

## The National Bilingual Programme in Colombia: Imposition or opportunity?

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*The National Bilingual Programme, created by the Colombian Ministry of Education in 2004, offers all students in the country the possibility of becoming bilingual in English and Spanish as part of a vision of increased productivity in a globalised world. However, the language and education policies promoted within this framework tend to foreground the development of English at the expense of bilingual competence in Spanish and English. This bilingual policy has been strongly criticised by several Colombian academics with regard to what they consider as the imposition in the Colombian context of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the disregard of local knowledge and expertise in informing glocal perspectives, as well as the exclusion of other types of bilingualism (in other foreign languages and in the indigenous and Creole languages spoken in the country). This article will present key aspects of the ongoing debate in Colombia. It will argue that the exclusive emphasis on one type of bilingualism does not do justice to the many different forms of bilingualism and multilingualism present in the country. However, in addition to being an imposition, we will maintain that the National Bilingual Programme could be harnessed as an opportunity to promote a more inclusive vision of bilingualism, alongside the focus on increased national prosperity.*

*Keywords:* bilingualism, bilingual policy, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, foreign language learning

### Introduction

Historically, domains of bilingual and multilingual use in Colombia, as in other Latin American countries, have been positioned at two opposite poles of the social scale (Hamel 2008): so-called 'elite' bilingualism, and the bilingualism of the indigenous communities and the speakers of Creole languages. Furthermore, it may be noted that while bilingualism in internationally prestigious languages, such as Spanish-English, Spanish-French, and Spanish-German, provides access to a highly 'visible', socially-accepted form of bilingualism, leading to the possibility of employment in the global marketplace, bilingualism in minority Amerindian or Creole languages leads, in most cases to an 'invisible' form of

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bilingualism in which the native language is undervalued and associated with underdevelopment, poverty and backwardness (de Mejía 1996).

In spite of a long tradition of bilingualism and multilingualism in the country, since before the arrival of the Spanish in the fifteenth century, it was only in 1991 that the multilingual and pluricultural nature of the country was officially recognised for the first time within the framework of the Political Constitution of 1991 and indigenous languages were awarded co-official status with Spanish, in the territories where they are spoken. Today there are around 69 separate indigenous languages in existence. These include: Amerindian languages, two native Creoles, Colombian Sign Language and Romani.

Spanish continues to be the official language of Colombia and is used in government and education. It is spoken by the majority of the population as a first language. Many speakers of Amerindian languages are bilingual in Spanish and their native language, though the degree of bilingualism varies widely in different parts of the country (Baker & Prys Jones 1998). The official policy of Ethnoeducation for minority communities, ratified by the Education Law of 1994, recognised the importance of designing curricula which take into account the type of educational provision which reflects the visions of the indigenous communities themselves, as well as respect for their cultural and linguistic heritage. However, in spite of these efforts, bilingualism in minority Amerindian or Creole languages is often not recognised as such and is undervalued (de Mejía 2005).

In a later development, in 2004, the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN) created *The National Bilingual Programme*, aimed at offering all school pupils the possibility of reaching a B1 level of proficiency in English at the end of their school studies. The objective was:

To have citizens who are capable of communicating in English, in order to be able to insert the country within processes of universal communication, within the global economy and cultural openness, through [the adopting of] internationally comparable standards.<sup>1</sup>(MEN 2006b: 6)

Thus, the emphasis was mainly on the improvement of English language proficiency within a vision of competitiveness and global development.

As part of this policy, in 2006, the Ministry formulated a document entitled *The Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign Languages: English* based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The reasons given for adopting the CEFR were the fact that it was the result of ten years of research, and that it provided a common language to establish foreign language performance levels throughout the Colombian educational system, particularly in relation to international standards, as the following quotation shows, “The adoption of a common referent with other countries will allow Colombia to examine advances in relation to other nations and introduce international parameters at local level” (MEN 2006a:57).

However, the emphasis on English at the expense of other foreign and vernacular languages present in the country, as well as the adopting of the CEFR as a guiding model, has generated a series of criticisms from academics from some of the leading universities in the country, as well as defensive statements by the Ministry of Education and by the British Council, the agency which coordinated the development of the “Standards” document.

In this overview article, therefore, I will present a meta-analysis of some of the contributions to the ongoing debate in Colombia about the *National Bilingual Programme* and about what many see as the imposition of the CEFR. I will argue that there is a need to recognize the importance of the contribution of bilingual education programmes to the creation of a more tolerant society, as well as to increased national productivity. I will also maintain that restricting the notion of bilingualism to Spanish/English bilingualism in the *National Bilingual Programme* leads to a distorted view of the complex interrelationships between languages, cultures and identities in the Colombian context. I will end by indicating some of the linguistic and educational policy issues which need to be resolved in order for Colombia to develop a more equitable multilingual language and education policy.

### **Adapting the CEFR - advantages and difficulties**

I will begin with a discussion of some of the reasons for incorporating aspects of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in educational policy and practice. In November, 2007, Rosa María Cely, academic consultant to the *National Bilingual Programme* at the Ministry of Education was interviewed by a reporter from *El Educador* ([www.eleducador.com](http://www.eleducador.com)) in relation to the implementation of the "Standards for English" document (MEN 2006b), which explicitly bases the standards for the development of competency in English throughout the school system, from primary to the end of secondary education, on the Common European Framework. In reply to a question as to why the CEFR had been adopted, she explained that there was no such document in existence in Colombia and although other possible frameworks had been considered, such as those in force in the USA, in Ireland, in Spain in Australia and in Canada, the Ministry considered that the CEFR was the framework that could best guide some of the policies for English in the country. She noted specifically that,

The Ministry found the CEFR to be a guiding document, which is flexible, adaptable to our Colombian context, complete, sufficiently researched, used throughout the world in general and in the Latin American context in particular, which has finally been accepted as the referent for the Bilingual Programme. (Cely 2007: para. 12).

It is interesting to note, in this respect, that the use of the CEFR for teaching and promoting English, rather than any other language used in the country is, in fact, a Colombian decision, the Framework being conceived for the promotion and regulation of multiple languages in the European context.

According to Jan Van de Putte (2009), coordinator of the joint programme of the Ministry of Education and the British Council for the *National Bilingual Programme* at the time of the publication of the National Standards for English (2006b) based on the CEFR, there are a number of reasons why this was adopted as a frame of reference within the *National Bilingual Programme*. These clearly relate to the view of language underpinning the CEFR. The first refers to the fact that language is seen as centred in social action and language users as social actors who carry out tasks in specific social contexts, a relatively new

perspective in language teaching and learning in the country. Van de Putte also refers to the inclusion of competences not traditionally associated with language use in Colombia (sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence) as well as the general competences associated with knowing, knowing how to do, knowing how to be, and knowing how to learn.

Yet, from the beginning, the use of this framework has been criticised by many Colombian researchers. Initially, there was a perception, which still exists today, that the CEFR was imposed by the Ministry of Education, and the British Council who were coordinating the process. Although various alternatives, such as those developed by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the Three Linguistic Spaces, were considered, participants working for some of the most important universities in the country (Universidad Nacional, Universidad de Antioquia and Universidad del Valle) resigned from the coordinating committee, alleging pressure to choose the CEFR.

Another common objection refers to the adopting of a framework which has been developed in a foreign context (Europe) for use in a very different scenario (Colombia) (Ayala & Alvarez 2005; Cárdenas 2006; Gonzalez 2007). This objection stems from a wider critique of the workings of globalisation in education whereby local school systems are given the appearance of being internationally competitive. According to Usma Wilches (2009: 131 citing Steiner Khamsi 2004), “national governments adopt different discourses and models accepted by an imaginary international community or a concrete other, which is evoked as a source of external authority”. In this case, the international model accepted is, of course, the CEFR. Usma Wilches (2009) maintains that the whole process has been highly contested, particularly by local scholars, while teachers and students are often caught in the middle of the debate.

A further important focus of dissent is the role of foreign agencies in the implementation of the official language and education policies relating to the teaching and learning of English. The adoption of the CEFR as the point of reference for policies relating to the *National Bilingual Programme* has meant that private agencies, in particular the British Council, have assumed a dominant role in many of these processes, such as the initial use of both the Teaching Knowledge Test, designed by the University of Cambridge and the implementation of the ICALT model of professional development, which has been criticised as inadequate by González Moncada (2007: 315) in that it “lacks the promotion of autonomous work and networking, and imposes a pre-established package of pedagogical knowledge.” This has upset many of the Colombian universities, particularly the influential state (public) universities in the large cities of Bogotá, Medellín and Cali, which have traditionally been responsible for the training and educating of foreign language teachers.

In similar fashion, Usma Wilches (2009: 136) has condemned an increasing tendency towards the standardization of language teaching and learning in the country based on the introduction of international models as a move in the direction of “uniformity through stringent normalization and control.” He sees the adoption of models such as the CEFR as evidence that international organisations are driving the definition of local standards within the context of language and education reform in Colombia, at the expense of local expertise, generating as a result “inequality, exclusion and stratification (Usma Wilches 2009: 137).

Other researchers have criticised the adoption of the CEFR taking into account the particular nature of the socio-cultural conditions pertaining currently in the country. Cárdenas (2006:3) postulates that

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.

She also goes on to argue that English is not a priority in much of the country, particularly in remote rural areas and in areas of population displacement due to the ongoing internal conflict. In other words, in order to work effectively, the CEFR would need to be modified to fit the particularities of the Colombian context. In this type of situation, the expectations that all school leavers will reach a B1 level are seen as unrealistic.

According to Cárdenas (2006), there is also a tendency towards dependence on the results of examinations based on the CEFR in order to take decisions about student foreign language proficiency, rather than to consider other indicators of the process of language learning. In addition, teachers, who frequently work in very difficult situations in remote areas, without access to material resources, are often blamed for their students' foreign language deficiencies as shown up in standardised examinations and tests.

Furthermore, it may be added that although one of the reasons given by the Ministry of Education for adopting the framework in Colombia was the amount of research evidence available, in fact, according to Hulstijn (2007: 665), "the CEFR is not based on empirical evidence taken from L2 learner data" but rather, "its empirical base consists of judgments of language teachers and other experts with respect to the scaling of descriptors".

## **European perspectives on the use of the CEFR**

It is interesting to note that in spite of a generalised perception in Colombia that the CEFR functions smoothly throughout Europe, there have been warnings from some European agencies about assuming an a critical stance towards the Framework. As Martyniuk and Noijons (2007: 7) observe, "In general the CEFR seems to have a major impact on language education. It is used - often as the exclusive neutral reference - in all educational sectors". However, this supposedly universal, "neutral" status belies the need to adapt and modify the framework according to different contextual constraints evident across the 27 member states of the European Union. In this respect, members of the Intergovernmental Forum of the Council of Europe (2007: 13) observed that:

There are consistent signs that the CEFR is susceptible to being misused in a number of ways:... misunderstandings regarding the CEFR's status which, where no contextualization takes place, may result in a homogeneity contrary to this instrument's goals; shortcomings in the training process and in the explanations given to... users, which may result in superficial use and even poor understanding of the tool, sometimes leading to its rejection.

This type of comment underlines the importance of carefully analysing the necessary modifications to the framework which will allow it to function in an appropriate fashion, not only in Europe, but also in a very different, Latin-American setting. As Hugo Baetens Beardsmore (April, 2008: personal communication) notes, “often superficial and glib references to inspiration from the CEFR are proving to be distortions”.

### **The focus on English**

As has been discussed above, English is seen mainly as a means of increased competitiveness and internationalisation in Colombia and this is reflected in the ethos of the *National Bilingual Programme* which, in spite of its title, only refers to one type of bilingualism: English-Spanish and does not take into account the many other languages in the country. In fact, Valencia Giraldo (2005: 1) has observed that

As a result of globalisation and widespread use of English worldwide, the term ‘bilingüismo’ [*bilingualism*] has acquired a different meaning in the Colombian context. It is used by many... to refer almost exclusively to Spanish/English bilingualism... This focus on Spanish/English bilingualism now predominates and the other dimensions of multilingualism and cultural difference in Colombia are often ignored. The existence of other languages in different regions of the country is overlooked, particularly the languages of indigenous Colombian populations. The teaching of other modern languages (e.g. French...) has also been undermined by the spread of English and by people’s increasing desire to ‘invest’ in English.

This position has been supported by Guerrero (2008) who notes that the choice of English over other foreign languages is justified by the Ministry of Education, “given its importance as a universal language” (MEN 2006b: 1 cited in Guerrero 2008: 34). She also observes that restricting the Standards document to “foreign languages”, excludes by definition the 69 indigenous languages present in the country, thus constituting a reductionist vision of the notion of bilingualism as applied to the national context.

Furthermore, Carlos Patiño (2005: 1), an ethnolinguist working with Amerindian communities, questions the use of the term ‘bilingual’ with regard to the learning of English at primary and secondary school level in Colombia from a different point of view, considering bilingual programmes for majority language speakers as less ‘authentic’, and the strong emphasis on the teaching of foreign languages as a fashion, which cannot truly be considered ‘bilingual’ education, as this foreign language has no social basis; “it is not the language of any section of Colombian society”.

In addition, there has been concern expressed by members of the Colombian Language Academy who are worried about the status of Spanish in the face of what many consider the rapid rise of English, particularly in the upper and middle echelons of society. The emphasis on the teaching of subjects such as Science and Maths through the medium of English in private bilingual schools is seen as reinforcing the idea that Spanish is a language which is not appropriate for scientific development.

## Mixed discourses

At this point, I would like to return to the conception of English as a means of attaining competitiveness and global development which is clearly stated as the aim of the *National Bilingual Programme*. Usma Wilches (2009: 133) has situated this conception within a vision of the instrumentalisation of language learning. Instead of focussing on the potential of foreign language learning to help towards a deeper understanding of 'the other', it becomes rather, "another strategy to build a better resume, get better employment, be more competitive in the knowledge economy". Usma Wilches condemns this vision as reductionist and draws attention to the multiple implications of language teaching and learning within this type of framework.

Valencia Giraldo (2005: 17), for her part, maintains that it is important to analyse these developments from a critical point of view, in order to determine, "who in reality benefits from the promotion of 'bilingualism'", as there is a tendency to accept uncritically the necessary connection between 'bilingualism' (understood as English language proficiency) and better employment prospects. Nevertheless, as Lina de Brigard, an executive working for a talent spotting firm contracted by multilingual companies in Colombia, observed in a talk in 2006, in fact, only 5% of the posts dealt with require bilingual staff. For the vast majority, while English is desirable, it is not essential. However, she also observed that consciousness of the need for English has become a "way of thinking" for many young professional people in the country.

What is interesting to note, in this respect, is evidence of mixed discourses found in official policy documents referring to the promotion of bilingualism in Colombia. On the one hand, there is the discourse of instrumentalisation referred to above. Thus, the Ministry of Education (2006b) refers to the fact that English being an instrument in strategic communication allows access to grants and study leave abroad, as well as greater and better work opportunities and the consolidation of a "basis on which to construct the competitive capacity of a society" providing people with "a comparative advantage, an attribute of their competence and competitiveness" (Vélez White 2006:3). On the other hand, however, in the same documents there is reference to the desire to help students learning English to "open their minds and accept and understand new cultures and promote interchange between different societies" (MEN 2006b: 9) and "to diminish ethnocentrism and allow individuals to appreciate and respect the value of their own world, as well as to develop respect for other cultures...and appreciation of plurality and difference" (MEN 2006b: 8).

So what are we to make of these apparent contradictions and tensions relating to the *National Bilingual Programme* as the guiding framework for the promotion of bilingualism in Colombia? I think we have to realise that the discourses on bilingualism, while apparently inclusive, in fact emanate from two very different sources. The Bilingual Section of the Ministry of Education is responsible for the spread of foreign language teaching and learning, particularly English, as part of educational policies linked to "quality education for innovation and competitiveness" (Cely 2009: slide 7). References to intercultural communication and sensitivity are primarily associated with the *Sección de Poblaciones*, also part of the Ministry of Education, which promotes the development of Ethnoeducation, or, as it is known in other Latin American countries, Intercultural Bilingual Education.

## The National Bilingual Programme as opportunity

While the *National Bilingual Programme* is currently viewed by many academics in Colombia as an unwelcome imposition, tied to processes of globalisation and global inequalities, it must be said that this initiative undertaken by the Ministry of Education has certainly helped to make bilingualism a household word in Colombia. Although officially interest has centred on English-Spanish bilingualism, there have also been measures which demonstrate increased sensitivity towards other types of bilingualism, particularly involving indigenous languages. Among these we can cite the Ethnoeducation Mother Tongue Project aimed at the conservation of the native language and culture of indigenous communities, such as the Wayuu, U'wa, and the Ette Enaka (Grimaldo 2006). In addition, the *National Bilingual Programme* has helped to promote an inclusive vision of bilingualism by requiring that by 2019 all school and university graduates should reach a certain level of bilingualism in English and Spanish at the end of their studies (either B1 or B2 as regards English). Thus, bilingualism (however it is understood) is seen as a possibility for everyone, and not just for a social elite, as it has been in the past<sup>2</sup>. In other words, this language policy initiative has the potential to be harnessed for the wider purpose of challenging dominant ideologies about language and cultural difference in Colombia and for opening up a constructive national debate about 'what counts as bilingualism'.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on presenting an overview and meta-analysis of some of the key issues raised as a result of the recent implementation of the *National Bilingual Programme* in Colombia. The tensions and contradictions noted by several of the researchers whose publications have been discussed, are perhaps to be expected in a scenario where the development and promotion of one powerful language – English – is privileged at the expense of other languages which form part of the local language ecology.

However, that being said, there remains a notable absence of a coherent national policy involving all languages in play. The Ethnoeducation programmes for Indigenous and Creole languages are seen as separate from bilingualism in international languages and both are served by different departments in the Ministry of Education. In a recent publication, de Mejía and Montes Rodríguez (2008) called for increased articulation between academic programmes concerned with language and education, whether these are in Spanish, minority languages or foreign languages, in the interest of working towards a more equitable and inclusive language and education policy for the country.

The expressed desire of the Ministry of Education in Bogotá (2006b) to help students learning English to adopt an intercultural perspective is a worthy aim and, as we have noted, a little at odds with the rest of the discourse on competitiveness. However, if Colombian students can be helped to recognise and positively accept alterity, and if the *National Bilingual Programme* can contribute to the enhancing of the value of linguistic and cultural diversity in Colombia,

then the disadvantages of many aspects of this policy may be overlooked. As Abadio Green Stocel, a linguist from the Nasa indigenous community observes,

It is not enough to recognise 'the other' in that dimension which interests us, or which seems correct, urgent or similar. In this case, we are looking at and projecting ourselves in the other, but we are not looking at the other as different. (Green Stocel 1998:7)

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## **Endnotes**

- 1) Here and elsewhere, the author's translation from the Spanish original into English.
- 2) Elite bilingualism' in the Colombian context refers to bilingualism in Spanish and international languages, such as English, French and German. This is typically associated with private bilingual schools founded to promote bilingualism in these high prestige languages.

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