English in Colombia

A study of the state exams in upper secondary schools in Bogotá

Pia Mattinen
Abstract

Obligatory state exams in English are implemented in all upper secondary schools in Colombia in order to reach the European pre-intermediate (B level) of English. However, the state exam is criticised for its contents and for how it assesses the students’ skills. The Colombian assessment follows the European standards of assessing. This study aims at investigating the criticism further.

This project has been carried out as a Minor Field Study. Two related surveys have been realised. The first survey was an examination of the Colombian English exam and the European standards of assessing. The second survey was interviews with English teachers in Colombia.

The results from the two surveys show that there is a discrepancy between how the Colombian English exam expresses the assessment of the students’ skills and how the equivalent in the European standards is expressed. Moreover, the interviews with the English teachers show that they do not find the exam to be complete, reliable or a fair evaluation. The students do not have equal opportunities to succeed in the exam.

Conclusions drawn from the study are that Colombia needs to form its own standard levels of English assessment in their state exam that corresponds to the contents of the curriculum, not to the European standard. Furthermore, Colombia needs to make an effort in schools through: teacher-training, material supply, structured and organised curricula, and clear instructions in all state documents given from higher instances.

Keywords: Colombia, State exam, English assessment, Minor Field Study.
Acknowledgments

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1. Interview guide
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1. Introduction
The international communication researcher, David Crystal, writes in *English as a global language* (1998) that English has a global status today and that the importance of mastering English can be expected to increase in the future in all countries. Colombia is a country under development where English is taught as a foreign language. For the last century efforts have been made to improve English among the citizens of Colombia in order to make the country and its people a part of the global changes. Obligatory state exams in English have been implemented in all upper secondary schools in Colombia. This thesis investigates the English state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*.

Since I work as an English teacher and teach English as a foreign language I am interested in this subject. For the last two years I have lived and worked in Spain where I have come in contact with Spanish people and Latin American people mostly from Colombia. Through these meetings I have noticed that English is considered important to master in Spanish speaking countries, and it is needed for higher education and in international relations and contacts.

People learn and improve their English through education. There are of course several factors in the society that affects foreign language acquisition, mainly media: TV, radio, internet, newspapers etc. This thesis does not discuss the importance of these factors further; however, they are important to keep in mind because they affect the general aim of improving English in a country. This thesis focuses on English acquisition in school and the way English is assessed. I have chosen to travel to Colombia to investigate the English state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*, and interview English teachers in upper secondary schools about their perceptions of the state exam and its implementation in schools.

In the year 2000 the *United Nations Millennium Declaration* was announced, with eight *Millennium Development Goals* to be reached by the year 2015. All these goals have the vision of a better and united world. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) writes in an article (2009) that education is the key to economical growth and political and social development. Therefore they give their support to the education sector in

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1 More information on the following webpages:
http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/About.htm and
developing countries to help them achieve the *Millennium Development Goals*. One of the developing countries that SIDA cooperates with is Colombia and one of the projects is that SIDA functions as the sponsor behind the scholarship program Minor Field Studies (MFS)<sup>2</sup>. Colombia was chosen as the target country because of the changes that the nation is going through in the educational sector, and the efforts made in order to improve the level of English. The implementation of the English state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*, is an example of one of these efforts.

This Colombian English exam functions as a way of assessing the students’ skills in English and determines their level of competence. The exam was realised as a part of a project called *Plan Nacional Bilingüismo (PNB)* that was implemented in all schools in 2004. This project has the goal that all upper secondary school graduates in Colombia should have acquired a European B1 level of spoken and written English before the year of 2019 (MEN, 2006b, p.3). The European B1 as it is described by the Council of Europe in *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)* is an international competence level for foreign languages. However, I have discovered through my investigation that the B1 level expressed in the Colombian English state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*, does not correspond to the European B1. This means that in Colombia the European B1 level of competence is modified in the English state exam (see 4.1). Therefore, I have chosen to use my own created expression: *Colombian B1* when the level is mentioned in the English state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*. In stead of only using the European international competence level B1 I use two different terms in this thesis to highlight the differences: *European B1* and *Colombian B1*.

The English state exam is criticized for not being complete since it only assesses vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension. It does not evaluate the students’ oral or writing skills. Moreover, the way the exam assesses the students is criticised since the exam uses the standard levels of self-evaluation and assessment from CEFR without adapting them to the situation in Colombia.

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<sup>2</sup>This program allows university students in Sweden to realise their thesis as field studies in a developing country. More information of the program and the conditions can be found on the following webpage: www.mfs.nu
1.2 Aim and goals
The aim of this study is to investigate if the criticism directed at the state exam is justified and it will also investigate English teachers’ view of the exam.

I will start by investigating the contents of the state exam and then compare the description of a Colombian B1 according to the state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*, and the European B1 in the self-assessment grid of CEFR. Moreover, I will interview English teachers in upper secondary schools about their perceptions of the exam and the governmental goal of 2019. Finally I will discuss the results in order to see if the critique is entitled or not. The perceptions and opinions of the teachers will also be set in a wider perspective for a comprehension of the importance of mastering English in Colombia as a part of improving the educational system and participating in the global processes.

The research questions for the study are:

What does the investigation of the assessment in *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés* show? Is the exam reliable for its purpose?

Do the teachers believe that *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés* is a complete evaluation of the students’ skills? How do they motivate their views?

Do the teachers believe that the students have equal opportunities to succeed in the exam?

Will the students be able to reach the Colombian B1 level of the state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*, before the year of 2019? If it is impossible with the present system which changes need to be made?

1.3 Abbreviations and explanations
CEFR= Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (A document which describes the competences necessary for communication, the related knowledge and skills, and the situation and domains of communication)

FECODE= Federación Colombiana De Educadores (A Colombian teacher association)

ICFES= Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (The governmental institution for assessment and evaluation in Colombia)
IPK= The International Programme Office for Education and Training (A Swedish government agency that promotes academic exchange and cooperation across national borders)

MEN = Ministerio de Educación Nacional (National Agency for Education in Colombia)

MFS= Minor Field Studies (A scholarship program for Swedish university students, who wants to travel to a developing country in order to gather information for their thesis)

PNB= Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (A bilingual program for schools created 2004 by MEN)

SIDA = Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (A government organization under the Swedish Foreign Ministry who administer Sweden’s budget for development aid)
2. Theoretical background

Some 10 years ago it was estimated that around four hundred million people had English as their mother-tongue, and about one billion used it as a second or foreign language (quoted in Graddol et al., 2007, p.29). Today the numbers are higher, and more and more people learn English all over the world every day. The global changes require knowledge in English since it acts like a united tool of communication. In this essay globalisation is used as it is described by Uriel Hedengren (2006). Hedengren explains globalization as a phenomenon that comprises political, economical and cultural processes all over the world so that they merge together and become dependent of each other. Moreover he means that this leads to the need of a mutual international language that will enable people to keep in contact (Hedengren, 2006, p.6-9). According to Crystal (1998) English is that mutual language. The importance of mastering English has become more and more important not only for its global position, but also for international relations and co-operation.

Section 2.1 starts by giving some background information of English as a global language. In 2.2 the position of English in Colombia is described. This is done in order to explain some of the important changes that have occurred in the educational sector concerning the improvement of English in schools in Colombia. In 2.3 English teaching in schools, and the curricula is explained. Finally, in 2.4, the state exam of ICFES and the English part of the exam, Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés, are explained and the criticisms the exam has received accounted for.

2.1 English as a global language

According to David Crystal “a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (Crystal, 1998, p.3). Crystal argues how this means that not only a mother-tongue use of English is sufficient to give English its global status; it needs to be taken up by all countries in the world to “give it a special place within their communities, even though they may have few (or no) mother-tongue speakers” (Crystal, 1998, p.4). This, Crystal continues, can be done in two ways. Firstly, the language can be made the official language, i.e. a second language used “as a medium of communication in such domains as government, the law courts, the media, and the educational system” (Crystal, 1998, p.4) or secondly, it can be given privileged status in foreign-language teaching in school. However, in the latter case, the language can be present in countries in various ways. It depends on the governmental or/and the foreign-aid financial support in areas such as media, libraries, schools, and institutes of higher education. This does not only concern all
material needed in schools, e.g. computers, books, tapes, but also the need of sufficient and competent teachers (Crystal, 1998, p.5).

Furthermore, it is relevant to know why English is the global language of today. In order to understand this phenomenon a historical view is necessary. Throughout history the political and military power of the people in a nation has given their language international status. To maintain and expand the established language the powerful military nations also have to be economically powerful. This happened in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the economical developments through new communication technologies, the growth of competitive industries, international relations and companies as well as the mass entertainment industries that exploded and made a worldwide impact. The English language thrived because of Britain’s role as a leading industrial and trading country which was followed by the economical supremacy of the United States with its large population (Crystal, 1998, p.9-10).

In the globalized world there have been discussions of adopting a lingua franca to facilitate and reduce all translation work: “the need for a global language is particularly appreciated by the international academic and business communities, and it is here that the adoption of a single lingua franca is most in evidence, both in lecture-rooms and board-rooms, as well as in thousands of individual contacts being made daily all over the globe” (Crystal, 1998, p.13).

Schools all over the world are preparing themselves to participate in the global processes with English as its medium of communication. Many countries see knowledge in English to be a benefit for their nation as a part of world affairs, trade markets and a global presence (Crystal, 1998, p.24). Knowing English means that you as an individual can be a part of the global interdependence with other countries in the worlds’ political, financial and educational fields. It means that you as an individual are a part of the communication and the interaction in the world today.

2.2 English in Colombia
Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) writes in Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés (2006b) that English in Colombia is seen as a foreign language. Furthermore, English has been given a more privileged status in Colombia today. This means that it is on its way of achieving a global status and special role. In the document Educación de calidad (MEN) the ministry writes that good education leads to prosperity in Colombia. In this document it is mentioned that for the last fifteen years there have been changes in the
educational sector and that the country needs an education that can develop skills for life both on a national and global level (p.1)\textsuperscript{3}.

In year 2004 MEN created the bilingual program Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB) as a strategy for improving the quality of English teaching in Colombia both in the compulsory school and in higher education. The main objective for PNB is to have citizens who in the future are able to communicate in English with internationally comparable standards\textsuperscript{4}. Many debates concerning education have been held and are still ongoing in Colombia due to the changes and the PNB. For example a debate can be followed in the article \textit{Para vivir en un mundo global}, published in the paper Altablero (MEN, 2005) where a discussion is held between Ricardo Romero (RR) the political consultant for English teaching and Anne-Marie Truscott de Mejía (AMTM) from Centro de Investigación y Formación en Educación at Universidad de los Andes. The discussion treats the importance of learning English in Colombia, and is a reaction to the implementation of PNB. In the debate it is said that it is a necessity to know English in the global world of today, and that it is also important for higher education and work even inside Colombia. Moreover, AMTM states that a Colombian student who masters English is well prepared for the increasingly interdependent world.

In 2006 MEN formulated basic standards of competence in English: \textit{Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Ingles} as one part of the PNB. In this document MEN states the importance of mastering English in a global world. MEN developed these standards with the aim of improving the quality of English in schools. They believe that having a good level of English helps the students in further studies and that gives them a greater chance to improve their quality of life by increasing their possibility of getting a better job. The Colombian government has a fundamental goal of creating the conditions for Colombians to develop good communication skills in English. This goal is evident in the document \textit{Vision Colombia 2019}\textsuperscript{5} and it says that all Colombian students at the end of the eleventh grade shall have reached an intermediate level of English proficiency, i.e. an European B level described in CEFR (MEN, 2006b, p.1-6). Since the year 2007 the state exam, \textit{Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés}, created by ICFES follows the standards of CEFR (ICFES, 2011).

\textsuperscript{3}It also connects these needs to the Millennium goal against poverty; hence, a connection is made between the value of education and poverty reduction Moreover, the document generally describes how Colombia will work to improve the quality of education from pre-school until University.
\textsuperscript{4} More about the PNB can be read at \texttt{www.colombiaaprende.edu.co}
\textsuperscript{5} More information in the document at \texttt{Educación:Visión 2109} (MEN, 2006a)
2.3 English teaching in Colombia

In Colombia the students start to study English the first year in school at the age of six. Since 2006 all the English teachers are obliged to follow the basic standards of competence in English: Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés. The standards are the same for all regions in Colombia, in all schools public and private. The standards are supposed to help the teachers understand what skills are expected from their students at a certain level of English. Moreover, the standards are supposed to be a guideline showing how to reach the governmental goal of the PNB and Visión Colombia 2019. The document describes the competences a student should have in English. It starts by describing listening and reading comprehension and then writing and speaking production. The competences are structured in columns and in each column there are explanations to what a student should accomplish. These sentences are based on the self-assessment grid from CEFR. The Council of Europe writes in CEFR that the guide “provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbook, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively” (CEFR, p.1). In CEFR the self-assessment grid for students has been created in order to see what competences (understanding, speaking, and writing) should be achieved at a certain level. The levels are A1-A2 = beginner, B1-B2 = intermediate, and C1-C2 = advanced (native) (CEFR, p.26-27). In Colombia they have introduced two more steps at the A and B levels (A 2.1 and B 1.2); there are no descriptions of B2 or C levels since these levels belong to the higher education in Colombia. The figure below from Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés illustrates what level of English each student should reach each year from compulsory school to upper secondary school in Colombia⁶.

⁶My translation: First to third year, beginner A1. Fourth to fifth year beginner/basic1, A 2.1. Sixth to seventh year beginner/basic 2, A2.2. Eight to ninth year pre-intermediate1, B1.1. Tenth to eleventh year pre-intermediate2, B1.2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primero A Tercero</th>
<th>Principante</th>
<th>A1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quarto A Quinto</td>
<td>Básico 1</td>
<td>A 2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexto A Séptimo</td>
<td>Básico 2</td>
<td>A 2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Octavo A Noveno</td>
<td>Pre intermedio 1</td>
<td>B 1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Décimo A Undécimo</td>
<td>Pre intermedio 2</td>
<td>B 1.2</td>
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</table>

(MEN, 2006b, p.14)

The level of English (A1 to B 1.2) as seen in the last column above should equal the same competences as mentioned in CEFR. There are, however, no grading criteria connected to the different levels.

In the compulsory state exams created by Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES)\(^7\) the English subject has gained importance, thanks to the PNB and therefore the grade and scores obtained in the English test affect the total score of the whole exam (ICFES, 2011). One purpose of the exam is to evaluate the students’ skills and levels in English. In 2.4 more information about the exam will be given.

The number of English lessons given in the schools in Colombia varies from year to year and also between schools depending on if it is a public or private school, if a special program has been implemented, if it is bilingual etc. The profile of the school and its financial resources often decide the number of English lessons.

2.4 ICFES Saber 11°

This exam is taken by all last year upper secondary students, which in Colombia is in the 11\(^{th}\) year. The results serve several purposes with different players in the educational system. Firstly they are used as self-evaluation for the students. Secondly as an instrument for some institutions of higher education that select suitable candidates for their programs. Thirdly all the data collected is used by educational institutions and the authorities in their work when improving the quality in schools. Moreover, with good results in the test the student can gain entrance to some universities and obtain scholarships.

\(^7\) ICFES is an institution that works in direct contact with MEN. The main functions of ICFES are to design and develop assessments and evaluation systems. More information about ICFES is found on their homepage www.icfes.gov.co
The exam consists of two parts, which covers several subjects. The first part is considered to be fundamental, i.e. the subjects are obligatory and English is one of those subjects. The second part is flexible and students are supposed to show their skills in one of six subjects that they choose themselves. The questions in general are based on a theme, idea or a problem and the task has either the form of *multiple choices with single answer* or *multiple choices with several answers*.

The English part of the exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*, consists of forty-five questions and the maximum time for finishing is one hour. It is divided into six different parts. Each part tests the students’ vocabulary, reading comprehension, and grammar in various ways. All parts have one common denominator: to give the students opportunities to answer in the above mentioned manner (ICFES, 2011). The scores given in the exam can be between 0-100 and the grade from A1 to B1 (ICFES, 2010, p.54). See also the figure on page 7 (MEN, 2006b, p.14).

### 2.4.1 Criticism

The state exam gives ICFES important data for their statistics enabling them to draw conclusions about the level of English in the schools. Gomez Campo (2009) criticises the construction of the ICFES exams and the purposes of the same exams in relation to the educational changes in Colombia (p.173ff). He does not talk about the English part in particular, but the state exams in general. However, this is relevant in order to understand the educational system and the reasons for the criticism directed against the exams. In Colombia, Gomez Campo writes, the educational field that concerns evaluation is highly underdeveloped. One of the problems lies in that ICFES has the monopoly of creating the exams, and that there are no opportunities to evaluate their work and interpretations of the governmental propositions and documents coming from MEN. There is a weakness and even an absence of methods to evaluate the ICFES tests and their effects and impact on the educational system. Gomez Campo means that the way the ICFES exams are formed reduces and works against the improvement of education in Colombia at all levels. Gomez Campo also writes that this leads to questions concerning what the exams really are testing, what impacts or effects they have on competences that are not tested what the purpose of the exams is and if they fulfil it, and to what extent the state exams contribute to the improvement of the quality of education in general. Moreover, the author means that by using the ICFES exams as a tool of measuring students’ skills with the superior goal of improving the quality of education one scenario might be that the tests simplifies or leaves out other competences or
skills that cannot be tested in the way that the exam is formed. This, Gomez Campo states, is contradictory to the aim of improving the quality of education in Colombia.

Moreover, Gomez Campo writes that the main reason for the existence of the ICFES exams are that high results give the student access to higher education. However, he continues, this only concerns some private Universities, where you also can pay for your entrance if the results not are enough. Furthermore, Gomez Campo means that the results from the ICFES exam are used as a ranking system between institutions. If an institution can show high scores on the ICFES exams it means that they achieve higher social status. However, Gomez Campo means that in most schools with high results this does not come from the quality of the teachers, neither the working conditions, but in the test-drilling achieved in special Pre-ICFES\textsuperscript{8} courses.

More criticism can be read in a recently published Master degree paper where Davila Perez (2012) compares two public schools in Bogotá to each other. One of the schools shows low results on the ICFES exam and the other high results. Through her investigation Davila Perez tries to find out how the teachers can work in order to help their students to achieve better results. Her focus lies in the difficulties of the implementation of the PNB and the actions of the teachers to help their students improve their English; nevertheless she also criticises the state exam of ICFES. She writes that the students do not have equal chances of succeeding in the exam because the education policy does not take into consideration the social classes, the socio-economical differences (p.15). Moreover, she writes that the acquisition of English in school is not enough to do well on the test and reach the goal of 2019 (p.15). Moreover, Davila Perez writes that the adoption of the self-assessment grid from CEFR in the exam was made on financial and administrative grounds only, and there have been many complaints because of the lack of adaption to the conditions in Colombia (p.18ff). She also writes that the exam does not test the students’ competences in listening or speaking (p.35).

\textsuperscript{8} Courses held by different institutions, separated from the school, which allow students to practise for the upcoming test. During four months the students focus on the test and prepare for all the different subjects that are tested. Students pay for the courses.
3. Method
The study consists of two related surveys. The first part is an examination of the state documents, i.e. a comparison of the Colombian B1 according to *Saber 11°-prueba de Inglés* and the European B1 according to the self-assessment grid of CEFR. The second part is interviews carried out among English teachers in upper secondary schools in Bogotá.

Since the study is empirical and carried out as a thesis in the teacher training program in Sweden the methods used are inspired of ethnography as it is described by Kullberg (2004), with the qualitative interviews explained by Trost (2010) as main tools. Furthermore, the minor critical study of state documents has been carried out according to Johanson & Svedner (2006) where the guidelines of the latter also to a great extent have formed the structure of this essay. To guarantee that the study follows and has taken into consideration all ethical aspects regarding research the principles of the Swedish Research Council (2011) has been followed. The study has been inspired by and based its findings on what is written in several state documents, plans, propositions and articles of MEN and ICFES (see list of references) on the issues on educational matters. Moreover, the works of Gomez Campo (2009) and Davila Perez (2012) have been important for understanding the contemporary situation in Colombia and have inspired further discussions of the consequences of the discrepancy in the state exam of ICFES.

A fully developed ethnographical study has not been possible since it requires empirical studies for a long period of time, through observations, participation, and interviews; with the possibility to come back to the field and continue or develop the work. Also it requires practicing and a pilot study before starting the actual investigation (Kullberg, 2004). However, this study has been inspired of ethnographical studies and uses ideas and inspiration from the methods mentioned. For example the analysed state documents can be seen as ethnographical artefacts (Kullberg, 2004, p.43) and the interviews are dialogues and interviews integrated (Kullberg, 2004, p.110). The interviews with the English teachers are seen as the primary investigation in this essay and have therefore more depth than the analysis of the documents. Both investigations are, however, related and relevant for the study. The methods chosen are suitable for the investigation since it is inspired of an ethnographic study, and according to Kullberg (2004, p.74-75) quantitative methods cannot be applied on these kind of studies. However, observations or interviews with students could have complemented the study. In this case they were omitted due to the time limit and the regulations for a thesis.
3.1 Selection for interviews

The qualitative interviews have been carried out among six English teachers at an upper secondary level in two schools in a suburb to Bogotá. The teachers are of different age groups and gender. Some of them have been teachers for several years while others have a few years’ experience. None of them has worked less than five years as teachers. In the figures below fictive names have been given the teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School A</th>
<th>Juanita</th>
<th>Pedro</th>
<th>Gloria</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender, age, experience</td>
<td>Female, 30, 5 years</td>
<td>Male, 52, 26 years</td>
<td>Female, 52, 22 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>School B</th>
<th>Andrea</th>
<th>Carlos</th>
<th>Elena</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender, age, experience</td>
<td>Female, 25, 5 years</td>
<td>Male, 48, 7 years</td>
<td>Female, 30, 5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variety of teachers was chosen because it increases the chances to find the most important perceptions and the varieties of them (Johanson & Svedner, 2006, p.51). Moreover the number of teachers was decided during the actual study, when the investigation reached a point where it could be assumed that there were no more perceptions to be found, and that a generalisation was possible with few interviewed if the focus lies on their perceptions (Johanson & Svedner, 2006, p.50-51). The schools visited are situated in a suburb to Bogotá. A part of the suburb is identified as an estrato 2-3 i.e. stratum 2-3 neighbourhood; which in Colombia is described as a socio-economical level that stretches from 1-6 (1 being the poorest and 6 the richest). An estrato 2-3 neighbourhood is considered poor. Both schools are represented as estrato 2-3 schools and they have existed for more than twenty years. Moreover, they are situated only approximately 1km from each other. Both schools have more than 2000 but less than 2500 students, from primary to secondary level. Each school has 82 teachers in total of which 8 are English teachers, with 3-4 of the English teachers working at the upper secondary level.
Both schools have implemented PNB\(^9\). In both schools the hours of English lessons per week have recently been increased to four hours for each class at the upper secondary level. In each class there are 40-45 students. The students come from the same neighbourhood, i.e. they have, more or less, the same kind of socio-economical background. One thing that distinguishes them is that one school is public and the other school is private. This means that the education is free of charge for the students in the public school, whereas in the private school the students pay for each semester and for all the material needed.

The schools were chosen for this project because they give a general comprehension and picture of the choice of education that the children have in this area. Furthermore, they have been chosen because of their equivalent size, i.e. number of students and teachers, and the students’ similar socio-economical backgrounds. Moreover, as presented in the work of Davila Perez (2012) the majority of the schools in Bogotá, especially in the lower stratums, have a low level of English which makes these schools more representative for the purpose of the study.

3.2 Data collection
The first part of the study is an examination of the section for Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés in the state document Orientaciones para el examen de Estado de educación media ICFES SABER 11°(ICFES, 2011), and the self-assessment grid of CEFR has been carried out through close reading. The relevant questions used in the critical analysis/close reading of the documents are: What has been included, what is omitted, what is highlighted, and what is seen less important (Johanson & Svedner, 2006, p.65. The texts will be described and explained, and the differences interpreted (idem).

The second part of the study concerns the teachers’ perception of the state exam Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés. The investigation is completed through qualitative interviews since according to Trost (2010, p.43-44) some of the main interests of the qualitative interviews are to understand how the respondent thinks and feels and what experiences he/she has. In order to investigate somebody’s perception the qualities mentioned by Trost are essential to have in mind. The interviews are structured with open questions, in the terms of Trost (2010, p.39ff) which means that they are concentrated to one main area and the questions have no solid answers. This way of proceeding is connected to the thoughts of ethnology (Kullberg, 2004)

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\(^9\)A related survey has been carried out in the same neighbourhood by Magdalena Horvath during 2012, about the implementation of PNB, which among other things shows a lack of communication between the teachers and the government.
where the context controls the interviews and they can therefore not be planned in detail in advance. This has its purpose in bringing to mind the thoughts and feelings of the respondent. For the study an interview guide (Trost, 2010, p.71ff) was constructed (see Appendix 1) and used during the interviews in order to let the respondent decide the proceedings. Moreover, questions connected to the aim and goals are presented in Appendix 2. These questions have been adjusted during each interview to fit the specific context, and can therefore only be seen as examples of questions used. Moreover, follow-up questions that have been used to help the respondents to specify or motivate their answers are not accounted for in the list.

3.3 Ethical considerations
In order to protect the integrity of the respondents three ethical issues have been considered according to the recommendations from the Swedish Research Council (2011). The following issues have been taken into consideration: permission to collect data, the participants’ right to end the involvement, and disclosure of sensitive material. The principals have been informed and certificates from MFS and the University of Karlstad have been handed out in order to prove the credibility of the study. The principals have given their permission for the study. All the participants have been informed of the intentions of the study in advance, during personal meetings. The participants had the right to withdraw from the study if they so wished and to decline responding to questions. The participants have been informed of their integrity and their total anonymity. Moreover, all material will be handled with professional confidentiality and all the material collected used for scientific purpose only.

3.4 Validity and reliability
The validity and reliability of the study has been secured since it has been carried out within the frame of the scientific approach with carefully planned methods. Several methods have been used in the study to complete each other and to add to the validity and reliability of it (Kullberg, 2004, p.75-76), e.g. the character of the interviews is that of an integrated dialogue and interview which means that the implementation of the interviews in themselves contains validity. To prevent that the respondent gives the answers that he/she thinks is expected time has been spent with the participant in the field before the actual interview (Kullgren, 2004, p.76). During some of the interviews I had a feeling that a few answers were given in order to impress or show off. This might have affected the answers to some extent. However, thanks to the feeling of trust in the investigation and the security in the anonymous situation this does not compromise the general validity and reliability of the study. Furthermore, with references
to Trost (2010, p.131-135) the questions have been held open. Efforts have also been made so that the only opinions that are relevant for the study are those of the respondents.

3.5 Implementation of the study

3.5.1 Examination of state documents
The examination started with a close reading of the section for Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés in the state document Orientaciones para el examen de Estado de educación media ICFES SABER 11° (ICFES, 2011). Thereafter, a close reading of the self-assessment grid of CEFR was done. The descriptions given in Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés were compared to their equivalents in the self-assessment grid in CEFR. These equivalents were analysed and interpreted.

3.5.2 Qualitative interviews with English teachers
The interviews with English teachers were mainly held in English. Many teachers, however, expressed their wish to explain things in Spanish when they felt it necessary. The preparation of the interview guide started with structuring all the thoughts and questions so that they came to concern one area of the study, with focus on the state exam Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés in focus. The interview guide consists of six main areas (see Appendix 1). These are: Global language, state exam, methods, resources, students and parents, solutions and improvements. The areas functioned as an aid during the interviews and they were constructed with the inspiration from Kullberg (2004, p.111-125) in order to create a calm atmosphere and the feeling of a structured conversation during the interview. The main purpose was to get the interviewed to feel comfortable and relaxed, hence feel more free in expressing his/hers thoughts and feelings.

The preparations for the interviews started through e-mail contact with a teacher in one of the schools. Through this teacher contact with the principal of the school was arranged. The purpose and aims of the study were explained through e-mail, which resulted in a promise to visit the school and interview the English teachers. Contact with the second school was arranged during the visit in Bogotá, with the help from a Colombian family. In this school a meeting with the principal was arranged and afterwards permission was obtained to carry out the investigation in their school. The first weeks of the field study were spent visiting the schools several times, talking to principals, teachers and students. Through these visits a feeling of trust grew and the staff in the schools became comfortable in the situation of being

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10 The level of English among teachers in Colombia is generally low. There are projects and efforts made in Colombia in order to improve teacher education, and to give practicing teachers further education.
interviewed. The conversations with the teachers resulted in ideas and material for the upcoming interviews; these preparations resemble the informal and formal interviews that are carried out in ethnological studies (Kullberg, 2004). During the visits dates for interviews were set with teachers. All the interviews took place in calm areas of the schools, with no risk of disturbance. The teachers were aware that the interviews would take around forty-five minutes. One hour of free time was booked with all the teachers to be sure there was enough time. The interviews were carried out with the help of the interview guide. Permission to record the interviews had been given before starting. All interviews were recorded. During the session notes were taken. The preparations, the setting and the implementation of the interviews were carried out according to the guidance given by Trost (2006) and Kullberg (2004), i.e. the interviews strived towards being as relaxed as possible, carried out in a familiar environment, in this case in the school, for the teachers and with the aim of being structured conversations.
4. Results and analysis
The results of the two surveys are presented in different sections below. In section 6.1 the results from the examined and compared documents are accounted for, together with an analysis of the findings. In section 6.2 the results from the interviews are presented and analysed. In section 6.3 a summary of the results in 6.1 and 6.2 is made.

4.1 Examination of state documents
The examination concerns the section for *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés* in the state document *Orientaciones para el examen de Estado de educación media ICFES SABER 11°* (ICFES, 2011) and the self-assessment grid of CEFR. *What has been included, what is omitted, what is highlighted, and what is seen less important?*

In the analysis below relevant parts from the documents will be illustrated to give a comprehensive picture. The whole table for how a Colombian B1\(^{11}\) is described according to the exam *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés* is presented below in figure 1. A translation and adaption of it to English is made in figure 2. The table of the self-assessment grid from CEFR shows only the analysed European B1\(^{12}\) and the equivalent to the Colombian B1. The bold text implies the equivalent.

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\(^{11}\) See explanation of a Colombian B1 in the introduction.
\(^{12}\) The entire table can be found in the following document: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)
In figure 1 below the description of a Colombian B1 according to *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés* is illustrated. In figure 2 my translation is given.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-intermedio</th>
<th>Banda</th>
<th>Descripción</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
|                | B1    | • Es capaz de comprender los puntos principales de textos claros y en lengua estándar si tratan sobre cuestiones conocidas, ya sea de situaciones de trabajo, estudio u ocio.  
- Sabe desenvolverse en la mayor parte de las situaciones que pueden surgir durante un viaje por zonas donde se utiliza la lengua.  
- Es capaz de producir textos sencillos y coherentes sobre temas familiares o en los que tiene un interés personal.  
- Puede describir experiencias, acontecimientos, deseos y aspiraciones, así como justificar brevemente sus opiniones o explicar sus planes. |

**Figure1. Source: ICFES (2011, p.23)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Pre-intermediate| • Can understand the main points of clear standard text if it concerns familiar questions about work, studies or leisure.  
- Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in areas where the language is used.  
- Is capable of producing simple and connected texts about familiar themes or about things that are of personal interest.  
- Can briefly describe experiences, events, wishes and ambitions, in order to express opinions and explain plans. |

**Figure2. My own translation of figure1.**

The figures above illustrate the qualities that a student should possess when reaching the Colombian B1 level on the exam. According to MEN (2006a, 2006b) these qualities have been developed trough the inspiration from the self-assessment grid of CEFR (see figure 3) in order to converge with European standards. In figure 3 below the self-assessment grid of CEFR is presented.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. I can understand the description of events, feelings and wishes in personal letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spoken Interaction</td>
<td>I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversations on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spoken production</td>
<td>I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes and ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>I can write simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. I can write personal letters describing experiences and impressions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Source: *Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grid* (CEFR, p.26)

Through a comparison between the texts it is clear that figure 1 is inspired of the text in figure 3. In some cases the text in figure 1 can be more or less understood as a translation of the text in figure 3.

The first item in figure 1 corresponds to the bold sentence in the listening section and to the bold sentence in the reading section of figure 3. In figure 1 they use “textos” which means that this quality can treat a listening comprehension as well as a reading comprehension.
The second item in figure 1 is almost a literal translation of the bold sentence in the spoken interaction section in figure 3. “dónde se utiliza la lengua”(fig.1) is translated to “where the language is used”(fig.2) and is expressed “where the language is spoken”(fig.3).

The third item in figure 1 is a literal translation of the sentence in the writing section in figure 3.

The forth item in figure 1 corresponds to the bold sentences in the spoken production section in figure 3. The only difference is that the word “dreams” in figure 3 is omitted from the text in figure 1. It can be interpreted into some of the other words, but it is not expressed literally or clearly.

4.1.1 Analysis of state documents
The qualities presented in the four items are ambiguous in their way of not specifying what kind of competences they are illustrating.

The first item details a listening comprehension and reading comprehension. In the exam no listening comprehension is tested.

The second item refers to comprehension of the English language in situations while travelling. This can be interpreted as in spoken situations and in listening. The exam however, does not test any speaking skills.

The third item expresses writing skills. In the exam the students have no possibility to show this competence.

The fourth and last item expresses an ability to describe. There are no indications of how the students are meant to describe, orally or in writing. Either way none of these competences are tested in the exam.

The ambiguous descriptions of the competences in the four items in figure 1 and the absence of connection to what it assessed in the exam makes the whole purpose of the exam easy to question. Also, it is easy to question the Colombian B1. It is a reduced form of the European B1 expressed in CEFR. In the self- assessment grid (figure 3) it is evident that the students should possess more skills for a European B1 than what is accounted for in the reduced Colombian B1. In the curricula Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés more competences for what a student should achieve for a Colombian B1 in each category (listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing) is
described (MEN, 2006b, p.26-27). However, the competences in the Estándares are not relevant in the final exam, where the students’ skills that are tested are assessed according to the descriptions given in figure 1.

4.2 Interviews
In the presentation of the results and the analysis below the schools will be referred to as: School A=public and School B=private. The results are presented in three sections, with different titles. In each section the results from school A are presented first, to be followed by the presentation of school B and finished with a section in which views that are similar for both school A and B are presented. Finally, at the end of each section a summary and analysis of the results are presented. I have interviewed three teachers in each school.

Quotations from the respondents are interspersed with the information. In the quotations the following symbol: (...) means that some words or a sentence is omitted, three dots ... means that there is a pause. Italics is used for the voice of the interviewer. See 3.1 for information about the respondents.

4.2.1 Teachers’ perceptions of the state exam, Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés
The teachers in school A see the exam as a revision of everything that the students have learned in previous years. According to them it only tests grammar and vocabulary. Moreover, they mean that the hard part of preparing the students is the fact that the exam functions as a revision. They mean that it is hard to know what material to use during classes to prepare the students for the test. Material used in school A as a preparation for the exam is: old exams from the internet, their own exercises inspired by old tests, basic grammar repetition and worksheets. The teachers express their frustration of the lack of material. There is not enough material for everyone. In the quotation below a teacher expresses what she does when she lacks material:

This is my niece book...ahm...was my niece book and she gave me (...) and the student copy. For example videos, here there is no videos...here there is no ...mmm...no book no video no cards or flashcards. What happen then?Ok...I bought....ahmm...I buy my material. You buy? Yes, sometime I buy it. Sometime I buy my material and I use here with my estudent (...) for example the videos in English. I bought my videos for children and I pu...use here (Gloria school A).

In school A the teachers explain that their students do not know enough English when entering the eleventh grade. All the teachers in school A find the lack of the basic skills
troublesome. All of them conclude that the skills the students at the moment have when entering year eleven is not enough for only revising the knowledge before the upcoming exam.

In school B, they also say that the exam tests grammar and vocabulary, and also in some parts reading comprehension. The teachers name several methods that they can use and material they work with. For example they have several books with exercises that prepare for the exam, they also have a new book from 2010\textsuperscript{13} which contains explanations of the exam, grammar repetition, tests for the different parts of the exam and practice test similar to the original exam. They create their own material, they work a lot with the students in the computer room/laboratory, they use the internet and read articles, they revise old exams. All of the students have books of their own. In school B they say that the students do not have sufficient skills in English when starting the eleventh grade. In school B all teachers agree that it is important with communication and that the exam should test this in order to give it more reliability. The teachers mean that the exam is not complete because it does not test all the competences in English.

Both in school A and in school B the teachers estimate that the students’ level of English in eleventh grade is A1-A2. In one class in school A the teacher said that the level is A2, and in two classes in the school B they estimated the level to be A2. Furthermore, teachers feel inadequate in helping their students when it comes to learning vocabulary.

They think English as a very hard and very difficult thing because the pronunciation the vocabulary...yes..aaamm...I try to do a lot of adifferent activities...dynamic activities like listening test reading test eee espeakin activities to try to improve my students a... basic English level (...) Its is so difficult to them to create sentences...yes..because they don’t have the evocabulary. They have so many problems with the evocabulary(…) (Juanita school A).

In both school A and B teachers say that the work in the school is not enough in order to improve the students’ vocabulary. Moreover, the teachers in school A and B mean that the most important part of mastering English is to be able to communicate, and that their students think it is hard. The teachers in both school A and B mean that it would be easier to motivate the students to speak English if this competence was tested on the exam. All of the teachers in

school A and B mean that you cannot give a student his/her grade based on the results of the exam, because it leaves out skills like communication, writing and listening.

**Summary and analysis**

The general picture of the teachers’ perceptions of the exam, both in school A and in school B, is that they are not very impressed by it. It is hard to prepare for. In school A they do not have enough material, in school B they do. This indicates that there is an inequality in the possibilities to prepare the students properly for the test. This inequality is based in economic differences. In both schools the teachers say that the students do not have the basics skills that are needed when they start eleventh grade. The teachers also mention that it takes time to achieve a good basic vocabulary and that this can not only be done inside school and during the lessons. This view shows that the teaching in schools is not enough, there has to be something else done in order to improve the level of English among the students. All teachers both in school A and in school B agree that the test is not complete, because it does not measure all the students’ skills. It only tests reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar. It leaves out listening comprehension, communication, and writing. There is also an expressed discrepancy between the need of improving the students’ oral skills and preparing them for the “grammar/vocabulary” state exam.

**4.2.2 What is needed to get a good result in the exam**

In school A the teachers mean that in order to do well on the exam a lot of the responsibility lies in the students’ own motivation and interest. The students need to work hard on their spare-time and outside the classroom. If the students have the possibility and the interest to see movies, play videogames, read books or magazines, listen to music, chat on the internet or talk to foreign people (all of these things in English) this will help them in the process of improving their English. Hence, this will give them better opportunities to succeed in the exam. Concerning the contact with and the engagement of the parents, they mention in school A that this is one of their biggest problems. There is a general disinterest among the parents, the teachers claim, to participate in their children’s education. Many of the children come from poor families from the countryside, where the parents’ concern is that their children should be helping them on the farm or in the family business and not strive for any higher education. Families usually also have several children and they do not have the financial possibilities to help their children to further studies. One of the teachers expresses it like parents sees the school like a “parking lot”, where they only leave their child in the morning and come and get him/her when school finishes. The teachers in school A explain that most of
the times it is impossible to get in touch with the parents when it is needed. Often there are more social problems in the families too.

Right now there is no family...ahhaa? No so our estudents live with eehhh single parent except father and mother... aahhaa ok ye... sooo or with his or hers grandfather or mother no with his parents...and here estudents no live with his or her parent and his or her sibling(...). Why is important? Because the student mmm could be hmm secure more secure the student eee could have? Yeah...Could have an excellent support...ok support...And at this moment the family support is very poor(...) I try to call her parents mmmahh(...) in order to establish an ecompromise, ok... my ee grandmother ....is difficult with grandmother to establish....to help the student... aahhh ok. Please do this and please do that....in this time in this hour estudy student (Gloria school A).

One of the problems within the school that affects the students’ performances in the exam and their overall improvement of English is, according to the teachers in school A, the lack of collaboration between the teachers. They mean that their work is really individual. They do not know what the other English teachers are doing; they do not exchange ideas or work in any sort of projects together. Neither do they have any insight in what is happening in the English classes in primary school or in the earlier years of secondary education.

In school B the teachers mean that students need to take responsibility and take their homework seriously. They need to practice at home with the help of their assignments and books, and they need to repeat what has been done during the classes. Moreover, one of the teachers in school B mentions that they can also stay in school and work in the computer room, and use the programs and the internet. However, none of the teachers seem to know how many of their students do this, they mean that the opportunity is there and then it is up to the student to take it. In school B the social background and history of the children are described in the same words as in school A. However, the teachers mention that they often meet hopeful parents who want their children to get a good career, and go to university. There is also contact between teachers and parents. The teachers in school B often feel that they can communicate with the parents, and that they seem interested in how their children are doing in school. The teachers in school B work together in an English teacher team. They organise projects, they work together and exchange ideas. All the English teachers in the school are involved and they have a coordinator for the group.
We are nine teachers in all the schools... yeah... and we work together... yeah ok... eeh ok here I mean I don’t know I coordinate this area... yes... and the other teacher are new... and they are new in the school so they... yees... you know they have different... anatt... mmm... an positive attitude they have an different activities... yeah... and they ok at this moment we are working and they and everyone us have help for instance this book for bilingual program... yes... all we are connect with the same project with the same goal (Andrea school B).

In both schools A and B the teachers mention the Pre-ICFES courses that the students should take in order to have a better chance of succeeding in the exam. They mean that the courses can help them focus more on the test intensively for four months, and learn the structure of the test.

**Summary and analysis**

Both schools express the importance of students taking responsibility for their own English studies, and that they work hard in school and on their spare-time. In school A the teachers give examples of what kind of media resources the students can use outside school. This indicates that the resources of the school or the actual efforts made by the school in order to teach them English are not enough for them to be able to improve as much as required to do well on the exam. Furthermore, this means that the students need to have access to all media at home, which cannot be guaranteed. In school B, the case seems to be the same, although teachers refer to practising at home what they have learned during classes. This is a vital difference from school A, since the teachers in school B give a more positive image of the chances of making it at the exam, with the help from the school, if only the homework is done properly. In school B the students also have the opportunity to use school equipment after classes. Both schools name the pre-ICFES. This seem to imply that it is not enough that the students follow classes in school and do their homework if they want to be successful on the exams. Since the pre-ICFES courses are not free of charge this becomes an issue of economical capacity and parents’ possibility to pay the fee. Moreover, a majority of the parents in school A does not push their children to further education. This means that they probably do not give their children any support or encouragement to do well in the exam, neither to improve their English. In school B however, the parents seem to be more interested in a higher education for their children in the future and most likely understands the importance of doing well at the exam and improving the level of English. Furthermore, the lack of collaboration between the teachers in school A seems to be something that affects the students’ improving of English and their results on the exam. There is also a hint that the
teachers work “behind closed doors” in school A, with no insight into what their colleagues do. In this case the collaboration becomes a question about methodology in the school in general, where the teachers could benefit from finding new ways of working together. In school B this seems to have already happened.

4.2.3 This can be done in the schools to improve the level of English and to strive towards a Colombian B1 level on the exam

In school A the teachers want more teaching material e.g. books, computer programs, work sheets etc. Three teachers claim that the material the school offers is old, and that they need something that is updated and new that complies with the goal set by the government. One of the teachers say that the school has computers in a lab, but that they are not being used, and that at least one third of them are not working. Another teacher also mentions the computer room but claims that the teachers do not use it because they do not know how the programs work. They want more computers that function and teacher training in how to work with the different programs. One of the teachers say that a possibility for the students to stay in school and work in the lab could be really good for his/her improvement of English. Moreover, all the teachers in school A want to have more English hours per week.

In school A they mean that materials are less important than a functioning organisation of the English lessons in the school. All of the teachers in school A mention and request better and more cooperation between the English teachers at the school in order to reach the goal. They also request better cooperation generally in the school between teachers, parents, students and the board. Cooperation is also desired with other schools and teachers. Two out of three teachers in school A say that their students can achieve a Colombian B1 on the state exam before 2019, if the changes mentioned are done.

In school B they say that they need more resources or co-work between the teachers in order to help the students reach Colombian B1. However, they mention that the parents could be involved more. They also believe that there should be more teacher-training in English and methodology. The courses that are offered “should be less expensive or free for us”. All teachers in school B claim that there is a need for exchanging ideas with other schools. The teachers want to participate in conferences, have more international relations, and interchange with native speakers. More English hours per week are needed, and a better structure so that the children get to practise “a little English every day”. One of the teachers in school B wishes to have “smaller classes”, in order to have a better chance of helping the students to reach the goal and focus more on every individual. Two of the teachers in school B mean that all
English teachers in the school should agree on always talking English during the lessons, so that the children constantly are exposed to English. All teachers in school B believe that their students could reach a Colombian B1 on the state exam, but not without more efforts and changes.

All of the teachers in school A and B want to have the opportunity to further training in order to improve their English, as a part of their job. One of the teachers explains that training costs and that it has to be done on Saturdays:

> I would like to...to improve my English you know in what is the only way practicing all the time you know ahhh If I if I go to If I want to improve my English I have to pay ee this institution... majority of them are expensive... aahh ok...than the problem yes education is expensive here especially English(...) If you want to be better you have to do it yourself...yeah... you have to pay yes...in the republic school I heard that I’ve heard ee that last year...mmeee...the government gave them like aaa like aaa economic some help...and they pay some amount of money and teacher have to pay another kind of money yes? but a short one...the problem is that a lot of people would like to learn English you know but another people don’t care about it(...)from Saturday for instance from eight until twelve, I prefer to be at home I want to be at home with friends that a bad point for English, its wrong (Carlos school B).

Two of the teachers in school A and all teachers in school B mention that the question of improving the level of English in the school must be seen “outside school”. They say that as it is now there is no good communication between the different instances in the educational system in Colombia in general. The government does not know the situation in the schools.

> I dare I would dare say 80 % ...maybe more of English teacher in Colombia don’t have even a B1 level...not good(...)Especially teacher in the public education...are not willing to be evaluated. They don’t want to be evaluated. (...) FECODE¹⁴ ....Its a very powerful union very powerful it has some members in the parliament...ok...I mean very powerful. They have a post they are enemies of evaluation for teachers in Colombia (...) it is more strange what I am going to tell you...you take 10 teachers...I am one of those ten teachers ...and just me agree with the evaluation(...)so why do you think it is important with evaluation, to evaluate? Because what I told you before...mmm most teacher in English and in another subject don’t have the enough level to teach their estudent (Pedro school A).

¹⁴ A teacher association, more information on www.fecode.edu.co
Summary and analysis

In school A there is focus on the need for more material; they also need training in using it. This is not mentioned in school B since they already have the material needed, and the students themselves buy their books. In school A they want a better organisation and structure of the English lessons and more communication inside school with all involved, i.e. board, teachers, parents, students. In school B teachers are organised in teaching groups, they request more participation from the parents in order to make it work even better. In both schools more English hours per week is requested. Furthermore, both schools request more teacher-training in English and this with no cost or at a low cost for the teachers. One part of students’ improvement is based on the ability of the teachers to help them, therefore it is also vital for the teachers to feel that they have this possibility and that their own level of English is sufficient. However, this is a financial question for the schools that could benefit from help from MEN.

Moreover, the teachers show great interest in projects and contact outside their own institution, preferably with native speakers or international relations. This shows that there is a general optimism among the teachers who give the impression of really enjoying their work, and being eager to establish more and new contacts. They want to cooperate on all levels and that gives the impression of a general feeling of opening up the classroom doors even more, and letting everyone participate in a united process of striving for the same goal. The teachers mention that they do not feel that there is a good communication between them and the government. There must be some kind of evaluation coming from the higher instances, MEN and FECODE, so that there can be a better understanding of what is going on in the schools. There seems to be some discrepancy between the teachers and the government.

When the teachers in both school A and B were asked straight out if there is a chance that their students will perform a B1 result on the exam before 2019 five out of six answered yes. However, not under present conditions but with some changes done. There is an optimistic view on reaching a Colombian B1 on the state exams for all students before 2019. A positive attitude is a step in the right direction of realizing it. The teachers want to believe that with more resources, better communication inside the school with all people involved in the students’ education, better communication with the higher instances in the educational sector, teacher-training and positive thinking it can be achieved.
4.3 Summary of the results in 4.1 and 4.2
What does the investigation of the assessment in Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés show? Is the exam reliable for its purpose? The comparison between the two documents (see 4.1) shows that there is discrepancy in the way the state exam Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés presents the competences achieved for a Colombian B1 and what is actually tested in the exam. This shows that the exam is ambiguous and easy to question. Moreover, the comparison shows that a Colombian B1 is a reduced form of a European B1. The exam does not cover all the skills mentioned in a European B1. Therefore, the Colombian B1 is not equivalent to a European B1. The exam is not reliable for its purpose.

Do the teachers believe that Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés is a complete evaluation of the students’ skills? How do they motivate their views? The interviews confirm, through the perceptions of the teachers, that the exam does not measure the students’ oral or writing skills or listening comprehension. None of the teachers consider the exam to be a complete evaluation of the students’ skills in English since some competences are not tested.

Do the teachers believe that the students have equal opportunities to succeed in the exam? The teachers do not believe that the students have equal opportunities of succeeding. The answers show that there is an inequality in the possibilities the teachers have to prepare their students for the test, due to the differences in the school finances. Moreover, the students need to prepare themselves through the Pre-ICFES courses, which are expensive and therefore out of reach for some students. Financial inequality and unequal family support also adds to the conclusion that the students’ opportunities to succeed are unequal. The structure and organisation within the schools, and the collaboration between teachers also affects the students’ opportunities to succeed.

Will the students be able to reach the Colombian B1 level of the state exam, Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés, before the year of 2019? If it is impossible with the present system which changes need to be made? The teachers are optimistic and they believe that their students will be able to reach the goal. However, in order to do this the students need to work hard, take responsibility for their studies, do their homework and work on their spare time in order to reach the Colombian B1 level. They also need to take the Pre-ICFES courses. The schools need more, better and updated material and instructions in how to use it. Better organization and more communication between all persons involved in the school, including parents. More English hours are requested. The teachers need teacher-training in methodology and training...
in English to improve their own skills and team work. Moreover, the ICFES exam is questioned, and it should be revised to contain all the elements from the curricula of English, in order to fulfil its purpose.
5. Discussion
How is the Colombian B1 to be understood? In the state exam of ICFES it does not correspond to what the exam is assessing. Moreover, it is not an equivalent to the European B1. In the goal of 2019 of PNB it is said that all upper secondary school graduates in Colombia should acquired a B1 level of spoken and written English. The Colombian B1 should be equivalent to the European B1, but it is not. Moreover, the state exam, Saber 11°-prueba de Inglés, expresses a reduced form of a Colombian B1 level, since not all competences in English are assessed. How is this to be interpreted?

One way is to criticise the communication between the two institutions, MEN (that creates PNB) and ICFES (that creates the exam). Both of these institutions work for the government and there should also be some kind of follow-up from higher levels ensuring that the proposals are carried out in the organisations such as MEN and ICFES. As I see it this communication does not work properly. This lack of communication may have something to do with the monopoly that ICFES has on creating their exams that Gomez Campo criticizes (see 2.4.1). Moreover, why is a reduced form of a B1 level used? It does not give a reliable or trustworthy picture of the competences, and is certainly not an equivalent to the same standards used in Europe. Hence, as Gomez Campo (2009) writes it works against the general goal of improving the level of English in Colombia. I would say that it also makes you question the reliability of the students’ competences. The Colombian B1 given in the ICFES exam is not reliable. The exam might be a way of to some extent assess the students’ skills in English, but my opinion is that it is not clear what exactly is assessed and what the Colombian B1 level of English stands for in this context. If the adoption of the self-assessment grid from CEFR in the exam was made on financial and administrative grounds only, as Davila Perez means (see 2.4.1) I hope that these motivations can be reconsidered in the institutions concerned and new ways of assessing developed. Moreover, put in a wider perspective and in a global context, this means that Colombia can not use the results from the Saber 11°-prueba de Inglés in order to make any kind of international comparisons. To be able to participate in the global processes the standards must be equal. Furthermore, the teachers’ perceptions are important to take into account when discussing the improvement of the English level in schools in Colombia. The teachers have the responsibility to realise the demands from government and from higher institutions. In this study I have interviewed six English teachers.
5.1 Discussion of method
The generalizability of the results from the interviews can be criticised for the low number of respondents. However, as seen in Johanson & Svedner (see 3.5.1) the focus is on the teachers’ perceptions and the number of teachers interviewed was decided during the empirical study. More teachers could have been interviewed in order to get a more secure result. However, due to the time limitation and my assumption that no more variety in the answers were to be found, six respondents was considered sufficient. Naturally, the results may have been different in other schools in the same stratum, if they have different programs implemented or specific strategies or methodologies used. The schools selected for this study were as similar as possible, in order to provide a picture of schools in estrato 2-3 which do not have any special programs or profiles. A completely accurate picture is of course impossible to give with this kind of minor study.

Furthermore, the reliability in the interviews is secured because of the same collection method was used for all of them. However, there were some difficulties connected to the language barrier that emerged during the interviews. The interviews were held in English because my Spanish did not feel sufficient. All the respondents agreed to this under the premise that Spanish could be used if something was hard to explain or if something was unclear. However, with some respondents there were more difficulties than with others, and questions and discussions had to be reformulated, sometimes translated, sometimes interrupted or explained in Spanish. The general feeling was that the respondents felt comfortable with me interviewing them in their school, but less comfortable with the interviews being held in English. This can of course to some extent have affected the answer.

The investigation of the teachers’ perceptions of the state exam, Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés was made because the teachers are the ones who face the reality at a local level in Colombia, and have the task of realising and fulfilling the governmental demands. In this case it also means to strive against the goal for the whole nation of 2019. Moreover, it is their responsibility to send out competent and qualified students to the society, with a B1 level of English. It can be questioned, with references to the examined documents, what a B1 level actually means. For further studies an investigation of what the authorities say in addition to their documents would be interesting to make. The teachers do not think that the test in itself is complete. Unfortunately, I do not know what their exact opinions are about the difference between a Colombian B1 and a European B1. If the investigation could be done again, I would make sure to find out their opinions about this.
Regarding the students’ opportunities to succeed in the exam there is an inequality rooted in the economic differences which mean that some students have the privilege of coming from a more wealthy family or a family that prioritizes education. In general in Colombia there are large socio-economical differences, a tangible indication of this is the community division in stratums. The poor English level of students and citizens in Colombia can therefore not only be connected to the situation in the schools. Within the schools however the organisation and structure could be better. There could be more communication and co-work in the institutions and between all instances in the educational sector in Colombia as discussed before. The Colombian B1 on the state exam can maybe be reached before 2019, at least the teachers believe so; but the Colombian B1 is not equal to the European B1 set by the Council of Europe.

I would say that this study has enriched my own supply of knowledge concerning the value of education and the importance of mastering English. Furthermore, it has given me an understanding of the difficulties that countries go through in the process of changing and improving the educational system, and how these changes are related to the socio-economy and history of the nation. To change and improve something other related issues must be changed. Moreover, this opportunity has given me valuable contacts with people involved in the educational sector in Colombia. People have been most helpful and interested in this study. My hopes are that this study together with the new relations can lead to future cooperation. As the global world proceeds to bring people closer to each other and make organisations to depend on one another I hope that this study can add information on issues that concern and are relevant for everybody.
6. Conclusion
The study shows that the Colombian B1 received in the state exam, *Saber 11°- prueba de Inglés*, does not correspond to the European B1 expressed in CEFR. The exam is not complete. This means that the validity of the state exam can be questioned and the criticism that it has received is entitled. The answers given in the interviews support this conclusion. The students do not have equal opportunities to succeed in the exam, but nevertheless the teachers believe that their students can reach the Colombian B1 of the state exam before 2019. However, the Colombian B1 is not equal to a European B1 according to CEFR.

Based on the information obtained it seems as if Colombia needs to take a few decisions: Firstly, a decision has to be made about the Colombian B1 in the state exam. The Colombian B1 on the exam needs to correspond to what is stated in the curricula. This has to be done before a new goal can be set that strives towards equality with a European B1.

Secondly, the financial support to schools could increase in several areas. For example in teacher-training programs and material supplies. Before an improvement of the students’ competences in English can be realised, the teachers need to have an adequate level of English. Moreover, clear instructions through the curricula should be given to schools, in order to help the teachers to organise their lessons. The organisation in general inside the schools would also benefit from clear instructions. A better structure and organisation means that parents would be more engaged and give their children more and better support from home.

This study could work as an inspiration for further investigations in the state documents provided of ICFES. I agree with Gomez Campo (2009) who claims that more research, critical analysis, evaluation and empirical studies at a local level in the schools is necessary.

Moreover, it would be interesting to look deeper into some aspects of the curriculum and do a document analysis on a deeper level. Studies could also be made as observations in the classroom, to investigate teaching methods and the implementation of new ideas. Also students’ attitudes towards English and the new curricula and the state exam could be investigated.
7. List of references


Horvath, Magdalena (Under production) thesis. Karlstad University, Department for education, Karlstad.


http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/article-122719.html


Appendix 1

**Interview guide**

Global language

State exam

Methods

Resources

Students and parents

Solutions and improvements
Questions

Examples of open questions connected to the main areas in appendix 1.

Global language
* What does a global language mean to you? Describe it.
* Why is English important to master?
* Why do people in Colombia need to know English (or why not)?

State exam
* What do you think about the English state exam? Motivate.
* How do you perceive the intentions of the exam?
* Why are the exams important (or why not)?
* What is your opinion about the different parts of the exam and how it is constructed?
* Does the exam give you as a teacher enough information about its purpose?
* Is the information clear?
* What do you think about the way the exam assess the student?
* What do you think about the evaluation of the students’ skills through the exam?
* Is the B1 level of the state exam reachable for your students before 2019? What is needed in order to reach the goal?

Methods
* How do you prepare your students for the state exam?
* How do you work together with the students in the classroom?
* How can the students prepare themselves for the state exam?
* How do the English teachers in your school work?
* How is the English classes organised in your school?
* How do you motivate your students for English studies?

Resources
* What resources is needed in order to get a good result in the state exam?
* Where do you find your material?
* What material do you use? How do you use it?
* What kind of resources does the school provide you/ and the students with?
* What kind of resources does ICFES provide you/ and the students with?
Students and parents
* Do you feel that your students are motivated to learn English?
* Do you feel that they think it is important to learn English?
* What are the students’ attitudes to learning English?
* What does the students’ home situation look like?
* Do you feel like the students have support in their English studies from home? From somewhere else?

Solutions and improvements
* How can the level of English among your students be improved?
* What can your school do in order to help the students improve their English?
* How can the level of English among all upper secondary students in Colombia be improved?
* What kind of improvements is needed in Colombia to reach the goal of 2019?