

Bilingual Colombia: Are we ready for it? What is needed?

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The national "Bilingual Colombia Programme" has established proficiency levels to be attained in the long-term –2010 and 2019, respectively. Actions have started in connection to the definition of national standards, teacher preparation and examinations. This paper attempts to pinpoint the challenges policy-makers, teachers and teacher educators are facing in Colombia, a Spanish-speaking country in the north-western part of South America, as well as some critical points we have identified for achieving the above-mentioned goals. My reflections are complemented with some University professors' testimonies, as expressed in a survey given to them on the topic of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The Colombian government has started the national *Bilingual Colombia Programme* (BCP). This has generated expectations and concerns. English is taught from elementary levels in private schools, but the situation is not the same for the public sector or for private schools who serve the needs of a good number of people. With a limited number of hours for English language teaching, not many resources, large classes, a shortage of qualified teachers, and scarce use of the English language in authentic communication, we can ask: "Are we ready for a bilingual Colombia? What is needed?"

We agree on the importance of strengthening English proficiency in all educational levels. Nonetheless, the definition of national standards as well as the implementation of regional actions have spawned controversy among members of academic communities.

The programme poses key issues in language teaching and teacher education, and highlights the need to revise how we teach English, in which circumstances, and for what real purposes. Likewise, in the area of teacher education, it is necessary to know with whom we can work to help learners achieve higher proficiency levels and to take advantage of what has been investigated vis-à-vis the teaching profession. It is also important to consider how we are pursuing teacher preparation.

THE GOALS OF THE PROGRAMME

The BCP has been planned for the period 2004 to 2019 with the purpose of improving the quality of English language teaching at all educational levels. The goal is that by 2010 students should have a B1 or pre-intermediate level and teachers a minimum of B2. By 2019, the students' school-exit level should be B2 or intermediate and their teachers should be at least in B2.

Two phases have been proposed for the Programme. By the end of the first one, that is to say 2010, secondary school students should have a basic domain of English and those of higher education, a higher one. In the second phase, the full development of bilingualism in the

country is expected. To see this, emphasis will be placed on the teaching of English from pre-school. In view of what has been defined for the two phases of the programme, the preparation of qualified English teachers has been set out as a priority in the first phase.

The following table shows the levels expected in the target populations the Program has selected:

Population	Level expected in 2019
Teachers of English in levels 1-11	B2
Primary teachers and teachers of other areas	A2
Students who finish high school (11 th grade)	B2
Graduate language teachers	B2-C1
Students who finish higher education	B2

Table 1. Levels expected in the target populations of the BCP.

As far as non-formal education, actions have been planned to establish regulations for language programmes run by different institutes. Furthermore, in order to attain the stated goals, three actions have been prioritised: the definition of standards, examinations, and teacher preparation.

REFLECTIONS UPON THE PROGRAMME AND THE COLOMBIAN REALITY

The goals have generated big expectations. Schools and universities welcome the idea of placing teacher education at the cornerstone of the programme, but serious concerns have also risen because we do not see clear policies to make language teaching conditions appropriate to attain the defined goals. Next, I will examine what has been done so far in the three fields of action already mentioned and the critical points that might need revision and/or stronger involvement of parties who belong to the ELT area.

The definition of standards for English

The National Ministry of Education decided to lead the definition of national standards for our country with The Common European Framework for languages -learning, teaching, and evaluating (Council of Europe, 2001). Voices from academic communities have expressed that because of contextual reasons, the Common European Framework (CEF) does 'not not suit the Colombian reality' (Clemencia). For instance, the idea of mobility that is at the core of the CEF is not easily perceived in the implementation of the national standards; not even in Bogotá. As one teacher stresses,

'It is clear that the essence of the CEF is very positive, but a forced use of it in Colombia makes me think that there are other factors different from cultural and social ones that prevail in the intention of the MEN. Those factors are something that has been kept hidden or, at least, has not been manifested in public academic arenas' (Patricio).

Others have questioned why proposals based on closer contexts like *Los Tres Espacios Lingüísticos* (TEL-The three linguistic spaces: Spanish, French and Portuguese) or the American National Standards for Foreign Language Education were not taken into consideration.

Each one of the frameworks quoted above offers valuable approaches. The CEF advocates the overcoming of difficulties generated by the different European educational systems that limit communication among professionals working in the modern languages field and the necessity of acquiring one or more foreign languages for the adequate performance of people in the public and working domain, mainly as a response to the professional mobility requirements among the different countries. Conversely, if their contributions are important regarding the possibility of improving communication among peoples and the respect for diversity -equally present in the ACTFL framework, it is relevant to notice that both proposals are considered to fall within multilingual and multicultural contexts that are not necessarily similar to the general characteristics of our Colombian context, mostly monolingual –with 2% (approximately 450) indigenous communities- without the same reasons and motivations for communication in foreign languages.

The reality established in the CEF would have to be contrasted with the conditions of Colombian educational institutions, namely, infrastructure, curriculum organization, use of foreign languages in the academic and cultural domains of the country, working hours and competences of language teachers. English is not the natural code to mediate communication in Colombia, a country with about 41.2 million people and more than 3 million internally displaced persons, the highest number of any country in the Western Hemisphere, and second world-wide, after Sudan. Thus, tracing frameworks for the Colombian context would have cultural, logistic and economic implications.

The idea of having minimum standards for the country was proposed in the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Languages (1999). Standards were thought of as points of reference to achieve the goals of the General Education Act (1994), especially learning a foreign language starting in elementary school. At the time this paper was written, the official document had not been published. However, the analysis of a working document makes us wonder to what extent the proposal has considered those regions where English is not a priority for the educational system e.g. very remote rural areas, regions suffering socio-political conflicts, or those with hardly any chance to use the language for authentic purposes.

The national standards linked to CEF are set not only for schools, but also for teachers, as shown in the previous section. This has set the theme for debate particularly within several teacher-education communities. As Ayala and Alvarez (2004) remark, we should reflect on some implications of the implementation of the CEF in Colombia, given the socio-cultural, political and economical traits of our country as well as our education system.

The emphasis on examinations vs. the promotion of teaching for testing

A diagnosis carried out in 2003 and 2004 in Bogotá and Cundinamarca, the central-Andean region of the country, showed that the group of teachers from Bogotá who were tested fell in level A2. An average of 63% of those evaluated teachers proved to possess a basic level of English proficiency (levels A1 and A2); 35%, an intermediate level (B1 and B2); and only 14% demonstrated an advanced level (C1, C2). Concerning teachers from Cundinamarca, a lower percentage is located in level A2. Most teachers, 76.6%, showed a basic level (A1, A2) and only 21% was placed in the intermediate level (B1, B2). This is 13.8% less than the average for Bogotá teachers.

Talking about students from Bogotá and who were in the last year of secondary school, 11th grade, 84.5% were classified in levels A1 and A2 and only 2.6% show an intermediate level of competence in levels B1, B2. The examiners explained that part of this situation is linked to the low communicative competence in English that teachers of this subject have, coupled with the low relevance of some curricular programs for English teaching and the deficient methodologies applied by teachers (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2005). However, no evidence has been shown so far to demonstrate validity of the diagnostic study by contrasting test score, curriculum appropriateness, and teaching methodologies. Additionally, complete results of the diagnoses carried out by the BCP in 2003 and 2005 in the 11 regions of the country had not been published by the time this paper was written (August 2006).

Rea-Dickins and Germaine (1992:23-27) state that evaluation may be undertaken for three reasons: accountability, curriculum development and betterment, and self-development. Accountability is usually linked to summative evaluation while curriculum development and teacher self-development are better informed by evaluation as a formative process. In our case, the first one has been overemphasised over the others.

Decisions have been made and monitored by relying mainly on tests. This has also shown an increase of teaching for testing. Many teachers care too much about preparing pupils to pass exams and the same has been done with teachers. For example in Bogotá, teachers who have completed a 270-hour in-service course are then required to do another which focuses on getting prepared for test-taking.

It has been observed that the obsession to show numbers of teachers classified in given proficiency levels goes against the idea of using different evaluation processes and of paying attention not only to the results (test scores, statistics), but to the process as well.

Teacher preparation: The strongest need for the Programme's success

Pineda (2002) highlights the fact that knowledge base in the teaching profession has become a central focus of attention for researchers, educators, and accreditation agencies during the last decades. The BCP has had a positive effect on the increase of in-service teacher education, an area that had not been prioritised in the last years. Likewise, some teachers have taken the TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test) and attempts have been made to promote the idea that teaching qualifications can be guaranteed by introducing and replicating the ICELT (In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching).

Schools and universities welcome the idea of placing teacher education at the cornerstone of the programme. In fact, before the BCP was launched, several universities had already developed in-service courses all over the country. In tune with the national guidelines for teachers' professional development, the curriculum accounts for language, pedagogical and innovation-research skill development. In short, there is important local expertise in pre and in-service teacher education.

Colombian educators have also documented teachers' needs (González, 2000; González, Montoya, and Sierra, 2003), teachers' innovations (Clavijo, Guerrero, Torres, Ramírez, and Torres, 2004), the way teachers have been guided to do action-research (Cárdenas, 2000),

their experiences when writing project reports for publication (Cárdenas, 2003), the nature of research undertaken by school teachers in in-service programmes (Cárdenas, 2004), and the profiles of teacher educators (González and Quinchía, 2003).

Teaching English poses seven challenges for teachers and teacher educators in the new millennium: language proficiency, diversity of contexts, access or lack of access to resources, implementation of classroom-based research, professional development, networking, and education of teacher educators (González, 2000). Another study shows that practitioners acknowledge the need 'to move from individual awareness to groups of schools working together doing research to improve their work conditions' (González et al., 2003:43). This implies networking and illustrates the vision of teacher development as a process of continuous intellectual, experiential and attitudinal growth of teachers.

No one denies the need of teacher education. Nonetheless, the prescriptive practices for teaching and learning and the promotion of teacher qualification by the BCP can be contrasted with the critical dimension of language education. Furthermore, there is a need for more collegiality, openness to debate, and revision and implementation of actions based on knowledge coming from more local communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The central management of the BCP has been criticised for not having opened up the discussion to all parties directly connected to ELT and for having disregarded suggestions or reactions coming from teacher educators. Schools of Education are often blamed for poor teacher preparation and slow response to action plans due to our romantic rhetoric. Nonetheless, our ELT community maintains its quixotic persistence in pursuing pedagogical and intellectual aims in key regions through innovations, networking, research, and publications.

In connection to the BCP goal, we should be cautious. Many teacher educators and linguists do not see this possible. Others have expressed that bilingualism, as a natural and spontaneous phenomenon, cannot be imposed by any government decree. The argument used by the MEN to justify the need for a bilingual Colombia is limited to only the administrative and economical dimensions that force the implementation of English as a pseudo-official language. 'There are social, theoretical and educational considerations to make on this issue' (Paula). As Cadavid, McNulty and Quinchía conclude in a study done in seven public schools, 'educational policies should not be implemented blindly without a careful analysis of our contexts and without knowing the real needs of our teachers and students' (2004:44).

Rather than a bilingual country, we need to join efforts to raise the standards of teacher and student preparation to be able to communicate in English as well as in the mother tongue (Patiño, Ardila, Roselli, Celis, Pineda, Torres, and Cárdenas, 2004). It is then our challenge to work towards better proficiency in language and in teaching. In the same line, we should admit Colombian universities' responsibility in supporting the development of high proficiency levels of English among prospective teachers. It is also our challenge to care for a strong cross-cultural component in the school curriculum so that teachers promote intercultural awareness.

The reflections gathered in this paper have evidenced controversy in policy-making and implementation. Tensions between policy makers and several academic communities are due to the fact that the latter are more in favour of regional diversity, flexible approaches to teacher education and assessment, as well as of respecting local expertise. It is then necessary to examine the fact that there is no single way of teaching English, no single way of learning it, no single way of testing it, and no single syllabus or textbook. Besides, 'more cohesive, coherent, well-informed, well monitored policies... More evaluation of processes... (and) More sustained processes' are needed (Paula).

It is well-known that keeping students' attention in the EFL Classroom implies moving from imposition to attraction. The same could be said of the BCP. It is time to consider that imposing creates aversion, lack of genuine interest, coping with the 'have to' kind of reaction, insistence on short-term results, and promoting dependent learners. In contrast, building inner motivation, fostering interest, promoting a 'want to' kind of reaction, and setting up long-term results can support independent learners –in our case, teachers responsible for the betterment of ELT and teacher educators. This would imply abolishing the hierarchical view of language policy planning where language teachers are at the bottom and have little or no voice in the decision-making process. As one teacher educator puts it, this would require the 'inclusion of professionals in language education and the acknowledgement of their insights which, in turn, can be confronted or correlated to those (of) administrators of the educational system in Colombia' (Patricio). In brief, openness and stronger university participation are needed to guarantee success in ELT.

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