

Reflecting on the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism

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Abstract

The globalized world requires the knowledge of a foreign language; in Colombia, the current government has conceived the english language as the language that opens frontiers and allows the cultural and economic exchange. Therefore, one of its policies is the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism. This article presents some theoretical reflections about the same program and its implications in the Boyacá's context.

Key words: bilingualism, sociolinguistics, Common European Framework, Bilingual National Program.

Resumen

El mundo globalizado requiere del conocimiento de un idioma extranjero; en Colombia, el actual gobierno ha concebido al idioma inglés como el lenguaje que abre las fronteras y permite el intercambio económico y cultural. Por lo tanto, una de sus políticas ha sido el Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo. Este artículo presenta algunas reflexiones teóricas sobre el mismo programa y sus implicaciones en un contexto como el boyacense.

Palabras clave: bilingüismo, sociolingüística, Marco Común Europeo, Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo.

Introduction

English nowadays is an "obligatory" tool to human communication not only in Colombia but also around the world. Social events like globalization are factors that involve everybody in different contexts without any restriction, social classes, sex, age, etc.

English was before a privilege for some rich or middle class people, now it is included in private and public schools as part of the Colombian Educational System. One of the main political strategies in the current government is the implementation of bilingual programs around the country which have foster the idea of Colombia Bilingual and of course Boyacá Bilingual, Bogotá Bilingual, Casanare Bilingual, etc.

When people are interested in learning a foreign language (specially English), they focus their attention on two purposes: spoken and written skills. For people, especially students, the most important in learning a language is the possibility to establish communication with someone else from a different culture.

Technological advances like internet, video cameras, chat, messenger, TV conferences, etc. had created curiosity about how other people are. Thus, as English language have become the international language, it is considered, nowadays, essential for this purpose.

Based on the reasons displayed before, this article presents a discussion about the BNP (Colombian National Program of Bilingualism), based on

some sociolinguistics issues. The first part considers a theoretical framework including different definitions about Sociolinguistics, Bilingualism, Common European Framework and the Bilingualism National Program. The second part highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses concerned to BNP, and finally some conclusions are addressed in the light of the reflection about this topic regarding the experience of the authors as English teachers in Boyacá.

Theoretical Framework

Doing a deeper study about the project that pretends a "Colombia bilingual in 2019" requires the definition of different aspects implicit in the idea of a bilingual country. Some of those aspects are sociolinguistics, the notion of bilingualism in BNP, the Common European Framework and the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism. In this part, some ideas related to these concepts are described and discussed.

Sociolinguistics

Learning a language is not easy, it requires a lot of time to study and to understand how to communicate in that language. During the whole process it is very important to learn about grammar rules, phonetic, syntax, among others. For that reason, different methods and models have been proposed to teach and learn English, in the 50's, the "audio-lingual" model was based on memorization of grammatical patterns and it was supported by the conceptual psychology.

However, learning a language goes beyond than speaking or repeating sounds. Learning a foreign

language implies simultaneously knowing about the culture where the language is spoken, it means, the sociolinguistic aspect of a language. Thus, in the 80's the "communicative approach" appeared, it was focused on speech acts and sociolinguistics was taken into account for the first time in the teaching and learning English processes.

Sociolinguistics implies the different situations that are implicit in the everyday of a society. This also accounts for cultural issues that are not very clear in the Colombian national program of Bilingualism.

According to Spolsky (1998) sociolinguistics is a field that studies the relation between language and society, based on the idea that language is to communicate meaning and at the same time it is used to maintain social relationships. Van Dijk (2004) proposes a similar definition about sociolinguistics, for him sociolinguistics is focused in the micro level of the social order. It means, in the interaction of any particular conversation or in the daily life talk.

Unfortunately, in some schools, in the Colombia country, teaching has been centred only in showing rules without any context or any meaning in the target language. Therefore, if sociolinguistics perspective includes learning the language and learning about the language, some institutions fail in the way of teaching English (or only rules) with any specific purpose and far away from the context. It means that sociolinguistics is not practiced and the Spolsky's and Van Dijk's ideas are far of achieving in the BNP.

The Notion of Bilingualism in the Colombian National Program

In order to understand what bilingual and bilingualism are, it is necessary to establish a difference among these terms. Bilingual is the use of two languages by a human being. Based on Spolsky (1998), a bilingual person is someone who has some functional ability in a second

language. Baker (2001) says that defining who is or not bilingual is impossible, but he says we can make differences between bilingual ability and bilingual usage. It means that a person can be proficient in two languages but rarely employ both, and someone could be less fluent in a language but he could use regularly both because of different contexts, he also proposes that different patterns could be possible. In this sense, bilingual refers to the person who knows about two languages, not matter if this person uses them in communicative situations or not.

On the other hand, bilingualism is conceived as the existence of two languages in a region or country.

Currently, the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism is defined by Cely (2007) as a project proposed by Ministerio de Educación Nacional that attempts to improve the quality in the teaching and learning English as a foreign language process. She states that one of the goals of this politic is that students achieve all the knowledge they need to learn and apply in their life. In addition, she bases her definition in the linguistics learning aspect including three important issues such as: language, communication and culture. This process will include standards developed by the Common European Framework in order to asses students, teachers, and in service teachers from the language schools as well as assessment in preparation in language and in methodology for English teachers.

According to MEN (2005) speaking a foreign language means opening frontiers, understanding different contexts, communicating better with others, as well as playing a decisive role in the development of a country. It means knowing more in order to get more opportunities, being more competitive, and increasing the quality of people's life.

Common European Framework

The CEF (Common European Framework) is the result of researches done during more than ten

years by specialized linguists from 46 countries part of the European Council. For the MEN (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2005) the Common European Framework is based on competences where it is mainly relevant the use of the language in contexts, it provides precise descriptions about the categories for the use of language. The CEF frames the levels of references from A1 to C2, it shows the scale of descriptions about the idiomatic competences, as well as some tools for those who teach and learn.

On one hand, the CEF is understood as a pragmatic enounced which attempts to solve some problems such as mobility and social equality and challenges new policies of education, mean proposes some competences that should be placed beyond knowledge.

On the other hand, it suggests that education should be concerned on learning and not on the teachers' role as it was in the XIX century where education was teacher-based. This new educative model is concerned with the learning processes where autonomous learning and the use of new technologies are implicit.

Projections and Difficulties to Develop the BNP in Colombia

Colombia is confronting a globalization process that demands the domain of a second language. Behind this process is immersed the political interests of English speaking countries which have contributed to the expansion of the idea about English as the language needed for being bilingual. Their political interests reinforce the idea about English as the international language; it has become not only the language that is necessary to learn but also the language that "must" be learned. The English language has been conceived as the door that opens the possibilities for better life conditions, better labor opportunities, and of course success.

The theory about the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism remarks the urgent necessity of learning English for being

competitive in the global world. It also emphasizes the importance of learning to value other cultures. For the program, being bilingual is to be able to achieve goals never thought. Being bilingual is to demolish the barrier between developed and underdeveloped countries. They consider that learning English is the key for opening the door to happiness. If a person knows English, then s/he is a world citizen and s/he gets a better social status.

Esta competencia tiene efectos diferentes sobre el mercado laboral de nuestro país. A los profesionales que pueden comunicarse y comprender una segunda lengua les permite movilidad y flexibilidad en el mercado laboral, están mejor preparados para enfrentar una economía global, pueden plantear y desarrollar cualquier iniciativa de negocio, conocer las necesidades de su cliente, ser innovadores, se adaptan fácilmente a los cambios y a las necesidades de su entorno. En cambio, aquellos que no la poseen pueden experimentar serios costos y limitar sus oportunidades (MEN, 2005).

Colombia is a country that currently lives an army conflict and for that reason it is evident that most of the population is poor in some of its departments. There are many difficulties in some regions where not only poverty but also war separate people from the educative system or because of the same reasons; schools cannot bring any comfort to the childhood.

The idea of developing the BNP in Colombia was piloted in big cities such as: Bogota, Cali, Medellin among others, and unfortunately the social, economical and cultural problems in Boyacá as well as in other Colombian departments were not analyzed to conduct this kind of efforts.

In Boyacá region, the government does not invest economical resources to provide public schools with labs, bilingual rooms or materials for helping English classes. The schools do not have enough resources to do a better English teaching and learning process. In addition, most of the teachers follow with the traditional grammatical method. There is not a space to show

language production and communication at least inside the classroom.

Another problem enhance with the BNP is that there is not discrimination between public and private institutions, and it is clear that they are different. In public schools the number of hours devoted for English classes is only two or three a week, meanwhile private schools offer eight or nine hours in the same term.

Teachers' training has become another concern. In public schools teachers' training does not exist and the last seminars and training courses, offered by the MEN, have selected a small group of teachers, sometimes ten or fifteen teachers out of thousands to be involved in a teachers' development program to improve teachers' level in the Teachers' Knowledge Test which is the test used to evaluate teachers.

The rest of teachers, those who are not selected by the MEN, and if they want to increase their professional development, they should pay courses or masters of their own and they should carry out them in different schedules from the school. Private schools teachers, on the contrary, can accede to different degrees and in some institutions; they can make international exchanges with some colleagues.

Regarding other projections and limitations of the BNP, it is relevant to analyze what would happen with the native culture? Is it going to be replaced for a foreign one? Are students going to conceive their culture as inferior to the one they are learning about? Is the Colombian culture endangering in the bilingual boom? Could students perceive their culture as inferior to the foreign one? How is the program prepared to put in the same rate both cultures?

All of the questions above should be analyzed and considered for both, the MEN policies and the teachers involved in the bilingualism boom. There are different examples about the results of biculturalism and multiculturalism. De Mejía (2006) quotes a relevant reflection done by an

M.A student, Laura Fajardo, which allows perceiving the cultural undervaluing of students in a bilingual school. Fajardo found that students perceived native literature samples as if those reflect a different background from their own one. For some students, the pictures and texts where Colombian culture was portrayed came from other countries rather than their own country.

Fajardo also pointed that textbooks used for working on Social Sciences presented images of massacres and drug mules as examples of Colombian culture. This example is a short illustration about the way Colombian and its citizens are perceived in other countries. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers, materials and resources are prepared and designed to give a whole understanding of both languages and cultures without diminishing any of them.

Finally, it is also important to reflect about the results in the last ICFES exam published at "El Tiempo" (November 8, 2007), where it is evident that students are far away from expected results new policies require.

Under the minimal level	55%
Elementary understanding	32%
Can understand phrases and can communicate	7%
Describes experiences and produces texts	5%
Upper level	1%

Strengths to Develop the BNP in Colombia

Globalization, TLC (Free Trade Agreement), and Common European Framework are much heard words at this time where governments are doing several efforts and investing certain amount of money in developing different programs which permit to everybody speaks a second language with the principal objective of making economical, cultural, and political business with different countries around the world. Spolsky (2005) affirms that language could be a source

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of social and political power and everyone could be entailed in this process of improvement if s/he decides to learn another language.

In short, globalization or internationalization is defined as the capacity to think the world, and it is not limited only to business, it also involves a cultural exchange, social patterns and behaviours, etc. In this sense, as a way to provide colombian people with opportunities to be competitive by means of knowing another language, the BNP is pointing in a right way. However, the BNP policies should reflect in the issues mentioned in the last paragraphs.

Some Suggestions for Policy and Schools

Developing the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism is not easy at all. It involves many changes in the current educational system as well as changes in the mind of professors, administrators, students, and, society in general. As quoted by Mejia (2005) the first change is in minds. For those reasons, the first suggestion addresses the English teachers free training in topics related to the CEF, standards, and bilingualism. Besides, it is relevant to consider that specially some high schools and primary teachers need to refresh their knowledge and government can do it through the universities, it is the main sector in the community in charged of making extension courses and it could have a great benefit for teachers to take classes of Basic English in those settings.

Specifically for high school English teachers and teachers in the tertiary level, it is imminent the development of some in-training courses based on teaching improvement where future teachers could be taught about approaches, ICT's, autonomous learning, among others with the main goal of bringing to those teachers tools to take the TKT (Teachers Knowledge Test) exam.

Moreover, schools and universities should motivate professors in the design of books of English and different materials where series in the market could be totally authored and

produced in Colombia, with the highest international standards in quality printing and as part of researches done in each setting, in that way English can be taught according to specific contexts and this process could be faster and more meaningful than following international books with realities and contexts different to the colombian ones.

Conclusions

All human beings can communicate mainly through the use of the language; it is well known that in the world there are many people who speak English as a second language or as a foreign language than native speakers. Therefore, English is conceived as the universal language. At this time, we need to change our attitude toward English because it is not useful only in business but also as a process of internationalization where not only others will change our mind but we will influence other people with products, services and cultural exchanges.

Applying the BNP moves us forward from the old curricula, PEIs (Proyecto Educativo Institucional) and PUIs (Proyecto Universitario Institucional) and generate innovations in institutions where teachers and administrators will work together in the development of different strategies to attain the goal of making a bilingual community, in that sense, BNP generates a new compromise with the society bringing more English speakers.

In order to be successful in the application and development of the Colombian National Program of Bilingualism, English teachers have to adopt a radical position of believing in students' abilities to learn, that is, to believe in the students' intelligence and maturity.

To really achieve that the learners learn the language, it is important to begin to change the schemata built during years. The first step it is to train primary school teachers so they can begin to teach English from early stages in the infancy, when the learner is able to learn with more

accuracy and effectiveness. Also, it is important to begin in this age because when s/he arrives at the secondary school it could be possible to develop or reinforce the skills that s/he has been developed in her/his first academical years.

The success of the program will depend on government engagement to improve standards applicable to the colombian contexts; also it

should maintain this idea for more time than planned.

Finally, it is needed economical support to carry out in each single region this project with egalitarianism. In that way, it should guarantee for all colombian citizens the same opportunities not only to access to the educative programs but also to have equality in the kind of sources for each institution to facilitate the ESL learning.

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