EARLY REFLECTIONS UPON THE COLOMBIAN NATIONAL PROGRAM OF BILINGUALISM IN BOYACÁ

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Abstract

This article aims at reflecting upon the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism at the level of its implementation. This reflection is the result of the first stage of a project research a group of professors is carrying out on this program in the state of Boyacá. One survey has been applied to teachers from different state schools to know about difficulties they have found when attempting to implement this bilingualism program in their academic context. A sociolinguistic perspective will be included in this article to relate some concepts such as culture, society and language to the principles of the Bilingualism National Program. The projection of this program and some obstacles found by diagnosed teachers are also established.

Resumen

Este artículo pretende exponer una reflexión acerca del Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo en Colombia, visto desde la perspectiva de su implementación. Esta reflexión es el resultado de la primera etapa de una investigación que un grupo de profesores universitarios está desarrollando, para analizar críticamente el PNB en el contexto de Boyacá. Hasta el momento, se ha aplicado una encuesta a algunos profesores de Instituciones del Estado para recoger información sobre las dificultades que ellos han encontrado con respecto a la implementación de este programa en su contexto educativo. En este artículo se incluye también una perspectiva sociolingüística que relaciona algunos conceptos como cultura, sociedad, y lenguaje con los principios del PNB además de la proyección de este programa y algunas de las dificultades encontradas en su implementación.

This discussion presented in this paper nurtures the research field of ´Language and culture´of the UPTC Master Program in ´FL Teaching´.

INTRODUCTION TO BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Globalization has brought a new model of education which demands from the new citizen the elements to be ready to face this emerging world. Within this environment, the foreign languages learning skills are essential to prepare students for the challenges of a global society. The schools and universities are likely one of the most important bases to start developing the need of multilingualism in the new millennium. It is there where people and communities in general can find the tools to prepare themselves as members of the society.

According to Spolsky (1998), the simplest definition of a bilingual a person is that who has some functional ability in a second language. This ability may be limited in the use of both or more domains, or may be balanced if there is a strong command in both languages. Bilingualism is acquired in educative contexts through programs that use two languages as a part of the daily experience in students (Dutcher, 1994). Bilingual programs share the objective of developing contents and, at the same time, a bilingual proficiency. In Colombia, most of the bilingual education programs are based on English or French and they have the support of international organizations as L'Alliance Colombo-Francesa and The British Council. These programs are mostly created in private bilingual schools where students belong to upper or upper media social class. Consequently, there is a wide difference in the English proficiency between these students and those who belong to public educational system. It is convenient then to be clear on what bilingual education and bilingualism may mean.

Within the Colombian context, the MEN (Ministerio de Educación Nacional), does not state that English be considered as a foreign language since it makes reference just to 'a foreign language' as reiteratively can be seen particularly in the articles 21, 22 and 23 (Law 115 1994). Supposedly by including these statements within the National Curriculum as well as within the institutions syllabi, students are to reach the proficiency level enough to understand, read and express themselves in a foreign language. It is necessary now to briefly establish the difference between the notions of a second language and a foreign language.

According to Graddol (2006), a foreign language is not used in the immediate and local setting, because it is not necessary for the communication among people who share the same setting. A foreign language can be learned in classrooms, and usually, students are immersed in the language during controlled times, and for limited

purposes. A second language is instead used mainly in different official, business, social and teaching activities or used for communicating among people of a country. Accordingly, what is expected in our particular setting is the learning (and the teaching) of a foreign language. It is uncertain to determine when English was chosen to be that foreign language to be taught in Colombia.

An overview to the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism

As stated above, one of the objectives in the Primary and Secondary Education in Colombia is to acquire elements of conversation, reading, comprehension, and oral ability to communicate in a foreign language. However, it was not until the inclusion of English and French in the State Test (Icfes) as a piloting survey, in which students were asked for to select their preferred foreign language, that the MEN decided to select English as the foreign language needed in our country. Of course, it is not hard to discern that English was chosen as the subject being taught in most institutions across the country.

The increasing need to reduce boundaries among nations to try to get more close economical and cultural relationships, mainly, also propels the search of a series of alternatives to make world´s continents get and keep a common means of communication. This is likely the primary reason for the statement and development of the project carried out in Europe to the end of making the teaching, learning and evaluation of foreign languages a reality among its country members.

This process of globalization makes it mandatory to at least speak and comprehend two languages. Taking into account this principle of globalization, the Ministry of Education (MEN) is promoting the 'Bilingualism National Program 2004 – 2019', which includes the standards of communicative competencies in English. This program has three main goals to achieve in the year 2019. The first one is to improve the communicative competence level in English for students of primary and secondary Education. They are expected to reach B1 level (Intermediate level, according to the Common European Framework, CEF) of communicative competence in English. The second one is to improve the communicative competence and methodology for English teachers, who are expected to achieve B2 level (Intermediate–Advanced); and the third goal is to improve the English level in pre-service teachers of English or Language students, who are expected to reach C1 level (Advanced) as future English teachers. Also, students other than languages programs are believed to reach B2 level (Intermediate Advanced) in their last year of studies. (MEN presentation, 2006).

The MEN developed, among others, three concrete proposals to achieve the three goals: definition and diffusion of standards in English Language, definition of standardized tests (pruebas SABER, Prueba de Estado -in eleventh grade- and ECAES –in higher education), and strategies for improving teacher development for quality assurance in language and methodology.

Here, the Ministry of Education undertook some actions to support the Secretaries of

Education and involved different educational statements in English teaching, learning and evaluation.

In first instance, a document called ' Lineamientos Curriculares – Lenguas Extranjeras' was promulgated (1999, MEN). These guidelines try to illustrate from a theoretical perspective the processes of acquisition of a second or a foreign language. Also it defines concepts about the curricular development to be considered for designing the PEIs (Educational Institutional Plan) of the institutions (Pag. 13). On the other hand, the document also gathers conceptual elements on the education and learning of a foreign language from the perspectives of the special didactics for foreign languages, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, among others. Likewise, some constructs appear on socio-cultural aspects besides a synthetic description of the elements of the new technologies and its potential applicability in the learning and use of the foreign language, which already is glimpsed, will be English. The document also presents some considerations on the professional growth of the language teacher from a reflexive frame focused to the scientific query.

Later on, a new document appears: 'Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lengua Extranjera: inglés´ (2006), whose principal aim is to "to have citizens capable of communicating in English, in such a way that they could insert the country into the processes of universal communication, into the global economy and into the cultural opening, with internationally comparable standards". Moreover, this document describes, more or less in detail, the desirable standards that the students must reach, from the first grade up to the grade 11 of the Colombian educational system. It is necessary to remember that the mentioned standards have their origin in the Common European Frame of Reference to the Languages: Education, Learning, Valuation (Council of Europe 2001), and being so, their cultural background, piloting stages and proposed implementation are alien to our particular needs and specifics contexts.

A series of evaluative issues concerning the situation of English both in terms of learning and teaching were implemented in some regions of the country. Standardized diagnosis tests (QPT = Quick Placement Test) to measure the proficiency were applied to language teachers and students. Also, the TKT test measuring language teaching skills was administered to a majority of language teachers in some departments in Colombia. Additionally, State tests (Icfes and ECAES) included English sections devised under the European Framework parameters were implemented for both last academic year of secondary school and last semesters undergraduate students. An official reports informs that until June 2009, 78 Secretaries of Educations and 11.064 language teachers have been diagnosed. Preliminary results (just 10% of language teachers reached B2 or upper) encouraged some 'corrective' actions: retraining language teachers by specialized institutions and some universities, improvement plans for some public universities with language teaching programs, immersions courses and the like. It is worth saying that all those actions pursued foundations for establishing the

Bilingualism plan, nevertheless, they are restricted to the improvement of language. It is also prudent to say that to the time of the writing of this paper, no results of those actions have been evaluated, at least, in Boyaca.

Notion of bilingualism within the BNP

It is not easy to narrow a definition for bilingualism since there are different and mixed variables: geographical, historical, linguistic, sociolinguistic, politic, religious, psychological, cultural and pedagogical. Also, it is possible to speak about bilingualism as an individual characteristic or bilingualism in a social group, community, region or country (Baker, 2001). Besides, we could call "bilingual" to a person who masters two languages; to the migrant person who communicates in another language; or the individual who takes a course in order to learn a foreign language.

There are different definitions about bilingualism. It is important to analyze some of them to understand better the notion of bilingualism in the BNP and its role in this program. Spolsky (1998) claims that an individual who develops some knowledge and capacity in a second language is a bilingual person. "The simplest definition of a bilingual is a person who has some functional ability in a second language. This may vary from a limited ability in one or more domains, to very strong command of both languages (which is sometimes called *balanced bilingualism*)." (p. 45).

Baker (2001) states that there is not an exact definition of bilingualism. According to him, it is possible to talk about dimensions or

levels of bilingualism, but not about a specific concept. There is an essential dissimilarity between bilingual ability and bilingual usage. Some bilinguals may be fluent in two languages but infrequently use both. Other may be less fluent but employ their two languages frequently in diverse environments.

According to Bloomfield (1933), a bilingual person is that who has a native control of two languages. On the contrary, Macnamara (1967), states that a bilingual person is any individual who has the ability of developing some competence (speaking, reading, listening, and writing) in a second language.

Being bilingual is essential in a globalized world. Globalization has been a challenging economical process worldwide. It opens different gates for the countries, but at the same time, demands a high communicative competence in a foreign language. Colombia needs to prepare its citizens in, at least, one foreign language; in this case, the BNP focused its attention on promoting English teaching and learning at all the levels of the education system. English has been considered the universal language for business, science, technology, and communication. English is the most extended language all over the world. It is thought that about 1,400 million of people speak English, but from those people, only the third part is constituted by native speakers.

In short, for the BNP, bilingualism is considered as the management of a second language to better communicate, to open borders, to comprehend different cultural contexts, and to contribute in the

development of the country. A bilingual person acquires better labor opportunities to be more competitive in the society. Those purposes clearly state that the BNP pursues a high demand of expectations which well deserve a careful revision in terms of their policies, strategies, budget and extents.

On the other hand, in Colombia there is a preference to teach and learn English in spite of the fact that there are about 64 other foreign languages including our own indigenous languages. This is perhaps because English Language is seen as the key to get opportunities for a better life which is one of the purposes on BNP. Anyway, in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language, an important aspect appears: culture. Language involves society and society involves culture. Taking into account social and cultural aspects, it is important to think about how teachers can teach a foreign language and, at the same time, help students to understand a society and a culture in which they are not entirely involved.

Annie de Acevedo (2005: 62, cited in Mejia, 2006:156) states that "Learning another language opens the doors for them to other cultures and allows them to enrich themselves". From this perspective, the bilingualism program has the advantage of helping students to know another culture, to enrich their knowledge about the world, and to value the differences among cultures. English language and American culture are seen for most of the people as the door to obtain better opportunities and the top of the status in the society. Therefore, a bilingual program might be seen as a proposal to understand cultural aspects not only from the English-speaking countries, but also from our own country.

Projection and difficulties of the BNP

When we talk about bilingualism, we talk not only about linguistic features or development of competencies, but also about cultural knowledge in order to facilitate all the communicative channels all over the world. Currently, the BNP is one of the mandatory topics in schools, universities, and academic contexts all over the country. This program is real and, in the schools, the English Standards are the great innovation of these times; nonetheless, both instructors and learners must be clear about what standards mean and more important, how the implementation of those standards are to validate bilingualism.

As it was before mentioned, the Ministry of Education (MEN) set the Basic standards of competencies in English. These standards, which are based on levels of expected performance and competencies, were shared within the community in the first semester of 2007. The levels of performance are on the basis of the Common European Framework, and pretend to be a reference point for establishing what students know and must know at the moment of facing a specific communicative context.

The basic standards of English seek to develop the communicative competence, which includes linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic competencies. At the beginning of 2007, the standards were a referent in the ICFES Exam for assessing students' performance in English. According to the MEN (2006), for improving teachers'

development for quality assurance, in language and methodology, the National Program of Bilingualism will continue its emphasis on the formation of teacher's trainers, English teachers in the private and public sectors and in the intensive use of technological resources. Those aspects allow the MEN to achieve the goals proposed for the year 2019:

- Eleventh graders will achieve B1 level of the communicative competence in English.
- Teachers who teach English in primary and secondary education will demonstrate B2 level.
- The students of non- foreign language professional studies achieve B2 level.
- Language teaching trainees will achieve C1 level.

Obviously, those goals could be accomplished with hard work. For example, it is necessary an adequate training for English teachers so that they can develop linguistic and communicative competencies. Also, they may be trained to apply suitable teaching tools to approximate target culture that is implied within language.

One of the objectives of the BNP is to create the conditions for developing communicative competence in another language. The BNP will be developed as team work, involving all the concerned parties: schools, universities, language institutes, MEN-foreign institutions in agreement, state offices, teachers, students, and even parents. This is something that we have to bear in mind because of the fact that the responsibility of becoming bilingual and establishing bilingual education is from every single sector in our country.

According to the MEN, some of the stages in the Bilingualism National Program (BNP) are: a diagnosis stage; the elaboration of standards; assessment of competencies among students, English teachers, students of foreign languages, programs of teachers' quality development, and technological resources. Taking into account these stages we have, as researchers, found the following shortcomings in the implementation of this program:

1. The diffusion of the standards document has been restricted to a few English teachers. Only one teacher, from each institution, has had the opportunity to attend the socialization. This implies that teachers from rural areas have not had the opportunity of attending the meeting. In one of the surveys we applied to basic education teachers from different public schools in Boyacá, they mentioned that one of the teachers from the urban area who attended the meeting gave teachers from rural areas a brief summary of the standards and the way as these had to be implemented. Obviously, some questions emerged from that explanation; questions that the teacher could not answer. For instance, one of their questions was: "How can we, as English teachers in secondary school, implement the standards in sixth grade when we know that students have not studied English in preceding grades?" So, if the Bilingual National Program is based on the standards in foreign language, how can it be successful if teachers of primary school and some English teachers in secondary do not have the opportunity of knowing the standards clearly and having answers to related questions?

2. The MEN considers assessing English teachers as a need to know about the teachers' difficulties and expectations so as to improve the teaching quality. However, teachers do not understand how they will be evaluated. What will happen with the teachers who fail the exams? Who will evaluate the teachers? When will teachers be evaluated? If the objectives of the BNP are planned for 2019, is there enough time for assessing and improving teaching quality? We think it is possible but the MEN must be clear and precise in its policies and proposals and consider the opinions of the teachers.

3. The MEN has proposed the design and implementation of programs for improving teachers' quality development. We consider that these programs have not been developed in a systematic manner. For example, teachers of primary school should have the opportunity to attend courses planned by the MEN in order to learn and improve English language. Most of these teachers did not study English as a part of their professional education. Consequently, they do not really know how to teach. So, what is MEN doing to solve those problems? Why does MEN not organize projects where teachers can study English and obtain a benefit or an incentive? Learning another language is a stimulus itself, but if we consider time and devotion with which teachers do their labor, we should conclude that they need to be motivated to learn and improve their teaching quality.

4. The MEN has also considered important in the BNP, the training and use of technological resources. Computers, internet, videos, recordings, software programs, can be useful tools for teaching English as a foreign language. However, what can a teacher from a rural area do when there are no technological resources in the schools? One interesting software program implemented, not just for the BNP but for different and prior purposes, has been "English Discoveries" and the creation of Bilingual rooms in schools. However, there are a few schools that have those resources, so, what will happen with the other schools; for instance rural area schools? The MEN needs to create policies in order to provide all the schools with the same technological resources. Simple like this: if learners are to be evaluated with standardized instruments, the conditions for learning must be standardized as well!.

5. Visual, oral, and written languages are developed in educative television and internet. The use of platforms for virtual, distance study has modified the roles of students and teachers by promoting the autonomous learning. Teachers are guides and students are expected to be autonomous and independent from their teachers. The National Program of Bilingualism highlights the importance of these tools, (Al tablero No. 37, octubre-diciembre 2005), but fails in providing training within these new perspectives for education. We all know that becoming independent or autonomous is not matter of projects and papers but a total concern and commitment of education policies. Will we and our students be autonomous in less than ten years?

CONCLUSIONS

According to Mejía (2005), there are some issues that we should be aware of when implementing a bilingual program. First, there should be a change in the thinking of teachers. It is necessary to think that we, as teachers, can improve our teaching and use different tools and propose projects in order to improve the teaching quality. Second, inter-institutional assistance with bilingual schools should be implemented to help students and teachers to recognize the importance of learning a foreign language. Moreover, teachers from different areas can help English teachers to connect content and language. In this way, students learn contents through language and learn language through contents. Finally, mass media and new technologies can motivate teachers to change their pedagogical practices by using new didactic resources. Those resources are required in a bilingual program. It is also needed to train teachers in the use of those new technologies because sometimes is not matter of resources availability, but teachers expertise to use them.

It is not enough that teachers have a high level of English proficiency to participate and make the National program of Bilingualism a reality in Colombia. It is important that teachers and administrators understand its principles to plan the appropriate objectives to be achieved. However, we cannot despise the effort and work that English teachers have been developing to help students improve their abilities and capacities in this language. We think that this is the first step in a long – term bilingual program. We have to be able to devise purposeful and cogent actions to develop more bilingual teaching teams committed to the implementation of more cross-curricular projects all over the regions.

Bilingualism policies are grounded on three main components: language, communication, and culture. Cultural learning is implied into linguistic learning. In some cases, when talking about bilingualism, there is an extreme evaluation of the foreign culture; and in some other cases, culture is not considered at all. The challenge with English language is that it does not represent only one culture, but many of the different countries, where English is their first language. Consequently, when we are learning English, we are enriching our identity as Colombian people because of the fact that we are comparing other cultures with ours. We are appreciating culture in a reciprocal relationship. Thus, it can be said that it is urgent to implement meaningful changes in the traditional role of EFL teaching in which the imposition of a unique dominant ideology does not occur any longer; and, what it is actually important is the opening to a different, more democratic and tolerant world.

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