



## Mediating Standards and L2 Instruction in a Colombian Setting

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### 1. Introduction

Standardization has been for years a source of concern for teachers [2] [3]. Although the spirit of standards is that of equal quality of education for students, teaching and learning conditions may hinder this goal. The Colombian government set forward a booklet containing foreign language standards for elementary and high schools in 2006 [1]. These standards were not accepted easily by the academic community [4] [5] [6] [7] and there has been an ongoing discussion at different conferences in Colombia (ASOCOPI Colombian Association of English Teachers, Encuentro de Instituciones Formadoras de Licenciados) about how these standards fit in the professional practice of teachers throughout the country, and if it is desirable to adopt these standards based on the Common European Framework of Reference [8] in a South American EFL setting where the spirit of mobility fostered by the European standards is not present.

One effort towards conciliating the standards provided by the government and the common practices of teachers inside the classroom has been the implementation of in-service training courses. The Universidad de Nariño offered one such course for teachers who work at public schools in the urban and rural areas of Pasto. This paper summarizes this experience which took place in fall, 2011.

### 2. Discussing standards and teaching

The in-service training course was the result of an agreement between the Linguistics and Languages Department and the Secretary of Education at Pasto. The purpose of the Secretary of Education was to find a way to incorporate the standards provided by the government into the syllabi for the courses taught in Pasto. After analyzing the task at hand, it was decided that it would be interesting to work with the teachers in the design of a syllabus that combined their knowledge and experience, and the government standards.

The initial meetings revealed situations that may hinder the implementation of standards in schools in Pasto and Nariño:

- a. In Colombia, teaching and learning conditions are opposed to the goals that are expected to achieve with standards. This lack of coherence can be detrimental for the teaching/learning process.
- b. Foreign language teachers with a degree in language teaching need to be in charge of EFL courses. Here a caveat is in order. In Colombia, teachers from other areas such as social sciences or math also teach EFL up to 5<sup>th</sup> grade; foreign language teachers only begin to work with students when they are in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This lack of articulation between elementary and high school can also make the implementation of standards and the achievement of the government's goals difficult.
- c. The teachers agreed upon the idea of increasing the number of hours devoted to foreign language instruction. Some of the teachers who participated in the course only had one hour a week available for instruction. Can we really reach a B1 level with such a limited time available?
- d. Any foreign language course that intends to take students to tangible goals requires resources and materials that support the implementation of standards. According to what teachers said, there are standards related to listening, but their schools do not have CD players, DVD players or TV sets that allow learners to be exposed to different sources of input.
- e. Class size is another element that affects teaching. Teachers suggest reducing the number of students in each course to make the most out of the scarce available time. Even though Colombian standards include standards related to speaking, large classes limit opportunities for interaction and feedback on the part of teachers. [9]
- f. There must be a consensus on how and to what extent standards need to be implemented so that each grade grows in complexity.
- g. The implementation of current trends in methodology (e.g., Task-based language teaching, Competency-based language teaching, Content-based instruction) and alternative assessment are an important support for the implementation of standards and syllabus design. [10]

These ideas were the starting point for the course and set the tone for it. More than just showing teachers how to implement standards, the course involved teachers in creating their own interpretation and implementation of standards taking as a basis theory and practice [11] [12] [13] [14].

The theoretical foundations of the course entailed defining some key terms which teachers need to know and that had not been made sufficiently explicit in the Colombian standards booklet. The key terms teachers learned to distinguish and define were: standard, standard descriptor, standard indicator and competence [15]. These terms were deemed important since they are commonly used in specialized articles in Canada, Australia, Europe, and The United States [16] and they have been extensively evaluated. In Colombia, Vasco [17], an educator and writer defined standards as "clear and public criteria that allow judging if a person, institution, process or product fulfills some social expectations of quality". This and other definitions were compared and contrasted so that each



teacher could come up with their own idea of standards. The second part of the course focused on defining and working around the concepts of syllabus design, postmethod pedagogy and alternative assessment.

### 3. The advantages of standards

An element worth clarifying was that standards specify the purpose of schooling, but the way learners reach that goal is not written in stone, and that is one thing teachers need to remember when creating standards-based syllabi. Knowing about standards led teachers to answer the next question: What was the relationship between Colombian standards, or any standards, and their teaching? It was interesting for teachers to see that using them can have clear benefits for teaching. First of all, having standards gives a direction for teaching tasks since they have to go hand in hand with standards. Secondly, they tell learners specifically what is expected from them. Thirdly, teachers and students are aiming for the same objectives and these objectives are also known by the academic community and parents. Finally, standards help teachers evaluate other aspects related to their professional practice such as schedules, tasks and materials as they all should be related to standards.

### 4. The limitations of standards

As many authors have pointed out [4] [5] [6] [7] standards are not free from criticism and the teachers participating in the course were aware of this. One of them is that standards may compel teachers to teach to the test and privilege rote learning instead of focusing on the development of creativity. This first limitation is evident in Colombia where students who finish high-school and students who are about to graduate from college have to take standardized tests. Another downside of standards is derived from the first one: the success learners attain in these standardized exams sometimes may depend on their test-taking ability, not on their real-life skills. Students from some schools or who come from more privileged urban areas may outperform students from disadvantaged backgrounds. One more disadvantage has to do with the fact that standards not always come from negotiations between experts, administrators, teachers, researchers and the government. In Colombia, the creation of foreign language standards was rather vertical and the difficulties for implementing them may be a result of this process that has been questioned [6] [18].

### 5. Outcomes of the course

As it was stated before the course was initially thought to help teachers implement Colombian foreign language standards. However, the course evolved and the theoretical background [19] [20] [21] [22] served as the basis to really evaluate Colombian standards against other standards around the world. This process made teachers aware of the need to adapt standards to their situations and to take a critical stand regarding the extent to which they wanted to use standards in their lessons. We concluded that even though Colombian standards needed some modifications, they could be used to create syllabi for their courses. These syllabi were created after the teachers did a self-assessment task with the syllabus they were currently using. The result of this was a syllabus that incorporated the standards described in the booklet provided by the government into the whole syllabus structure. Some standards were used in the objectives section, some others were included in the content, and others were considered for assessment criteria. These new syllabi were more realistic, contents were adjusted to the available time; the assessment process was more explicit and organized. All in all, the new syllabi were adapted to their teaching and learning conditions. Teachers were satisfied with this product and they suggested they wanted to have access to all the syllabi in order to propose the model at their schools. Teachers felt empowered, felt ownership and they saw that investing time in designing a syllabus with an organized format can help them plan their work in a more professional way, demystifying the use of standards and fostering cooperative work among teachers. All the syllabi designed by the teachers, can be seen here:

<http://eslassessment.wordpress.com/standards-based-syllabus-design/>

### 6. Conclusions

Even though standards are not always received with great expectations by teachers, it is important to take them into consideration to help implement current trends in teaching. On the other hand, teacher knowledge, classroom conditions, student conditions, schedules and high school regulations in countries like Colombia affect teaching greatly. Furthermore, the implementation of policy from a top down approach is not a helpful strategy if the collaboration of teachers is expected for the regulations to work and be successful. Finally, academic articles, papers and presentations in national and international events are essential if teachers' voices are to be heard.

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