

# Ongoing project: curricular design for the english extension courses at Universidad Libre, Bogota - Colombia

## Proyecto en marcha: diseño curricular para los cursos de inglés de extensión en la Universidad Libre, Bogotá - Colombia

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### Resumen

Este artículo describe un proyecto de investigación en desarrollo en la Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, que inicia a partir de necesidades encontradas en los cursos de extensión en inglés de la Universidad Libre, principalmente relacionadas con el desarrollo de la competencia pedagógica de sus futuros profesores de inglés y el diseño y desarrollo de un currículo reflejado en materiales educativos que tienen en cuenta el contexto colombiano. Hasta ahora el grupo de investigación ha diseñado, aplicado y analizado algunos instrumentos de recolección de información de los estudiantes, profesores y administrativos de los Cursos de Extensión. Se construyó el marco teórico y se están elaborando los materiales educativos.

**Palabras clave:** Currículo, aprendizaje del inglés, diseño de materiales, desarrollo profesional docente.

### Abstract

This article describes an ongoing research project at the School of Education that started from some needs found at the English Extension Courses, mainly related to the enrichment of the pedagogical competence of its future English teachers and the design and development of a curriculum reflected in educational materials that take into account the Colombian context. At this point, the research group has designed, applied and analyzed some data instruments in order to gather information from students, teachers and administrators of the English Courses. The theoretical framework was built and the educational materials are in construction.

**Key words:** Curriculum, English learning, materials design, teachers' development.

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## Introduction

The research project works on the three main functions of a university: teaching, research and extension to the community. The project is developed by the research group “Investigación, Aprendizaje y Comunicación, **IAC**”, from the Languages Department at the School of Education of Universidad Libre.

The Pedagogical Research Practicum started with the beginning of the School of Education in 1961 and it has evolved according to the needs of students, future teachers, the university and the Colombian society. The Pedagogical Research Practicum is defined by the School of Education as “un proceso académico en un ambiente real del contexto educativo en el cual el docente en formación aplica los conocimientos y saberes construidos en su proceso de formación pedagógico, didáctico, disciplinar, ético e investigativo”. (Universidad Libre, Facultad de Ciencias, Manual de Procedimientos de la Práctica Pedagógica Investigativa, 2008, p.1).

Foreign Languages Extension Courses is one of the ways Universidad Libre in Bogotá offers university extension to the community. This program began in 2004 and most of its teachers are pre-service teachers going through their Pedagogical Practicum who have not acquired the necessary pedagogical competences for teaching yet. The others are in service teachers graduated from the program.

Future teachers of the Languages Department develop their pedagogical research practicum in some schools that have agreements with the university and also in the English and French Extension Courses. Students attending these courses come from different backgrounds: technicians and professionals from diverse fields, university students, high school students, stay-at-home parents, and other people belonging to the nearby

community who do not have any academic degree and/or any occupation. There are no requirements to enter the courses.

The researchers and their research auxiliaries, who are teachers at the Extension Courses, through some instruments like direct observation, interviews, and surveys applied to students, teachers and administrators of the courses, found the following:

### **The English Program**

- Does not take into account students' needs and interests or the context they live in.
- It is based only on the contents of a commercial international book. Future teachers and students said that this material is very complex and sometimes do not reflect their reality.

### **Pre-service teachers**

- Are in the process of acquiring pedagogical competences for teaching and need experienced teachers' feedback, but there are no teachers supervising their practice at the Extension Courses.

### **Classes**

- Diversity of ages, academic level and socio-cultural background in the same group.
- Classes meet only two hours weekly. An academic semester covers 14 weeks, that is 28 hours of classes during an academic term.

### **Administration**

- Lack of meaningful communication between the directors of the Extension Courses and the Languages Department.

To sum up, the following needs were found:  
1) to have a curriculum that takes into account

students' characteristics, needs and wants and future teacher's pedagogical needs, 2) articulation among research, teaching and university extension to the community, and 3) research must be a process linked to the curriculum. Based on these findings the research group established the following research question: How can the design and implementation of a curricular proposal guide the learning and teaching processes of English Extension Courses at the Education School, and enrich their quality?

To answer the research question, the following objectives were posited.

### **Aim**

To contribute to the betterment of the teaching and learning processes at the English Extension Courses at the School of Education of Universidad Libre, through a curricular design proposal.

### **Objectives**

- To Design, apply, systematize and analyze the data that support the problem, the curriculum design and the piloting of the books.
- To inquire about theoretical foundations for the project.
- To design a curriculum proposal and didactic materials for English learning and teaching processes to address some of the needs of the Extension Courses population.
- To promote a reflective, analytic and continuous learning attitude of future teachers that leads them to a permanent transformation of their teaching practice.
- To contribute to the consolidation of the materials design research field.

The object of study is the English learning and teaching processes. The field of study is curriculum design.

This is a collaborative action research, according to Burns (1999). Teachers work together to find solutions to the possible problems they can encounter in their classes. Collaborative action research triggers collaboration among teachers, as a key factor of change in educational institutions.

This research also aims to address the three functions university education has: teaching, research and extension. To develop it, the researchers take into consideration the following legal references for their investigation:

- Colombian General Law of Education, Law 155, 1994.
- Decree 1860, 1994, article 44.
- National Program of Bilingualism 2004-2019, Colombian Ministry of Education.
- Curriculum Guidelines for Foreign Languages. Colombian Ministry of Education, 1999.
- Basic Standards for Competences in Foreign Languages. Colombian Ministry of Education, 2006.
- Program 13 of the Academic Institutional Project at Universidad Libre: A university with a wide coverage in non-formal education. 2005-2014.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework is based upon the following concepts: curriculum design (planning and content, methodology, evaluation), learning English as a foreign language, learning strategies, teaching languages, intercultural competence, communicative competence, material design and teacher's development.

The researchers agree with Sacristan (2011), Berstein (1998) and Tyler (1998), who state that a curriculum gives a logical order to the sequence of contents of learning and teaching, and guides those processes. They also coincide in defining education as the best way to develop the person as

a human being: his mind, body and sensibility, and as a citizen. Universidad Libre (2002), states that the curriculum reflects a pedagogical and didactic culture and it is composed of classroom learning projects where characteristics, values, techniques and experiences are selected and contextualized.

In the field of teaching and learning languages, Stern (1990) remarks that a curriculum can be defined as the study programs of an institution or, in a restricted way, the syllabus of a specific subject, for example, the English curriculum. For Stern, a curriculum must consider the conceptualization of its three main components: objectives and contents, methodology and evaluation.

For Nunan (1996) a curriculum must be learner-centered; it will need to be modified during the course of a program as the learners' skills develop. This view tends to see language acquisition as a process of acquiring skills rather than a body of knowledge.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2001) states that the curriculum construction must be done from the perspective of the following principles: 1) The promotion of plurilingualism and linguistic diversity. 2) This diversification is only possible if the cost efficiency of the system is considered. 3) The considerations and measures relating to curricula should be approached in terms of their role in a general language education, in which linguistic knowledge and skills, along with the ability to learn, play not only a specific role in a given language but also a transversal or transferable role across languages.

Nation and Macalister (2011) point out that a curriculum is largely a "how to do it" activity. They provide a curriculum design model that has three general divisions. The first two are related to principles, environment and needs and they represent the curriculum. The other one represents

the syllabus; it has goals and deals with three parts: content and sequencing, format and presentation, and monitoring and assessing. Evaluation is in the entire model.

For Brown (2007) a curriculum should have the following factors: 1) situation analysis (educational setting, class characteristics, school characteristics, governance of course content and assessment and evaluation requirements), 2) needs analysis, 3) problematizing, 4) specifying goals, conceptualizing a course syllabus, 5) selecting textbooks, materials, and resources, 6) assessment, and 7) program evaluation.

In Colombia, the *Lineamientos curriculares para lenguas extranjeras* (1999) point out that most of the teaching foreign languages programs emphasize on the *how* (grammar) to say *what* (vocabulary). Nevertheless, the main principle of the study of a language is communication that points out the *why*, *who*, and *where* (socio-linguistic and cultural aspects of language). This approach makes easy a genuine interaction with others, even though they are in other continent, country or city.

To build the proposal, the research group takes into consideration the three main curriculum components: 1) planning and contents, 2) methodology, and 3) evaluation. These components are going to be analyzed from the points of view of recognized theorists. However the focus of this proposal is mainly on contents and methodology.

### **Planning and contents**

As Nunan points out (1996), content should be derived through a process of teachers' consultation and negotiation with the learners, the information given by experienced expert colleagues, and revision of course books for ideas on content.

Van Ek and Alexander, (cited in Nunan, 1996, p. 58), point out that to plan a content, it is very

important to pay attention to the following aspects.

- The situations in which the foreign language will be used, including the topics which will be dealt with:
- The language activities in which the learner will engage
- The language functions which the learner will perform
- Topics, and what the learner will be able to do with these
- The general notions which the learner will be able to handle
- The specific (topic related) notions which the learners will be able to handle
- The language forms the learner will be able to use
- The degree of skill the learner will be required to display.

The starting point for the curriculum design, following Nunan (1996), must be: 1) the learners' goals, 2) the communicative goals students need to reach, and 3) the functions, structures, lexis that have to be a result of the previous two. That is to say, curriculum designers need to focus on output, on performance, instead of input, on what the student is able to do at the end of a course. It also deals with the selections of materials and learning activities for the classes.

On the other hand, Nation and Mcalister (2011) point out that needs analysis can play a major role in determining the content of courses, particularly for language items. It was taken into consideration in the present research that started from context observation and analysis of the information, gathered from students, teachers and administrators, related to the learning and teaching processes, as it is specified in the proposal, in order to decide the contents based on the instrument results.

Based on the above theories, the researchers started to specify the communicative tasks and

skills students would be able to perform in order to reach their language goals. The curriculum would be organized in a book series of four students' books, audio cds and a teacher's book. It was decided that each book was to be organized into four units and each unit into seven sections with a sequenced content having in mind that language learning is a process of learning to do things with language (listening, speaking, grammar, practice, reading, writing and cultural tips) and ending with a self-evaluation chart where the student reflect about his achievements.

### **Methodology**

It is considered the "how" to learn and teach. Because of that it provides theories on the nature of these processes, in this case, the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language, as it is described in the next pages.

To talk about the learning of a foreign language process, the researchers follow Gagne and Perkins's ideas who says that the environment where the student lives in, has a great influence in his learning process (1988). This process begins with a sensorial register that is reflected in actions.

According to Gagne and Perkins (1988), there are several different types or levels of learning requiring different types of instruction. They identify five major categories of learning: verbal information, intellectual skills, cognitive strategies, motor skills and attitudes. They also consider that different internal and external conditions are necessary for each type of learning. For example, for cognitive strategies to be learned, there must be a chance to practice developing new solutions to problems; to learn attitudes, the learner must be exposed to a credible role model or persuasive arguments, and so on.

Gagne and Perkins (1988) suggest that learning tasks for intellectual skills can be organized in a

hierarchy according to complexity: stimulus recognition, response generation, procedure following, use of terminology, discriminations, concept formation, rule application, and problem solving. In addition, the theory outlines nine instructional events and corresponding cognitive processes: 1) Gaining attention (reception), 2) Informing learners of the objective (expectancy), 3) Stimulating recall of prior learning (retrieval), 4) Presenting the stimulus (selective perception), 5) Providing learning guidance (semantic encoding), 6) Eliciting performance (responding), 7) Providing feedback (reinforcement), 8) Assessing performance (retrieval) and, 9) Enhancing retention and transfer (generalization).

In relation to affective considerations, the researchers follow Spolsky (1989), Brown (2007) and Oxford (1990), who agreed on the importance of emotion when teaching and learning and pointed out the factors of the affective domain: empathy, self-esteem, extroversion, inhibition, imitation, anxiety and attitudes, as important elements in the learning and teaching processes.

Talking about social considerations Vigotsky (2007) and Ellis (1991), are revised when they established that learners need to be prepared for interaction in the real world. They need to be aware of the intentions as well as the meanings of the speakers and writers they interact with.

Moving to the intercultural competence, the CEFR (2001) makes a distinction among: 1) general competences which are divided in four: declarative knowledge, skills and how-know, existential competence and ability to learn and 2) communicative language competences that are classified in three: linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences and pragmatic competences. The intercultural competence underlies all of them and it is defined by the CEFR as:

The ability to bring the culture of origin and the foreign culture into relation with each other.

Cultural sensitivity and the ability to identify and use a variety of strategies for contact with those from other cultures,

The capacity to fulfill the role of cultural intermediary between one's own culture and the foreign culture, and to deal effectively with intercultural misunderstanding and conflict situations.

The ability to overcome stereotyped relationships.

This intercultural competence includes the regional and social diversity that is enriched by the knowledge of other cultures different from the own. All of these incorporate in the students new ways to see the world that lead them to be more aware of themselves and their place in the globalized world.

In a similar trend, Byram (1997) states that the intercultural competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures. A person who is interculturally competent understands the culture-specific concepts of perception, thinking, feeling, and acting.

Referring to the communicative competence, it is understood as a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use them appropriately. The term was coined by Dell Hymes in 1966 and, it is one of the theories that underlies the communicative approach to foreign language teaching.

Canale and Swain (1980) defined communicative competence in terms of three components: 1) grammatical competence (words and rules), 2) sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness) and 3) strategic competence (appropriate use of communication strategies). Bachman (1990) includes the "organizational competence," which contains both grammatical and discourse (or textual) competence, and "pragmatic competence," which

includes both sociolinguistic and “illocutionary” competence. Strategic competence is associated with the interlocutors’ ability in using communication strategies (Faerch & Kasper, 1983).

As it is generally known, the language learning process turns around the development of communicative skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Each one of them helps the others in their learning and use. However, each one is developed in different ways and they require different strategies to be learnt.

Moving to didactic material design, Tomlinson (2011) states that “...material writing is as its most effective when it is turned to the needs of a particular group of learners”. Many authors also agree that a home-grown textbook, if it is well written, stands a much greater chance of success, simply because the authors are more aware of the needs of the learners, and are thus able to design the materials to fit their institution’s learning and teaching styles while keeping in mind the knowledge and world-view their students bring to the classroom.

On the other hand, Masuhara (cited in Tomlinson, 2013, p.236) points out that “global course books from English-speaking countries seemed impressive with more fashionable approaches promising success, but their contents seemed too alien to be imported directly into my classrooms”. Those texts did not have into consideration students and their contexts, needs and interests.

Tomlinson’s (2013:2) defines materials as “... anything which is done by writers, teachers or learners to provide sources of language input, to exploit those sources in ways which maximize the likelihood of intake and to stimulate purposeful output”. He also points out that to be effective, didactic materials should have some characteristics, that are summarized in the following items:

- To impact the students. That is to say, catch their interest, curiosity and attention.
- To get students to be comfortable, for example, when reducing anxiety.
- To develop students’ self-confidence.
- To maximize students’ opportunities to communicate.
- To have in mind that learning is, sometimes, a long time process.
- To take into account learning styles when designing and developing activities.
- To allow a silent period in the first learning levels.
- To stimulate both brain hemispheres, maximizing students potential to learn.

In the same perspective, Nunan (1996) states that “materials are the tangible manifestation of the curriculum in action; they are omnipresent in the language classroom and it is difficult to imagine a class without books... good materials also provide models for teachers to follow in developing their own materials”. This research project at Universidad Libre started because there was a lack of a curriculum that took into consideration the needs and wants of the students and their context.

In the field of teacher’s development, the researchers considered Simpson et al. (2005) who spread Dewey’s ideas. Dewey was the first to promote reflection as means of professional development in teaching. He believed that critical reflection is the most important quality a teacher may have and that it has great impact on the quality of schools and instruction. Reflective teaching is not simply doing what you are being told to do. The teacher should really dig and investigate why something is wrong to make intelligent changes to teaching procedures.

Research is an important means of professional development for teachers. In his *reflective model* Wallace (1991), states that “teachers have demanding expectations for themselves and their

colleagues because they regard professional development as an ongoing process". Discussion with colleagues about classroom situations is one of the most valuable experiences. The use of a wide variety of formal and informal strategies like reading professional journals, attending conferences and daily reflection, are also considered to be very important.

Also some concepts of Schon and Rein are considered in this project. For example, they say that through reflection

English teachers can react, examine and evaluate their teaching to make decisions on necessary changes to improve attitudes, beliefs and teaching practices. An effective teacher should possess a set of attitudes towards teaching practice based upon broader understandings of self, society and moral purposes. Also reflection would ensure more effective and self-confident teachers (1995).

They also consider reflection in action, related to thinking and doing because these two concepts lead to modifying teaching practices with the purpose of improving learning.

This research follows Wallace's theories (1998) establishing that the key to effective teaching is definitely a balance between theory and practice. Theory is important not only to perform well, but also to be able to answer students' questions. Wallace (1998) says that "there is a continuous relationship between reflection and practice". Moreover, this cycle allows for reflection both before and after practice. Knowledge makes sense when it can be related to immediate and or past experience". He also pointed out that "the teacher brings to class personal beliefs about teaching, he brings to class personal styles for teaching, personal perceptions of students' needs and even personal assumptions of what good teaching is".

Tomlinson, (2011, 2013) agrees with Wallace, (1998) and Schon and Rein (1995) on the role of the teacher as researcher. He also sees the need for teachers to write their own materials in order to reduce their dependency on publisher materials and a means of professional development. In general they would provide opportunities for both controlled practice and creative expression.

Schon and Rein (1995) state that "an inexperienced teacher might need more detailed instructions and suggestions on teaching methods in the teachers' guide to supply a lot of different optional activities or interesting raw materials to be exploited". Besides, he considers that one of the crucial factors in the success of learning anything depends on what the learners themselves bring to the learning situation. Learners need to start learning what is simple; they need rules and also need to be prepared for interaction in the real world. They need materials which are designed to facilitate systematic progress but which at the same time, provide them with encounters with the reality of target language use.

Continuous reflection is key to the learning and teaching processes. The student should reflect on what he has learned, how and when he has learned it and what actions he needs to take to improve his learning and to overcome the problems or difficulties he encounters. The teacher should also reflect on his practice, confront it with pedagogical theories and share experiences with other teachers, always seeking to analyze what happens in his classroom in order to improve the pedagogical process. It is considered that the simple act of teaching day after day can develop self-confidence, and make the teacher more at home in her or his profession, but it is essentially a consolidating function. Development implies change, and fruitful change is extremely difficult without reflection. It should be possible to make of the classroom relationship a reciprocal one, not one-way, so that the future teacher can reflect on

the received knowledge in the light of classroom experience and so that classroom experience can feed back into the received knowledge sessions.

About Critical Pedagogy, Wink (2005) and McLaren (2010) were considered in this research. Wink defines it as

a prism that reflects the complexities between teaching and learning. It is a prism which sheds light on the hidden subtleties that might have escaped our view previously. The prism has a tendency to focus on shades of social, cultural, political, and even economic conditions, and it does all of this under the broad view of history. (p. 26)

McLaren believes that critical pedagogy is “a way of thinking about, negotiating, and transforming the relationship among classroom teaching, the production of knowledge, the institutional structures of the school, and the social and material relations of the wider community, society, and nation-state” (2010). From those authors, it is understood that critical pedagogy is a change in the way of thinking that leads to asking about the how and the why knowledge is built in the way it is. Critical pedagogy calls to action to the actors involved in education. It is about the real world. It gives people the courage to challenge the current ways society forces them to live.

### **Evaluation**

As Nunan (1996) stated, “evaluation is intimately tied to the rest of the curriculum”. It is a wide term that includes assessment and decision-making processes. It is done during the whole learning process and the questions: Who, What, When and How, should be considered for determining the efficacy of the curriculum. In the same way, Nation and Mcalister (2010), state that evaluation looks at all aspects of curriculum design to see if the course is the best possible. It requires looking

at the results of the course and the planning and running of it.

Assessment, on the other hand, deals with the processes of what a student achieves as a result of a course. It generally involves the use of tests. Self-evaluation provides a very important way of developing critical self-awareness of what to be a student means.

### **Proposal**

The findings described in the problem statement, allow the researchers to work on a curriculum design proposal for the Extension Courses at Elementary and Pre-Intermediate levels, and designed, piloted and evaluated a set of four students' books, audio materials and a teacher's book rich in explanations and information for future teachers. The series is called *Go Beyond the Limit*, name chosen by the research team from some alternatives that were presented by research auxiliaries and researchers.

The current curricular proposal is done from a perspective where the linguistic knowledge, the linguistic skills and the capacity to learn are incorporated and transferable among languages. The curriculum should: 1) develop cognitive (thinking development) and learning to learn a foreign language, 2) be oriented to students' interests and 3) take into account the social relevance of learning and individual differences.

*Go Beyond the Limit* is the product of a research project called “Curriculum design for the English Extension Courses at Universidad Libre in Bogotá” being developed by the Research Group “Investigación, Aprendizaje y Comunicación - IAC” from the Research Center at the School of Education.

*Go Beyond the Limit* is a general English course for adults and young adults who want to learn to effectively communicate in English in today's

world. The series follows a comprehensive method that takes into consideration traditional and contemporary theories about the learning and teaching of English as a foreign language. The material is based on the development of the communicative competences and seeks to provide a balance among them. These competences are developed using the language in meaningful and motivating ways. The pedagogical units of the series are made up of six main sections: listening, speaking, grammar, reading, writing and cultural tips, giving students the possibility of interrelating their previous knowledge of the world with new culture they are trying to understand and the new language they are learning.

The cognitive, social, affective and reflective processes are present through all the activities. Though, each one of them is given some preeminence in the different sections of the series. The cognitive, social and affective domains can be seen mainly in the speaking section, for example in the Elementary B Students' Book, unit three, students have to get into groups of three and make up a conversation about ordering food in a restaurant. Students have to take roles, express likes and dislikes and reach an agreement. In the cognitive domain, students have to reflect on the metalinguistic aspect of language to fulfill specific exercises. The reflective domain is mostly seen in the self evaluation section that is presented at the end of each unit. There, students reflect about their own process and establish goals to achieve in order to enrich their learning.

Besides, the intercultural competence is a very important one in the learning and teaching processes, since it aims to reinforce the students' own culture and identity, acquire some knowledge of the foreign one and establish a link between them. It is mainly shown in the series through the Cultural Tip Section.

So far, the Extension Courses are organized to be developed in two shifts on Saturday afternoons.

The first group takes classes from 1 to 3 pm and the second one, from 3 to 5 pm. The research group proposes to have only one group having English classes from 2 to 5 pm. Each level of *Go Beyond the Limit* will cover 42 hours of classroom activities. That is, 50% more class time, students are also expected to spend time working independently as part of the language learning process. According to content covered and time spent, after completing this series (4 books: Elementary A and B, Preintermediate A and B) students should score at the A.2.2 level or higher on the Colombian Basic Standards. The average beginner students of the Extension Courses are high school students, technicians and professionals in different areas, all of them having in common their extremely low or non-existent English level.

### **Methodology**

The series shows a simple structure that helps future teachers to begin their professional practice as English teachers using a textbook to follow in the classroom, different from the commercial ones that are not designed with the special characteristics of the Extension Courses.

The textbook *Go Beyond the Limit* adopts the comprehensive or "integrated" approach the authors consider is the best for Colombian students with very specific needs. It takes into consideration and applies some principles stated by different approaches used internationally in the teaching of foreign languages. It follows an informal syllabus where the focus is on language use and skill development: students work in a growing sequence from reception to production. Pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and structures of discourse are worked upon progressively following their mastery by the learner. Thus, students complete the circle: reception, production, reception, growing their language learning in a cyclical way. Content Learning Integrating Language CLIL is another approach that is used as it encompasses

any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and subject have a joint role (Coyle and Marsh, 2010).

Some linguistic concepts were taken into consideration in the development of the series. From the "Notional-Functional" syllabus: the cyclical nature of language acquisition as it moves from the particular to the general to the particular in a spiral of growing complexity, and its use as a means for interaction. Conveying meaning is as important as fluency and accuracy. These concepts are applied in the books as it is described: Students begin with a listening exercise where they perform very concrete activities (particular), and then they go to the speaking section where they think and analyze their personal reality (particular). The grammar section makes them reflect about general rules of language and apply them in specific circumstances (general and particular). Finally they have the writing section where they express their own ideas about a particular subject (particular).

Regarding language as interaction, the speaking section and, in some cases, the reading section, are designed for students to interact according to the collaborative approach, applying the following basic principles when fulfilling the tasks: 1) two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together, 2) people benefit from one another's resources and skills, 3) learners engage in a common task where each individual depends on and is accountable to each other, 4) groups of students work together to search for understanding, meaning, or building knowledge as a product of their learning, 5) individuals are actively immersed in a context in which learning takes place through collaborative efforts, 6) activities can include group projects, joint problem solving, debates, etc.

From the "Task-Based syllabus", *Go Beyond the Limit* selects the ability to interpret and express

meaning and the need to constantly develop new language. Students are asked to work actively in individual and/or collaborative ways, developing concrete tasks which demand the acquisition of new language to express their own reality, share and interpret their ideas. Sometimes they have to interact creating new situations that spring from the proposed tasks.

Following the "Communicative Approach", this series draws on the notion that meaningful communication promotes true learning. As such, it focuses on activities in which language is used to carry out meaningful tasks. By making real sense students can communicate among themselves. The series also adheres to the belief of the "Post Communicative Approach" that the classroom is an artificial setting in which the communicative environment the teacher attempts to create is in fact a pre-communicative one, where students rehearse in order to later apply their knowledge in a real context.

From the "Cultural Studies Approach", this series encourages students to use the cultural and linguistic knowledge they possess in their native language to add in their acquisition of a second one. The series also follows the "Intercultural Approach" that considers that intercultural communicative competence includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of native people. The cultural tips provided in the series give students some insights of British and American cultures, according to personal experiences of natives and of foreigners who have lived in these contexts for many years.

The approaches briefly described above, are clearly evident in the development of the proposed tasks in each unit. The series *Go Beyond The Limit* prepares students for the interconnected world they will be living in, making emphasis on the understanding of life and culture in English speaking countries.

Finally, evaluation is considered to be a continuous process in which students are given constant feedback about their achievements. This process includes the assessment of students' performance and communicative competency level through a variety of activities and tasks. Students are expected to master the specific elements of the foreign language required for communication and interaction. Their achievements are evaluated through oral activities, written assignments, listening exercises, reading comprehension activities and class work.

Self-evaluation is an important part of the learning process. The students are required to reflect on their knowledge, attitude towards learning, learning strategies, and personal responsibility. This process of diagnosis and revision is made explicit in the student's book self-evaluation section at the end of each unit, which results in promoting autonomous learning.

## *Stages for planning the curriculum and designing materials*

### **Planning and content**

- *Need analysis*

It was done by collecting information from students, teachers and administrators. Students were asked about their needs in terms of learning, strengths and weaknesses learning English, the way they perceive the courses, methodological aspects they like most, activities they prefer, their own objectives, topics they wanted to learn about, proficiency level, age, educational background, previous learning experiences, and occupation.

Teachers answered questions related to their teaching preferences, current proficiency level, methodology and materials used. On the other hand, administrators were asked about their point

of view of the way the courses are conceived, organized, and developed.

- *Results of data collection*

The books Elementary A, Elementary B, Preintermediate A and the teachers' book for them were piloted as following:

<b>Book</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>
Elementary A	X	X	X
Elementary B		X	X
Preintermediate A			X

During 2013 the research group made some adjustments to the books. In 2014 the materials were sent to some external experts to evaluate them in order to be published and currently, the research team is working on the design of the Preintermediate B and Teacher's books.

The evaluation process was done in different times. Students did it formally at the end of each course but during the classes they gave feedback to their teachers. Teachers did the evaluation in three different ways: 1) formally they answered a format, twice per semester, 2) they gave suggestions and comments weekly to the research auxiliaries, and 3) they attended a meeting to give face to face feedback to the researchers once per semester.

The research auxiliaries worked with the researchers three times per week and communicate to them how the process was going on. The research team, based on the comments and suggestions received, reflected about the process and made the necessary changes in the books.

To have the research auxiliaries as teachers of the Extension English Courses was very valuable for the project. They were an excellent bridge of communication between researchers, teachers, students and administrators. They gave direct and constant feedback as they were both part of

the research, part of the piloting and teachers at the same time. In that way, they made a process of meta-research.

The most common aspects, about the series, stated by teachers and students were:

- The material provides balance in the communicative skills and variety of activities.
- The material was provided in photocopies, so it was difficult for them to enjoy it completely. Students and teachers prefer full color material.
- Contents and activities are according to students' English level.
- The photos provided help understand the texts and complement them.
- To include information about Colombia is a good way to increase and/or reinforce students' own identity and values, and provides opportunities to compare their native language and culture with foreign ones.
- The self-evaluation section is a very good way to reflect about how much each student has reached his own learning objectives.
- It was necessary to revise the quality of the audio material.

- *Content selection*

The contents of the curriculum design were established from the results of the data collection, linguistic and pedagogical theories, researchers' experience, revision of some curricula and materials for teaching English. According to Nunan, (1996), selecting the contents in the described way may lead to obtain the following benefits:

- Learners come to have a more realistic idea of what can be achieved in a given course.
- Learning comes to be seen as the gradual accretion of achievable goals.
- Students develop greater sensitivity to their role as language learners and their rather

vague notions of what it is to be a learner become sharper.

- Self-evaluation becomes more feasible.
- Classroom activities can be seen as a gradual, rather than an all-or-nothing process

- *Evaluation*

"Any element within the curriculum may be evaluated" (Nunan, 1996). Following this author, the validation of the research project has been done by experts inside and outside Universidad Libre, teachers and students of the English Extension Courses. The three first students' books have been piloted in the extension courses. Each class had an average of 20 students. A format called: "Materials evaluation form" was filled out by pre-service teachers and students in different moments of the learning and teaching processes. Teachers and students forms are different. Also, at the end of each semester, there was a meeting with pre-service teachers who have worked with the book, to get their comments and analysis. The suggestions and comments they provided were revised and analyzed by the research team and the ones that the group considered relevant were taken into consideration.

## Conclusions

So far, the research team can conclude that in the designing of a curriculum proposal and didactic materials for the English teaching and learning processes to fulfill the needs of the Extension Courses, population was taken into account in terms of context, its characteristics, teachers and students' needs and wants, interculturality and a deep knowledge of those processes.

Team work is a very good way to build knowledge and increase cognitive, affective, research and didactic skills of in-service and pre-service teachers. In the same way, the piloting was an important element for the research auxiliaries to know:

1) how to systematize and analyze information, 2) to validate theory with practice and vice versa, and 3) to know that every class is an opportunity to do that. Promoting a reflective, analytic and continuous learning attitude in future teachers leads them to a permanent transformation of their teaching practice. In sum, the proposed curriculum design is a collaborative action research in which all the stages of this research method are addressed. It also makes the connection between research, theory and practice and that connection, as Nation and Mcalister pointed out, necessarily implies changes or innovations in an educational field (2010).

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