic variation (how communities of

speakers from different regions in a country use language differently, for instance). (p. 43)

A pedagogical procedure or kind of method “to show students that language is a social practice” is to “submit every oral or written text to seven questions: who wrote/said, about what, for whom, for what, when, how, where” (p. 43).

Another interesting feature in the teaching of a foreign language and, more specifically, in the teaching of English as a foreign language offered by *Parâmetros* is how students are trained in their awareness of global citizenship and of sociopolitical aspects related to the learning of English:

Asking students to act as ethnographers in their social practices, taking notes of the uses of English at the same time that they become aware of the countries that use English as their official or first language seems to be essential for their “conscientization”<sup>9</sup> of aspects of sociopolitical nature related to that language. (p. 50)

In sum, the Brazilian document describes a socio-interactional view of language that asks foreign language teachers to engage their students in sociopolitical and citizenship issues while they learn a foreign language whereas the Colombian document expresses a competence-based view of language that asks foreign language teachers to get their students to reach competence and proficiency standards in English.

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<sup>9</sup> Originally “conscientização”; a term used by Brazilian critical theorist Paulo Freire meaning awareness of power structures.

Table 6 below summarizes the comparison between the two documents.

*Table 6: Comparison of the Colombian document Estándares and the Brazilian document Parâmetros*

	<i>Estándares</i> (Colombia)	<i>Parâmetros</i> (Brazil)
Language	<b>Competence-based:</b> "What we need to know and need to know how to do."	<b>Socio-interactional:</b> "Meaning is constructed by participants in discourse."
Foreign Languages	English is seen as the "universal language" and therefore as the main choice of <b>foreign language</b> . To teach English is the challenge.	Three criteria determine the inclusion of <b>foreign languages</b> in school curricula: historical factors, local community factors and tradition factors.
Foreign Language Learning	Guided by <b>standards</b> and <b>proficiency levels</b> of the comprehension and production <b>skills</b> and <b>competences</b> required to listen, read, write, and speak in the foreign language.	Guided by the <b>social role (use)</b> of the foreign language in Brazilian society. In the case of English, reading is emphasized because it is what most Brazilians will need to do in English.
Foreign Language Teaching	Guided by levels adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001).  Starts in first grade, 2-4 hours a week.	Guided by three central themes: citizenship, critical awareness of language, and sociopolitical aspects of foreign language learning. Sees the teaching of a foreign language as a very good opportunity to examine the relationship between language and society.  Starts in sixth grade.

### **The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)**

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a document of nine chapters (273 pages), available online at [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf), originally published in 2001 by the Council of Europe, used as a tool that provides "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe" (CEFR, 2001, p. 1). The CEFR is also increasingly used across Europe for the comparison of language certificates.

The CEFR was adopted by the Colombian Ministry of Education within its National Bilingual Program (PNB) in order to determine the standards of competences

that Colombian students should have in their learning of English as a foreign language (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006). Although the CEFR mainly describes “what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively” (CEFR, 2001, p. 1), it also takes into account the cultural context in which language is set.

What is evident from my examination of the document is that the CEFR is not only a document about standards of competences in a foreign language. The Colombian document *Estándares*, a key document in the implementation of Colombia’s PNB, mainly adopted Chapters 2 and 3 of the CEFR, sections of the CEFR which have to do with communicative language competences (linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic) and reference levels in the different language skills. Other sections of the CEFR such as “Language use and the language user” (Chapter 4) and “Language learning and teaching” (Chapter 6), which according to the CEFR are key for the Framework users, seem to have been left out from the Colombian document.

From my examination of the CEFR, I discern that it calls our attention to many different aspects of foreign language learning and teaching that are very important for the process of adapting the Framework. With respect to these aspects, I offer the following critique of the adaptation of the CEFR by the Colombian document *Estándares*:

1. The CEFR emphasis is on plurilingualism (as opposed to multilingualism). From this perspective, the aim of language education is “no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages... [but instead] to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place”

(CEFR, 2001, p. 5). The Colombian document, on the other hand, exclusively emphasizes bilingualism (in Spanish and English) and seems to push for the ‘mastery’ of English without necessarily encouraging the development of aspects related to plurilingualism.

2. The CEFR explicitly states how the framework should be adapted to different needs, interests, or contexts, in order to participate in a coherent educational system:

In considering the role of a common framework at more advanced stages of language learning it is necessary to take into account changes in the nature of needs of learners and the context in which they live, study and work.... [General qualifications] have, of course, to be well defined, properly adapted to national situations and embrace new areas, particularly in the cultural field and more specialized domains. (p. 7)

The “nature of needs of learners and the context in which they live” is precisely what the Colombian foreign language policy makers do not seem to have very clear. A process of foreign language learning guided exclusively by a set of standards in competences without actually probing into the needs and interests of students in the Colombian educational context is arbitrary, to say the least.

3. The CEFR constantly offers boxes of information that read “Users of the Framework may wish to consider...” in which the adaptation of some of the framework concepts is discussed to make it flexible and adaptable to different learning contexts. An example reads:

Users of the Framework may wish to consider and where appropriate state: to what extent their interest in levels relates to... learning objectives, syllabus, content, teacher guidelines and continuous assessment tasks (constructor-oriented)... increasing consistency of assessment by providing defined criteria for degree of skill (assessor-oriented)... reporting results to employers, other educational sectors, parents and learners themselves (user-oriented). (p. 40)

In the Colombian document, there is not one single occasion in which readers are told how the CEFR was *adapted* to the Colombian context, so as to state the rationale for the interest in the common reference levels described by the CEFR. Instead, as it was said before, one section of the CEFR was literally *adopted* without too much justification except the idea that Colombian students ought to be bilingual in Spanish and English at the intermediate level by the year 2019 because English is “the universal language.”

4. In order to offer clues on what the linguistic needs of students in different contexts may be to efficiently adapt the framework, the CEFR includes a really useful checklist called “Language Use and the Language User.” Some of the questions that users of the Framework may want to ask themselves before adapting it to their specific situation are:

- Can I predict the domains in which my learners will operate and the situations which they will have to deal with? If so, what roles will they have to play?
  - What sort of people will they have to deal with?
  - What will be their personal or professional relations in what institutional frameworks?
  - What objects will they need to refer to?
  - What tasks will they have to accomplish?
  - What skills will they need to have developed? How can they still be themselves without being misinterpreted?
  - How can language learning best contribute to their personal and cultural development as responsible citizens in a pluralist democratic society?
- (pp. 43-44)

Although the Colombian document *Estándares* is quite explicit on the skills and competences that students should develop, nowhere in the document is it stated what domains learners will operate in, what situations they will have to deal with, or how

English language learning can best contribute to their development as responsible citizens in a pluralist democratic society.

5. The CEFR is explicit about (a) the arbitrariness of proficiency levels and (b) the fact that the Framework is open to re-examination:

In accordance with the basic principles of pluralist democracy, the Framework aims to be not only comprehensive, transparent, and coherent, but also open, dynamic and non-dogmatic... In order to fulfill [the role of encouraging all those involved in the learning/teaching process to state as explicitly and transparently as possible their own theoretical basis and their practical procedures] it sets out parameters, categories, criteria and scales which users may draw upon and which may possibly stimulate them to consider a wider range of options than previously or to question the previously unexamined assumptions of the tradition in which they are working... [A]ll those responsible for planning should benefit from a re-examination of theory and practice in which they can take into account decisions other practitioners have taken in their own... (p. 18)

The Colombian document, on the other hand, takes the standards as the ultimate goal without necessarily giving too much thought to how these levels may be used as parameters that should always be open to discussion. In fact, one of the criticisms of the PNB having adopted the CEFR is how the PNB neglected local knowledge and suggestions from Colombian teacher educators (Cárdenas, 2006; González, 2007; Quintero, 2007).

I have briefly tried to show how the Colombian Ministry of Education left out very important aspects of the implementation of the CEFR (demanded by the CEFR itself) in its adaptation of the CEFR in the document “Basic standards for competences in foreign languages: English,” a key document in the implementation of the PNB.

## Colombia's Escuela Nueva (EN)

### Description

According to their website description, Escuela Nueva (EN) is “child-centered, community-based education led by teachers who are facilitators for active, participatory and cooperative learning” (Escuela Nueva, 2012). EN programs are based on four essential components: the curriculum, the community, the administration and teacher training and evaluation.

EN started on very small scale in the 1970s and with constant experimentation it grew and spread from 500 schools in the mid-1970s to 8,000 in the mid-1980s. It was thereafter declared by the government as the standard model for rural schooling in the country and is currently spreading slowly to urban schools as well (Farrell, 2008). By 1987 it had reached 24,000 rural schools in the country.

In evaluations carried out by national and international agencies throughout its existence, EN students have scored higher than students in traditional schools in standardized tests of subjects such as Spanish language and mathematics. EN students have also shown lower repetition and dropout rates and usually have higher levels of self-esteem and more developed civic values (Farrell, 2008). “In a 1998 UNESCO study of academic achievement in 11 Latin American nations, Colombia was the only location where rural students out-performed urban students. This remarkable achievement was attributed to Escuela Nueva (Pitt, 2004, pp. 22-23, cited in Farrell, 2008).”

EN has been included among the most successful educational initiatives in Latin America. The Colombian journal *El Tiempo* described the model thus<sup>10</sup>:

In Colombia the project Escuela Nueva was created by the civil society to offer a complete elementary of high quality especially to rural areas. The model guarantees active and collaborative learning in institutions linked to their communities having a mechanism of flexible promotion, which suits the conditions of vulnerable childhood.  
(*El Tiempo*, Oct. 2011, p. 9)

In terms of English-language teaching and learning, the document called “Escuela Nueva Learning Circles” (2007), which describes a program created in 2001 by the Fundación Escuela Nueva to assist the needs of displaced children, states that children who participated in this program showed “increases in English and Math scores on national standardized tests” (Fundación Escuela Nueva, 2007, p. 3).

EN has also been known for the organic nature of its formation, “a process that drew on the input of many educators and allowed for numerous revisions to be made throughout its nearly two decades (1971-1989) of evolution” (Kline, 2002, p. 1). In fact, some of the key components of the EN throughout its history are teacher training and teacher support. The success in the implementation of this new concept of school was in great part determined by the training of teachers and their participation in the development of student learning guides<sup>11</sup> and periodical meetings in micro-centers where teachers exchanged ideas and helped each other.

Table 7 below shows a timeline of the development of Colombia’s EN.

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<sup>10</sup> My translation.

<sup>11</sup> See Definition of Key Terms and Abbreviations on Chapter I for a definition of the term.

Table 7: Timeline of Colombia's Escuela Nueva (EN)

<b>Year</b>	<b>What happened</b>
<b>1974</b>	The pedagogical model known as Escuela Nueva (EN) is conceived and designed by Vicky Colbert, Oscar Mogollón, and Beryl Levinger from the experiences of the “Unitary Schools” (Escuela Unitaria) in the country (sponsored by UNESCO, ISER Pamplona, and Universidad de Antioquia).
<b>1978</b>	One of the creators and key innovators of EN, Oscar Mogollón, is transferred to the Ministry of Education’s central office to coordinate teacher training and participate in creating EN regional support groups.
<b>1987</b>	The Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN) is created “to adapt EN to urban contexts and new populations ... and to promote its expansion nationally and internationally.” With the help of the Fundación Interamericana, FEN “adapts the strategies and materials of the EN model to the urban context and initiates pilot courses in several cities of [Colombia].” This new model is called Escuela Activa Urbana.
<b>1989</b>	EN is selected by the World Bank “as one of the [three] most successful reforms to impact public policy in the developing world.”
<b>1992</b>	EN is selected by the World Bank “as one of the [three] most successful reforms to impact public policy in the developing world.” EN is one of the five pillars of Colombia’s National Development Plan (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo) to eradicate poverty.
<b>1994</b>	Through UNICEF, USAID, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), among others, EN starts a process of internationalization. Rural Colombian teachers are sent to different countries to adapt the model internationally. To this date, the model has been implemented in 16 countries (Brazil, Chile, Salvador, Philippines, Guyana, Timor, Uganda, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico). The model has adopted different names in different countries and has reached more than 5 million children.
<b>2000</b>	The United Nations report on Human Development selects EN as one of the three main accomplishments in the country in this area.
<b>2001</b>	The FEN creates the program Círculos de Aprendizaje – Escuela Nueva Activa to assist the needs of displaced children.
<b>2008</b>	The Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) adopts the program Círculos de Aprendizaje – Escuela Nueva Activa as a national educational policy for displaced children.
<b>2012</b>	FEN is included in the top 100 NGO’s by the Global Journal (Switzerland). FEN ranks 42.

(Escuela Nueva, 2012; Kline, 2002)

## **Components**

It is important to understand the EN model of pedagogy as an ongoing exchange between students, teachers, and the community rather than as a static teacher-centered traditional form of schooling. The EN model is child-centered, active learning, which demands that students themselves take hold of their own learning situation from early on. The main components of the EN model, teacher training and support, flexibility, community involvement, and self-instructional learning guides, are described below:

**Teacher training and support.** In order for teachers to understand their role within this model, three one-week teacher trainings are held during the first year of the program. Some of the topics covered during these sessions are the goals and methodology of EN, the use of student learning guides, flexible promotion, and the creation and use of the school library. After those training sessions, teachers will still meet once a month in micro-centers, where they will help each other solve teaching problems or find ways to involve their communities (Kline, 2002). In addition to providing teachers with these trainings and materials, the MEN trains local supervisors to serve as pedagogical advisors to teachers, so that teachers are not alone trying to implement their educational goals.

**Teacher and student flexibility.** With the objective of reinforcing the sense of ownership of both teachers and students within the process, EN allows for a significant amount of flexibility within a centralized structure (Kline, 2002). Teachers take into account similarities and differences between rural communities and in the aforementioned micro-centers they have the opportunity to discuss problems and come up with creative solutions. Students, on the other hand, are offered flexibility in terms of how their school day and school year are structured. Instead of having preset periods by

subject and type of activity as in traditional models, in the EN model time flows freely and the school day and year are determined by local adaptations (Farrell, 2008).

**Community involvement.** In an effort aimed at teaching civic and democratic values, the EN model asks students to create a student government. The student government “requires students to take on leadership roles and make decisions that have tangible impacts in their school environment” (Kline, 2002, p. 4). Students find ways to interact with their communities to draw from them and to share knowledge about them. The division between the school and the larger community is broken and there are “very strong school-community linkages, with parents and other community members actively supporting the work of the school” (Farrell, 2008, p. 382).

**Self-instructional learning guides.** The EN model uses carefully developed self-guided learning materials developed by EN scholars known as “guías de aprendizaje” or “learning guides,” which children can work through themselves, at their own pace, and with help from other students and teachers as necessary (Farrell, 2008). These specially designed learning materials for self-guided learning provide flexibility and adaptability to the local context and to the learning needs of students. Information is presented in such a way that already-literate students can move at the speed and level that is appropriate for them. This, in turn, allows the teacher to address the individual needs of students who may need extra help without detracting students at different levels from their learning process. Teachers, then, won’t have to plan lessons for various grade levels and can, instead, take time to connect the curriculum to the local community, making learning more relevant for students. Learning guides also direct students through activities that require them to work with peers and to explore their communities (Kline, 2002).

## Synopsis

No studies have been carried out exploring the views of Colombian teachers, students, and school administrators of the policies of the PNB in specific settings such as the Escuela Nueva (EN). The objective of this study is to explore how teachers, students, and school administrators of a school of the Colombian EN see foreign language education. In other words, this study dug into (a) how teachers, students, and administrators of this school talk about teaching/learning a foreign language and (b) how teachers and administrators implement teaching/learning a foreign language. As a result, subsidiary questions included the following: (a) what these teachers, students, and administrators see as the main needs regarding foreign language education; and (b) what kind of policy they would like to have regarding the teaching/learning of a foreign language in Colombia. In addition, the analysis of the data that follows was an attempt to determine to what degree the school where this case study was carried out implements the aforementioned elements of Responsible ELT.

Table 8 below shows how the research questions of this study relate to the elements of Responsible ELT.

*Table 8: Relationship between research questions and the elements of Responsible ELT*

Research questions	Responsible ELT
<p>What are the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva regarding foreign language education?</p> <p>(Questions 1-3)</p>	<p>Awareness of the hegemony of English (how aware one is that one may be privileging English over other foreign languages and contributing to the spread of English).</p>
<p>What are the perceptions of teachers and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of the PNB?</p> <p>(Questions 4-5)</p>	<p>Critical language-policy research (knowing whose interests are served by the current language policy).</p> <p>Resistance to linguistic imperialism (how English can be learned to empower and further the cultural, social, and educational interests of local communities).</p>

## METHODS

### **Purpose of the Study**

The objective of this study was to explore how students, teachers, and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva see foreign language education. In other words, this study examined how students, teachers, and administrators of this school discuss teaching/learning a foreign language and how teachers implement teaching a foreign language. Subsidiary questions included the following notions: (a) what these students, teachers, and administrators see as the main needs regarding foreign language education; (b) what teachers and administrators know and think about the policies of the PNB; and (c) what kind of policy teachers and administrators would like to have regarding the teaching/learning of a foreign language in Colombia.

A qualitative framework was chosen for this study because the study was raising questions that would otherwise remain unasked (Schram, 2005). When dealing with language policy research, what has usually mattered in instrumental, quantitative studies is efficiency on how to adapt and implement policy. Thus, variables usually considered in instrumental studies usually pertain to the individual aspects of second language learning (such as age, aptitude, attitude, etc.) or to the quantifiable effects of teaching methods on individuals. Such quantifiable variables relate to Tollefson's (1991) "neoclassical approach" to language policy research. Therefore, the contribution of a qualitative study such as this one has to do with "raising questions about ideas otherwise taken for granted or left unasked" (Barone, 2001; Page, 2000; both cited in Schram, 2005).

Within the qualitative approach to research, this study adopted a critical stance because it is interested in finding out *why* English is taught as a foreign language in

Colombia in addition to *how* English is being taught as a foreign language in Colombia. As Kincheloe and McLaren (2003) stated, instrumental rationality “delimits its questions to ‘how to’ instead of ‘why should’” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 438). Thus, instrumental approaches many times “fail to provide information which could be used to change [...] situations, i.e. concerning *mechanisms*... and conditions which produce the events we want to change” (Sayer, 2010, p. 135).

The qualitative, critical stance adopted by this study has to do with the “historical-structural approach” to language policy research described by Tollefson (2006). The historical-structural approach aims “to examine the historical basis of policies and to make explicit the *mechanisms* by which policy decisions serve or undermine particular and economic interests” (Tollefson, 1991, p. 32, emphasis added). In other words, a critical stance as the one adopted by this study “attempts to expose the forces that prevent individuals and groups from shaping the decisions that crucially affect their lives” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 437).

More specifically, the lens of critical language policy (CLP) research as described by Tollefson “acknowledges that policies often create and sustain various forms of social inequality, and that policy-makers usually promote the interests of dominant social groups” (Tollefson, 2006, p. 42). Some of the questions that a critical view of language policy research would bring to the table are questions also contemplated by this study: How do language policies in schools create inequalities among learners? How do policies marginalize some students while granting privilege to others? And how are local policies and programs in language education affected by global processes such as colonialism,

decolonization, the spread of English, and the growth of the integrated capitalist economy? (Tollefson, 2002).

I have pointed out how the theoretical framework of this study (critical language-policy research) may help to explore some of the social and political mechanisms that may have led to the implementation of Colombia's PNB and to the institutionalization of English as the foreign language of choice in the country. This means that issues such as the following may also be addressed by this study: (a) the adoption of standards for the teaching of English as a foreign language; and (b) the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) as the central document on which to formulate those standards.

A couple of studies have been written (in English) about the English language teaching context in Colombia, which somehow touch on the views held by Colombian EFL educators. Both studies are critical discourse analyses of written documents. One is a critical analysis of the handbook published by the Colombian Ministry of Education establishing the national standards for the teaching of English in Colombia, called "Basic standards for competences in foreign languages: English," referred to as *Estándares* in this study. The other is a critical analysis of theses written by in-service EFL teachers completing a one-year graduate program in a private university of the Colombian Caribbean. Interestingly enough, both studies were submitted at the University of Arizona as doctoral dissertations and both studies had the same advisor. One of the authors of these studies mentions the importance of valuing local knowledge and having teachers become more visible in the process of determining what foreign language learning policies should demand:

High school and elementary school teachers also have important contributions to make... school teachers know best who their students are, what they need, what resources they count on, what methodologies work better with their students, to what types of evaluation they respond to in more effective ways, and... many more of [sic] aspects related to the teaching-learning situations of the everyday. (Guerrero-Nieto, 2009, p. 276)

No known studies have been carried out exploring the views of Colombian teachers, students, and school administrators and their perceptions of the policies of the PNB in specific settings with a micro-social perspective. Thus, my choice of a case study to carry out this exploration has to do with the choice of object to be studied. As Stake (1995) stated, “[a] case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied” (Stake, 1995). The Colombian Escuela Nueva is a model worth exploring regarding foreign language education and policy due to its organic growth, its strong ties to the community, and its process of internationalization. Thus, my main interest in this study is to find out what students, teachers, and administrators *at a specific school* of a successful community model have to say about foreign language education policy in the country.

The authors of a phenomenological study of schools in Medellín (Cadavid et al., 2004) suggested the use of research as a way to begin to understand and transform the context of foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia: “Exploring teachers’ methodological practices through class observations and teacher interviews can provide a starting point for this task” (Cadavid et al., 2004, pp. 44-45). In fact, one of the main contributions of this study is to bring teachers and students’ voices to the discussion of foreign language education policy in Colombia. It is my belief that by bringing teachers and students’ views to the discussion, the guidelines developed for foreign language

teaching policy in the country will one day have a common ground with the reality and the experience of the country.

### **Participants and Setting**

In this study I interviewed students, teachers, and administrators of the Institución Educativa Octavio Calderón Mejía (OC), a school in Medellín, Colombia, that started implementing the Escuela Nueva model in 2005. The OC was suggested after extensive correspondence with people at the Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN) in Bogotá as it is one of the schools in Colombia implementing the Escuela Nueva model in an urban area. (For a description of the Escuela Nueva model, see Chapter 2.)

The OC is located in a humble neighborhood in Medellín, known as Campo Amor, in the city's "Comuna" 15, which is known as Guayabal. (The city of Medellín is geographically divided into 16 "comunas.") Guayabal is in the southwest region of the city and, with a wealthier and more touristic comuna known as Poblado to the east, the comuna of Belén to the north and west, and the municipality of Itagüí to the south, it is an industrial region of the city covering 7% of the city's total area. According to Wikipedia (and confirmed by my observation), the predominant socioeconomic status of Guayabal is middle-to-low. Among other things, Guayabal houses the national Olaya Herrera airport for domestic flights, a park called Juan Pablo II, a cemetery called Campos de Paz, and an inter-city bus terminal. The maps below will help locate Medellín in Colombia and the comuna of Guayabal in Medellín.

## Maps of Colombia and Medellín



According to the OC's website, <http://ieocm.edu.co/escuela-nueva.html>, the OC went through a process in order to stop being the 'ugly school in the neighborhood' and "turn into what it is today: an educational institution with more than 1,180 students, with vocational courses of secondary education, and its own articulation to SENA (National Service of Learning)."<sup>12</sup> The website tells how several awards (including a 2008 award for the best public school in Medellín) are evidence of transformation related to the implementation of the Escuela Nueva model in the school.

Initially with the help of the FEN, the OC adopted the Escuela Nueva model, which was renamed Escuela Activa Urbana in order to differentiate it from the Escuela Nueva model implemented in rural settings. Although the OC's website says that the Escuela Activa Urbana was implemented and developed by the FEN in six educational centers in Bogotá and three educational institutions in Medellín, my correspondence with

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<sup>12</sup> My translation.

FEN representatives indicated that the OC was the only school in Colombia that had actually developed the model in an urban setting. I later confirmed during my interviews that the OC is *the only* school of the Escuela Nueva - Escuela Activa Urbana model in an urban area in Colombia.

From Bogotá, I took a flight to Medellín's Olaya Herrera airport, a domestic airport located within walking distance from the school. I stayed at a very modest hotel three blocks from the school. My walk to the school would start going down a very busy street ("*Calle 10*") in this industrial sector of the city known as Guayabal. Going down this street I would find car garages, shops selling car replacement parts, and small "*cafeterias*" where people can have home-made breakfast, lunch, or simply some coffee with "*empanadas*". Turning left for the next two blocks, I would find a quieter residential neighborhood of mainly modest three-floor houses with exterior stairways and a few industrial storehouses scattered here and there. Many times I would have to go around trucks or forklift cars that would be there picking up or delivering boxes. The block where the school lay would disrupt the view due to its being a larger three-floor brick building with many windows. The building, however, brought some sort of peace and quiet to the surrounding neighborhood as one could hear children's voices of play or singing coming from inside.

I got to the school door on the morning of Monday, August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013. I found a doorman who was constantly opening the door for students arriving at different times. As one of the characteristics of the Escuela Nueva model is flexibility with students' schedules, although students are expected to get to school at a specific time, those who get to school a little later are not punished. Thus, the school doorbell is constantly ringing

throughout the day to have the doorman open the door. From the inside, in the event that the doorman is not at the doorman's booth, there is also a button to ring the bell and ask the doorman to open the door. This constant ringing of the doorbell doesn't seem to bother anyone at the school. It is just another characteristic sound layer of the school. In the event that students who arrive late haven't received their self-instructional learning guides yet, they may have to go through the process of picking up their learning guide at a photocopying booth that lies next to the doorman's booth.

Having gone through the process of registering with the doorman, giving my personal information, ID, and so forth, and having informed the doorman that I would be coming in and out the door during the next two weeks or so, I was warmly greeted by the principal. She welcomed me with a hug, told me she was really glad I was there, and immediately got me in touch with the high school English teacher with whom I had previously exchanged e-mails. After some time letting this teacher know what my study was about and what I intended to do during the next two weeks, I asked the teacher if I could interview him right away. He agreed and took me to a teachers' lounge to have me interview him. Thus, I started the process of interviewing participants.

This high school English teacher helped me greatly. He introduced me to the other high school English teachers at the school with whom I would set up appointments for interviews. He also helped me sample the students from the two grades he taught (Grades 9 and 10). To sample students, first, he chose the section with the largest number of students of the three sections of each of the two grades he taught. (There was an average of 40 students per section.) Then, he asked different students at the school corridors to say numbers from one to forty and picked up the students corresponding to the said

numbers in his class rosters. For the remaining grade (Grade 11), the English teacher in charge of teaching that grade suggested two students from one of her sections that, according to her, would be willing to participate due to their outgoing attitude.

Inside the school, one of the first things to call my attention was that every room had a label in both Spanish and English. I found descriptions such as the following: Sala de Encuentro Pedagógico/Educational Meeting Room, Salón de Humanidades/Humanities Room, Rectoría/Principal Room, Baños Damas/Womens Bathrooms (sic). The classroom where most English lessons took place had the label Sala Bilingüe/Bilingual Room. Such labeling of school rooms and places was evidence of what one of the participants of this study said: “The principal has invested a lot on this thing of bilingualism in the institution...”

Such initiative goes hand in hand with some of the city’s initiatives regarding bilingualism in Spanish and English. When I took the city’s monorail to visit the city’s botanical garden, for instance, I noticed that the announcements at each station were given first in Spanish and then in English! This and other city initiatives have to do with the idea of having a “bilingual Medellín” someday, as the project has been called by several of the city’s mayors.

Several other arrangements called my attention at the school. The school’s main patio, where students stood in line whenever there was an event that asked for it, offered numerous hanging baskets with beautiful flowers decorating the school. One Sunday I was invited by the principal to participate in a morning parade as part of the celebrations for the two hundred years of the department (province) of Antioquia. I had arranged to have the principal interviewed after the parade. Once the parade was over, before

beginning the interview, I had to follow the principal as she watered the plants, saying something like, “These are my plants and I don’t want them to get dry.” It should be pointed out that by the time of my visit to the school, Medellín was having its Flower Fair (*“Feria de las Flores”*), in which *“silleteiros”* with enormous flower decorations on their backs (called *“sillas”*) parade through the city streets, showing the color and beauty of flowers grown in neighboring towns.

I also noticed, one rainy weekday morning, when the principal used a wireless microphone connected to big speakers hanging in the corners of all the building floors. The principal asked students not to stay in the patio so they wouldn’t get wet and not to run through the school corridors as they could fall down. There was, in short, an effective sound system for any kind of announcement given by the principal or academic supervisors.

During my initial strolls through the school I noticed a small office with a window through which I saw a small desk and a chair, and I saw it was usually dark and empty. I asked the principal if there was a way I could use that small office to carry out my interviews. The principal directed me to the doorman and I was luckily given the key to the small office. This small office became the ideal place to hold participant interviews. One time, though, somebody who worked in this office found me there as she opened the door. I told her who I was and what I was doing there, and she said that she could go somewhere else, that there was no problem. Thus, I can say ALL of the people at the school were really helpful in providing me the space and time to hold the study interviews.

I ended up interviewing participants at this small office next to the academic supervisors' office after trying a few classrooms and offices. At these classrooms and offices there would be numerous interruptions, distractions, or noise that impeded participants' concentration. I remember the case of one teacher constantly greeting people who would go past outside the classroom window thus losing her flow of thought constantly. Or the time I was interviewing one of the academic supervisors at his office when suddenly students showed up at his office door, having been sent by their teacher due to disciplinary issues. During this same interview, the phone rang several times and I had to stop the interview accordingly.

Once at the small office, there was a learning process involved in how to carry out the interviews. I figured out that participants would be less distracted if they had their backs to the window, so I ended up positioning them that way. Once, in the case of a student I was interviewing, I had to go out the office and ask some of his classmates to please stop making noise and to stop teasing him for the fact that he was being interviewed. I resumed the interview normally but I could sense he had been affected to some extent by his classmates' teasing and wanted to get over with the interview soon.

Most of the participants' interviews took place in the aforementioned office. Only two interviews took place outside the school: the two interviews with an administrator who had worked for the Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN) and was actually suggested by the principal as one of the administrators to be interviewed (see complete description below). The morning I was supposed to meet this administrator, I was taken by the principal outside the school building, where a taxi cab was waiting. The principal gave the driver some instructions, and she told me that I wouldn't have to pay for the ride, that

the administrator would be waiting for me at the headquarters of a foundation that she and this other administrator were setting up (see Appendix for the foundation's information flyer). The interview with this administrator took an unexpected turn (see Trustworthiness section below).

A note should be made regarding the informed consent forms that I had gotten from my IRB at FIU. It was interesting to see how most participants reacted to their having to sign them: they thought it was *too* formal. The assisting high school English teacher even suggested *not* using the informed consent forms with students and parents, as they could cause an undesired effect, thereby leading children to refrain from participating in the study. I decided to go on with the university requirements and asked everybody to sign the informed consent forms. There was no undesired effect on the side of parents or students and all students brought the consent forms signed by them and their parents by the end of that first week, a fact I thought spoke really well of students' acting responsibly at this school. It should be said, however, that one of the high school English teachers at the school seemed surprised when she went over the informed consent form. Actually, when she noticed that I would be recording the interview, she decided not to participate in the study (see Trustworthiness section below).

Students, teachers, and administrators from the OC who participated in this study were questioned on their view of foreign language and foreign language teaching/learning; teachers and administrators were additionally questioned on their view of foreign language education policy in the country and the policies of Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB). I interviewed students and school administrators because as suggested by Vélez-Rendón (2003), we need to "create pedagogical responses

that are more appropriate for the country and [...] better address the real needs of all learners at all levels” (Vélez-Rendón, 2003, p. 196). I interviewed teachers because as suggested by Cadavid et al. (2004), exploring teachers’ methodological practices through teacher interviews can provide a starting point to begin to understand and transform the context of foreign language education in Colombia.

I interviewed each participant individually twice. Since I spent two and a half weeks at the OC campus (August 5<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013), I arranged to have the second interview a week or so after the first. Thus, semi-structured individual interviews were carried out twice with 15 participants: six students, five teachers (four English teachers and one chemistry teacher), and four school administrators of the Octavio Calderón. Six students were randomly chosen from Grades 9 to 11 (the Colombian school system ends in Grade 11). Students were selected from those grades because (a) they were approaching graduation, and (b) they had gone through the Escuela Nueva model for about eight years (since the school started implementing the model in 2005).

According to correspondence with one of the English teachers of the school, there were five English teachers in the school: one in elementary and four in high school. I intended to interview the four teachers in high school to make the research design consistent with the high school students who were selected. I decided to interview four school administrators in order to provide balance with the number of teachers interviewed. Below is a detailed description of the actual sampling of participants, as scheduling had to be adapted to the participants’ availability and willingness to participate.

*Students:* I interviewed six students: two students in Grade 9, two in Grade 10, and two in Grade 11. These students were randomly sampled with the help of English teachers at the school. In the case of ninth and tenth grade students, the English teacher in charge of teaching those grades asked four students to give him a number from one to the total number of students in each roster (approximately 40) and then the students with the corresponding numbers were asked to participate in this study. In the case of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade students, the 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher chose two students who she knew would be willing to participate in this study due to their collaborative attitude.

Something must be said about the sampling of the students for this study: As I mentioned before, I intended to interview students who were approaching graduation and who had gone through the Escuela Nueva model since the school started implementing the model in 2005. Unfortunately, due to the random sampling of students, I found out while interviewing the students that some of them had not been at the Octavio Calderón for that long; some had only been at the Octavio Calderón for only a few years. Thus, some students' experience learning English at the Octavio Calderón was somewhat limited.

In the sampling of students, then, I should have considered how much time the students had been at the Octavio Calderón as an essential criterion to be asked to participate, as it would have helped me determine how the Escuela Nueva model had been useful or not in their learning of English. However, I tried to turn this sampling disadvantage into an advantage of this study by digging deeper into how English lessons at the Octavio Calderón were different from English lessons at those students' previous schools. It came as no surprise that those students said that English lessons at their

previous schools were more teacher-centered than English lessons at the Octavio Calderón and that lessons at their previous schools were usually “boring.” This issue will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

*Teachers:* I ended up interviewing five teachers of the Octavio Calderón: three high school English teachers, the main English teacher in elementary, and a chemistry teacher who, I was told, was very familiar with the Escuela Nueva model. Although initially I planned on interviewing only the four high school English teachers, unfortunately one of them did not want to participate in this study. On the other hand, while interviewing some of the high school English teachers that agreed on participating in this study and some of the administrators, the elementary English teacher was often mentioned.

As the elementary English teacher was often mentioned by the high school English teachers (along with issues pertaining to the teaching of English in high school and in elementary), I thought that asking the elementary English teacher to participate in this study could help me understand those issues. Luckily, the elementary English teacher was happy to participate in this study. Finally, although he was not an expert in foreign language education (or foreign language education policy), I decided to interview the school chemistry teacher as a fifth teacher-participant because he was suggested by school administrators as someone with very good knowledge of the Escuela Nueva model.

*Administrators:* I had planned on sampling administrators of the Octavio Calderón conveniently depending on who was willing to participate. I interviewed four administrators. Three were school employees: the principal of the Octavio Calderón, the

academic supervisor in charge of the morning shift, and the academic supervisor in charge of the afternoon shift. The fourth “administrator” was not exactly a school employee: He was an expert in the development of (self-instructional) learning guides who had worked for the Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN) and had been hired by the principal to lead a process of curricular and academic reform at the Octavio Calderón. As with the chemistry teacher who I asked to participate in this study due to his knowledge of the Escuela Nueva model, the latter expert with previous experience at the FEN offered great insight into the Escuela Nueva and, more specifically, into how the Escuela Nueva model was localized in Medellín (the Octavio Calderón being *the only* school of the Escuela Nueva model in an urban setting in Colombia).

### **Research Questions**

In order to explore how students, teachers, and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva see foreign language education, and how teachers and administrators see foreign language education policy, the questions posed by this study were the following:

1. What are the perceptions of students of the Octavio Calderón regarding foreign language education?
2. What are the perceptions of teachers of the Octavio Calderón regarding foreign language education?
3. What are the perceptions of administrators of the Octavio Calderón regarding foreign language education?

4. What are the perceptions of teachers of the Octavio Calderón regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB)?

5. What are the perceptions of administrators of the Octavio Calderón regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of Colombia's National Bilingual Program (PNB)?

Subsidiary questions of this study included:

6. What do students, teachers, and administrators of the Octavio Calderón see as the main needs regarding foreign language education in Colombia?

7. What kind of policy would students, teachers, and administrators of the Octavio Calderón like to have regarding foreign language teaching/learning in Colombia?

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were carried out with students, teachers, and school administrators of the Octavio Calderón over a period of two weeks (August 5<sup>th</sup> to August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013). The interviews were recorded using an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder WS-100, a recording device with a built-in USB plug that can be connected directly to a computer USB port. In order to aid the arduous process of transcribing the interviews, I used the program called "Express Scribe" (available for free download when used for non-commercial, home use only), which has the possibility of playing the recorded material at a slower speed.

Each selected student, teacher, and administrator was interviewed twice using semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes. Thus, the total interview time with each participant was approximately one hour. The second interview with each participant was carried out one week after the first interview. At the second interview with each participant I had already gone over the first interview carefully and had prepared questions in order for participants to confirm, clarify or expand topics of the first interview (see further discussion in Trustworthiness section below).

I asked each participant for his/her email address in order to send him/her the transcripts of both interviews for member checking purposes. In other words, I asked each participant to go over the interview transcripts (in Spanish) and confirm that what I had transcribed actually corresponded to what they had said. Although I sent several email reminders to those participants who did not return their confirmation of the transcripts via e-mail, I ended up getting only five confirmations out of the 15 participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were carried out in Spanish, the native language of all participants and the researcher. Data (in Spanish) was coded both deductively and inductively. First, I coded the data deductively (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), according to the topics that I had selected beforehand. In terms of foreign language education, the pre-existing coding categories were the following: importance of a foreign language, hegemony of English,

other languages, advantages/disadvantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of a foreign language, suggested changes in the teaching of a foreign language at the school/in Colombia, and how foreign language lessons included the community. In terms of foreign language education policy and the policies of the PNB, the pre-existing coding categories were the following: the 1994 General Law of Education, PNB, PNB objectives, the document *Estándares*, the Common European Framework of Reference, and suggestions for foreign language education policy.

Second, I coded the data inductively for any topics that emerged from the interviews that were either mentioned by several participants or were very unique and still relevant to the research questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Thus, inductive coding of data intended to look for both common and uncommon emergent themes. The third and last stage of data analysis was carried out comparing and contrasting the deductive and inductive sets of coding in order to avoid excessive reiteration of themes and to develop comprehensive and nuanced answers to the research questions.

As I wrote the section of findings, I translated the coded excerpts of interview transcripts into English. When in doubt about the exact translation of some terms or expressions, I emailed participants asking for their opinion. In the case of English teachers who were interviewed, they would sometimes offer suggestions for the translation and I often decided to go with their translation. In the case of administrators who were interviewed and didn't know English well, they would clarify and expand the topic in Spanish via email. Then, after they had sent their clarifications, I proceeded with my translation.

As data were coded in the sequence of the research questions (first deductively and then inductively) the translated quoted excerpts from transcripts were taken from pages in a chart I developed for *each* research question. Thus, translated quoted excerpts may sometimes appear repeated in several questions as they may have to do with the question at hand.

I did *not* ask any bilingual peers, instructors in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) courses, to revise the transcripts to see if what participants were quoted as saying in English corresponded to what they initially said in Spanish or if it made sense for an English-speaking audience as I intended to as I figured it would be too time consuming for my TESOL peers.

### **Trustworthiness**

A preliminary note should be made regarding my translations of original documents or transcripts in Spanish or Portuguese into English. I am a native Spanish speaker with a Bachelor's degree in Language Arts from a Brazilian university. As this dissertation indicates, I am pursuing a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (see researcher's Vita at the end). Such credentials must hold my translations as reliable.

This study employed two main trustworthiness measures: respondent validation and triangulation (Maxwell, 2005). Respondent validation or member checking has to do with asking participants to go over the transcripts of the interviews for confirmation, clarification or expansion of topics. Although I was not always able to send participants

the transcripts of the first interview before the second interview, at the second interview with each participant I had gone over the first interview carefully and therefore was able to ask questions in order for participants to confirm, clarify or expand topics on the first interview. As mentioned before, I asked each participant for his/her email address in order to send him/her the transcripts of both interviews for member checking purposes.

Triangulation in this study has to do with collecting information from a diverse range of individuals: students, teachers, and administrators of the school of the Escuela Nueva model. Getting information from the different stakeholders at this school should give a better picture of the school as a whole.

I also kept a researcher journal during the process of data collection, in which I commented on issues or difficulties of the data collection process. Some of the main issues that came out in this diary were:

Having interviews at the school was hectic. Teachers and administrators were on their daily routines, and it was usually hard to find the peace of mind necessary for an interview. Students, on the other hand, were either worried during the interview about the class that they were missing or, if they were on recess, they were aware of what their classmates were doing at the time of the interview and therefore wanted to leave the interview as soon as possible.

At the beginning of the data collection process, I didn't have a space to carry out the interviews. Teachers or administrators would suggest a room or an office to be interviewed but I noticed we would be interrupted constantly. In the case of teachers, there could be other teachers or students looking for them to ask them something. In the case of administrators (academic supervisors), we would be interrupted by students who

had been sent by teachers to their office on some kind of disciplinary charge. When interviewing the principal, school staff would come looking for the principal to ask her about things that needed to be handled immediately. Many times I would have to stop the recording and continue after the interruption.

As one of the high school teachers sent signals that she didn't want to participate in this study (she did everything she could to avoid being interviewed), I decided to interview the elementary English teacher as a substitute to have four teacher-participants. All participants had their second interview a week after the first interview, except for the elementary English teacher who was interviewed on two consecutive days because my field work was coming to an end. (I had spent a lot of time trying to interview the high school English teacher that finally decided not to participate.)

The fourth administrator – the expert on (self-instructional) learning guides who had worked for the FEN and had been hired by the school to lead a process of curricular reform at the Octavio Calderón – decided to have me interview him at a different place. I later found out that the place where I was taken to functioned as the headquarters of a new foundation that he and the principal of the Octavio Calderón were setting up (see information flyer in Appendix). The principal thought that it was a good idea for me to go there and become familiar with what they were trying to do.

In the case of the “interview” with this person, he did most of the talking, causing difficulty for me in terms of sticking to my script of questions. However, I noticed that getting him to answer my specific questions would not really allow him to tell me the story he told of the Escuela Nueva, the Fundación Escuela Nueva, and the new foundation he was setting up together with the Octavio Calderón's principal. Although I

tried my best to incorporate my questions into his long talk and to have him answer those questions, I learned that researchers simply can't put some people in front of a script of questions because they might lose pertinent information that might not necessarily surface while answering the scripted questions. Therefore, when presenting administrators' data, the reader may notice that one of the administrators will be sometimes missing.

## FINDINGS

In this chapter readers will find the analysis of data pertaining to each of the research questions. Research questions 1-3 deal respectively with the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators of the Octavio Calderón regarding foreign language education. Research questions 4 and 5 deal respectively with the perceptions of teachers and administrators of the Octavio Calderón regarding foreign language education policy in Colombia and the policies of the National Bilingual Program (PNB). For each question, first readers will find the deductive analysis of the question according to predetermined categories relevant to the model of Responsible ELT. Next, readers will find the inductive analysis in which common or uncommon categories emerged from participants' views. When quoting participants, in order to protect their privacy, I use initials of their (first, middle or last) name.

### **Students' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education**

#### **Deductive Analysis**

##### **Importance of a foreign language.**

*Learning a foreign language gives more opportunities.* One common comment of the students that I interviewed was that learning a foreign language would give them more opportunities both nationally and internationally. Students said that a foreign language would allow them to communicate with foreigners both inside and outside Colombia.

A foreign language is important because it gives us more opportunities in other countries and also here to communicate with tourists. (E)

Learning a foreign language is important because it would help a lot in tourism or if one travels. English mostly. (M)

Learning a foreign language is important because if people from other countries come here, it would help us understand what they are saying without having to ask somebody else. (S)

Many foreigners come to Colombia and I have noticed that they want to hire interpreters but there aren't any. (A)

***English is now required for most jobs.*** Most students pointed out that English is now required for jobs. Students said that there is usually a commercial application of English. Students believe that those who learn English will probably get better jobs and better salaries.

They are requiring us to learn English for jobs and to do business with companies. (S)

Now you need two languages. Let's say Spanish and English for more job opportunities. One can easily get a job speaking two languages. (A)

Those who speak English get better salaries because they are better prepared; they have acquired a new knowledge, which is the new language, and it makes it easier to communicate with other people from different parts of the world. (E)

The job demand in the market requires people who speak another language. (C)

***Learning a foreign language has to do with students' "life projects."*** From ninth grade on, students at the Octavio Calderón are asked to come up with a "life project" in order to more clearly define the career they want to study and set their goals for the future. This "life project" is developed throughout several subjects such as ethics and their secondary education vocational courses. When asked why it was important to learn a foreign language, students in eleventh grade pointed out that learning a foreign

language (usually English) had to do with their own “life project.” One student pointed out that learning a foreign language was necessary to pursue a career in social communications and acting, as he intended to do. The other student mentioned how English was important to study gastronomy outside Colombia.

Many of the job offers nowadays require a foreign language. Even for my life project an indispensable thing is speaking a foreign language. I am going to study social communications and journalism and at the same time I am going to do some workshops in acting and performing in TV and these environments demand the use of a foreign language to progress. (C)

I plan on studying gastronomy and going to other countries, so I need to learn to speak another language... I do not want to study only here. I would like to go to other countries to get to know new customs, new ways of cooking... That is why English is important: it is the most common language in other countries. (E)

### **Hegemony of English.**

“*English is a universal language.*” Some students said that English is the obvious choice when it comes to learning a foreign language because English is “a universal language.” For some of the students, what makes most sense worldwide is to learn English. The belief that the world revolves around the English language was evident in a student’s affirmation that “Washington is the capital of the world.”

For me, English is a universal language. Since it is mostly spoken in the United States and in the United States there are more possibilities to get ahead. Then, if one goes there, one will make it there with English. (J)

English is basic at a world level. I think it is the most spoken language due to the fact that Washington is the capital of the world. (M)

### **Other languages.**

#### ***French and Mandarin are the next two foreign languages of choice after***

**English.** If students had the opportunity to learn a foreign language different from English, they would like to learn French or Mandarin. Learning Mandarin was associated with technological advances and the idea of development or with the idea of learning a really different foreign language, as English is somehow already seen as a requirement. Some students said that they would actually like to be able to choose what foreign language to study. Other students were emphatic about the importance of learning English as they see it as a universal language.

... French because I've always liked French. And also Mandarin because in China there are many opportunities because they practically manage the world's technology and one can easily get there if one learns another language. (A)

... French, because it's cool and also Mandarin. I would actually like to learn various languages... English is already customary, so I would like to learn other things like Mandarin. (E)

It would be cool if Italian or Mandarin were taught. (S)

#### **Suggested changes in the teaching of a foreign language at the Octavio**

##### **Calderón.**

***Teachers should speak English when teaching English (even if students feel strange).*** A frequent response to the changes that students would like to see in the teaching of English at the Octavio Calderón was that they would like to have their teachers speak English during English class. Many times, because the level of English that students have is so different, English teachers in the higher grades in this institution end up translating directions or content to Spanish. Most of the students I interviewed

said that although it would take them some time to adapt to their teachers speaking only English, doing so would be an effective way to get them to communicate in English.

Below are some of the things that students would do if they were English teachers at the Octavio Calderón:

[If I were a teacher] I think I would speak English all the time. I wouldn't translate anything. That would be a change, because most of the time the teacher speaks English but he translates because there are people who say "I just can't get the hang of English", but it would be better that way because everybody would say "either I learn or I learn English." (A)

I would speak English to... well... As time goes by and students more or less know English, I would speak to students in English. I would teach the lessons in English. (J)

I would only speak English in class so that students start getting the language, getting the way they have to speak. It would be cool to listen to the teacher speak English the whole class. (S)

Still, there seems to be a paradox in relation to this topic. Whenever I asked these students how they would feel if their teachers spoke only English during class, some of them said that they would feel strange or they wouldn't understand much:

If the English teacher taught only in English, I would feel strange. Yes, strange. Because... well... I don't know (*laughs*) the language well, English, so... (J)

If the teacher spoke only in English, I wouldn't understand much. He would have to speak it very slow for me to understand. (S)

Some of the teachers I interviewed even told me about an issue they had had with some students and parents of students in eighth grade who complained when the English teacher had decided to speak only English during English class (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language, "We can't get to the idealism of teaching a lesson directly in English: When we've tried to do it here, it hasn't been seen as something positive by students and parents"). These students and parents said that having

the English class be taught only in English was a sudden and abrupt change and that it had never happened before in the institution.

### **Changes to foreign language teaching in the country.**

To the question of what changes they would like to have in Colombia regarding the teaching of a foreign language, there were two common threads: one had to do with having free (or cheaper) foreign language or English-teaching institutions in the country; the other had to do with teaching English from earlier on (pre-school) and for a longer period during the week.

I think it would be very important for the country to have more free foreign language learning centers because, for instance, the courses I took I had to pay \$10,000 pesos [approx. \$5 dollars] every week and many people do not have... well... they have the will to learn but they don't have the necessary resources. Then, it would be a good idea to generate those free learning centers. (C)

I would like to have cheaper ways of studying English, to have more opportunities to study it. It is very expensive to study English outside of school. For example, an English course is really expensive if one wants to study English in a place where they do teach well and all. I would like it to be less expensive and it should be free for people who do not have the resources. (E)

It would be cool if they taught English since pre-school. They could start teaching so that when one is... one knows more about the topic... about how to speak it better. (S)

We could have one more hour of English because four hours a week are not enough for one to learn English well. Well, I don't think so. (J)

One student went even further, suggesting the use of campaigns encouraging people to see the need and the advantages of learning English. One way that these campaigns could reach people would be by bringing Colombians who have succeeded in an English-speaking country to tell their story as a way to inspire other fellow Colombians to learn English.

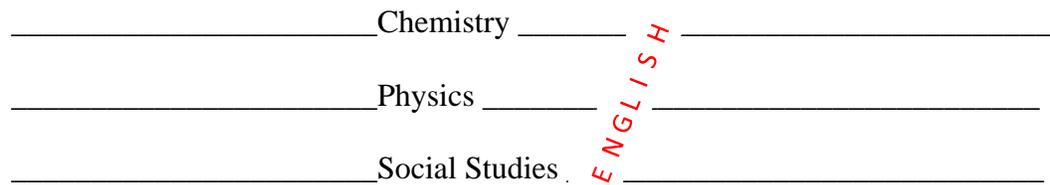
Maybe they could have campaigns to attract people, show them that learning a foreign language is very important, and generate in them the need to learn a foreign language through campaigns, advertisements, and things like that... Personally, if I went to one of those English centers, I would like to have people telling me about their experiences, about how English has been useful for their careers... For example... something a little bit crazy: Bringing Sofia Vergara and Sofia Vergara would tell them: "Look, I'm from Barranquilla but then a man happened to discover me. I had to learn to speak English. Thanks to [speaking] English I am where I am." (C)

### **Inductive Analysis**

**Inside school experiments.** While analyzing the data inductively for students' perceptions of foreign language, the emerging themes were linked primarily with experiments carried out within the school in terms of improving students' English learning. The principal and the academic committee at the Octavio Calderón have somehow developed ways to make English more visible throughout the school curriculum in an attempt to make it more meaningful or "natural" for students. Although there are several experiments taking place in the school for the diffusion and learning of English, such as the labeling of classrooms and school facilities in both Spanish and English and the use of student teachers carrying out their internships helping the English teacher in the early elementary grades (see teachers and school administrators section), the students brought up three main situations used in higher grades to encourage the practice of English: a) the use of English in other academic subjects' learning guides; b) the school's "English Day;" and c) guiding foreign visitors who come to the school in English. Let's take a look at each of these.

*The use of English in other academic subjects' learning guides.* For the development of learning guides in higher grades (eighth to eleventh) in subjects other

than English, the requirement exists that these learning guides should include at least one section or activity in English: a reading in English, a text to translate from English into Spanish, a video to watch and listen to in English, etc. This concept is referred to in the institution as the “transversality” of English. The idea is that English, as a “transversal” line in geometry, should “cross” or intersect other lines (subjects). The graphic below should help understand the concept:



Here is what some of the students said:

The learning guides always have to have a part in English, any part. It’s obligatory. Let’s say a text to translate from English, words, the learning guide objectives, the performance standards, and the title of the learning guide... I think it’s... new. I find it... innovative because it’s good for us. (A)

For instance, Chemistry, the C part of the Chemistry learning guide, the application activities, we have to translate a text about chemistry in English. For example, last period’s text was about a tear gas, so we had to translate the text and present it to our teacher, so that he sees that it wasn’t only Google translator that we used. (C)

***The “English Day.”*** The Octavio Calderón has also established a day called “English Day,” in which students go around the school examining projects from different grades made in English. According to one of the teachers that I interviewed, the “English Day” is being expanded and is becoming some sort of “English Week” (see deductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of foreign language, *Although the English lessons do not explicitly reach the community, there are ways in which the community gets in touch with*

*what is happening in the English lessons*). Here is what a student said about the “English Day:”

In “English Day” everybody does projects and the best ones in each group are chosen and displayed all over the school: posters, information boards, games, information about what the different groups have learned. Ninth grade, what they’re learning; tenth grade, what they’re learning, and so on. (S)

***Guiding foreign visitors who come to the school in English.*** Another way mentioned in which students from the Octavio Calderón can practice their English is by speaking in English to foreign visitors who come to the school and do not speak Spanish. The Octavio Calderón, being the main example of the Escuela Nueva model being implemented in an urban setting, periodically receives delegations from different Asian or African countries interested in observing how the model works. The Octavio Calderón takes this opportunity as a meaningful way in which students can use their English to show foreign visitors what is being done in their school. Below is what one student said about such guiding opportunities:

When English-speaking people come to our school, the teachers choose a group of students to accompany and guide the visitors, so many times we have to... for example, I don’t remember if it was this year or last year, some people came and then our teacher told us “explain this to them, what this information board says, what the learning guides are like,” things like that. (C)

## Teachers' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education

### Deductive Analysis

#### **Importance of a foreign language.**

*It is really important to learn a foreign language due to globalization.* When asked whether learning a foreign language was important or not, several teachers replied that learning a foreign language was important due to globalization processes. Whenever globalization is mentioned by these teachers, it is usually related to the spread of English or the dominance of English as a foreign language. Teachers referred to how English has penetrated the social and cultural contexts of many countries such as Colombia and to how English can be the common language to interact with people in different parts of the globe. Therefore, most teachers (if not all) see the choice of English as the foreign language to be taught in schools as the most natural and relevant choice.

Taking into account the phenomenon of *globalization*, I think that in every country it is important to learn a second language or in our case a foreign language because we are constantly invaded by publicity, by products coming from abroad and in most cases everything takes place in English, one of the universal languages. Then, even if one doesn't want, in order to be competent in one's job, not only as a teacher but also as an engineer, as an administrator, as an architect... in any company or job you will need at least the basics of English. You will find instructions, advertisements, a lot of information provided in English [...] so you will need a second language. (C)

Learning a foreign language is very important because aside from the fact that it opens the doors to the world it also opens an opportunity to learn more about other sciences, because a lot of the information that we get nowadays comes in English. And according to what is currently happening with this thing of *globalization*, English is for me the most important language in Colombia and in any other country. (M)

Usually a lot of what we consume, either in information or technology, has to do with a foreign language, basically with English, which is the language that we have most proximity to. The other reason is because one has to be open to new

frontiers because the earth is now a *global village* where one is always interacting with other geographical spaces and that is why it is good to learn a second language, even to interact with people who are not in our immediate geographical environment. (J)

***Learning a foreign language guarantees better working opportunities.*** As it was also mentioned by students, one of the reasons learning a foreign language is considered important by these teachers is because it will bring better job opportunities. This fact was pointed out by a couple of teachers.

More than important, I would say that nowadays it is indispensable to learn a foreign language because it is a way to guarantee up to an 80% the possibility of having *better opportunities* both at a work level and at an academic level. More than a luxury [learning a foreign language] is a necessity. (Y)

Learning any foreign language is important because it gives the student *better opportunities* of employment, of communicability, of educating oneself. I think it is very important. (L)

### **Hegemony of English.**

***English is seen by teachers as the universal language.*** When asked what foreign language they thought should be taught in schools in Colombia, most teachers said that English was the best choice because it is the “universal language,” the “most important” language or the “common language” across nations. Although individually each of these teachers expressed a desire to also learn other foreign languages, they seemed to agree on the fact that English is the language that should be taught in schools.

English would be the foreign language I would choose. First, because it is *universal* and it is English that runs the world nowadays. And second, because I love it! I’m in love with songs in English (*laughs*). [...] We’re an underdeveloped country; therefore we will always need another country that is superior to us: either to go and look for better opportunities, or to make investments, either to go out and study and develop oneself professionally, as in one way or another when one comes back it gives you a different level here in Colombia. When one is a world power, one generally either accepts help from others or not. But when one

is not [a world power], one has to go out and search. And in order to do that you need a second language. (Y)

Many people have relatives in the United States; many people have relatives in some European countries. When one enters the cyberspace, one finds friends in other countries. In virtual or daily common spaces such as YouTube, for instance, one sees many comments in English or videos in English and one is interested in knowing what they say. Not to mention the idea that one can be here today and tomorrow in any of those geographical spaces... In other words, I can be here in Medellín, in Colombia, today, and tomorrow it is possible that I have to or I want to travel to the United States. That is why I find it important to have at least the basics, to know the foreign language as much as I can. And taking into account that English is practically the *universal* language, the commercial language, or the most common language across nations, the easiest way to get close to those people would be through English. (J)

### **Other languages.**

*Teachers would also like to learn other languages.* When asked if they were interested in learning other languages aside from English, teachers had different languages in mind. Some of the languages that teachers would like to learn were: Italian, French, Portuguese, German and Mandarin. The reasons given to want to learn these languages varied from having a certain compatibility with the culture of the language (Italian, Portuguese) to challenging oneself to learn a very different language (German, Mandarin).

I would like to polish my French. I also like Italian; I find the Italian culture very nice. (M)

I like Portuguese and Mandarin a lot. Portuguese because it is a very musical language in its pronunciation and also because it is related to my ethnic group [...] And Mandarin because besides from being the most spoken language in the world, it is a very complex language to learn... I am fascinated by the symbols that they use in order to express their thoughts or feelings. (Y)

I have always had in mind Italian or German, but I haven't had the time to learn them. Italian because I understand that it would be easy for me to learn as a

speaker of Spanish and someone who knows some French. And German because it is a challenge. It is a complicated language not only in its syntax, but also in many different aspects such as its pronunciation... And it has some similarities with English, so it would be good for me in that sense. (C)

**Advantages of the *Escuela Nueva* model for the teaching of a foreign language.**

*Most teachers see the Escuela Nueva model as advantageous to the learning of a foreign language.* Teachers were emphatic and unanimous when expressing the advantages that the Escuela Nueva model had for the learning of a foreign language. Some of the reasons for teachers to see the model as beneficial were: a) students are used to working in groups; b) students have different “freedoms” in their learning process; c) students learn at their own pace without the pressure of having to learn things quickly; and d) lessons within the model are not guided by textbooks and thus lessons are more varied. Here is what teachers said about the advantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of English:

Some advantages are: Students at the Octavio Calderón know beforehand what they will be studying during the three-month period [that each learning guide is used for]; they have the freedom to go deeper into what they want to concentrate on, they have the freedom to suggest ideas, and the freedom to innovate. Students at this school are already used to working in groups and easily understand that when it is time to work in groups, it is time to work, not to bother other people or chat with them. They don't find it strange when a teacher talks to them in English, or when the learning guides are given to them in English, whereas other students [coming from other schools] say “Ms. A., I used to have to translate sentences; it was all about translating sentences and the teacher would stand in the front of the classroom telling us what to do in Spanish.” (Y)

Advantages? In any case, since they advance at their own pace, they don't feel they are pressured, and they learn according to their understanding because they don't have to run. (L)

As I was telling you now, it allows us to respect each student's learning pace. Now, we won't allow one student to stay at the beginning or first level, but we will try to... Well, if there is an advanced student, we should give him the tools to keep going further, and if there is a student who is lagging behind, we should give that student the tools for him to catch up without hurrying him. (C)

I think an advantage is that by not restricting ourselves to one single textbook, lessons are more varied. Another advantage is that students here are always doing; they're in an active position compared to traditional schools where students are in a passive position listening and listening and listening. (M)

One teacher highlighted the fact that the Escuela Nueva model gives students an opportunity to develop democratic behaviors. When students have to share their knowledge with others and have to come to agreements on their own, they are learning certain characteristics that will be very useful to them as citizens and members of society.

Another advantage is cooperative work because many times when you're performing a task as a student, you only have one vision and one understanding of what you have to do. But when you have a group of peers who affirm what you think, or who show you a different way of doing things, then you can share the progress or the outcome of a determined task by including different opinions, different conclusions, different agreements... That goes beyond and it is what the Escuela Nueva wants because the Escuela Nueva wants those spaces or moments to encourage conviviality and it is then that democracy takes place, you know what I mean? There is a space for dialogue, to come to agreements. So besides from being something merely academic or study-related, there is an intention to form human beings through those short moments when students interact in small societies. (C)

Another teacher referred to the geographic location of the Octavio Calderón and how this specific location contributed to students at this school having "more ambitious plans" than students in other areas of the city.

Students at the Octavio Calderón have more ambitious plans, they have life projects, in spite of being in an in-between zone, because (*showing the location*) here is "El Poblado,"<sup>13</sup> here is the Octavio Calderón, and here is "Barrio Antioquia", a very poor neighborhood depressed economically and in other aspects. And so the students who are coming from "Barrio Antioquia" get the

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<sup>13</sup> A wealthy "comuna" (and neighborhood) of Medellín in the higher part of the city

feeling and say “I don’t want to be that way; I want to improve in order to move on and go up [to “El Poblado”].” So I think that is another advantage we have. (Y)

**Disadvantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of a foreign language.**

*Most teachers do not think there are disadvantages to the Escuela Nueva model as a way to learn a foreign language.* When asked if they saw any disadvantages to the Escuela Nueva model as a way to learn a foreign language, most teachers said they didn’t see any. The only disadvantages mentioned had to do with the disadvantages arising when working in groups or when having too much freedom to do the work: some students do most of the work in the group while some students don’t work as hard and students do not necessarily challenge themselves to do things in more demanding ways, instead relying on more familiar ways of doing things. Here is what a couple of teachers said about the disadvantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of English:

Of course there are disadvantages. In the sense that cooperative group work can have many advantages and can also have serious disadvantages. There are times when a student does not bring much to the team and ends up like... like someone who depends on what other people do. And his process will eventually prove not as significant as the process of the other members in the group. [...] In that sense, it is a counterproductive aspect of this methodology. (C)

The disadvantage is that since the student is given so much autonomy, sometimes the student takes that autonomy to extremes and only wants to do things his or her way, in an inflexible way... [...] So they say things like “I’m free to study one or two hours” and you as a teacher should respect that, but then there are other students who do not study one or two hours but five hours, so that’s when the student starts falling behind, because there are some very advanced students and there are other students who fall behind. [...] When the student says “I don’t want to do the presentation that way; I want to do it this way because I think this way works better for me”, you as a teacher should accept the decision that the student made. (Y)

### **Suggested changes in the teaching of a foreign language at the Octavio**

**Calderón.** Even if most teachers don't see any crucial disadvantages to the Escuela Nueva model as a way to teach a foreign language, they were ready to suggest changes in the way the foreign language is taught at the Octavio Calderón. Some of the changes that were suggested were (in no particular order): a) learning a foreign language could be something more experiential; b) students can learn while they play; c) there should be fewer students in each class; d) there should be more weekly hours of foreign language instruction; and e) foreign language lessons should be taught in the target language. Let's go over each of these suggestions briefly.

*Learning a foreign language could be something more experiential: “We should go out of these four walls.”* One teacher suggested making the learning of a foreign language something more experiential. One possible way to do that would be to take the students out of the classroom, not only to other schools in some kind of exchange in which they would see how well they are performing in the foreign language, but also to different parts of the city depending on what they are learning.

Lessons should be more virtual than classroom-based. They should be more active, more dynamic. Students should be able to go out and practice in... something more experiential. I would like it if students had the opportunity, once they get to a certain level, to go on exchanges or visit other schools in order to find out what level they're at... We should go out of these four walls and these chairs we have here. For instance, today we want to have the class at the coliseum, then we'll go to the coliseum; today we want to have the class at the field, we'll go to the field; we'll be talking about means of transportation, then we'll go to the airport or the bus terminal, things like that. Our lesson will have to do with food, then we should be able to go to a restaurant or a supermarket. It would be something more practical, having to do with day to day routines. Because it's not the same when you're told “this is a tomato” and when they actually *show you* the tomato, you know what I mean? (Y)

*“Students can learn while they play.”* Another teacher commented on the importance of play and of not turning the learning guides that are so characteristic of the Escuela Nueva model into grammatical drills or exercises. According to her, playing games in the target language is a very effective way to learn that language.

In any case teaching depends on teachers. It is the teacher who brings the creativity. One could only suggest that they not forget that children are playful and that they don't make learning guides very dense or boring. Teachers should remember that students can learn while they play, because sometimes teachers turn the learning guides into grammatical exercises, and here we try to make learning playful and fun. And we share a lot with other teachers. There is a teacher who I think is very creative, she does very nice activities. She holds fashion shows if they're learning about clothes, students do recipes when learning about food... She's a teacher we copy so that we can have nice things happening in the classroom. (L)

*There should be fewer students in each class.* A couple of teachers mentioned how hard it can be to teach and assess students learning a foreign language when there are forty to fifty students per class. One teacher said that if he had the chance to have smaller classes, eighteen to twenty students per class, it would be easier for students to interact among themselves and for teachers to better assess their students' learning process.

The ideal situation for me would be if there weren't as many students in each class. I would try... if conditions and supplies are met, to divide the groups into smaller groups. But this is something that is beyond our control because it is precisely the government that forces us to have such large groups, right? I have worked before with groups.. not in public but in private schools, with groups of forty students, but these were schools that had... that were very aware of the fact that the smaller the groups are the more effective the learning will be, so they would divide students according to levels and would end up having groups of eighteen to twenty students...I think that a smaller group is very good in order to have students interact among them, to achieve a more significant learning. In our case, having classes from thirty-five to forty, sometimes even fifty students, it is very complicated to have a significant learning experience. (C)

One: We could say, although I don't know how the other teachers will take it: If the number of students that you could interact with were a bit less, since the number of students in lower grades is high, in that case learning could be more personalized with each student and in that sense the teacher could really figure out the needs that each student has. To the extent that knowledge is made accessible to all, and the teacher has to throw the same to a large number of students, fifty or fifty-something in lower grades, then it will be very hard for teachers to find out or diagnose how much their students know. To the extent that knowledge is more personalized, it will be easier to reach students. (J)

*There should be more weekly hours of foreign language instruction.* A couple of teachers mentioned how they would like to have more hours of foreign language instruction per week. Although they said that they were fortunate enough to have at least two to four hours per week of foreign language instruction whereas other public schools have fewer hours, they wished they could have more time devoted to the foreign language. One teacher pointed out how much of a disadvantage there was comparing the four weekly hours of foreign language to the context of private bilingual schools in which most subjects are taught in the foreign language. Another teacher also mentioned the fact that whenever there were extra-curricular activities going on, these were usually carried out during the time devoted to the English language lesson.

The problem is that in any case the number of weekly hours is not enough to reach the objectives because I only have two hours per week whereas one knows that in private bilingual schools students either have many hours of English per week or have bilingual teachers who always speak to them in English. [...] I would like to intensify the number of weekly hours, but that is not really possible because we only have 25 hours to divide among all subjects. So what subject will we take hours from if all subjects should be very important? (L)

This year, for instance, we've had difficulties with children coming from other schools who get to sixth grade because the level of English in high school is more demanding, so we've had mothers saying to us "Miss, the thing is he used to have only one hour of English per week, sometimes he wouldn't have class, or he would miss class, or the teacher would replace the English class with any other subject." So the level of English that these students bring to school is zero. (Y)

Disadvantages? Let's see... Maybe when we miss class, that is something I don't like. Sometimes there are extra-curricular activities that make me skip class with my students. The number of weekly hours we have is four, which I think is OK. I would obviously like to have more hours but that's not possible because there are other subjects. (M)

*Foreign language lessons should be taught in the target language.* A change that several teachers would like to have is to be able to teach the English lessons in English. One teacher referred to this fact as some sort of "revolution" because students are not used to having such thing. Starting in the elementary grades, English lessons are taught in Spanish, so students find it very strange when suddenly, in sixth grade, the teacher mostly speaks in English. One teacher talked about having students "interact" in English, which means that not only teachers but also students should use English during the lesson. A teacher brought up an incident happening with eighth grade students at this school, in which students and parents complained about the fact that the English teacher was using only English in class.

After having smaller groups, we would have to start some sort of revolution in terms of trying to teach the lesson more in English than in Spanish. But that should be done, as I say, if we were able to divide the whole class in smaller groups according to levels. We would be able to demand more from those students with a higher level of English, we would be able to use the language, the "whole language" in class. (C)

Maybe there should be more interaction; lessons should be more interactive. But when we've tried to implement that interaction here at school, we've had some students see it as a disadvantage and they have, let's say, complained. Because when the teacher tries to speak to his students in English, which should be the natural way since one learns that way and it creates the need, then the students and the parents complain about it. And I think that's the change that should be introduced, that according to the grade that the student is in and keeping in mind the level the student has, each time the interaction between teacher and student in English should be higher in order to create the need, or else one will never see the need to learn the language. But when we've tried to do it here, it hasn't been seen as something positive by students and parents. (J)

### **How foreign language lessons include the community.**

*Although the English lessons do not explicitly reach the community, there are ways in which the community gets in touch with what is happening in the English lessons.* Since one of the main characteristics of the Escuela Nueva model is having strong ties between the school and the community in order for the students to draw from and share knowledge about their community, I asked teachers how much the English lessons would incorporate the community outside the school. At first, teachers seemed puzzled and didn't really see how their lessons related to the community. One teacher even said that she didn't think her lessons had any intention of students counting on their parents or community members for knowledge about English.

I think the parents' participation... I mean, I talk to parents mostly as their children's grade teacher, as their counselor, but within the English lessons, I don't. I don't think it happens much in the English lessons because what students do in the activities that I have designed for them... I don't know how much students count on their parents' opinion, because they could do it too, but from my experience I don't think they go out and ask their parents. (M)

Little by little, teachers realized that there were some ways in which the school in a general sense and the English lessons more specifically incorporated the community or at least gave parents and community members ways to get familiar with what is going on in the English lessons. One activity that was brought up (and will be described more deeply in the next section of inductive themes) was the "English Day." According to one of the teachers, the "English Day" is a result of the principal's idea of having English "cross" through all academic subjects, the idea known at the school as the "transversality" of English, which was discussed in the previous section of students' perceptions of foreign language.

For instance, we have this thing called the “English Day,” in which students, with time, do different kinds of activities. Although it’s called “English Day,” it’s usually a week in which students do all kinds of activities in English, even newspapers, posters, everything is done in English... Things are posted on the walls, there are presentations given at tables, etc.

Since the principal has wanted for a long time to make English cross all subjects, to be “transversal...” In fact, it is included in the mission of our institution: to make English “transversal”. In other words, to have English cross all areas, to have English somehow present in all areas. And with the “English Day” we were looking for a playful way, let’s say, of bringing English to the students or to the educational community. In this case all the community has to do with it. In order to playfully bring this “transversal” English to all areas, the “English Day” was born.

It was a day initially but then it was expanded and now the “English Day” is not only one day but really a week in which students do all kinds of playful activities: newspapers, bulletin boards, videos, etc., etc. It was born out of a need to make English “transversal” and bring students close to English in a practical and playful way. And the educational community. Because somehow it also touches the educational community in the sense that all works are exhibited, parents also have an opportunity to look, etc., etc. Although there isn’t a main activity that says “let’s take the parents to...”, but in a certain way parents can see all those boards and posters when they get to school because they are posted all over the school. (J)

Other situations mentioned by teachers in which students might resort to family or community members for knowledge of English or in which the community members have access to school activities in English were the following: activities within the learning guides to be carried out at home in which students are asked to incorporate family members, and different “advertising campaigns” developed in English at the school in order to educate community members about a certain issue such as protecting the environment or urban issues.

In the activity C of the learning guides, for instance, we always include the family or the community. The idea is not to give homework, right? Here all work takes place in groups, in class. But in the part C of the learning guides one does try to involve the family: ask your grandparents or something, yes, we always do. For instance, in the learning guide that we will be working on by the end of fourth grade, we will go over Christmas time, so the students will have to make a Christmas card in English *with their family* to send to a relative or somebody they

would like to send the card to, but they will have to elaborate the card with their family, things like that.

On “English Day,” for instance, what may actually reach the community from the school are the advertising campaigns that we do. For instance, we worked on the topic of the environment, so we did an advertising campaign to remind all of us how important it is to protect the environment. We made bookmarks with messages that related to taking care of the environment in English and posted them all over the school, so other students could read the messages that younger students wanted to send to the older students in English. Actually, many students didn’t post their bookmarks because they wanted to bring them home to show their parents... The topic of taking care of the environment was actually from the learning guide for the subject of technology. We were studying plastic, polymers, etc., and since plastic is useful but it is also a pollutant, we did the advertising campaign for recycling and it was done in English. (L)

We do it with different tasks. For instance... we have done some bulletin boards for all the community to see, staff, students, etc. Advertising campaigns about the environment or about urbanity, which are sometimes simply ads or imperative sentences with images. Those ads are posted in the school hallways or on the humanities bulletin board for all the people to see. Now, trying to project those messages beyond the school doors is a bit more complicated, you know what I mean? (C)

### **Inductive Analysis**

The following were some of the themes that emerged while inductively analyzing the data for teachers’ perceptions of foreign language education:

**The students’ levels of English at the Octavio Calderón are very uneven.** A recurrent theme mentioned by teachers was how uneven the levels of English were among their students. One of the factors mentioned in order for this to happen was the school being open to receive students coming from other schools. It was usually clear for these teachers that students coming from other schools in the city have lower levels of English. However, teachers could notice that some students developed better levels of

English than others, even within the students that have spent several years at the Octavio Calderón. The fact that the students' levels of English are usually uneven and constantly altered due to the school accepting students coming from other schools creates a challenge for teachers. Below are some of the teachers' comments on the uneven level of English of their students:

The principal has invested a lot on this thing of bilingualism in the institution, but it is a very complex process because every day we receive students from other schools that do not come with the same level of English that we have here at the Octavio Calderón... The English class is a class that may sometimes be entertaining but sometimes it is very difficult because not all students realize how important it is to learn English. (Y)

And there are abysmal differences, really. There are students that are very good in English and if you talk to them in English they understand you and they try to always participate in English. And at the same time there are many students that are learning from scratch, or they have a hard time with English and have serious difficulty with the language, so that is why it is so difficult to get everyone to reach the same level.

Besides, if you have a process with a certain grade, say ninth grade, but once they get to tenth grade the group changes dramatically, let's say that several students leave and new students arrive from other schools with lower or higher levels of English, that modifies the group balance once again... Because there are precisely different learning rhythms, but in our case we have the problem of getting students with very uneven levels of English, so in the end everything has to be reduced to a level that is not going to be the highest, but an intermediate level or even one below the intermediate level in order to include the whole community of learners. (C)

I would like to have more interaction in English with my students, but due to the large number of students that one has and to the different levels of English that they have, it is not very easy. It all depends on the exposure that they have to English. And if they like it or not. Some students like English naturally. I also feel that English, or language in general, is an innate ability for some students. And also because of the things they like in terms of music, Internet, videogames... The more they are exposed to English, the better their performance in class... And there are other students for whom English is something strange. There are less of these students each year but there are many students that also culturally... For instance, a girl who came from Chocó<sup>14</sup> would say to me last year: "Ms. M., I

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<sup>14</sup> An economically depressed department (province) in Colombia

don't know any English, any, any, absolutely any!" For someone like her, who hasn't had any exposure to English, it is more difficult than for a student who has had some exposure. (M)

**English-language teaching in other schools is usually teacher-centered.**

Teachers also referred to the way in which English is usually taught in other schools in Medellín. In the section of students' perceptions of foreign language education, some of the students who had come from other schools in Medellín had also commented on this. Both teachers and students agree on the fact that in other schools English is taught in a more teacher-centered way. Usually, English lessons are taught in Spanish. Teachers at these schools usually ask students either to translate sentences from English (some sort of grammar-translation method) or to write sentences using verbs in different tenses (grammar practice). In other words, there isn't a communicative approach to have students use the target language to express themselves. What takes place in other schools is a teacher-centered approach in which translation and practice with grammar are the most important elements.

Students at the Octavio Calderón are already used to working in groups and they know that when it's time to work in groups, it's not time to play or fool around. They don't find it strange if the teacher speaks to them in English in class, or if the learning guide is in English, or if all texts are in English, whereas students coming from other schools usually say: "The thing is that I used to have to translate sentences; here's the sentence, translate it, and then the teacher would stand in the front of the classroom telling us what to do in Spanish." (Y)

Because English is still... I mean, in many other schools, I say it based on my interaction with peers, English is still the same. I mean, the teacher stands up in the front and keeps teaching the verb "to be," etc., etc. and doesn't bring many tools for students to interact with what they're learning or to create the need for the student to communicate. The teacher keeps teaching in the traditional way: the verb, the past, the future, write a sentence and that's it. (J)

**“We can’t get to the idealism of teaching a lesson directly in English: When we’ve tried to do it here, it hasn’t been seen as something positive by students and parents.”** As it was mentioned in the previous section (deductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of foreign language), one of the main changes that teachers would like to have is to teach foreign language lessons in the target language. Teachers pointed out that the level of English that students have is usually very uneven and thus it would not be fair to students with lower levels of English to teach the lessons only in English. The incident happening at the school mentioned before, in which students and parents complained when a teacher in eighth grade decided to teach her lessons in English, is proof that teachers “can’t get to the idealism of teaching a lesson directly in English.”

It turns out that in the context of a public school we [teachers] can’t... we can’t get to the idealism of teaching a lesson directly in English because the groups are not totally homogeneous. While in a group of 40 students there might be two students who lived in the United States and have some... confidence and control of the foreign language, there are others that come with zero English, I mean, they don’t know any English and one feels and realizes that trying to teach the lesson only in English could be some kind of abuse with them. (C)

I would like to have more interaction in English with the students, but due to the high number of students that one has to manage in the classroom and to the very different levels of English that students have it’s not as easy. [...] Classes are taught in both English and Spanish. The idea is that I talk to them in Spanish but I want them to interact in English a great part of the class and to answer in English and pronounce... (M)

Maybe there should be more interaction; lessons should be more interactive. But when we’ve tried to implement that interaction here at school, we’ve had some students see it as a disadvantage and they have, let’s say, complained. Because when the teacher tries to speak to his students in English, which should be the natural way since one learns that way and it creates the need, then the students and the parents complain about it. And I think that’s the change that should be introduced, that according to the grade that the student is in and keeping in mind the level the student has, each time the interaction between teacher and student in English should be higher in order to create the need, or else one will never see the

need to learn the language. But when we've tried to do it here, it hasn't been seen as something positive by students and parents. (J)

**Teachers see the motivation to study English as related to students' "life projects" and students' secondary education vocational courses.** A couple of teachers mentioned how students' interest on studying English is related to the students' "life projects" and their secondary education vocational courses. As it was also mentioned by students (see deductive analysis of students' perceptions of foreign language, *Learning a foreign language has to do with students' "life projects"*), students at the Octavio Calderón are asked from ninth grade on to come up with a "life project" in order to more clearly define the career they want to study and set their goals for the future. This "life project" is not only developed throughout several subjects such as ethics, but it may also determine the students' secondary education vocational courses.

One teacher explained how in tenth and eleventh grade students are divided in three vocational courses: software development, fashion design, and graphic design. Some English teachers take these vocational areas into account when planning their tenth and eleventh grade lessons. In other words, they may ask students to develop different projects according to the vocational course that their students are in. Some teachers said that students' awareness of how English may contribute to their "life project" is a powerful motivator for students. Students who, on the other hand, do not see the importance of English in order to carry out their "life project," will not be as motivated to learn English.

I don't think that students would be more motivated if they studied a different foreign language. I think that their interest has to do with their convictions, with the "life project" that they have. A student who knows that studying English is

important, that English is necessary to excel in today's society, sees the importance of English; but a student who has few aspirations, or a weak "life project," won't see its importance. A student who aspires to be an architect and to go out and construct great works at the level of South America or North America or Europe is not the same as a student who aspires to hold a broom in the municipality. (Y)

Here we have three vocational courses. Students in tenth and eleventh grade are divided in three groups: software development, fashion design, and graphic design. Vocational courses start in tenth grade. In ninth grade students are given a survey. In ninth grade they have an opportunity to talk about their preferences and in tenth grade they start the vocational course that they chose. Usually in part E of the learning guide, when it's time to apply knowledge, English teachers take that into account to develop the students' projects. Not all teachers do, because the same content can be taught for the three groups of students, but sometimes we do. I sometimes like to differentiate, to have each student emphasize his area... For instance, we're now working on part E of the learning guide and students in the software development course were asked to develop some sort of game or software in which they could apply the theme that we studied in the learning guide; students in the fashion design course made a fashion model in which they practiced the vocabulary and the grammar of the unit; and students in the graphic design course created flyers, brochures or posters using their knowledge of graphic design but working the theme that we had studied in class. (M)

**Listening to music in English is a common antecedent of English teachers at the Octavio Calderón.** When asked where or how they had learned English, several teachers replied that they hadn't learned English at school. Most teachers said they had learned English at the university, but that there had been one thing that had helped them significantly in learning the language: listening to music in English. One teacher also expressed that she also used to watch movies in English. Another teacher said that students who perform well in her English class usually like to listen to music in English, play videogames or use the Internet in English. In other words, the products of the English language entertainment industry can often be the gateway to proficiency in English.

My experience with English at school was very little. It was just that I liked to listen to music in English a lot, but not because of what I learned at school. (M)

English would be the foreign language I would choose. First, because it is universal and it is English that runs the world nowadays. And second, because I love it! I'm in love with songs in English (*laughs*). Besides from the songs, I fell in love with film productions in English, that unknown world, the feeling that there is a language different from the one that we always speak, so learning it and knowing it, and then there's also what I learn every time I try to transmit it to other people... (Y)

I can have students that are not very good in most subjects, but in English they excel. Then you realize that they like rock music, they listen to music in English, they spend a lot of time playing videogames in English, or they spend a lot of time on the Internet sharing stuff with people from other countries... All of that makes it easier for them to learn English. (M)

**“Nowadays kids are in contact with English from their homes.”** A frequent remark made by teachers about English and their students' relationship with English was that nowadays students are in contact with English from an early age and from the comfort of their own homes. English is present in videogames, movies, music, the Internet and therefore “English is already customary” as a student put it. When I asked if students at the Octavio Calderón weren't skipping what Krashen and Terrell (1983) call the “silent period,” (the period in which language learners are quietly receiving language “input”), by being constantly asked to speak or write in the target language, a teacher suggested that students nowadays live their “silent period” at home, being in contact with English and receiving lots of “input” in the target language.

I think that students live that “silent period” stage at home. Why? Because nowadays kids are in contact with English from their homes through videogames, movies, songs... even the advertisements that they see in the Street, almost everything in English, so I feel that they come to school with all of that already. (M)

[English] is a language that [students] use. They're around it all the time... Even for the computer's commands here at school, we have them in English, we use the computer mail in English here at school, so they start identifying what they use: the computer, Facebook... There are so many things that they use in English. (L)

## **Administrators' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education**

### **Deductive Analysis**

**Importance of a foreign language.** The reasons why the administrators of the Octavio Calderón who were interviewed considered the learning of a foreign language in Colombia important were quite varied: the principal highlighted the need for integration among nations; one of the academic supervisors referred to the fact that most of the information about research in several areas is available in English or exists in other languages; the other academic supervisor of the school talked about the importance of English for business and training purposes. Below is what each of the administrators said:

It's important for everybody. It's important to manage not only one [foreign language] but two, three... because all nations should integrate in one single voice and we have to understand and comprehend each other. (C)

First of all, we know that a lot of information is mostly available in English, right? For example, in my case, being someone who likes to study: a lot of information about research, almost everything they do in other languages is translated into English or exists in other languages. And translations are not the same as they are some sort of interpretation of what was actually written, so [learning a foreign language] is very important. (F)

Learning English opens a lot of doors because of all the people that come, all the businesses that are done, all the trainings there are. You should have at least... the possibility of getting by abroad. And one of the necessary languages to do so is English. (D)

One of the academic supervisors quoted above also mentioned how English is important for students to be competitive both academically and in the workplace.

We know that English is necessary for our students to be competitive. So as I was saying before, it's very important that our students learn that foreign language for their studies, for trainings, to have access to information, even for their jobs. (F)

The idea that learning English will improve students' competitiveness in the workplace is actually one of the reasons stated in the document *Estándares* to have English be taught in schools.

Having a good level of English facilitates access to working and educational opportunities that help improve the quality of life. Being competent in another language is essential in the globalized world... Being bilingual increases the opportunities to be more competent and competitive. (*Estándares*, p. 3)<sup>15</sup>

The question here is if these "opportunities to be more competitive" are being fostered by Colombian public schools by actually helping students become bilingual in Spanish and English at an intermediate level or if, on the contrary, students in Colombian public schools are being turned away from English. Students may become resistant to learning English because of why and how it is taught; therefore, they may be losing the "opportunities to be more competitive" that the creators of *Estándares* promote.

According to some of the ways that we have seen English is taught *in the elementary grades* at the Octavio Calderón, there are reasons to consider the latter may be happening.

Kachru (1992) has written about two main motivations to learn English: the integrative motivation and the instrumental motivation. If the motivation is integrative, the learner's desire is mainly "to identify with the members of the other linguistic cultural group" (p. 54). If, on the other hand, the motivation is instrumental, a language is acquired in a utilitarian way, that is, as a linguistic tool for special purposes rather than as a way to acquire a second culture. It is worth pointing out that most of the reasons given

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<sup>15</sup> All translations from the Colombian document *Estándares* are mine.

by administrators at the Octavio Calderón of why learning English may be important for Colombians reveal an instrumental motivation rather than an integrative motivation.

**Hegemony of English.** Two of the interviewed administrators expressed their dissatisfaction with the fact that English is the foreign language imposed in public schools and is usually the only language considered as a choice of foreign language. When asked why they thought this was happening, they talked about political and economic reasons. On the one hand, the principal said that it had to do with globalization and with how governments interrelate among others and adopt their foreign policies. She referred to the government of the U.S. as a kind of octopus whose arms are these other countries that adopt English as their foreign language. If it had been her choice, she would have had Mandarin taught at her school. Not only would she innovate, but she would also be in tune with the new order of world powers arising, according to her, in Japan and the Middle East.

I would've liked to choose another language to innovate, not because of the need. I mean, the world need is English. English is the world language. Because we're talking about a country [the United States] that was considered -because it's no longer- a world power. [...] So these countries start turning into arms, as if the U.S. was an octopus in the language and all these small arms are the countries like ours that think that they have to adopt English. But when there are other world powers forming as there are now and at a higher level, as Japan, as the Middle East, then we start saying: "How nice to learn Mandarin!" [...] Why this happens, in my opinion, has to do with the world economy, with globalization. The time to choose comes and so come the looks. It has to do with economics, with something else besides simply speaking English. It's how our governments sell or buy themselves, how they interrelate among them, and how we acquire these foreign policies. It comes from there because we're not given options. It is a lie that the school chooses [a foreign language]. The school does not choose; it is imposed on the school. (C)

The principal also talked about how English works as some kind of bridge, as a common language between people who speak different languages. She talked about her experience when representatives from UNICEF and Iraq visited her school and English was the bridge to communicate. She still asked herself why it had to be English.

And English is generally... I have confirmed it here. I don't know why English is always the bridge. Why? I would instead ask you: Why is English always the bridge in order to have an understandable dialogue among people who speak different languages? It happened to me here at the school. Last year [2012] in November I had people from UNICEF and Iraq visiting the school. About 15 teachers and principals came from Iraq along with UNICEF representatives. So imagine the situation: They would speak in Arabic, somebody would translate to English, and finally somebody to Spanish. I would answer in Spanish, somebody would translate to English, and finally somebody to Arabic. So I noticed that English was the bridge. Why wasn't Portuguese the bridge? Why wasn't Italian the bridge? Why English? (C)

On the other hand, one of the academic supervisors speculated that English was usually chosen as the foreign language to be taught in public schools for economic purposes: Although there are easier languages to learn, English is the language of commerce, he said. Once again, the influence of the U.S. was mentioned and reference was made to economic treaties among countries like Colombia and the U.S.

I imagine that it is thought that [English] is the easiest language to implement, to learn and the most logical to use. I would think. I'm conjecturing here, assuming the stance of the State in which the decision was made that the language that had to be taught was English. Knowing clearly that the Law says "foreign language" and any other simpler language could be taught. Portuguese is easier to learn than English. Italian is easier to learn than English. I imagine it is because [English] is the most commercial language, I don't know. This is a conjecture: the most commercial. The U.S.: We buy everything there, almost everything comes from there. We have to translate, then: English. The agreements, the treaties. (D)

This academic supervisor also referred to the times when he was a student and both French *and* English would be taught in schools. The General Law of Education in 1994, as it has been said, made the learning of a foreign language in Colombian public

schools mandatory from elementary school onwards. The academic supervisor asks himself why many people understood the mandate of the 1994 General Law of Education as the teaching of English exclusively. Just like the principal quoted above, he wonders why English became the only foreign language of choice if public schools would also teach languages such as French, Italian or Portuguese.

I remember in my times as a student, a long time ago, they would teach us French. And I loved French! And when the [General] Law came out French was eradicated and people thought the Law spoke of English exclusively. But the Law said “a foreign language.” Wouldn’t it be nice to have an institution that would teach you Italian, for instance? I find Italian an excellent language. To listen to it, it’s nice. Or Portuguese. And there were schools that would teach those. I had a cousin who learned to speak Portuguese and Italian in a public school. But I’m talking about my time as a student. The 1994 Law said the teaching of a foreign language was *obligatory*. From pre-school to eleventh grade. But it never said it was English! That’s when one says: Why English? English is necessary, but why is it the only one? (D)

**Other languages.** When I asked the administrators what foreign language they would like to learn, there were varied responses: The principal said she would like to learn English and French; one academic supervisor said he would like to learn German and French rather than English; the other academic supervisor said he would really like to learn English. All of the administrators recognized the importance of learning English. They had already taken courses of English at some point of their lives on their own or were, like the principal, still taking those courses. However, I could sense two of them would rather learn another language like French or German. Their reasons to study those languages were very personal:

I like English and I like French a lot. I think it’s very romantic. I think it’s a door that opens up in Europe, very important. (C)

I think in terms of languages, I would like to learn German and French rather than English. I like German. I had a professor who taught us German in college and I thought the language was very cool. Difficult as any other language, but I would love to learn it. [...] It's not that I don't like English. It's just that I have more affinity towards German due to some experiences I have had, some interaction with teachers of German. I like French also because I took a course of reading comprehension in French at the University of Antioquia. I'm interested in using French. English, because of the need. [...] Besides, as I have said, I had studied French in school. I had French lessons from eighth grade to eleventh grade, so that must've helped me like French. In that time they would teach us both French and English. (D)

One of the academic supervisors, on the other hand, had English as his major choice. He said English was necessary for him to continue his academic career. Even if he were to study in a Spanish-speaking country like Mexico, he said, he would need English to enter the university:

I would like to learn English. I try to learn it on my own for the reasons I have said. Look, even to start a master's degree they require proficiency in another language. In my case, they have asked for proficiency in English. Even to study in Mexico, where Spanish is the native language, they require English because many of the courses are taught in English. And the textbooks, the bibliography, was all in English. (F)

**Advantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of a foreign language.** Three of the administrators of the Octavio Calderón who were interviewed agreed that the Escuela Nueva model has advantages for the teaching of English mainly due to the students' group work and to the use of learning guides. On the one hand, they said, students' collaborative work allows students to learn from each other and to show the teacher what they have learned.

One of the main advantages is that students work together, collaborative work or group work. That is a really valuable advantage and tool: A student leaves the Octavio Calderón being able (*emphasis*) to be intervened by others and to

intervene others, see? Here at the school we don't foster their selfish spirit: me, me, me; no. Starting from the individual, [the school teaches them how] to share with the other, to accept the other, to look at the other, not to turn their backs on the other. The classroom furniture is adapted for that: not to turn our backs on each other. And that brings a special synergy and with time results can be seen. They now may say, "This is a silly thing, the table is there and the chair too," but sooner or later, all those lessons will translate into something. That's important, what the school does. (C)

The Escuela Nueva has students participate at a group level, see? That makes it all better. Students show what they have learned. Proactivity and interaction let students show what they are learning and let teachers identify that. (D)

On the other hand, the (self-instructional) learning guides developed by teachers allow teachers to be authors and become more involved in their students' learning process. This advantage had also been mentioned by teachers (see deductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language, Advantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of English). As teachers don't have to follow a textbook, they not only participate actively in the design of the school curriculum, but they also have the freedom to choose what's important for their students and can really "attest their students' progress without any complaints from their students."

The second advantage is that teachers are authors of what their students will learn when they elaborate their own learning guides; when they have control of their didactics, their resources, when they have control of their students' learning process and they know where their students stand and come to me and say: "C., Juliana developed this learning guide but she copied it and she's at this stage of the process," see? When teachers argue, don't copy from a text but elaborate and construct for themselves. That's when I think we can say we have a good curriculum: When teachers really participated in choosing its themes, in constructing its standards and guidelines; when teachers are able to attest their students' progress without any complaints from their students. And when a student comes to me and says: "Principal, I have nothing to say about my teacher because he has acted ethically and in conformity [in compliance with standards, rules or laws]." (C)

Learning guides also give teachers the opportunity to “personalize” their students’ learning process. As one of the main principles of the Escuela Nueva model is to understand that students learn at their own pace, learning guides take that into account and give students many options in terms of how they approach their learning process. This advantage had also been mentioned by teachers (see deductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of foreign language, Advantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of English).

With the Escuela Nueva model we’re talking about “personalized education,” because teachers explore different tools, strategies, and instruments to have each of the students that participate in that educational and formative act identify with and contextualize those processes. Through those tools, instruments and strategies, the model generates the possibility that the learner that is more visual, the learner that is more auditory, etc., can enter and be in tune with the process that the learning guide provides. (R)

One of the administrators referred to having English majors as teachers in high school as one of the main advantages that the Octavio Calderón has for the teaching of English. High school English teachers, he said, make English lessons more practical and less grammar oriented:

Well, one of the advantages, as I was saying, is to have talented teachers, mostly in high school, teachers with a degree in a foreign language. And to have them implement this methodology which is, let’s say, more practical, not as focused on a grammatical or structural level, but to have their students speak the language, right? (F)

**Disadvantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of a foreign language.** Only two of the administrators interviewed saw disadvantages in the teaching of English at the Octavio Calderón. The principal, on the other hand, saw no disadvantages. The only “disadvantage” that she saw did not necessarily have to do with

the Escuela Nueva model. Instead, she referred to teachers' devotion to their profession as one possible disadvantage of teaching any academic subject:

I don't see any [disadvantages], none. The only disadvantage sometimes is that I would like to have a school without time limit in which teachers would dedicate a lot more to their profession. In today's system in Colombia, and the world in general, things are given for teachers to miss class for teachers to sometimes not even do their homework well. And in a school like my school, the Escuela Nueva that is a school for the world, that is a daily struggle. (C)

*“Children don't have a strong background in English.”* Of the two administrators who saw disadvantages in the teaching of English at the Octavio Calderón, only one referred to an issue that had been taking place specifically at the school: students getting to high school with a very low level of English competence and suddenly required to speak and use English in practical situations. The low level of English competence that students bring to high school could be explained by the fact that English teachers in elementary are not always proficient in English (they are not English majors) and thus do not foster students' communicative skills but instead end up asking students to do grammar or vocabulary exercises. This theme had also been mentioned by teachers (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language education policy, “What is:” “The requirement level in high school is a lot higher”).

One of the disadvantages, which has been diagnosed by some high school English teachers, is that children don't have a strong background in English. And we see that happening for a simple reason and that is that the [English] teachers that we have in elementary are teachers who majored as general education teachers and do not have a strong knowledge of English. Therefore, their classes turn into a lot of grammar activities and children do not speak the language. Children only do exercises that don't help them develop their speaking skills. (F)

***Students' lack of motivation.*** The other administrator who saw disadvantages to the teaching of English at the Octavio Calderón referred to a situation that may be taking place in schools in general, not only at the Octavio Calderón: students' general lack of motivation or discipline. This administrator wished for students to become really interested in what they learn so that they can be intrinsically motivated to do things and get to the end of their tasks effectively. He wondered how teachers of the Escuela Nueva could contribute to students' discipline and (self-) motivation:

That's where I see the weakness, perhaps: in some students' lack of motivation. That's why I'm telling you that I wouldn't necessarily slice some things off from the traditional school, because discipline is still important.... I'm talking about teaching the kid that if he's going to dedicate some time to reading exclusively, he shouldn't stop reading until he's finished, see? He should stop only when he's finished. It's about incentivizing that discipline, that wanting to do things because they like to. (D)

### **Suggested changes in the teaching of a foreign language at the Octavio**

#### **Calderón.**

***There should be English majors teaching from elementary.*** One of the main suggestions of administrators at the Octavio Calderón for foreign language teaching at the school was to have teachers with a degree in foreign language teaching from early on, say, pre-school, and not only in high school. Having a foreign language major in the early elementary grades would even contribute to the issue mentioned above of children not having a strong background in the foreign language when they reach high school. This theme had also been mentioned by English teachers at the Octavio Calderón and, as I have said, constitutes one of the main weaknesses in foreign language education policy in the Colombian educational system (see deductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of

foreign language education policy: Teachers' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *In the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers who have a degree in English, not by general education teachers*). Said one of the administrators:

First of all, there is a situation: we have to strengthen students' foreign language background from the start, from pre-school. The strategy that I have thought of is maybe having a teacher who has a degree in English, an English major in order to mitigate, because it might be complex due to the fact that in elementary it is the same teacher who teaches all areas and the same happens in pre-school until second grade. (F)

***The elementary and high school foreign language curriculum should be better articulated.*** The administrator quoted above also said that besides having that foreign language specialist in the early grades, what was needed was a better articulation of foreign language content given in elementary and in high school so that students would not feel the shock of suddenly having a higher level of foreign language requirements in high school. This issue had also been mentioned by English teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language education policy: "What is": "The requirement level in high school is a lot higher").

Then, in high school, as I have said, there should be a dialogue between elementary and high school so that there is some sort of articulation at least in terms of content, and students don't feel those gaps and those differences [between elementary and high school]. (F)

**How foreign language lessons include the community.** As it had been expressed by the English teachers at the Octavio Calderón, having English lessons include the community or, as one of the teachers had put it, "trying to project those messages beyond

the school doors” has been complicated. One of the administrators talked about the day that the Escuela Nueva model calls “the day of accomplishments,” and how this day gives the opportunity to have “a moment of community integration where the triad family-school-community can be seen.” During that day, parents are invited to share their children’s “accomplishments” in any of the academic areas. Accomplishments are usually portrayed in the form of performances or presentations and parents are welcome to contribute as they wish. Although such a day exists, the administrator said that there is still work to do in how not only the English lessons, but all academic areas are articulated into “the day of accomplishments.”

This administrator also mentioned some situations in which teachers ask students to carry out activities that may give parents an opportunity to contribute, such as making recipes in class thus encouraging students to go shopping for the ingredients and perhaps integrating their parents into their learning of English:

One of the important things that the [Escuela Nueva] model has is “the day of accomplishments,” the day in which parents are given their children’s grade report, but it’s not the kind of report in which parents stand in line and the teacher says “your child did well, or didn’t do very well,” no. It’s a moment of community integration where the triad family-school-community can be seen. It’s the day in which all these application activities are taken out and students actually apply what is taking place inside the school.

So, for instance, we’ll have a dance performance but we’re going to include the parents. A practical example: a parent who speaks English is invited that day to give a talk in English and all signs are written in English that day, to see what happens. When do English lessons include the community? I have seen it in sixth, seventh, eighth grade, when [students] are working as chefs on their famous recipe and they go home and tell their parents “tomorrow in class we’re going to make this recipe so we need to buy these ingredients.” And so they tell their parents how to say this or that in English... Let’s say that in that moment there is a short integration because the kid has to go and look for eggs, has to buy the salt, has to get the bag to put it all inside, and he’ll tell his parents what he’s doing when his parents ask. So in that moment there’s some sort of articulation, but it’s not enough. There’s a lot that needs to be done. (R)

## **Inductive Analysis**

### **Foreign language.**

*English as an “added value” to compete in the labor market.* One of the academic supervisors at the Octavio Calderón expressed a possible reason for English being taught in public schools was having students graduate from high school with some sort of added value that would help them become valuable in the labor market. If many people were to look for a job within a company, he said, the person who speaks English would be the most likely candidate to be chosen for the job due to the “added value” that the foreign language represents:

When I talk about competing, I’m talking about the kid being able to enter a company and do his job according to his role. If you take five or six [people] who carry out the same function, one of them has to have an added value in order to be hired due to that added value. I imagine that the State thinks that one of the ways for the student to go out and compete and win above others is to speak English. The added value of the professional, or the student, or the person who will go out to work is English. That is what we’re taking our students to do: to compete, to believe that they have to win over others with something else. (D)

*“Not studying English now will generate a problem later in life.”* The academic supervisor quoted above told me the story of a physics student he had had some years ago: The student was intelligent but wasn’t good at learning English. He used to say that he wouldn’t need English in his life. One day, the academic supervisor sat with him and told him: “You know about Newton’s third law of physics, don’t you? Everything you do in life has a consequence, good or bad. You decide if the consequence will be good or bad. Not studying English now will generate a problem later in your life.” The student asked when exactly that would happen. The supervisor said he was not a fortune teller. Years later, the student came back to the supervisor. He told the supervisor: “Guess what

happened: I applied for a job as a chef at the Intercontinental Hotel. They said they wouldn't hire me if I didn't speak English. So I had to take an intensive course of English." The supervisor told the student: "Hadn't I told you? Nowadays you need to speak English if you want a higher level of life. And you used to say you wouldn't need English in your life because you wouldn't leave the country! See?"

The supervisor told me how his student's salary would increase and how he would earn about four times more than what he was earning at that moment. He ended up saying how English had unfortunately become so necessary in Colombia and how the PNB had helped people realize that mastering another language was very important for the globalized world we live.

*A foreign language can be a harmful weapon but it can also be a tool.* Another of the administrators at the Octavio Calderón expressed the double edged sword nature of a foreign language. A foreign language can turn into a weapon that harms or into a tool that can be used for one's own convenience. How? Basically, the administrator said, if the foreign language is imposed from above and there are no choices, and foreign language education policies require that students learn that language or else they will be "out of the system," the foreign language becomes a weapon against teachers:

[A foreign language] becomes a dangerous weapon against teachers when they tell them "if you're not there for 2019, you will be out of the system." Mastering English is an excellent idea, but if you didn't join the process of learning a foreign language, you're out? In that case, it is a lethal weapon against you because you were imposed that language; you were not given any options. A foreign language: nice. But there's also German, French, Urdu, don't pigeonhole me! (R)

On the other hand, according to the administrator, a foreign language can turn into a tool for students, some sort of “added value” (as the administrator above was quoted as saying) which can contribute to getting and maintaining a better job. If learning a foreign language becomes an enjoyable experience and students see the point of learning that language, the foreign language would definitely become a tool. Said the administrator:

How is [a foreign language] a tool? We live in a competitive society: the more knowledge you have, the more competent you will be and the harder it will be for others to take your job. In other words, you will have an efficient way to solve your employment survival. It’s as simple as that. It’s an obligatory thing and people have to buy into it. [...]

[A foreign language] would become a tool to the extent that you enjoy it, that you don’t feel that it’s being imposed on you. I say that people who are imposed things do not learn those things. Then, it means sitting down with [students], with arguments, telling them why it is important to learn it... When you are imposed things, you rebel against them. (R)

*It’s easier to learn a foreign language as a child.* The other academic supervisor at the Octavio Calderón told me about the difficulties that he had found during his school years studying English at an Escuela Nueva school. As at that time a foreign language was only studied in high school, he said that in spite of being a good student, from sixth grade on he had difficulties learning English. He said that it might be easier to learn a foreign language while you’re still a kid. Although now, as an adult, he believes that learning it is possible and that it depends on how much effort you put into it, he said he didn’t have much time to devote to the learning of English.

What happens is that [English] is not your mother tongue, right? Then, for instance, we speak Spanish but many times we don’t have much clarity about the grammar of Spanish; it is something natural for us. In order to speak English, on the other hand, you have to know the grammar of English and other things that the language requires, so that is where the difficulty lies sometimes. And perhaps it might be my own impression, but it is harder for an adult. It’s easier to learn it while you’re still a child. (F)

### **Foreign language at the Octavio Calderón.**

*English-speaking visitors are given a tour of the school in English.* One of the academic supervisors at the Octavio Calderón mentioned how English is used at the school when visitors from other countries who do not speak Spanish come to the school. Usually, the students who are more fluent in English are in charge of taking those visitors on a tour of the school in English. The English teachers at the Octavio Calderón may participate in these tours whenever there is a need, but the academic supervisor made it clear that the students were the ones in charge. This theme had already been mentioned by students (see inductive analysis of students' perceptions of foreign language: Inside school experiments, *Foreign visitors are given a tour of the school in English*).

There are also the arrangements that the principal makes regarding the foreign language. Many people from other countries come to the school due to the school model and the curiosity that they have about the Escuela Nueva. And the principal makes arrangements in that sense: The students who have the ability and who are more fluent in English are destined to interact with those visitors. We have had people from the Netherlands, South Africa, England... And so the students do the tour, they show the visitors: "Here's this. Here's that. Here's this group. We work with this model..." The tour is not given by the principal or the teachers. The teachers may help in case there is a difficulty in... communication, but it is actually the students who do the tour. (D)

### **Foreign language teachers in Colombia.**

*"You don't like English. Get bored with English": Children may start generating some prejudice against English for not having English majors teaching in elementary.* While interviewing administrators of the Octavio Calderón, the issue of having general education teachers teach English in elementary rather than teachers with a degree in English surfaced once again. This issue had also been mentioned by teachers (see deductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language education: Teachers'

suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *In the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers who have a degree in English, not by general education teachers*). Two of the administrators who were interviewed pointed out that children in the elementary grades may start generating some prejudice against English due to poor practices on the side of general education teachers who may, themselves, have some prejudice against English due to the fact that they were forced to teach it without necessarily being proficient in it.

The principal was emphatic and said that Colombian elementary teachers with their scarce knowledge of English and their poor practices in teaching English seemed to be sending an indirect message to students: “You don’t like English. Get bored with English!” Once again, she called my attention to the need to have English majors teach English in elementary. It’s worth noting that when the principal refers to “our teachers” she’s talking about Colombian elementary teachers in general, and when she refers to “my students,” she’s talking about Colombian elementary students in general, which reveals the principal’s big interest in the Colombian educational system.

In Colombia there still this idea that one teacher should teach everything! So a teacher teaches Spanish, English, Math, Physical Education, and obviously our teachers at their age don’t really do it. And they do it poorly, which is worse, because instead of helping the child to love the foreign language, they spoil him. With their poor practices they’re telling the child: “You don’t like English. Get bored with English!” So when my students take English lessons with a professional in English in high school, they’re already bored and they say: “I hate this language. What a pain!” So look at the need we have in elementary, and obviously neither the State nor the municipality of Medellín has given us those specialized English teachers for elementary. (C)

One of the academic supervisors agreed with the principal on the need to have teachers with a degree in English teach English in the elementary grades. Referring to the

specific situation at the Octavio Calderón, where English lessons start in third grade, he said that the ideal situation would be to have English specialists from pre-school and on. Having general education teachers teach English in the early grades might help students develop “some prejudice” against English:

We have to strengthen students’ foreign language background from the start, from pre-school. The strategy that I have thought of is maybe having a teacher who has a degree in English, an English major in order to compensate, because it might be complex due to the fact that in elementary it is the same teacher who teaches all areas, and the same happens in pre-school until second grade. And I think that in that stage it is crucial to have an English specialist because children may start generating some prejudice, and then by third grade it might be too late. We should take them in pre-school and motivate them when they have that sense of wonder: If they see the importance of the language, then it will be more familiar for them.  
(F)

The administrator quoted above pointed out how having an English major in elementary would get students a lot more motivated to study English:

Someone who majored in English will surely have a better management, a better control of the area and will surely motivate students to learn English a lot more.  
(F)

*There aren’t teachers of other foreign languages.* While talking with the principal about the possibility of having other foreign languages taught at the Octavio Calderón (as she had mentioned that she would like to teach Mandarin at her school as a way to innovate), I asked how likely it was to have teachers of other foreign languages at the Octavio Calderón. She replied that it was simply impossible: No matter what language a school in Medellín has decided to teach, the Departmental Secretary of Education will not appoint a teacher of a foreign language other than English. She said that it had to do with “economic policies” rather than with “curricular policies”:

No, there aren't teachers of other foreign languages, I'm telling you. If I were to say that there's a heap of teachers in Medellín: one speaks English, the other Mandarin, the other Italian... And I said: "We want to learn Mandarin in our school." Would they appoint the teacher? Of course not! Of course not. That has to do with economic policies, not with curricular policies. (C)

### **Foreign language teachers at the Octavio Calderón.**

*"It's the first time that I have found teachers who really speak English fluently."* One of the academic supervisors expressed his admiration of high school English teachers at the Octavio Calderón. Although it has been pointed out that the elementary English teacher at the school is a general education teacher who somehow was assigned to teach English in third, fourth and fifth grade, and does not have a degree in English or in English-language teaching, the high school English teachers are all English majors, as it usually happens in Colombian public schools. This fact was highlighted by one of the academic supervisors who praised the high school English teachers for their good command of English:

I admire the three [high school] English teachers because... It's the first time during the long time that I have been working in education that I have found teachers who *really* speak English fluently. Teachers like M., C., J., they speak a very fluent English! Some more than others, but very fluent. (D)

*High school English lessons at the Octavio Calderón "are very proactive" and the strategies that teachers use "are infinite."* The academic supervisor quoted above also said that high school English lessons at the Octavio Calderón were very dynamic, very "proactive," and that high school English teachers at the school constantly try many tools and strategies in order to get students to learn and practice English. He mentioned

the use of movies, videos, role plays, and magazines. He also referred to the *bilingual room*, where students can practice English at the computer using the Internet or using computer software that teachers provide.

[High school] English lessons here are very proactive. Teachers here use a lot of tools and the strategies that they use are infinite. They use movies, videos, dialogues between [the students]. There is also an exclusive English room so that [students] can start interacting speaking English: *the bilingual room*. The principal made the arrangements in order to have that room and have teachers and students use it exclusively for English, so I think the teachers' methodology is excellent. (D)

I asked the supervisor what he meant by "proactive." He said that it had to do with using anything available in order to go beyond the board to teach students how to write, use or pronounce words or expressions, with getting students active having, for instance, dialogues between them:

It's not that teachers show students on the board how to write and how to read a word, but that students go and listen to a word, start pronouncing it, start having dialogues in English, you know what I mean? And here they do that, so that there's the possibility for teachers to tell students, "You're not pronouncing it correctly." There is a closer relationship with the student. There is a higher chance to use other tools and not only use the board to write the verbs, for instance. (D)

The *bilingual room* was also mentioned as an important place for the students' development of English skills such as listening and pronunciation:

Additionally, we have an exclusive room for [students] to work on their English. There, they not only listen how English is pronounced; they also learn to speak it and listen to their teacher explain the activities in English. Sometimes it's necessary to hear how English is pronounced and to hear it not only from their teacher. That's why the *bilingual room* is a very good option when learning English. (D)

***"English Day" was an idea by the English teachers at the Octavio Calderón.*** An example of the "infinite" repertoire of strategies that high school English teachers at the

Octavio Calderón use is the creation of the “English Day,” the day in which students in different grades and academic areas exhibit projects made in English (mainly posters, information boards, or games). The “English Day” was described by some of the students who were interviewed (see inductive analysis of students’ perceptions of foreign language: Inside school experiments, *The “English Day”*). According to the academic supervisor quoted above, the English teachers at the school came up with the idea. The “English Day,” as it has been pointed out in the students’ section, is slowly turning into a week in which projects in English, even from subjects different from English, are displayed.

That’s why I highlight [English] teachers’ qualities because even when they see that there are some weaknesses, they try to do new things. Every time I see them doing new things... For instance, since last year [2012] we’ve been doing something called “English Day,” and that day has turned into a week in which all students in all areas show their ideas, their posters, their activities in English; exclusively in English. And that was the teachers’ idea; to have a week dedicated to works in English. (D)

### **Foreign language students.**

*“Children are now much more familiarized with English.”* The idea that children are now surrounded by English and that therefore they are a lot more familiarized with English was mentioned by one of the academic supervisors. This idea had also been mentioned by teachers (see inductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of foreign language: *“Nowadays kids are in contact with English from their homes”*). As the supervisor points out, English is a pervasive language in Colombia nowadays: It can be found on the Internet, on TV, on technological devices, etc.

In that sense, children are now much more familiarized with English. All children now have access to the Internet and a lot of the information that they access is in

English; also the technological devices, the TV... I think they're more familiarized, and if they have a way to do it, they send the teacher explanations or even the information in English. (F)

*“Students have lost interest and motivation due to several reasons.”* One of the academic supervisors commented that he felt that students in general have lost their interest and motivation. He refers to the interest in many different subjects, not only English. This is the same administrator quoted above in the deductive analysis section who wondered how teachers of the Escuela Nueva could contribute to students' discipline and (self-) motivation (see deductive analysis of administrators' perceptions of foreign language above: Disadvantages of the Escuela Nueva model for the teaching of English, *Students' lack of motivation*).

I asked the supervisor what the reasons could be for the students' lack of interest and motivation. In his characteristic conjectural tone he gave three possible reasons: a) teachers simply following what is required of students by the State; b) the influence of too much technology available; c) the influence of International Organizations (IOs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in setting educational standards. I'll go over each of these reasons briefly.

The first reason, teachers simply following what is required of students by the State, has to do with teachers' submission to what the supervisor calls “the traditional school,” in which students are not given opportunities to develop their strengths or talents but instead are required certain competences or standards in most areas. The academic supervisor talked about the difference between the traditional school and a more personalized approach:

The traditional school doesn't allow students to do only what they want. Students have to meet these parameters, these competences, these standards, and that should show some evidence at the end. What evidence? A grade. And that grade means what? That the student passed. [...] Instead, we could focus on the things that students like. If the State thought about that, about educating kids in what they really like, I guarantee kids would do things with all the love in this world. If the kid likes English, let's train the kid in English. The problem is to be competent in other areas. Do only what you like to do. That would be something to think about. (D)

According to the supervisor, the State is only interested in training competitive students in what it wants students to be competitive in and thus sets the standards to be reached in specific areas, leading students to become uninterested or lacking motivation.

The second reason, the influence of too much technology available, may lead students to lose their sense of wonder, according to the supervisor. He said that his seven-year-old son is constantly asking him "why is this" and "why is that," while his older stepson is not as curious and, instead, is "glued to a computer." The supervisor expressed that one of the main efforts of teachers is to "awaken the sense of wonder" that his seven-year-old son still shows, which in many students may be in a dormant state due to too much technological stimuli.

The third and last reason, the influence of IOs in setting educational standards, is quite related to the first reason. According to the supervisor, IOs such as the IMF and the World Bank are only interested in training competitive students. These organizations want students "to go out to compete and perform." The issue of how IOs may have an impact on national education systems and a role in the internationalization of school curricula has been mentioned above (see Foreign language teachers in Colombia, *There aren't teachers of other foreign languages*).

## Teachers' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB

### Deductive Analysis

**The 1994 General Law of Education.** When I asked English teachers at the Octavio Calderón what they knew about the 1994 General Law of Education regarding foreign language education, it was clear that these teachers were not “on the same page,” as it is commonly said. The 1994 General Law of Education in Colombia mandated the teaching of a foreign language starting at the elementary level, among many other things included in a comprehensive educational reform. The law states, under Article 21, the specific objectives of basic elementary education. Among these objectives, we find: “the acquisition of elements of conversation and reading in at least one *foreign language* [...] the understanding of and ability to express oneself in a *foreign language* (1994 General Law of Education, pp. 7-8).”<sup>16</sup> Out of the four teachers that were interviewed, only one teacher knew what the Law said in terms of foreign language education: the elementary English teacher. One teacher didn't know anything about it; another teacher said that he had seen the 1994 Law before but couldn't remember it; and another one said that the 1994 Law had mandated the teaching of *English* in public schools.

I have no idea. (Y)

I have seen that Law before, but it was a long time ago. I don't remember it very well now. I know that it basically asks to give students who graduate from high school enough tools to be competent in a foreign language, but I don't specifically know under what parameters. (C)

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<sup>16</sup> My translation and emphasis.

What I know is that it is obligatory to teach English since elementary in all educational institutions. (M)

The teacher with knowledge of the 1994 Law commented on the very negative effect that the Law had had among elementary teachers in general. As a foreign language was from then on obligatory, elementary general education teachers were held accountable for teaching it. As we will see, this is one of the main weaknesses in the Colombian educational system in terms of foreign language education policy: In Colombia, a foreign language is never taught in the early grades by teachers who have a degree in a foreign language. Foreign language majors only teach in high school. As general education elementary teachers are held responsible for the teaching of a foreign language, they are offered training in foreign language teaching. A simple question emerges as we think about this fact: How can teachers be trained to teach a foreign language if they don't *know* the foreign language? As we will see throughout this section, this is one of the main concerns expressed by the English teachers at the Octavio Calderón. Below is what the elementary English teacher said:

You mean Law 115? Yes, because when they decided that schools should teach a foreign language, this generated a conflict for many elementary teachers because they didn't know the language... I even had a classmate who used to say: "I wasn't taught a foreign language in normal school; otherwise, I would have retired!" (*Laughs*) In order to be ethical if one was required to teach a foreign language, one had to be trained in it... It could be any language, but it was usually English. There was also French as an option depending on the school, but generally all schools adopted English. (L)

**The National Bilingual Program (PNB).** As it happened with teachers' knowledge of the 1994 General Law of Education, knowledge of the National Bilingual Program (PNB) was scarce. Again, only one teacher – the elementary English teacher

who had actually been to some of the PNB training sessions – had a good idea of what the program was about. The other three teachers either didn't know much about it or related the PNB to more recent local initiatives such as “Medellín Bilingüe” (“Bilingual Medellín”). A couple of teachers said that the PNB (which was actually announced around the year of 2006 through the document *Basic standards of competences in foreign languages: English* and was therefore seven years old at the time of the interviews) was a very recent program. Another teacher said it was four to five years old; another one asked if the program was two years old.

Something must be said at this point in terms of how the Colombian educational system works. After the Colombian Political Constitution of 1991 the idea of decentralization was promoted in the administration of public education in Colombia in order to give the different regions in the country more responsibility in terms of finances and ensure a policy of participatory democracy (Peña Dix & de Mejía, 2012). Thus, there are three main levels of administration of public education in the country: the central level, the departmental level (provinces), and the municipal level. The central level has to do with the Ministry of Education; the departmental level has to do with the Departmental Secretaries of Education; and the municipal level is represented by the Municipal Secretaries of Education (Borjas & Acosta, 2000, as cited in Peña Dix & de Mejía, 2012).

Most English teachers at the Octavio Calderón related the PNB, dictated at the central level by the Ministry of Education, to the initiative developed at the municipal level by the (Municipal) Secretary of Education of Medellín in its initiative of turning Medellín into a bilingual city known as “Bilingual Medellín.” Such initiative is, in fact, a

more recent initiative, according to its description in the Ministry of Education website, under the heading “Medellín will invest a historical quantity in bilingual program as a strategy for equity,”<sup>17</sup> dated in July of 2012 (<http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/cvn/1665/w3-article-309992.html>). According to the website’s description, the bilingual program at the municipal level has invested “the largest budget in the history of Colombia in this area.” Below is the description of the bilingual program as developed at the municipal level found in the Ministry of Education website<sup>18</sup>:

The Bilingual Program is a city’s bet, led by the mayor Aníbal Gaviria Correa, framed within a public-private alliance that joins efforts to turn Medellín into a territory that allows for the internationalization and insertion of the city in processes of universal communication, global economy, and cultural openness. It is a strategy that hopes to strengthen social equity and diminish the social gaps through the democratization of a foreign language.

The general feeling among English teachers at the Octavio Calderón is that programs such as the PNB are unrealistic and do not usually yield good results, even among the teachers who were not familiar with the PNB. One teacher said that usually there isn’t much continuity with such programs and another said that it was too idealistic. Only the elementary English teacher said that the program was worthwhile and that Colombia should aim for higher goals in the area of foreign language education. This teacher accepted, however, that she still had a long way to go in order to reach the level expected of teachers (level C, as described by the Common European Framework of Reference), and that it will take time to reach the PNB objectives because “not all teachers are qualified.” She also said that there was, indeed, noteworthy support from the

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<sup>17</sup> My translation.

<sup>18</sup> My translation.

Colombian Ministry of Education in order to train teachers to become qualified and help students reach the desired level of English (B1, as described by the Common European Framework of Reference).

Well, in any case, we accepted the PNB. We read it. We read that it was under the Common European Framework. We read what the desired level of English was, how to identify the current English level of students and how to improve those levels. The school's English plan was based on that Common European Framework. When I read it, and I read that Colombia aimed for higher goals, that Colombia would become a bilingual country in a certain amount of time, that students should graduate from high school with a B1 level and that teachers should be at a C level, I said to myself, "This will definitely take time because not all teachers are qualified," but since one knows that those are goals that Colombia has at the national level, one tries to reach those goals from one's own job not only to have students reach that B level, but also for one to reach that C level. I mean, I'm in A2! (*Laughs*)

We had a diagnostic test and I was diagnosed as being in level A2, so imagine all I have to improve. [...] In any case I think it's interesting for Colombia to have higher goals, to challenge itself in areas that are new for the country such as foreign language education. And I can see that they're really investing in it, because sometimes goals are set and one says "OK, let's do it," but one doesn't see any resources or anything... But in this case, there are resources. The Ministry of Education has always been targeting the training of teachers so that we can really comply with reaching the goal of having students graduate with a high level, with a good level of English. (L)

One thing became clear after interviewing the teachers regarding their knowledge of the PNB: The English elementary teacher knew about it because she had actually been to some of the PNB training sessions; the English high school teachers, on the other hand, were "out of the loop" in their knowledge of the PNB. They had a vague idea of what the PNB policies were and, as it has been said, usually related the *national* program to more localized initiatives such as "Bilingual Medellín."

I don't know much about it. I know that we're working with the Common European Framework and, well... I don't really know much. (M)

I know that it's been more or less four or five years since they've been investing in the program, but since there isn't a unified approach, all the effort that they've

made is wasted and we don't see the results. Why? Because each one comes and does as he wants and there is no continuity of the processes. Considering the time that they've been investing on that project, it should be yielding results by now. (Y)

It is a very, very recent program and... I know it is a very ambitious project that Medellín has: getting the city to become bilingual. And that Bilingual Program is only, what, two years old? I mean, the idea of saying "bilingual Medellín." However, I see it's very complicated. It's too ambitious and too idealistic. It depends on the amount of years in which Medellín projects itself as a bilingual city. I think that turning a city into a bilingual city is a very, very long process and, as I have said, Medellín's public institutions, I mean, the way Medellín's public institutions are managed, it doesn't lend itself to something as ambitious. I'm telling you: I think the problem lies in the number of students that we have to manage per class to teach a foreign language lesson. (C)

**PNB Objectives.** As pointed out previously, the major goal of the PNB is to make students bilingual in Spanish and English in accordance with international standards by the year 2019 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006). It's important to remember that the year 2019 was determined because in that year Colombia will commemorate its 200 years of independence, and goals in different areas (including education) were set for that year. In other words, the year was determined in an arbitrary way. The minimum expected level for high school graduates by the year 2019 is a pre-intermediate level, which corresponds to the B1 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages. The minimum expected level for English teachers is an Intermediate level, which corresponds to the B2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages.

In general, English teachers at the Octavio Calderón were skeptical of the national objectives of the PNB. Teachers mentioned several reasons why those objectives were difficult to reach and unrealistic: (a) teachers themselves are sometimes not qualified

enough; (b) there isn't a unified approach; (c) the number of students in the classroom is simply too large to reach all students equally; (d) elementary English teachers don't have a degree in English; and (e) there are too few weekly hours devoted to English. As we will see, all of the above were recurrent themes in the teachers' assessment of foreign language teaching policies in Colombia. Therefore, many of these themes will reappear either as changes that they expect to have at their school or as suggestions that they have in terms of foreign language education policy in Colombia.

The truth is we're in our diapers. To start with, sometimes we have our own shortcomings for teaching. Or we may have a lot of knowledge but we do not know how to transmit that knowledge. As there is not a unified approach, or a unification of needs in all schools, having all students speak the same language, having the same number of weekly hours for English, having qualified personnel, etc., etc., then I don't think we will reach the objective. (Y)

I see it very difficult to reach. I mean, they provide us with events, trainings, talks and all of that. But I have never seen them invite us to a talk in which they want to help us or show us how to reach those objectives with very large groups. Never. It can sound very pessimistic, but I don't think the PNB objectives will be reached. In order to say that the objective was reached, there should be statistics of an impressive amount of schools. Now, as it is customary here in Colombia, or in this kind of government, they will make up things in order to make them look beautiful. So they will pick up three or four schools that did well in the ICFES<sup>19</sup> test and they will have those four schools as their sample. And then it will probably project at an international level: "Medellín made it." But they won't say exactly who made it. Ten out of forty students? Three out of forty schools? (C)

It is very difficult to reach the objectives. It is very difficult because of the things that I have said. I mean, we're saying that English should be obligatory from elementary school. But English taught at the elementary grades is not of very good quality and as I told you in a previous question: they sometimes do not choose a qualified teacher to work in the area. I mean, we have to think about several things: the number of hours per week; here at school we're lucky to have four hours per week but in most schools they have three; the number of students per group; the times when there are unqualified teachers; and the fact that

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<sup>19</sup> A test administered to students in all Colombian schools prior to graduation similar to the SAT in the U.S.

elementary English teachers are not qualified to teach English. So I think it is difficult to reach those objectives. (M)

Only one of the teachers seemed hopeful about the PNB objectives: the English elementary teacher that was more familiar with the PNB itself. This teacher said that the objectives of the PNB should not be lowered and that taking into account students' exposure to English nowadays, the goal of having students graduate from high school with a Pre-intermediate level in English could actually be reached.

Well our goals are ambitious but I wouldn't say that we should lower the bar or anything, no. We have to try to meet those goals, and to me it is possible because... it's a language that they use, they're around it all the time... Even for the computer's commands here at school, we have those commands in English, we use the computer mail in English here at school, so students start identifying what they use: the computer, Facebook... There are so many things that they use in English, that I know that it is possible to get there if one intends to. And if one sets oneself a target, most surely one will do things in class that will help reach the target level. The problem is that in any case the number of hours per week is not enough to reach the objectives because I only have two hours per week whereas one knows that in private bilingual schools students either have many hours of English per week or have bilingual teachers who always speak to students in English. One knows that here at this school it won't happen. Elementary teachers don't even risk saying a word in English, so one has disadvantages but we try our best. (L)

**The document *Estándares*.** Teachers' opinions regarding the document *Estándares* were mixed. It's important to remember that the document *Estándares* was published by the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) in partnership with the British Council in Colombia in order to help students reach the goal of the PNB. The document adopted the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) and reorganized them according to Colombian notions of grade levels. Thus, it could be said that the document started a radical reform of

foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia in the sense that (a) a foreign framework of standards was adopted, and (b) it was adopted for competences in English exclusively.

The teachers who were interviewed had at some point seen the document *Estándares* before. Some of them would keep the document at hand in order to prepare their lessons. To a certain extent, the document would guide their lesson planning. The following quotes illustrate how some teachers use the document *Estándares* to develop their learning guides. It is worth mentioning that although the school's learning guides in high school are written in English, the descriptions of competences (standards) from the *Estándares* appear in Spanish for students to have a clear idea of what is expected from them.

In order to develop our curriculum we stick to the guidelines and standards of the PNB. We look exactly what students should learn according to the levels. A student in level A1 should do this and this. Then, one starts planning: "remember to do this..." In a meeting of English teachers we distribute the themes in order not to repeat them and to keep in mind the competences that we will be working on. In that meeting we decide things such as: in first grade we'll go over the family and the colors; in second grade we'll go over this and this... And then the teacher, looking at the competences, elaborates her learning guides based on those themes. (L)

I look at the standards first. They determine what I will be doing in class. For instance, I copy the first standard on the learning guide (*reading from Estándares*): "I identify key words in the text that help me understand the general idea." This is a standard in the areas of listening and reading. Why? Because I don't want the student to look up every single word in the dictionary. I want him to figure out the general context of the reading or audio using the words that he knows. OK, a standard in listening, for instance (*reading from Estándares again*): "I use the images and the information in the classroom context to understand what I listen to." In my learning guides I include listening activities. I try to have very natural conversations in the listening activities that I download from the Internet. (M)

Other teachers seemed to just have a general idea of what the document was about and would not refer to it as frequently in order to plan their lessons. Although two teachers saw the idea of having standards for the teaching of English as a positive thing that could actually improve the teaching and learning of English, one teacher saw this kind of document as having little ground on the foreign language teaching context of the country, on the day-to-day experience that students and teachers in public schools live.

Those standards were created from a desk, not from real life or experience. Then, when I create from a desk, it's very easy; but when I'm going to apply it to real life, I realize that a lot of these things are completely unrealistic... For instance, a student from first to third grade should be able to recognize animals, figures; should be able to greet, respond to basic commands in English... but I don't know how the government intends to accomplish that if it doesn't even send a qualified English teacher for elementary; if it is the teacher who teaches science, social studies, math, and religion, the one who should also teach English for an hour a week. And many times since that teacher doesn't know the language or hasn't studied the language, then he will end up skipping that hour of English to teach math or social studies or science... That is the real problem that we have here in Colombia. That document has nothing to do with the day-to-day in which one works. [...] If [the government] were really interested in investing to have students learn English from the elementary grades, then in high school students would keep going on their own. They would be like kites that one would only have to guide a little bit because they come with such strong basics that the acquisition of knowledge would be really simple. (Y)

The teacher quoted above refers to the standards in the document *Estándares* as being “unrealistic” also because of her experience with students coming to the Octavio Calderón from other schools in Medellín. The teacher highlights the kind of chaos that the lack of a “unified approach” in terms of implementing these standards can cause. According to her experience, students in public schools in Medellín do not even have the same number of hours of English per week. Thus, she says, no matter how clear the standards described in *Estándares* are, there will always be things related to how each school approaches foreign language teaching and learning that will prevent students from

actually reaching those standards, such as the number of hours per week that each school devotes to the teaching of the foreign language.

So for instance this year we've had difficulties with the students entering sixth grade because the requirement level in high school is a lot higher. We've had mothers telling us, "The thing is that my son used to have only one hour of English. Sometimes he wouldn't have any, or he would miss class, or his teacher would take the hour of English to teach other subjects." Therefore, the student brings zero knowledge of English to our school even though he's supposed to have reached those famous standards that were created from a desk. It's just like building a house: it can have beautiful walls and it can be covered in marble but if its foundations are weak, it will fall in a matter of days. The same thing is happening with the teaching of English in Colombia. (Y)

Although most teachers knew that the standards had been adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference, they hadn't asked themselves what that really meant, if this was something positive or negative. Except for the teacher that emphatically opposed the document for not being grounded in students' actual experiences with the language, most teachers seemed to have faith in the document and in the people who elaborated it. While giving their opinion about the document, many times teachers, in referring to what they saw as the main weaknesses of the foreign language education context in Colombia, gave their own reasons of why it would be hard to reach those standards. Some of the (recurrent) problems teachers brought up were (a) having unqualified English teachers in the elementary grades, (b) having very few hours of English per week, and (c) evaluating students from different backgrounds (rural/urban, public/private) using the same test: the ICFES exam.

We're based... I know we're based on the competences established in the International European Framework, right? (C)

What happens is that with this kind of document, obviously, I feel that the perspective of English-language teaching in Colombia has improved... Looking at the document I see that what is sought is to work on competence, but at the same

time we have to be very aware of the possibilities that students may have within their context. Then, even if now it is easier to learn English because students have access to the Internet, we also have to keep something in mind: the fact that all students are being evaluated in the ICFES with the same measuring stick, no matter if they're from a rural area, a public school or a private school. Then it is exactly there, in the evaluation, where I feel that it is not fair because students in a private school have more hours of exposure to English, more access to the language for obvious reasons, so the way they measure shouldn't be the same. Therefore, I think that the ICFES should take that variation into account. (M)

Well anyway one knows that all those documents, the guidelines... they were an effort made by a group of people who know and who set important goals. I also happen to know the document developed for arts, and I know that professors that I had when I studied arts, very good teachers, were in charge of developing that document. And they would also tell us about the document developed for English and how that document looked as if it was made for another country because they dreamed of wonderful things. In arts, they expected schools not only to teach crafts, but also to have students appreciate the arts through dance, music, the body... And if the teacher is not passionate about this, he won't reach the minimum standards. The same thing happens with English: they were dreams that I think when one aims for a higher dream, that's when you get better. Otherwise, we'll just stay in this idea that "no, we're mediocre, or there aren't any resources, or the teachers are really bad," and then we're going to have very low standards, no. They set some standards in order for one to improve the level. (L)

**The Common European Framework of Reference.** The opinions that teachers had about the fact that the standards described in the document *Estándares* were adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages were mixed. Some teachers saw it as a positive thing: one teacher said that there should always be a frame of reference; another said that having those standards would contribute to having "competitive high school graduates" at an international level.

I think it's OK. There should always be a frame of reference anyway. Another thing is how each teacher will adapt or implement that frame of reference, but in general I think it's OK. (M)

I think that the impact of the [Common] European Framework has been very important because at least it is something that delimits and shows us the levels we

want to get to, the standards. It would be very different if we didn't have any guidelines or if we designed our own guidelines, our own standards. I think that in order to have competitive high school graduates, not for the city but for the world, we must base ourselves in a common language, which in the case of foreign language teaching are these standards of competences, so I do think it is really important. (C)

Other teachers saw the adoption of foreign standards as something more arbitrary: one teacher hoped to one day have standards developed “according to the needs that we have in our country;” another teacher drew attention to the fact that many times foreign models are adopted in Colombia without any kind of validation process, i.e., some kind of pilot program or experimental trial in which models are tested and proved against a very specific context that brings its own set of difficulties. Some of the difficulties that the Colombian context may bring that were identified by this teacher were (a) the lack of resources that many institutions face and (b) the fact that many times classrooms are overcrowded and thus offer numerous distractions for students. According to this teacher, such circumstances found in the Colombian context will make it difficult to reach the standards based on foreign models such as the Common European Framework of Reference.

I think that one day when we really learn to create according to the needs that we have in our country, things will be different. (Y)

What I perceive is that usually here in Colombia we don't start with educational policies that are born or emerge from our context, from the ground up, but instead we try to copy models that have yielded results in other places. And when it comes to apply the model in this context, the model doesn't really work. The model is not validated. The teacher is simply given the booklet with the model and is told “this is what you should (*gesture of quotation marks*) teach.” And usually there hasn't been a previous validation process of the new model or standard that will be adopted.

It would be good to have previous experiences to validate the model. In other words, saying “OK, we brought this, let's experiment here.” If we get good results, the model would be validated and it could be adopted as national policy.

Even with some slight changes, but it would be more applicable. Or having an experimental trial or pilot program, could be. Simply having a way to apply the model to see how it works and if there are good results, then it can be expanded to the national territory. [...] To the extent that the model is not validated with the person in charge of applying the model, and it isn't adapted to the context, the model won't work. Context is a very important thing because our context is one in which most institutions do not have the resources and most institutions have overcrowded classrooms in which students can't pay attention to the lesson because they are distracted by circumstances in their environment. (J)

Even within those teachers that were in favor of adopting the standards of the Common European Framework, there was some sense of disbelief that these standards were actually beneficial within the Colombian context of foreign language education: one teacher expressed how the standards emphasize students' performance on formal tests of English (such as the test administered by the ICFES) and overlook students' actual communicative competence, that is, students' ability to have an informal conversation with foreigners in English.

[The standards] focus a lot on the areas of comprehension and basic presentations but I haven't seen any focus on the communicative competence of students, you know what I mean? Students being able to go out and have an informal conversation with a foreigner or something like that. They mostly promote being able to comprehend, give opinions or write something personal based on a reading, but the communicative approach is very far from that, I think. (C)

On the other hand, as it was already mentioned regarding the elaboration of the document *Estándares*, there was some sort of blind faith in the judgment made by the people who chose the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference: their choice must have been the right choice, most teachers said. In general, not one single teacher had actually gone to the original document published by the Council of Europe (2011), had seen what part of the original document was actually adopted, or knew of any other foreign language framework.

I don't know of any other framework. And I think that the people who adopted [the Common European Framework] did so because it would adapt more to the abilities that Colombia has. So I believe in those who said, "Let's stick to this framework because we will achieve things this way." I don't know any other framework either. (L)

I haven't seen the original document but I know that the previous one was from Spain or something like that. And now they thought this one was better so they changed it. No, wait, not Spain, I don't remember... Anyway, they thought this one was better and they changed it. (Y)

### **Teachers' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia.**

*In the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers who have a degree in English, not by general education teachers.* There was one theme mentioned by the four teachers that were interviewed: In Colombia, English in the elementary grades should be taught by teachers who have a degree in English and not by general education teachers as it usually is. Teachers see this as one of the main weaknesses of foreign language education policy in Colombia. High school English teachers at the Octavio Calderón feel that students coming from the elementary grades do not have the basic foundations of English. They attribute students' lack of a strong foundation in English to the fact that English in the elementary grades is taught by general education teachers who many times don't know the language very well. Although the efforts of the PNB include training those teachers in order to be qualified to teach the language, it is evident that teacher training will not be enough to compensate for their lack of knowledge of English.

In the case of the Octavio Calderón more specifically, the elementary school English teacher acknowledged the issue herself (see first quote below). After explaining how she was assigned to teach English simply because she was one of the few teachers who would attend the training sessions offered by the Ministry of Education, she was

emphatic about how important it is to have English majors teaching in elementary school. She admitted that her own level of English was not good enough to be teaching at the elementary level. On the other hand, the high school English teachers at the Octavio Calderón appreciate her effort but say it is not enough.

The first thing is to have teachers who have a degree in English teach English since elementary. We elementary teachers have very basic knowledge of English and I think that mostly English, physical education and arts should be taught by specialists because children learn very easily; they're like sponges that soak everything easily. The levels of English would change a lot if students had a person who really mastered the language, teaching them English since first grade, speaking to them in English since first grade. As a teacher, I'm kind of learning at the same time with my students, but I study! I study a lot the vocabulary that I bring to students in order not to make mistakes.

There's this story of a teacher who was seen by a secretary telling her students that "twelve" was "ten-two" in English. One says: What was that teacher doing there if she didn't even study the numbers herself?! Then, if teachers had English degrees, if they mastered the language, I think we would reach higher goals, the way they do in private or bilingual schools where all teachers are English graduates who have also studied the subject they teach. Teachers speak English all the time and they awaken the students' linguistic competence easily. That would be one of my policies: English majors teaching in elementary school. (L)

First of all I would like to have more qualified personnel to teach in elementary. Elementary English teachers don't have a degree in languages. Instead, they are general education teachers that are trained in English to teach their students. I think that just as it is required to have a language graduate teach in high school, it should be required to have a qualified teacher to approach children from the very beginning. (M)

I don't know how the government intends to accomplish [the objectives of the PNB] if it doesn't even send a qualified English teacher for elementary; if it is the teacher who teaches science, social studies, math and religion, the one who should also teach English for an hour a week. And many times since that teacher doesn't know the language or hasn't studied the language, then he will end up skipping that hour of English to teach math or social studies or science... That is the real problem that we have here in Colombia. [...] If [the government] were really interested in investing to have students learn English from the elementary grades, then in high school students would keep going on their own. They would be like kites that one would only have to guide a little bit because they come with such strong basics that the acquisition of knowledge would be really simple. (Y)

The other suggestion is to have actual English teachers since pre-school, since first, second, third, fourth and fifth grades, because here in Colombia the government doesn't allocate an English teacher for the elementary grades. They only allocate English teachers from sixth grade to eleventh grade. I mean, who is in charge of teaching English in elementary? Any teacher who teaches elementary. There isn't actually an English teacher teaching English in elementary. That would really strengthen the foundations that students would bring to sixth grade, you know what I mean? That would really be a fundamental proposal if we want to have a bilingual Medellín. [...]

In my humble opinion, although [the PNB] must have been done by specialists, I think they are doing it the wrong way, because they're trying to teach English courses to teachers in elementary who are teaching science, social studies, math, etc. And they intend to train those teachers to also teach a foreign language: English. I think that the person in charge of teaching English in elementary must be a professional in foreign language teaching. (C)

*More hours of English per week and fewer students in each class.* Some of the suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia from the interviewed teachers were the same as the changes suggested in the teaching of a foreign language at the Octavio Calderón (see teachers' perceptions of foreign language, research question 2 above). Teachers said that (a) there should be more weekly hours of foreign language instruction, and (b) there should be fewer students in each class. Each of these two themes was mentioned by two teachers out of the four who were interviewed.

I would like to intensify the number of hours of English per week, but that is sometimes not very feasible because we only have 25 hours to divide among all subjects. So what subject are we going to take hours from if all the subjects should be as important? (L)

I mean, we have to consider several things: the number of weekly hours of English; here at the Octavio Calderón we have the advantage of having four hours per week but in most schools they have three; the quantity of students per group... (M)

One of my main suggestions is the one that I have already mentioned twice: trying to have, at least during English class, smaller groups. Trying to reduce the groups at least 50%: If we have a class of fifty students, it would be good to have two groups of twenty-five students each. (C)

*Having some sort of field work to adjust the program to the needs of regions or specific contexts.* A couple of teachers mentioned the fact that Colombia is a really diverse country and thus foreign language education standards would have to be adapted to the very specific needs of regions or contexts. These teachers were aware of social inequality in Colombia, of the distinctions between public and private, and rural and urban schools. Even within the context of urban schools, a teacher says, there are differences determined by socioeconomic status. Then, it is simply not fair to have the same foreign language standards for all schools.

One teacher suggested having some sort of field work or research with participants from different social areas: government, educators, parents, students, and experts or specialists. There would be focus groups, let's say, according to regions. These focus groups would be in charge of developing standards for their region or context. Then, the government would collect all the information from regions or contexts and would try to structure (give a pattern or organization to) all the information. The teacher didn't know exactly how such information could be organized, but she found such process more organic and worthy than simply adopting pre-existing standards, such as those of the Common European Framework, which were developed for individuals with different needs and objectives. The same point was raised by another teacher who succinctly referred to the initial and crucial step in the implementation of any foreign language program or model: "adapt it to the different social contexts."

I would suggest having field work, I mean, not really following what [the Ministry of Education] likes. Planning for a private school is not the same as planning for a public school, and even within public schools, planning for a public school here in Medellín is not the same as planning for a public school in Sopetrán, which is located in a small village. Teaching here at the Octavio

Calderón is not the same as teaching in a village or in a municipality where children are only thinking about whether it's time to harvest the coffee, milk the cow, sweep the house floor, or things of that sort. There is a lot of inequality in Colombia, so we can't really follow what a few people like, but instead we should have a field work done and adjusted to the needs of specific regions. Everybody must participate in that field work because if it is only done by those people at the desk that I mentioned to you the other day, they will make the same mistakes if they do it on their own. If we teachers do it on our own, from our own experiences and expectations, we will make mistakes that perhaps the people at the desk outside have already seen or know how to avoid... I think it's everybody's responsibility: government, educators, parents, and students.

I dream of it this way: We would have committees from all points: a government committee, a committee representing educators, and we would contact experts to guide the research and to look at different focus groups. Then, kind of gather the information that those focus groups have. Once they have all the information, they would start unifying and structuring all that information. That's why I say it's a lot of work! But surely it would yield better results than simply copying and adapting from others who don't have the same needs as we do. (Y)

My proposal: Initially, adapting it to the different social contexts. I mean, our context is very different to... In other words, Colombia is a very diverse country, so we should adapt it to the different social contexts. (J)

*Having pilot programs to validate foreign language education models.* Another suggestion made by one of the teachers who were interviewed was to have pilot programs or experimental trials in order to validate foreign language education models or reforms. This point was mentioned above in regard to this teacher's perception of the Common European Framework of Reference. According to this teacher, regarding the implementation of foreign models, many times there isn't a process to actually prove if the model to be implemented is effective within a Colombian context. His simple suggestion is to actually test the model or reform to be implemented in some kind of pilot program. In this case, teachers would be important agents and would have a say in terms of adapting the model. Teachers' input to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the

model would be helpful in adapting the model to different contexts. Doing so, the teacher said, would be more of a bottom-up process, unlike current procedures, which are more of a top-down process that doesn't necessarily bring about positive results.

What I perceive is that usually here in Colombia we don't start with educational policies that are born or emerge from our context, from the ground up, but instead we try to copy models that have yielded results in other places. And when it comes to apply the model in this context, the model doesn't really work. The model is not validated. The teacher is simply given the booklet with the model and is told "this is what you should (*gesture of quotation marks*) teach." And usually there hasn't been a previous validation process of the new model or standard that will be adopted. It would be good to have previous experiences to validate the model. In other words, saying "OK, we brought this, let's experiment here." If we get good results, the model would be validated and could be adopted as national policy. Even with some slight changes, but it would be more applicable. Or having an experimental trial or pilot program, could be. Simply having a way to apply the model to see how it works and if there are good results, then it can be expanded to the national territory. (J)

*A unified approach to the foreign language education guidelines.* Although a couple of teachers talked about foreign language education standards being adapted to specific regions or contexts and foreign language education models or policies being validated at the local level, there was one teacher who saw the need to have a unified approach in terms of the general guidelines for foreign language education. In other words, all public schools should be consistent with at least some norms that determine how to teach a foreign language such as the number of hours of English per week, the sequence of content areas according to grade levels, etc.

One of the main reasons this teacher suggested a unified approach was her experience with students coming to the Octavio Calderón from other schools in Medellín. The teacher has noticed how students in other schools in Medellín bring very little

knowledge of English. (This issue has already been mentioned; see teachers' perceptions of foreign language, inductive). The low level of English of students coming to the Octavio Calderón could be attributed not only to the fact that other schools teach English differently (using a teacher-centered methodology as opposed to the Octavio Calderón's student-centered methodology), but also to the fact that schools and teachers do as they please and don't follow a set of established guidelines in terms of foreign language teaching. Having what this teacher calls "a unified approach" would prevent such situation or at least would diminish the gap in the students' knowledge of English.

First, I would like to have a unified approach from the Ministry of Education and to have all schools give foreign language learning the same degree of importance. If you take a look, you will see that here in Medellín each school works in its own whimsical way. Each school controls its weekly hours of English and each teacher works his way. Here, thank God we have the Escuela Nueva model and we have to adapt ourselves to its methodology, but when we receive students coming from other schools, we notice how uneven the teaching of a foreign language is at the national level. These students are used to translating sentences and as soon as they arrive here, thus, they're shocked.

So I'm in favor of a unified approach and of giving the learning of a foreign language the importance that it should have. English or any other language. If a student comes from eighth grade from a school in Cartagena to eighth grade here at the Octavio Calderón in Medellín, the continuity of the Colombian foreign language curriculum should make that student's transition smooth because we would be following the same guidelines here in Colombia. It would prevent the student from getting lost and saying something like "the thing is that at the other school I was studying vocabulary about animals, not verb tenses." It's not a matter of standards but of having a unified curriculum, let's say. Having all schools teach the same, having some sort of root or ground, I don't know how to explain... Not getting students with so many weaknesses simply because they're coming from another school. If we decide to have three hours of English per week, then all schools should have three hours; if we decide to have four weekly hours, then all schools should have four weekly hours. And all schools should teach the same content areas. (Y)

***Better control of teacher quality selection.*** One of the interviewed teachers suggested having a more rigorous process in the selection and recruitment of English teachers both at the elementary level and at the high school level. According to this teacher, the Departmental Secretary of Education doesn't always evaluate the total quality of English teachers: knowledge of English, pedagogy, passion to teach. Sometimes, this teacher said, English teachers in schools are not qualified and end up teaching English because they couldn't find anything else to do. Teaching English was for these teachers some sort of last resort, a way to get to a safer position among the difficulties of getting a steady job. And, unfortunately, the Departmental Secretary of Education may not notice these teachers' lack of preparation because of its loose requirements in the process of teacher selection, this teacher said. Thus, many times teachers are not well prepared to teach English.

One more time, the issue of having English teachers with degrees in English came up. Among the considerations that the Departmental Secretary of Education should have in order to select qualified teachers is their degree in English, this teacher said. A combination of English knowledge, pedagogical skills, and love for teaching would make a qualified teacher for both elementary and high school.

I also think it's necessary to revise the quality of the teachers that will be recruited in schools very well. Sometimes the Departmental Secretary of Education doesn't really notice many aspects of teachers who apply for a job in the municipality. They sometimes don't notice this person's level of English, or his pedagogy, I mean, I don't think they carry out a really selective process. [...] My suggestion would be: First, teacher selection: when it comes to choosing teachers for schools, to choose them well. In the job interview the selected teacher must have made it clear that he likes what he does and that he knows English. Many English teachers end up teaching English without even knowing the language. Or many times teaching becomes the last resort in terms of finding a job. [...] [There should be] a better selection [of teachers]. First, elementary teachers should also be required

to have a degree in English. I don't know why there is this idea that because they're elementary teachers, English teachers don't need to have that much of a high level. Quite the contrary: Teachers should be very good for that initial stage! They should have the pedagogy, the real knowledge of the language. Besides, they should like what they do. The same thing should apply for high school. If I interview a teacher to see if he's qualified: First, he should like what he does; teaching shouldn't be his last resort in terms of finding a job. Second, he should know the language, be competent, and be able to speak it, read it, and understand it. And he should have good pedagogical skills. (M)

*Updating teaching practices to more interactive tools such as the Internet.* One of the interviewed teachers suggested that teachers be constantly updating their teaching practices and that schools help teachers in their updating process. In the Internet age, this teacher said, English teachers should find ways to bring into their teaching all the possibilities that the Internet has. Teachers can't only rely on what they learned or on how they learned it. They have to constantly catch up with new ways of interaction. This teacher suggested having students interact in English with native English speakers via the Internet as one of the possibilities that a modern English classroom could incorporate. Thus, schools should provide the tools for students to keep up to date with new ways of interacting and learning, the way the Octavio Calderón has attempted to with its "Bilingual Room," the classroom where students carry out guided activities on the Internet.

My proposal: [...] Trying to give teachers the basic tools for them to try to teach English well. [...] Trying to... update ourselves, I don't know if that's the right word, but trying to update English teachers in their area as well because language is a changing thing, it's dynamic and alive. While many teachers stay only with what they have learned, teachers who are outdated for sure, it would be good to update teachers so that they teach what really is... And they do it with the appropriate tools, which are more dynamic. We already have an advantage: There is a growing tendency among most institutions at the national level to use the Internet, to make it available for all the family, to make it affordable for those in

the lower socioeconomic status, etc., etc., etc. So I would suggest trying to use those tools, I mean, using them for something more specific: for interaction. How? The school with the lowest number of computers now has at least four or five of them. It's not a matter of having those computers but of using them as tools. Using those computers starts creating the need in students. If students go on the Internet but not to the same pages or websites in Spanish, but instead to pages and websites that have been previously selected by teachers because they are useful and interesting, then teachers will be able to use those programs as support to study English in an interactive way, even having students interacting with native speakers somehow. (J)

### **Inductive Analysis**

The following were some of the themes that emerged during my inductive analysis of the data regarding teachers' perceptions of the PNB policies. The themes have been organized in two main sections: (a) What is: What English teachers at the Octavio Calderón see is happening right now as a result of the PNB policies and (b) What should be: What English teachers at the Octavio Calderón think should be happening in foreign language teaching policy.

#### **What is.**

##### ***Teachers.***

*"Since they are forced to teach English, they don't like English."* Starting with the 1994 General Law of Education general education elementary teachers were held responsible for the teaching of a foreign language in the elementary grades even if they didn't have a degree in foreign language teaching. The resistance that such law created

among many elementary teachers has been mentioned above (see deductive analysis, The 1994 General Law of Education). It has also been pointed out that efforts by the PNB have been carried out in order to train these elementary teachers to teach English. It is clear, however, that the training of these elementary teachers will not compensate for their lack of knowledge of English.

One of the interviewed teachers went further to say that elementary English teachers *don't like* to teach English and don't like English itself simply because they are required to teach it although they are not English majors. This issue was also brought up by the principal of the Octavio Calderón when she said that many times these teachers transmit their dislike of English to their students as if suggesting to students, "Get bored with English!" (see administrators section).

Elementary teachers don't like English because they're focused on other subjects. But since they are forced to teach English and they are not qualified, they don't like English. So they won't find a methodology that would help their students like English. In order to have students love English, the teacher has to be really qualified and, more important, he has to like what he does. (M)

This idea was reinforced by the elementary English teacher at the Octavio Calderón when she explained how she was chosen to be the English teacher in the elementary school. As it has been mentioned above, she was assigned to teach English at the school simply because of all the elementary teachers at the school, she was the only one who would regularly attend the training sessions offered by the Ministry of Education. She clearly expressed that none of the other elementary teachers wanted to teach English:

I'm still learning English but since of all elementary teachers I'm the only one who kind of likes English and likes to be in English courses, I was asked to teach it. In elementary, all teachers teach all subjects, as we teach the basics. But three

years ago we implemented this idea of having teachers become specialists and intensify their work in certain areas. [...] I have a degree in elementary education but then (*laughs*) I studied arts... I would love to teach art lessons in elementary, but when the areas were assigned, there were other teachers who wanted to teach arts whereas nobody wanted to teach English. (L)

*“Not all teachers are qualified.”* Two English teachers at the Octavio Calderón commented that one of the main obstacles to reach the objectives of the PNB was the fact that teachers themselves are sometimes not qualified enough to teach English. As it has been pointed out above, the main requirement for English teachers should be to have a degree in English, but even teachers who have a degree in English are not qualified to teach English if they don't know how to manage a classroom or don't have pedagogical experience.

The truth is we're in our diapers. To start with, sometimes we have our own shortcomings for teaching. Or we may have a lot of knowledge but we do not know how to transmit that knowledge. (Y)

When I read [the PNB], and I read that Colombia aimed for higher goals, that Colombia would become a bilingual country in a certain amount of time, that students should graduate from high school with a B1 level and that teachers should be in a C level, I said to myself “this will definitely take time, because not all teachers are qualified.” (L)

### ***The PNB's teacher training.***

*“The only thing they have done is invite teachers to training sessions.”* As it has been pointed out above, the PNB offers training sessions for teachers (either for general education teachers in elementary grades or English teachers in high school). The elementary English teacher at the Octavio Calderón made the point that many times in

teaching programs or initiatives such as the PNB there aren't resources, but that this time there *were* resources and that the Ministry of Education has actually been investing in teacher training. She has been quoted saying: "The Ministry of Education has always been targeting the training of teachers so that we can really comply with reaching the goal of having students graduate with a high level" (see deductive analysis above, The PNB).

However, one of the interviewed teachers had the feeling that the *only* thing that the PNB had been doing was "invite teachers to training sessions." This teacher expected a national foreign language program to implement deeper reforms at the school level ("to the curriculum," as he says) such as having more weekly hours of English and smaller groups to teach. These two issues have been mentioned above (see deductive analysis, Teachers' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *More hours of English per week and fewer students in each class*).

In my opinion, the only thing that they have done is invite teachers to training sessions, teachers who work in the municipality teaching English. They offer sessions and lectures. But I don't think those sessions will bring changes if there aren't deeper changes to the curriculum. Changes as simple as... How come some schools teach four weekly hours of English whereas other schools teach two hours of English per week? How likely is it for a kid to become bilingual in English and Spanish if in his lifetime he only gets two weekly hours of English instruction? How likely is it for a kid to become bilingual if he attends an English lesson taught mostly in Spanish? The groups are too large and they are given two weekly hours of English. I mean, I have always had my resistance to that program precisely because of that: because they intend to reach the objective simply with teacher training sessions. (C)

The teacher quoted above raises a relevant question in terms of foreign language teaching policy in relation to the PNB objective of getting bilingual high school graduates in Spanish and English at a pre-intermediate level: "How likely is it for a kid to become

bilingual in English and Spanish if in his lifetime he only gets two weekly hours of English instruction?" The chances are scarce, we must admit.

*There are many opportunities for teachers to be trained, but teachers do not go to training sessions either because they don't know about them or they're not motivated to go.* As I asked the elementary English teacher at the Octavio Calderón to tell me more about the teacher training sessions that she was attending, she described each of these sessions: The Ministry of Education offers training sessions at the Escuela del Maestro ("Teachers' School") and are given by English volunteers. On the other hand, the Departmental Secretary of Education in an agreement with the University of Antioquia offers training sessions at the university. The teacher couldn't really explain why the sessions at the "Teachers' School" were given by English volunteers who come and go depending on their time but she assumed those sessions were articulated with Colombia's PNB.

I'm taking some English courses offered as part of the agreement that the University of Antioquia has with the Departmental Secretary of Education. The teachers there help us improve the level of English that we have and give us tools to improve our English teaching. And there is another very nice course with volunteers from England. They come here from England and teach us Tuesday and Thursday at the "Teachers' School." [...] The agreement that the University of Antioquia has with the Departmental Secretary of Education must be articulated with the PNB, as it is within that project's framework that teachers are trained. They know what goals are to be accomplished, so they have to train teachers. [...] The lessons taught by English volunteers at the "Teachers' School" are offered by the Ministry of Education. I mean, the two [courses] represent economical efforts of teacher training to have teachers reach a better level of English. There are spaces available because the course is for 40 people and we're only 15 or 20. It started last year but I knew it was being offered this year so I started this year. [...] The lessons at the "Teachers' School" are taught by English volunteers. Very nice. They speak British English, which is more difficult. I don't know how they ended up here. I know that they're offered some volunteering

hours through a foundation, so they're coming and going as they complete their time. This year we've had two teachers so far. (L)

One of the high school teachers at the Octavio Calderón mentioned some training sessions that he had attended, offered at the EAFIT University, a private university in Medellín, as part of the "Bilingual Medellín" initiative. He didn't seem very motivated:

I went to one of those "Bilingual Medellín" training sessions at EAFIT in which they emphasized pronunciation and speaking. I was also at the opening event in which they projected the city as a bilingual city. And there have been other courses that I haven't been able to attend because of time constraints or simply because of lack of motivation towards the program. (C)

In fact, the elementary English teacher at the Octavio Calderón had said that she was one of the few teachers at the school who would attend the training sessions offered by the Ministry of Education because not many general education teachers liked to attend these training sessions. I asked her what could be preventing teachers from attending these training sessions. She said that one of the main reasons that could explain teachers' absenteeism was the lack of diffusion of training session information. In other words, many times teachers don't know that these sessions are being offered. Other times, this teacher said, teachers know about the sessions but don't consider them a priority as general education teachers.

There are various reasons. Sometimes they say "it's too far" because they have to go downtown or "I don't have money to pay for transportation." So I really couldn't say. I would also guess that since it's not their direct responsibility to teach English, they don't see it as something important. I have been in charge of teaching English for three years now, so they go "I'm the math teacher, English is not..." Although it is supposed to be worked "transversally." They now that they should work English from their area. I don't really know why they don't get into [the training sessions] if they're free. The Ministry has already paid for them, we don't have to pay for anything except get the time and pay for transportation, but I don't know. [...] In the case of the course offered by the agreement [of the University of Antioquia with the Departmental Secretary of Education] I think there's a lack of diffusion because I didn't know about it. I was expecting the

course to be offered this year, since last year I couldn't register, and I didn't know it was already being offered. So I think there's a lack of diffusion because as soon as I knew about it I went there immediately. I don't think I got the information at the right time. And I know how much we have to work to reach those goals, how much we have to learn to actually become good teachers. (L)

### *Students.*

"We see that the use of English is being encouraged in many ways." One teacher pointed out how the use of English has been encouraged in Medellín in several instances lately. He said this had to do with the city's idea of someday becoming bilingual. Some of the situations mentioned by the teacher included: English teachers sent abroad to be trained; local newspapers like *El Colombiano* or TV channels like Tele Antioquia having sections in English; the municipality of Medellín webpage being navigable in Spanish or English; the metro-rail system in the city having audio announcements in both Spanish and English; taxi drivers being offered a basic English course and certificate to be able to communicate with tourists (an initiative by the Alcaldía de Medellín and the Centro Colombo Americano in Medellín), and so forth:

I know that it's been some years since Medellín started having bilingualism as a target. I know of programs that have been developed at the municipal level. For instance, a few years ago they sent a group of English teachers to be trained; I don't remember if it was to Canada or the United States. I know that in the Escuela del Maestro [Teachers' School] the interaction among English teachers is encouraged. I know that in newspapers such as *El Colombiano* English is encouraged. The municipality of Medellín webpage is in both languages: you can navigate it in Spanish or English. At the city metro-rail system instructions are given in Spanish and English, so that people get closer to English more and more. [...] Oh, I know that taxi drivers were offered an English course in order to communicate with foreigners at a basic level. Medellín has a lot of foreigners and many of them speak English, even if it is not their mother language, but they use it as the language to interact with others... Also, a lot of advertisements are in English. Tele Antioquia has programs in English and programs to teach English. We see that the use of English is being encouraged in many ways. (J)

*“The requirement level in high school is a lot higher.”* The teachers’ discussion of foreign language policy during the interviews revealed the differences that exist in the teaching of a foreign language in elementary and the teaching of a foreign language in high school at the Octavio Calderón. As already pointed out, the foreign language at the elementary level is usually taught by general education teachers without a degree in foreign language teaching who are offered training by the PNB. In high school, on the other hand, English teachers are foreign language majors, usually with a degree in foreign language teaching. Therefore, students at the Octavio Calderón can expect different approaches to foreign language teaching in elementary and in high school. In the elementary grades, teachers speak mostly in Spanish, the instructions to the (self-instructional) learning guides are written in Spanish, and teachers concentrate on teaching vocabulary. In high school, teachers try to speak English during class, learning guides are written in English, and teachers adopt some sort of communicative approach and expect students to start using English to communicate. The following quotes from two of the interviewed teachers illustrate the point:

So for instance this year we’ve had difficulties with the students entering sixth grade because the requirement level in high school is a lot higher. We’ve had mothers telling us, “The thing is that my son used to have only one hour of English. Sometimes he wouldn’t have any, or he would miss class, or his teacher would take the hour of English to teach other subjects.” Therefore, the student brings zero knowledge of English to our school even though he’s supposed to have reached those famous standards that were created from a desk. (Y)

I mean, who is in charge of teaching English in elementary? Any teacher who teaches elementary. There isn’t actually an English teacher teaching English in elementary. That would really strengthen the foundations that students would bring to sixth grade, you know what I mean? (C)

“What does the ICFES test evaluate students on? Reading comprehension. And the government basically wants students to be good at speaking. Which of the two areas should we focus on?” Three teachers pointed out that there is disagreement between the objectives that the Ministry of Education sets for students in the foreign language education area and the test that is administered to students through the *Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior*, or ICFES, an organization that evaluates educational institutions in Colombia, at least in terms of the language skills to be developed. Although it is not clear what language skill is emphasized by the Ministry of Education (one teacher says that it’s speaking while another says that speaking is not emphasized), one thing is very clear: The ICFES test concentrates on testing students’ reading comprehension in English. Two of these teachers suggest some kind of unified approach in the sense that *both* the curriculum and the ICFES test should concentrate on the same language skill. In other words, according to the colleagues: If speaking is emphasized by the Ministry of Education, then it should be emphasized on the ICFES test; if reading comprehension is heavily tested on the ICFES test, then students should be trained in reading comprehension.

For me, the ICFES test mostly evaluates reading comprehension in all subjects.  
(M)

The schools and the national government are out of sync. I mean, things are so unrealistic because the ICFES requires one thing from the student and the Ministry of Education requires another one; even within our own house there isn’t a unified approach. How can we expect to have a unified approach in schools then? What does the ICFES test evaluate students on? Reading comprehension. And the government basically wants students to be good at speaking. Which of the two areas should we focus on? (Y)

The Colombian educational system wants to prepare students for some tests over all. Those tests don’t emphasize the oral part. Those tests emphasize reading,

writing, the grammatical part basically. The oral part is not really worked on. We do work on it but it's not what we go deep into, which I think is the hole that the ambition of getting Medellín to be bilingual has. In order for Medellín to become bilingual, we should have the same objectives in everything: in the ICFES test, in the curriculum. Then it would really be revolutionary. (C)

*“All students are being evaluated in the ICFES with the same measuring stick, no matter if they're from a rural area, a public school or a private school.”* A couple of teachers pointed out that the PNB should take into account the differences in the contexts of Colombian schools: rural and urban, public and private. According to one of the teachers, “planning for a private school is not the same as planning for a public school,” and even within public schools there are differences depending if they're located in an urban or a rural area. What this teacher suggested is having some kind of field work in order to adjust the foreign language teaching curriculum (or program) to the specific needs of regions. This point has already been mentioned (see deductive analysis, Teachers' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *Having some sort of field work to adjust the program to the needs of regions or specific contexts*).

Planning for a private school is not the same as planning for a public school, and even within public schools, planning for a public school here in Medellín is not the same as planning for a public school in Sopetrán, which is located in a small village. Teaching here at the Octavio Calderón is not the same as teaching in a village or in a municipality where children are only thinking about whether it's time to harvest the coffee, milk the cow, sweep the house floor, or things of that sort. There is a lot of inequality in Colombia, so we can't really follow what a few people like, but instead we should have a field work done and adjusted to the needs of specific regions. (Y)

Another teacher raised a similar point but in relation to how students are evaluated. According to this teacher, “All students are being evaluated in the ICFES with the same measuring stick, no matter if they're from a rural area, a public school or a

private school.” What the teacher suggested is to have different exams according to school contexts. Rural schools should have their own exam; private schools should have their own exam; public schools should have their own exam, etc. This teacher didn’t see any fairness to evaluating all students with the same test if there are crucial differences in the way a foreign language is taught in different contexts. Private bilingual schools, for instance, have most of their subjects taught in the foreign language by teachers who have a degree in the foreign language whereas public schools have a few weekly hours (usually two to four) of foreign language instruction. To make the situation even worse, as it has been said, in the elementary grades in Colombia the foreign language is taught by general education teachers who do not have a degree in the foreign language. According to this teacher, it would be fair to take into account these differences and evaluate students accordingly.

Even if now it is easier to learn English because students have access to the Internet, we also have to keep something in mind: the fact that all students are being evaluated on the ICFES with the same measuring stick, no matter if they’re from a rural area, a public school or a private school. Then it is exactly there, in the evaluation, where I feel that it is not fair because students in a private school have more hours of exposure to English, more access to the language for obvious reasons, so the way they measure shouldn’t be the same. Therefore, I think that the ICFES should take that variation into account. I mean, they should have an exam for the rural context; another exam for private schools; and another exam for public schools that we know... In a private school there are many students who are actually bilingual. When I say bilingual I mean they study almost all subjects, if not all, in English. Here at the Octavio Calderón, we’re fortunate enough to have four hours of English per week, but the average in a public school is two, three hours of English per week. So I don’t think it’s fair to have students from different schools being evaluated the same way. (M)

*“The students who reach the objectives of the PNB have been students who see that the amount of English that they learn at school is not enough.”* Two teachers

mentioned how students who may actually reach the objective set by the PNB (of having students graduate from high school with a pre-intermediate level of English) are students who take additional English lessons outside the school. This is related to the topic of how insufficient the number of weekly hours of English is in order to become proficient in English at an intermediate level (see teachers' suggestions for foreign language policy in Colombia, deductive analysis, above). Four hours of English per week would not be enough to accomplish this objective. One of the teachers said that they were lucky at the Octavio Calderón because parents usually register their children in additional English courses outside the school.

Many times the students who reach [the objectives of the PNB] have been students who see that the amount of English that they learn at school is not enough; students that go beyond. They may be taking extra courses or they may be really into learning English. [...] I work at the university [of Antioquia] teaching young students who haven't graduated from high school and who are taking those extra lessons at the university precisely to get to eleventh grade with a good level of English. And these are students who study in schools where they have five or six hours of English per week, where they take other subjects in English. And still they need those extra lessons to graduate from high school with a very good level of English. (C)

The advantage that we have here at the Octavio Calderón is that in the area where the school is located most parents see learning English as something important. So some parents don't think the four weekly hours of English that students have at school are enough and they register their children in additional English courses. Or some students keep in touch with their relatives outside the country and they keep practicing their English. We're saved by that. (Y)

### **What should be.**

*“The communicative part is the most important part:” Learning a foreign language should be something “natural and spontaneous.”* Two of the teachers interviewed called attention to the fact that the communicative aspect of learning a

foreign language is the most important aspect. The teaching of a foreign language should incorporate, one of the teacher says, the “whole language” approach. In other words, everything should be done in the target language. Classes should be taught in the target language. This point has already been mentioned (see deductive analysis of foreign language, Suggested changes in the teaching of a foreign language at the Octavio Calderón, *Foreign language lessons should be taught in the target language: “Teach the lesson more in English than in Spanish”*). On the other hand, teachers recommended that this process start from early on, from the early elementary grades or even pre-school, as something natural and spontaneous for students. Such then would ease students’ entrance to the way English is taught in high school: in a more communicative way trying to perform all tasks in English.

I think the communicative part is the most important part. To be able to communicate, to understand what people say, to understand instructions. To be able to express what you want to say in the target language. How could we do that in our context? (*Long silence*) We must have a radical change in our foreign language curriculum. In order to make it communicative, we have to apply, in my opinion, the “whole language” approach. Always teach the lesson in English. Try to answer students’ questions always in English. And I come back to the same point: This can only be done with smaller groups of students. And with people who already have previous knowledge of English, who have been exposed to English from early on. (C)

[...] So there’s the need for this to be done since pre-school if necessary, so that students see it as something natural. It could be such a natural process, that it wouldn’t even be conceived as a subject, but as a possibility to simply use a foreign language. It should be something natural and spontaneous. (J)

***“It would be good to have previous experiences to validate the model. If we get good results, the model would be validated and could be adopted as national policy.”***

One teacher commented that in Colombia the educational models, programs, (or in the

case of the PNB, standards) that are copied from foreign contexts are never validated.

This point has already been mentioned (see deductive analysis, Teachers' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *Having pilot programs to validate foreign language education models*). This teacher's idea is simple: Before adopting an educational model or program as national policy, the model or program must be tested to see if it adapts well to the Colombian context. In other words, the model should be validated somehow. This teacher felt that policies such as the PNB's were never validated. These policies were simply adopted without any proof that they would be effective for the Colombian context(s).

What I perceive is that usually here in Colombia we don't start with educational policies that are born or emerge from our context, from the ground up, but instead we try to copy models that have yielded results in other places. And when it comes to apply the model in this context, the model doesn't really work. The model is not validated. The teacher is simply given the booklet with the model and is told "this is what you should (*gesture of quotation marks*) teach." And usually there hasn't been a previous validation process of the new model or standard that will be adopted. It would be good to have previous experiences to validate the model. In other words, saying "OK, we brought this, let's experiment here." If we get good results, the model would be validated and could be adopted as national policy. Even with some slight changes, but it would be more applicable. Or having an experimental trial or pilot program, could be. Simply having a way to apply the model to see how it works and if there are good results, then it can be expanded to the national territory. [...] To the extent that the model is not validated with the person in charge of applying the model, and it isn't adapted to the context, the model won't work. Context is a very important thing because our context is one in which most institutions do not have the resources and most institutions have overcrowded classrooms in which students can't pay attention to the lesson because they are distracted by circumstances in their environment. (J)

### **Inside school experiments in foreign language teaching policy.**

***"Transversality" of English: English crosses through all subjects at the Octavio***

***Calderón.*** Talking about the elaboration of learning guides at the Octavio Calderón, one

teacher commented on the initiative implemented about a year ago at the school of having all learning guides from subjects different from English include at least one component in English. I dug deeper into this idea and asked all four teachers to tell me more about this practice at the Octavio Calderón. This concept is referred to in the institution as the “transversality” of English: English “crosses” through all academic subjects, just like a “transversal” line in math intersects other lines. In other words, English appears across the school curriculum. This initiative was also mentioned by students and administrators (see inductive analysis of students’ perceptions of foreign language, *The use of English in other academic subjects’ learning guides*, and administrators section).

According to one of the teachers, the idea of having English across the curriculum has become a part of the institution’s mission and expects not only to improve students’ but also teachers’ knowledge of English. Another teacher said that one of the English teachers at the Octavio Calderón is in charge of revising the English component that teachers of other subjects bring to their learning guides.

All learning guides must have a component in English, all of them. In other words, teachers [of all subjects] should bring their students closer to English in their learning guides. This idea will also help teachers, as teachers will have to research, refer to, and at least get familiar with the text that they will present to students in English, so it will also help teachers in their English training. It’s an idea from last year. [...] Because of the need there was, the principal had wanted to have English cut across the curriculum a long time ago. In fact, it is in our institution’s mission, the idea of having English be “transversal,” having English cut across all subjects somehow. (J)

What we do is we want the learning guides of math, science, and all other subjects to have a component in English. That English component in the math or science learning guide is prepared by the corresponding teacher and given to an English teacher to revise. Teachers do whatever they want to do as long as students have to use English at some point of their learning guide. It can be a vocabulary exercise, a translation exercise... Each teacher decides. (M)

The elementary English teacher pointed out that this idea had already been in place at the institution with the area of technology being “transversal” across the curriculum and that the idea of having English also become “transversal” was a more recent one.

The idea of “transversality” was to have all academic subjects use technology as a tool to improve pedagogy. And in the case of English, which was adopted as the foreign language at this school, to have all areas work in English from their corresponding subject. That would be “transversality,” from first grade. (L)

Another of the high school teachers mentioned that final projects carried out in English class may sometimes include other subjects and thus they may have to be presented in other classes (in English or in Spanish) as part of this idea of English cutting across academic subjects.

There are students that do their [learning guide] final project several times because they do projects that include several subjects, so they may have to present their project in English class in English and then they may have to present it to their vocational course teacher in Spanish or sometimes in English, depending on the teacher. There are a few teachers that know English who teach other subjects, as the technology teacher for instance. If the project has to do with chemistry, they will present it in chemistry class and if they don't present it in English, they will have to use at least some terms in English to show the teacher that there is actually a connection of the topic to English. (C)

*Practicing teachers from Luis Amigó University in Medellín assist the English elementary teacher.* Upon my interviews with administrators at the Octavio Calderón one of the administrators mentioned a foreign language teaching practice that was being implemented at the school as some sort of experiment: Practicing teachers from Luis Amigó University, a university founded by Capuchin (Catholic) priests, were assisting the teaching of English in the elementary grades (see inductive analysis of administrators’

perceptions of foreign language policy). In my second interview with the English elementary teacher, I decided to ask her about the experiment.

The teacher said that for some time at the school they had had practicing teachers in the area of technology and that the Luis Amigó University had suddenly offered practicing teachers in the area of English. Both administrators and teachers at the Octavio Calderón embraced the idea and thus the school decided to have these practicing teachers assist the English elementary teacher as much as possible. The teacher told me that she had one practicing teacher helping her teach English to third and fifth graders on Wednesdays. Fourth graders were not as lucky, as the practicing teacher only came on Wednesdays. This seems to be a way for the school to compensate the absence of an English major teaching at the elementary level and to give more opportunities for elementary students to practice their English.

Luis Amigó University has offered us practicing teachers in technology. We've had them for some time. This year they asked us if we wanted to have practicing teachers in English and we said *of course* immediately. The practicing teachers are in their first year of practice. I have only seen them once, last week when they started. The first thing they said to me was "Please don't leave us alone," as it seems many times teachers leave their room and leave the practicing teachers in charge. I told them I wouldn't leave them alone at all. What they are doing initially is getting familiar with how we teach English here and assist me whenever they can. They won't be in charge of grading or anything but they can certainly help me prepare teaching material or assess students...As the idea here is to constantly monitor the groups to see how they're doing or if they're having any difficulties, going from one group to another, it's very nice to have them help me because sometimes there isn't enough time for me to do it alone. (L)

## **Administrators' Perceptions of Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB**

### **Deductive Analysis**

**The 1994 General Law of Education.** The principal at the Octavio Calderón referred to the 1994 General Law of Education, which required the teaching of a foreign language in Colombian schools from the elementary grades, as a “sad law.” According to her, the idea that schools are free to choose what foreign language they will teach is “a lie.” She said that this simply happens because the teachers that the Departmental (or Municipal) Secretary of Education sends to schools are all English teachers. Whenever there is a call for foreign language teaching positions at schools, the call is implicitly understood as a call for English-language teaching positions. If the school were to choose a different foreign language, the principal said, they would never get a teacher of that foreign language. Only English teachers are appointed in schools:

Look what sad law we have: It asks educational institutions to choose a foreign language, but obviously the teacher that they send us does not teach the language that the school chose; they send us an English teacher. And what if I chose Mandarin? I would've liked to choose another language to innovate, not because of the need. I mean, the world need is English. English is the world language. (C)

As it was pointed out before, the principal said that the reason for this situation to happen was globalization, i.e., international economic policies among countries, and not necessarily domestic curricular policies (see deductive analysis of administrators' perceptions of foreign language: Hegemony of English; see also inductive analysis of administrators' perceptions of foreign language: Foreign language teachers in Colombia, *There aren't teachers of other foreign languages*). Below is what the principal said:

Why this happens, in my opinion, has to do with the world economy, with globalization. The time to choose comes and so come the looks. It has to do with economics, with something else besides simply speaking English. It's how our governments sell or buy themselves, how they interrelate among themselves, and how we acquire these foreign policies. It comes from there because we're not given options. It is a lie that the school chooses [a foreign language]. The school does not choose a foreign language; it is imposed on the school. (C)

One of the academic supervisors also said that the 1994 General Law of Education was usually misinterpreted as a mandate to teach English in schools. Although the Law talks about "a foreign language," languages such as French were "eradicated" and English became the only choice. Said the supervisor:

I remember in my times as a student, a long time ago, they would teach us French. And I loved French! And when the [General] Law came out French was eradicated and people thought the Law spoke of English exclusively. But the Law said "a foreign language." Wouldn't it be nice to have an institution that would teach you Italian, for instance? I find Italian an excellent language. To listen to it, it's nice. Or Portuguese. And there were schools that would teach those. I had a cousin who learned to speak Portuguese and Italian in a public school. But I'm talking about my time as a student. The 1994 Law said the teaching of a foreign language was obligatory (*emphasis*). From pre-school to eleventh grade. But it never said it was English! That's when one says: Why English? English is necessary, but why is it the only one? (D)

As it has already been pointed out, he conjectured about why English had suddenly become the only foreign language taught in schools and said that it could be due to the fact that English is "the most commercial language," (see deductive analysis of administrators' perceptions of foreign language: Hegemony of English).

I imagine that it is thought that [English] is the easiest language to implement, to learn, and the most logical to use. I would think. I'm conjecturing here, assuming the stance of the State in which the decision was made that the language that had to be taught was English. Knowing clearly that the Law says "foreign language" and any other simpler language could be taught. Portuguese is easier to learn than English. Italian is easier to learn than English. I imagine it is because [English] is the most commercial language, I don't know. This is a conjecture: the most commercial. The U.S.: We buy everything there, almost everything comes from there. We have to translate, then: English. The agreements, the treaties. (D)

The other academic supervisor at the Octavio Calderón, on the other hand, said that what the 1994 General Law of Education wanted was to give the foreign language the same status as other obligatory subjects such as math, science, and social studies:

What I remember about the Law is that it establishes the foreign language as an obligatory area from first grade. What calls my attention is that from then on in educational institutions the foreign language was as important as other areas such as math, science, social studies, Spanish... (F)

**The National Bilingual Program (PNB).** In general, administrators at the Octavio Calderón were either skeptical about the PNB or not very familiar with it at all. Only one of the administrators saw a positive side to the PNB. According to him, the PNB has made teachers aware of the importance of a foreign language:

*At least* the program is getting teachers to be aware of the importance of a foreign language. There are institutions that still don't see the usefulness of a foreign language, but the PNB has made us know how important it is to master another language; it has helped us realize that we live in a globalized world. (D)

Another of the administrators was blunt, saying he didn't know much about the PNB although he had heard of it:

Well, to tell you the truth I don't know much about the program. I have heard the name but I don't really know it. (F)

The principal, on the other hand, was completely skeptical of the PNB. She said that the program looked good on paper but that what "they" were doing in order to actually get students to reach an intermediate level of English didn't have to do with reality:

The PNB sounds very good in words. It is a program with very beautiful words that doesn't have to do with reality. It has nothing to do with what they are doing in order to get to the goal. Yes, the program exists; we had to read it and now I can't even remember it. (C)

Again, as it happened with teachers, there was misinterpretation of the PNB, and it was sometimes understood by some administrators as some of the local, regional initiatives or even as some of the more recent school policies in foreign language teaching such as the aforementioned “transversality of English,” (see inductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of foreign language education policy: Inside school experiments in foreign language teaching policy: “*Transversality*” of English: English crosses through all subjects at the Octavio Calderón; see also inductive analysis of students’ perceptions of foreign language: Inside school experiments: *The use of English in other academic subjects’ learning guides*). One of the administrators said:

I have seen that there will be support for some institutions in terms of bilingualism and that they want English to be a *transversal* area. Here what we mean, once again, is that English is not only used in one subject, but in all subjects. (D)

Another administrator voiced one of the frequent criticisms to the PNB: the fact that the program adopted a top-down approach and didn’t really reach consensus among educational actors or stakeholders:

When one has made part of the Ministry of Education study groups, one stays with the feeling that the Ministry’s employees are only a bunch of bureaucrats that dictate norms from their desks but that actually don’t respond to the real needs of schools. [...] With the implementation of policies such as the PNB the only thing I see that they’re doing is reading the market. They’re establishing laws without any kind of consensus. (R)

**PNB Objectives.** When asked about the main objective of the PNB – to have high school graduates reach an intermediate level of English by 2019 – administrators were, in general, reluctant to consider that it would be possible. Most of the administrators agreed that it was an unrealistic goal. There were different ways and degrees of expressing how

unrealistic the objective seemed. One of the academic supervisors said that he had been hearing that story since he was in school and that it was more important to have follow up studies to see if the implemented policies were actually changing the pedagogical practices of teachers in the classroom. In other words, to have some kind of validation of the PNB policies. Something similar had already been mentioned by some of the teachers who were interviewed (see deductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: Teachers' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *Having pilot programs to validate foreign language education models*). Below is what the supervisor said:

I've been hearing that since I was in school. There have been projects from many years ago that talk about that: make it a goal in Colombia to have people master a foreign language... I don't want to make up excuses but I think that it has to be a serious work and research has to be done to see if those changes actually have an impact on the pedagogical practices in the classroom. It's not only having the standards. As I was saying: I may have the standards, but what if my first grade or second grade teacher doesn't know the language or is not interested in knowing it or implementing it because he doesn't have the proficiency or the competence? So I think it's not only necessary to have the PNB, but also to assess the implementation of the program in the educational institutions. Especially in the institutions because that's where all students go through, public or private, so it's important to have that kind of assessment and to have it from the early grades. (F)

The other academic supervisor maintained that if English teachers used the same teaching tools that have been used for decades, which according to him are not really working, it would be simply impossible to reach the goal. The State, he said, would have to provide support in order to make the goal of the PNB an achievable one and get teachers to change their practices:

I insist that that's exactly where the support of the State should come: in the face of the goal set by the PNB, because English hasn't been taught for a short time in our institutions; English has been taught for a long time. So, what's the use of setting a goal for the year 2019, six years from now [2013]: to have students

graduate with an intermediate level [of English]; what's the use of that goal if I don't do anything to support that? That's when one can think: If teachers keep using the same tools that they have used for twenty years, which are not working... How long has English been taught? For almost twenty years and I'm talking about the moment that the 1994 Law required a foreign language, and English was taught before that! (D)

The principal, once again, was really skeptical of the PNB and of the main objective of the PNB and said that she felt that her school was "alone" in the process of getting students to reach the goal. She said that there was no support given by the Ministry of Education or the Departmental (or Municipal) Secretary of Education in the form of concrete actions to help both teachers and students. She said that the only things that teachers at the Octavio Calderón had available in order to start the process and get students to reach the objective of the PNB were the standards and the curricular guidelines determined by the Ministry of Education. Besides from that, the school, she said, was left alone in the move towards the objective of the PNB:

It's an unrealistic goal. At least here [at the school] we haven't started. I don't have the slightest idea of what goal [students] will reach. [...] The only thing I can tell you is that my institution, the Octavio Calderón Mejía, is alone in face of that goal. They have not given us any training; they have not informed us about the strategy, or the resources to implement the program, the labs... how to improve them... say, that teachers are attending massive training sessions, not at all; not at all. The only thing we have is the standards. We take the standards and the Ministry of Education's curricular guidelines and we choose our themes. That's the only thing we have. We have no idea of those high goals and all those other things. (C)

**The document *Estándares*.** The administrators' view of the document *Estándares*, which basically reorganized the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages according to Colombian notions of grade levels, was generally positive. Although administrators were in general skeptical of the main

objective of the PNB, as seen in the previous section, they saw the publication of *Estándares* as a step in the right direction. One of the academic supervisors said that, although limiting at times, the use of standards for the teaching of English has helped English teachers and has made them aware of the importance of a foreign language:

I haven't really sat down to read [*Estándares*], but I think it gave English teachers some lights for them to know what is required. However, I will criticize something again: Looking at the standards, I think they're still limiting teachers in being more creative in the area of English, but *at least* the program is getting teachers to be aware of the importance of a foreign language. There are institutions that still don't see the usefulness of a foreign language, but the PNB has made us know how important it is to master another language; it has helped us realize that we live in a globalized world. (D)

The other academic supervisor also considered the *Estándares* document useful in the sense that, compared to a previous document called *Idiomas Extranjeros*:

*Lineamientos Curriculares* (Foreign Languages: Curricular Guidelines), *Estándares* specifies the competences required for a group of grades and thus helps teachers in their articulation of the English curriculum:

I find it positive in the sense that it gives the teaching of English some sort of direction: the levels, what is required... It organizes the curriculum not so much according to the content or themes, but according to students' performances and competences: listening, reading, writing... [...] I recognize the effort of the Ministry of Education in putting out the standards. At least we can see some articulation, because I remember the previous document, the curricular guidelines, it was very general; it didn't specify the curriculum or the students' competences. *Estándares* at least specifies performances for each group of grades. (F)

As pointed out in the previous section (PNB Objectives), the principal said that the *only* thing that English teachers had available for the teaching of English at her school were the standards described in *Estándares*. According to the principal, the standards and the general curricular guidelines determined by the Colombian Ministry of Education are

the two things that English teachers at the Octavio Calderón use in order to plan their lessons and their curriculum:

The only thing we have is the standards. We take the standards and the Ministry of Education's curricular guidelines and we choose our themes. That's the only thing we have. [...] The curriculum that English teachers at the Octavio Calderón prepare with their learning guide must have a ground on the standards of competences for English determined by the Ministry of Education. (C)

**The Common European Framework of Reference.** As happened with the teachers who were interviewed, the administrators' views of the fact that the standards were adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages were mixed. Two of the administrators thought that the Europeans should know better and one of these two even thought that choosing the CEFR had to do with choosing British English as the model instead of American English. The principal, on the other hand, was critical and expressed her disbelief in importing or copying models that according to her have nothing to do with the needs of Colombian citizens. Let's go through each of these views more deeply.

One of the academic supervisors knew about the levels that were adapted from the CEFR and saw the adoption of these levels as a change in the traditional way of teaching English using textbooks towards the achievement of some levels of competences that perhaps could help students "have access to another kind of information." When asked what he thought about the fact that the standards were adopted from a European framework, he said he had never thought about that.

In what I consider the curriculum of the area of English, we have tried to implement the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, which no longer have to do with the traditional way of teaching English using textbooks, but instead with

some levels of comprehension in listening, reading, writing... I'm not an expert in the technical concepts, but we're talking about A1, A2, B1, B2... We have tried to implement that. [...] I had never thought about [the fact that the standards were adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference for languages]. I suppose it has to do with the competence that the kids will have to develop... I don't know much about it, but if it's a standard, it will probably be useful for the students to have access to another kind of information in college or... information coming from these countries. (F)

The other academic supervisor thought that the CEFR had been chosen for the description of standards of competences in English because British English was a better model of English compared to American English. He saw the adoption of the CEFR as a logical step in order to establish the standards: "to use those who know" about the (English) language.

Well, I think that Europe and the European countries are the model for us in terms of how to use any foreign language. I think it is the most logical thing. It is logical to use those who know the language and know the basic parameters when learning the language. [...] I have always thought that American English is the English of the populace and not the English that should be used. I'd rather learn British English than American English. (D)

Later on, during his chain of thought, however, he asked if having chosen the British variety of English (and thus the CEFR) instead of the American variety hadn't been a mistake, given the growing popularity of American English in Colombia:

We have to learn English: British or American English; it doesn't matter. In terms of the standards, one would have to ask if leaving out a kind of English such as the American, which has become traditional for speaking, wasn't a mistake. One would have to sit down and analyze if actually an error wasn't made not taking it into account. (D)

The principal, on the other hand, was critical of the fact that the standards had been adapted from the CEFR. According to her, once again, that kind of choice had to do with economic policies and "convenience among States" rather than with a conscientious analysis of the needs of Colombian citizens. She insisted that Colombian citizens should

have choices in “what to speak and how to speak” and that they simply do not have those choices. She expressed her annoyance at the fact that Colombia is used to copying foreign models rather than creating its own. In terms of education, she said, better models such as Finland could be copied instead.

We get to the same point: Those are systems, economic and governability policies, issues of convenience among the States without a real perception of what Colombian citizens really need. [...] I would like to have a Colombian citizen for the world who has choices in what to speak and how to speak. But we don't have those choices. What do I think about the framework being taken from Europe? It's obvious, because Colombia doesn't have its own creations for its own country. Colombia copies everything; Colombia copies permanently. Colombia copies everything. Everything. We follow any model and in terms of education we don't follow successful models such as Finland. (C)

**Administrators' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia.**

*“Schools need teachers with a degree in English from pre-school.”* Of all administrators' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia the only one mentioned by two administrators was to have teachers with a degree in English from pre-school (or in the elementary grades). This was also the main suggestion made by English teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see deductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: Teachers' suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *In the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers who have a degree in English, not by general education teachers*).

Both academic supervisors suggested having an English specialist teach from the early grades. Both mentioned how English in Colombia is taught at the elementary level by general education teachers who may not have the desired level of English. One of the supervisors even said that specialists of all subjects only teach in high school and that they should be teaching from the early grades. Below is what each of the academic supervisors said:

Well, I don't think I can get out of the educational institutions too much, but there is this thing I was telling you about: There has to be political will in the sense that they understand that schools need teachers with a degree in English from pre-school, that we need that position because many times they appoint professional teachers but only for high school and not for elementary. And that is a problem that not only has to do with English, but with other areas. Professionals such as the biologists, science teachers, math specialists, physicists... they teach in high school only. In elementary we have the "normalistas," people who haven't had enough training in a specific area, so at least in English, one of the most important areas even to continue studying, we need specialists from the early school years. (F)

What would be really necessary is that *you*, as the State, said: "We'll finance that." We need our students to speak English, so we'll finance all mechanisms to have students speak English. [...] Starting with an elementary teacher that would exclusively teach English in elementary. I'm not criticizing our elementary English teacher, but it would be as if I, who can't pronounce English well, went to teach an elementary English lesson, saying "The burger is big" and told students "This means this" because I only know how to read and write. (D)

*Give students real foreign language choices by training teachers in different languages in colleges of education.* The principal often talked about educating students "for the world." She referred to her school as "a new school for the world." Within this idea of education "for the world," in the area of foreign language, the most important thing is to have real choices in terms of what language the school wants to teach. This idea was mentioned above (see The Common European Framework of Reference) when

the principal insisted that Colombian citizens should have choices in “what to speak and how to speak,” and she asserted that Colombian citizens simply do not have those choices. In order for schools to have real choices in terms of teaching foreign languages, colleges of education should train teachers in different languages at a high level, she said. If there aren’t teachers of other foreign languages available, how can schools choose what foreign language to teach? Below is what the principal said:

I would suggest an education for the world with a few clear, basic tools: An education where we had the option to really choose what [foreign language] we want to teach. The Ministry of Education should be an agent in charge of potentiating, controlling and assessing the results of education. When will it be able to do so? The day it gives us [schools] a bit of freedom to create; to create! When they themselves have the guts to do so! If the Ministry of Education tells us: “We want an education for the world in Colombia.” OK. Let’s start with the foreign language. Let’s give choices and train teachers in different languages at a high level in colleges of education. These teachers of different languages will be teaching in the schools where they have been *elected* to speak that language. And these teachers will in turn train other teachers. (C)

***Give elementary English teachers opportunities to go abroad and learn from other teaching experiences.*** One of the academic supervisors talked about the importance of giving elementary English teachers the opportunity to become really well prepared to teach by having experiences abroad and getting familiar with all the tools that may be available to teach English. Something similar had been mentioned by one of the teachers who talked about updating English teachers’ practices (see deductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of PNB policies: Teachers’ suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *Updating teaching practices to more interactive tools such as the Internet*).

According to the supervisor, these opportunities to go abroad and learn about other teaching experiences should be financed by the municipality. Such experiences could bring more dynamic teachers who would show students lots of strategies that are available to learn English. These experiences could well be part of English teachers' academic and professional training:

I would love to have really well prepared teachers in the early grades. Those teachers should not only have the opportunity to have a career here and learn, but they should also have the possibility to go abroad and listen, speak, and learn the language in such a way that they could say: "Look, I went abroad, I did my Master's, my doctorate, it was paid by the municipality and here I am because I want to transmit it." They should see how the language is taught abroad; they should learn from those experiences and come and show students that there are all these mechanisms available to learn it: audiovisual media, communication, movies, a room where I can sit and listen to pronunciation... I would train teachers in that kind of experiences and give them the tools; having all the tools would help. (D)

*Implement some of the characteristics of the Escuela Nueva such as collaborative work, learning guides, and the student government in foreign language teaching.* The principal also suggested implementing some of the most common characteristics of the Escuela Nueva in foreign language teaching. According to her, characteristics such as collaborative work among students, having teachers develop their learning guides, and having students form a student government to become empowered, would be useful to teach a foreign language.

Then, I would implement collaborative work; I would have all teachers make their learning guides; and I would implement the student government to empower the school cultures and organize schools. I wouldn't permit schools not having a very substantial and essential reason to be. Schools in disorder, schools in chaos: I wouldn't permit it. Principals getting in and out of schools as they wish: I wouldn't permit it. (C)

*Make English lessons more practical and applicable the way English teachers do at the Octavio Calderón.* One of the academic supervisors also saw some of the features of English lessons at the Octavio Calderón as worthy recommendations for foreign language teaching policy in Colombia. He said that English teachers at the Octavio Calderón tried their best at making lessons practical and applicable. According to the supervisor, English-language teaching in public schools in Colombia is still traditional and teacher-centered, and students are not always taught how to use the language in practical ways. Students in public schools in Colombia are usually asked to copy words or sentences from the board and translate them without necessarily having opportunities to apply what is being learned. This theme had also been mentioned by teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language: English-language teaching in other schools is usually teacher-centered; and inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: "The communicative part is the most important part:" Learning a foreign language should be something "natural and spontaneous"). Said the supervisor:

What changes? Precisely the ones that I see here at the school. In our country, in most institutions, it's usually the traditional school that is used for teaching English: students sit down and copy from the board and teachers write "big," "small." They say, "This means *grande*," but they don't *show* students; they just write on the board, "The burger is big," and the students may have to draw a picture, "*La hamburguesa es grande*," and that's it; they don't do something different. That's why I love what teachers do here: they ask students to apply things, to listen to how things are pronounced... (D)

*Create language networks.* The principal talked about the need to have schools of education train teachers in different languages in order to really offer students choices in

terms of what foreign language to study at their school. According to the principal, language networks could be created once there is a group of teachers of a certain foreign language. These language networks could then start spreading the seeds of that language in different regions of the country. In other words, there could be some sort of interconnected regional field work going on across the country. Students, in turn, would become experts in the language and the culture of the language they study. Said the principal:

And [then] we create networks; large networks by regions. We could start field experience sites on the Atlantic zone of the country, the east, the south of Colombia; we could grab Colombia by regions and look at the results by regions. We would empower teachers here with high levels and proficiency, and then take them here to spread the language, then here to spread it here... And we create language networks: networks of Mandarin, networks of Italian... And we establish clear policies in which students really know their foreign language; really know the country from which they're adopting the language... In other words, getting to meet the world before going out to know it; that's important. (C)

*Create a net of awareness of love for education.* In one of her most abstract suggestions for foreign language teaching policy in the country, the principal talked about creating “a net of awareness of love for education.” She referred to teachers and their labor. According to the principal, education is not about control (of students); education is about love. Said the principal:

I would establish that if you are going to work for six, eight hours, you should do it with love and with an actual commitment. I would create a large net of awareness of love for education. This is not about control; this is about love. I can control myself. (C)

*English-teaching centers in Medellín should be free for children who want to attend English lessons.* One of the academic supervisors mentioned the need to make

English-teaching centers in Medellín more affordable for those students (especially children) who are interested in studying the language. According to the supervisor, these centers are still a privilege for those who are able to afford expensive courses; there should be some sort of economic support for people who do not have the means to afford those courses. This theme had also been mentioned by students at the Octavio Calderón (see deductive analysis of students' perceptions of foreign language: Changes to foreign language teaching in the country). Said the supervisor:

We know that in Medellín there are many English-teaching centers but they are expensive, so they're still a privilege for the people with high socioeconomic status. These centers should be free for everybody in order for any person interested in learning the language to be able to register. That would be the deal; to have more economic support: scholarships, agreements, or internships for the children or the people who do not have the resources so that they can study a foreign language *since they are young*. (F)

## **Inductive Analysis**

### **Foreign language education policy in Colombia.**

*The Octavio Calderón is facing the goal of the PNB alone.* When asked what she thought about the PNB and its objectives, the principal expressed that the Octavio Calderón was (left) alone to reach the goal of the PNB. In other words, although the PNB was launched at the national level, at the local level of a public school in Medellín nothing had happened. According to the principal, the PNB hadn't offered any training, strategies or resources to the school. It would be good to ask if the initiative of the PNB was only good "on paper" and if it really had little to do with (transforming) reality, as the principal herself expressed (see The National Bilingual Program above). Said the principal:

The only thing I can tell you is that my institution, the Octavio Calderón Mejía, is facing that goal alone. They have not given us any training; they have not informed us about the strategy, or the resources to implement the program, the labs... how to improve them... say, that teachers are attending massive training sessions, not at all; not at all. (C)

The principal would have probably liked to have people from the PNB disseminate their ideas at her school. She expressed that the PNB people had never done that:

Obviously we should have those [PNB] high goals here at our school, but not because we have joined that large program. They haven't even given us opportunities to get to know the program. (C)

The principal was very dismissive of the PNB and said that the only thing the PNB had done was call elementary teachers at her school to be trained in “some sort of training course”:

In the 18 years that I've been here, only until this year did they call elementary teachers to participate in a little course they will have. So I sent a teacher there and that's it. Some sort of training course. (C)

***Teaching English is obligatory but schools do not have the autonomy to hire specialized personnel in elementary.*** As the principal expressed, it is practically impossible for public schools in Colombia to have a teacher appointed for a foreign language other than English (see inductive analysis of administrators' perceptions of foreign language: Foreign language teachers in Colombia, *There aren't teachers of other foreign languages*). Although the 1994 General Law of Education requires teaching a foreign language from elementary, according to the principal what usually happens is that public schools are sent an English teacher for high school. In other words, there are a couple of contradictions: a) there is no choice in the teaching of a foreign language, and

b) schools have no autonomy to hire specialized English teachers in elementary. If the schools were to hire an English specialist in elementary, the school would get “a disciplinary process.” Said the principal:

Look what sad law we have: It asks educational institutions to choose a foreign language, but obviously the teacher that they send us does not teach the language that the school chose; they send us an English teacher. And what if I chose Mandarin? [...] English doesn't have to do with the choice of an institution; it is a governmental choice and we have the obligation to teach it. So one has no choice to say: I want a French teacher, I want a Mandarin teacher... The Ministry of Education would fall apart. [...] Schools don't have the autonomy to hire specialized personnel in those areas in elementary. It's as simple as that. We don't have the autonomy or the resources. And if we did, we would get a disciplinary process. (C)

One of the academic supervisors told me a little bit better how the whole thing works in terms of appointing English teachers for public schools. In public schools, the Secretary of Education is the organism in charge of appointing the teachers. For elementary, the Secretary of Education usually appoints teachers with a degree in elementary education with an “emphasis” in English. The “emphasis” means that the teacher attended training sessions. For high school, on the other hand, the Secretary of Education appoints teachers with a degree in English. The sad thing, the supervisor said, is that none of the teachers with a degree in English will ask to teach in elementary. Said the supervisor:

It's very unlikely that a teacher with a degree in humanities and foreign languages would accept a job in elementary. That kind of teacher will not say: “Appoint me for elementary.” So then you can see the shock, right? [...] The Secretary of Education will never say: “Do you need an English teacher? I'll send you one with a major in foreign languages to cover elementary.” It will send a teacher with a degree in elementary education with an emphasis in English. And for the most part, the emphasis means they have gone to training sessions. (D)

Once again, the principal touched on one of the main needs in terms of foreign language education policy in Colombia: having teachers with a degree in a foreign language (English) in elementary. This theme has been mentioned several times before (see deductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: Suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *In the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers who have a degree in English, not by general education teachers*; see also deductive analysis of administrators' perceptions of PNB policies: Suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, "*Schools need teachers with a degree in English from pre-school*").

In Colombia there still this idea that one teacher should teach everything! So a teacher teaches Spanish, English, Math, Physical Education, and obviously our teachers at their age don't really do it and they do it poorly, which is worse, because instead of helping the child to love the foreign language, they spoil him, with their poor practices they're telling the child: "You don't like English. Get bored with English!" So when my students take English lessons with a professional in English in high school, they're already bored and they say: "I hate this language. What a pain!" So look at the need we have in elementary, which obviously neither the State nor the municipality of Medellín has given us: specialized English teachers in elementary. (C)

Both academic supervisors gave reasons why having a specialized English teacher in elementary would help students:

Someone who majored in English will surely have a better management, a better control of the area and will surely motivate students to learn English a lot more. (F)

It's so good to have a teacher who speaks English fluently teach elementary students, who are at the foundation: You teach students from first, second, and third grade, and they will carry on those well-established concepts well until they finish high school and they become professionals. (D)

*The sudden higher level of English in high school may end up demotivating students.* One of the academic supervisors referred to the gap that usually exists in the teaching of English in elementary and in high school. As in elementary, English is taught by general education teachers who may not be as proficient in English whereas in high school English is taught by teachers with a degree in English, the two approaches differ. This theme was also mentioned by teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: "The requirement level in high school is a lot higher"). According to the supervisor, this sudden change in high school having lessons taught mostly in English, with learning guides and instructions in English, asking students to express themselves using English may end up demotivating students. The supervisor also mentioned the incident that happened at the school in which eight grade students and their parents complained about the English teacher who had decided to teach the lessons mostly in English. This incident was also mentioned by teachers (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language: "We can't get to the idealism of teaching a lesson directly in English: When we've tried to do it here, it hasn't been seen as something positive by students and parents"). Said the supervisor:

In this moment I'm in a process of inquiry that started with some complaints that I have received... because there's a concept in pedagogy (*chuckles*) that Vygotsky called "the zone of proximal development": the idea that you can't teach students something very easy because they will demotivate, but that you can't teach them something very difficult either. So we have to solve that situation: If it is true that students come with some difficulties from elementary, the requirement in high school has to be gradual because if it isn't gradual, it will end up demotivating students. Students will feel that they're not able to learn, then... I like the idea of getting students to be well prepared, but the process should be fun for students; it shouldn't create something negative in them that would lead them to say: "English is very difficult; I can't learn it." (F)

I asked the supervisor if he had any suggestions to prevent this situation from happening, students suddenly being required in high school a lot more than they were used to in elementary. He had one main suggestion: English teachers should work together, led by the head of the area, to articulate the English curriculum. In other words, the process of learning English should be gradual and there shouldn't be any major "jumps" in the curriculum. In addition, all teachers should know what is taught in other courses to prevent teachers from teaching at their own will. Still, the supervisor wondered how this articulation would come to life if only in high school is English taught by teachers with a degree in English:

The first thing that we have talked about with the English teacher in elementary is that it's not only her responsibility, but it's the responsibility of all the team of English teachers: to really have an articulated curriculum, so that there aren't any conceptual jumps. If the curriculum is articulated in such a way that students really feel that it's a process without any jumps, it will not depend on the teacher and students won't feel like: "with this teacher it's difficult; with this one it's easy." Although it might be complex, as I was saying, because the English teacher in high school has a degree in his area and will probably have his own teaching method, probably more demanding... but to have that dialogue between elementary and high school English teachers is important. (F)

In this sense, the supervisor praised the effort of the Ministry of Education in putting out the standards as a way to start articulating the English curriculum in a more specific way. He referred to the previous document put out by the Ministry of Education (*Foreign Languages: Curricular Guidelines*) and indicated how *Estándares* is more specific in describing students' competences according to grade levels. Said the supervisor:

Look, at least I recognize the effort of the Ministry [of Education] in putting out the standards. At least we can see some sort of articulation. I remember the document about curricular guidelines [in English] and it was very general, it

didn't specify the curriculum or the competences of students. At least *Estándares* specifies the competences for each group of grades. (F)

The supervisor highlighted that the head of the area should be the person in charge of leading the articulation of the English curriculum. He also mentioned that the Octavio Calderón is now in the process of revising the curriculum of different subject areas (including English) and training teachers in order to develop learning guides that really fit into an articulated curriculum. (This process will be described at length in the next section: Foreign language education policy at the Octavio Calderon, *The Octavio Calderón is in the process of teaching teachers how to make better learning guides*).

There is material, there is information, there are programs, but ultimately we need one person to do the orientation. We actually have that person and it is my duty to make that person aware: the head of the area. We actually had a conversation with [the head of the English area] regarding the situation [complaints of students and teachers due to harsh jumps in the English curriculum]; that he should be the person to guide and articulate our [English] curriculum, so that what the first grade teacher does is not very different to what the second grade teacher does. [...] It is important to have this articulation, not only in the area of English. We're actually in that process. We have started working with the heads of different areas to articulate the curriculum, to avoid some teachers doing some things and others doing other things. (F)

***“It's necessary to have a follow-up of the implementation of the program in educational institutions.”*** One of the academic supervisors highlighted the need to have a follow-up of the implementation of PNB policies in educational institutions in the country. Something similar had been mentioned by teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see deductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: Suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *Having pilot programs to validate foreign language education models*). According to the supervisor, having the standards dictated by the PNB is not enough, as it is likely that elementary teachers are not interested in

implementing the standards due to their own lack of proficiency and competence in English:

There has to be research to see if the [PNB] policies are really having an impact on pedagogical practices in the classroom. It's not only having the standards. As I was saying: I may have the standards, but if my first grade or second grade teacher isn't proficient or competent in English, he won't be interested in getting to know or implementing the program. Then, it's not only necessary to have the PNB, but also to have a follow-up of the implementation of the program in educational institutions. (F)

*The students who reach a good level of English are “students who have had the possibility of studying English outside the school.”* One of the academic supervisors expressed that usually the students who reach a good level of English are “students who have had the possibility of studying English outside the school” in other English-teaching institutions or even in the U.S. As the principal had mentioned that one student from the Octavio Calderón had been a finalist in an English competition among sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students of schools in Medellín, called “English Olympics,” I asked the supervisor what he knew about that. The supervisor said that at the time of the competition he was working at a different school and that certainly he knew that a student from the Octavio Calderón had classified to the finals of the competition. Once he joined the Octavio Calderón, he inquired who those students with such good levels of English were. He realized that students with a good level of English were usually students who were studying English outside the school or who had gone to the U.S. This theme had also been mentioned by teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: *“The students who reach the objectives of the PNB*

*have been students who see that the amount of English that they learn at school is not enough”).*

I was at a different institution before coming here and I saw that a student from the Octavio Calderón had classified to that competition [“English Olympics”]. Talking to some of the teachers here they manifest that some students have a good level of English; sometimes one can actually see them talking in English among them or with the teachers... But I have tried to inquire who those students are and what I have realized is that they’re students who have had the possibility of studying English outside the school, students who are in other academies or institutes, even some who have come from the U.S., so... (F)

*“Colombia doesn’t have its own creations for its own country. Colombia copies everything.”* An interesting point made by the principal when talking about the adoption of the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference by the PNB in order to establish the target English levels of competence for students and teachers, was that Colombia likes to copy everything. According to the principal, “Colombia doesn’t have its own creations for its own country.” Colombians are used to copying foreign models and sometimes they don’t even copy the models that are worth copying. Said the principal:

What do I think about the framework being taken from Europe? It’s obvious, because Colombia doesn’t have its own creations for its own country. Colombia copies everything; Colombia copies permanently. Colombia copies everything. Everything. We follow any model and in terms of education we don’t follow successful models such as Finland. (C)

Some of the teachers at the Octavio Calderón agreed with the principal’s observation (see deductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of PNB policies: The Common European Framework of Reference). What these teachers would like to have is “policies that are born [...] from our context,” “according to the needs that we have in our country:”

I think that one day when we really learn to create according to the needs that we have in our country, things will be different. (Y)

What I perceive is that usually here in Colombia we don't start with educational policies that are born or emerge from our context, from the ground up, but instead we try to copy models that have yielded results in other places. (J)

The principal mentioned that Finland had a successful educational model that would be worth copying. I asked why the Finnish model of education would be worth copying. The principal referred to the high regard that Finnish education has for teachers in general. She talked about the professional development opportunities that are given by the Finnish State in order to have highly qualified teachers in the elementary grades:

The Finnish model believes in the teacher. The Finnish model focuses on education. It believes in the standards assessment of each student, and it encourages teachers to improve academically with Master's degrees, doctorates, specializations... There, an elementary teacher has a doctorate or a Master's, so to the extent that they help teachers become great teachers, they expect those teachers to help students become great students. And they evaluate teachers permanently; not here in Colombia. (C)

The principal mentioned how different the situation was in Colombia, where teachers may have to go on strike to keep their salaries and have their basic healthcare coverage. (It's worth pointing out that when the principal refers to "my teachers," she's talking about Colombian teachers in general.) Said the principal:

My teachers have to go on strike, have to go to demonstrations so that they are given their medicine by the health system. Here [in Colombia] they reduce teachers' salaries and they take their subsidies, and then they expect me to have teachers for my school. (C)

***"In Colombia anyone can enter the educational system."*** While comparing the characteristics of the Finnish educational system to the Colombian educational system, the principal brought up the issue that in Colombia the people who teach are not always

teaching professionals. According to the principal, “In Colombia anyone can enter the educational system.” If the person who applies for the call for teaching positions (made by the Ministry of Education through Departmental and Municipal Secretaries of Education) passes the test by showing that he’s competent in the area, he will be the appointed teacher. That person does not have to be a teaching specialist. This issue was also mentioned by one of the teachers who brought up the issue of teaching becoming a safe place for many professionals who can’t find a job within their professional field (see deductive analysis of teachers’ perceptions of foreign language education policies: Teachers’ suggestions for foreign language education policy in Colombia, *Better control of teacher quality selection*). Said the principal:

In Colombia anyone can enter the educational system. Anyone. An engineer, a mathematician, a cop, a soldier... Anyone who is competent in math, in chemistry, who prepares really well in Spanish... He goes, passes the test, gets interviewed and... Ready! What an excellent teacher, he’s ready to teach! (C)

According to the principal, in terms of foreign language education, anyone can become a foreign language teacher as long as they know the foreign language. There is no need to have teaching credentials or teaching experience. Just like the teacher who also brought up the issue, the principal wondered what could happen to the pedagogical knowledge and the love of teaching in the case of hiring non-specialists in teaching:

The Ministry of Education makes the call for teachers through the Secretary of Education. Then, anyone who’s interested in the position buys the PIN [Personal Identification Number] and shows up. If you know the language, even if you’re not a teacher, you’re welcome. So what happens to the didactics, the ability to relate to people, the ethics? Where will these end up? Who teaches those? What happens to the passion for teaching, the passion for the area, for the kid, for the child? (C)

*“Areas such as English, religion, ethics, and technology are still being explored in Colombia.”* One of the administrators expressed that areas such as English and technology were not considered fundamental up until the year 2012. According to the administrator, it wasn’t until 2012 that *all* academic subjects were considered fundamental. Before the year 2012, then, teaching English or technology was not a priority in Colombia. Nobody at the Ministry of Education really cared how you would plan for the teaching of English, as what really mattered, according to the administrator, was teaching four fundamental areas: natural sciences, social sciences, math and Spanish. Said the administrator:

Areas such as English, religion, ethics, and technology are still being explored in Colombia. Why is that? Because up until two years ago [2012], they were not considered fundamental areas. Now, all areas are considered fundamental, not only the same four areas. So, before, no one cared how you would plan for the teaching of English! That’s why they used to say that English, physical education, arts education, ethics... were “sewing lessons”<sup>20</sup> If you taught those subjects, good. But what really mattered were the math lessons, for instance. Nowadays, all subjects are as important. (R)

Although to my knowledge the General Law of Education of 1994 required the teaching of a foreign language from elementary, thus considering the foreign language a fundamental and obligatory area since then, the point that I think the administrator is trying to make is that English and technology, among other subjects, are still at an exploratory stage in terms of their curriculum. There are actually nine areas that the General Law of Education of 1994 considered fundamental: “Natural sciences and environmental education; social sciences, history, geography, political and democratic constitution; arts education; ethics; physical education and sports; religion; humanities,

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<sup>20</sup> An expression meaning that something is very easy or a waste of time.

Spanish and foreign languages; math; and technology”<sup>21</sup> (General Law of Education, Article 23).

*There has to be a process “where we take into account the voices of those who are actors and protagonists of all education processes: teachers.”* One of the administrators talked about the importance of taking into account teachers’ suggestions in terms of developing educational policy. According to the administrator, if there isn’t some sort of ground-up process in which teachers’ suggestions are actually heard, then students will not be as motivated. The administrator emphasized how teachers’ discourse has to change in order to become a motivating discourse. Talking about the formation of the student government, the administrator gave an example of how teachers’ discourse can sometimes not help change things and can actually be demotivating for students: If teachers transmit their disappointment with mechanisms intended to foster democratic participation saying things like “why will we vote if nothing’s going to change,” then students will find it useless to form their own student government. If, on the other hand, teachers transmit to students the idea that their active participation will actually affect the constitution of their student government (e.g., someone can actually be impeded from participating in the government because of their poor performance), then teachers would foster the idea that active citizenship will actually bring changes to society. According to the administrator, teachers’ discourse could thus help students “visualize a different democracy.” Teachers with such an active discourse would help turn the classroom “an entity that regulates” and the school “an entity that controls democratic processes.”

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<sup>21</sup> My translation.

Although the administrator's point refers to processes of educational policy in general, I find the point quite relevant to processes of foreign language education policy in Colombia. Said the administrator:

To the extent that there isn't some sort of process... I'm not talking about pleasing everybody because it is very difficult, but having situations that would bring us to agree on some sort of middle point, where we take into account the voices of those who are actors and protagonists of all educational processes: teachers. In other words, teachers' discourse has to evolve. It's the only way to boost our students' morale. Motivation starts with the teacher. (R)

### **Foreign language education policy at the Octavio Calderón.**

*“We introduced English very strongly in elementary.”* The principal told me that the school had decided to introduce English in the elementary grades with substantially more emphasis than had been done before. She said that around 2008 the fifth grade teacher started teaching English in third, fourth and fifth grade. (This teacher is the elementary English teacher that participated in my teacher interviews.) The principal said that she had had to “specialize” her elementary teachers in different areas according to their strengths and that English was one of those areas where there was a need to have a specialized teacher:

I find it wonderful that about five years ago [2008] we introduced English very strongly in elementary. [...] In view of this great need to specialize teachers in this basic phase which is elementary, in which the tree of formation is strengthened, we could say that I had to specialize teachers. In other words, I said: These teachers will teach math; these will teach Spanish; these will assess these other areas, etc., according to their most relevant strengths so that I didn't lose English, which is basic. (C)

*“Transversality” of English: English crosses through all subjects at the Octavio Calderón.* The principal and the two academic supervisors brought up the topic of

English crossing through all subjects at the Octavio Calderón. Teachers of all subject areas at the school are encouraged to include a section in English in each of their learning guides. This topic was also mentioned by students and teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see inductive analysis of students' perceptions of foreign language: *The use of English in other academic subjects' learning guides*; see also inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: "*Transversality*" of English: *English crosses through all subjects at the Octavio Calderón*).

The principal said that there were two areas that the educational mission and vision of the Octavio Calderón considered fundamental and that therefore were considered "transversal" areas, that is, crossing through all subject areas: English and technology. In Colombia, the area of technology is usually referred to as the "TICs", for the Spanish acronym of "*Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación*" (Information and Communication Technologies). Thus, at the Octavio Calderón, from pre-school to 11<sup>th</sup> grade, besides the four weekly hours of English as a subject, English is intended to appear in all other subject areas. The requirement for teachers at the Octavio Calderón is simple: at least one section of each of the learning guides that they prepare for students should be in English. Said the principal:

[English] should cross all areas. In teachers' learning guides there's a paragraph that teachers should write in English. In other words, each learning guide must have a part in English that teachers will ask students to respond to. (C)

The two academic supervisors confirmed what the principal had said:

There's a preoccupation with the teaching of the foreign language. There's even a project that tries to have the teaching of English be *transversal* to the other areas. In fact, one of the requirements for the development of teachers' learning guides is that they should include some information in English: titles or texts to be worked with students. [...] All learning guides made by teachers should have

information in English in order to get students more familiar with English and help them write, read and speak in English. (F)

Here we try to make areas *transversal* and in that sense English has become transversal. If you take a look at the learning guides, all learning guides of all subjects have a part in English. Whether it's Spanish, religion, natural sciences, chemistry, physics... they all have a part in English, so in that sense all areas try to work with English. (D)

When I asked how this initiative was born, one of the academic supervisors said that there had always been a preoccupation with teaching a foreign language at the heart of the school's educational mission statement, as the principal had expressed. He also mentioned the advantages that such initiative brings to teachers, as teachers have to become more familiar with English themselves in order to use English in their learning guides. One of the teachers had also pointed out the benefits of the "transversality" of English for teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: "*Transversality*" of English: English crosses through all subjects at the Octavio Calderón). Said the supervisor:

How did the idea come about? The school has always had that preoccupation. Within the school's educational mission statement one of the objectives is to strengthen the development of competences in English and to do it not only from the area of English. There's a lot of information... Teachers should also get trained to speak English, so it's a way to motivate them to research a little bit. And we have seen a lot of improvement in some teachers. Some teachers only put the title of the guide in English; others put texts and activities... (F)

*The level of English of students at the Octavio Calderón has increased thanks to the work of the English teachers and the arrangements made by the principal.* I asked administrators of the Octavio Calderón if the level of English of students had actually increased recently, as reported in some of the literature about the Escuela Nueva (Farrell, 2008) and revealed by a student of the Octavio Calderón winning the third place in the

“English Olympics” among schools in Medellín. According to one of the academic supervisors, the evidence that the students’ level of English had improved was the ICFES exam. The supervisor said that since he had been working at the school in 2010 the results of the ICFES exam in the area of English had improved, and the school was working hard in order to keep those results going up.

The supervisor attributed the improvement in the results of the ICFES exam to the work of English teachers at the school and the arrangements of the principal. On the one hand, English teachers in high school have adopted an interactive approach in their teaching of English. The teachers’ idea of having an “English Day,” for instance, has contributed to the students’ development of English at the Octavio Calderón. On the other hand, the arrangements made by the principal, such as asking teachers of all subjects to include a part in English in their learning guides, making English a “transversal” area through all subjects, have also helped. Said the administrator:

The level of English has gone up a lot. Thanks to the work of [teachers]. Thanks to their not only using the chalk and the board to teach English. That’s not the way to learn a language! The first thing that English-teaching institutions say is that you have to interact: make mistakes but speak the language; practice it. So it’s thanks to the work of teachers and the arrangements made by the principal and the teachers to provide all kinds of mechanisms to speak English. Mechanisms such as the week of English, or the learning guides having a space for English. We decided to have that part in English in the learning guides; nobody imposed that on us, see? All learning guides must have a part in English, and if the math teacher doesn’t speak English very well and he has difficulties, he has to go and call the one who knows English. (D)

*The Octavio Calderón is in the process of training teachers how to make better learning guides.* The principal expressed that the Octavio Calderón was, around the time I conducted my interviews (August, 2013) in a process of re-examining how teachers at

the school wrote their learning guides in order to have them make better learning guides. She said that teachers at her institution had been writing their learning guides for about seven or eight years and that it was time for a revision. She said that they had an expert in the elaboration of learning guides advising teachers at the level of the conceptual framework of their academic areas on how to write learning guides that are “more agile, deeper, and with a lot more academic rigor.” An interesting bonus that this process would bring for teachers, according to the principal, was that teachers would be able to improve their writing skills and thus would also write *about* education. The principal expressed that, weirdly enough, in Colombia everybody writes about education except teachers.

I had the chance to interview the expert in the elaboration of learning guides. He actually became the “fourth administrator” to be interviewed for this study besides the principal and the two academic supervisors – the morning shift supervisor and the afternoon shift supervisor. He told me in detail about the process that he was leading in order to get teachers to write better learning guides. It turned out that he had actually worked for the Fundación Escuela Nueva (FEN), helping them with the elaboration of their learning guides at the national level. This is what he replied when I asked what his job was at the FEN:

I was in charge of the academic coordination of the curriculum design in each of the academic areas, which is what we are doing here [at the Octavio Calderón]. What does that mean? It means balancing the learning guides, the number of pages, what average number of hours per week each of the academic areas should have at a national level... (R)

My “fourth administrator” was enthusiastic about the process that he was leading at the Octavio Calderón. While he was telling me the story of the process at the Octavio Calderón, he also told me why he had distanced himself from the FEN: According to

him, the elaboration of learning guides by the FEN had become too dependent on the guidelines and standards of the Colombian Ministry of Education and thus were no longer contextualized or effective. He saw the process taking place at the Octavio Calderón as some kind of rebirth of the Escuela Nueva of the seventies, in which teachers were in charge of developing their learning guides, except this time the process taking place at the Octavio Calderón was in a different context: the urban context. According to him, if teachers are trained how to make contextualized learning guides, they will make more effective learning guides, as these should not be standardized but should take into account the educational mission statement and the context of each educational institution.

Said the administrator:

Why is the Octavio Calderón the rebirth of the Escuela Nueva? Because the Octavio Calderón rethinks the rural Escuela Nueva of the seventies and takes it to an urban context with the use of TICs<sup>22</sup>, the incorporation of a foreign language, with not buying learning guides, but training teachers how to make them. Learning guides at the Octavio Calderón won't be standardized or out of context because they will be elaborated by teachers. [...] Each educational institution must follow its educational mission statement. For instance, the Octavio Calderón's mission statement should not be the same as the mission statement at a school in Envigado<sup>23</sup>. That is why I distanced myself from the FEN. The FEN was not interested in training teachers how to develop their learning guides. (R)

According to the administrator it is important to train teachers at the Octavio Calderón because they are actually the ones who will educate students. Teachers should know the Escuela Nueva model really well, its tools and strategies, and writing effective learning guides is a part of that process. Once again, he expressed that the FEN had lost

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<sup>22</sup> Acronym for Information and Communication Technologies

<sup>23</sup> A neighbor town of Medellín

its direction by concentrating only in the making of learning guides and ignoring the importance of teacher training within the Escuela Nueva model:

If teachers are actually the ones who will educate students, then what should I aim for? For teacher training! Teachers should be trained to have the tools and strategies of the model; that means knowing the model. If teachers don't know the model, we're screwed. You know where I think the FEN lost its bearings? The FEN concentrated its efforts in making learning guides. Man, that's really important; I'm telling you because I worked with them. But the FEN lost its bearings when it decided to concentrate on making learning guides and it left teacher training aside. Both things are important! (R)

According to the administrator, the learning guide is the most important tool of the Escuela Nueva model. If teachers are not aware of how important the learning guides are, then students will not go through the process of (a) individually analyzing the learning guide, (b) sharing information with peers, and finally (c) developing the learning guide socially with their peers and teacher. In that sense, the administrator said, the learning guide is "a road, some kind of map." An additional difficulty in developing the learning guides, as conceived of by the Escuela Nueva model, is getting to know the instruments, strategies and tools that the Escuela Nueva model has available and finding the right moment to use them within the learning guide. Said the administrator:

In general the success of the [Escuela Nueva] program is determined by the learning guides. The hardest thing is to make teachers aware of how important the learning guides are, how important it is to elaborate good learning guides. Some teachers would be better off buying a textbook and having students do exercises. But that's not the way our program works. [...] In order to make a learning guide, you have to select the instruments, the strategies, and the tools that you will use for that learning guide. You have to think about the moments of the guide, the closing "buttons." For instance, will you use an "infography"<sup>24</sup>, a "mindfact"<sup>25</sup>, a conceptual map? Will you work a film forum, a song, or using posters? See what I mean? Then, harmonizing all of that so that it all sounds good is very difficult. (R)

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<sup>24</sup> An educational tool of the Escuela Nueva model

<sup>25</sup> An educational tool of the Escuela Nueva model

The administrator then talked about the difficulties in making effective, contextualized learning guides. As any public school, the Octavio Calderón has to follow the guidelines and standards determined by the Colombian Ministry of Education. When developing their learning guides, teachers at the Octavio Calderón must start with the guidelines and standards. As the administrator put it, guidelines and standards make up the first “store” for the development of learning guides. Still, there is a long process to contextualize the learning guides, to make them “relevant and pertinent.” According to the administrator, only if the learning guides have these two ingredients, they will be contextualized:

There’s a framework of guidelines and standards that regulates all of us; we can’t move away from those. [...] So I go and get from the store: guidelines and standards. I get what I need. First period, I put it here; second period, I put it here; third period, I put it here. I make sure I’m not missing anything. My academic year is ready. How are teachers then supposed to contextualize the information? That’s when relevance and pertinence enter the stage. When is a learning guide relevant? When students understand that the information is useful. When is a learning guide pertinent? When students can put it into practice. Look at the evolution there is: information becomes knowledge when I can use it; and if I can use it, it is relevant and pertinent. *At that moment* we have learning guides that are contextualized. (R)

The learning guides used by the Escuela Nueva model have at least two main advantages when compared to traditional textbooks used by traditional schools. On the one hand, as the principal pointed out, learning guides give teachers the opportunity to design a curriculum that is relevant for students. As there is not a fixed textbook to follow, teachers are free to experiment with the content of their learning guides, free to decide what to include or leave out depending on how relevant topics are for students. In that sense, the principal said, teachers are constantly rebuilding their learning guides, as they are constantly stimulated by students to include new things. Said the principal:

Schools have to open an appetite for the world. When we approach a traditional textbook, it is so schematic: you're supposed to teach page 1 to page 100 from January to November and that's it. You can't get out of it. And most textbooks aren't even covered completely! Here [at the Octavio Calderón] teachers have the possibility of constantly taking out or including things in their learning guides. Looking at how the world turns, teachers are constantly building their learning guides. Besides, teachers are stimulated by their students to teach them something new, something that students see outside and would like their teachers to illustrate to them, to show them the way. (C)

On the other hand, as the administrator who worked for the FEN pointed out, learning guides give teachers opportunities to include strategies that will help teach content more effectively. As mentioned above, if a learning guide is effective and contextualized, if it is relevant and pertinent, it will guide students in the process of turning information into knowledge. In other words, the learning guide will give students opportunities to practice and apply what they learn. Said the administrator:

Teachers have to elaborate their guides and elaborate strategies that help them in their teaching process. That's the difference between a textbook and a learning guide. The textbook provides content, but it doesn't provide strategies to teach that content. The learning guide does. The objective of the learning guide, then, is to orient students in their learning process responding to and solving problems. [...] Textbooks do not orient students in their road to knowledge; learning guides do. Because textbooks do not orient students with questions, they simply turn into pages full of exercises. (R)

Therefore, if we take into account these two advantages of learning guides, we're able to see that teachers at the Octavio Calderón have not only a very flexible instrument that helps make the (English) curriculum meaningful for students, but also a rich ground on which to plant and develop strategies that are characteristic of the Escuela Nueva model.

*The possibility of implementing a vocational course of English at the Octavio*

*Calderón.* When I asked the administrator how the aforementioned learning guides could be contextualized at the Octavio Calderón in the area of English, he discussed the possibility of having a vocational course of a foreign language at the Octavio Calderón in articulation with the SENA<sup>26</sup>, just like the school already has in place for the areas of software development, fashion design, and graphic design. He said that any efforts at contextualizing the learning guides at the Octavio Calderón should start with indicators in the study of the socioeconomic status of students at the school. Questions could be addressed such as, “Are students at the Octavio Calderón the children of people who work at the public or private sector?” Then, he mentioned taking into account the kind of businesses that exist around the school. When looking at the location of the Octavio Calderón, he said, there are two important places around: a local airport and a bus terminal. He called those places “two very important focal points.”

The administrator then asked if the school had ever considered the area of tourism as one of the possible secondary education vocational courses to be developed at the school together with the SENA. According to the administrator, within such vocational course the learning of a foreign language would make a lot of sense. Going over the vocational courses already offered at the Octavio Calderón, software development, fashion design, and graphic design, the administrator asked why the school hadn't thought of having a vocational course on tourism and/or a foreign language:

Has the school studied the possibility of developing the theme of tourism in its articulation with the SENA? There's a [bus] terminal and there's an airport. Why

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<sup>26</sup> Acronym for National Service of Learning, a Colombian public institution focused in the development of programs of professional formation

haven't they considered this? [...] And if you talk about tourism, you need a foreign language. Why did the school choose fashion design? As far as I'm concerned, fashion is in Itagüí<sup>27</sup>, not around [the Octavio Calderón]. Having software design makes a lot of sense because that's what's hot today, the theme of technology, no need to discuss that. But, why fashion design? Couldn't the school have a fourth vocational course called, I don't know, a foreign language? Or a course to train tourism or tourist guide professionals? For a city like Medellín, having those two very important focal points near the school, I would have common sense, you know what I mean? [...] (R)

The administrator highlighted that there is already an agreement between the Octavio Calderón and the SENA, and that programs like the ones already in place at the school for software development, fashion design and graphic design, are opened according to students' preferences. He also said that he had heard that the English courses offered at the SENA were good. Thus, he said, having a vocational course of English in articulation with the SENA seemed like a good idea:

[A vocational course of English in articulation with the SENA] would be really good. As far as I'm concerned, there is an agreement between the Octavio Calderón and the SENA and programs are opened according to the likes and preferences of students... I don't really know what criteria there are to open, for instance, a fourth or fifth secondary education vocational course. What I'm trying to say is: If the world is influenced nowadays by the knowledge of a foreign language, it would be really nice if the Octavio Calderón opened that possibility to students, and if it could articulate it with the SENA. I've heard the SENA offers good English courses. So let's say that the Octavio Calderón could implement the teaching of a foreign language at the school working together with the SENA. (R)

**What the Octavio Calderón is doing to compensate not having teachers with a degree in English in elementary.**

*Practicing teachers from Luis Amigó University in Medellín assist the English elementary teacher at the Octavio Calderón.* One of the academic supervisors at the Octavio Calderón mentioned that practicing teachers from Luis Amigó University, a

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<sup>27</sup> A neighbor town of Medellín

university founded by Capuchin (Catholic) priests, were assisting the teaching of English in the elementary grades. I asked the English elementary teacher about this experiment and she gave more details about it (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: *Practicing teachers from Luis Amigó University in Medellín assist the English elementary teacher at the Octavio Calderón*). The supervisor said that this was a measure taken by the school as a way to compensate for the lack of teachers with a degree in English in elementary and to prevent the "shock" that some students at the school have had when they are taught by English majors who are more demanding sometimes teaching lessons mostly in English. This theme was also mentioned by teachers at the Octavio Calderón (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of foreign language: "We can't get to the idealism of teaching a lesson directly in English: When we've tried to do it here, it hasn't been seen as something positive by students and parents;" see also inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: "The requirement level in high school is a lot higher"). The thinking behind the recently implemented experiment is that having teachers who have a better knowledge of English will help motivate students. Said the supervisor:

What are we doing in this moment? If you're here on Thursday, you will see: There are some practicing teachers from a university, Luis Amigó University; they're studying to be English teachers and they're doing their field practice here [at the Octavio Calderón] in elementary. One comes on Mondays and Thursdays in the afternoon to help the second grader teacher. And there is another one who comes in the morning. We've said it before: someone who majored in English will surely have a better management, a better control of the area and will surely motivate students to learn English a lot more. (F)

The supervisor said that the experiment was a recent idea. Just two weeks had passed since they had started it and there were still a few flaws in its implementation:

fourth graders, for instance, were not receiving any help; only second, third and fifth graders. Still, it seemed worth trying and thus they hoped to have the practicing teachers at the school during the four semesters of their field practice. One important aspect of the experiment is that these practicing teachers had agreed to do their practice in the elementary grades although in the future they would teach at the high school level, as usually happens in the Colombian educational system.

These practicing teachers have to complete four semesters of field practice. At this point we're just at a diagnostic and observation stage, but we talked to their field practice coordinator last week and we told him that we were interested in having those teachers during the other three semesters here at our school, so that they could elaborate a classroom project and we could have other practicing teachers for the other grades. We started with second and third grade; the idea is to continue with fourth and fifth grade. [...] It's been only two weeks since we started the process with them. (F)

I asked the other academic supervisor about the experiment and how it had gone so far. He said that the practicing teachers had had empathy with the children at the Octavio Calderón, and that they were hoping the results of the practicing teachers' assistance in the area of English would be as good as the results of the practicing teachers' assistance that the school had had for the area of technology:

What we've heard so far is that the girls [practicing teachers] have had empathy with [the children]. I think the girls working in third, fourth, and fifth grade have had two or three classes? One comes on Mondays and the other one on Fridays. [...] So far it has gone well. The field practice with technology gave us good results, so we're going to try with English because we need to emphasize that language in elementary. That's why we did it. (D)

*The English elementary teacher attends training sessions offered by the Secretary of Education.* The academic supervisor that told me about the practicing teachers from Luis Amigó University also referred to another measure taken by the

school as a way to compensate the lack of teachers with a degree in English in elementary: The English elementary teacher at the Octavio Calderón was attending training sessions offered by the Secretary of Education. The English elementary teacher at the Octavio Calderón had mentioned these training sessions in detail (see inductive analysis of teachers' perceptions of PNB policies: The PNB's teacher training). Although not convinced of the effectiveness of these training sessions, the supervisor seemed to have faith in them:

What have we done in the meantime? We have... we're taking advantage of a training session offered to teachers by the Secretary of Education... They must have some tools that help teachers improve the teaching of English. (F)

It's worth pointing out that the principal also dismissed these training sessions when she said the only thing that the PNB had done was call elementary teachers at her school to be trained in "some sort of training course" (see above: *The Octavio Calderón is alone in face of the goal of the PNB*):

In the 18 years that I've been here, only until this year did they call elementary teachers to participate in a little course they will have. So I sent a teacher there and that's it. Some sort of training course. (C)

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter is divided in three parts: (a) conclusions, (b) a discussion of these conclusions within the conceptual framework of this study, and (c) recommendations for foreign language education policy in Colombia.

### **Conclusions**

For this section, responses to the research questions are grouped in terms of what the three groups of participants (students, teachers, and administrators at the Octavio Calderón) said about the topics. Research questions deal with the perceptions that students, teachers, and administrators of the Octavio Calderón have regarding foreign language education; and with the perceptions that teachers and administrators of the Octavio Calderón have regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of the PNB. It should be pointed out that when I refer to students, teachers, and administrators of the Octavio Calderón, I'm referring to the students, teachers and administrators that participated in this study.

### **Perceptions of Students, Teachers, and Administrators of a School of the Colombian**

#### **Escuela Nueva Regarding Foreign Language Education**

#### **Importance of a Foreign Language**

Students and teachers at the Octavio Calderón pointed out that learning a foreign language guarantees better working opportunities or at least gives more opportunities, as English is now required for most jobs. Teachers pointed out that it is really important to

learn a foreign language due to globalization. Other reasons for learning a foreign language mentioned by the participants of this study were: a foreign language has to do with students' "life projects;" the need for integration among nations; the fact that most of the information about research is available in English or in other languages; and the use of English for business and training purposes.

### **Hegemony of English**

Students and teachers at the Octavio Calderón see English as a/the universal language. Administrators, on the other hand, say that English is imposed in the Colombian educational system as *the* foreign language due to political and economic reasons.

### **Other Languages**

If students at the Octavio Calderón had the choice to learn a foreign language, they would like to learn French and Mandarin after English. Some of the languages that teachers would like to learn were: Italian, French, Portuguese, German and Mandarin. Although all of the administrators at the Octavio Calderón recognized the importance of learning English, two of them would like to learn another language like French or German rather than English.

### **Advantages of the Escuela Nueva (EN) Model at the Octavio Calderón for the Teaching of a Foreign Language**

Students at the Octavio Calderón see the EN model at the Octavio Calderón as advantageous for their learning of English. Most teachers at the Octavio Calderón also see the EN model as advantageous to the learning of a foreign language. Some of the reasons mentioned by teachers as advantages of the EN model were: (a) students are used to working in groups; (b) students have different “freedoms” in their learning process; (c) students learn at their own pace without the pressure of having to learn things quickly; and (d) lessons within the model are not guided by textbooks and thus lessons are more varied. Administrators also considered the EN model as advantageous for the teaching of English mainly due to the students’ group work and to the use of learning guides.

### **Disadvantages of the Escuela Nueva (EN) Model at the Octavio Calderón for the Teaching of a Foreign Language**

Students at the Octavio Calderón don’t see any disadvantages of the EN model at the Octavio Calderón for their learning of English. Most teachers at the Octavio Calderón do not think there are disadvantages to the EN model as a way to learn a foreign language. The only disadvantages mentioned by teachers had to do with disadvantages that may arise when working in groups or when having too much freedom to do the work. Administrators at the Octavio Calderón mentioned two disadvantages for the teaching of English at the Octavio Calderón, not necessarily related to the EN model. They said that (a) students who enter high school at the school do not usually have a strong background in English, and that (b) there is a general lack of motivation in students.

### **Suggested Changes in the Teaching of a Foreign Language at the Octavio Calderón**

The main suggestion of students at the Octavio Calderón for the teaching of a foreign language at their school was that teachers should speak English when teaching English. In other words, as teachers also expressed, foreign language lessons should be taught in the target language. Teachers at the Octavio Calderón had the following suggestions: (a) foreign language lessons could be more experiential; (b) play could help students' learning; (c) there should be fewer students in each class; (d) there should be more weekly hours of foreign language instruction; and (e) foreign language lessons should be taught in the target language from early on. Administrators at the Octavio Calderón had the following suggestions: (a) there should be English majors teaching from elementary; and (b) the elementary and high school foreign language curriculum should be better articulated.

### **How Foreign Language Lessons Include the Community**

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that although the English lessons do not explicitly reach the community, there are ways in which the community gets in touch with what is happening in the English lessons such as the “English Day,” activities within the learning guides to be carried out at home, and different “advertising campaigns” developed in English at the school. One of the administrators talked about “the day of accomplishments,” a day in which family, school and community come together, as a potential day to incorporate the community into the students' process of learning a foreign language.

## **View of Foreign Language**

**Students.** Students at the Octavio Calderón mentioned that the foreign language (English) is also used at their school in the learning guides of all other academic subjects different from English.

**Teachers.** Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that the students' levels of English at the Octavio Calderón are very uneven.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón believe that English-language teaching in other schools is usually teacher centered.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that they can't teach English lessons using only English. They said that when they had tried to do it, it hadn't been seen as something positive by students and parents.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón believe that students' motivation to study English is related to the role that English plays in students' "life projects" and students' secondary education vocational courses.

**Administrators.** Administrators at the Octavio Calderón see English as an "added value" to compete in the labor market.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón think that not studying English will generate a problem later in students' lives.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón see a foreign language as something that can turn into a powerful weapon against teachers if it is imposed on them or into a tool to be used by students when students feel that it's not being imposed on them.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón think it is easier to learn a foreign language as a child.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that children may start generating some prejudice against English in elementary due to their not having English majors teaching at the elementary level.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that there aren't teachers of other foreign languages available in Colombia available and thus schools are sent only English teachers.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón feel very fortunate to have English teachers in high school who really speak English fluently.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón believe that English teachers at the Octavio Calderón use a lot of strategies and thus English lessons are very proactive.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón think that students have lost their interest and motivation to study English and other subjects due to several reasons including having too much technology available.

**Students and administrators.** Students and administrators at the Octavio Calderón mentioned that guiding foreign visitors who come to the school in English is a good opportunity for students at the school to practice the foreign language.

Students and administrators at the Octavio Calderón mentioned the “English Day” at the school as an experiment taking place inside the school to have students practice the foreign language and incorporate the school community into the process of learning a foreign language.

**Teachers and administrators.** Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that nowadays kids are in contact with English from their homes and thus are now much more familiarized with English.

### **Perceptions of Teachers and Administrators of a School of the Colombian Escuela Nueva Regarding Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB**

#### **The 1994 General Law of Education**

**Teachers.** Out of the four teachers who were interviewed only the elementary English teacher knew what the 1994 General Law of Education said regarding the teaching of a foreign language in Colombia. The three high school English teachers either did not know the Law or thought that the Law demanded the teaching of English.

**Administrators.** Administrators at the Octavio Calderón seemed better informed about the 1994 General Law of Education. The principal at the Octavio Calderón considered the Law a “sad law” because schools are simply not free to choose what foreign language they will teach. According to the principal, only English teachers are appointed by the Secretary of Education to teach a foreign language in Colombian public schools. One of the academic supervisors at the Octavio Calderón was aware that the Law had been misinterpreted as a mandate to teach English, and said that languages such as French had suddenly been “eradicated” perhaps due to the fact that English was the most “commercial” language. The other academic supervisor at the Octavio Calderón

said that what the Law intended was to give the teaching of a foreign language the same status that other obligatory subjects (such as math, science, and social studies) have.

### **The National Bilingual Program (PNB)**

**Teachers.** Out of the four teachers interviewed only the elementary English teacher had a good idea of what the PNB was about. The other three teachers, the high school English teachers at the school, related the PNB, dictated at the central level by the Ministry of Education in the year of 2006, to a more recent initiative developed at the municipal level known as “Bilingual Medellín.” Therefore, the three high school English teachers thought the PNB was a more recent initiative.

The general feeling among English teachers at the Octavio Calderón is that programs such as the PNB are unrealistic and do not usually yield good results. One teacher said that usually there isn't much continuity with such programs and another said that it was too idealistic. Only the elementary English teacher said that the program was worth and that Colombia should aim for higher goals in the area of foreign language education.

After interviewing the English teachers at the Octavio Calderón, it was clear that the elementary teacher had more knowledge of the PNB because she had actually been to some PNB training sessions. (We should remember that one of the PNB's main fronts is the training of elementary general education teachers to teach English.) The high school teachers, on the other hand, were “out of the loop” in their knowledge of the PNB, as they are teachers with a degree in English who don't usually attend the training sessions.

**Administrators.** In general, administrators at the Octavio Calderón were either not very familiar with the PNB or were very skeptical about it. The principal was completely skeptical of the PNB. She said that what the PNB was doing in order to get students to reach an intermediate level of English didn't have to do with reality. Only one of the administrators saw a positive side to the PNB: it has made teachers aware of the importance of a foreign language.

As it happened with teachers, there was misinterpretation of the PNB, except administrators sometimes related the PNB to recent policies in foreign language teaching at the Octavio Calderón such as the “transversality of English,” (learning guides of all academic subjects having a part in English). One administrator voiced one of the frequent criticisms to the PNB: the fact that the program adopted a top-down approach and didn't really reach consensus among educational actors or stakeholders.

### **PNB Objectives**

**Teachers.** The three high school English teachers at the Octavio Calderón were skeptical of the main objective of the PNB, to have high school graduates reach an intermediate level of English. They considered the PNB objectives hard to reach and unrealistic, offering that teachers are sometimes not qualified enough, there isn't a unified approach to foreign language teaching across the country, the number of students in classrooms is usually too large to reach all students equally, elementary English teachers don't have a degree in English, and there are too few weekly hours devoted to English.

Only the English elementary teacher (attending the PNB training sessions) seemed hopeful about the PNB objectives. She said that the objectives of the PNB should not be

lowered and that, taking into account students' exposure to English nowadays, the goal of having students graduate from high school with a pre-intermediate level in English could actually be reached.

**Administrators.** All of the administrators interviewed thought that the main goal of the PNB was unrealistic. The principal was really skeptical of the main objective of the PNB and said that there was no support given by the Ministry of Education or the Secretary of Education in the form of concrete actions to help both teachers and students. She said that the Octavio Calderón was “alone” in the process of achieving that goal, and the only thing that they had to work with were the foreign language standards and the curricular guidelines determined by the Ministry of Education.

Two administrators had one main recommendation in order to make the goal of the PNB more achievable: teachers have to change their pedagogical practices. In order to do such, the State would have to provide support and also offer some kind of follow up of the PNB to see if the policies are actually being implemented and if they are changing the pedagogical practices of teachers. One administrator said that if teachers keep using the same tools they have used for twenty years, it is unlikely that students will reach a higher level of English.

### **The Document *Estándares***

**Teachers.** Three out of the four teachers interviewed saw the use of standards for foreign language teaching as something positive that could actually improve the teaching and learning of English. They said that it was better to have some framework of reference

than to have no framework at all. Two of the teachers who were interviewed said that they would always keep the document at hand to prepare their lessons and develop their learning guides.

One teacher was critical of the document saying that the adopted standards had little ground on the foreign language teaching context of the country and that they were “created from a desk, not from real life or experience.” Most teachers seemed to have faith in the document and in the people who elaborated it. Although most of them knew that the standards had been adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference, they hadn’t really asked themselves what that really meant, if this was positive or negative.

**Administrators.** The administrators’ view of the document *Estándares* was generally positive. Although administrators were skeptical of the main objective of the PNB, they saw the publication of *Estándares* as a step on the right direction. According to administrators, the document has not only made English teachers aware of the importance of a foreign language, but it has started to specify the competences required for groups of grades in a more concrete way thus helping teachers in their articulation of the English curriculum. Even the principal said that the school only had the standards (described in *Estándares*) and the foreign language curricular guidelines to work towards the goal of the PNB.

## **The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)**

**Teachers.** Two teachers saw the adoption of the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as positive. These two teachers said that there should always be a frame of reference and that those standards would contribute to having “competitive high school graduates” at an international level. Two teachers saw the adoption of foreign standards as something more arbitrary. According to these two teachers, it would be better to develop standards “according to the needs that we have in our country;” or to have some sort of validation process before adopting foreign standards such as those from the CEFR.

As with the elaboration of the document *Estándares*, there was in general some sort of blind faith in the judgment made by the people who chose the standards of the CEFR in the sense that they should know better. None of the teachers had actually gone to the original CEFR published by the Council of Europe (2011) or knew of any other foreign language framework.

**Administrators.** As it happened with the teachers who were interviewed, the administrators’ views of the fact that the standards were adopted from the CEFR were mixed. Two of the administrators thought that the Europeans should know better at developing standards for the English language. (One administrator even thought that the CEFR had been chosen because British English was a better model than American English.) The principal was very critical of the adoption of the CEFR and expressed her disbelief in importing or copying models that have nothing to do with the needs of Colombian citizens. Once again, she pointed out that choices such as the CEFR had to do

with economic policies and “convenience among the States” rather than with a conscientious analysis of the needs of Colombian citizens.

### **Suggestions for Foreign Language Policy in Colombia**

**Teachers and administrators.** Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón expressed that in the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers with a degree in English, not by general education teachers.

**Teachers.** Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that there should be more hours of English instruction per week and fewer students in each class.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that there should be: a) some sort of field work to adjust policies to the needs of regions or specific contexts, and b) a pilot program to validate foreign language education models such as the PNB before it can be expanded to the national territory.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón expressed that there should be a unified approach in the country to basic foreign language education guidelines. In other words, all public schools should be consistent with at least some norms that determine how to teach a foreign language such as the number of hours of English per week, the sequence of content areas according to grade levels, etc.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón expressed that there should be better control of teacher quality selection.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that foreign language education policy in Colombia should consider teachers updating their practices to more interactive tools such as the Internet.

**Administrators.** Administrators at the Octavio Calderón expressed that foreign language education policy in Colombia should give students real foreign language choices and thus colleges of education in Colombia should train teachers in different languages.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that elementary English teachers should be given opportunities to go abroad and learn from teaching experiences outside the country.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón expressed that foreign language education policy in Colombia should implement some of the characteristics of the Escuela Nueva model such as collaborative work, the use of learning guides, and the formation of a student government.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that English lessons should be practical and applicable.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón mentioned the possibility of creating foreign language networks across the country.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón talked about the possibility of creating a net of awareness of love for education.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that English-teaching centers in Medellín should be free for children who want to attend English lessons. (Students at the Octavio Calderón also expressed their interest in having free or more affordable English-teaching centers in their city.)

## **Teachers' View of Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB**

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that since general education teachers at the elementary level in Colombia are forced to teach English, they don't like English.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that not all English teachers in Colombia are qualified to teach English.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón expressed that the only thing that the PNB has done is invite teachers to training sessions. They said that many times teachers don't go to training sessions because they don't know about them or they're not motivated to go.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that in Medellín the use of English is being encouraged in many ways maybe due to the efforts of the PNB.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón expressed that there is a disagreement between the areas that the Ministry of Education wants to emphasize and those that are tested in the ICFES exam.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón said that the communicative area of learning a foreign language is the most important area. They said that learning a foreign language should be something natural and spontaneous.

Teachers at the Octavio Calderón expressed that the ICFES exam evaluates all students using the same measuring stick, no matter if they're from a rural or urban background or a public or private school.

### **Administrators' View of Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB**

**Foreign language education policy at the Octavio Calderón.** Administrators at the Octavio Calderón expressed that the Octavio Calderón is alone in the face of the goals

of the PNB. In other words, the PNB has not been effective at disseminating information or implementing its policies.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón expressed that around 2008 English had been introduced very strongly in elementary at the school. The principal said that she had had to “specialize” the fifth grade teacher to teach English in third, fourth, and fifth grade.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón expressed that the level of English of students at the Octavio Calderón had increased thanks to the work of the English teachers and the arrangements made by the principal.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that the Octavio Calderón was in the process of training teachers how to make better learning guides.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón talked about the possibility of implementing a secondary education vocational course in English at the school.

**Foreign language education policy in Colombia.** Administrators at the Octavio Calderón pointed out that there is a contradiction in terms of foreign language education policy in Colombia: Teaching English is obligatory starting at the elementary level but schools don't have the autonomy to hire specialized personnel at the elementary level.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón think that the teaching of areas such as English, religion, ethics and technology is still at the exploratory level in Colombia.

Administrators at the Octavio Calderón believe that the voices of teachers need to be taken into account in order to develop sound foreign language education policy in Colombia.

## **Teachers and Administrators' View of Foreign Language Education Policy and the Policies of the PNB**

Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón agree that in the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers with a degree in English, not by general education teachers.

Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón mentioned two ways the school is trying to compensate not having teachers with a degree in English in elementary: (a) Practicing teachers from Luis Amigó University in Medellín assist the English elementary teacher at the school, and (b) The English elementary teacher attends the training sessions offered by the Secretary of Education.

Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón said that English crosses through all subjects at the Octavio Calderón in what they call the “transversality” of English. (Students at the Octavio Calderón also mentioned that English is also used in the learning guides of all other academic subjects different from English.)

Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón pointed out that in Colombia (foreign language) educational policies don't usually that take shape from the ground up, but that instead foreign models are usually copied. This comment was made regarding the adoption of the CEFR for the description of standards by the PNB. Teachers commented that it would be nice if Colombians could develop their (foreign language) educational policies according to the needs of the country.

Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón mentioned that in Colombia anyone can enter the educational system and thus there is little control of teacher quality selection. In terms of foreign language teaching, for instance, it happens that those

selected for teaching a foreign language in high school may have knowledge of the language but no pedagogical knowledge or training.

Teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón mentioned that the requirement level of English in high school is a lot higher and that thus that sudden change may end up demotivating students. The requirement level of English in high school is higher due to having English majors teaching at the high school level.

Teachers and administrators mentioned that it would be useful to have either pilot programs to validate the policies of the PNB or a follow-up of the implementation of the PNB in educational institutions.

Teachers and administrators pointed out that the students who reach a good level of English within the objectives of the PNB have been students who see that the amount of English that they learn at school is not enough or who have had the possibility of studying English outside the school.

## **Discussion**

The conceptual framework of this study is related to an ecology of languages paradigm as opposed to a diffusion of English paradigm (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) and to the model of Responsible ELT that I propose, which includes three main components: (a) awareness of the hegemony of English, (b) critical language-policy research and (c) resistance to linguistic imperialism. Thus, one of the main objectives of this discussion of findings is to determine to what extent the school where this case study was carried out implements the elements of Responsible ELT.

In order to make it easier to follow through, the table below (already included in chapter 2) presents the descriptions each of the components of Responsible ELT in order to help determine to what extent such model is implemented. I thus offer such table one more time and continue with a discussion of each of the components of the model.

*Table 9: Relationship between research questions and the elements of Responsible ELT*

<b>Research questions</b>	<b>Responsible ELT</b>
What are the perceptions of students, teachers, and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva regarding foreign language education?  (Questions 1-3)	Awareness of the hegemony of English (how aware one is that one may be privileging English over other foreign languages and contributing to the spread of English).
What are the perceptions of teachers and administrators of a school of the Colombian Escuela Nueva regarding foreign language education policy and the policies of the PNB?  (Questions 4-5)	Critical language-policy research (knowing whose interests are served by the current language policy).
	Resistance to linguistic imperialism (how English can be learned to empower and further the cultural, social, and educational interests of local communities).

### **Awareness of the Hegemony of English**

Being aware of the hegemony of English means being aware that one may be privileging English over other foreign languages and may actually be contributing to the spread of English. As stated above, it was clear from the analysis of data that students and teachers at the Octavio Calderón see English as “the universal language” and that administrators, on the other hand, say that English is imposed in the Colombian educational system as *the* foreign language due to political and economic reasons.

The belief that the world revolves around the English language was evident in a student’s affirmation that “Washington is the capital of the world.” From teachers’

assertions that English is the “universal language,” the “most important” language or the “common language” across nations and, thus, it is the best option as a foreign language in schools in Colombia, teachers at the Octavio Calderón unfortunately see themselves as responsible of “saving” English language learners from their “non-English-speaker status,” (Macedo et al., 2003). It is perhaps understandable that as English teachers they see English as superior to all other languages. Unfortunately, such view reveals little awareness of the hegemony of English and certainly does not contribute to an “ecology of languages” paradigm (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Administrators had a different view. The principal said that the idea that schools are free to choose what foreign language they will teach is “a lie.” According to her, no matter what language a school in Medellín has decided to teach, the Departmental (or Municipal) Secretary of Education will not appoint a teacher of a foreign language other than English. There was a strong emotional response to this reality on the side of the principal; some sort of frustration and impotence expressed. She even seethed at the idea that choosing a language other than English would result in negative consequences from the Ministry of Education:

English doesn't have to do with the choice of an institution; it is a governmental choice and we have the obligation to teach it. So one has no choice to say: I want a French teacher, I want a Mandarin teacher... The Ministry of Education would fall apart. [...] Schools don't have the autonomy to hire specialized personnel in those areas in elementary. It's as simple as that. We don't have the autonomy or the resources. And if we did, we would get a disciplinary process. (C)

The principal also said that the fact that there aren't any teachers of other languages available for schools and therefore the Departmental (or Municipal) Secretary

of Education always sends English teachers to teach a foreign language in schools had to do with “economic policies” rather than with “curricular policies”:

No, there aren't teachers of other foreign languages, I'm telling you. If I were to say that there's a heap of teachers in Medellín: one speaks English, the other Mandarin, the other Italian... And I said: “We want to learn Mandarin in our school.” Would they appoint the teacher? Of course not! Of course not. That has to do with economic policies, not with curricular policies. (C)

The “economic policies” that the principal mentioned may have to do with the growing influence of International Organizations (IOs) and their impact on national education systems. In their book, *Transformation of Education Policy*, Martens, Nagel, Windzio, and Weymann (2010), called our attention to the impact of IOs such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Study on national education systems. According to Martens et al. (2010) education policy “no longer seems to be a domestic area in which government activity, supervision, and control are particularly strong and (almost) exclusive, rather these internationalization processes exert influence on national education systems” (p. 3). How IOs such as the World Bank or the British Council may have influenced foreign language education policy in Colombia is an issue worth examining in the future.

It is worth pointing out that the document *Estándares* and the policies of the PNB in general may have actually contributed to the widely held notion that English is the foreign language of choice in the country. According to the document, most of the educational institutions in Colombia have opted to teach English as a foreign language: “Based on the law [the General Law of Education] and in exercise of their autonomy, the great majority of Colombian educational institutions *have opted* to offer their students the opportunity of learning English as a foreign language” [emphasis added] (p. 7). After the

interviews with administrators at the Octavio Calderón, we know that such assertion is simply not true, at least in the context of the Octavio Calderón.

As a way to deal with the hegemony of English, the principal talked about the need to have schools of education train teachers in different languages in order to really offer students choices in terms of what foreign language to study at their school. The principal suggested the creation of language networks that could spread the seeds of different languages in different regions of the country.

And [then] we create networks; large networks by regions. We could start field experience sites on the Atlantic zone of the country, the east, the south of Colombia; we could grab Colombia by regions and look at the results by regions. We would empower teachers here with high levels and proficiency, and then take them here to spread the language, then here to spread it here... And we create language networks: networks of Mandarin, networks of Italian... And we establish clear policies in which students really know their foreign language; really know the country from which they're adopting the language. [...] In other words, getting to meet the world before going out to know it; that's important. (C)

No matter how well-intentioned the idea of the creation of language networks may sound and how it certainly reflects awareness of the hegemony of English, it is worth pointing out that *none* of the participants in this study ever said a word about Chocó, Guahibo, Saliba, Macu, Witoto, Bora, Tucano, Andoque, Awa'caiquer, Cofán, Gambiano, Kamentsá, Páez, Ticuna, Tinigua, Yagua, Yarur or any of the 80 language groups in Colombia. In other words, it seems the discourse of *Estándares* and the policies of the PNB in general have been effective at (a) wiping out all other attempts at bilingualism in Colombia involving Colombian native languages and Spanish, and (b) reducing the concept of bilingualism to being bilingual in Spanish and English.

## **Critical Language-Policy Research**

Being critical in terms of language-policy research means knowing whose interests are served by the language policy that is being implemented. In the Colombian foreign language education context this would mean knowing why standards were developed for the learning of English and why the CEFR was chosen as the document on which to formulate those standards. Let us say at this point that opinions among teachers and administrators regarding the adoption of standards and, more specifically, of the CEFR were mixed. Some teachers and administrators said that having a frame of reference was beneficial and would contribute to having “competitive high school graduates” at an international level. Other teachers and administrators saw the adoption of foreign standards as something more arbitrary and were in favor of either developing standards “according to the needs [...] in our country” or having some sort of validation process before adopting foreign standards such as the CEFR’s. It is worth noting that (a) there was, among teachers and administrators in general, some sort of blind faith in the judgment made by the people who chose the standards of the CEFR and that (b) none of the teachers or administrators had actually seen the original CEFR or knew of any other foreign language framework.

One of the administrators made an interesting point, which relates to the concept of critical language-policy within the Responsible ELT model that I propose. The administrator said that “a foreign language becomes a tool when you don’t feel that it’s being imposed on you.” In other words, when you critically agree that you should learn that language. This is exactly the point that I’m trying to make when I talk about learning a foreign language critically. If one learns a foreign language critically, one would ask

questions such as: Why should I learn this language? What will I be able to do with this language? Do I really want to learn this language? If one is imposed a foreign language, this administrator said, it will be very likely that you rebel against it and you end up not learning it: a very important thing to consider in the Colombian context of foreign language education with English being ineffectively enforced in schools.

I argue that the way in which English is taught and the teaching of English is implemented in Colombia (by getting students to reach certain proficiency standards) has little to do with students' actual experiences of English, with their attitudes towards it, and with their use of that language as a means of empowerment. In other words, English is not learned critically in Colombia. I totally agree with the administrator quoted above in the sense that the way English is enforced as the only foreign language option in the country may actually end up turning students away from that language and, I would add, from their critical engagement in their learning of it. Tollefson (1991) has pointed out that language can become a tool for sustaining inequality when it is a gatekeeper for employment and higher education. Let us look carefully at the incredible paradox we have here.

Because English is uncontested as a “universal language” it has become indispensable to pursue a higher education or to get better paid jobs. Educational entities such as the Ministry of Education in Colombia decided that English has to be taught from early on in all public schools. It is widely believed (even by participants of this study) that the earlier one learns a language, the better. How do they decide to implement this? As it has been said by participants of this study many times, by having general education teachers (without a degree in English or in ELT) teach it. If they are not proficient in the

language, they are offered training sessions or courses of professional development. What exactly is the message that general education teachers having to teach English usually send to students? The principal of the Octavio Calderón couldn't have said it more eloquently: "You don't like English. Get bored with English!"

On the other hand, students who can afford taking lessons at expensive ELT institutions actually pursue a higher education or qualify for better paid jobs. In other words, only those who can pay will achieve the practice needed to attain English proficiency. It was also said by several participants of this study, except in kinder terms: "The students who reach the objectives of the PNB have been students who see that the amount of English that they learn at school is not enough." Thus, we see how policies of programs such as the PNB play a role in helping English become a tool to sustain social inequality. Let us go slowly through some of the issues involved in this paradox.

Vélez-Rendón (2003) has referred to the widening gap between private and public education and how the area of foreign language education may be contributing to such gap. After the 1994 General Law of Education mandated the teaching of a foreign language at the elementary level, public schools have had to rely on general subject area teachers who may not know English to teach it whereas private schools have hired specialists for the job long before the law was passed. Thus, as Vélez-Rendón (2003) explained, students in public schools "are exposed to methodologies emphasizing rote learning, repetition and memorization, which inevitably result in students' failure to cope with a simple communicative situation after several years of classroom instruction" (Vélez-Rendón, 2003, p. 191). In other words, the level of proficiency achieved by students in private schools is very different from the level of proficiency achieved by

students in public schools. One recommendation from this study that both teachers and administrators at the Octavio Calderón agreed on was that in the early elementary grades English should be taught by teachers who have a degree in English, not by general education teachers.

Also in relation to the gap between private and public education, it is worth noting the wide difference in terms of the time that students at each of these instances spend studying a foreign language: Students in private schools that are bilingual have lessons taught in the foreign language (usually English, French, Italian or German) and have language specialists teaching the subject areas. In other words, students in private bilingual schools can spend most of their weekly time studying *in* the foreign language. Students in public schools, on the other hand, are lucky if they spend two to four hours a week studying English. As one of the teachers of the Octavio Calderón stated, “We’re lucky to have four hours per week but in most schools they have three.” Another teacher of the Octavio Calderón raised a relevant question in terms of foreign language teaching policy in relation to the PNB objective of getting bilingual high school graduates in Spanish and English at a pre-intermediate level: “How likely is it for a kid to become bilingual in English and Spanish if in his lifetime he only gets two weekly hours of English instruction?” The chances are scarce, we must admit.

As stated above, it is widely believed (even by participants of this study) that the earlier the foreign language is learned, the better. In my review of the literature, I have pointed out how Phillipson (1992) referred to this idea as one of the tenets of the ELT profession and how he traces the origin of that tenet to the Commonwealth Conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language, held at the University of Makerere,

Uganda in 1961. Actually, Phillipson traces the neutral view of the English language held by many in the ELT profession to that seminal report. What the report seems to ignore, according to Phillipson, is the fact that students with a solid grounding in their mother tongue, who have already learned to use the language for analytical and critical purposes, may be well prepared to learn English at a later stage.

After my analysis of *Parâmetros*, the Brazilian foreign language-policy document that asks for a foreign language to be taught from sixth grade with the main purpose of learning how to read in a foreign language, and, on the other hand, after finding out in this study that due to the way English is enforced in public schools in Colombia, students at the Octavio Calderón (a) may end up demotivated to learn the foreign language in the early elementary grades and (b) experience a gap between how English is taught at the elementary level and at the high school level, a few questions seem pertinent:

- How and when can students learn English critically?
- Why is English introduced in the early grades by non-specialists who end up demotivating students?
- Why is learning English *suddenly* more demanding at the high school level?
- Couldn't English be introduced critically ("responsibly") at some point?

After an examination of the paradox of ELT in Colombia, it comes as no surprise that several students and one administrator of this study suggested having free or affordable English-teaching centers in Medellín for children who wanted to attend English lessons. According to one of the administrators, there should be some sort of economic support for people who do not have the means to afford the courses offered at

those centers. In line with Tollefson (1991) and his idea that language can become a tool for sustaining inequality, this administrator declared that ELT centers are “still a privilege for the people with high socioeconomic status.”

To make the scenario of ELT in Colombia even worse, one teacher mentioned how sometimes English teachers in Colombian public schools may end up teaching English because they couldn't find a job in their professional field. In other words, teaching English was for these teachers some sort of last resort, a way to get to a safer position among the difficulties of getting a steady job in Colombia. This issue was commented upon in one of Colombia's most popular newspapers, *El Tiempo*, when a reader who had a PhD in Science Research, talking about the non-existent credentials of a Dean of one of Colombia's universities, called people's attention to this fact<sup>28</sup> (Pedraza González, 2013):

In the country of the “Sacred Heart” in order to be a teacher you only need to know someone working in a school who would offer you the job and suddenly you will be teaching in the classroom and talking about crucial themes with the students. If we examine the issue carefully, we'll see that there are politicians, medical doctors, or journalists who, without any pedagogical training, entered the colleges and schools to teach young students. In this country, the quality of a teacher is in conflict with the idea of a person who orients students, sets an example and actually trains students. It would be worth for the State to start revising the CVs of administrators, deans, principals and teachers at colleges and public and private schools to determine who are the real teachers and end this idea that teaching is the last resort in terms of finding a job for some professionals who are hiding in the classroom because they weren't able to find a job within their field.

One can only wonder if such teachers would ever ask themselves whose interests are served in the language policies they help implement.

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<sup>28</sup> My translation

## **Resistance to Linguistic Imperialism**

Incorporating the element of resistance to linguistic imperialism in ELT means thinking how English can be learned to empower and further the cultural, social, and educational interests of local communities. The Escuela Nueva model being known for its involvement of the community around the school, I wanted to dig into how the Octavio Calderón approached the community in English lessons. In order to dig into how the Octavio Calderón implemented or not this component, I asked participants how (or if) they saw English lessons at the school incorporate the community. I must say that there were very few occasions in which participants said this would happen. I must also say that I was surprised at the fact that English lessons had little to do with the school community.

Not only had I read that the Escuela Nueva model was very effective at incorporating the community, but I had heard of the initiative *Medellín Bilingüe* (Bilingual Medellín), a strong commitment of the city in becoming a “bilingual” city (in Spanish and English). The latter was actually confirmed by some participants of this study. One of the teachers mentioned instances such as local newspapers or TV channels having sections in English, the municipality of Medellín webpage being navigable in Spanish or English, the metro-rail system in the city having audio announcements in both Spanish and English, taxi drivers in the city being offered a basic English course and certificate, and so forth. In the analysis of data above it was also mentioned how some teachers at the Octavio Calderón thought of the PNB as the Bilingual Medellín initiative.

However, instances in which English was learned specifically at the Octavio Calderón to empower and further the interests of locals were scarce. Students mentioned

how they would sometimes take visitors of the school who don't speak Spanish on a tour in English. Such instance sounds definitely empowering. One of the administrators conjectured about the possibility of having a vocational course on tourism and/or English at the school (such as the vocational courses already in place at the school) due to the school's proximity to one of the city's airports and an important bus terminal. Still, English lessons reaching out to the community and/or its interests at the Octavio Calderón mostly has to do with exhibiting posters in English on information boards around the school.

After my comparison of policy documents, I could see how the Brazilian *Parâmetros* express an interest in the development of citizenship. As mentioned previously, *Parâmetros* sees the foreign language lesson as an opportunity to examine social practices according to how these are understood by discourses in other social contexts and, at the same time, think critically about the social practices in their own social environment. Themes such as “awareness of the dangers of a society that favors consumerism in detriment of personal relationships; respect of human rights (including cultural and linguistic rights); [and] protection of the natural environment” (*Parâmetros*, p. 44) would be themes of the foreign language lesson/classroom. *Estándares*, the Colombian language-policy document, on the other hand, favors the view of (foreign) language as neutral and sees the learning of language competences as the main challenge of a foreign language lesson/classroom. It comes as no surprise, then, that a school trying to implement such document has given little thought to how to learn a foreign language while also resisting linguistic imperialism. Actually, how to implement such crucial

component of the model of Responsible ELT remains an intriguing question for future research.

## Recommendations

After interviewing students, teachers, and administrators of the Octavio Calderón, there were several recommendations made by them for foreign language education policy in Colombia. In no specific order, these are:

- In the elementary grades, teachers of a foreign language should be foreign language majors. The idea that general education teachers can be trained to teach English doesn't seem to help students on their process of learning a foreign language. As it has been pointed out many times by participants in this study, students are demotivated to learn English in elementary because their English teachers are general education teachers who were forced to teach English. On the other hand, once students enter high school and are taught by foreign language majors, they are shocked: students were not used to having their lessons taught in English and they feel that suddenly too much is asked of them.
- If schools are to offer foreign language learning choices, there should be a good supply of foreign language majors to teach in elementary, as the principal of the Octavio Calderón suggested. What is happening now is that schools are sent *only* English teachers and students in schools do not have other choices of foreign languages to learn.
- The process of developing foreign language policy could be more localized and dictated by regional or contextual specificities. The Colombian educational system allows for a decentralized, bottom-up approach in terms of foreign language education policy. As it was implied by teachers at the Octavio Calderón,

top-down policies such as the PNB are unrealistic and do not have a ground on the day-to-day reality of schools. Furthermore, measuring all students with the same exam regardless of the school context (rural/urban, public/private) is unfair, to say the least.

- Decentralizing the development of foreign language education policy does not necessarily mean that there isn't a unified approach in foreign language education in the country. At least some key aspects of foreign language education can and should be defined and applied throughout the country: number of hours of foreign language instruction per week, maximum number of students per class, foreign language specialists in elementary, curriculum progression, etc.
- In order to avoid the shocks that may result from having very easy foreign language lessons in elementary taught by non-specialists and very difficult lessons in high school taught by specialists, and the constant disparity in the level of foreign language proficiency of students in different schools, there should be a well-articulated national curriculum that progresses smoothly from the elementary years through the high school years and that is in place in any school in the country.
- As it was often mentioned by teachers that students' level of proficiency in English within the same class (grade) was very uneven, also due to the fact that students from different schools (and different English-proficiency levels) are constantly entering the Octavio Calderón, teacher training offered by programs such as the PNB should incorporate practice with respect to differentiated learning. Although initially the self-instructional learning guides developed by

Escuela Nueva scholars were aimed at dealing with different proficiency levels (in any area), it was clear from teachers' suggestions that they need more expertise in dealing with "uneven levels of English" within the same class (grade).

- If foreign frameworks or models such as the Common European Framework of Reference are adopted for foreign language education, there should be mechanisms to follow up and validate those frameworks or models. If objectives are set, say, for the year 2019, there should be ways to assess frameworks or models in place in educational institutions through and until the year 2019. The PNB has, at this point, changed its name and objectives twice since its creation. It was called *Programa de Fortalecimiento al Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras* at some point during 2013 and in 2014 has been replaced by the program called *Programa Nacional de Inglés 2015-2025 Colombia Very Well!* (MEN, 2014), which was launched in July of 2014 by the current Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos, and sets new objectives for the year 2025. What happened, then, with the assessment of the objectives set by the PNB for the year 2019?
- It makes a lot of sense to intensify the teaching of a foreign language as part of a secondary education vocational course, as suggested by one of the administrators at the Octavio Calderón. Vocational courses such as the ones already offered at the Octavio Calderón – software development, fashion design, and graphic design – or tourism (as suggested by the administrator) could have a strong English

component that could be articulated by schools together with the SENA (Colombian National Service of Learning).

- As it is evident that the students with the highest levels of English proficiency are those who also take English lessons outside the school, the State should help students by making courses at English-language teaching institutions more affordable for those young students who are interested in them, as suggested by students and administrators at the Octavio Calderón.
- Schools could find ways to make the teaching of a foreign language “transversal” to other academic subjects the way it is being implemented at the Octavio Calderón.
- Practicing teachers could aid foreign language teachers in elementary the way it is being implemented at the Octavio Calderón.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Information Flyer for *Fundación Formador de Formadores – Una Nueva*

*Escuela para el Mundo*



**FUNDACIÓN**  
**FORMADOR DE FORMADORES**  
**"UNA NUEVA ESCUELA PARA EL MUNDO"**

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