

## Unanswered Questions in Colombia's Foreign Language Education Policy

Preguntas por responder en la política educativa de lenguas extranjeras en Colombia

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Following the trend of much of the Western, non-English speaking world, Colombia has tirelessly strived for spreading English education in an effort to augment economic benefits. This paper aims at providing a critical account of foreign language education policy in Colombia, with special attention to English. It outlines the impact of its multiple transitions over the past decades through a historical description that overviews all previous policies, the critical reception by scholars, and present-day initiatives. We then move on to analysing the choice of English as a synonym for bilingualism and conclude with emerging questions that are to be considered for future debates and reassessments of Colombia's English-Spanish bilingual education policy.

*Key words:* Bilingual education in Colombia, Common European Framework of Reference, language policy, linguistic colonialism.

Siguiendo una tendencia general en el Occidente no anglófono, Colombia ha intentado incansablemente difundir la educación en lengua inglesa en aras de alcanzar beneficios económicos. Este artículo busca ofrecer una descripción crítica de la política de enseñanza de lengua extranjera: inglés. Se considera el impacto de las múltiples transiciones que ha sufrido la misma a lo largo de los años mediante una descripción histórica de las anteriores iniciativas, la recepción de parte de los académicos y la propuesta actual del gobierno. Finalmente, se analiza la elección del inglés como sinónimo de bilingüismo para concluir con las dudas que suscita la política actual a fin de abrir un futuro debate y revaloración sobre la educación bilingüe español-inglés.

*Palabras clave:* colonialismo lingüístico, educación bilingüe en Colombia; Marco Común Europeo de Referencia, política lingüística.

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How to cite this article (APA, 6<sup>th</sup> ed.): Bonilla Carvajal, C. A., & Tejada-Sánchez, I. (2016). Unanswered questions in Colombia's language education policy. *PROFILE Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 18(1), 185-201. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15446/profile.v18n1.51996>.

This article was received on July 21, 2015, and accepted on October 1, 2015.

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## Introduction

Foreign language education has become a common core subject in the Colombian school and university system since it contributes—up to now, indirectly—to meet the criteria of standardised measurements,<sup>1</sup> but also because of the outstanding role of English to achieve global communication in today's world. Our intention as scholars is to discuss the implications, advantages, and disadvantages of hegemonising language policies, as in Colombian programmes for bilingualism and English education. Most particularly, this paper will address the issue that language policy has constantly been altered due to political transitions disregarding education's ultimate goal, namely, to produce critical and resourceful citizens who might contribute to a global society.

After ten years of designing and implementing an explicit English-dominant foreign language education policy (*Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* in 2004 [National Bilingualism Program]), we deem it necessary to uphold the existing debate in two ways:

1. By outlining the initiatives preceding that enterprise as well as the current ones.
2. By providing open questions about the future and development of English-Spanish bilingualism in Colombia.

This paper begins with a background review of all Colombian linguistic educational policies, since their inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century until now. Next, it discusses Colombia's transitions in its policies, as well as draws open-ended questions that emerge from introducing English as a foreign language for Colombian citizens. It is therefore our intention to address these reflections to all stakeholders in a persistent national education policy whose conversation urges to be expanded.

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<sup>1</sup> PISA being one of them: OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. Although PISA does not address language testing per se, it includes language-related skills such as reading, critical thinking as well as problem-solving (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2008).

## Case Background

### Previous Attempts of a National Foreign Language Teaching Programme<sup>2</sup>

Each administration has attempted repeatedly to implement a nation-scale English teaching plan. Gómez Delgado (1971) summarises some milestones in the national history up to 1970. The ever-growing governmental interest is observable and shared by different institutions to make the teaching and learning of foreign languages a more technical, scientific, and efficient process.

In 1826 there was a national official policy to establish compulsory subjects across all national public schools such as Spanish, Latin, Greek, French, English, and an indigenous language, the one with the most speakers depending on the region where the school was located (Rivas Sacconi, 1993). This well-intended law did not have any practical effects and it was followed by a series of reforms that would inevitably lead to the progressive suppression of Latin, until its total extinction at the end of 1970. French, on the other hand, was adopted as a subject for secondary school (compulsory for grades 10 and 11) at the end of the same decade after a visit of Colombia's president to France. This did not spark any practical improvement in the students' development of bilingualism either, and ten years later, in a report issued by the British Council, the conclusion was that the Ministry of Education had no firm foreign language policy for students, and its decisions were a result of political pressures rather than educational considerations (British Council as cited in de Mejía, 2012b).

It was not long before Colombia signed a political constitutional reform in 1991 that expressly provided (for the first time in Colombia's history) an

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<sup>2</sup> For a historical overview with special attention to other foreign languages, see Cárdenas (2010).

open recognition of all indigenous languages, and of the country's multilingual and cultural richness; furthermore, there was an economic policy expansion and massive admission of imports (USA and Europe), which called for a need to improve the English level of students, and specially of their teachers.

In February 1991 the Colombian Framework for English (COFE) project was created to be carried out in four years (it would not be concluded until 1997) between the Government of the United Kingdom, via the British Council, and Colombia, for an improvement in the teaching of English. The COFE project had a grass-roots approach to propose changes in Bachelor programmes for teachers (*Licenciaturas*) suggesting an increase in the number of hours of English, as well as the inclusion of a research component (Rubiano, Frodden, & Cardona, 2000). Later on, in 1994 the General Education Law was enacted which stated, very broadly, a necessity for the acquisition of conversation and reading elements in at least one foreign language (Congreso de Colombia, 1994).

Ten years later, the Government—once again, under the supervision of the British Council—launched the *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo. Colombia 2004-2019. Inglés como lengua extranjera: una estrategia para la competitividad* [short: National Bilingualism Programme, NBP henceforth]: A national programme spanning 15 years to propel the learning of English in both schools and universities all across Colombia. This programme was boosted in 2013 when the *Ley de bilingüismo* [Bilingualism Law] (Congreso de Colombia, 2013) was enacted to modify 1994's General Education Law (see discussion below). The programme however was not meeting its own standards and as a result, the government decided to stop and start afresh with a new budget (1.3 billion Colombian pesos) for ten years in a flagship endeavour: *Colombia Very Well! Programa Nacional de Inglés 2015-2025* (CVW). It seems, much to the surprise of teachers, researchers, students, and interested

parties, that again CVW was not the right path, hence, after only five months from the implementation date (January, 2015), the Ministry of Education changed its mind and goals. The new programme is now called *Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2018* (CB). Figure 1 summarises the stages described up to present day.

### Transitions: *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, Colombia Very Well! and Colombia Bilingüe*

The NBP was the direct predecessor to CVW and CB. It remains a matter of debate whether NBP was a planned previous stage to CVW (as stated by its documentation: *Documento de socialización*) or if it was an amendment to itself, with a larger budget and a new name deleting the word *bilingualism* in the face of prior harsh criticism by national scholars (Correa & Usma Wilches, 2013; García León & García León, 2012; Guerrero Nieto, 2008; inter alia) for its deliberate focus on English, and ensuing contradiction for not addressing bilingualism in the academic sense (Baker, 2006; Romaine, 1995), let alone in its etymological root (the use of two languages).

The common denominator of both NBP and CVW is the claim that language learning is a means to social development *specifically* because it brings forth more job opportunities (MEN, 2006). This seems to be the sole driving force behind all political agendas and election campaigns in terms of educational goals in Colombia: the access to employment (MEN, 2015).

On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, and former Minister of Education María Fernanda Campo, presented CVW. What stood out the most was not the fact that the official document was entirely designed by a consulting agency (McKinsey & Co.) without apparent assistance from university departments of education, or experts in bilingualism, with the minor exception of some telephone interviews of a few chosen professors (as it is printed on the CVW document, p. 110). Nor is it

Figure 1. Timeline: Bilingual Educational Policies in Colombia<sup>3</sup>

Law March 16th	1826	Compulsory subjects across all national public schools Spanish, Latin, Greek, French, English and an indigenous language, the one with most speakers depending on the region where the school was located.
Extinction of Latin in schools	1970	Ending decade for Latin as a subject in Colombian schools
Visit of Colombia's president to France	1979	Decision to adopt French as a compulsory subject for secondary school (grades 10 and 11).
British Council's report	1989	A Survey of English Language Teaching and Learning in Colombia: A Guide to the Market.
Colombia's new political constitution	1991	Open political recognition of all indigenous languages, and of the Colombia's multilingual and cultural richness.
General Law of Education	1994	Ley 115 de Febrero 8 de 1994. Por la cual se expide la ley general de educación, broadly states the acquisition of conversation and reading elements at least in a foreign language as a desirable goal.
Ending of COFE Project	1997	Licenciaturas were modified thanks to the initiative but no major changes were perceived in national students' proficiency.
National Bilingualism Programme	2004	Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo. Colombia 2004-2019. Inglés como lengua extranjera: Una estrategia para la competitividad. Intended to last up to 2019. First inclusion of the Common European Framework.
Bilingualism Law	2013	Various articles from the previous General Education Law in 1994 were modified to reflect the horizon of English as a technical tool for employment.
Colombia Very Well	2014	Programa Nacional de Inglés Colombia Very Well 2015-2025. 1.3 billion Colombian pesos for ten years in a flagship endeavour.
Colombia Bilingüe	2015	Some traits of CVW are kept (textbook materials such as English Please, and the Common European Framework) but ample and clear information of its overall scope and strategies for implementation have not been released.
???	2026	Only time will tell...

<sup>3</sup> For a description concentrating on the phases for policies in bilingualism spanning 2001 through 2016, see Fandiño-Parra (2014); for other descriptions addressing the status of Colombia's Islander English, see González (2010).

the fact that the CVW presentation was precisely held at a technical institution for the training of a labour workforce (*Instituto Técnico Central La Salle*), or that the colours of the programme matched those of the UK, USA, or Australian/New Zealand flag;<sup>4</sup> what is more salient is the unhesitating treatment of language learning as a response to the needs of the captains of industry to supply factories and businesses with a workforce in English (Reyes, 2015). A literacy and proficiency measured by external, transcontinental, and de-contextualised criteria (Ayala Zárate & Álvarez, 2005) in need of modifications to work effectively in the Colombian context (de Mejía, 2012a; Fandiño-Parra, Bermúdez-Jiménez, & Lugo-Vásquez, 2012), adopting (without adapting) textbooks and materials made abroad for the benefit and ease of expansion of major publishing houses (Álvarez, 2008); a trend imported from abroad that conforms to the standards of an idealised English native speaker as the ultimate goal of learning (Vélez-Rendón, 2003) enshrining such as a symbol of prestige over the local English varieties (González, 2010), and the reality of those who are already bilingual (and indisputably alienated): Raizals and indigenous peoples (Torres-Martínez, 2009). In so doing, the only benefit goes for an institution intended to spread British cultural propaganda in the form of learning materials, teaching training, assessment, proficiency evaluation as well as books (González, 2007), creating dependency upon an inner circle model via the

4 An additional thought emerges: Should educators accept uncritically a governmental programme that spreads and consolidates the acceptance of a norm-providing inner circle of English (Kachru, 2006) whose rhetoric only serves to perpetuate the exo-normative native speaker model? (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Careful consideration of Santos's (2014, pp. 48-51) public statement evidences such bias towards a colonial view of the language: "Among other actions we will also create an incentive package [for teachers] to improve their teaching practice with language immersion trips to San Andrés, and also abroad. And I want to thank the ambassador and his government in that regard, since they have shown so much interest in helping us with this programme, with that remarkable English that they speak in the United Kingdom" (Our translation).

exclusive use of materials from inner circle countries (Vélez-Rendón, 2003). "The British Council is clearly an institution supportive of British commercial and political interests. It has always had the goal of spreading the English language as far as possible and this has been for clear political and commercial reasons" (Pennycook, 2013, p. 150). Thus, what leads the programme is not the treatment of learning as a tool for social and personal empowerment, aiming to emancipate school and college graduates for social advancement, but to stock call centre franchises (Santos, 2014).

### Scholars' Reception to *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019*

Out of the three modern governmental projects for bilingualism English-Spanish (NBP, CVW, CB), the NBP has been the longest in duration (ten years, from 2004 through 2014). It has been likewise the one more fiercely criticised of all.

A common trend across all references to the programme is that its foundations are rooted in the misconception that English is the only language that might open the doorway to success and economic empowerment (Fandiño-Parra et al., 2012). From the official documentation, the NBP states that English communicative competence is the road to opportunities for citizens, social mobility, and people's development (Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, n.d.). In sheer opposition Valencia (2013) criticises the willingness to introduce English as the foreign language of choice, as though it was a natural solution. Colombia's governmental decisions are therefore based on economic grounds, linked to concepts such as productivity and competitiveness, teachers' voices are not taken into account and the government representatives' attitude is managerial and authoritarian instead of participative (Quintero Polo, 2009).

In the same vein, according to the NBP's logic, the concept of bilingualism is tantamount to speaking

English exclusively (Bermúdez Jiménez & Fandiño-Parra, 2012; de Mejía, 2011). Bilingualism is thus presented as a rigid conceptualisation fostered by myths (Guerrero Nieto, 2008), at the expense of the full recognition of all other indigenous languages and the multilingual nature of the country. It is a source of concern that the government refers to bilingualism in Colombia as a concept that can be detached from Spanish (Vargas, Tejada, & Colmenares, 2008). Plus, in the design, planning, and implementation, none of the voices from English teachers, scholars, principals, secretaries of education, or indigenous community representatives have been heard thus far (Correa & Usma Wilches, 2013), all framed as a panacea against poverty, creating in this fashion the image of an apolitical, homogenous nation, without regions, or ethnic groups; neglecting the traditions of Raizals and Afro Americans (Torres-Martínez, 2009).

Another criticism is that peculiar contextual features were outright disregarded when the NBP was put into effect. In this respect De Zubiría Samper (n.d.) highlights the major drawback of imposing a nationwide bilingual programme without first attending to the priorities in education: students' deduction and induction skills, argumentation and critical reading; it is meaningless to aim at foreign language proficiency without Spanish fluency in the first place. At the higher education level the NBP is not influential either. López (2009) argues that it does not shape any perceivable change in foreign language programmes because its implications are not clearly understood; he focuses on the NBP's presence in the *Exámenes de la Calidad de la Educación Superior* [ECAES] whose English section is based on reading excerpts from the Cambridge publishing house. His findings suggest that ECAES is a low-stakes test given that no influence is found in those programmes, which leads one to believe that the policy-driven tests cannot have the consequences intended.

In general, NBP does not consider the differences in context of application of assessment criteria which

certainly obscures its scope, reliability, and validity, because these should be based on national, informed perspectives and methodologies (Ayala Zárate & Álvarez, 2005). The extant conditions are unsuitable for the desired governmental purposes; likewise, there is an absolute absence of clear policies to attain the goals set in a bilingualism programme (Cárdenas, 2006), bringing forth an undesirable mismatch between the government's intentions and the actual social conditions (Guerrero Nieto, 2010). For instance, even though the NBP initially presented a baseline for intervention, as of June 2009, with only 10% of assessed teachers reaching a B2 level or above<sup>5</sup>, the objective was to train the remaining 90% to help them to better their proficiency. Some years into the programme all evaluations were unfavourable, even from official statements (Sánchez Jabba, 2013). The following year, Colombia's Minister of Education, María Fernanda Campo Saavedra, publicly accepted the programme's failure, precisely due to unawareness and a bad diagnosis of the real national proficiency levels (Diario LR, 2014).

The programme did not consider the external variables such as the huge social and economic differences among the various strata in Colombia (Valencia, 2006). The monolingual and monocultural dominant context in the country also hinders the opportunity to perform as expected; the goals were then unrealistic and envisaged an idyllic, non-existent group of students (Guerrero Nieto, 2008).

The Ministry's original assumption that only a scarce 10% of all language teachers were capable of reaching the imposed B2 level aids in building the perception of national underachievement, which called for immediate action in the form of adopting

<sup>5</sup> The levels adopted by the Ministry of Education were those of the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). The levels are comparable to the traditional distinction of basic, intermediate, and advanced proficiency, where the letters A, B, and C represent each level accordingly.

foreign standards with little attention to the actual conditions of teachers and students (Cárdenas, 2006; Sánchez Solarte & Obando Guerrero, 2012; Valencia, 2013). This adoption came in the form of externalisation of policy discourses, stratification of groups, and marketisation of language teaching (Usma Wilches, 2009), at the risk of embracing globalisation through an unthinking exploitation reducing foreign language teaching to sheer formal instruction (Torres-Martínez, 2009); this adoption was chiefly driven by the need to respond to the changes associated with economic globalisation (Peña Dix & de Mejía, 2012) regarding the absence of national, all-encompassing assessment criteria for foreign language proficiency.

The decision to integrate The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) on account of the “soundness of its proposal, and applicability to the educative field” (Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, n.d., para. 6, our translation) forced scholars to insist that externalisation of language discourse in education is a mechanism through which foreign standards are adopted as an indisputable external authority (Usma Wilches, 2009), taking advantage of the absence of information in the local communities to impose a hegemonic discourse (Cárdenas, 2010). As a consequence such adoption was soon met with a barrage of criticism: Ayala Zárate and Álvarez (2005) confronted such de-contextualised implementation of overseas assessment standards, and called for the construction of context-based foreign language education principles while preparing students to be globally competent. Vargas et al. (2008) also remarked on the out-of-context adoption in the Basic Competence Standards (BCS) in Foreign Languages: English (*Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: inglés*, MEN, 2006), where the CEFR is not adopted along with all its rich theoretical analyses but rather a mere usage of its competence grids and can-do statements overlooking Colombia's socio-economic, geographic, political, historical, and educative reality

(see also Sánchez Solarte & Obando Guerrero, 2012; Torres-Martínez, 2009). For González (2007) the NBP did not consider the previous COFE project carried out in the 1990's where major local universities were brought together to foment action research and professional autonomy; as a result, Álvarez (2008) stressed the importance of adopting a postcolonial approach to evaluate the standards, with a critical stance towards the deployment of merchandising coming from the publishing houses that are interested in the NBP. Finally, de Mejía (2011) forewarned that taking the European perspective without modification to the local setting may end up as a distortion of the intended aim.

Finally, not only does the NBP contradict other Colombian linguistic policies promoting bilingualism—on account of its limiting focus on English (de Mejía, 2011)—but it is also the doorway to a market where only a few high-class, well-off citizens can afford the textbooks, materials, preparation courses, and international exams (García León & García León, 2012). In that regard, it is Correa and Usma Wilches' (2013) proposal to adopt a critical sociocultural model that can set out better actions. They provide a detailed account of the bureaucratic, traditional model of policy-making in order to assert that the NBP is indeed the embodiment of a top-down philosophy that dictates rules of teaching and assessment without previous consideration of the Colombian context. Likewise, for Vargas et al. (2008) the standards' assessment criteria are oblivious to the variety in regional features and local cultures.

There is, then, a socio-cultural, economic, and political dimension in the teaching and learning practice that cannot be overlooked (Ayala Zárate & Álvarez, 2005). The NBP either neglects it or openly accepts it but in the form of education as a subservient device for job-skill technical training, not integral education (Vargas et al., 2008). Goals were clear for the NBP in aiming at the same objective as India in training low-tier, blue-collar workers proficient in English (MEN, 2005). Tools as the

BCS are simply “a vehicle used to spread a hegemonic and ideological influence and to alienate teachers’ beliefs and practices within English language education” (Guerrero Nieto & Quintero Polo, 2009, p. 135).

This unease with CB 2014-2018 lies in forgetting such previous faux pas (from both NBP 2004-2019 and CVW 2015-2025), and the continuation of a massive, billionaire, and pervasive project whose goal is opposite to that of a humanistic and social-empowering type of education. Researchers, teachers, language instructors, professors, policy makers, pre-service teachers, and parents all agree on sharing the same objective; a conflicting point for discussion is whether we all are on the same page, with the same goals in mind and, with the same definition of education: training to provide international call centres franchises with a low cost workforce, or the humanistic, social-empowering, and liberating education that starts with a different philosophy of action to that promoted by this government, that is, complying with international standards (Torres-Martínez, 2009).

The governmental standpoint towards education, however, should not come as a surprise for it has been perceived since mid-2013 when the *Ley de bilingüismo* [Bilingualism Law] (Congreso de Colombia, 2013) was enacted to modify the General Education Law (Congreso de Colombia, 1994) to reflect the new frame of English as a means to employment. For instance, one of the articles states as one of its purposes the development of competences and skills to foster citizens’ access to higher education and opportunities in the corporative and labour fields (Congreso de Colombia, 2013). And Law 1651, 2013, was appended so that English would be prioritised.

### **The Current Policy: Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2018**

Shortly after the presentation of a strategic plan for CVW, the re-election of President Juan Manuel Santos in late 2014 brought several changes in his

administration and thus in the aforementioned policy, which re-emerged under the name of *Colombia Bilingüe* (MEN, 2014b). This denomination intends to recover the use of the term *bilingual* as a distinctive characteristic of the programme and erase the previous title and logo with no official justification. CB was officially introduced in early 2015 as part of a “relevance project”<sup>6</sup>—no longer regarded as a quality issue—and as a compendium of more realistic and adapted strategies concerning three main *lines of action*: teacher education, use of materials, and pedagogical design. Albeit this recent initiative has been seldom presented in public, and the official information in its website remains scarce, we can summarise some of its main aspects as of today.

The most salient feature about CB is that it has reduced its geographic scope to a fewer number of target institutions, partially covering 36 cities.<sup>7</sup> The reason why the government has chosen these focal cities and not others remains officially unclear. Another important yet controversial strategy involves the arrival of more than 300 foreigners to the focal cities. This group, referred to as *Formadores Nativos Extranjeros* (Foreign Native Trainers), would provide opportunities to communicate in English authentically with the students outside regular class time. It includes professionals ranging across different disciplines who have some teaching experience, but not necessarily enough background in Spanish, let alone in language teaching and didactics.

Moreover, CB intends to allocate most of its task-force to ensuring that 100% of the teachers are assessed and “diagnosed” so that they can be accompanied by the MEN in improving their language

<sup>6</sup> Information about CB, as well as the Ministry’s lines of action can be found here: <http://www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/html/micrositios/1752/w3-article-31515.html>, and on the Ministry’s official website: <http://www.mineduccion.gov.co/>

<sup>7</sup> Information about the focal regions: <http://www.mineduccion.gov.co/cvn/1665/w3-article-351513.html>

level through training sessions and feedback, short local or international immersion programmes, as well as the provision of the materials they need for classes. Interestingly enough, CB sets as one of its goals the creation of a national syllabus for the English language—as a step further ahead of the BCS—and yet it did not turn down the use of materials previously developed for CVW: the textbook *English Please!* for secondary school, and *Bunny Bonita* for elementary. In this respect, studies such as Cano-Morante (2014) discuss the impact of these materials' underlying dominant discourse. Thought-provoking conclusions arise from Cano-Morante's epistemic critical discourse analysis of the teacher training sessions of *Bunny Bonita*. Following van Dijk's (2010) model which states the NBP is not a solution to the inequities stirring Colombian society, it is instead a way to comply with the elites' necessities in providing a long-term trained workforce. In the same way, the NBP's discourse is designed in such a way that its direct users accept it and support its implementation. For the government, when it comes to English everything might change, that is, the method, teacher training, the regions to implement the programme, but never the materials, and thus the CEFR and the British Council.

In sum, this reformed policy seems to perpetuate much of the former criticism and observations especially regarding the concept of bilingualism as an instrumental characteristic of the students, and not a skill which carries much more than the linguistic code. This assumption leaves again the foreign language as a separate component from the students' native language (L1) dimension, their multi-literacies, and intercultural awareness.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Conclusions emerging from this reflection are manifold. For starters, English is anew presented as a neutral, nuance-less, apolitical system to codify reality detached from all ties to its real bases (Guerrero Nieto &

Quintero Polo, 2009), a royal road to include the country in a global economy (García León & García León, 2012), since it is deemed as the language of the new world, the sole language worth promoting and the one that opens scientific and technological progress with the exclusion of indigenous languages (Guerrero Nieto, 2008).

English is enthroned as the par excellence language of choice for all matters pertaining to development, progress, richness, and prosperity; its choice over other languages is embedded in a history of colonialism, economic and political unrest, free-trade agreements, and the urge to solve even deeper societal issues by means of training skilled workers.

Several countries aiming at their economic and scientific growth, like Colombia, have chosen English as the official *foreign* language, standing as a subject alone with no evident linkage with the rest of the curriculum that is taught in the L1. In some other cases, English is set as the official *second* language and thus the medium of instruction at school, as it is the case of Rwanda where, since 2008, English replaced French as the schools' language (Samuelson & Freedman, 2010). In their thorough analysis of the inclusion of English as a post-conflict plan, these authors refer to the "drastic shifts" in language policy taking place in different parts of post-colonial Africa, benefiting English over other languages. The rationale behind these changes is rooted in the social imaginary of what the English language has come to represent: power, along with the understatement of being powerless where it is not in the official agenda. In this way, Rassool's parallel with Bourdieu's "colonial habitus" proves to be particularly relevant to Colombia's case meaning that people "often make linguistic choices that reinforce existing social, political, and economic inequalities; and, in doing so, they collude in their own collective disempowerment and/or dispossession" (as cited in Samuelson & Freedman, 2010, p. 203).

The question of *language* as a window to the human mind, as well as a means of codifying reality

and exchanging existential experience amongst two or more speakers, needs to be differentiated from the *codes* stated in a forthcoming national syllabus, in this case Spanish and English. In Colombia's particular case, it is intriguing that the government takes "language" as a subject that covers the mother tongue and English as an instrumental code then contend that together they mean bilingualism. Reference to the implications of this notion call on the necessity to be revisited by the government, especially for it to consider two main aspects: (1) a bilingual programme, even at its preliminary stage, must entail bi- and multi-literacy as an educational mission; this has been stated for decades as an Ibero-American priority in the sense of how essential reading and writing are; and (2) in such an endeavour, educators must promote students' development of BICS: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, and CALP: Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (Cummins, 2008) so that these skills can permeate their linguistic repertoire.<sup>8</sup>

Mastering a target language entitles the speaker to a membership to the economic, cultural, geographical, and socio political benefits held by the verbal community of native speakers. This goal however may ultimately become twofold: on the one hand, governments might make the best effort for providing their citizens with a linguistic passport to access the literary, scientific, sporting, academic, and commercial benefits of the cultural products from the target verbal community; whereas on the other, governments might simply make an effort to have their citizens become literate in the target language so as to sell them as a skilled labour force that can understand the orders of new foreign employers, namely: multinational corporations investing in the

<sup>8</sup> The national reading plan "Leer es mi cuento" encourages bi-literacy in regions where English is widely spoken such as the San Andrés and Providencia archipelago, but not as part of the overall bilingualism programme (MEN, 2013).

country. This attitude has been dubbed as language "genocide," particularly regarding dominant groups' empowerment at the expense of diversity:

Through glorification, the non-material resources of the dominant groups, including the dominant languages and cultures, . . . specifically English, are presented as better adapted to meet the needs of "modern," technologically developed, democratic post-industrial information-driven societies—and this is what a substantial part of ESL ideology is about. . . . The "free-market" ideology, more a political dogma than an economic system, erodes democracy by shifting power from states and democratically elected bodies to transnational corporations and banks, while "demanding" homogenisation and killing diversity. (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, p. xi)

It should be a feasible alternative for any government to set forth a national, overarching bilingualism (or, better yet, multilingualism) programme, led by national, democratically appointed parties of scholars, teachers, and researchers that can propose a more suitable implementation of the Ministry's initiative without accepting overseas domination from institutions whose main goal is cultural display in the form of books, learning materials, teaching training and assessment, as well as proficiency evaluation (see Pennycook, 2013). Likewise, the goal needs to be set in the willingness to educate bilingual human beings, rather than to shape bi-literate, low-tier, minimum-wage workers. Countries striving for giving its citizens the opportunities of accessing a better quality of life should also guarantee the means to hold linguistic membership to as many cultures and views of the world as possible.

Also, it is important to highlight the current administration's intention in reformulating the cvw programme. It remains unclear though to what extent they acknowledge its flaws and implications. The document "*Colombia Very Well! Documento de socialización julio 2014*" outlined the general structure

of the *Plan Nacional de Inglés: Colombia Very Well* for the next 10 years. This plan, as a nation-wide initiative, with the united sources of other departments and ministries (ICT and employment) clearly suggested an innate philosophy of employability and job-training as the sole drive for education.

CVW was mainly crafted by a foreign company whose field of expertise is financial consulting and no signs of contribution by educators, researchers, or scholars in the field were given. We could establish a link with these two facts to the emerging concern of the graphics and rationale given by the Ministry of Education to boost the teaching of English. The pivotal reasons are based on the need to supply the business process outsourcing sector (BPO), tourism and technical-level employment vacancies, unlike other initiatives for bilingualism, where the focus is set on the preparation of graduate students to achieve academic mobility, internationally-competitive scientific production, or upgrade the ranking of universities.

It has also been underscored that the name of the overall plan has changed several times: from *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* (National Bilingualism Programme) to *Plan Nacional de Inglés* (National English Plan), where the latter excludes the co-existence of the L1 (not that it was present in the former), and CB. There are no clear distinctions between the NBP, CVW, and CB either. The latter holds itself accountable for only a portion of the country's institutions. This brings up numerous issues for students and teachers who would not benefit from the same resources as the focal areas.<sup>9</sup> By the same token, these transitions evoke unsteadiness in the deliverables as well as in the approaches to language in education.

As a consequence, CB resumes the prescription of foreign standards that were fruitless for the NBP in the past (Diario LR, 2014; Radio Santa Fe, 2015). Although

more modest in its aspirations than CVW, by setting goals only for 2018, CB goes on to measure quality in language teaching through the exo-normative illusion of the monolingual native speaker (see Abouchaar, 2012; Torres-Martínez, 2009), and it is pre-supposed that only native or near-nativeness is a prerequisite to quality and success in teaching. Furthermore, it keeps using the yardstick of alien models and discourses as it is intended by 2018 to diagnose the 100% of English teachers in their proficiency level according to the CEFR, to upgrade English teachers' CEFR level one or two letters (i.e., A1 → A2), to include 1,400 foreign native speakers to teach English in a number of focus group schools. Their role derives from a co-teaching and complementary strategy where the main outcome will be to help students communicate effectively in the L2.<sup>10</sup> In higher education the overview is not less colonial: teachers nation-wide aiming at promotion or incentives ought to reach a minimum B2 level. English will be included as a compulsory requirement for all technical and professional university programmes striving for accreditation. Alumni from Bachelor programmes in education, major in English, will need to reach a B2+ in order for the programme to receive official accreditation. More worryingly, all Bachelor programmes in English will also need to have native English speakers, as well as provide their students with internships abroad.

CB's aspirations affect the structure of undergraduate-level teacher training programmes and the general evaluation system. If this new layout comes from the previous CVW unaltered, then doubts and concerns should remain since CVW was obscure in much of its recommendations (when a web-based methodological support was announced, which method would be followed? [MEN, 2014a]). It is also clear that the intended goal is to place English amongst

<sup>9</sup> For a study regarding the constraints that yield the infrastructure and resources of private schools and the implementation of the NBP, see Miranda & Echeverry (2010).

<sup>10</sup> The latest public information retrieved on this matter (July, 2015): <http://www.eltiempo.com/estilo-de-vida/educacion/bilinguis-mo-llegan-200-profesores-extranjeros-a-colegios-publicos/16033796>

other technical skills to shape the incoming generations of blue-collar wage-earners in the lower steps of the BPO and tourism sectors, rather than amongst the productive, entrepreneurial freethinkers of tomorrow. Until now, all previous Colombian initiatives for bilingualism have been a cog in the gear of a utilitarian logic where the linguistic product is determined by all the tenets of an investment-profit mindset (language = product) (Fandiño-Parra, 2014; Torres-Martínez, 2009), in short, government linguistic planning resembles the pattern of the Spanish colonisation to value the language of the powerful stretching the asymmetry of social strata (Guerrero Nieto, 2009).

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Venezuelan diplomat, grammarian, legislator, philosopher, and educator, Andrés Bello, defended with equal verve the maintenance of the human sciences in secondary education. His legacy echoes from centuries ago—from the very days of the failed multilingual Law of March 1826—and in the words of one of the experts in his life and works, Aurelio Espinosa Pólit, these final thoughts remain in full force, now more than ever, to make sense of the present-day state of South American Education:

It is, on the one hand, the invading growth of pan-economist theories that reduce everything to the material concerns of existence; it is the narrow view of an immediate profit of those studies that are directly linked with earnings; it is the urgency of so many youngsters for earning a livelihood as soon as possible; it is, on the other hand, the real need for technical scientists and business people that every country carries out research for the exploitation of the national resources; it is the reduction of the advancement of science and its applications to the household needs which makes it essential for the modern man to be initiated in the experimental sciences... Nobody denies the immediate necessity of technical workers at all production levels, and in the modern mechanised life; nonetheless nobody should deny either the need (as essential as that of the technicians) of men with a higher mental training—more agile and more universal—men capable of coordinating the partial and unbound tasks

of these technicians, as well as the highly complex issues of general management and the rule of society, according to the main principles of the philosophy of life and political sciences. Reducing the education of the young to the training of specialised technicians would be a suicidal objective for any country. There is no need to reach this state to assess the damage that some nations are doing to themselves through iconoclast reforms, as is attested almost everywhere on our continent. This is but a regrettable pedagogical naiveté on the part of its leaders when failing to realise the cultural decay that comes with the abandonment of the disciplines for the selfless education of the spirit. (Espinosa Pólit, 1981, pp. XVII-XVIII, our translation)

### Unanswered Questions

In keeping with the previous literature review, the actions undertaken by the Ministry, and the current perspectives of CB, several questions emerge. We will attempt to briefly discuss them as a whole with the hopes of stirring conversation between the government officials, schools, universities, technical institutions, teachers, professors, scholars, administrative staff, parents, and, importantly, undergraduate students in *Licenciaturas*.

1. Why does the government continue replicating previous flaws that have already received criticism thereby plainly ignoring the extensive body of literature that stands against those flaws?
2. Why was CB a clean slate after CVW was launched?
3. What is the notion of education that the government truly seeks, and especially of English teaching? Training for minimum-wage workforce? English as a skill for technical literacy in an inner-circle dominated world?
4. Why has *Colombia Bilingüe* 2014-2018 (until the revision of this paper) decided to implement this policy in what they called “focus areas” and not the rest of the country as stated before? What will it happen to the rest of the country?
5. Why is an English-only policy tantamount to “bilingualism” for the government and why are

- other types of bilingualism with other relevant or official languages such as Spanish-Mhuysqa, Spanish-Ticuna, or even multilingualism Spanish, English, Portuguese not part of the bilingual milieu?
6. Will the forthcoming curriculum consider bi- and multi-literacy dimensions as part of bilingual students' language development?
  7. How does *Colombia Bilingüe* plan to articulate itself with current pre-service and in-service English teachers' agenda for all levels, especially with *licenciatura* programmes that others consider foreign languages in addition to English?

The answers to Questions 1-3 could be associated with several conversations and fields. Therefore, it could be argued that CB and precedent policies defend a specific education paradigm. It is true that having a sound educational philosophy is a key component in curriculum development and therefore in governmental mandates; however, this policy does not necessarily mean it is beneficial for its users. In the current policy, it is apparent that foreign language learning is regarded as separate from other disciplines. Even more disconcerting is that the policy predominantly configures itself around a linguistic fashion: the erroneous idea that language principally consists of grammar memorization and metalinguistic knowledge. As of yet, there is little evidence on how this policy would go beyond this basic conception of language learning to include current trans-disciplinary approaches that entail content-based methodologies in the English classroom such as CLIL (a phenomenon which has timidly emerged in the Bogotá region in the past few years [McDougald, 2015]), an intercultural dimension, and even a pragmatic competence. Having said this, this paper argues that CB and precedent policies are evidently including English in the curriculum to attain a mechanical level of the language. The problem behind such a goal lies in a contradiction: Nowadays a high competence in English is strongly needed as

it is the language of problem-solving, technology, and global communication. It is counterintuitive to educate people to be automatised in an era where machines have taken over many of human beings' traditional duties and where critical thinking has become essential to survive.

This brings us to Question 4 which addresses why the CB program plans to implement its strategies in several focus areas or institutions, excluding Bogotá. It is worth noting that these areas are given an advantage regarding other institutions; however, the reasons behind this decision need to be clarified. It is likely that this justification could imply the recognition that the previous programs were too ambitious to ensure significant outcomes in the entire country or that CB intends to ensure a considerable percentage of significant outcomes (increased number of hours in English, incorporation of technological support, enhanced levels of the language, covered training sessions and immersions, observations by the MEN, etc.) over a selected population. Whichever the case, it is necessary to have these justifications stated publicly since there are many cities, rural villages, and communities whose education agenda will not change as a result of the policy and this fact has many problematic implications.

Finally, Questions 5-7 lead us to two of the most resonating topics in the recent literature on language teacher education: empowerment and multi-literacies pedagogy (Cummins, 2009). A key element of today's education goals is to be leadership-oriented. This means that students and teachers are enabled to make autonomous decisions, solve problems that affect their community, and put their strongest intuitions into practice in order to engender change for a better world. All of these skills can only be achieved through the critical literacy perspective that fosters understanding our role in society and that of the others around us. It also entails collaboration, mastering technologies as well as reading and thinking in multiple formats.

It is our hope that Colombia will rather pursue this educational paradigm through teacher training programs that should necessarily go beyond a linguistic understanding of language acquisition; it is our belief that a paradigm incorporating the aforementioned additional characteristics would provide the necessary ingredients to reach our most important goals as a country: eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequalities, and the termination of the war.

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### Acknowledgments

We are particularly indebted to Nicole Bruskwitz, who offered helpful commentaries to the final draft, Anne-Marie Truscott De Mejía, Harvey Tejada, Germán Triana Santamaría, and Alexandra López Ruiz. We would also like to extend our gratitude to three anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions on improving an earlier draft.