

English Teaching in Cali: Teachers' Proficiency Level Described¹

*Rosalba Cárdenas
Orlando Chaves*
Universidad del Valle
Cali, Colombia

Abstract

This article presents a description of the proficiency level of a group of English teachers who participated in the study about the conditions of implementation of the National Bilingual Program in Santiago de Cali. To offer a view of teachers' proficiency beyond tests results, and in an effort to understand the make-up of this proficiency, focus group interviews and survey data were also used. Findings were analyzed following the models of teacher development of Richards (1998) and Roberts (1998), as well as theory about language proficiency from different authors. The results show that teachers from both public and private sectors are still in the process of building the proficiency levels sought by the Ministry of Education. The study also found that the elementary level, especially in the public sector, provides a frail basis for teaching and learning English at the secondary level.

Key words: Proficiency, English teaching, National Bilingual Program, conditions of implementation, standards, tests results.

Resumen

Descripción del Nivel de proficiencia de los docentes de inglés de Cali

En este artículo se presenta una descripción del nivel de proficiencia de un grupo de profesores de inglés que participaron en el estudio sobre las condiciones de implementación del Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo en Santiago de Cali. Con el deseo de ofrecer una visión más amplia de la competencia lingüística (proficiencia) de los docentes se utilizaron no sólo resultados de pruebas sino también datos de encuestas y entrevistas de grupo focal. Los hallazgos fueron analizados teniendo en cuenta los modelos de desarrollo profesional docente

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de Richards (1998) y Roberts (1988), al igual que teorías sobre proficiencia proveniente de diversos autores. Los resultados muestran que los docentes de los sectores público y privado están aún en el proceso de construir los niveles de proficiencia determinados por el Ministerio de Educación. También se encontró que el nivel de educación primaria, especialmente en el sector público, ofrece una base frágil para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés en el nivel secundario.

Palabras clave: competencia lingüística (proficiencia), enseñanza del inglés, Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, condiciones de implementación, estándares, resultados de pruebas.

Résumé

Description du niveau de langue des professeurs d'anglais à Cali

Cet article présente une description du niveau de compétence d'un groupe de professeurs d'anglais, dans le cadre d'une recherche sur les conditions d'implémentation du Programme National du Bilinguisme à Santiago de Cali. Dans l'intention d'offrir une idée complète de la compétence linguistique des professeurs, on a fait la collecte de données à travers des épreuves de langue, des enquêtes, et des entretiens de groupe. Les résultats ont été analysés en tenant en compte des modèles de développement des professeurs proposés par Richards (1998) et Roberts (1998), et des théories sur la compétence linguistique de plusieurs auteurs. Les résultats nous permettent de conclure que les professeurs qui travaillent dans les secteurs privée et publique sont au stade de construction des niveaux de compétence en anglais visés par le Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale. On a trouvé aussi qu'à l'école primaire, notamment dans le secteur public, la base pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage de l'anglais est faible par rapport aux exigences de l'apprentissage de la langue au niveau secondaire.

Mots clés: compétence linguistique, enseignement de l'anglais, Programme Nationale de bilinguisme, conditions d'implémentation, cadre commun de compétence, résultats d'examens.

INTRODUCTION

The launching of the National Bilingual Program by the Ministry of Education (MEN) (2004-2019) and the subsequent issuing of the standards for foreign language learning (2006) started a time of efforts to promote bilingualism (better interpreted as the improvement of the level of English teaching and learning) in Colombia. As a consequence, most of the actions undertaken by the Ministry of Education have been directed towards English teachers, as the task of leading Colombian citizens to

proficiency in the language rests mainly in their hands. Nevertheless, a growing number of teachers at all levels have questioned the sole emphasis that the implementation of the policy has laid on teachers' English proficiency levels, to the exclusion of other relevant aspects that would give students better learning opportunities.

In this article we address the issue of English teachers' linguistic profile, through the study of a sample of 220 English teachers of Santiago de Cali, with the intention of describing their proficiency level and understanding its composition. The teachers belong to public and private elementary and secondary schools of low to middle socioeconomic strata. As proficiency is built through formal and informal linguistic experiences, we explored not only the teachers' English level through test results, but also the contribution of other elements such as their opportunities of using of the language, experiences abroad and self-perceptions.

SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Proficiency

Proficiency is one of the most debated issues in language testing. Bachman (1990 p.16) reviews most common notions of language proficiency according to authors in the area of testing (Carroll 1961a; Davies, 1968b; Spolsky, 1968, Upshur, 1979, Oller, 1979; Rivera, 1984); he states that

...the term 'language proficiency' has been traditionally used in the context of language testing to refer in general to knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what conditions it has been acquired.

The evolution of language teaching, which implies, among other aspects, different emphases (grammar, knowledge about the language, language as communication, language use as a means and not an end in itself) has certainly changed the conceptualization and definition of language proficiency. The concept of proficiency has been reviewed (Farhady 1982, Spolsky 1995 and Chastain 1989) regarding its vagueness, the difficulty of measuring it and its components. Other theoreticians of

the concept (Francis and Rivera 2007, in Abedi, 2007) recognize in its make-up non-linguistic information contained in elements such as timing, intonation and stress. In the discussion of the components of proficiency and its association with academic skills, we revised the work of Bachman and Palmer (1996), Hakuta, Butler and Witt, 2000; Cummins (in Bratt Paulston & Tucker 2003 eds.), Snow 1987, and Collier, 1995; Cummins' (1979). The role of language proficiency in language teacher education was revised in Shulman 1987; Richards 1998; Roberts 1998; Kelly, Grenfell, Allan, Kriza and McEvoy, 2004). The established profile for Colombian English teachers (Cely, 2009) and the Common European Framework of Reference (2001) were also taken into account. The views and contributions of these authors are integrated in the analysis of results.

Proficiency exams provide a measure of proficiency levels that, for a long time, has remained unchallenged; international exams evaluate and rank people from all over the world and, likewise, their results are accepted internationally; however, as much as we admit the need and benefits of having standardized measures, we have come to recognize the need of understanding proficiency at other levels and incorporating people's perceptions of their own proficiency. This is what we tried to do through the use of self-ratings, which undoubtedly sheds light on speakers' awareness of their level and help us understand how they have built their proficiency.

Self-assessment as a Measure of Language Proficiency

Self-assessment can be defined as a process of self-perception and description of one's abilities, knowledge, and progress (or lack of it) in an educational/learning process. The concept has received special attention in the last decades (Dickinson, 1978; Oscarson, 1989, 1997; Holec, 1985; 1987; Bachman & Palmer, 1989), as a way of handing learners responsibility and ownership of their learning processes and in the search of alternatives to teacher-centered evaluation. Self-assessment is one of the constituent elements of autonomy. In this sense, we are considering teachers in their role as language learners, and we acknowledge the need of empowering them when it comes to giving them voice in the definition of their own proficiency level. Cárdenas (1997 p.65) refers to self-assessment as "... the most participatory and democratic of the possibilities that formative or informal evaluation offer; it is also the most reflective one."

Oscarson (1989) makes a case for the adoption of self-assessment of language proficiency indicating the practical aspects that make it a valid way of determining it. He also acknowledges that self-assessment has sometimes been considered subjective and therefore unreliable, and that the use of self-assessment for decision-making situations such as certification, selection or promotion of individuals is not suggested. Harris (1997) also mentions doubts on the reliability of self-assessment in formal educational settings; these doubts are connected with the use of traditional ways of teaching and evaluating; present-day education fosters active learning, more varied and frequent assessment, and an integration of assessment procedures and classroom work. In this new scenario, there is a clearer role for self-assessment; studies by López-González (2010) and Williams and Burden (1997) explored self-perceptions, self-beliefs, self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, and metacognitive knowledge, and pointed out that self-concept is multi-faceted in nature.

The role of Language Proficiency in Teacher Education and Performance

Although it is clear that proficiency is the cornerstone of the English Language Teaching (ELT; hereafter) profession, there are other elements that need to be taken into consideration. Briguglio and Kirkpatrick (1996 p.34) found that the definition of 'language teacher proficiency' was broad and included attributes of a 'competent' language teacher. It appeared, however that, with two exceptions, the main area of concern of those interviewed for the report was actually 'linguistic' proficiency (Norris, 1999:9). This reflection is very valid here and now, because the standards movement in our country has concentrated most of its attention on the language level of teachers, to the exclusion of other aspects that make teachers competent in the exercise of their profession. Language teacher quality is nowadays equated to how well the teacher speaks the target language, leaving aside elements such as pedagogical and methodological preparation, experience, and view of language, philosophy of teaching and social commitment, among others. Unfortunately, the same view is held for recruitment, licensing and certification (Dozier & Bertotti, 2000): some people get certified in crash courses (one to six months), while it takes five years to get a college language degree.

Proficiency and Language Policy in Colombia

González (2009) defines language policies as "...interventions that take place to modify the use of a given language in a community". Policies involve more than educational issues; as Shohamy (2006) and Spolsky (2004) state, they are closely related to open or hidden economic and political agendas and, many times, respond more to the interest of governments than to the educational needs of countries.

Since the mid-1990s the Colombian educational authorities have issued several documents with the intention of regulating the area of ELT (the *Ley General de Educación* (1994 p. 19, 22); the (*Lineamientos Curriculares Idiomas Extranjeros*, 1999; the Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (2004) (PNB; hereafter), which basically seeks to have bilingual citizens (English-Spanish) by 2019, and finally, the National Standards for Languages (2006). Actions have been implemented nationwide, mainly in the area of teacher training. The goal is to have competent teachers (B2 for those in service and C1 for those graduating from language programs). The NBP has generated much debate and criticism for several reasons, among which we can mention, in line with Shohamy (2009 p.47), the little participation teachers had in "crafting, constructing and designing" the language policy and "the extent to which teachers were consulted about the policy, whether the policy was examined for its likelihood to be implemented and successful..."

Measuring Proficiency

Proficiency tests are intended to serve as benchmarks in testing the knowledge and skills by contrasting the tests results against the desired learning objectives. In most language proficiency tests, proficient users of a language must demonstrate accuracy and fluency as well, and use a variety of discourse strategies; even native speakers of a language can be fluent without being considered proficient.

Through history, the design of proficiency tests and exams has been based on concepts which include degree and level, knowledge, competence, capability, ability, focus on grammar and/or skills, knowledge about language or use of it, use of language for (general) real life or for specific (e.g., academic) purposes, independence from acquisition-learning conditions (what distinguishes them from

achievement measures, which are classroom or course-linked), accuracy/fluency, and, more recently, standards. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that in language teachers' proficiency, other professional features such as pedagogic knowledge and teaching practice or methodology expand and complement this concept (Norris, 1999; Páez, 2001; Madrid, 2004, 2005; Roelofs & Sanders, 2007; Kostina & Hernández, 2007). As theories vary in which regards what constitutes proficiency, there is little consistency in relation to the way it is measured; this is also a product of the evolution of our conceptions about language.

Proficiency Exams Nowadays

Nowadays, proficiency exams tend to reflect the recent trends regarding language and proficiency and are linked to standards (Harley, Allen, Cummins & Swain, 1990; Abedi, 2007 p. 6). Typically, language proficiency tests include all or a combination of receptive (listening and reading), and productive (speaking and writing) skills within one or several of the various levels taken as framework. They have evolved from paper modes (PBTs) to computer adaptive versions (CBTs) to Internet-Based styles (IBTs). The current overall tendency is to standardization and equivalence.

Most of the proficiency tests used in our Colombian contexts exclude the evaluation of productive skills, possibly because of practical and economic reasons; this fact provides a partial understanding of what test takers can do with the language. When a teacher has to use the language in the classroom to teach it or to convey meaning, as well as when this teacher has to produce texts, either formal and informal in the language or guide the development of students' writing processes, a big gap may be found between incomplete proficiency tests results and teachers' capability to use the language effectively or to guide its development in the students.

The Research

The study about teachers' English language profiles was carried out in Santiago de Cali, Colombia, in the frame of a broader project, "*El Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo en Santiago de Cali: un diagnóstico de condiciones*

de implementación"² (Cárdenas et al, 2011). The objectives of the project sought to establish, through description, the conditions that schools in Cali have for the implementation of the National Bilingual Program launched by the Ministry of Education in 2004. To this end, the project sought to describe and analyze the profiles, attitudes and expectations of administrators, teachers, students and parents, as well as describe the institutions themselves (premises, material resources, management.) The study of profiles included demographic, socioeconomic, academic, professional and linguistic information of teachers.

An inter-institutional team of twenty researchers, made up of seven university teachers, four graduate and nine undergraduate students, all in the area of language teaching, carried out the research during 30 months; the project was sponsored by COLCIENCIAS, the Colombian entity that promotes, funds and regulates academic research.

The project was carried out in fifty-one schools and provided information about teachers' language profiles. The schools belong to lower to middle class socioeconomic strata (one to four in Colombian stratification) and are part of both, public and private sectors. The sample was made up of 220 non-native English speakers (131 from official institutions and 89 from private ones), ranging in age from 25 to 60+ years old; 99% of them were Colombian and their teaching experience ranges from one to 30 + years.

A multi-site, descriptive, mixed-method and mixed-design study (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2003, 2007; Creswell 2003, 2007) was carried out. Data was collected mostly through surveys; in the teachers' profiles study additional data came from other sources, including semi-structured focus group interviews, language exams, self-assessment of language proficiency and documentary study to describe teachers' methodological practices.

Extensive meetings of the team were held throughout the whole research process in order to discuss progress, setbacks, interesting happenings, and to guide research in decision-making processes through the discussion of situations, sometimes with the help of people specialized in data management or with experience in similar research processes.

2 A Diagnostic of Conditions of Implementation of the National Colombian Bilingual Program in Santiago de Cali.

Data analysis was initially conducted through the use of the statistical package SPSS, which allowed the creation of databases; In later stages Excel and Atlas-ti, were used, as well as more traditional analysis through data reading and rereading, coding, labeling, categorization, triangulation and final description and analysis.

RESULTS

Description of the Proficiency Level of English Teachers in Cali

One of the main objectives of our research was to describe the linguistic competences of English teachers in Santiago de Cali through the definition of their level of competence in the language, based on the national standards (that describe levels A1 to B1) and on the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages for levels B2 to C2. To have a more complete picture of teachers' competence, the description of their proficiency level was based on several sources; one of them was the result from English tests. Other sources included teachers' self-evaluation, both global and discriminated by skills, information about experiences they have had with the language, and their use of it in their academic lives, information about their familiarity with the standards of the CEFR and self-rating according to their descriptors. Finally, teachers were asked if they had taken any tests as part of the implementation of the national policy and, if their answer was positive, their results in these tests. (See section V of the survey. Appendix) Results from two other tests, a Quick Placement Test (QPT) and an Oxford On-line Placement Test (OOPT) that some teachers had taken as part of the standards workshops we offered in *Universidad del Valle* and *Universidad de San Buenaventura* were also used as terms of comparison, to reinforce our appraisal of teachers' language level.

Apart from these pieces of information, we included in the interviews some questions about teachers' self-perception as language users, about the consistency of their perception with tests results and with their performance in situations of language use. We would like to determine if and how all these elements influence teachers' proficiency level.

From the total number of 220 participants 136 (61.81%) took the language test. Eighty-two of these teachers belong to the public sector and fifty-four to the private one. The participation in the test was voluntary, and, with few exceptions, the researchers visited schools to administer the test.

The selection of the test that was administered was based on several considerations:

- The National Bilingual Program aims to have English teachers reach, by 2019, levels B2 (for a 100% of in-service teachers) and C1 (for 100% of university graduates in the *licenciatura* programs that educate language teachers) of the CEFR. A logical consequence of this was to select a test that classified teachers from A1 to C2, following the National standards and the descriptors of the CEFR.
- We acknowledged the fact that a test which included listening and reading comprehension, as well as writing and speaking tasks (direct testing) would have given a more complete picture of the teachers' level of competence; however, to our knowledge there is not a test with all these characteristics that also follows the CEFR standards.
- Logistic reasons, which included the lack of language labs or good sound systems in the participating schools for the listening part, the large number of teachers involved the difficulty to have teachers take the test in the universities, especially if it was a long one.

After all these considerations, we decided to use the Quick Placement Test, an internationally recognized standard-based test which classifies test takers from A1 to C2 in the scale of the CEFR and lasts only a half hour. We used the pen and paper test, Version 1 and followed the scoring criteria for both, those who answered items one to forty or those who completed (or tried to complete) the test up to item 60. Situations like teacher mobility (especially in the private sector), and the change of academic calendar in the public sector made it difficult to reach some teachers and reduced the number of teachers who took the test.

The results obtained by teachers who work in the official sector show the following:

82 teachers took the test; this represents 60.29% of the test-takers and 37, 27% of the total sample (220); figure 1 shows their results.

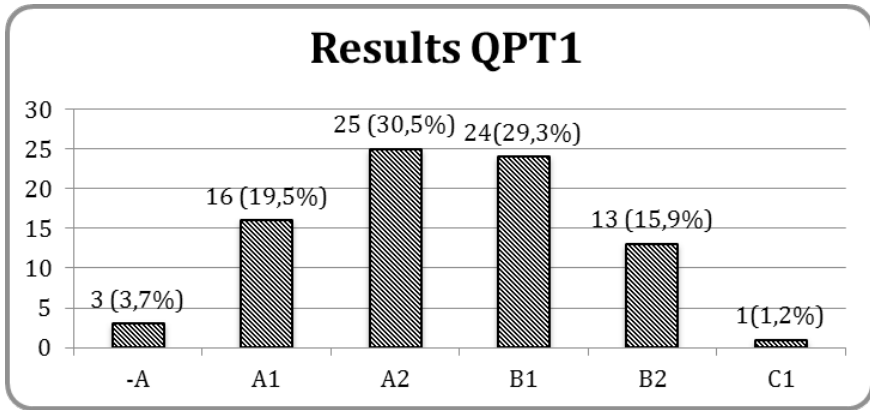


Figure 1: QPT test results from teachers in the public sector.

The results show that 23,2% of the teachers classified at level A1; a 3,7% of them preferred to hand the test in after solving two or three items and expressed their absolute lack of knowledge concerning the English language (-A). These teachers work at the elementary level. 30,48% of the teachers can be considered 'basic users' (A2) according to the CEFR, and was the largest group in the sample of test takers in our study. The B level included 29,26% of the teachers in the B1 level, and 15,85% at the B2 level, these two last groups of teachers are considered 'independent users' by the CEFR. Only one teacher, or 1,21% classified at the C1 level and is considered a 'proficient user' according to the CEFR. It is worth noticing that the percentage of basic users (A2) and independent users (B1) is very similar.

This set of results constitutes the largest and most homogenous set of test results of the project. Nevertheless, as expressed earlier in this section, two more sets of test scores were obtained from a more reduced number of participants. One was a second QPT, which was administered in one of the Standards workshops offered to teachers participating in the research and other teachers who were at the time registered in the Teacher Development Program. The third set of test scores corresponds to an Oxford On-line Placement Test (OOPT), also obtained from participants in another Standards workshop.

31 teachers took the QPT 2, while 14 took the OOPT. Five teachers (16,13 %) classified as A1; fourteen teachers (45,16%)

classified as A2; ten (32.26%) as B1; one (3.22%) classified as B2 and one (3.22%) as C1. This set of results is very similar to the ones teachers obtained in QPT 1; both tests show a concentration of results in standards A2 and B1.

As for the OOPT, three teachers (21.43%) classified at level A1; one (7.14%) at level A2 and seven (50%) at level B1; finally, three teachers (21.43%) classified at level B2. Again, most teachers are placed at level B1.

The following figure shows a comparison of the results obtained by the public sector teachers in these three tests.

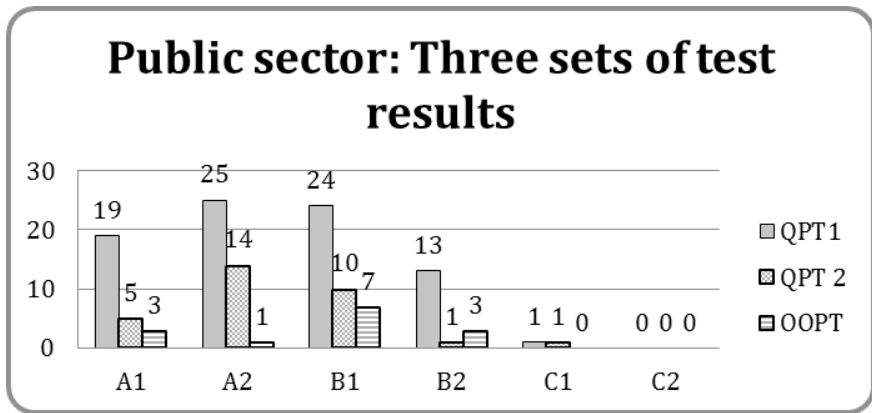


Figure 2: Public sector: Comparative test results.

As for the private sector, the results of the tests showed the following: 54 teachers took QPT1 (39.79% of the test takers); there were no teachers at level A1; 12 teachers (24%) scored between 18 and 29 points and classified at level A2 (basic users); 20 teachers (36%) scored between 30 and 39 points and classified at level B1 and 11 (20%) between 40 and 47 points and were classified at level B2. This indicates that a 56% of teachers in the private sector are considered independent users of the English language according to the CEFR. Nine teachers (16%) scored between 48 and 54 points and classified at level C1 and two (3,77%) scored between 55 and 60 points and classified at the C2 level; this means that 19,77% of the teachers in the private sector are proficient users of the English language, according to the CEFR.

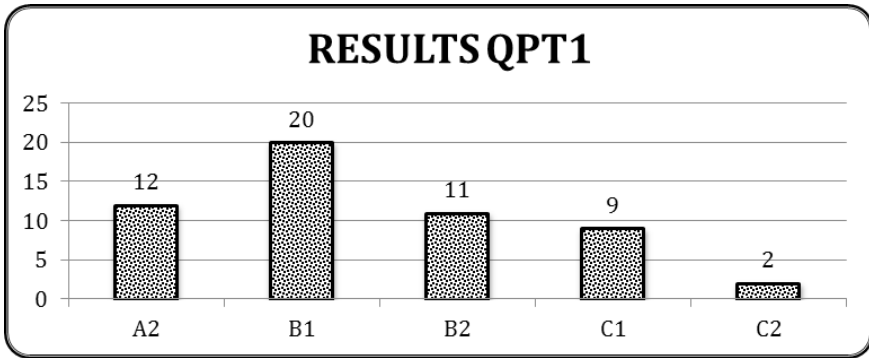


Figure 3: QPT test results from teachers in the private sector

Teachers from the private sector did not take QPT2 because the workshop in which we obtained this set of results was offered only for teachers in the public sector; only 13 teachers in this group took the OOPT test, and most of them scored at the B2 level (6, or 46.15 %); four (30.77 %) scored at the B1 level and three (23.07 %) at the A2 level. These results are consistent with the QPT results, placing no teacher at the A1 level, and showing a concentration at the B1 and B2 levels. Figure 4 shows the comparative results of the two sets of test results.

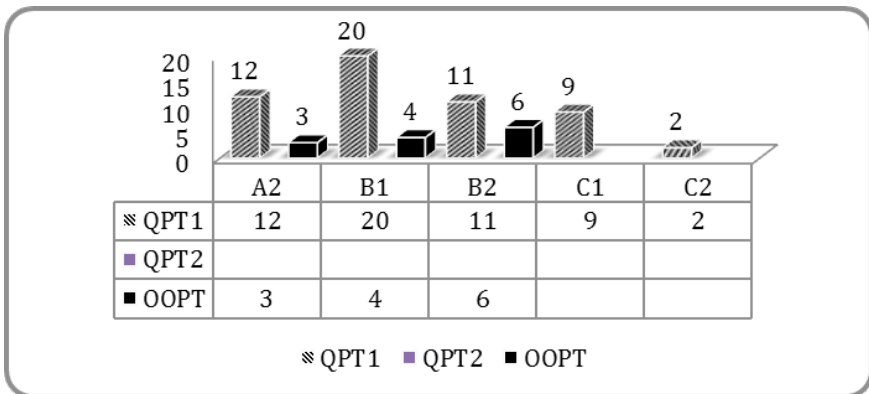


Figure 4: Private sector: Comparative test results.

Other Estimates of Teachers' Proficiency

Self-perception

The survey the teachers answered also contributed with useful information to the definition of their proficiency level through self-ratings that indicated their own perception of their language level, both as overall perception and in separate skills. In general, teachers from the private sector ranked themselves in high levels when asked to define their levels of oral and written comprehension, as well as in their oral and written production. Levels of self-perception and self-rating were lower in the public sector, where teachers placed themselves in the intermediate and low levels, especially when self-rating separate skills. The survey included a question about acquaintance with the CEFR. 119 teachers (66 from the public sector and 53 from the private sector) said they knew about it; 63 (41 from the public sector and 22 from the private sector) answered that they did not know about it, and six teachers, all from the public sector, did not answer the question. Teachers who work at the secondary school level outnumbered those working at the elementary level in acquaintance with the CEFR (84/26).

Before administering the test to the teachers, they were also asked to rate themselves in the CEFR standards scale.

Table 1: Self-ratings of English teachers

CEFR levels	Public sector	Private sector	Total
A1	5 (4.42%)	0	5
A2	6 (4.51%)	1 (1.33%)	7
B1	20 (17.69%)	10 (13.33%)	30
B2	27 (23.89%)	22 (29.33%)	49
C1	5 (4.42%)	16 (21.33%)	21
C2	0	0	
No rating	50 (37.59%)	26 (34.66%)	76

An explanation to the large number of teachers who did not rate themselves could be insufficient knowledge about the CEFR, which is backed up by the number of teachers who said they did not know about it and those who did not answer the question, 69 in total, or 36.7%.

To the question "Do you know the levels of linguistic competence proposed by the CEFR and adopted by the Ministry of Education?" 58.41% of teachers from the public sector, and 79.66% from the private

sector answered Yes. These results are very consistent with the number of teachers who did not rate themselves.

Another element of self-evaluation was the questions from the survey that asked teachers about their self-perception regarding the language skills; reading was the leading skill: 109 teachers (57 from the public sector and 52 from the private one) rated this skill as high. In the same line, a large number of teachers- 98- rated their listening comprehension as high (48 public/50 private). These results go in line with the ease most language users experience with receptive skills, as opposed to the increased level of difficulty experienced with productive skills. Many teachers rated their use of speaking and writing as *high*, but the numbers are lower than those for the two receptive skills (89 for writing and 81 for speaking). The rating in writing was very similar in both sectors (44/45), but most teachers from the private sector selected 'high' when rating their speaking skills (46, against 35 from the public sector).

The selection of intermediate levels of self-ratings followed a similar path. The trend was that teachers from the public sector selected this option more frequently, in all skills, than teachers from the private sector. The number of teachers who selected the intermediate levels showed no significant differences in the different skills. As for the private sector, the results showed exactly the same pattern than for the public sector; only that in numbers and percentages, the figures were lower.

Finally, the number of teachers who rated their language skills as 'low' was higher in the public sector, especially among those at the elementary level. The differences were significant between the two sectors in numbers; however, more teachers from the public sector rated themselves lower in speaking than in reading.

The self-ratings are very illustrative of teachers' reality: a high percentage of teachers did not do the self-ratings, and this is consistent with both, the number of teachers who said they did not know about national standards and those who did not know about the CEFR. This lack of familiarity with the official document and with the international document from which the National Standards were derived was unexpected after seven years of the implementation of the policy. Even more surprising was the fact that a high percentage of teachers from the public sector, where the MEN has held many standards workshops, manifested lack of familiarity with standards.

Among the teachers who did the self-rating, it was found that those from the public sector are aware of their difficulties and limitations, and they rated themselves more often in levels A1 and A2, ratings that were confirmed by test results; nevertheless, teachers from this sector also overestimated their level when they placed themselves in the B1 and B2 levels in percentages not confirmed by test results. This happened after taking the official tests several times. Inconsistencies in self-ratings may have several explanations: the natural desire of presenting one's best side, lack of criteria about what it means to have linguistic competence at international levels, lack of demanding teaching environments, and lack of connection between what the exams require and teachers' actual proficiency level; it might also be that, for their self-assessment, the teachers are taking into account other factors, such as their theoretical knowledge about the language, their pedagogical experience, and their knowledge about the curriculum context, among other factors mentioned by Shulman (1987), Roberts (1998), and Richards (1998). As far as the self-rating of teachers from the private sector goes, their self-ratings were, much of the time, confirmed by their test results; this, we can infer, is due to the fact that many of them have taken exams to have access to their posts, and that some institutions carry out periodical tests which, in many cases, have an effect on hiring and salary raise. Also, teachers from the private sector are generally younger, their studies are more recent and they are the product of language programs which reflect the impending need to produce graduates with a higher level of proficiency. Besides, in this group of teachers we find people who are fully bilingual because they have been raised and have had part of their formal education in English, even if they are not *licenciados*.

The Role of Living and Studying Abroad

Thirty five teachers, 20 from the private sector and 15 from the public one (35 of 188 teachers who completed the survey, or 18.61%) have lived in an English-speaking country. Most of them work at the secondary level. From this group, 28 did some studies in the English-speaking country of residence, and most of them work now at the secondary level in private institutions. As it was mentioned above, this fact shows a positive incidence in their proficiency levels, as far as their oral competence is concerned; however, other more formal skills, like grammar accuracy

and a level of sophistication in their writing do not seem to benefit from these experiences, unless it has included formal education beyond the high-school level. These findings are supported by Cummins' (2003) differentiation of BICS and CALP.

Academic Uses of English

Finally, we considered that another indicator of the proficiency level of the English teachers could be the use they make of it in academic situations, namely, in class and in professional development events such as courses and seminars. Regarding the use of English in class, results from the survey showed that 54 teachers (72%) from the private sector and 46 teachers (40.71%) from the public sector say they always use the language in class. The percentage of teachers who use English in class is higher at the secondary level (33.51%) than at the elementary level (15.43%). Nevertheless, the figures and percentages cannot be considered satisfactory in terms of language use, especially if we take into account that, for many students, their teacher is the only consistent source and the English class the only opportunity of exposure to the language.

As far as the use of the English language for professional development, such as the participation in courses, seminars and workshops, the results showed that 32 teachers from the private sector (42.66%) and 23 teachers from the public one (20.35%) say they always use it; conversely, 11 teachers from the private sector (14.66%) and 36 from the public sector (31.86 %) say they never use English in these situations. Teachers from the secondary level (37 or 19.68%) are more constant users of the language in events than teachers from the elementary level (12 or 6.38%); this finding is a logical consequence of the primary teachers' lack of familiarity with the English language, as it has not been a strong part of their studies. The surveys showed that elementary school teachers, especially in the public sector, were mostly *normalistas* with diplomas (*especializaciones*) in areas such as preschool or primary school education, social sciences, biology and literature. This means that they do not have a high level of proficiency in the English language as to make them confident in its use.

The numbers of those who say they use English sometimes (17 teachers or 22.66% from the private sector and 28 from the public sector or 24.78%) are of relevance, as well as those who do not provide

information (15 teachers or a 20% from the private sector and 26 teachers or 23% from the public sector) because we tend to associate the fact of not providing information with not using the language in events. This would amount to 54.87 % the number of teachers from the public sector not making use of the English language in events, as opposed to 34.66% from the private sector.

Interviews: What Teachers say about their Knowledge and Use of English

Interviews were used to corroborate the teachers' perception of their proficiency level, together with concomitant feelings and comments about their confidence or lack of it as users of the language; also, the fact that some teachers did not complete the survey, but took the exam and participated in the interview provided us with a more complete view of the proficiency level of the teacher population.

In the public sector, elementary school teachers, in general, manifested that they like English but feel their level is too low because its study was not part of their initial education; although many of them have had recent training courses, these have not been enough or they have not assimilated enough of them as to feel comfortable teaching of the language.

Teachers recognize the importance of learning English and the problems they face for not being able to teach it; the strategies they follow to face the situation are personal *"I do the best I can (T3, Pu4³)"* *"I try to do something, like teaching vocabulary and writing; I do not work on pronunciation because I am conscious of not doing it well (T6, Pu2)"*, *I teach what is basic, the easiest things (T7, Pu4)"*, or collaborative, asking colleagues who have a better level or are more experienced to teach the English class for them or to guide them in their preparation and teaching; they also exchange English lessons for other areas they can handle.

One of the shortcomings of the situation the elementary school teachers face is the lack of a clear policy, at least at the local level, from the educational authorities. Sometimes courses offered by the MEN or *Secretarías de Educación* are directed to teachers from the elementary and the secondary levels; other times, according to some of the teachers who

³ T3 (teacher 3); Pu (public school; the numbers identify the schools.) Teachers were numbered inside each school.

were interviewed, they are offered only for secondary school teachers. Many teachers have started the process of learning the English language, only to interrupt it a few months later for various reasons.

Other difficulties in teachers' learning can be explained by the Critical Period Hypothesis (Penfield & Roberts 1959; Lenneberg 1967; Seliger 1978 & Scovel 1988, in Singleton 2007). Penfield and Roberts (1959 p. 236) state that

“for the purposes of learning languages, the human brain becomes progressively stiff and rigid after the age of nine... and “...when languages are taken up for the first time in the second decade of life, it is difficult... to achieve good results...” (Penfield & Roberts, 1959 p. 255).

By the same token, Lenneberg (1967 p. 142) expresses that, after puberty, “... foreign languages have to be... learned through a conscious and labored effort, and foreign accents cannot be overcome easily”. Seliger (1978) specifically refers to limitations of phonological and phonetic functions for L2 learning after puberty, claiming that syntactic functions are localized and become lateralized later in life, which allows acquisition until later periods in life. This view is supported by Scovel (1988, in Singleton, 2007:49), who says that pronunciation has a physical reality, which is neuromuscular and shows early maturational effects.

Many of the teachers who participated in our study experience the drawbacks of adult language learners in many ways, but specially in terms of an articulatory system that cannot reproduce new sounds easily, syntactic and semantic systems in L1 that seek to transfer its structures, words and expressions to the new language and fall into constant translation or search for a one-to-one correspondence in sentence structures or in lexical items. The age factor also causes a generational problem: many teachers are eager to teach English but confess that learning it was not “...something our generation had to do...”, that nowadays they do not have the time, and the drive to start learning almost “from scratch”. Some teachers even fear teaching English because children have a higher level than they have.

In the private sector, the fact that teachers work at the elementary level did not make a difference in the kind of comments they made concerning their preparation, knowledge of the language or experience. Some of them are not language teachers, some studied to be teachers in

areas other than foreign language teaching; others are currently either studying English or are enrolled in a program to become language teachers.

With a few exceptions, the teachers consider they have a good level of proficiency in English. They point at the strategies and factors that have helped them achieve this level: hard work, traveling, practice, attending conversation clubs, and using the foreign language with colleagues and in other professional settings. A teacher with a very good level mentioned she was surprised when she found out that her results in an international test were not as good as she expected (*"I thought I had a higher level!"*.⁴ T10, Pr3). Another teacher said s/he considered himself/herself to be bilingual (*"I have roughly the same level both in L1 and L2"* T1, Pr4).

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The results of this study show that, in 2010, neither teachers from the public sector, nor those from the private one had met the English language standards set by the Ministry of Education to be attained by that year. However, teachers from the private sector showed higher levels in several ways; also, they ranked themselves in higher levels which seem to show a good level of confidence in their knowledge and skills. Their self-ratings, although inconsistent at times, also showed their awareness in terms of low proficiency levels and less confidence in their proficiency level. The study also found that differences in the proficiency levels of teachers occur not only between public and private, but also among private schools. It is worrying to realize that the difference in the level of public and private sectors is creating and deepening the gap between these sectors in ELT, while standards are the same for both.

The primary level revealed itself as the weakest: in interviews, elementary school teachers manifested their awareness and concern regarding their poor, sometimes non-existent level of English and their limitations to teach it; this reaffirms our belief that there is no firm basis for the learning and teaching of English in elementary schools in the public sector.

Focus group interviews shed light on contributors to teacher proficiency, as well as their experiences with the language and the use

⁴ Pr (private school)

they make of it. Again, more teachers from the private sector have had living and learning experiences abroad and this fact has undoubtedly had an influence on their level of competence in English, at least in what concerns BICS (Cummins, 1979, in Cummins, 2003). As a logical result of a higher competence and their lived experiences, these teachers also use the language more frequently and keep it 'alive'. If we add to this the control exerted by private institution in what concerns hiring policies (teachers have to be tested and posts are assigned to those who show better levels of proficiency), we find a panorama that explains the differences in language level between a segment of private teachers (mainly those who teach in institutions of lower to middle class socioeconomic strata), and most teachers from the public sector. Nonetheless, a comparison of information provided by surveys, interviews and test results also found that the role of living and studying abroad is not significant for the largest percentage of the teacher population due to the fact that this is not so common an experience for most of the EFL teachers who participated in the study. Besides, living abroad does not necessarily imply that speakers are highly proficient users of the language, and neither does studying, unless it is formal studying, beyond the high school level, which is associated with Cummins' concept of CALP (1979). It seems that policy actions aiming at fostering this kind of experiences (especially if short-termed) might not have as good results as sound teacher development programs (TDP).

The interviews also revealed that teachers from both sectors, regardless their level of proficiency, feel the need for TDP and better resources to do their job. This need for a more complete foundation for language teachers is part of the language teacher preparation models proposed, among others, by Roberts (1998), Richards (1998) and Shulman (1987).

Self-assessment measures, in the way of rankings, showed that teachers seem to have a positive self-perception that, in many cases, was not necessarily confirmed by test results, especially in the public sector; there is probably the need to have feedback on evaluations for teachers to actually understand the distance between test performance and every-day language use. Teachers need to assess themselves less subjectively; unfortunately, proficiency exams are not meant to provide feedback, and at times, teachers do not even know their results. Also, in the national context, many times tests results are published, but there

is lack information about the type of test that has been administered so as to interpret their results.

Finally, concerning academic uses of English by the teachers, it was found that even in the EFL class it still seems to be a rather uncommon reality. The promotion of English use in class might be a useful path for the building of better levels of fluency and reassurance on the part of the teachers and ensuring students have constant comprehensible input in class. If, for example, more and more frequent academic events at the local, regional and national level were offered and participation in them were fostered by schools and educational authorities teachers would have both the opportunity and the challenge of being exposed to and of using academic English. Teacher networking and the use of on-line resources could be other sources of exposure and use of academic English.

As concerns teachers' attitude towards evaluation and its implications, it is necessary that the results of diagnostic tests be shared with the teachers and their effects go beyond punitive perspectives; those results should support improvement actions. Moreover, the new paradigm in which evaluation is central must be revised: teachers should not be prepared or trained just to pass proficiency exams; instead, language proficiency should be sought.

Implications of these Results

Diagnostic testing carried out by educational authorities and studies carried out by representatives of the academic community have shown that, eight years into the program, teachers and students of English are still behind the levels that would signal a healthy progression towards the goals.

Policies are usually divorced from reality (Shohamy 2009); also, they are not always successful in achieving major changes in the language habits of people. Bilingualism is, mostly, a social phenomenon; to be achieved by means of education, appropriate conditions have to be present and maintained for a sustained period of time or indefinitely; and, if democracy and equity are to be fostered, conditions should be available to all.

Colombian teachers, and specifically teachers from the public sector, were not part of the making of PNB; massive diagnostic tests were not

administered, serious studies of teachers' working conditions were not carried out before the policy started to be implemented. This fact left the country with a worrying number of teachers who still today, do not have the B1 level they have to help their students achieve. Additionally, the vision of teacher proficiency has been narrow, focusing on language levels to the exclusion or neglect of other components of a language teacher profile. It is beyond discussion that Colombia needs to make part of international trends; nevertheless, it is also true that national and regional contexts and differences need to be taken into consideration, especially if equity and democracy are invoked in the statement of the policy. It is beyond discussion that all English teachers, at all levels want to do a good job; unfortunately, not all of them can and many others who have on their shoulders the responsibility of providing the foundations for the achievement of the goals of the PNB are not even English teachers.

The present status of English language teaching in Colombia, and, especially, of teacher preparation to carry it out, needs a careful revision and sustained work from all influential sectors (governmental, academic, private enterprise), if not necessarily to meet the deadline of standards, to make a real and positive impact in the quality of language teaching and learning. Some of this has been achieved: there is more interest in ELT, more (although not enough and not sustained) investment in the field, there are also more events in the area and more awareness of what there is and what is needed. The academic field has made important contributions in this respect. The need to meet not only language standards, but also opportunity-to-learn and teach standards, (Cárdenas, R. & Hernández, F. 2011, 2012) would include the issuing and implementation of regulations that assure equity and democracy. This could be done with the support of the influential sectors already mentioned.

The universities that prepare teachers, as well as all other institutions responsible for language teacher education and development have a crucial role to play: changes have to be implemented in initial language teacher education; programs need to be set up to give elementary teachers the necessary language and methodological backgrounds to provide firm bases for ELT; research elements need to be included and maintained in initial and in-service teacher programs to foster innovation and change. Besides, sound programs for those in charge of teacher development

should be available and opportunities have to be provided for exchange programs, with a significant duration as to produce effective changes in teachers' proficiency.

Finally, and following Kumaravadivelu's recommendations for the teacher of the Post-method condition (2001, 2003, 2006), autonomy has to be an essential element of language teacher education to prevent language attrition and help teachers to be life-long learners.

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SOBRE LOS AUTORES

Rosalba Cárdenas Ramos

Profesora Titular de la Universidad del Valle. MA. en Lingüística y Educación en Lenguas Extranjeras. Research Attachment en Language Testing and Programme Evaluation; Diploma en Language Teacher Development. Miembro del grupo de investigación EILA de la Escuela de Ciencias del Lenguaje en la Universidad del Valle. Áreas de interés académico: didáctica de las lenguas, evaluación, investigación educativa y en el aula.

Correo electrónico: rosalba.cardenas@correounivalle.edu.co

Orlando Chávez Varón

Profesor Asistente de la Universidad del Valle. Especialista en Educación Básica y Procesos Pedagógicos, Comunicación y Creatividad para la Docencia, Enseñanza de Inglés, Docencia Universitaria. MA. en Lingüística y Español. Licenciado en Filología e Idiomas. Miembro del grupo de investigación EILA de la Universidad del Valle. Áreas de interés académico: lingüística, lingüística

aplicada, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras (inglés), didáctica de lenguas extranjeras, investigación, pedagogía.

Correo electrónico: orlando.chaves@correounivalle.edu.co

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