



On English Language Teaching and Teacher Education: Academic Disagreements In a Developing Country

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1. Introduction

Teacher quality is often related to the quality of general education and students' achievements [1]. Although it is hard to argue against this idea, policies related to teacher education and professional development are shaped by political decisions and practices, mainly under the premises of teachers' professionalization agendas and accountability [2]. These interventions may generate disagreement between teachers and teacher educators and policy makers because they may disempower these educational actors from their roles as decision makers and intellectuals. In this paper, the author reflects on the impact that a national language education policy has on language teaching and language teacher education programs [3]. She highlights how local scholars and policy makers have encountered six main divergence points around the definition and implementation of a bilingual program for Colombia.

2. Background

2.1 Colombia

Colombia is labeled as "developing country". With a culturally and ethnically diverse population of 45 million inhabitants, the country has remarkable differences between its urban and rural areas. Income, standards of living, access to public services and education, and rates in regional development represent a main source of economic and social inequity. Although the primary language is Spanish, the country has also 64 indigenous languages and two Creoles: "Islander" and "Palenquero".

2.2 English in Colombia

English has the status of a foreign language. Although is a mandatory subject in the curriculum of K-11, its implementation reveals a huge gap in the time devoted to instruction, access to resources, and qualified teacher force between private and public schools. Its use and expansion allows Colombia to be in the expanding circle [4]. According to a report of the British Council, 3% of the population in urban areas speaks English [5]. English is spoken on the Caribbean archipelago of San Andres and Providencia in a triglossic situation, co-existing with Spanish and Islander.

2.3 Bilingual Colombia

The National Program for Bilingualism (NPB), "Bilingual Colombia", is a language education policy that promotes the mastery of English among the population. The main arguments to support the policy are the need to insert the country in the globalization movement, train students and professionals to be competitive in the labor market, and facilitate the population access to knowledge and culture from international contexts. By 2019, the government expects the following levels of proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR):

Population	Levels of proficiency
High school students	B1
University graduates	B2
K-11 in-service English teachers	B2
Language teacher education graduates in 2019	C1

Table 1. English Proficiency levels targeted for Colombia

To attain the goals for English learning and to support the professionalization of teachers, the government issued the English national standards, mass training of English teachers, the alignment of curricula and international tests, and the intervention on language teacher preparation programs. The British Council has played a leading role in the



design and implementation of the policy. Their consultants have obtained important decision-making positions based on international agreements celebrated between the Colombian government and the United Kingdom. The British Council is also an important provider of English courses, tests, teacher training, and teaching materials.

2. The disagreements

The definition and implementation of the NPB brought tensions and possibilities. The policy has motivated debates, publications and studies from local scholars to contest some of the educational decisions made by the government. And concurrently, it has enhanced the students' and teachers' motivation to study and use English, the investment in public education, and the opportunities for Colombians to travel abroad and to have foreign visitors in the country [6]. The local academic community has dealt with the policy through two approaches: an accepting position and a critical position. The first gathers teachers and teacher educators that value the decisions made by policy makers and support their implementation [7], [8]. The second shows an analytical evaluation of the NPB. A close look at the academic production derived from each approach, reveals that scholars that embrace the policy have published less, whereas those with a critical position have a more prolific academic production. This imbalance makes the critical position more visible, and as a consequence, it is seen as negative, and even as subversive.

Various tensions within and among different groups in language policies and practices appear involving policy discourses, policy makers and communities, different orientations of the policy, the intentions and the realizations, the policy and practice, the policy effect on different social groups, and within identity [9]. Rather than see these tensions as unusual, we have to see them as normal, as a constant negotiation of the interests of social groups and the changing priorities of communities. The divergences among teacher educators and policy makers are presented below:

2.1 The notion of bilingualism:

Policy makers proposed a general framework of English-Spanish as the desired bilingualism disregarding the linguistic diversity of the indigenous communities and the long tradition in the study of other foreign languages. This is reductionist view of bilingualism requires a wider scope including nontraditional languages such as Colombian Sign Language [10]. Additionally, questions appear around the packed, monolithic and homogeneous view of bilingualism and language learners proposed by the government [11] and the symbolic power assigned to English under the promises of academic and economic success [12].

2.2 Academic colonialism:

The control of foreign agencies and publishers over English teaching and teacher education in the country is increasing. Certain discourses within the policy ignore the work of local teachers and teacher educators, favor top-down agendas for professional development, and marketize the access to English [13]. Certain politicians and educational authorities approve this colonial view of language learning and teaching because they believe that academic communities that use English as a native language have the power to improve our educational system, and therefore, are the models to emulate.

2.3 The country's unreadiness to implement the language policy:

The intentions of "making the country bilingual" are subjects of different analyses as the country does not seem to be prepared to face that challenge. The lack of readiness to attain the objectives of the policy based on its superficial analysis of the teachers' professional needs, the use of mass language proficiency testing for English teachers for accountability purposes, the separation of professional development from intellectual and personal growth, and above all, the lack of thoughtful consideration of the social and educational differences among the regions are evident [14], [15].

2.4 The unrealistic language goals based on the CERF:

From the early presentation of the policy, local scholars showed how the imposition of the CEFR as the general orientation for the targets and national standards for the Colombian population represented a serious shortcoming [16]. For obvious reasons, the educational and socio-cultural conditions of Colombia are not similar to those in Europe. Therefore, the policy design should have had a scope in accord with our reality setting our own proficiency reference.

2.5 The portrayal of English teachers as technicians rather than as active intellectuals:

The professional development and the initial education of English teachers, represent a major cornerstone in the implementation of Bilingual Colombia. The results of the mass testing of English teachers' language proficiency allowed policy makers to conclude that their professional preparation was insufficient and inadequate. To solve this problem, the government promoted programs for in-service training and the use of the ICELT (In-service Certificate in



English Language Teaching and the TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test) endorsed by the British Council [17]. To improve the initial education of English teachers, the government proposed a national plan to support university-based programs. This initiative homogenizes teacher education curricula and promotes students' preparation to pass the TKT making them competitive in the teaching market [18]. Although considered as a possibility to improve the standards of English Education, all these programs include a view of English teachers as clerks and technicians who are portrayed from lazy and unintelligent to problematic and mediocre in official discourses [19].

2.6 The importance of supporting local knowledge construction and dissemination:

For those scholars that have taken a critical stand towards Bilingual Colombia, the absence of local knowledge as part of the policy represents a substantial weakness. Official documents that frame the policy, in-service training proposals, and testing initiatives neglect the extensive body of local knowledge constructed through teaching and research [20].

3. Conclusions

English teaching and learning in Colombia has been reshaped and redefined by the implementation of Bilingual Colombia. An analysis of the main academic actions included in the NPB discloses some academic disagreements between language teacher educators and policy makers. These disagreements could be solved through the establishment of collaborative agendas that provide teachers and teacher educators the possibility to become valid interlocutors in the definition and implementation of language education policies and that value local knowledge. Despite the difficulties that may appear, this option may represent an opportunity for better understanding of local needs and more realistic and attainable alternatives to improve English teaching and learning in the country.

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