

**RUTH ROUX**

## **ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN COLOMBIA AND MEXICO**

### **Abstract**

English language education policies have attracted the attention of researchers in applied linguistics and English language teaching world-wide in the last few years. Some contend that English language skills are vital if a country is to participate actively in the global economy and individuals are to have access to knowledge for social and economic development (Richards, 2008). Others claim that behind the spread of English is a growing transnational business with headquarters in Britain and the USA (Canagarajah, 1999; Phillipson, 1992). The problem is that language policies are ideological although the ideology may not be acknowledged by practitioners or theorists (Ricento and Hornberger, 1996). ELT professionals – teachers, material designers, textbooks writers, program developers, administrators, consultants or academics – are involved in one way or another with the processes that involve the spread of English and they need tools to investigate how the language became so dominant and why, to teach and use English in a way that suits their needs. This paper presents the approach proposed by Ricento and Hornberger (1996) to analyze foreign language education policies. Then, the approach is used to examine the English language education policies in Colombia and Mexico. The aim is to acquire a better understanding of how the ideology transmitted with, in and through English language has penetrated these two Latin American countries.

### **Language Policy Analysis: Unpeeling the Onion**

Although there is currently no unified theory of language policy, several frameworks have been developed to explain the ways in which policies have certain effects in specific contexts (Phillipson, 1992; Tollefson, 1995). Ricento and Hornberger (1996), for example, propose an approach that views language policies in terms of layers. The authors use the metaphor of an onion to represent a language policy with layers of agents, levels and processes. At the outer layers of the onion/policy are its objectives, articulated in legislation at national level, operationalized in guidelines at local level. The guidelines are interpreted and implemented in institutional settings (middle layer) such as schools, government offices, or businesses. In each of those settings or contexts, individuals (inner layer) interact. At each layer (national, institutional and interpersonal) one can find characteristic patterns of discourse (oral and written) that reflect goals, values and personal identities. These discourses are structured by ideologies. Within each layer, competing discourses create tensions in the formation and implementation of a policy.

Looking more closely at the outer layer, which concerns the role of the state in the development and the implementation of the language policy, Ricento and Hornberger (1996) maintain that the states have the resources to engage in language planning that are not available in other sectors of society and the ability to operationalize language policies through regulations. States are most likely to engage in policy activities in those areas that serve their interests and where the

structures exist to disseminate the policy. The middle layer, composed of all institutions, have a large impact on language policy development because institutions involve not only schools and universities but also book publishers and education consulting services. Finally, the layer at the center of the policy/union involves classroom practitioners, who need to be prepared according to the language policy being developed or implemented. The following sections present the analyses of the English language education policies in Colombia and Mexico using the framework provided by Ricento and Hornberger (1996).

### **English Language Education Policy in Colombia**

Colombia is located in northwestern South America, bordered to the north by the Caribbean Sea; to the northwest by Panama; to the east by Venezuela and Brazil; to the south by Ecuador and Peru; and to the west by the Pacific Ocean. It covers 1140000 sq. km., similar to the area of Portugal, Spain, and France together. It has over 46 million inhabitants. Before the Spanish colonization of what is now Colombia, the territory was home to a significant number of indigenous peoples. Today indigenous communities comprise some 800,000 people, roughly 2% of the population. The 1991 constitution established their native languages as official in their territories, and most of them have bilingual education (native and Spanish).

#### *The outer layer*

Law 115 approved in 1994, related to the objectives of basic and middle education demands “the acquisition of elements for conversation, reading, comprehension and the capacity of expression in at least one foreign language” (Ministerio de Educación de Colombia). Once this law was approved, schools started the teaching of English as a foreign language without an established policy or program. The Ministry of Education simply supported the local education authorities and started involving universities, language centers, international cooperation organizations and learning material providers.

It was not until 2003 that the English Language Program was launched in the capital city of Bogota by the Municipality, the Government of Cundinamarca and the Chamber of Commerce. Its objective was to make the city more competitive in the international level. The aim was to increase the number of bilinguals (English-Spanish) in the period from 2004 to 2014. Gradually, other cities followed until the Ministry of Education implemented the policy now known as *Bilingual Colombia* or National Program of Bilingualism 2004-2019. The program is directed to all students of elementary, middle, high school and university studies. The program includes a set of standards of communicative competence in English, based on the Common European Framework (CEF). The program states that “Being bilingual is having more knowledge and opportunities to be more competent and competitive, and improving the quality of life of all citizens” (Ministry of Education of Colombia, n.d.).

For the creation of the Program, the role of the British Council was pivotal. A diagnostic study was carried out in 40 Normal Schools in 25 entities. Online surveys and English language tests were used to evaluate the teaching of English in Normal Schools. Results indicated that the even when students took English courses three hours a week for six years (from sixth to eleventh grade), students had very low

levels of proficiency. It was concluded that there were deficiencies in the teaching methods used and new models were designed by the British Council to improve the quality of English education. The language policy suggested included three areas of development: language, communication and culture. The articulating themes proposed were: openness to others, tolerance of difference, capacity to communicate effectively with members of other cultures and valuing the native culture.

#### *The middle layer*

The language education program in Colombia is supported by a number of institutions. The ICETEX, for example, is a State entity that provides financial aid to population with low income and good academic standing. It also gives access to education opportunities provided by the international community to raise the quality of life of Colombians and contribute to the social and economic development of the country. This organization created the program *Languages without Frontiers* to support teachers of public and private schools who want to take language courses (French, Italian, or English) at low cost in Colombia. It also provides financial aid to study abroad. Finally, ICETEX manages an exchange program in which citizens from France, England, Jamaica, and Barbados teach languages in Colombian schools, while Colombian teachers teach Spanish in those countries.

Public and private universities have also played an important role in the implementation of the foreign language policy in Colombia, particularly to promote the British teaching qualifications. The National University of Colombia and Universidad de la Sabana, Coruniversitaria, de Ibagué, Atlántico, del Norte, in Barranquilla, and Tecnológica de Pereira, for example, permanently offer the In Service Certificate of English Language Teaching (ICELT) for university teachers and the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) for elementary and middle school teachers.

Another example of the middle layer agents involved in the implementation of the language education policy in Colombia is the Israeli enterprise *Edusoft*, which operated between 2007 and 2009, providing English language education to 115,000 adults in a nation-wide project using multimedia software.

#### *The inner layer*

Language teachers have had the most difficult part in the National Program of Bilingualism 2004-2019 in Colombia. In 2003, according to the studies of the British Council, 63% of all Colombian English language teachers had a low level of proficiency in that language (A1 – A2 according to the CEF). The government established a minimum of high intermediate for the year 2009 (B2 of CEF). Also, new regulations were created to introduce French language in the mandatory curriculum of high school. The Alliance Française is in charge of training French language teachers of public schools. Private schools and language centers in Colombia are required by law to hire only teachers with a minimum level of B2 in English or French.

The professional development actions taken by the Ministry of Education and suggested by the British Council have received numerous criticisms by Colombian scholars. Ayala and Alvarez (2005), for example, have argued that adopting foreign standards may be misleading because of the differences between European and

Colombian students. The authors invite the government, administrators and the academic community to adopt a critical view on the adoption of foreign models that do not respond to the needs of the Colombian learners. Also, Gonzalez Moncada (2007; 2009) affirms that Colombian teachers need new models of professional growth that incorporate post-method approaches; and that teacher development programs should recognize locally produced knowledge and the collaboration of policy makers and national scholars.

### **Language Education Policy in Mexico**

Mexico is located in the North American continent, with the United States on the north, Guatemala and Belize on the south, the Gulf of Mexico on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the West. It covers 1,972,550 sq. km. with a population of 103,088,021 inhabitants. Mexico is the world's largest Spanish speaking nation. Although not defined in legislation, Spanish is *de facto* the official language spoken by about 90% of Mexicans.

#### *The outer layer*

The Constitution of 1917 considers the country as multicultural and promotes bilingual and intercultural education. In 2003 Congress recognized indigenous languages as national languages with the same validity as Spanish and approved the General Law of Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This law protects about six million Mexicans who speak indigenous languages. It has been estimated that more than 100 indigenous languages and dialects were spoken in Mexico before the Spaniards colonized Mexico in 1492; however today around 60 indigenous languages are still used, only 28 of them with more than 10,000 speakers (Baldauf & Kaplan, 2007). The Ministry of Education has an office for indigenous education, teacher training and language learning materials.

In contrast to Colombia, in México there is no law related to foreign language learning. The idea of improving English language learning emerged in the context of the poor performance of the Mexican Education system in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2006. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) made 12 recommendations among which were: establishing clear levels of performance expected from students in key areas at the various stages of schooling; and enhancing teaching quality through the development of programs that focus on understanding the curriculum, and the evaluation of teaching and learning. To heed the recommendations, in 2008 the Ministry of Education initiated the Integral Reform of Basic Education (IRBE). The Reform considered as one of its challenges in elementary school "the continuous and efficient learning of a foreign language -English- as a state determined program" (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2008), and developed the National English Program for Basic Education (NEPBE) in 2010.

The NEPBE aims to provide a curriculum for basic education; to design the teaching materials; and to plan and implement teacher training programs (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2011). The purpose of the program is that the students participate in different activities that involve the production and interpretation of oral and written texts, of everyday, academic and literary nature, to be able to satisfy

basic communication needs in familiar situations. The program includes a set of standards, based on the standards of the Common European Framework (CEF).

#### *The middle layer*

Private rather than public universities have played an important role in the implementation of the foreign language learning policy. The Mexican Ministry of Education has provided teacher training to NEPBE teachers through institutions as Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey and Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara.

Other institutions involved in the implementation of the policy are the Office of English Language Programs for Mexico and Central America of the U.S. Department of State, which has been in charge of designing English language tests and training examiners; and the British Council, which has not only been directly involved in the design of the NEPBE program, but has promoted the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT). This test has been included in the list of standardized tests for language teachers, together with the TOEFL, the KET and PET by Cambridge University.

Book publishers are also influencing the ways in which program is being implemented. A variety of textbooks are being bought by the Mexican Ministry of Education to support the English language policy. Among the book publishers are Fernández Educación, Heine Cengage Learning, Macmillan Publishers, Nuevo México, Richmond Publishing, Santillana, Trillas and University of Dayton Publishing.

#### *The inner layer*

Teachers of the NEPBE program seem to be more concerned with the acquisition of qualifications and the attainment of the standards mandated by the educational authorities, than with becoming reflective practitioners that evaluate their teaching, identify problems, find solutions and try new ways of teaching. The model of professional development that the policy promotes focuses on the accumulation of hours in short isolated courses and the gathering of certificates and diplomas. No attention has been paid by education authorities and the Mexican scholars to the disparity between these practices and the new developments in the field of professional development in foreign language education and language education policy.

### **Conclusions**

In Colombia the policy was launched in 2004 articulated to legislation while in Mexico the policy was implemented in 2010 as program guidelines. However, the middle layers of the policies clearly show the economic forces influencing, if not determining, the language policies. These forces come from private universities, software enterprises, book publishers, and the leading role of the multinational academic empire, i.e., the British Council and the Office of English Language Programs of the US. The inner layers seem to indicate that whereas in Colombia scholars are taking a critical stance towards the policy; in México scholars must consider how to promote a better understanding of language policy issues among politicians, bureaucrats and other language professionals.

## References

- Ayala, J. & Alvarez, J. A. (2005). A perspective of the implications of the Common European Framework implementation in the Colombian socio-cultural context. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, 7, 7-26.
- Baldauf, R. B. & Kaplan, R. B. (2007). Language policy and planning in Ecuador, Mexico and Paraguay: some common issues. In R. B. Baldauf and R. B. Kaplan (Eds.), *Language planning and policy. Latin America Vol.1: Ecuador, México and Paraguay*, (pp. 6-33). NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Ministerio de Educación de Colombia. (n.d.) Colombia Aprende. La Red de Conocimiento. Retrieved from: <http://www.colombiaprende.edu.co/html/home/1592/w3-channel.html>
- González Moncada, A. (2007). Professional development of EFL teachers in Colombia: Between colonial and local practices. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 12(18), 309-332.
- González Moncada, A. (2009). On alternative and additional certifications in English language teaching: The case of Colombian EFL teachers' professional development. *Íkala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 14(22), 183-209.
- Hopkins, D., Ahtaridou, E., Matthews, P. & Posner, C. (2007). *An analysis of the Mexican school system in light of PISA 2006*. London: University of London/OECD.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ricento, T. K. & Hornberger, N. H. (1996). Unpeeling the onion: Language planning and policy and the ELT professional. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(3), 401-422.
- Secretaría de Educación Pública (2008). Sitio de la Reforma Integral para la Educación Básica. <http://basica.sep.gob.mx/reformaintegral/sitio/index.php?act=rieb>
- Secretaría de Educación Pública (2011). *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica. Fundamentos Curriculares*. México: SEP.
- Terborg, R., García Landa, L. & Moore, P. (2006). The language situation in Mexico. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 7(4), 415-518.
- Tollefson, J. (Ed.) (1995). *Power and inequality in language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dr. Ruth Roux  
Colegio de Tamaulipas  
México  
rrouxr@gmail.com