

# Education and Language Policy in Colombia: Exploring Processes of Inclusion, Exclusion, and Stratification in Times of Global Reform

Políticas educativas y lingüísticas en Colombia: procesos de inclusión, exclusión y estratificación en tiempos de reforma educativa global

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This paper examines the National Bilingual Program in connection with other education and language reforms in Colombia and some of the processes of inclusion, exclusion, and stratification that accompany current school reforms. The author outlines some patterns that have accompanied language innovations in the country and highlights some interconnected processes that seem to be favored in international reform and are reflected in current national policy agendas; namely, the externalization of policy discourses; the instrumentalization of languages; the stratification of groups, languages and cultures; and the standardization and marketization of foreign language teaching and learning. This paper attempts to demonstrate that processes of inclusion, exclusion and stratification through schooling are favored not only through the overt exercise of power and control, but also through the introduction of new discourses, policies, and practices.

*Key words:* National Bilingual Program, language policies, education reform

Este artículo analiza el Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo en conexión con otras reformas educativas y lingüísticas promovidas en Colombia y distintos procesos de inclusión, exclusión y estratificación que las acompañan. El autor esboza algunos patrones que han acompañado distintas reformas educativas y lingüísticas en el país y diversos fenómenos reportados a nivel internacional que ahora se pueden evidenciar en Colombia. Estos incluyen: la “externalización” de discursos, la instrumentalización de las lenguas, la estratificación de grupos, idiomas y culturas, y la estandarización y marketización de las lenguas extranjeras. Este artículo busca demostrar que los procesos de inclusión, exclusión, y estratificación social a través de la escuela son favorecidos no solamente a través del ejercicio del poder y el control de parte del gobierno, sino también mediante la introducción de nuevos discursos, políticas, y prácticas escolares.

*Palabras clave:* Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, políticas lingüísticas, reforma educativa

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## Introduction

Acknowledging the importance of English in the times of competitiveness in the global market, and within the context of different international trade agreements being negotiated with other countries, the national government in Colombia has recently introduced the National Bilingual Program (Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, Colombia 2004-2019). Among other changes, this policy has introduced the notion of bilingualism where local stakeholders previously talked about foreign language teaching and learning, reduced the notion of bilingualism in Colombia to English-Spanish; established the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) as the guiding norm for this reform; and standardized foreign language teaching and learning in the whole educational system.

Motivated by this current situation, and supported by a systematic review of policy documents and literature produced locally and abroad, I will, in this paper, start to analyze this policy in relation to previous and accompanying education and language norms. I will also examine how the new reform favors processes of inclusion, exclusion, and stratification through policy transfer; and what issues and questions emerge as this policy comes into local schools. For this purpose, I will outline some patterns that accompany education and language reforms in Colombia and highlight four interconnected processes that seem to be favored in global language and school reform and are reflected in the National Bilingual Program in Colombia; namely, the externalization of policy discourses; the instrumentalization of language learning; the stratification of languages, groups, and cultures; and the standardization and marketization of foreign language teaching and learning. In this process, I question the notion of bilingualism

that is being adopted in Colombia and outline some of the challenges faced by local actors when international discourses are borrowed, when the foreign supersedes the local, the notion of English as an instrumental tool to access the job market is favored, students in public schools are not given the same conditions existing in the private sector, and the whole school system is shaped for those who are competent in both Spanish and English. In this piece, I will attempt to demonstrate that processes of inclusion and exclusion in times of local and international reform are favored not only through the overt exercise of power and control over educational institutions and actors, but also through the introduction of new discourses, language policies, and school practices.

This exploration is divided into three main sections. It starts with a historic overview of policies in Colombia before the National Bilingual Program was issued; then it continues with a presentation of the adoption of this plan, its stated goals, its areas of intervention and policy tools; and it concludes with a discussion of its actual and potential effects on schools, teachers, and students and the academic community in general.

### Linguistics Policies in Colombia: An Historic Overview

Language policies and reform agendas preceding the National Bilingual Program in Colombia can be traced to the times of the colony. As presented by Zuluaga (1996, as cited by de Mejía, 2004) after the colonization of the “new” continent, Catholic missionaries were effective in imposing their languages, mainly Spanish, Greek, and Latin. Later on, after the independence of the region from Spain two centuries ago, the new ruling elite started to send their children to Europe, which then led towards the importing of

books and ideas associated with languages such as French, German, and English. These moves paved the road to these languages into the country and their association with enlightened ideas and intellectual elites, while indigenous and Creole languages started to be associated with ignorance and underdevelopment.

In more recent developments after World War II, political, economic, and cultural processes associated with what we now know as “globalization” brought about the consolidation of English and French as the most commonly taught languages in Colombia. During these decades, the national government attempted to introduce these languages into the school system through isolated and, to a big extent, improvised policies as part of international political and economic agendas (Zuluaga, 1996, as cited by de Mejía, 2004). For instance, “in 1979, after a visit by the Colombian president to France, a decree was issued, making English compulsory for Grades 6 and 7 and French mandatory for Grades 10 and 11, with a free choice of either English or French in Grades 8 and 9” (de Mejía, 2004, p. 386). That is how foreign languages such as English and French continued to become consolidated in secondary schools in Colombia, while minority languages were not given importance in national policy.

In more recent decades, at least four initiatives would mark the field of foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia: *The English Syllabus*, *The COFE Project*, *the General Law of Education*, and *the Curricular Guidelines for foreign languages*<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This list does not include the so called “Educational Revolution 2002-2006” as, surprisingly, this far reaching and highly influential policy did not explicitly include any strategy connected to foreign language teaching and learning. The new Educational Revolution Plan, 2006-2010, just published in 2008, addressed this omission. Considering this caveat, the Educational Revolution Plans 2002-2006 and 2006-2010 will not be included as a standpoint to the National Bilingual Program, but as complementary to it.

*The English Syllabus* corresponds to a seminal effort to improve foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia. It was proposed in 1982 by the National Ministry of Education in partnership with the British Council and Centro Colombo Americano, two bi-national language, educational, and cultural organizations with a long tradition in Colombia and abroad after World War II (Valencia, 2007a). The plan attempted to address students’ low levels of proficiency; lack of clear and feasible objectives in schools; the need to renovate language teaching and learning; and the absence of updated materials and textbooks. This reform introduced an English syllabus for grades 6-9 and 10-11, called for a communicative approach to language teaching, and encouraged school administrators to consider the possibility of including other languages in their curricula.

Nevertheless, the results of this plan were not as positive as expected. First of all, most school teachers did not have the oral proficiency required by the new approaches, while structural changes such as intensifying the number of classes in schools did not occur. Additionally, teachers were not familiar with these methods and approaches and continued to teach in ways they considered were more appropriate or, as officials in the British Council arguably concluded, resulted more “comfortable” for them (The British Council, 1989, p. 8, as cited by Valencia, 2007a, p. 7). Despite the well grounded rationale behind the reform, an apparent mismatch among the rationale, goals, and strategies of the decision makers, as well as the complex reality and conflicting conditions of the school stakeholders, seemed to have affected the successful implementation of the initiative.

During the early 1990s, and now with a focus on teacher education programs across the country, the government tried what they called ‘Proyecto COFE’ or *Colombian Framework for English (The*

*COFE Project*). As described by Frodden & Correa (2000), this project was carried out in different universities around the country between 1991 and 1996 as part of another bi-national partnership between the governments of Colombia and the UK. The project offered professional development to local teacher educators; provided material resources to promote the use of self-access centers; proposed a framework for the reform of teacher preparation programs; and introduced local university and school stakeholders to mostly U.S.— and U.K.— oriented notions of reflective practice, practitioner research, and autonomy in language learning. This is how different universities started to engage in research with a higher impetus, and began to consider the revision of their curricula according to the new guidelines.

As happened with the *English Syllabus*, the *COFE Project* represented a number of opportunities for the participants, but also implied different complications and misunderstandings. It supported different teacher educators in becoming educational researchers, initiating their own research groups, improving their own teacher education programs, and proposing research studies with a clear impact on school practices (e.g. Usma & Frodden, 2003). But at the same time, the implementation of the project led to difficulties and improvisations when the ideal plan for the transformation of teacher education programs contrasted with the actual university structures, teachers' little familiarity with educational research, limited resources, and insufficient administrative leadership (See McNulty & Usma, 2005). Again, the ideal proposals of the foreign lenders and their traveling libraries (Popkewitz, 2000) contrasted with the unfavorable conditions and conflicting priorities of the local borrowers.

Yet, the nineties not only came with efforts to improve school practices and teacher education programs, but also with a far reaching and unprecedented National Constitution and General Education Law that would reorganize the whole school system and establish specific goals for foreign languages in the country. These policies were part of a transition from a highly centralized, nationally bounded, and Catholic oriented government, to a weakened, competitive, marketized, networked, contested, and, at least officially, lay state (González & Ocampo, 2006; Guadarrama, 2006; Munck, 2005; Ocampo, 2002). In this transition, the National Constitution of 1991 emphasized separation of Church and state, and the education system, whereas the state started to emphasize private capital, decentralization, open markets, individual choice, and competition. These were times when the interests of transnational organizations such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the International Monetary Fund contrasted with bottom up efforts to make economic, social, and educational and language policies more effective for those frequently excluded from the system (Ocampo, 2002). This continuous struggle and resistance would characterize not only the policies adopted after the early nineties, but also its enactment and final outputs (Agudelo-Valderrama, 2006; Lowden, 2004; Ocampo, 2002; Saldarriaga & Toro, 2002).

In this conflicting context, the General Education Law would not only shape the whole school system, but also serve as basis for the different reforms and counter-reforms produced in the last 15 years in the area of language teaching and learning in Colombia (Valencia, 2007a). In essence, the General Law regulated for the public and private as well as formal and informal education, introduced the notion of school

autonomy, opened the possibility for school governance, and granted school communities the ability to define their content and pedagogical processes within a general set of guidelines included in it (Ocampo, 2002, p. 22). Additionally, in its articles 21, 22, and 23, the national policy highlighted the need to learn at least one foreign language starting in elementary school, and included foreign language teaching as another mandatory area in the curriculum (Ministerio de Educacion Nacional, 1994). As stated in the Law: “The capacity to use and understand a foreign language” would become another specific goal in secondary schools (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 1994, article 22).

This is how in 1999, that is, five years after the National Education Law had legislated for foreign languages across the whole system, the national government proposed the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign languages (Lineamientos Curriculares Lenguas Extranjeras) (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 1999). These guidelines attempted to get into the specifics of the National Law in terms of foreign language approaches and methods, but at the same time limited teachers’ exercise of autonomy by establishing the conceptual frameworks within which teachers should exercise their professional discretion (Ocampo, 2002).

Despite the impetus behind these last two reforms, and the public support for the idea of learning another language, research in the field evidenced a number of difficulties at the ground level. Some studies concluded that the school system was not ready to introduce foreign language classes in the both elementary and secondary schools (Cadavid, McNulty & Quinchía, 2004); others agreed on the need to provide public school teachers with better working conditions in order for them to be

able to exercise their professional autonomy and improve their practice (Usma & Frodden, 2003; Usma, 2007); still others declared the little impact that central policies were having on teachers’ practice and students’ learning (Ayala & Álvarez, 2005; Valencia, 2006). A general feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration could be perceived in the field as related to public education. As Valencia (2006) concluded in a study of the times:

Many students feel that success in English language learning is only achieved outside the realm of the public school. The ideas that teachers have about the possibility of learning English in public school contexts are equally pessimistic. There are few resources and difficult working conditions, and the way teachers position the learners also has a direct effect on the attitude of the students; however, teachers, such as those in this case study, do manage to comply [with the policies] (p. 34).

As is evident, the discourse of autonomy and improvement in public education contrasted with the lack of teachers, few materials, limited professional development opportunities, and constraining school structures that conflicted with the policy mandates.

In the meantime, bilingual schools continued to thrive, the existing gap between private and public seemed to widen, and bilingual schools were depicted as the model to follow. As Ordóñez (2004) commented:

[P]arental demand for bilingual education is constantly increasing in Colombia, from the youngest possible age. At present, the model appears widely admired. Furthermore, awareness of the practical advantages of mastering a second language is generalised, and there has been serious interest on the part of policy makers to find ways to provide access to early bilingual education in the public sector (p. 450).

The conditions for the adoption of a new set of discourses and practices coming from

the private sector were given. The road for what later on would become the National Bilingual Program was paved.

### **The National Bilingual Program**

Late in 2005, the Ministry of Education would present the National Bilingual Program 2004-2019, a language policy with no precedents in Colombia. Different from previous projects, this program would constitute a long term, far reaching, and comprehensive policy complemented by a presidential plan called “Educational Revolution” (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2008). It would start to have an influence not only in schools and universities, but also outside the formal education system and, for better or worse, would completely change the way teachers and students perceive foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia.

Three diagnostic studies commissioned to the British Council in Bogotá and carried out in public and private schools in main cities in Colombia in 2005 constituted the basis for this policy<sup>2</sup> (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2005). In the first study, consultants in the British Council evaluated the communicative competence of 3,422 teachers by using the Quick Placement Test administered by Oxford University Press. In the second study, they tested pedagogical and content knowledge of 243 teachers by using the Teaching

Knowledge Test (TKT), a Cambridge University Press product. In the third, the evaluators partnered with agents at ICFES for the application of an instrument that would test 2,467 students in public schools and 1,293 in the private sector, not including bilingual schools.

According to Jan Van De Putte and his team at the British Council in Bogotá, the studies provided enough evidence about the state of the art in Colombia (The Guardian, 2006). They allowed the foreign consultants to conclude that, although teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge was satisfactory as measured by the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT), only 1.8% of the teachers performed in English at an advanced level, 32.8% did at an intermediate, and 65.4% reached a basic, according to the scales proposed in the Common European Framework. Additionally, consultants concluded that only 6.4% of students finishing high school performed in English at an intermediate level, whereas an overwhelming 93.6% did at a basic. No students were found to perform at an advanced level (Ministerio de Educación, 2005). Officials at the Ministry of Education and those at the British Council and Cambridge University Press were ready to propose an improvement plan for the whole country based on this diagnosis.

This is how in 2005 the government proceeded to present the National Bilingual Program with one overarching goal: to make Colombian citizens bilingual in Spanish and English by 2019 and in accordance with international standards (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2005). Additionally, they presented five targeted areas in the implementation, which would include the following actions: 1) developing standards for English teaching and learning; 2) continuously evaluating communicative competence in students as well as inservice and preservice teachers within

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<sup>2</sup> To the best of my understanding, these studies have not been officially published in any peer-reviewed journal in Colombia. What I report here is based on what state officials or agents at the British Council have officially presented in the Ministry of Education’s website. As far as I know so far, no additional information is available about how the participants were selected, how representative the sample was, how data were analyzed, and what procedures were followed to make findings valid and reliable. Despite these methodological flaws, I need to report on these studies, as they are the official basis for the National Bilingual Program.

and outside the formal school system; 3) providing professional development programs for teachers in order to develop their pedagogical knowledge as well as communicative competence in English; 4) supporting the use of new information and communication technologies for the teaching of English; and 5) consolidating bilingual and trilingual models in the different ethnic communities around the country (Cely, 2007). At the same time, the government would designate the British Council in Colombia as the leading implementation agency around the country, but now in cooperation with private transnational companies such as Cambridge University Press, which would be in charge of testing teachers and students, and publishing the materials that would serve as a reference for the plan. Practitioners in the field had hardly faced a similar transformation like the one being experienced with this reform.

The process of making this policy public was combined with the formulation of some complementary regulations. After the publication of the plan in one of the official bulletins (Altablero No 37, October- December, 2005), government officials started to produce the different decrees that would regulate the new system. These policies included Law 1064 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006a), which both dictated the norms for the support and strengthening of non-formal education programs, now denominated “Education Programs for Work and Human Development” (Art. 1), and determined that public monies could go to private institutions provided they were accredited (Art. 2). Additionally, the government also issued Decree 3870 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006b), which “adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching and evaluation” in Colombia (Art. 2); regulated the organization and functioning of foreign language programs

(Art. 3-6); mandated accreditation for language programs offered in universities (Art. 6); and, in a controversial decision, defined that those “Programs offered by organisms of international cooperation (...) would not require any certification” (Art. 7).

In a later phase, started in January 2007, the government would publish the set of standards for elementary and secondary schools based on the recently adopted Common European Framework. As they stated in a press release at the time:

Bogotá, 05 January, 2007

- The National Ministry of Education establishes the standards for competencies for the teaching of English for grades 1 to 11.
- In 2007, the Ministry of Education and ICFES (Colombian Institute for the Promotion of Higher Education) will start the application of tests aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
- It is expected that 50% of the English teachers in the country can reach level B2 by 2010 and 100% by 2019.
- There is an inter-sector strategy for the strengthening of English learning in the productive sector (Ministerio de Educación, 2007. Emphasis added).

In other words, the Ministry of Education had issued a new set of standards for schools, defined standardized tests for students and teachers, established attainment targets for 2010 and 2019, and made the National Bilingual Program a multi sector agenda aligned with productivity needs. The far reaching scope of the plan started to become clear.

This is how, in a couple of years, university and school stakeholders were inundated with standardized models and tests. These included national exams such as Pruebas Saber and ICFES, which continued to test school students, now with a special attention to English; ECAES,

applied to future professionals in public and private universities; First Certificate of English, administered in teacher preparation programs in order to test pre-service teachers' competence before going into the classrooms; and the QPT, MELICET/MET, and TOEFL, among other instruments that tested communicative competence in teachers and the public in general. Additionally, the government adopted standardized models of professional development by embracing the ICELT (In Service Certificate for English Language Teaching) and the TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test), which tested future teachers' professional competence based on normative and foreign models of what school teachers need to know and need to be able to do. As would happen in other countries, standards and tests mainly produced in the private sector began to be the international answer to local problems in schools (see e.g., Hargreaves, 2003; Hargreaves *et al.*, 2001; Stromquist, 2002; Lipman, 2004; Tatro, 2007; Veugelers, 2004; Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008).

At the same time, these new regulations would definitely attempt to redefine the field by introducing a new set of discourses about bilingualism and second languages where teachers and students used to talk about foreign language teaching and learning. The government characterized bilingualism as “the different degrees in which an individual is able to communicate in more than one language or culture” (Ministerio de Educación, 2006d, p. 5), but limited their notion of bilingualism to Spanish and English as the new norm for the coming years. As they clearly stated:

The National Bilingual Program is oriented to educate citizens who are able to communicate into English and may contribute to incorporate the country into the processes of universal communication, global economy,

and cultural aperture, with internationally comparable standards (Ministerio de Educación, 2006c, p. 6. Emphasis added).

So, in a multiethnic and multilingual country, where indigenous languages are usually ignored and silenced in the public space, and less than 2% of the population are able to speak English and Spanish and have the opportunity to interact with others using these two languages (DANE, 2008; de Mejía, 2002; Gamboa, 2007; Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006d), the field of applied linguistics and foreign languages was not only adopting a new set of standards and tests, but also a new way of defining their own work and target population. New discourses and practices associated with “bilingualism,” not “foreign language teaching and learning” would accompany the national reform. As commonly happens in current school reform, a deep change in school practice would start with the adoption of new discourses, notions, and imaginaries (Popkewitz, 2008).

These changes would start to generate immediate reactions throughout Colombia. While analysts tended to agree on the importance of English, the need to improve foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia, and the importance of a coherent plan that could address students' and teachers' needs, a number of local and international leaders questioned the plan (ASOCOPI Newsletter, 2007; Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2005; Revista Internacional Magisterio, March, 2007). Among these voices, some called into question the very adoption of the term “bilingualism” in a country like Colombia (Ayala & Álvarez, 2005; Cárdenas, 2006; Sánchez & Obando, 2008), or criticized its limited notion of Spanish-English bilingualism (de Zárate, 2007). Others became alarmed about its negative effects on the different ethnic groups around the

country (Gómez, 2007), its top down adoption approach that neglected to recognize local knowledge and efforts for school improvement and professional development (González, 2007; Quintero, 2007), or even its dubious viability due to the scant contact Colombian students have with the foreign language (Genesse, 2007). As happened with some of those reforms reviewed in the first section of this paper, the implementation of the National Bilingual Program started to take place in a highly contested atmosphere, which would necessarily shape its actual enactment.

All these critical observations lead us to raise a number of important questions about language and education policy in Colombia. For instance, we may wonder why the national government continues to reinforce the plan despite these local and international concerns; how the National Bilingual Program is connected to other official and unofficial economic, political, and cultural agendas that shape national policy; how global discourses and practices circulate through international policy and are adopted at the national level; how different subgroups of the population are depicted in current education and language policies in Colombia; and what final effects these policies may have on different subsets of the population. These enduring and quite evolving questions in relation to international trends of reform will propel my analysis in the final section of this paper.

### **Linguistic and Education Policy in Colombia and International Reform: Exploring Processes of Inclusion, Exclusion, and Stratification**

In order to answer some of these questions, in the last section of this paper I explore the connection between local and global and

how what happens in Colombia resembles or differs from international trends of language and education reform. For this final purpose, I investigate some international trends that go along with current reforms across countries and help us explain what happens in Colombia. These processes can be conceptualized as the “externalization of transnational discourses”, the “instrumentalization of language learning”, the “stratification of languages, groups, and cultures”, and the “standardization and marketization of foreign language teaching and learning”. In this final section, I elaborate on these matters as a way to contribute to the current discussion in Colombia, contextualize national policy within an international context, and thus explore further implications of current policies.

### **The Externalization and Internalization of Education and Language Discourses**

Scholars in different latitudes explain processes of policy lending and borrowing that take place during the current era, the role that international organizations play in policy transfer, and how processes of inclusion, exclusion, and stratification are favored through education and language policies such as the National Bilingual Program. Drawing on Schriewer (1990), Steiner-Khamsi (2004) referred to the concept of “externalization” to explain how, in the process of making local school systems appear more “competitive”, 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”(p. 203).

And this seems to be case of the National Bilingual Program and most of the language

and education reforms that have preceded it. As explained above, government officials have faced a record of ineffective policies and a scaling external pressure to adopt language policies appealing to “the international community”. In this process, they have decided to borrow a global discourse about “bilingualism”, embraced a European model for language teaching and learning, enforced internationally sound standards and tests, and commissioned transnational organizations such as the British Council and Cambridge University Press for the local implementation. The result is an amalgam of international discourses adopted, adapted, and resisted at the local level, while past efforts and failures are politically resolved by borrowing from others and downgrading the local. As has happened in other countries, this externalization and internalization of discourses and practices have turned the adoption and implementation of the new policy into a highly contested process, one in which external pressures exert an influence over local policy makers, local scholars mostly react against the reform, and school teachers and students are left in the middle of the debate with the intricate task of enacting the policy (see Saldarriaga & Toro, 2002).

The externalization and internalization of discourses and the adoption of international policy rhetoric and practices in Colombia have been connected to the exclusion of local knowledge not only in current but also in past local reforms. In the case of the National Bilingual Program, in the process of formulating the plan the national government discharged the whole responsibility on representatives of foreign organizations such as the British Council, and even though leaders of Colombian universities were called to participate, their voices were silenced and substituted by European views of language, teaching, and learning (Quintero, 2007). This is the main reason

representatives of the most important public universities in the country decided to withdraw from the implementation process, instead of just accepting that their names and institutions be used to authenticate the imposition. Resembling reform efforts in other countries (see e.g., Tatro, 2007; Veugelers, 2004; Zeichner & Ndimande, 2008), Colombian leaders had been expected to validate the program in a top-down decision making process in which foreign actors have controlled the agenda. As we may conclude, and in alignment with international reform trends, the externalization and internalization of policy discourses in the case of reform in Colombia has been accompanied with processes of exclusion and imposition of new discourses. In this process, the local is taken as outdated and obsolete; local knowledge is superseded by foreign, and borrowed discourses are internalized by native policy makers and school stakeholders while taken as the basis for reform.

### **The Instrumentalization of Language Learning**

The externalization of discourses and practices in the presence of international lenders such as the British Council seems to be closely connected to a second phenomenon: the instrumentalization of education and language learning. As presented in the literature (de Mejía, 2006; Lantolf & Sunderman, 2001; Tochon, In press; Valencia, 2007a, 2007b; Ayala & Álvarez, 2005), learning a foreign language may serve at least three sets of different purposes: a humanitarian, intellectual, or cultural goal; a cognitive and language development purpose; and a utilitarian, instrumental or practical objective. From a humanitarian, intellectual, and cultural standpoint, foreign languages allow a better human understanding of “the other”,

the different, and the inaccessible by breaking language barriers and allowing for inclusion based on intercultural sensitivity. From a cognitive or language development angle, a foreign language opens the possibility to know other ways of perceiving the world through language, other alternatives to name what is around us, and develop a more flexible way of reasoning and facing learning and life. Finally, from a utilitarian point of view, a foreign language becomes a tool that serves economic, practical, industrial, and military purposes (see Lantolf & Sunderman, 2001). Learning a foreign language, in this way, loses most of its cultural and cognitive development motivations, and becomes another strategy to build a better resume, get better employment, be more competitive in the knowledge economy (Guile, 2006), or, as Lantolf and Sunderman have clearly explained, even participate in wars taking place overseas.

And the externalization of discourses and practices seems to exclude other possibilities and promote an instrumental view of foreign language learning in relation to terms such as “human capital” and “knowledge economy”. This tends to happen when transnational and local models of “competitiveness” are not only associated with money exchange, economic capital, or trade of tangible goods, but are also connected to the “application of knowledge from any field or source, new or old, to spur economic development”, or what Drucker (1969) referred to as the “knowledge economy” (as cited by Guile, 2006, p. 355). In this new environment, “economic growth” and “competitiveness” do not only, or mainly, depend on possessing and controlling international flows of currency, but on being able to compete with human capital (Becker, 2002). Having this human capital includes possessing information and communication technologies,

innovative knowledge, cutting edge information, creative ideas, and being a competent, healthy, and multilingual individual proficient in at least one of the lingua francas of our time. From this perspective, the recent emphasis that international reform models place on education, and the importance that local reforms grant to technology, flows of information, credentials, English language teaching and learning, standards, tests, and educational regulations are connected to local and transnational productive needs. These are usually determined by economic groups under rational views of education, language, and policy, and are highly emphasized in current economic and social policies (Hargreaves, 2003; Munck, 2005).

As happens in Colombia, these instrumental views of education and policy are tightly connected to particular notions of “development”, “competitiveness”, “human capital”, and “knowledge economy”. These notions shape current policy and public perceptions of formal education and foreign language learning, especially when people see in education and foreign languages a real opportunity to succeed and find a better job. That is how in the process of “inserting” the country into the global economy, proponents of the reform tend to rationalize foreign language learning and reinforce instrumental goals at expense of cognitive and sociocultural rationales. As evidenced in the policy documents reviewed above, the government usually connects bilingualism to big expressions such as “being competitive”, “global economy” or as “the vehicle that we need in order to take substantial advantage of the benefits offered, for example, by the Free Trade Agreement or the new commercial and educational opportunities available abroad” (Ministerio de Educación, 2005). The false illusion of “investing in English” (Valencia, 2007a) as the key for future employment sparks the proliferation of English institutes

that teach “English for specific purposes” and “prepare for the TOEFL,” and then provide high-value-attached credentials required in the job market. As explained by Ayala & Álvarez (2005), the push for foreign languages in Colombia is based on the premise that a foreign language provides status, and that “speaking foreign languages brings about expectations or represents benefits” (p. 16). As we may conclude, processes of inclusion, exclusion, and stratification do not only include and exclude particular groups in society, but also alternative ways of reasoning and perceiving a foreign and local language. This rationalization and instrumentalization of policy and human behavior following economic models of “development” may lead to the instrumentalization of language learning, the reduction of “other” languages to “foreign”, foreign to English, and English to a powerful and highly instrumental tool to be “competitive” in the job market and the “knowledge based economy”.

### **The stratification of languages and cultures**

With the internationalization of discourses and practices and the instrumentalization of education, learning, knowledge, and languages, a third process is evidenced in Colombia: the stratification of languages, groups, and cultures and the systemic exclusion of less powerful groups and individuals. In the case of Colombia, and within the context of the National Bilingual Program, the situation of indigenous languages and cultures becomes more than worrisome. As the last National Census (DANE, 2008) indicates, out of the 44 million people in the country, 1.435.575 inhabitants identify themselves as members of the indigenous, African descendant, or Rom communities that live in Colombia, but

only 44% of them speak their native language<sup>3</sup>. That is, while according to the official data 3.2% of the population in Colombia belongs to these three minorities, only 635.645 persons, or roughly 1.5% of the total population in the country, manifest being bilingual or multilingual in any of their languages *and* Spanish. They usually combine two or more languages in their daily life, but struggle to maintain their linguistic code and culture in a country where Spanish is and has historically been dominant in public, legal, and trade scenarios, and, as presented in the first part of this paper, local minority languages have not been assigned the high value and respect they deserve<sup>4</sup> (de Mejía, 2004; Sanmiguel, 2007).

This is how, in times in which languages are stratified according to their instrumental value in the job market, and languages such as English gain a higher status based on the assumption that they provide better possibilities for employment and traveling, indigenous languages are deemed to be undervalued and disappear (de Zárate, 2007; Sanmiguel, 2007). As de Mejía (2004) illustrates:

“Due to the recent economic opening up of the country in response to globalising and internationalizing tendencies, career advancement is dependent to a large degree on English language proficiency, and bilingual education is seen as the key to foreign language development. Thus, prestigious or ‘elite’ bilingualism has a very high profile

<sup>3</sup> Gamboa (2007) asserted that, out of about 44 million people in the whole country, about one million speak one or more of the 65 Amerindian languages in the country; about 33,000 members of the African descendant communities in Palenque and San Andres and Providencia use Spanish- and English-based Creole varieties, whereas 8,000 of the Rom or Gipsy communities speak Romanés.

<sup>4</sup> Another group of bilinguals in the country are the deaf persons who combine Spanish and Colombian Sign Language (Lengua de Señas Colombiana) in order to communicate with others (Ramírez, 2007). The recent national census shows that barely 1% of the population is classified under this category (DANE, 2008).

among the Colombian middle and upper classes and there is increasing demand for bilingual programmes (especially English–Spanish provision). Parental support for bilingual education is thus very strong and attending a bilingual school is considered to be high status” (p. 392).

Thus, by imposing a particular notion of bilingualism, the National Bilingual Program does not seem to provide a favorable context for these cultural and language minorities; instead, it seems to continue to stratify and under appreciate them. Additionally, this policy seems to contribute to the promotion of “elite bilingualism”, a process that was described by de Mejía (2002) within the context of private bilingual schools, but now seems to expand to the whole nation. As she stated, the concept of “elite bilingualism” applies to a privileged group of people who, “because of life style, employment opportunities or education, need to move frequently from one country to another, or who, because of the multilingual-multinational nature of the organizations they work for, need to interact with speakers of different languages on a daily basis” (p. 41). In the current wave of globalization, members of these elites, even in nations like Colombia, conform to socially and economically privileged groups that attend bilingual schools, work in multinational corporations, travel around the world, and, as French analyst Bourdieu clearly explained, attempt to retain and transform economic, social and cultural capital in order to maintain their position in society (Bourdieu, 1986; 1991).

English as an international language, in this context, represents an asset, especially when the government regulates and sets the stage for those instructed to be “bilinguals” under the new conditions. The processes of exclusion are not just given at the discursive level, but also through a new set of practices that certify and sort students and teachers, place them in

public, private, or bilingual institutions, and offer disparate resources and unequal quality in different school programs. As explained by Valencia (2007a), children are thus placed into different tracks within the global and national job market, paths that may highly determine their future welfare, possibilities for entrance to higher education institutions, and future role in the knowledge economy. Evidence of this creation of elite through the National Bilingual Program has been indirectly acknowledged by the Minister of Education who states that one of the final goals of the plan is having at least 10% of the population bilingual by 2019 (*El Tiempo*, January 28, 2008), not necessarily all students in the private and public sector. As is clear, the stratification of different subsets of the populations depending on their mother tongue and ability to speak English seems to be favored in the new reforms and indirectly acknowledged by government officials.

### **The Standardization and Marketization of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning**

A fourth set of processes associated with the externalization of discourses, instrumentalization of education and language, and the stratification of languages, groups, and cultures can be described as the standardization and marketization of foreign language teaching and learning. In terms of standardization, a review of local and international literature about these matters indicates that national policy follows a rational logic and deficit view of schools and teachers imported from abroad as well. In the United States, where these models have been reinforced in the last decades, educators are commonly referred to as a “relatively low-skill teacher force”, and schools

as loosely coupled and irresponsible organizations where teachers are isolated from each other, hardly respond to policy initiatives, and lack commitment towards school communities (Elmore, 2000, p. 5). From this perspective, the public school system needs to be intervened through the enforcement of a standards-based school reform model justified by the need for control, common parameters, centralization, permanent evaluation, measurable performance, evidence, and finally, rewards and sanctions<sup>5</sup>.

And this seems to be the logic behind the National Bilingual Program and its accompanying reforms. More than ever, the government has called for the enforcement of standards in schools, universities and all types of language programs. Additionally, they have introduced foreign and prepackaged models of professional development that indicate what teachers need to know and be able to do. Undeniably, this standardization of language teaching and learning depicts a lack of trust in teachers, universities and schools, and a move towards uniformity through stringent normalization and control. This standardization is based on the introduction of international models of quality and a move towards certification, accreditation, and credentials that may “prove” individual and institutional ability and capability to teach future teachers, be a “competent” educator, or speak English according to the imported models.

And this move towards standardization has come with a marketization of the field. This is evidenced in the proliferation of private institutions and ad hoc agents that determine what needs to be done in teacher education programs, schools, and language centers; prepare for the

different tests and certifications; administer these tools; and make a profit by selling their different products. These products include the TKT and ICELTS for current and future teachers, the ICFES for school students, or the IELTS, TOEFL or MELICET/MET for the general public. This is how language teaching and learning in Colombia become a matter of meeting a standard, paying for and taking a language and teaching knowledge test, being certified, and advertising yourself as another available product in the “free” market. In the meantime, a growing number of private institutions and individuals make profits on the basis of the new reforms.

In looking at the British Council web page, it is possible to measure this move towards standardization and marketization. They advertise the IELTS —International English Language Testing System— as “the world’s proven English language test” and the British Council as “one of the world’s largest administrators of international qualifications and examinations, with over 1,5 million tests taken with us each year in over 100 countries” (British Council, 2008, pp. 1-2). Among the main products advertised on the webpage and connected to this single test, potential customers are offered the test for \$435,000; practice materials for \$95,000; a preparation book for \$90,000; and a standard course for \$935,000. In other words, in a country where the minimum salary for 2008 equaled \$461,500, a person would require a full month to pay for this test, two months to pay for a standard course; and at least half a month to pay for the preparation materials and books. Meanwhile, the tests administrators would be making the equivalent of \$652,500’000,000, that is five times the national budget for research in 2008 in Colombia.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Ingersoll (2003) for a complete study about control in US schools.

This is how in the context of language and education reform in Colombia, international organizations drive the definition of local standards, private companies test school stakeholders and make a profit, whereas local teachers and students need to subsidize their own tests in order to keep their job or access other opportunities. This calls attention to the economic, political, ethical, and educational implications of this reform and how the influence of private publishing companies has driven the adoption of this plan. In the meantime, school and university educators keep on aligning their work to the standards; students continue to prepare for tests; and a market around language teaching and learning thrives in Colombia. The multiple dimensions of this standardization and marketization of language teaching and learning in Colombia are just starting to be perceived in the country and require continuous study.

### **Concluding Remarks and Future Directions**

This paper has examined language and education policies in Colombia in relation to processes of inclusion, exclusion, stratification and international reform. For this purpose, I have presented linguistic policy trends in times of the colony, after World War II, and some reforms in the last three decades. I have also presented the National Bilingual Program, its origins, goals, areas of intervention, and policy tools, and then focused on four interconnected and simultaneous processes that are favored along with their formulation and implementation.

Throughout the paper, I have attempted to argue that although the National Bilingual Program and its accompanying education and language reform involve opportunities for some groups and individuals, they mostly generate

inequality, exclusion, and stratification with the new discourses and practices being adopted. As I have explained, the instrumental notion of Spanish-English bilingualism borrowed in the National Bilingual Program, along with its accompanying policy texts and tools, excludes indigenous and most foreign languages from the discussion about bilingualism and second / foreign language learning in Colombia; imposes imported discourses and practices in the country at the expense of local knowledge; serves the purpose of stratifying, including, and excluding students and teachers by sorting them according to the educational center they attend and the score they obtain on a standardized test; and favors the consolidation of a lucrative market around language teaching, learning, and certification in Colombia in which those who benefit are, again, a minority.

By doing this analysis, this paper calls attention to the crucial role and social and ethical responsibility that central policy makers, in-service and future teachers, as well as teacher educators and investigators have in the formulation and enactment of reform in Colombia. It alerts one regarding the multiple interests behind current and past policies in the country, and the ethical commitment that all of us have in the actual appropriation of current policy texts for the construction of a more equitable system through language and education policymaking. Additionally, this analysis complements other pieces that aim at raising awareness about the multiple implications of teaching and learning a language within the context of a so-called “knowledge economy” and international school reform, and will hopefully generate changes in the way foreign discourses and practices are borrowed by national authorities.

Finally, this review indicates future directions considering the gaps found in the existent literature. As I have evidenced in the process of writing this paper, no empirical research has been published on the implementation of current linguistic policies and how different school communities interpret, enact, resist, and transform policy discourses and practices and use them as opportunities for personal and community development. Studies about the National Bilingual Program in Colombia, including this one, have attempted to explain the policy and its potential effects based on previous experiences or initial observations, but we know little about the actual initial implementation of this policy in schools and how processes of resistance and adaptation take place when reforms are enacted at the street level. Future studies need to address this gap.

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