The Two Fold Role of Pre-service Teachers: Their Perceptions Towards Bilingualism in their Future Practices

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of a group of pre-service teachers towards bilingualism and its role in their teaching practices. The participants came from two public universities who participated in a set of focus groups. Their responses were validated with theoretical elements. In order to gain deeper understanding of data gathered the Grounded Theory methodology was used in the analysis of it. Findings evidence that the participants' perceptions of bilingualism let them conceive themselves as having a twofold role in their future practices. This is sustained in two subcategories, the first: To be a bilingual master and the second: To be a bicultural reader.

Key Words: Bilingualism, English language teaching, pre-service teachers' perceptions.

Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como propósito explorar las percepciones de un grupo de futuros profesores de inglés frente al bilingüismo y su rol en sus prácticas de enseñanza. Los participantes formaron parte de dos universidades públicas quienes asistieron a una serie de grupos focales. Sus respuestas fueron validadas con elementos teóricos. Con el fin de comprender mejor los datos recogidos se empleó la metodología de la Teoría Fundada en el análisis de los mismos. Los resultados evidencian que las concep-ciones de estos profesores en formación sobre bilingüismo, los lleva a concebirse a sí mismos con un doble rol en sus prácticas futuras. Éste rol se sustenta en dos subcategorías, la primera: ser bilingüe y la segunda: ser un lector bicultural.

Palabras clave: bilingüismo, enseñanza de inglés, percepciones, profesores en formación.

Introduction

Beliefs and perceptions in the field of Language Education appear a source of investigation. Considering these contribute to better understanding priorities, interests and needs when teaching and learning a foreign language. Hence, for years, when the teaching and learning of English has become part of the mainstream, there has been apprehensions, not only in the students but also in the teachers, about features that tells the "correct" or the "successful" acquisition/learning of English. From polices to teacher's perceptions, the concept of "Bilingualism" has been stated, described, applied and reconsidered depending on what it is supposed to constitute. In the Colombian context, Bilingualism appear as a big issue in educational polices, that it is possible to find out all the different efforts made to consolidate or at least to approximate students to the features given in order to "demonstrate" that they can be catalogued as Bilinguals.

In Colombia there are different actions taken by the Ministry of Education to achieve the desired bilingual status. These actions take the form of polices and are called "*Colombia Bilingual in ten years*"[1] and "*Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: inglés. Formar en lenguas extranjeras: ¡el reto!*"[2]. These polices have become the main source of reference and objectives generator inside the English language teaching program in public

schools. Moreover, these are the documents that somehow dictate which aspects and features should be considered to have a "bilingual country" (considering only English-Spanish) by 2019. Cummins (1999, as cited by Kaplan, 2002) affirms that "the research on bilingual education has become so unfocused, has sent out so many mixed messages, and is particularly so ignorant of underlying theory that politicians can selectively use research to fit and support their ideology" (p. 239). Based on this, the researchers in this small scale study aims to explore the different perceptions of pre-service teachers towards Bilingualism. By means of this exploration, there would be a start on the approximation to how beliefs about being a bilingual can reconstitute their practices as future teachers considering the possible implications that it can bring to the classroom and to the personal experiences of the learner. Thus, the research question of this study is stated as: *What do pre-service teachers' perceptions on Bilingualism reveal about their role as future language teachers in two different universities?* With this question the aim is to explore what pre-service teachers' perceptions tell about their practices as future teachers. Having said that, the specific objectives stated to answer the research question are presented as follows: To allow pre-service teachers manifest the way they picture themselves in their future practices towards issues like bilingualism in Colombia and to identify ways in which responses provided by pre-service teachers about Bilingualism can establish

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1   Colombia Bilingüe en 10 años. http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/articles-132560_recurso_pdf_programa_nacional_bilinguismo.pdf

2   http://www.colombiaaprende.edu.co/html/mediateca/1607/articles-115375_archivo.pdf

mechanisms to better direct the teaching of EFL in their immediate contexts.

Literature Review

Bilingualism Path

Taking into consideration the phenomenon of bilingualism, it can be said that there has been different perceptions about Bilingualism nature and definition. Many attempts by different researchers and linguistics have been made in order to settle the different features and conceptualizations of what it takes and how it can be described or defined. For example, Butler and Hakuta (2004) state that bilinguals "are often broadly defined as individuals or groups of people who obtain the knowledge and use of more than one language." (p. 114). However, after long analyzing and restating the concept, theorists consider bilingualism as a complex concept which depends on psychological and sociocultural aspects within different dimensions. Initially, theorists such as a Bloomfield (1933) defines Bilingualism as the capacity of having the control of two languages as a native speaker, but Butler and Hakuta (2004) say "this strict view of bilingualism limits the number of individuals and groups that could be classified as bilinguals, not to mention that such definition make difficult to operationalize "native-like fluencies" (p. 114)

In that line of thought, broader views on what Bilingualism started to emerge and then an individual with different proficiency degrees in both languages could be considered bilingual (e.g. Hakuta; 1996; McNamara; 1967 and others). Thus, according to Butler and Hakuta (2004) bilinguals are people who can use their skills to communicate and/or interact in oral or written form in one or more linguistic codes regardless their level of proficiency. Also, it is important to consider that as in Butler and Hakuta's words "bilingualism is not static by dynamic" (p. 120) which means that the concept of Bilingualism is not a straightforward Decalogue of what to do or what should be avoided at any time. On the contrary, it means that the emergence of another language may be changing the different bilingual typologies. So, bilingualism is a term that is not always static despite of having different profiles and it is more complex that the superficial concept of mastering two languages as a native speaker.

When considering bilingual education, it is also possible to differentiate some types of bilingual education like "additive bilingualism" and "Subtractive bilingualism", Garcia (1997). The author affirms that the first refers to the students attending to schools where their mother tongue is spoken and the second is learned, while in the latter one the students are taught both languages at the same time. Ferguson, Houghton and Wells (1977 as cited by Garcia 1997) have distinguished ten goals of bilingual education, among the influential ones it is possible to find out the enrichment of the elite bilingual education, the preservation of minority languages and some others have to do with the pluralism and communication of multicultural societies. However, it seems that the term "bilingual education" has been presented into different and several contexts that its complexity brings a definition far away from what according to Garcia (1997) should be its original definition. The term

bilingual education has been reduced to education programs with two languages used as mean of instruction in which the mother tongue ends up by being discarded into a subject of the curriculum. This kind of educational practice is what gives strength to a reduced vision of what bilingualism is and takes. Thus, global but narrow perceptions on bilingualism brings into consideration the exploration of what can be the opinion of language teachers at the time to consolidate issues on bilingualism and bilingual education as being their perceptions one of their main motors of their decisions.

Pre-service teacher's perceptions as solid research contribution

As time passes by, more studies about teaching and learning languages have emerged. They show some concerns about teacher´s decisions on the way of teaching. Why do they teach the way they do it? As shown by an important number of studies, for instance Horwitz (1981), assumes that teacher's perceptions towards what to teach, how to teach and what to ask from the learner is influenced by the way they were taught while others think they are moved by their innate theories about language and learning. Thus, as a result on these diverse enquiries, it has been claimed that teachers' perceptions can be a solid prognosticator of teachers' performance (Pajares, 1992). Richardson (1996 as cited by Brown 2009) grouped "attitudes, beliefs and perceptions as a set of mental constructs that name, describe and define the structure and content of mental states through thought to drive a person's actions" (p. 47)

Hence, multiple studies have shown that these perceptions and beliefs play an important role in the practices implemented by the teachers in the classroom. Williams and Burden (1997) brought into consideration the straightforward relationship between the teachers' perceptions and their immediate actions in the classroom. They claimed that the teacher's actions are highly influenced by their beliefs and they somehow enhance their actions in the classroom. Furthermore, with regard to bilingualism, teacher's knowledge and training could affect these attitudes. For Bustos (2001) "our quintessential ideas, beliefs, and conceptualizations are formulated from experiences we have had within a sociocultural context. For example, our beliefs about the world are given to us through our familial and educational experiences" (p. 252). As Bustos illustrated, the same situation can happen in educational contexts in which a pre-service language teacher is exposed to. A pre-service educator is getting ideas about what language takes since the very first time he has an encounter with the language.

Thus, it is outstanding to inquire about how the teacher's perceptions on bilingualism can impact on their roles which somehow can be the replication of their exposure to different issues about language and language acquisition/learning. Hence, as being pre-service teachers, their perceptions towards aspects in language learning and teaching (in this case bilingualism) can be marked not only by future roles but also as actual learners of a second language. These two different roles make them consolidate

an actual posture on what they may consider bilingualism and what it takes which could bring future position and judging elements from the perspective of their roles as teachers.

Among those different perceptions towards bilingualism, Fishman (1965) states that, according to linguists, teachers' perceptions may come from different perspectives towards the language such as structural view of language, the perceptions regarding the level of performance in the language, conceptions on switching and interference, social-psychological views of the language, speed, automaticity and habit strength. Thus, the perceptions on bilingualism may come from their view of "successful" language learning and teaching and they will somehow tell about their practices in the classroom.

Methodology

In this section we present a description about the type of research, the setting, the participants, the data administration and analysis methodologies. Regarding the first aspect, we selected the qualitative research paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) under the interpretative approach to get our main objective with this study. It was, to depict the undergraduate students' perceptions around the implications of their bilingual formation as future foreign language teachers in two different public universities. It implies that the information was collected in a natural occurring setting where the students' voices where the type of data we needed to gain understanding of a reality evidenced in our particular contexts. Additionally, it was an interpretative study

considering that our main activity when administrating and analysing the data was to interpret our participants' voices.

In that sense the settings selected for this study where two public universities of Colombia. These settings share similarities. These include the offering of bachelor degrees programs in foreign language teaching. Additionally, these programs have the same duration (five years) and the syllabuses are quite similar in terms of the methodologies, objectives and processes followed with the students. Thus, the participants were students from ninth semester in the two universities. They were eleven participants who voluntarily decided to take part of the process. All of them are finishing their formation at the university level, at the time that they were conducting teaching practicum in different public schools.

Accounting for the methodology followed to administrate the data, the main instrument we selected was the focus group (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Through this instrument we put together our participants who were enrolled in an undergraduate program of foreign language teaching. It means that all of them shared the experience of being part of a bilingual formation and the same knowledge regarding the processes of language teaching and learning. In that vein the main purpose of the focus group was to capture the participants' perceptions of the role of their bilingual formation as future language teachers.

Once the data was collected, the methodology for the analysis was grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For our

particular study we conducted the following process. Initially we read the information gotten. Then we used an open coding procedure to determine common themes. Once we got them we designed a matrix where we organized the themes we came up with, our reflections and theoretical support. This matrix facilitates us the upcoming process of re reading the data to reduce (encapsulate) themes into patterns, and these patterns into categories that respond to our research question. Considering Grounded Theory methodology, these generated categories from the data constitute new knowledge as the process was purely inducted and coherent to a genuine situation occurring in a natural setting.

In the coming lines we present the findings discussion as the response to our research question.

Findings

Alongside this chapter the following category will be discussed, being a bilingual teacher: a twofold role. It refers to the two main aspects emerging from our analysis where participants expect to become both, bilingual masters and bicultural readers; these two aspects constitute the subcategories that sustain the main one.

The main category is: *Being a bilingual teacher: A twofold role.* This category responds to the perceptions some pre-service teachers handle regarding bilingualism in their future role as language educators. It refers to three aspects, the connection established between the formal and contextual aspects of a L1 and L2; the

interdependence of both of them to keep a balance and enrich people bilingual capacities; and some outcomes derived from assuming and playing those two roles. All these three aspects are illustrated by means of two subcategories, being a bilingual master and being a bicultural reader.

Being a Bilingual Master

This refers to the formal and profound knowledge language teachers should have about the L1 and the L2. Formality refers to the awareness of the different components of any language, its syntax, semantics, phonetics, grammar and its pragmatics. Participants perceive that when they are very clear about these elements of their L1 they become better learners and users of the L2. Some of the participants' excerpts serve as illustration:

> *A bilingual teacher is who masters two languages without making many mistakes. So it implies having knowledge of the grammar, syntax, vocabulary. That is to say, to know L1 and L2 very deep to become really competent.* (S2).

Another participant expresses:

> *I perceive a connection between the L1 and L2 master. It is that as both are interdependent we follow a process where if we are aware of the different dimensions of our language in terms of formality and cultural use we become more tolerant and willing to acquire the L2 even though we cannot become real bilinguals. It means almost perfect. For me it is impossible but we have to keep*

to be better in both languages each time (S7).

For these pre-service teachers being knowledgeable of the way a L1 or L2 works give them a sense of being competent but not real bilinguals. They assume this situation as a never ending process looking for perfection, but at the same time, it appears for them as a negotiation process through which they acquire the L2 in a formal setting but while being part of the context where their L1 is spoken. On the one hand, this is linked to what Guerrero (2010) describes as elite bilingualism. The author explains that elite bilinguals make their own decision to learn another language of wider communication inside their own context. On the other hand, the participants' perceptions still relate to the "native-like control of two languages" (Bloomfield, 1933). This conception could exclude some speakers or deny the capacities people may have to communicate in two or more languages; they see this prospection as a path through which they can become more competent bilinguals aware of their strengths as well as weaknesses.

In that respect Haugen's (1953) statement in terms of who a bilingual is appears useful as the author explains that they are individuals who can produce meaningful and complete utterances in both the L1 and the L2. At the same time (Peal and Lambert 1962) responds to the participants' view as they explain that "balanced bilinguals" are those people who can achieve similar levels of proficiency in both languages. There is another aspect perceived by our participants that responds to the interdependence of L1 and L2. This is conceived by them as a

mutual interaction and contribution process to enrich their individual bilingual capacities and avoid language subordination. This is evident in one of the answers given by a participant when the researchers asked about the relationship between Spanish, English and culture inside the classroom:

> *I think 8that as bilingual educators we are building a bridge between two different linguistic codes and cultures. This is because we need to understand the other person as a social, cultural and political entity. That is not easy to put two different realities at the same level to make people more tolerant but is a challenge and a must we as educators have to assume (S4).*

They perceive empathy and interaction between the formal as well as practical dimensions of languages as the main objectives in their formation as future teachers. Up to this point there is evident a latent concern of preservice teachers to become a native like speaker of L2 while being an expert in their L1 too. For them both demand equal attention and relevance in either the classroom or the target language context where being knowledgeable of L1 and L2 implies putting them together into practice. Additionally, this use implies awareness of what the second subcategory underpins in terms of bicultural capacities as explained in the coming lines. Accounting for the aspects described before in terms of foreign language teachers masters of L1 ad L2 all these will be portrait in their teaching practices. It means they will demand from students to become masters of both languages in terms of formality and the pragmatics.

Bicultural Reader

This subcategory reflexes the shared implication of being bilingual educators. They highlight that becoming bilingual also implies the capacity to interpret, understand and respect L1 and L2 cultures and most importantly establishing connections; tolerating and learning from the difference rather than reinforcing stereotypes. So it implies that their practices can be illustrated as atmospheres where two or more different cultures can interact in a dialogical way. Regarding this aspect a participant states:

> *I know that we as bilingual teachers need to be very very knowledgeable in terms of the host and target cultures. It implies understanding of people behaviours, attitudes, life styles, their social interactions among many other things that make us and the ones we teach to more sensible and tolerant to each other (S5).*

Participants conceive themselves as culture readers by means of bilingualism as it demands from them to go deeper in the understanding of the reasons behind people behaviours, feelings, interactions, life styles, social relationships among others. For them as important as knowing the L1 and L2 formality and pragmatics, it is to value and experience L1 and L2 cultures. At this point Bhatia and Ritchie (2004) state: "The context in which a language is used often adds further complexity to understanding bilingualism: bilinguals' language use is deeply embedded in context" (P. 119). Thus it implies the recognition of the capacity that as bilingual educators have to adapt,

tolerate, understand and respect themselves and the others. At this point such capacities are permeated again by the idea of trying to become a native like speaker because they stress on the experience in the target culture as a must or the best way to gain the capacities discussed previously.

The discussion at this point could go further in terms of the extent to which not having such experience can limit a person to become a very good culture reader. However what is implicit here is not the best way to become bicultural competent but the awareness of preservice teachers to accomplish that role as a complement to the master of L1 and L2. For them these two aspects are crucial two conceive themselves as bilingual teachers. They demand and expect to achieve and master the highest levels in these two dimensions and implicitly they are demanding that from their programs. It portraits the urgent and better connection of these teachers' formation programs with their future teachers' bilingual capacities.

Conclusions

The way pre-service language teachers part of two common programs in two public universities of Colombia perceive bilingualism constitutes a demanding compromise which directly involves the institutions where they are being formed. There is a shared interest to become master of L1 and L2 in order to be even better educators, able to share their expertise in their classrooms. At the same time, they highlight the value of being excellent Culture 1 and Culture 2 readers. This, for them serve the purpose of becoming more tolerant,

empathetic and respectful with others. Alongside these perceptions they portrait their concern to become equivalent bilinguals at all levels; Otherwise they do not will not consider themselves as competent bilinguals yet. This situation could bring positive as well as negative implications for them and their process inside the classroom. In terms of the positive ones, they are even more aware of quality as they set high standards for themselves not because it is imposed; but on the other side it can cause certain frustration when those standards do not respond directly to their needs and interests as well as their students'.

Additionally, the fact of recognizing themselves as bilingual masters and bicultural readers on behalf of preservice teachers reflexes both the common concerns and limitations that the institutions have at these levels. What we could identify here was that even though there is not clear understanding of who a bilingual person is, pre-service teachers are convinced of their responsibility to keep a balance between L1 and L2 to avoid subordination, it means both languages should serve the purpose of showing who we are; additionally, it is complementing with the capacity to tolerate, understand, interpret and respect others as cultural entities.

Finally, these two perceptions of bilingual teachers that our participants handle make us reflect upon the conception we have of ourselves as language educators and as teacher educators. Are we really covering these dimensions in our daily practices? What are the implications of our particular conception of bilingualism? How does our bilingual concept permeate our practices and students' lives? How do the institutional policies respond to the interests and perceptions our future teachers have as bilingual educators? These and many other questions should be considered for further research in our particular contexts in order to become more aware and coherent to our realities.

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