



Trying to Meet the Demands of English in a Global Market A Critical Discussion of the National Bilingual Programme in Colombia

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of the National Bilingual Programme in Colombia. It considers how and why it aims to extend the teaching of ‘a’ foreign language in Primary and Secondary school in 1994, to the teaching of English to an internationally recognized standard in all sectors of education by 2019, while at the same time attempting to promote the bilingual education of the Creole and Amerindian speaking sections of the population. It suggests that although some of the aims of the programme are being met, the contexts in which it is being implemented are too diverse and the aims too broad for the programme to be implemented successfully in its current state.

Keywords: Bilingual, Policy, English, Global, Decentralized, Amerindian, Culture

1. Introduction

Colombia, like many countries, is promoting the learning of English among its population to meet the opportunities and demands of functioning in a global society. To facilitate this, in 2004 the National Ministry of Education of Colombia embarked on the National Bilingual Programme.

The National Bilingual Programme (NBP) is to be implemented nationally in two phases. The first (2004 – 2010), according to the Minister for Education, seeks to provide students in Primary and Secondary levels of education with a “basic knowledge of English as a Second Language” and students in higher education with a “good knowledge of the language” (Altablero No. 37, 2005 page 2E). In the second phase of the programme (2010 to 2019) “the aim is to develop bilingualism in the country” (ibid. 2E). But, what is meant by a “good knowledge of the language”. This will be addressed in section 1.3, but we also need to question what the Minister means when she aims to “develop bilingualism” ... “in the country”. The latter phrase, similar to the use of “national” suggests that there is a single programme which is being implemented uniformly, yet more than 50% of the LEAs have not started to introduce it three years after the programme was initially launched. Furthermore, the very use of the term “programme” presupposes a series of actions which, when put into effect, will lead to a given end. In all this, the National Ministry of Education (NME) has limited itself to specifying the criteria to be used to evaluate the outcome of the “programme” (in reality, the second stage), but it is the LEAs which need to implement it in accordance with local conditions and resources. Finally, the term “bilingual” is not addressed in detail by the National Ministry of Education. On the one hand, it seems to conflate a developed level of English with a certain degree of cultural awareness to signify a bilingual individual, without specifying how schools or LEAs are to move from improving the level of foreign (or English) language teaching to provide bilingual education, nor how the programme and its effects on students should be assessed from a bilingual perspective. And on the other, it considers the provision of bilingual education in communities where Spanish is taught to speakers of a Creole or Amerindian language, thereby applying the term ‘bilingual’ to two contexts which are not mutually compatible. As a result, rather than talk about “a” or “the” National Bilingual Programme, there are probably as many “bilingual” programmes at the moment as there are LEAs, none of which seem to directly address the provision of bilingual education.

But the purpose of this paper is not to analyse the differences in the roles or functions of the National Ministry of Education and the Local Education authorities, though they cannot entirely be ignored, but rather conduct a critical analysis of the provision of the National Bilingual Programme and consider the appropriacy of the discourse in the programme and the extent to which its implementation is viable in the context of current conditions in state schools. To do so, I will begin by providing a brief synopsis of information about Colombia, its economy and its people so that the complex variables which have influenced the formulation and provision of the policy to date are better understood.

1.1 Colombia – the economy

Colombia is often associated with steps being taken to combat the drug trade or the violence which is instigated by left wing guerilla factions or right wing paramilitary groups. These factors have had implications throughout the country, with concern about travel out of major cities because of the danger of attacks or kidnapping and reluctance to invest in industry from foreign investors resulting in a lack of economic growth up until a few years ago (UNCTAD, 5:2006). However, since 2002 there has been a reduction in terrorist attacks and this, in addition to other factors, has contributed to increased economic development. In 2004 the economy expanded by 4.8% and in 2005 by 5.2% of the GDP (Energy Information Administration). But in 2006 it rose to 6.8%, the greatest increase that the country has seen in thirty years (El Tiempo, 24th March, 2007, page 1). It would seem that increased national security, coupled with confidence in the government of Alvaro Uribe Velez, the first independent president in Colombia's history, have made it possible to make the most of Colombia's location and natural resources. Colombia is the only country in South America which has coastlines on the Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea (as well as with five other countries in the region). It has natural reserves of oil, coal, emeralds, gold and silver as well as agricultural products for export such as bananas, coffee and flowers. It has mountain ranges with the capital, Bogota, at 2,600 metres above sea level with temperate weather and vegetation associated with Europe, and as one gets closer to sea level, so one encounters tropical flora and fauna and industry associated with a country bordering the equator.

Colombia has been involved in opening up trade with countries in the region and its president has just signed a free trade agreement with his counterpart of the United States of America, which needs to be ratified by the Congresses of both countries. This has occurred in the wake of foreign investment in Colombia growing substantially over the last couple of years with significant company takeovers and the buying of state industries by companies from the United States and Europe. The largest of these was the buying of the Colombian beer company, Bavaria, by SAB Miller in 2005 for \$3.5 billion. This is coupled with greater attention being given in Colombia to promoting tourism by drawing attention to colourful yearly carnivals in many of the major cities as well as a variety of conferences and events which take place in one of Colombia's tourist sites, Cartagena. However, despite economic growth and increased foreign investment, unemployment in Colombia is still in double figures, and at the end of 2006 rose from 11.5% to 12.7% (National Colombian Statistics, p.5). Here, it is worthwhile to refer to Brown et al (2003:111), who make the point that employability is a two way process, in the sense that opportunities need to exist for people who are appropriately qualified. At the moment, it is not possible to say if there are problems with appropriate vacancies for the population, or if workers are not sufficiently well qualified.

1.2 Colombia – The people

The official language of Colombia is Spanish and the vast majority of its 42 million inhabitants speak this as their first language. However, almost one and a half million claim to be of indigenous descent (Government census, 2005 p.2) and speak one or more of the 79 American Indian languages that are spoken by different ethnic tribes in Colombia (in Altablero, no.37, it is stated that there are 65 Amerindian languages spoken by 400,000 people). In addition, there are just over four million people who are of African descent, of whom approximately 60,000 live on the archipelago of San Andres, Providencia and Santa Catalina, and speak a form of creole based on English, and Spanish (Velez-Rendon, 2003:186). Accordingly, Colombia has a rich ethnolinguistic and cultural capital which is reflected in bilingual programmes in some areas of the country which seek to maintain their cultural heritage.

The insecurity that Colombians have been subjected to over the last fifty years or so has left its mark on the mobility of the population. It is estimated that between two, and three and a half million people have been displaced by the violence (UNICEF) and 49.2% of the population lives below the poverty level. (This is reflected by the way in which zones in cities are stratified for paying the services of electricity, water and gas; there are six "status" levels, with "one" being the lowest and "six" the highest.) These, and other factors, have had ramifications for the school population so that in 2004 only 55% of the school population were staying to finish secondary school (UNESCO).

1.3 Colombia – current levels of English in education

The upper classes, those that belong to "status" levels of 4, 5 and 6, generally send their children to private schools which, increasingly, offer bilingual education in English or have intensive English classes (however, there are also private bilingual schools which function in German, French and Italian, and are part funded by the respective governments of the countries where these languages are spoken). A growing number of these schools enter students for EFL exams provided by UCLES (often requiring that they pass the First Certificate Exam) or the American suite of EFL exams such as TOEFL. The passing of these exams demonstrates a level of competence in a second language equivalent to B2 (advanced independent user) as set out in the Common European Framework for Language, which is described thus:

Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with

native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and Independent disadvantages of various options. (2005:24)

At present, experience suggests that many students at these schools not only achieve this level, but actually exceed it. On the other hand, students that come from the other “status” levels not only fail to reach this level of English, but are not even close to achieving the previous level of English (B1), described below, which the NBP has set as the aim for students leaving state schools in 2019: *Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. (2006:24)*

In 2005, to provide a benchmark by which to plot progress of the provision of the NBP, a sample of 3,759 students in 8th and 10th grade at state schools in 11 departments in Colombia, and 3,422 teachers were given a diagnostic test in English. This was administered by the National Ministry of Education in conjunction with the British Council and its findings were worrying; results showed that only 6.4% of the students in the year prior to leaving school had the B1 level of English, while only 10.5% of the teachers had the necessary level of English to teach to this standard (<http://www.minieducacion.gov.co/1621/article-97594.html>). This led Jan Van de Putte, ELT manager at the British Council, Bogota, to comment that the level of English in Colombia was “appalling” (Moloney in the Guardian Weekly, 17th November, 2006) . But why is this so? Students tend to receive two or three hours a week of English instruction from 6th grade which means that they receive approximately 720 hours of language instruction at secondary school. The Minister of Education claims that this is sufficient for students to reach the intended B1 level of competence so obviously, it is suggested, something is going wrong in the class (Altablero op.cit p.2E). The survey which was conducted of the teachers seems to provide a basis on which the Minister made this observation. First, there is their insufficient command of English but, more to the point, it was found that while many of them have a significant amount of teaching experience (between 15 and 20 years), they may only have two or three years experience of teaching English. However, in addition to the information put forward in Altablero, there are also several other factors that should be taken into consideration. First, there are the conditions in which lessons are held; there tend to be between 40 and 45 students in a classroom which may not have a tape-recorder and the teacher has access to limited resources. This condition is not entirely amenable to developing communicative skills in a foreign language and the point made here is echoed by Valencia Giraldo, who writes specifically about the state school context in Colombia:

Considering that public school students spend only a few weekly hours dedicated to ‘learning’ the language in conditions that are, in most cases, not conducive to language learning, the proficiency that they achieve in English is unlikely to provide them with access to job opportunities. (2006:8)

In addition, it has been suggested that “two factors responsible for the low levels of participation in secondary education in Latin American countries are loss of interest on part of parents and students because of high repetition levels and perception that the quality and relevance of secondary education is slow” (World Bank, 2005:48). These points are synthesized by Velez-Rendon, who points out that as well as these, there are other social factors which limit the success of EFL teaching in state schools, such as “gang violence, lack of support and resources, overcrowded classrooms, lack of adequate space and quality materials, and low morale” (Velez-Rendon, 2003:192).

It is against this backdrop of teachers that do not have a high level of English, who are not always qualified to teach English, students who are not interested in learning English and classrooms which are over populated and often under equipped, along with social issues such as homelessness and poverty, and cultural issues such as indigenous minorities that speak Amerindian languages or sectors of the population that speak a creole form of language that the National Ministry of Education is asking LEAs to implement the National Bilingual Programme. In order to consider how this is being done it is now necessary to appreciate the educational structure of Colombia, after which I will set out my rationale for providing a critical account of the regulation and provision of the NBP.

1.4 Colombia – Education

The Colombian education system is formally decentralised in the new constitution of 1991 and greater specification of the role of the government in Education is provided in the decrees and laws which, together, are known as the General Education Law. This law sets out how education is to be conducted by providing specific guidelines on curriculum issues and the governance of schools. Amongst other issues, it states that education is stratified according to age with one year in Pre-school nine years in “Basic” education (five in Primary and four in lower Secondary), and then two years of “Medium” Education (being the last two years of school) before going onto “Superior” Education, which includes Colleges of Technology and Universities. It also states that the minimum school leaving age is 15, which should provide students with the opportunity to complete “Basic” Education (Article 19 Law 115 and Article 67 of the Colombian Constitution of 1991).

Concerning the decentralization of education, the LEAs need to apply for certification based on criteria which were initially set out in Decree 2886 of 1994, but were amended by Law 715 of 2001. A summary of this update can be found in the World Bank document of 2005. With regard to this, and comparing Colombia to other countries in the region, Carnoy (2002:299) writes “reforms in other countries, such as Colombia, shifted gears quickly, but for a different reason. Without waiting to learn the lessons of the finance-driven educational reforms, municipalities and teachers changed the decentralization reform to make it more competitive and equality driven”. Here, it seems that Carnoy is echoing a National Ministry of Education article in Altablero no.8, namely that “... resources should take into account the population that has been seen to and that which needs to be seen to, the distribution between the urban and rural population, that is, equality and efficiency” (my translation) (<http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/article-87441.html>). In addition to the budgetary implications here, the Ministry adds that there are three other purposes in amending the Law 60 of 1993 (which Decree 2882 is based on). These are to take the process of decentralization one step further, clarify the responsibilities between different levels of government, and provide educational institutions with better tools to serve the needs of the community. These factors point to, once again, inherent difficulties in instigating the National Bilingual Programme.

2. Approach to analyzing the National Bilingual Programme

To foreshadow some of the complexities of analyzing the NBP, particularly its implementation, it is tempting to refer to Foucault in Ball when he writes “I wouldn’t want what I may have said or written to be seen as laying any claims to totality..... I am still working and don’t yet know whether I am going to get anywhere” (Ball, 1995:255). It has already been suggested that there is a myriad of factors which needs to be taken into account here, and the ongoing nature of the Ministry of Education having to convince LEAs to implement the programme does little to facilitate the analysis of this policy (see section 2.5).

In setting out where the policy stands with regard to educational theories, I am more than aware of the observation that Parelius and Parelius (1987:14) make when discussing Consensus Theory and Conflict Theory that “no set of concepts is sufficient in itself to illuminate and organize all the complexities of social life”. Instead, I am employing a more pragmatic approach to critical policy analysis and will attempt to incorporate as many variables as possible. Ball suggests that:

Abstract accounts tend towards tidy generalities and often fail to capture the messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict, compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism in the policy process. It is easy to be simple, neat and superficial to gloss over these awkward realities. (1990:9)

Experience of education in Colombia suggests that even when LEAs and schools are willing to put policy (vis. The National Bilingual Programme) into practice, there may be factors which delay or hinder this. Large LEAs have various Local Education Academic Centres, known by their acronym CADEL in Spanish to liaise with schools and provide guidance on the provision of policy. There are about 10 of these in Bogota, and the one responsible for implementing the NBP in the suburb of Usaquen has selected a new school to serve as a pilot project. However, while this has not received sufficient textbooks, the teachers are undergoing training in applying the grading criteria, there is no written curriculum for English and parts of the school are still being constructed, there is an incredibly positive approach to implementing the National Bilingual Programme within the school and the community (Note 1).

It is obvious, then, that a comprehensive framework needs to be employed when analyzing policy; the more factors which are included, the more complete the analysis will be. Taylor et al go some way towards establishing a framework of factors to be considered when analyzing policy by putting forward six vignettes, namely that;

- 1) Policy is more than text,
- 2) Policy is value laden,
- 3) Policies exist in context,
- 4) Policy is a state activity,
- 5) Education policies interact with policies in other fields, and,
- 6) Policy implementation is never straightforward.

(Taylor et al, 1997:15-17)

However, they do so without taking into consideration the effects of globalization or the myriad of factors present in a developing country, such as Colombia. As a viable alternative, I would suggest that both Dale and Vidovich put forward conceptual frameworks which allow for the best analysis of the NBP. Dale, in his “Governance of Education” diagram (1997), provides a general framework which includes the “three forms of what is usually referred to as ‘state intervention’” (ibid: 275). These are regulation, funding and provision. By analyzing the National Bilingual Programme under these headings, the complexity of it will become a little clearer. This is to be complemented by the conceptual

framework set out by Vidovich (2001) who, under the headings of “Context of Influence”, “Context of Policy Text Production” and “Context of Practice/effects” sets out questions (see appendix) for the policy analyst that are wide ranging and refer to many variables which influence the procedures of regulating and implementing policy. She does this by “borrowing” from modernist and postmodernist approaches to education and then adapting elements of the policy cycle of Bowe, Ball and Gold (1992) to put forward “a conceptual framework with a focus on contexts of influence, policy text production and practices/effects” (Vidovich, 2001:12). In doing so, she provides some “specialized ‘tools’ for policy analysis” which seem to go somewhat towards filling the “large conceptual tool kit” which Parelius and Parelius call for (1987:14).

2.1 Funding of the National Bilingual Programme

Little reference is made to sources of funding for the NBP in the literature, but some is available from the National Ministry of Education for the training of some teachers through institutions such as the British Council. In addition, the National Ministry of Education provides funds for provision of teaching materials such as computer software and audio visual learning aids. The budget for this more than doubled between 2005 and 2006, increasing from 650 million pesos to 1,750 million pesos (Note 2.). But most of the funding comes directly from the LEAs and is currently being used to increase the teachers’ level of English at language courses at university or language institutes and enter them for the Cambridge First Certificate exam as well as send them on training courses at local universities. However, there are not sufficient funds to continue entering teachers for the First Certificate language exam and the NME is currently developing in-house exams, which are to be internationally validated, to assess whether or not candidates meet the required B1 level upon leaving school or the B2 level for leaving university. In addition, concern has been raised that the budget for the NBP in the Ministry and the LEAs is not sufficient and this could have negative repercussions for the full provision of the policy.

2.2 Context of Influence

The National Bilingual Programme largely addresses the need to improve the level of English at school and, by extension, in the work place. It seems that this is largely due to the belief that in order to succeed in a globally competitive world, it is a command of English which is essential. This point was made by Hernando Jose Gomez, one of the Colombian negotiators with USA when designing the terms of the Free Trade Agreement which was signed in 2006, who suggests that bilingualism should be high on the agenda of Colombia in the forthcoming years in order to improve its competitiveness in the global arena, and points to the success of India in attracting business as a result of having qualified, bilingual workers (Altablero no. 37 p. 15). He is accompanied by five other leaders of industry who, on the same page, underline the importance of workers having a basic knowledge of English in the face of the pressures of globalization. Some LEAs, notably those of Cartagena and Huila, already seem to be acting on this and have developed programmes specifically with a view to preparing students to work in tourism when they leave school (Altablero no. 37 p12/13 and p16/17). These points are a reflection of the observation that “the quality of a nation’s education and training system is seen to hold the key to future economic prosperity” (Brown and Lauder, 1997:172) and “...another consequence of globalization (is) the tendency to treat languages as economic commodities... individuals who command two languages are attractive to businesses competing in multiple, or multilingual markets” (Block, D and Cameron 2002:7).

The promotion of foreign investment in the economy and development of trade with other nations is also what motivated Chile to develop a similar programme named “English Opens Doors”, where the Chilean government expects all “elementary and high school students to be able to pass a standardized listening and reading test a decade from now” (Rohter in New York Times, 9th December, 2004). Like Colombia, this has just been started and has a ten year time frame. However, it differs from the National Bilingual Programme in several respects. First, Chile does not have decentralised education, so the English Opens Doors programme is being introduced uniformly by the Ministry of Education. Secondly, it is able to attract volunteers from the United States to help teach, thereby providing native speakers of English to act as role models (this strategy does not seem to have been considered by the National Ministry of Education in Colombia, but it could be that the violent reputation that Colombia unfortunately has would deter many potential volunteers). Thirdly, Chile does not seem to have the same number of ethnic tribes speaking Amerindian languages as are found in Colombia (Note 3). As a result, and by only addressing improving English, it avoids some of the confusion in implementing its language policy that Colombia has to deal with.

2.3 Context of Policy Text Production

Regulation of the National Bilingual Programme can be traced to a combination of the NME putting into effect some of the requirements of the National Constitution of 1991, the General Law of Education of 1994 and also a perceived need for Colombians to have a good command of English because of the effects of globalization. But this does not account for why the programme was launched in 2004 and not before. One reason that may account for the timing of its launch is that the National Bilingual Programme seems to have its antecedents in the programme entitled “Bilingual Bogota” (*Bogota Bilingue* in Spanish) which was introduced in 2001 by the current Minister for Education, who was then

working for the Bogota Local Education Authority. *Bogota Bilingue* was officially launched in 2003 (note 4), but was not fully taken up until 2006, when it was launched again with the backing of Jose Abel Valoyes (note 5) a councilor on the city council. It would therefore seem that the naming, if not the content and provision of the National Bilingual Programme is based on an earlier, smaller scale bilingual programme which was devised with the needs of the capital in mind. Needless to say, in a country with diverse regional, class and cultural differences it would be necessary to make changes to the provision of the programme in order to satisfy local conditions, and this is what the regulation of the National Bilingual Programme contemplates. However, in doing so its “national” nature starts to become fragmented as LEAs which take it up interpret policy so it is best suited to local conditions.

The NBP places a great deal of emphasis on the development of English as the second language in Colombia and barely mentions other languages. But for some stakeholders foreign languages should be valued and included in the bilingual programme and it has been suggested that, as German, French and Mandarin are also of importance for the workforce these should not be neglected at school (Note 6). But of greater concern is the situation of the speakers of Amerindian languages. In issue no.37 of *Altablero*, under the heading ‘Advances in indigenous bilingualism’ we find the comment “in addition to strengthening quality, breadth and efficiency, bilingualism is being implemented in educational processes developed for indigenous people through the teaching of their own language and the introduction of Castilian as a second language” (2005:18 my translation). Two issues are raised here. One is that, unlike instances of juxtaposing the term ‘bilingual’ with ‘English’, there is clear, if limited reference to how bilingual education will be provided for speakers of Amerindian languages. The other point is that no reference is made to the learning of English by these speakers. In other words, it appears that bilingual education for the Amerindian speaking section of the population is different to the rest of the population of Colombia. This is yet another observation that serves to query the validity of the ‘bilingual programme’ being prefaced with the adjective ‘national’

2.4 Regulation of the National Bilingual Programme

Although the genesis of the NBP can be found in the National constitution of 1991 and the General Law of Education of 1994, its aims have developed in two or three important ways beyond what is stated in these documents. It has moved beyond the General Education Law (Law 115) of 1994, where students in Primary and Secondary school must acquire reading and conversation skills in a **foreign** language (Note 7) (my emphasis) to now be in English. Furthermore, there are now language attainment levels that need to be reached, which were not specified before, and the final goal that Colombians should be bilingual by 2019. And yet, as has been mentioned, Colombia already has sections of its population that are receiving bilingual education. This point is clearly recognized in the General Law of Education, where we find “the teaching of the ethnic groups with their own linguistic tradition will be bilingual, being based on the mother tongue of the respective group.” (my translation) (Note 8). There is therefore uncertainty among educators in schools, CADEL and LEAs as to what the NME intends with its call for bilingual education. Is the rest of the population to be educated in the same way as the indigenous groups? If it is to be different, how will it be different? Will the indigenous groups need to learn a third language in order to comply with the other injunction of the NBP to learn English? It is this, the aim to provide bilingual education without a clear indication of what is meant nor how this is to take place which is the most contentious aspect of the NBP and will be commented on in more detail in section 2.6.2.

These changes, and the justification for them, are not presented in a single document “due to the continuous changes and additions that the program faces through time” (Note 9). Instead, details of the National Bilingual Programme are found in three documents: in two Ministry of Education circulars entitled “Information about the National Bilingual Programme” and “Education: Vision 2019 – National Bilingual Programme” as well as the Ministry of Education publication “Altablero no. 37”, which can be accessed on Internet. The last of these is, in many respects, the most complete document concerning the NBP as it contains a letter from the Minister of Education (in English and Spanish) and articles (some of which are in English and Spanish and others are just in Spanish) which:

- a) Postulate the need to be bilingual,
- b) Set out the current situation concerning the level of English among students and teachers,
- c) Explain the targets which the National Ministry of Education has set,
- d) Provide a transcript of a discussion of the issues involved in the bilingual programme between a language consultant and a member of the Centre for Research and Development in Education at the University of Los Andes,
- e) Give some examples of how the programme is being implemented in some LEAs and
- f) Relate advances in bilingual education for the indigenous population of Colombia.

But all these documents share a common purpose, namely to highlight the need to learn English to an internationally recognized standard and provide bilingual education both in English for the majority of the population and also among the indigenous peoples. This is encapsulated in *Altablero*:

.... The purpose of the programme is to respond to national needs in relation to English, to train teachers and students of primary, secondary and higher education so that they will be able to meet the challenges of a bilingual environment, and to promote and protect the use of other languages in border areas, ethnic minority languages and Afro-Colombian groups. With respect to proficiency in English, the aim is to ensure that the actors of the educational system develop communicative competence at levels which are classified as intermediate and sufficient at international level. (Altablero, no.37, 2005 page 3E)

But what is meant by “national needs in relation to English”? Does the whole workforce need to be bilingual? If it were to be, would this solve the unemployment problem? And what or where is the “bilingual environment”? What are the challenges that need to be faced? And can they really be faced with an intermediate or sufficient level of proficiency in English? To what extent can all the teachers in primary, secondary and higher education be trained to provide an education in English for their respective students? Can a language policy set targets for the teaching and learning of a foreign language (English) as well as set out to “promote and protect” the use of Creole and Amerindian languages? The aims of the programme are many, but so are the questions which they raise.

2.5 Provision of the National Bilingual Programme

In accordance with the statutes of the General Law of Education of 1994 the National Ministry of Education is only able to suggest policy to certified LEAs, and it is up to each one of these to decide when and how it is to implement it. This is indicative of the trend discussed by Jessop from government to governance (2000:9). And in the case of Colombia there are several reasons as to why policy needs to be sufficiently flexible to cater for different variables. Many of these have been alluded to, but there are several others. One is that there are variations in levels of funding, in the sense that the cost of educating a child in the capital is different to that of educating one in the tropical region of Choco (Altablero, no.8). This influences the size of the budget for each LEA. Another variable is that of appropriateness of teachers for the subjects they are teaching. Due to teacher shortages, at times teachers are asked to teach a subject that they have not been trained to teach. Furthermore, there is the ethnic/linguistic composition of the school population which exerts an influence on the way in which policy is interpreted and put into effect. There are some areas where all the students have Spanish as their mother tongue, others where there are students that speak a creole version of English and others that speak an Amerindian language. In other words, as each LEA undertakes to implement the National Bilingual Programme, it will take into account a variety of factors in order to decide how best to apply the policy. This observation is similar to that made by Vidovich, who points out that there is a difference between the formulation of a policy and its implementation, and she refers to Malen (1994) when she mentions that people involved in implementing a policy adapt it for their environment (2001:2). On the one hand this facilitates policy being adapted to local conditions, but on the other it results in a lack of consistency of policy implementation on a national basis.

At the moment eighteen of the 78 certified LEAs are in the process of implementing the NBP, and it is hoped that a further fifteen will join the scheme next year. On a positive note, the largest LEA in Colombia, that of Bogota, recently adhered to the programme. But it must also be born in mind that when an LEA adopts a policy, the form in which it is done and the enthusiasm with which it is implemented is largely a matter of the personal commitment to the policy from the leader of the LEA (Note 10) . In addition, practicalities and common sense dictate that the policy cannot be implemented in its entirety to all the school in the LEA. An example is the implementation of the NBP in Bogota. As mentioned, the LEA has recently decided to implement the policy so it has contacted the CADEL for each of the areas into which Bogota is divided. The CADEL for the area of Usaquen has decided to run a pilot scheme with one school to introduce the NBP, and is currently contacting local private bilingual schools to obtain advice on how to develop a language policy in order to implement the NBP, make the most of its resources and develop the language teaching skills of its teachers. The advice which the school receives in Bogota, will probably not be the same as that received by a state school on the Caribbean coast of Colombia.

2.6 Context of Practice/effects

2.6.1 Stage 1 of the National Bilingual Programme: 2004 to 2010

Many linguists have written on factors which need to be taken into account when developing a second or foreign language programme. These include factors such as theories of second language acquisition, curriculum design, classroom pedagogy and means of evaluation. A far from exhaustive example of these would be Stern (1983), Richards and Rodgers (1986), Spolsky (1989), Robinson (1998) and Baker (1996). Some of these are more prescriptive than descriptive, but I would suggest that those put forward by Baker (1996) are the most practical. He suggests that there are ten elements that need to be addressed when teaching a second language. These are:

- (1) A theory of what constitutes a second language
- (2) A theory of how children and adults best learn a language
- (3) The definition of second language classroom goals.

- (4) A language syllabus.
- (5) The form of classroom activities.
- (6) The role taken by the teacher.
- (7) The role taken by the learner.
- (8) The materials and facilities which exist in and out of the classroom.
- (9) The forms of assessment.
- (10) The contexts of second language learning.

(Baker, 1996:278-281)

As a result of the survey undertaken by the NME and the British Council in 2005 of the teachers, it was noted that many had a lack of understanding of these issues. Accordingly the LEAs, at times based on the recommendation of the Ministry of Education, work in cooperation with either universities or language institutions, such as the British Council, to send teachers on training courses locally such as the In Service Certificate for English Language Teachers (ICELT), through an immersion programme in San Andres – the Programme of Permanent Teacher Training (PFPD as it is known by its acronym in Spanish) or to England for professional development (Altablero no. 37 pp 10 and 3E). It is intended that teachers who take part on these courses provide feedback and training sessions to their peers in a ‘snowball’ effect.

There now appears to be a set of clear guidelines from the Ministry of Education to the LEAs on how to improve the way in which they teach English as a Second Language (at least in schools, though it seems that little reference is made to University level education). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has negotiated with 21 different language institutes in various regions of the country to provide language classes for the teachers at a discount (Altablero no. 37 p.20), in addition to which it has provided websites where students and teachers can practice and improve their vocabulary. Additionally, the British Council is playing a leading role in the provision of the programme as it works with the Ministry and other local organizations in the development of standards, evaluating, training of teacher trainers, teacher training and accreditation (Note 11). However, at the end of the day it is the LEA or CADEL that needs to choose which local educational organization it should recur to in order that schools and teachers receive instruction in theories of second language acquisition, curriculum design, second language pedagogy and evaluation processes as well as means to improve the level of English of the teachers. The LEAs, then, provide advice on implementing the NBP at a local level, taking into consideration local needs and resources and, although there are differences in terms of the quality of advice which is given, there do appear to have been significant developments in teachers’ level of English and their ability to teach English.

It therefore seems that a serious attempt is being made by the National Ministry of Education, in consultation with Local Education Authorities, local higher educational establishments and the British Council to improve the quality of language teaching at school and university. No doubt it is hoped that as the level of English among teachers and the methodology employed by them improves, so students will be more likely to first, apply themselves in class and secondly, have a better level of English. From a linguistic point of view, this may seem somewhat optimistic. Baker suggests that “where children receive a half an hour second language lesson per day for between five and twelve years, few students become functionally fluent in the second language” (1996:179), and he goes on to say “mainstream education rarely produces fully bilingual children (ibid:180). However, he adds that sometimes a second language is learnt to a high standard when “motivation is high, when economic circumstances encourage the acquisition of a trading language” (ibid: 180). In other words, it is not just improving the level of English among teachers and the methodology that they use which is needed here, but also a tangible need for workers to speak English when employed in many organizations and a positive learning environment in the school as well as a decrease in the harsh living conditions that some members of the school population have.

2.6.2 Stage 2 of the National Bilingual Programme: 2010 to 2019

Once students have achieved a “basic level” of English, we are informed by the Minister of Education that they will be prepared to start receiving instruction in English from the pre-school level (Altablero no. 37 pp 2/2E). Is this to be the first stage of the ontogeny of bilingualism in Colombia? How will the curriculum be organized? Will teachers be sufficiently trained and how will the students be evaluated in bilingual criteria?

The only reference in the Ministry of Education literature on the NBP to bilingual education is that which draws attention to the need to develop students’ appreciation of other cultures in order to communicate and the need to be bilingual (Altablero no. 37 p.3E), thereby establishing a (tenuous) link between cultural awareness and bilingualism. However, in no communication does it specify how bilingual education is to be differentiated from following the curriculum with English as a second language. As with many elements of the National Bilingual Programme, it appears that it is up to each LEA to decide how it is to organize schools to provide bilingual education. As a point of

reference, they may want to consult Baker, who enumerates 10 types of bilingual education (1996:175). Six of these refer to providing bilingual education for ethnic minorities and the other four for those of the majority language. In the Colombian context (except those areas with ethnic minorities) it would seem that “Bilingual Education in Majority Languages” would be the most appropriate, where bilingual education is provided through “the international language (being) used as a medium of instruction alongside the native language” (ibid:194). But according to Altablero no.37, subject teachers need only have an A2 level of English (Altablero no. 37 p.4), which is below the level of English which is expected of students. As such, it does not seem that the National Ministry is contemplating the teaching of other subjects through the medium of English. It may well be that the second stage of the NBP will only differ from the first stage in the sense that the students will be educated about the culture of English speaking nations. Does this constitute bilingual education? I believe not, if for no other reason than that there is not an evaluative mechanism that can quantify the degree of bilingualism of an individual by assessing their degree of knowledge of other cultures. Bilingual education is notoriously difficult to offer and even more so to assess. Lam refers to studies of bilingual programmes and notes that when evaluation criteria were applied, only between 2 and 22% of the programmes which had been considered were considered worthy of additional analysis due to serious flaws in the bilingual education that was being offered, or the structure of the programme (Lam, 1992:183/4).

In order to assess whether or not students are attaining an appropriate level of English, the NME has decided that the Common European Framework of Reference for Language be used as the evaluative tool. This provides criteria for evaluating a variety of language skills as well as an overall description of language ability. As a tool for evaluating communicative competence this is all very well, but it does not evaluate the degree of bilingualism of an individual – and the two are far from being the same (see Hamers and Blanc, 1989:16/17).

3. Conclusion

By making use of a combination of concepts put forward by Dale (1997) and Vidovich (2001), the critical description of the National Bilingual Programme presented in this paper considers and gives some order to factors that influence the regulation and provision of policy in a developing country which is motivated by the global economy. Although this provides an indication of some of the issues that stakeholders are confronting or need to address, it does not develop in sufficient detail the decentralized nature of education in Colombia nor the attitudinal factors mentioned by Ball when discussing the policy process, which can play a significant role in the provision of policy. It also needs to be born in mind that, because of the disperse and ongoing nature of implementing the National Bilingual Programme, conclusions about the efficacy of its provision can only be tentative at best. With this proviso, it can be noted that the Ministry of Education of Colombia has put forward an ambitious National Bilingual Programme so that Colombians, when they leave education, will have an internationally recognized level of competence in English by 2010, and be ‘bilingual’ by 2019. Although this has led to improved levels of English in some areas, its very name seems to be open to misinterpretation. The aim of improving the level of English among Colombians in order to cope with increased business conducted in English caused by globalization is a valid one. And, just as in the case of Chile, an acceptable time frame, bearing in mind the current level of English of teachers and their knowledge of EFL techniques needs to be set. However, due to the decentralized nature of education in Colombia, the time frame seems a little overambitious, in addition to which the use of the term “bilingual” seems to be insufficiently considered from a linguistic point of view in terms of its concurrent provision in majority language contexts and areas of Amerindian or Creole speakers. Much of this could be avoided by following the example of Chile by giving the policy a more ‘neutral’ term and having more funding, resources and incentives to improve the level of English at school and university. But it also seems that if students are to achieve high levels of English, other non-educational factors also need to be improved, such as the living conditions of lower status families and the degree of security in schools for these students.

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Notes

Note 1. I have visited the pilot project school on several occasions and spoken to students, teachers and administrators. Despite the lack of resources and ongoing nature of designing the curriculum, improving the level of English of the teachers and their awareness of EFL methodology, the enthusiasm with which all member of the school have embraced the policy is astounding.

Note 2. "Information about the National Bilingual Programme" National Ministry of Education

Note 3. "Los Mapuche de Chile" <http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r27020/id42.htm>

Note 4.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/colombia-events-reports-of-past-events-english-language-teaching-bogota-bilingue-launch.htm>

Note 5. http://www.concejobogota.gov.co/contenido.asp?id_sec=200&id=2887371&mode=ver_hoja

Note 6. Luis Guillermo Plata, Director of Proexport on p.1/15 of Altablero no. 37

Note 7. Ley General de Educacion 1994, articulo 21(m) and articulo 22 (l)

Note 8. Ley General de Educacion, page 35

Note 9. Personal correspondence with Juan Carlos Grimaldo, Director of the Nacional Bilingual Program

Note 10. Personal discussion with an academic consultant with the Ministry of Education

Note 11. "Information about the National Bilingual Programme" published by the Ministry of Education

Appendix

A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Policy

Vidovich (2001:15-18)

Context of Influence

What struggles are occurring to influence the policy?

Are global influences and trends evident in this policy domain?

Are there international influences being brought to bear? If so, which are the key nation-states involved?

How are global and international influences operating?

To what extent are global and international level influences mediated within the nation-state?

What are the prevailing ideological, economic and political conditions?

Who are the policy elite and what interests do they represent?

Which other interest groups are attempting to influence policy?

Which interests are most/least powerful and why?

Over what time period did the context of influence evolve before the policy was constructed?

Context of policy text production

What struggles are occurring in the production of the policy text?

When did the construction of the policy text begin, and 'why now'?

Which interest (stakeholder) groups are represented in the production of the policy text and which are excluded?

What processes are used to construct the policy text and why?

What compromises are made between the different interest (stakeholder) groups and how are they achieved?

Whose interests are the policy intended to serve?

What are the dominant discourses of the policy text and what discourses are excluded?

What is the stated intention or purpose of the policy?

Are there any 'hidden' agendas?

Which values are reflected in the policy?

What are the issues that constitute the focus of the policy, and do they relate to global/international policy agendas?

What are the key concepts of the policy?

What is the format of the policy and why?

What is the language of the policy and why?

Are there inconsistencies and contradictions in the policy text?

Who is the intended audience of the policy text?

How accessible or understandable is the policy text to the audience?

Are the steps for 'implementation' set out as part of the policy text?

Is the 'implementation' funded'?

Is there a specified mechanism to evaluate the policy?

Context of practice/effects

What struggles are occurring over the policy practices/effects?

Is this policy being practiced in a wide variety of localized contexts?

How different are the policy practices between, and within, different localized sites?

Are global/international influences evident in the policy practices at local levels?

Who *can* access the policy and who *does* access it?

How open is the policy to interpretation by practitioners?

How well is the policy received?

Who put the policy into practice?

What processes are used to put the policy into practice and why?

To what extent is the policy (actively or passively) resisted?

Is resistance collective or individual?

To what extent is the policy transformed with individual institutions?

How predictable were the policy practices/effects?

Are practitioners at the local level empowered by the policy?

Are practitioners at the local level able to respond rapidly to meet localized needs in the policy domain?

What are the unintended consequences?

What is the impact of the policy on different localized groupings based on class, gender, ethnicity, rurality and disability?

Are there winners and losers?