

The Crucial Role of Educational Stakeholders in the Appropriation of Foreign Language Education Policies: A Case Study

El papel crucial de los actores educativos en la apropiación de la política lingüística: un estudio de caso

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Drawing on the concept of policy appropriation, this study investigates how different education stakeholders in a rural region of Colombia perceive foreign language education policies, and how these perceptions shape the way they recreate these reforms at the ground level. Contributing to the field of language policy analysis in Colombia and abroad, findings in this study not only provide knowledge on foreign language policymaking processes in rural areas in Colombia, but also shed light on the active role played by different stakeholders in the continuous recreation and appropriation of language education reforms.

Key words: Bilingualism in Colombia, foreign languages, language policy, policy appropriation, rural Colombia.

Con base en el concepto de apropiación política, en el presente estudio se investiga cómo los distintos actores de la educación en una región rural de Colombia perciben las políticas lingüísticas y cómo esto determina la forma en que ellos reconstruyen estas reformas a nivel local. Como una contribución al análisis de la política lingüística en Colombia y en el extranjero, las conclusiones de este estudio no solo proporcionan conocimientos sobre los procesos de formulación de la política lingüística en las zonas rurales de Colombia, sino que arrojan luces sobre el papel activo que los distintos agentes de la educación juegan en la continua recreación y apropiación de las reformas educativas lingüísticas.

Palabras clave: apropiación de política, bilingüismo en Colombia, Colombia rural, lengua extranjera, política lingüística.

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Introduction

Foreign language education policies¹ in Colombia have flourished in unprecedented ways with the formulation of the National Bilingual Program 2004-2019, the National Program for the Strengthening of Foreign Languages 2010-2014, the National Law of Bilingualism in 2013, the National English Program 2015-2025, and more recently, Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018. All these different programs and policies have made evident the special interest of the central government to promote, improve, and regulate foreign language teaching, learning, and certification processes in the country, and thus look more attractive to foreign investment at times of economic globalization, transnational policymaking, and international competitiveness (Usma, 2015). As the national officials have stated, the main purpose of these different policies and programs have been to educate good and competitive citizens who will be able to interact with the world through the use of a foreign language (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2014).

A number of publications continue to examine the multiple dimensions of these plans. Some researchers point out that these reforms mainly respond to the transnational political and economic agendas that our country has undertaken in the last decades (Usma, 2009); which have generally imported monolithic and homogeneous discourses of reform (Guerrero, 2008), thus excluding local knowledge (González, 2007). Other scholars recognize these limitations, but also the multiple possibilities that these new trends may represent for teachers and students in the country (de Mejía, 2011). More recently, some papers describe the limitations of urban and rural communities in the implementation of these policies, (S. X. Bonilla & Cruz-Arcila, 2014; Correa, Usma, & Montoya, 2014; Usma, 2015), while

others emphasize the multiple challenges of imposed policies that do not recognize the active role that different educational actors should play for a more successful introduction of these reforms in the country (Correa & Usma, 2013; Guerrero, 2010).

Studies carried out at the national level (Sánchez, 2012, 2013), as well as in places such as Pasto (Bastidas & Muñoz, 2011), Antioquia (Correa et al., 2014), Medellín (Maturana, 2011; Usma, 2015), Bogotá (Dávila Pérez, 2012; Parra, 2009; Quintero & Guerrero, 2013), and Cali (Cárdenas & Chaves, 2013; Cárdenas & Hernández, 2012; Miranda & Echeverry, 2010, 2011), demonstrate that the acquisition of a communicative competence in English continues to be the privilege of a few and a challenge, not only for the National Ministry of Education, but for all school stakeholders in general. These studies show that, on top of a wide range of school and social factors that affects teachers and students, part of the failure in getting good results has to do with the lack of connection between the policies and programs being formulated, and the reality being experienced by educational communities in the different regions of the country (C. A. Bonilla & Tejada-Sanchez, 2016).

In order to contribute to this ongoing analysis, and hopefully to provide further insights to the formulation and reformulation of future policies and programs, this article examines the crucial role played by school stakeholders in the “appropriation” of foreign language education policy. We argue that even if we have some studies on the formulation and implementation of these reforms in the country, we have not necessarily examined the connection between local actors’ perceptions of these reforms and the role they play in policy “appropriation”, as a key concept in critical socio-cultural language education policy studies. Additionally, most of these reports have been produced in the large cities in Colombia and have not incorporated the views coming from rural areas. In the following sections we present the key concepts that illuminate this study, the method used, and the findings and implications for the field.

¹ With Spolsky (2004) we define foreign language education policies as those implicit and explicit norms or regulations that shape what, when, and how languages, and in this case, foreign languages, are taught and learned in the school system.

A Critical Socio-Cultural View of Policymaking

Drawing on previous analyses (Usma, 2015), this study embraces a comparative, critical, and sociocultural approach for the study of policy. This perspective recognizes that language education policy texts in Colombia respond to transnational policy agendas, which are then “appropriated” (Levinson, 2004; Levinson, Sutton, & Winstead, 2009; Sutton & Levinson, 2001) and reconfigured (Hart, 2002) at the ground level according to the actual conditions, needs, and interests of the local communities and school actors (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Drawing on Ricento and Hornberger (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996), this perspective acknowledges the multiple layers of governance and agents that interplay in policymaking processes, and looks at how different educational actors inside and outside schools play an active role in the final enactment of initial stated policies. From this standpoint, the entire policymaking process is conceptualized as social and situated practice (Levinson et al., 2009) and a highly political, dynamic, and unpredictable process in which initial policy texts interact with the individual and collective agency of the school actors, moving from processes of international policy transfer, and local policy formulation and reformulation, to processes of policy appropriation, reading, translation, transformation, and even resistance at the local community, school, and classroom level (Bray & Thomas, 1995; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004).

This is how the concept of *policy appropriation* becomes central in this study. As explained by Levinson and Sutton (2001), and has been elaborated upon in a recent publication (Usma, 2015), this concept responds to the limitations of rational and critical approaches that usually minimize the power of the different stakeholders in the recreation of policy discourses and texts. As Levinson and Sutton (2001) emphasize, the concept of appropriation “highlights other moments of the policy

process, when the formulated charter, temporarily reified as text, is circulated across the various institutional contexts, where it may be applied, interpreted, and/or contested by a multiplicity of local actors” (p. 2). In this sense, not only education and language policymaking become dynamic processes and social practices, but, more importantly, teachers and educational actors are conceived as policymakers (Brown, 2010; Menken & García, 2010), beyond passive implementers of policy texts or even “victims” of policy agendas (Davis, 2014; Heineke, Ryan, & Tocci, 2015; Pease-Alvarez & Schechter, 2005; Shohamy, 2009; Varghese & Stritikus, 2005).

Method, Setting and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach and incorporated a variety of research procedures and types of data. Following Yin (2003), this research focused on an in-depth analysis of the selected case within a specific context surrounded by political, economic, social, and cultural interrelations. For this purpose, we selected a rural municipality where, according to a previous study carried out by one of the authors, some educational stakeholders were interested in the improvement of foreign language teaching and learning, but little improvement was actually perceived according to students’ results in the national exams.

This municipality is located in the Northern region of Antioquia and 120 kilometers away from the department capital. It has 27 neighborhoods, around 52 small villages called “corregimientos” and “veredas”, and a population of around 46,800 inhabitants, 12,000 living in the rural areas (DANE, 2016). As mentioned in the Municipal Educational Plan, 90% of the population lives under low-income conditions, and are classified in the lowest socio-economic status according to the National System of Identification and Classification of Potential Beneficiaries of Social Programs (SISBEN). The town is located in a strategic place in the department, leading to a population growth in the last years.

Data collected for this study included policy documents at the national and municipal level, and a series of interviews with key political, educational, and economic actors. Participants were carefully selected in an attempt to cover different fields of the town. Interviews were carried out in Spanish and pieces of evidence included in this report were translated by the authors. We used pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. Since this study was focused on the role played by educational actors in the local appropriation of language policies, we found it relevant to interview local administration leaders such as the mayor of the municipality, school actors such as the principal of the main school, the English teacher coordinator in that school, an active student recommended by this teacher, and some key commercial actors, including some in the local bank and financial cooperative managers.

Stakeholders were individually interviewed and their voices were recorded and then transcribed for a better analysis. Data collected were analyzed using NVivo 10. We carried out thematic analysis moving from the identification of general patterns to the systematization of emerging categories and themes which became the basis for the findings and interpretations. In these interviews, we asked participants about their general knowledge of recent education and language policies in the country, how they perceived these reforms, and how they were appropriating these policy texts in connection to their understandings and perceptions.

This study observed the ethical principles and standards for educational research, especially those related to consent, harm, and privacy. In this sense, we were committed to respect participants' and their organizations' rights, dignity, and welfare and to avoid bias in findings and interpretations, always respecting and valuing participants' voices and points of view, even if they were unexpected and/or controversial for the researchers. At the same time, confidentiality was maintained as data were collected, handled, communicated, and stored before, during, and after the

study. In the same manner, participants were informed about their rights and voluntarily participation. All these ethical standards were incorporated into a written consent form that was discussed with and signed by every single participant before they provided any information for this study.

Findings

Findings in this research study account for the way administrative, school, and commercial stakeholders in this municipality appropriate current language education policies according to their expectations, needs, and understandings. As will be exemplified in this section, every actor and group perceive these policies from a different angle, and thus appropriate the initial discourses and plans differently, thereby highlighting the active role played by the community members in the policymaking process and confirming the importance of embracing the critical sociocultural perspective described above. In this section, we elaborate on these findings: administrative, school, and commercial stakeholders.

Administrative Stakeholders

Local administrative educational actors in this region showed a general understanding of the language reforms being studied, which is a very enlightening initial finding. This is the case of Pedro, the mayor in the municipality; Alvaro, the general coordinator of the local branch of SENA, the national technical college; and Sergio, the school principal from the main school. As we could confirm in each of the individual interviews, they all are familiar with the existence of the reforms and the general goals behind them. They might be doubtful about some particularities such as dates or specific actions, but in general, they knew about the existence of these plans, and their focus towards the promotion of English along the educational system. As Sergio, the principal in the main school in town expressed:

The program is a regulation that is established at the national level to mandate the teaching of a foreign language and it is a general

policy established for the years 2006-2019, so people or students at a general level develop some level of communicative competence.

However, even if administrative educational actors in this municipality knew about these reforms, they conceived these plans as abstract discourses with little impact on this type of rural municipalities. Pedro, the mayor, for example, considered that the policy is a governmental declaration from the central state that lacks specific actions or tools to allow for proper implementation in this rural town. As he stated, these language policies can be described as:

Political statements of benevolence that even if they are well structured, they just remain as a discourse, as an ambition, or as a possibility conceived inside a Development Plan of a specific political leader in a specific time, but sometimes do not go beyond that.

Additionally, even if local officials in this rural municipality showed awareness of the policies, they were not optimistic in terms of reaching the objectives proposed in the political statements. As the mayor stated, “it will be difficult to achieve the proposed goals due to the ambitious and unrealistic nature of the discourse, lack of resources, and lack of well trained teachers” (interview with Pedro). Likewise, from this perspective, the implementation of such policies has failed because this policy does not respond to the specific needs of a rural municipality like the one being analyzed in this study. As Pedro stated in relationship with the national program being analyzed:

[The current foreign language policy] is a well-designed policy, but when it reaches the reality of a remote small town, too many actions are missing to really guarantee that Colombian population will be bilingual.

Additionally, according to the mayor, not only the policy is an insubstantial discourse or an unreachable reality but also the local administrators in the municipality do not have the possibility or the autonomy to manage the resources and the decisions regarding these language policies and programs. As they

manifested, these decisions rely on the management of the central government:

The mayor is not the direct authority responsible for the management of the public educational issue. Such duty belongs to the national government since they are also the administrators of the financial resources. (Interview with Pedro)

At the same time, these local authorities did not feel the continuous support and control from the national government, for which they highlighted the need of the government to establish “specific channels or responsibilities to implement the policy and to set a quality cycle with clear mechanisms to control all the processes and to determine if there has been any progress” (interview with Sergio). They emphasized both the importance of having a well-structured policy and applying mechanisms to do a proper follow up of such policies as a way of assuring positive outcomes.

So, in terms of how these local actors appropriated these reforms, we could find a connection between these stakeholders’ perceptions of current policies as ethereal discourses and well-structured but unreachable plans for the small and distant towns of the country, and their indifference and doubtful attitude towards the policy. This also made administrators invest the limited resources in other priorities and more urgent needs, but not necessarily to strengthen foreign language teaching and learning processes. As was manifested by the mayor:

I am pessimistic regarding the policy and its implementation. I believe it will be difficult to achieve the proposed goals of these foreign language policies due to the ambitious and unrealistic nature of the discourse and the lack of resources to implement programs that can favor such ideals. I have to decide what the priorities in my municipality are, and the priority will always be to supply the town’s basic needs. Besides, I do not have the autonomy to make the proper decisions in terms of the quality of the education, since we are not a certified² municipality.

² A Certified Municipality is that educational secretary that does not depend on the department’s management, but has enough

Or as he stated later in the interview:

In a town full of displaced people by the social conflict affecting our nation, and a town without enough resources to take care of the most essential problems, the teaching and learning of English becomes secondary.

In addition, not only the mayor manifested that no actions could be led by the municipality, but other local authorities maintained that a more interactive, cooperative, and holistic understanding of policy was needed instead of the top-down approach that has been adopted so far. As expressed by Alvaro, the coordinator of the SENA branch in this region:

I believe these policies need to be conceived, understood, and implemented in a holistic way, like in a chain where all the links are connected affecting each other. The ones responsible for policies should be all of us, not only the government, but all the members of our educational system.

From this perspective, all the educational actors should be included in the policymaking process, which would allow all the different stakeholders to take on an active role and a sense of mutual responsibility. As they could express along the study, the current reform was perceived as a centralized effort to appear competitive as a country, while little recognition of the different actors' voices was a pattern. As expressed by Pedro:

These policies focus on the need of bilingualism as a fundamental tool for the country to be part of the Free Trade Agreements, and to launch the country in a globalized economy, without paying close attention to the reality of the Colombian towns.

So, as we may conclude from this initial section, even if political and education administrative actors were aware of the existence of these policies for the

resources to sustain and develop its projects on its own. It handles its own teachers' payroll and all expenses that are required for its proper functioning. There is a decree (2700 of 2004) that describes the process in which a municipality shall certify itself: http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1759/articles-85921_archivo_pdf.pdf.

development of English in the country, they considered that these reforms did not observe the specific conditions of the rural areas. At the same time, these reforms were not accompanied with specific resources and actions that allowed local authorities to take actions and give priority to English teaching and learning in this municipality. For these reasons, local authorities perceived the national policy as unreachable and had decided to prioritize other issues and needs in the municipality, thus reducing the possibility for future improvement in terms of English language teaching and learning in the town. In the next section, we will add to these realizations by examining the way school actors perceived and enacted these policy texts.

School Stakeholders

Martin, a teacher from a private school, and Jackeline, a student from a public school, compose this group of school stakeholders. In this respect, and aligned with some of the previous findings, they not only were familiar with the statements and expected goals set in national reforms, but they also perceived English teaching and learning as something essential for citizens to be able to compete and improve their life quality, while enriching the artistic and personal growth of human beings. As Martin, the school teacher, expressed:

I believe English is important not only because it gives people the possibility to be part of the globalized community or because it gives tools to be more competitive in the neoliberal economy of our society nowadays, as expressed by the national bilingual program, but also because the communication is a basic, necessary, and mandatory human tool upon which the relationships in a society are built.

Jackeline, the student from the public school, also endorsed this perception. She also expressed her willingness to learn English as a means to finding a good job in the future and being able to communicate with visitants from abroad. As she manifested:

I consider that English is important. As I told you, we can find job opportunities, but if we do not have that tool, then...we are going

to miss those offers. Or maybe, a foreigner comes and I will not be able to help, because we would not be able to communicate... It would be great to learn English!

However, Martin's and Jackeline's understandings about the importance of English in connection with being "competitive" in a global society were accompanied with a frequent complaint about the adverse conditions under which foreign languages were being taught and learned in the municipality. They considered that these adverse conditions finally and negatively affected the way most students perceived English as a mandatory subject, not necessarily as an opportunity. As Martin manifested:

There is more availability of resources for the central regions as compared to the outer communities. At the same time, people's perception is likely to be different towards the language policies in both contexts. In the bigger cities, people tend to give more importance and to have a slightly more positive perception toward the learning of a foreign language. Whereas in small town schools, either private or public, the student's acceptance is not very positive and it does not play an important role in their lives. So, what happens is that it is going to be fairly complex for students to be enrolled in a university or be eligible for the admission in any higher education program if they do not have any preparation in the English language. We end up teaching English only because it is mandatory.

In this respect, Jackeline manifested:

English classes are very basic...auxiliary verbs, and that kind of thing. Moreover, I believe that teachers need to teach with more strategies, because if the teacher just assigns workshops, it means, "translate". However, I believe that they should improve, so that we as students can learn easily.

In this sense, as manifested by these participants, even if they recognized the importance and value of communicating in English, there was a common perception or feeling in the community about English language policies being implemented with little resources, with the same teaching strategies used for

years, and under unfavorable conditions, and thus only because they connote an obligatory nature. This brings as a main result, and in terms of how different stakeholders appropriate these reforms, a resistance by the school practitioners who feel themselves forced to implement the policy envisioned by the government. As a consequence, English ended up being taught at the schools because it had been established as mandatory by the legal regulatory framework in our country, and not necessarily because students and teachers find the favorable conditions for an effective teaching and learning process, or, even worse, because the majority of students thought there was a real need or a real possibility of using the language outside the classroom. As a result, school actors ended up losing credibility in the authorized language policy and got discouraged. As Martin sadly concluded:

What happens is that students take English saying like "what do we need English for? Here we speak Spanish and we are not going abroad"...But I believe that this archaic mentality needs to change, because a second language is important. However, teachers need to change their methods, if this is what is not working for us to learn English!

Summarizing, these two educational actors initially recognized the importance of English learning as something essential to improve the life quality of the citizens and a strategy for competitiveness. However, even if they recognized this importance, at the time of recreating the policy in their final enactment, they referred to the adverse conditions under which teachers carry out their jobs, and how teaching methods do not respond to students' expectations and needs. This is how the teacher and the student ended up manifesting that English language policies and programs were being implemented inside schools just because it was a mandatory subject inside the educational system, which contributed to generate resistance in the school practitioners. In the coming section we will add some details as we refer to the local commercial actors.

Commercial Stakeholders

This group of commercial actors is composed of two participants, Genaro, the executive manager of the municipal cooperative bank, and Samuel, the regional branch manager of a national bank offering its services in this municipality. In terms of the general impressions of these commercial actors, we could find that, aligned with previous findings, the commercial sector also recognized the importance of foreign language education policies in the country in these times of economic globalization as trade across multiple countries. As they expressed, learning English could bring many advantages for the inhabitants of Colombia and would bring new possibilities for the nation. As Genaro expressed:

National residents would need to learn a second language to communicate and to make commercial transactions if the country wants to strengthen further commercial ties with other nations.

They also recognized the importance of this language for the country now that the national government was signing commercial and trade agreements with other countries. As Samuel expressed:

Since the Free Trade Agreement is relatively new, it has not strongly influenced the learning of a foreign language, but in a short or average term it will certainly have a positive incidence.

However, these perceptions started to change as these actors referred to the specific conditions of this rural region. They expressed their belief in those policies as being laws or regulations created by the national government in order to establish a certain number of hours in which English must be taught in schools every week, while, for them, “there is not a real need of using English, especially, to carry on local business” (interview with Samuel). They expressed that the policy itself had been framed just to the teaching of English, limiting it to a few hours spent in the educational institutions, but which does not go further than that in the municipality. As Samuel stated: “Students are limited to receiving just the class prepared by their teacher, but away from there, no more”.

People from the commercial sector of the town not only considered the language policies and the use of English far from their local current reality, but they also manifested that people in the municipality were not very much invested in learning it. As Genaro manifested: “Many people feel frustrated because they have started an English course and then have given up, because it is often conceived as a waste of time”. In terms of appropriation, this explained why the commercial actors in this municipality did not take any initiative in favor of improving English teaching and learning in the town, and how they had found ways to solve the issue inside the commercial sector or even inside their families. As Samuel manifested:

It has not been necessary to use the language, the only possible situation of application is related to the usage of technological devices, but when those cases show up the company just looks for a technician who is capable of solving such concerns; although a proper implementation of the language policies in the town will bring a positive impact in the future, currently the use of the language has not been necessary for doing business because the customer profile is different from the one in the bigger cities. Meanwhile we can send our children to study in Medellín, which is what I do with my son, because in the future he is going to need English.

This is how while they all were sensitive to the importance of English at times of international economic transactions and potential opportunities, they all agreed on the little importance given to English in their daily life in this municipality, as well as the adverse conditions for students to learn English inside schools. But, sadly, and in terms of the role these commercial stakeholders were playing in the appropriation of these reforms, these findings also illustrated how they were not contributing to the improvement of this situation, and how their family’s immediate needs in terms of English learning could be solved without the need for a wider English program for the whole municipality, and just sending their kids to the capital city on weekends, a privilege that only very few people have, given the fact that the majority

of the population live under low-income conditions. They recognized the potential importance of English for their kids, but decided not to change the situation for the whole municipality. These findings add to the quite moving findings described above when administrative and school stakeholders considered the policies as being unrealistic as they are not equally supported across the whole territory of the country due to the limited resources they have, and also because these reforms do not take into account the particular context and realities of the rural communities. In the coming section we will come back to these findings and discuss what we can learn in terms of policy appropriation.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides a number of findings that contribute to a better understanding of foreign language education policymaking in Colombia and the role played by different policy actors in their local appropriation. At the same time, this investigation illustrates the importance of policy appropriation as a key concept in policy research, and how as an analytical tool it may serve the purpose of education policy investigators in our country. Drawing on a critical sociocultural approach to policy analysis, and based on the findings presented above, we corroborate that the way different actors in society understand and perceive language education policies determine how they appropriate initial policy texts, thus explaining why the adoption of international standards and reforms models in the country does not necessarily imply uniformity inside municipalities and schools.

In this particular case, while municipal administrators perceived language policies as an insubstantial discourse with unreached objectives and insufficient resources, which led them to be apathetic and doubtful about the policy and to prioritize other issues besides English in the municipality, the school actors in the study recognized the importance of English, but perceived current English language education policies as defunded

and centralized that ended up being resisted by the school community, thus reducing English language teaching and learning to a mandatory process that did not reflect the local community priorities. Finally, these findings were confirmed by the municipal commercial actors in the study who perceived the English programs and policies as not necessarily relevant for this rural place, for which they showed indifference and little desire to contribute to a real strengthening of the English plans in the town. As a general pattern in the findings, we could confirm that the national policies and programs being adopted by the National Ministry of Education did not reflect the need, lacks, and priorities of the rural municipality, which ended up in a short response from the local actors. In the section below, we elaborate on these findings and interpret them, intending to highlight certain topics that serve as the bases for discussion and further analysis for the readers.

The Perpetuation of Inequality Through Unconsensual and Centralized Policies

As we may conclude from this study, in this almost desperate need to respond to the competitiveness demanded by the global economy, policies in Colombia are being formulated with far-off scopes, ignoring the particular needs and capabilities of small communities. As expressed by participants in this study, as language policies are formulated by the ones who exert power in the central government, such policy formulation and enactment processes do not take into account the reality of rural communities. In this respect, we notice that despite the intentions of the central government to place the entire nation in the global economy, the reality of this region is another. Issues like the distance from the metropolitan area, the lack of health centers, violence due to a complex socio-economic reality, abandonment of small farmers by the central government, among many other realities, are not taken into consideration when language policy is formulated. It is there in that

town and in that context, one perhaps not so different from the reality of most of the villages of other regions in Colombia, where the bilingual policies—English for competitiveness, development of communicative skills in English, positioning of Colombia in the global market, and so on—are far from being convincing.

We, therefore, state that the ideal of English is separated from people's real existence. Even though they acknowledge that speaking a foreign language could be an asset in their lives, at the same time, they believe that the policies that regulate the teaching and learning of it are decontextualized, far-off and in no concordance with what they expect. Perhaps this dichotomy between the acknowledgement of English for competitiveness and the feeling of a decontextualized policy that regulates teaching is explained by the fact that language policies are not touching people's social lives. No wonder people in rural Colombia tend to think of English as something valuable only in the future, or as something not needed at the moment because high school graduates or technicians do not need English to return to their farms to milk cows or grow cabbage. As expressed by Correa and Usma (2013) the formulation of language policies requires a careful consideration of the political, economic, cultural, and social reality of our country. It is not the same to learn English in a cosmopolitan city like Bogotá as it is in the countryside, or in a highly touristic town like Santa Fe de Antioquia as in a farming town like Toledo. But all of this diversity of objectives and contents is lost when imported homogenizing standards, methodologies, texts, exams, and professional development proposals are used.

Language Policy Appropriation as a Chain, not a Top-Down Execution of Centralized Mandates

An important theme that emerged from the findings and reflects the way local actors in this rural municipality understand and enact policy discourses associated

with English during the current times has to do with policymaking as a link, not as a top-down execution of centralized and, most times, decontextualized mandates for the rural areas. In this sense, one of the participants in the study referred to the image of a chain composed of many links, which, by being connected, are part of the components of the policy as a whole. This metaphor, similar to the many layers of the onion, proposed by Ricento and Hornberger (1996), insinuates that language policies are multilayered constructs, where their essential components, agents, levels, and processes, permeate and interact with each other in multiple and complex ways, as policies are translated from their initial formulation until they reach local contexts, where they actually find their fulfillment. In this respect, as Spolsky (2004) manifests: "language policy exists within a complex set of social, political, economic, religious, demographic, educational, and cultural factors that make up the full ecology of human life" (p. 7).

Unfortunately, language policies in Colombia, as we have presented in this study, have not sufficiently taken into account the role played by different administrative, educational, and commercial actors; a role which is even magnified when we talk about rural communities far from the capital district of Bogotá, from where the policies have been delivered. In the case of teachers, and concurring with a rationalist approach to policy formulation (Correa & Usma, 2013), this national reform has centered primarily on the question of whether the policy has been properly implemented, not necessarily on how the complex variety of needs, lacks, and wants (Nation & Macalister, 2012) have been incorporated in the reform. As we have confirmed at the ground level, and was stated by Guerrero (2010) in her critical analysis of the national standards booklet produced by the national government as part of this reform, teachers, and we would argue local policy actors, have been attributed the role of "problem solvers" and "clerks" with little opportunity to enrich the policy texts with their concerns and particularities. In this

line of thought, Ricento and Hornberger (1996) argue that teachers should be placed at the center of language policies, as they are the final arbiters of what happens inside classrooms. However, as we could confirm in this analysis of this rural municipality, teachers are not placed at the heart of the language policies as actors able to transform and reshape the policy; rather, they tend to be pointed out, even by their students, as the responsible ones for the policy that fails to produce the expected results.

Contrary to that perception, we argue that language policies have not had any significant impact in the region under examination because formulation and enactment of language policies by government officials ignore the role played by educational actors as they are in the core of the educational system, and finally they are the ones who determine the way policies discourses are enacted. But as we pointed out, local teachers tend to be blamed by the central authorities and presented to the public as the key people responsible for the little improvement in the educational system in connection with the reform. This ends up with language teachers being held accountable for the negative results, while the convoluted and complex panorama where these policies are enacted is usually ignored or oversimplified, at the expense of those who have traditionally been ignored all along the policy formulation process.

This top-down and centralized model of reform may represent an array of consequences for the coming years. First, the policies might lose their primary essence, whereas the initial objectives that gave origin to the policies may not be represented for what happens at the ground level. A possible reason has to do with the way the national government enacts the policies, and how policymakers at the national level execute power from governmental offices and import guidelines that ignore the local contexts of regions. Consequently, in a town like the one chosen, language policies do not go beyond raising the curiosity of the locals, who perceive these reforms as decontextualized ideas that

do not necessarily respond to the reality surrounding the community.

Another consequence of ignoring this central link, as far as a strategy for competitiveness and as it is highlighted in the findings, has to do with the way such policy discourses do not raise the interest of that particular community. In the specific case of the selected municipality, students do not “buy” this discourse of competitiveness. Perhaps in bigger cities, students are mindful of the importance of learning English to be able to compete in the global economy. However, this particular ideology has not penetrated the minds and hearts of young students in the selected municipality, considering the particular conditions of their own town.

As we may argue, based on this study, the role played by the different educational actors, especially teachers, is critical in the enactment of language policies and should be considered. Nonetheless, the message conveyed by the language policies as such is not clear in regard to the incorporation of all educational actors in the enactment and dissemination of the policies. Moreover, this understanding of policymaking as blaming teachers and educational actors at the bottom of the educational system, is very far away from that of Ricento and Hornberger (1996) who, in analyzing the role of English language teaching (ELT) professionals, argue that “ELT professionals are already actively engaged in deciding language policies, how they promote policies reaffirming or opposing hierarchies of power that reflect entrenched historical and institutional beliefs and how they might affect changes in their local contexts” (p. 401). One of the reasons to attribute this designation to teachers as suggested by the interviewed administrative leader is that as teachers are immersed in the classroom, they are the ones, then, who can give reasons for the accurate or inaccurate implementation of language policies. Here, the engagement and the active participation proposed by Ricento and Hornberger are voided by a simple role of implementer that was attributed to educational actors.

As we may conclude from this case, as in a mechanical chain where all pieces need to be assembled, the important role of each education actor must be taken into account and this includes not only those at higher levels but also every single individual in the great chain of education so that all processes may work. Considering this, language policies should be conceived as a chain at national, institutional, and local levels, allowing, this way, the processes of permeability and the active participation of all education actors in the formulation and dissemination of language policies. That was, at the end, what the education actors from this region sought.

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