

Review and Analysis of the Colombian Foreign Language Bilingualism Policies and Plans

Revisión y análisis de las políticas y planes colombianos de bilingüismo en lenguas extranjeras*

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This article reviews the background of the foreign language bilingualism in Colombia, as well as the Colombian bilingualism plans and the policy launched between 2004 and 2016. Then, these plans and policy are analyzed taking into account the most common criticisms from the academic community. In this sense, aspects such as the lack of continuity, emphasis on employability, misconceptions of bilingualism, privileged position of English, adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference, English instruction as a way of business, and omission of teachers' voices are analyzed.

Key words: Bilingualism plans, educational policies, English as a foreign language.

Este artículo revisa los antecedentes del bilingüismo en lengua extranjera en Colombia, así como los planes y políticas colombianas de bilingüismo lanzadas entre 2004 y 2016. Después, dichos planes se analizan considerando las críticas más comunes de la comunidad académica. Así, aspectos como la falta de continuidad, el énfasis dado a la empleabilidad, algunas ideas erróneas relacionadas con el bilingüismo, la posición privilegiada que se le ha dado al inglés, la adopción del Marco Común de Referencia Europeo, la instrucción en inglés como una forma de negocio y la omisión de las voces de los profesores son analizados.

Palabras clave: inglés como lengua extranjera, planes de bilingüismo, políticas educativas.

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Introduction

As many other non-English-speaking countries around the globe, Colombia has, in recent years, strengthened the efforts to foster English language learning among its population. Thus, between 2004 and 2016, the Colombian government has renewed the educational policy through Law 1651 and launched several plans that aim to insert the Colombian human capital into the global economy by means of speaking English, the global lingua franca. The implications of these plans have largely been discussed by several Colombian academics. In this text, the background of foreign languages instruction in the country, as well as the plans and policy launched between 2004 and 2016 are reviewed and then analyzed in light of the criticisms that they have received.

Background of Foreign Language Bilingualism in Colombia's

Colonial and Independence Periods: Latin-Spanish Bilingualism

According to Ahern (1991), during the colonial period—between 1540 and 1810—many schools and universities were set in the Nuevo Reino de Granada (group of Spanish provinces that existed during the colonial period where Colombia is located now). These institutions taught, mainly, males from wealthy Spanish families to read, write, and recite religious tracts in Latin. Latin was used as a means of instruction and was also studied, while Spanish was sometimes used as a means of instruction, but was not studied. Following Ahern, after independence in 1810 more educational institutions were opened and egalitarian education was promoted among white and indigenous children.

Post-Independence Period: Spanish-French and Spanish-English Bilingualism

Between 1811 and 1886, Colombia went through a period of political unsteadiness since the state was in process of consolidation; this affected the creation and implementation of all sorts of policies and plans (Ahern, 1991; L. González, 2010). In this period, many language policies were created, but some of them were not implemented. One of these policies, launched in 1826, proposed to teach in primary and secondary schools Spanish, Latin, Greek, French, English, and one indigenous language, the one most spoken in the region where the school was located (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Briceño, 1995). Although the policy was well-intentioned, it was never implemented (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016).

Ahern (1991) explains that in 1820, Francisco de Paula Santander—who would later become president of Nueva Granada (name that the Nuevo Reino de Granada received after independence from Spain) for the period 1833 to 1837 (Moreno de Angel, n.d.)—created a system of primary education that consisted of establishing a school for every community of more than 30 families. These schools aimed to teach reading, writing, arithmetic, human rights, sciences, arts, religion, and philosophy. Instruction *of* Latin and *in* Latin continued taking place in almost every school of the country.

In 1821, the government determined that Spanish needed to be taught as an obligatory subject and used as a means of instruction in all schools of the country, so most schools started to teach both Latin and Spanish (Ahern, 1991). Gradually, Latin stopped being taught in schools until its total extinction occurred in 1970 (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016). Ahern (1991) also affirms that in 1821 the government promoted the teaching of other foreign languages, which resulted in most schools selecting to teach English and French. L. González (2010) asserts that in 1826, studying English and French became mandatory to graduate from secondary school.

English and French were both taught between 1821 and 1993 in most Colombian secondary schools although between 1951 and 1993, more hours were assigned to English because of the worldwide relevance that this language gained after the Second World War (L. González, 2010). In the post-war period, the European countries devoted their time to rebuilding their economies, devastated as a result of the war, neglecting their relationships with Latin America. In the meantime, the economy of the United States grew and strengthened, which caused many people around the world to want to establish relationships with the USA (McKay, 2002).

Canagarajah (2007), McKay (2002), and Kirkpatrick (2007) claim that, through time, English was no longer associated with just the USA and/or its culture. According to these authors, English suffered a process of denationalization that transformed it into a *lingua franca*—a language that enables communication among people from different nationalities and/or backgrounds, regardless of their mother tongue. In the Colombian context, in 1994, the General Law of Education (Law 115) gave schools the right to teach only one foreign language (L. González, 2010). This provoked most Colombian schools to select teaching only English due to the international dynamics that were taking place (L. González, 2010).

Colombian Foreign Language Bilingualism Plans and Policy

According to the Ministry of Education (MEN, 2014a), although English had been taught in the Colombian context for a very long time, no clear criteria, levels, or objectives established in the law or national educational plans launched before 2004 existed. In this regard, the MEN asserts that:

Until 2005, when talking about English levels, there were not clear references that allow defining or distinguishing such categories. Terms such as “low, medium, and high” or “basic, intermediate, and advance,” among others, were used without clear criteria that define specific bands for designing courses or their evaluation.¹ (2014a, p. 8)

From 2004 to 2016 a national bilingualism law and four national bilingualism plans were launched in order to regulate the English language instruction in the country. The new policy and plans have aimed to increase the competitiveness of Colombian citizens so that they can participate in international dynamics by speaking English (MEN, 2014b). Subsequently, each plan and Law 1651 are explained in chronological order.

National Plan of Bilingualism 2004-2019

According to Angarita Trujillo and Arias Castilla (2010), the main objective of the National Plan of Bilingualism (PNB for its acronym in Spanish) was to attend to the particular bilingualism necessities of the different Colombian populations while considering the multiculturalism of the nation. In this sense, Cárdenas and Miranda (2014) explain that the PNB had three lines of action: Firstly, the ethno-education consisting of providing indigenous communities with bilingual education in their aboriginal language and Spanish; secondly, the inclusion of flexible models of education in order to regulate the teaching of foreign languages in the “education to work and human development”² (EDTDH for its acronym in Spanish); And thirdly, the improvement of the communicative competence in English in the public and private schools and universities of the country.

For the purpose of the present text, only the components related to teaching English in the Colombian context were revised. For these lines of action, the MEN (2006) stated the following objective:

To form citizens able to communicate in English who can immerse the country in processes of universal communication, global economy, and cultural openness through internationally comparable standards.³ (p. 6)

According to the MEN (2009a, 2009b), the following three strategies were implemented in order to achieve this objective:

¹ Segment translated for publication purposes.

² Originally named in Spanish as: “Educación para el Trabajo y el Desarrollo Humano (EDTDH).” The translation was done for publication purposes. According to the MEN (2008, 2009a), the EDTDH was previously known as *educación no formal* (non-formal education) and consists of programs to capacitate people in specific productive areas within a minimum of 600 hours or a maximum of 1800 hours so that they can work independently or independently in different productive sectors. These programs are usually articulated within the high school education (grades 10 and 11 of the high school).

³ The quotation was originally in Spanish, but it was translated to English for publication purposes.

- 1) Adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as the national standard. The Council of Europe (2014) defines the CEFR as an outline that:

Describe[s] . . . what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. . . . The framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners' progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis. (p. 1)

It is important to note that the CEFR was not developed to assess exclusively communicative skills in English, but in any foreign language that has been learnt (de Mejía, 2011). According to the Council of Europe (2014), the levels of language proficiency established in the CEFR are: A1 (breakthrough), A2 (waystage), B1 (threshold), B2 (vantage), C1 (proficiency), and C2 (mastery). Through the PNB, the MEN (2006) established that by 2019 all Colombian students would achieve a specific level of the CEFR, as follows:

At the end of the third grade, students should attain an A1 level; when finishing seventh grade, they should reach an A2 level; at the end of the eleventh grade, they should have a B1 level; final semester students from undergraduate programs different from English should achieve a B2 level, and final semester students from undergraduate English programs should reach a C1 level. However, this goal has been modified in subsequent plans because it was found to be overambitious.

- 2) Alignment of the national exams *Saber 11*⁴ and *Saber Pro*⁵ to the CEFR, which according to the MEN (2009a, 2009b) has been done since September 2007. However, López, Roper Pacheco, and Peralta (2011) and López (2009) affirm that neither the *Saber 11* nor the *Saber Pro* is completely aligned with the CEFR. The authors assert that both exams only assess students in reading, vocabulary, and grammar disregarding skills such as listening, speaking, and writing. The authors also claim that the reading section only approaches some of the reading comprehension skills from the CEFR and the vocabulary section emphasizes students' comprehension of words, but not their ability to use them in context.
- 3) Increase of training opportunities (immersion programs, financial aids to study abroad, virtual courses, workshops, etc.) for the community and, especially, for English teachers from the public sector. This is because diagnostic tests applied be-

⁴ National exam that students from last year of high school have to take in order to measure the competencies that they have developed as a result of the school formative process. It is used to analyze the situation of the Colombian educational system in the school level.

⁵ National exam that students from the last semester of any undergraduate program in Colombia have to take in order to measure the competencies they have attained at the end of their studies at university. It is used to analyze the situation of the Colombian educational system at the university level.

tween 2005 and 2006 (MEN, 2009a, 2009b) evidenced that nearly 65% of the English teachers from the public sector who voluntarily took the exam had an A2 level or below while only 33% of them had a B2 level or above (MEN, 2014a, 2014b). However, A. González (2007) questions the validity and reliability of the diagnostic since the results have not been systematically documented and presented; the exams have only assessed passive skills and grammar, which do not account for the true language proficiency of teachers, and limited computing skills may have also affected the performance of some teachers since the exam was computer-based.

According to the MEN (2009b), the PNB was presented to communities of English teachers in 2007 through workshops given to 4,300 teachers from all Colombian regions. Additionally, a booklet called *Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English*⁶ (MEN, 2006) was distributed to educational institutions (schools and universities) across the nation. According to Portal Colombia Aprende (2010), the PNB also promoted the inclusion of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in order to enrich the English teaching practices at all the levels of education.

Program for Strengthening the Development of Competences in Foreign Languages 2010-2014⁷

In 2010, with the change of government, the Program for Strengthening the Development of Competences in Foreign Languages (PFDCLÉ for its acronym in Spanish) was launched. According to the MEN (2014a, 2014b), the PFDCLÉ gave continuity to the strategies proposed in the PNB and added others in order to strengthen the English instruction in the country. The MEN (2014a, 2014b) states that the aim of the PFDCLÉ was to help Colombian citizens develop communicative competencies in foreign languages, emphasizing English, in order to favor the insertion of Colombian human capital into the global knowledge economy and the international job market. With this aim in mind, the program focused on the articulation of four aspects, namely, teachers training and professional development, pedagogical aspects, follow-up and evaluation, and institutional strengthening (MEN, 2014b).

In regard to teachers training and professional development, the PFDCLÉ provided more training opportunities to primary and secondary school teachers from the public sector (MEN, 2014a, 2014b). These opportunities enriched the options that were already offered by the education secretariats⁸ of the country. According to the MEN (2014a, 2014b), the new alternatives consisted of language and methodology programs, cascade formation, and

⁶ In Spanish: Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés.

⁷ In Spanish: Programa de Fortalecimiento al Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras.

⁸ In Spanish: “Secretarías de Educación”. These are official entities that propel the initiatives of the Ministry of Education in both urban and rural areas of the national territory.

more immersions programs. Through these initiatives more than 9,500 teachers were trained. However, the MEN (2014a) asserts that even though these strategies were well orientated, they have not been enough because they have not been applied on a large scale.

In regard to the pedagogical aspects, the PFDCLC developed the educational materials *Let's Learn English with the Adventures of Bunny Bonita*,⁹ *English for Colombia-ECO*, *My ABC English Kit: Supplementary Materials for English Learning and Teaching in Primary Schools in Colombia*, and *English, please!* (MEN, 2014a, 2014b). These materials were designed by Colombian specialists with the purpose of approaching the particular needs of the Colombian students from the public sector. Additionally, they provided methodological guidelines for teachers in order to enrich their pedagogical formation. The materials were piloted and, by 2003, incorporated into the pedagogical practices of the official schools of the country (Centro Virtual de Noticias de la Educación [CVNE], 2013b; MEN, 2012; Redacción vida de hoy / Educación, 2013).

In regard to the follow-up and evaluation, the PFDCLC implemented three strategies (MEN, 2014b). The first strategy consisted of continuing with the annual voluntary diagnostic tests that aimed to establish the English level and methodologies used by the English teachers from the official sector. The second strategy was named *Teach Challenge* and it consisted of a study that aimed to identify and characterize the population of English teachers from the official sector across the nation (CVNE, 2013a). The third strategy was a follow-up of the *Saber* exams in order to analyze the learning process of Colombian students.

According to the MEN (2014b), the annual voluntary diagnostic test evidenced that the training provided the teachers enhanced their English level. In 2010, 29% of the teachers who took the test achieved a B2 English level while in 2013, 43% of the English teachers who took the exam achieved a B2 level. Besides, the MEN (2014a) affirms that the training programs also increased the teachers' interest in diagnosing their English level because the number of teachers who took the diagnostic test rose from 3,525 in 2008 to 6,453 in 2013.

In addition, the MEN (2014b) states that the follow-up of the *Saber* 11th-grade exams revealed that, until 2010, 57% of the 11th graders from the official sector obtained scores that corresponded to having no exposure to the language—the MEN (2014b) calls this level of performance –A. Besides, only 31% obtained an A1 level, 6% an A2, 4% a B1, and 2% a B2 level or above. It is important to consider that the official institutions account for 75% of the total population of 11th graders in the country (MEN, 2006, 2014b).

In spite of the fact that private institutions had a better performance, only 17% of their 11th graders obtained a B1 level in the non-bilingual schools, which account for 24% of the total of 11th graders. In the bilingual institutions 80% of their 11th graders achieved

⁹ In Spanish: *Aprendamos inglés con las aventuras de Bunny Bonita*.

a B1 level or superior, but they represent 1% of the total population of 11th graders in the country. The follow-up evidenced that, in 2013, there was a reduction of 3% in the students who obtained an –A level. Hence, the rate of improvement towards the A1 level is 1% per year.

Finally, in regard to the institutional strengthening, the PFDCLE, by means of the education secretariats, encouraged schools, universities, and EDTDH institutions to create English programs or strengthen the existing ones in order to attend to the particular needs of their populations (MEN, 2014a, 2014b). In this sense, the education secretariats provided technical assistance, programmed activities to train teachers, and guaranteed the operation of those institutions (MEN, 2014a).

Law of Bilingualism (Law 1651 of July 12th, 2013)

In July, 2013, the Colombian congress approved Law 1651, which represented a major influence on the Colombian educational system as it modified and added articles to the general law of education (Law 115 of 1994). According to the Congreso de la República de Colombia (2013), Law 1651 of 2013 gave a more relevant role to the acquisition of a foreign language in all levels of education in Colombia (elementary, secondary, high school, EDTDH, and higher education) prioritizing the teaching of English in the public educational institutions of the country without disregarding the wide variety of indigenous languages spoken in the national territory.

For this purpose, the objective of “developing communicative skills to read, understand, write, listen, speak, and express correctly in a foreign language” (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2013, p. 1) was added to the general objectives of the elementary, secondary and high school levels of education. Besides, the specific objectives that corresponded to “acquiring elements of conversation and reading in at least one foreign language” (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1994, p. 7) in the elementary school and “understanding and developing the skill to express oneself in a foreign language” (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 1994, p. 8) in the secondary school were changed in both cases to “developing skills to converse, read and write in at least one foreign language” (Congreso de la República de Colombia, 2013, p. 1), which entails the achievement of a higher level of performance.

Through Law 1651, the Congreso de la República de Colombia (2013) also stated that the EDTDH institutions that decide to offer language programs must obtain a certification of quality for the institution and language program. Furthermore, all state entities can only hire certified language institutions when requiring language training. Finally, Law 1651 established that the national government is in charge of financing and regulating the implementation of the law.

National Plan of English: Colombia Very Well! 2015-2025¹⁰

More recently, in 2014, the government launched the National Plan of English: Colombia Very Well! 2015-2025 (PNI for its acronym in Spanish). To frame it, the MEN (2014b) analyzed the impact that the previous plans had on Colombian educational reality. From this exercise, the MEN (2014b) concluded that the strategies undertaken through the PNB and the PFDCLE have been positive, but they have had limited results. Hence, the PNI was born to give continuity to the strategies implemented in the two previous plans while proposing other improvement strategies.

According to the MEN (2014b), the objective of the PNI was that, by 2025, 50% of 11th graders achieve a B1 English level. The plan also aims at impacting the English education at the university level and in productive sector (workers). However, this article focuses on the strategies and objectives established at the school level. To achieve the goal with 11th graders, the PNI proposes to:

Firstly, continue with the diagnosis and training of teachers in language and teaching skills through a system of incentives. Secondly, support the inclusion of a minimum of three hours per week of English in the secondary education and half an hour per week in primary education in all the public schools. Thirdly, provide schools with technology, both face-to-face and virtual tools, as well as supporting the development of materials, tools, and initiatives that promote English language learning. Fourthly, align the *Saber* exams of 5th and 9th grades to the CEFR to have a record of the process of students and institutions. Fifthly, launch advertising campaigns to promote English learning through mass media. Finally, raise the English level of private schools by establishing minimum parameters and sharing experiences and materials.

The PNI started the implementation with students from 9th, 10th, and 11th grades with the intention to expand it gradually to lower levels of education. However, the implementation of the PNI was interrupted by the launching of a new plan (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016).

Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018¹¹

According to Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez (2016), five months after the beginning of the implementation of the PNI the program was re-structured and it re-emerged with the name “Bilingual Colombia” (CB for its acronym in Spanish) in an attempt to recover the bilingualism conception that was excluded in the PNI, which was openly focused exclusively on English as its name indicated. Although information regarding this plan is scarce, Portal Colombia Aprende (2016) affirms that the program aims to achieve by 2018 that 35% of the

¹⁰ In Spanish: *Programa Nacional de Inglés*.

¹¹ In Spanish: *Colombia Bilingüe*.

Colombian eleventh graders from the public sector attain a B2 level, and 8% reach an A1 level. The program pursues this by means of the following strategies:

Teachers: CB plans to continue with the diagnosis and training of teachers in language and methodologies. The goal is to diagnose all school teachers from the public sector before 2018: the ones who had obtained an A2 level or below should have improved one or two levels by the end of 2018. Besides, only B2 teachers will be hired in the public schools, and native speakers of English will teach in 9th, 10th and 11th grades. This strategy started to become implemented in 2015 when several English native speakers were welcomed to the Colombian public schools¹² (CVNE, 2015). Also, in order to be accredited, undergraduate programs in English must ensure that: Firstly, some of their teachers are native speakers of English. Secondly, their graduates achieve a B2+ level. Finally, they provide opportunities to do internships abroad.

Pedagogical design: CB aims to construct a flexible and adaptable curriculum that will guide the instruction of English in the schools of the country following a communicative approach. Two booklets have been launched with this purpose, namely, *Pedagogical principles and guidelines: Suggested English curriculum, 6th to 11th grades* (MEN, 2016b) and *Basic learning rights: English 6th to 11th grades* (MEN, 2016a).

Use of materials: CB aims to donate pedagogical resources and technological kits to schools so that students and teachers can take advantage of them.

According to Portal Colombia Aprende (2016), the CB will not be implemented throughout the national territory, but in 120 schools from 36 cities. The criteria to select the target schools are not clear as well as the reasons to launch the plan in such a sudden way (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016).

Analysis of the Colombian Foreign Language Bilingualism Plans and Policy

Colombian academics have criticized several aspects of the bilingualism policy and plans. Some of the most common ones are subsequently reviewed.

Lack of Continuity and Consistency

Between 2004 and 2016, four bilingualism plans have been launched; each one has overlapped the previous one. Although the objectives have become more realistic with each new plan, the constant changes have affected the continuity, consistency, and articulation of the strategies, resulting in a slow work pace and a feeling of low-achievement and frustration.

¹² These native English speakers are part of the initiative “English Teaching Fellowship.”

According to Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez (2016), the changes in the plans have reflected a mismatch between the Colombian reality and the course of action drawn.

Employability Instead of Social Development

The document for socializing the PNI (MEN, 2014b) provides as a main reason to foster English language learning in Colombia the need of high school graduates and technicians with a B2 English level who can work in the customer service of tourism and software companies, as well as in business process outsourcing (BPO). This suggests that the PNI was born to attend to the needs of industries and elites who are in search of a cheap workforce able to communicate in English, rather than to the need to foster social development (form human beings able to transform the Colombian reality by means of creating industries and innovations, conducting research, strengthening the local economy, etc.) (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Reyes, 2015).

According to De Zubiría Samper (as cited in Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016), other aspects in the Colombian educational system should be prioritized in order to contribute to the social development of the country, especially considering that national exams (*Saber 11th*), as well as international exams (PISA) have shown that Colombian students are not even developing sufficient skills in their mother tongue (results have shown that they struggle with reading comprehension in their own language). Hence, De Zubiría Samper claims that enhancing reading comprehension, deduction and induction, argumentation, and critical thinking, among many other skills in students' mother tongue would be more important for the development of the country than learning a foreign language.

Misconception of Bilingualism

There are several misconceptions related to the development of bilingualism in the Colombian context. Firstly, most people in Colombia associate “bilingualism” exclusively as the Spanish-English type because this is the one that has been emphasized in the national plans (S. Valencia, 2005). However, this association disregards the wide variety of indigenous languages spoken in the country, as well as a wide variety of other foreign languages (Guerrero, 2008; Quintero Polo, 2009). According to Fandiño-Parra, Bermúdez-Jiménez, and Lugo-Vásquez (2012) and de Mejía (2006, 2011), bilingualism should be seen as an opportunity to understand, respect, and protect the cultural and linguistic diversity of the world, and not as a way to extol a particular language.

Secondly, the plans have treated bilingualism as merely learning two separate linguistic codes when in fact being bilingual entails the interaction of the codes and their cultural and social components (Vargas, Tejada, & Colmenares, 2008). Hence, as Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez (2016) assert, “it is a source of concern that the government refers to

bilingualism in Colombia as a concept that can be detached from Spanish” (p. 190). Finally, Fandiño-Parra et al. (2012), M. Valencia (2013), Quintero Polo (2009), and de Mejía (2006) claim that the national governments have conceived English as the only language that might enable economic empowerment and success, discarding other options and strategies.

Privileged Position of English

Professor de Mejía (2011) asserts that the prominent position given to English has provoked some Colombian private schools to decide to teach science and mathematics only in English, sending indirectly the message that Spanish is inappropriate to talk about scientific developments and abstract thinking. Similarly, some “bilingual schools” do not teach English and Spanish, but only English, presuming that students will learn Spanish at home or in other contexts. As a result, students disown the local traditions and language (Vargas et al., 2008).

Adoption of Foreign Models

According to A. González (2007), Usma (2009), and de Mejía (2011), the adoption of the CEFR supposes the implementation of an aligned teaching methodology. This methodology is mostly represented by the ICELT model of teaching (A. González, 2007). The implementation of this model entails discarding local expertise and limiting the teacher’s possibilities for professional development. Furthermore, this uniformity neglects important differences between the Colombian and European contexts such as: schools’ infrastructure, organization of the curriculum, availability of materials and technological resources, teachers’ qualification and language proficiency, number of students per class, working hours, opportunities to use the language to communicate in the local context, and travel opportunities (mobility), among many others (Ayala Zárate & Álvarez, 2005; M. L. Cárdenas, 2006; R. Cárdenas, 2001; Maturana Patarroyo, 2011; Miranda & Echeverry, 2010, 2011).

In this regard, Sánchez and Obando (2008) claim that even teachers with a C2 English level and an ICELT qualification would struggle with overcrowded classrooms, shortages of resources, limited time, and a wide variety of learners. Hence, it is not possible to think of adopting a foreign model and standardizing the teaching practice. The CEFR can be used to set the communicative objectives to pursue, but research needs to be conducted in order to determine the number of hours and type of instruction that Colombian students require to learn the English language under the local conditions (cultural and educational reality).

Bilingualism Plans as a Lucrative Business

Usma (2009), A. González (2007), and Álvarez (2008) claim that the bilingualism plans and policy have boosted a process of commercialization more than a process of equity.

Although the plans seem to be inclusive because they propose to teach English to all Colombian students regardless of their economic condition or location, they are in fact exclusive since only well-off people can afford paying additional courses and materials to ensure learning when needed and pay for international exams to compete for scholarships and other international opportunities (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016). This has also become a lucrative business for publishing houses and international agencies (ELS, British Council, Cambridge University Press, among others), which administer the exams and also sell the preparation courses and materials.

Omission of Teachers' Voices

Few contributions from Colombian teachers, professors, and educational researchers have been taken into account when planning and evaluating the bilingualism plans (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Correa & Usma, 2013). Additionally, many teachers have pointed out the pitfalls and improvement opportunities of the plans, but their voices have not been heard by the governments and policy makers. They have imposed their points of view and have focused on political and economic aspects, disregarding the educational reality and pedagogical implications of their decisions (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Quintero Polo, 2009).

Conclusions

To sum up, Colombia has a long tradition in foreign languages instruction, especially French and English. Since 2004, the instruction of English has been prioritized through the launching of a bilingualism law and four national bilingualism plans. These plans and policy have shared the objective of inserting the Colombian human capital into the international dynamics by fostering communicative skills in English. However, many academics have criticized the policy and plans arguing lack of continuity, consistency and articulation among them, emphasis on employability rather than on social development, misconception of bilingualism, the privileged position given to English over other local and foreign languages, adoption instead of adaptation of a foreign standard (CEFR) and its corresponding teaching model (ICELT), promotion of English learning as a way to foster and perpetuate social inequities and business, and omission of the teachers' voices in the decision making process and evaluation of the plans.

The bibliographical revision done in this paper evidences that there is a general discontent among the academics regarding the way the bilingualism policy and plans have been conceived and implemented in the country. As mentioned earlier in this document, de Zubiría Samper (as cited in Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016) claims that if the goal is to pursue the development of the country, other areas of knowledge and skills should be

emphasized rather than focusing on the development of communicative skills in English. However, this needs to be validated through research that allows determination of what is more appropriate to teach in the Colombian schools while considering the multiculturalism and plurilingualism of the country.

Even if deciding that English is the answer to potentiate the development of the country, there are some aspects to consider. Firstly, it is necessary that teachers have more participation in the decision-making process and evaluation of the plans as they are the ones implementing the methodologies and strategies in the schools of the country. In addition, before thinking about improving the English level of school students, it is necessary to focus on strengthening the language skills of pre-service and in-service teachers so that they have sufficient skills to teach the expected B1 level to their school students. Also, research needs to be conducted to find the most suitable methods to teach English to Colombian students while considering the local conditions (number of students per class, materials available, use of the target language in the immediate context and daily life, among other features of the diverse Colombian students). Schools and teachers should then face the challenge of creating the differentiated education that will attend to the varied population of the country.

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