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Colombia Towards Bilingualism Policies, Achievements, Failures, and Challenges

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Abstract

In recent years in Colombia, the Ministry of Education has been creating policies to strengthen the development of communicative skills in English classrooms to generate better education, support national progress and prosperity, and prepare young citizens for the competitive job market. Bilingualism policies in Colombia have been implemented to contribute to reducing the inequality gap that at currently exists among the citizens since there are significant differences in schools in the public and private sectors. These differences are related, among others, to school facilities, teachers' qualifications, and the ongoing professional development for teaching staff, which at the same time shows that Colombian policies have not been fully successful in promoting bilingualism. The main objective of this research was to know about the impact of bilingualism policies in Colombia, achievements, failures, and challenges, taken from teacher's perceptions and experiences. This exploratory research has shown that Colombia has greatly advanced in including strategies to provide equal opportunities for everyone, especially the least favoured populations, but there is still room for improvement. The results of this research show that despite having bilingualism policies, the teaching conditions in educational contexts have not allowed for clear and successful processes and the Colombian population continues to demonstrate a low level of communication skills, which reduce of job opportunities for new professionals. The purpose of this article is to show preliminary findings related to the teaching of English in vulnerable communities in Colombia in contrast with the bilingualism policies. Findings show that the policies are not coherent with the real teaching contexts, there are situations that are unknown by the policy makers therefore become the cause of the failure to achieve the goals, the country is still far from bilingualism.

Introduction

For several decades, Colombia has been implementing strategies to promote the strengthening of English-language communication skills to respond to international trends and the globalized world. This is how bilingualism and strategies implemented have shown significant progress in the bilingualism policies of the country. The policies implemented and the efficiency programs at first sight have an inclusive vision because although they are designed to operate in all educational contexts, greater emphasis has been placed on public education, since there are significant differences in schools in the public and private sectors.

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Despite the significant progress in the implementation of these policies, it is pertinent to reflect on how inclusive the policies for English language education in Colombia since the results of these policies are not yet successful. In a review of the literature, we find that the concept of bilingualism in Colombia has been poorly interpreted and that it is reduced only to the concept of bilingualism as English - Spanish, leaving aside other forms of bilingualism such as that of indigenous communities and the languages of the visually and hearing-impaired population.

This article presents in the first instance the bilingualism policies and some of the strategies that have been developed to enhance the development of communication competencies in English developed especially in public schools with the aim of reducing the gap of inequality among the population. However, it can be observed that despite the vision of inclusion in the policies, they are totally exclusive, as they do not consider social differences and educational opportunities, rural areas, students with special needs and, what is most striking, English teachers have been excluded from the decisions and the construction of the bilingualism policy.

Finally, it is evident that even though bilingualism policies exist, there is no precision in their implementation. This shows that there are no successful results despite several decades of their implementation. Currently, Colombia ranks one of the lowest levels of English language proficiency among the countries in Latin America.

Theoretical Aspects

To start this reflection, it is important to consider some relevant concepts such as bilingualism, educational policies, and bilingualism policies. Bilingualism could be defined as the development of linguistic competencies in a second language according to Macnamara (1967) cited by Bermúdez and Fandiño (2012). Lam (2001) cited by Bermúdez and Fandiño (2012), defined bilingualism as the ability of communicate in two languages. Educational policies are the laws, decrees, provisions, regulations, and resolutions that compose the pedagogical doctrine of a country setting its objectives and procedures to achieve them, Tagliabue (1997, cited in Montes et al., 2019) and cited by Pita-Torres (2020). From this perspective, bilingualisms policies could be defined as a set of regulations governments define to implement strategies that promote de development of communicative competences in a foreign language.

Methodology

In this exploratory research with a qualitative focus, a sample of 40 Colombian teachers of English, aged between 30 and 60 years participated in the study. They teach in public institutions in rural and urban areas. The aim of the project was to identify the impact of bilingualisms polices in the development of communicative competencies of Colombian citizens. The data was collected thought surveys, interviews and documentary research which made it possible to find facts and exiting information about bilingualism policies. The objective was to know bilingualism policies in Colombia, achievements, and teaching context to identify failures and challenges.

Findings

The research began with a documentary review of the country's language policies in recent decades. As a second step participants were asked about the actual teaching contexts, their experiences, and perceptions of the bilingualism policies. Finally, the current situation of the

country in terms of English language proficiency according to published results of international testers were checked. In this way it could identify advances, failures and challenges in the bilingualism policies.

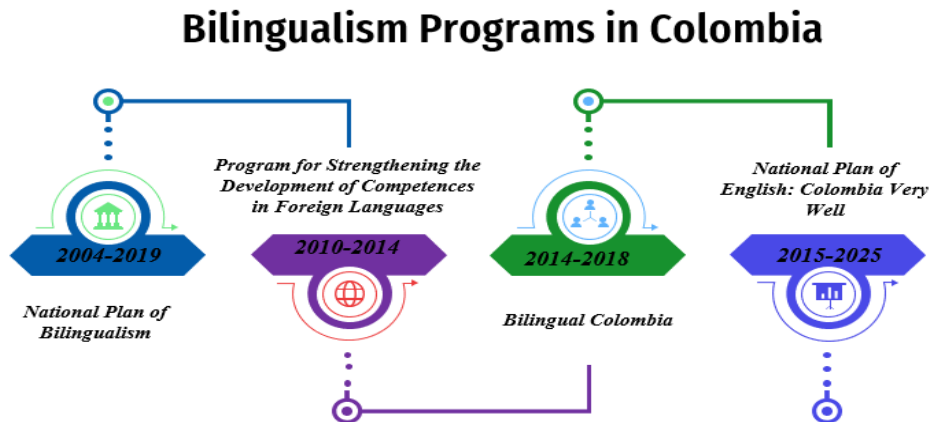
Bilingual Policies in Colombia

Through a documentary revision it was possible to identify bilingual policies, project and strategies to enhance communicative competences in English. In Colombia, a Spanish-speaking, bilingualism policies have been implemented, as in most non-English speaking countries around the world. These policies aim to have a bilingual population that will allow new generations and new professionals to have access to better job and academic opportunities. The national government is aware of the need to strengthen communication skills in English, as this language has become the language of business, academia, science, research, and technology.

In this sense, the general education law in 1991 established teaching of English as an official language in all educational contexts nationwide. After the proclamation of the 1991 Constitution, in 1994, through Law 115, the General Education Law, the teaching of a foreign language is formally introduced from the basic primary cycle. English has been officially established as the foreign language to teach round the country and was established as mandatory, Cobo & Valencia (2020).

Since 2004 in Colombia there have been various bilingualism programs as shown in the following graphic. These initiatives reflect the good intentions of the national government; however, the programs have not been followed through in a logical sequence and continuity, and it is observed that each one has overlapped the previous one, Gómez & Mily. (2017).

Graphic N. 1 Bilingualism Programs in Colombia.



Note: This Image Shows the Main Bilingualism Programs in Colombia Since 2004.

The firsts bilingual plan launched in Colombia was called National Plan of Bilingualism 2004-2019, its main objective was to strengthen the learning of foreign languages at different educational levels, it also included teaching training strategies to motivate and inspire teachers such as diplomas and courses to strengthen pedagogical skills in teaching English, Cárdenas & Miranda (2014). The national government published in 2006 guidelines for the teaching of

English as a foreign language. One of the requirements in the guidelines for the teaching of English as a foreign language is that new teachers of English in the country should have a level of C1 according to the Common European Framework. This project aimed at offering all school pupils the possibility of reaching a B1 level of proficiency in English at the end of their school studies, de Mejía (2011). All professionals in the country are also expected to attain a level of B2.

In this project, it was evident an interest in developing social and communicative competences in the early grades of primary school. The implementation of the project called Bunny Bonita that aimed to teach basic English with useful language for everyday communication to children between 4 and 8 years old. It consists of videos, posters and pedagogical guides in pdf format that emphasize everyday uses of the language, as well as grammatical aspects, vocabulary, and pronunciation of English.

A second plan was known under the name of Program for Strengthening the Development of Competences in Foreign Languages 2010-2014. It was created to help Colombian citizens to develop communicative competencies in English as a foreign language to facilitate the insertion of Colombian human capital into the globalization tendencies. This program included teachers training professional development, institutional evaluation, and institutional strengthening (MEN, 2014). During this program teachers from public institutions were certified by the University of Cambridge and British Council, Arias Castilla, and Angarita (2014). Moreover, universities nationwide had the opportunity of a new call training 190 English teachers from 17 education departments. Through these initiatives more than 9,500 teachers were trained, Gómez & Mily (2017).

A new program was known as Bilingual Colombia 2014-2018, in accordance with Timetoast (2000), this program aims to raise the level from A2 to pre-intermediate level in schools and universities. The program aims to help both students and teachers to improve their communication skills and to have an interaction with native speakers from other cultures. This plan consisted of the exchange of native speakers (English fellows) who worked as co-teachers with Colombian teachers. The national government signed agreements with entities that promote educational exchanges such as Heart for Change, Fulbright, and others. Through these agreements, young people from English-speaking countries came to the country every year to support communicative activities to students in ninth, tenth and eleventh grades in the country's official schools.

Gómez & Mily (2017) mentions that some strategies implemented during this program includes pedagogical design. Two booklets were presented: Suggested English curriculum, 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016b) and Basic learning rights: English 6th to 11th grades (MEN, 2016a). This plan also included the donations of pedagogical resources and technological tools to schools. Regarding the use of technology in English language teaching, workshops and training courses were offered on the use of virtual tools for English language teaching, a program was created called e- learning dynamizes, through which licenses for teaching English through ICT were granted to many English teachers. Although it was a national plan, it was also accomplished in 120 schools from 36 cities with no clear criteria of section.

During the government of President Juan Manuel Santos another bilingualism plan was launched under the name of National Plan of English: Colombia Very Well! 2015-2025, according to the Ministry of Education (2015) this program is a strategy to improve communicative skills in English implementing and ensuring quality requirements in education.

According to González (2020), this program was created to improve the communicative skills in English considering the quality requirements in education, that is, the rules to provide a good education.

The Ministry of Education with a group of experts designed textbooks for secondary students: Way to go for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders and English Please for 9th, 10th, and 11th graders. These textbooks were free of charge and the design considered the inclusion of motivating topics for the students. Textbook presents topics that are contextualized to the culture and customs of the country. As part of this process, the English teachers of these educational institutions were offered support from expert teachers. The English teachers of these educational institutions were offered support from expert teachers both in the content of the book and in the methodology for its use.

Image 1: Textbook Implemented Un Secondary Schools.



In addition to national bilingualism plans, some capital cities have also implemented their own plans at the local level. Cities such as Bogota, the capital city, Cali, and Medellin have created strategies to strengthen citizens' English communication skills. One of them were Bilingual Bogotá, according to Arias & Angarita (2014) this project aimed to make Bogotá competitive city and attractive for tourism. Bilingual Valle seeks to increase the number of teachers in bilingual training in the Valle de Cauca, highlighting the strengthening of communication skills of a second language. Arias & Angarita (2014).

Even though, those bilingualism programs have been officially known since 2004, Colombia has had a long tradition of teaching English and even French as a foreign language as stated by Gómez (2016) who mentions that Colombia has a long tradition in foreign languages instruction since Colonialism.

One of these policies, launched in 1826, proposed to teach in primary and secondary schools Spanish, Latin, Greek, French, English, and one indigenous language, the one most spoken in the region where the school was located, Bonilla & Tejada-Sánchez, (2016), as cited by Gómez & Mily (2017, p. 140).

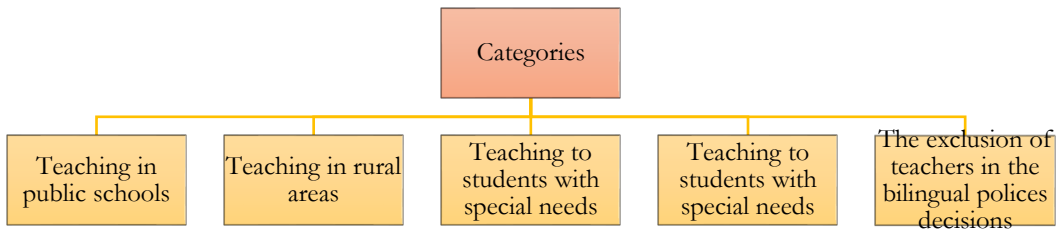
Throughout the history in Colombia there have been good initiatives to strengthen English language skills, however, it is evident the existence of different programs that sometimes one overlaps the other, which shows little clarity in the language policies and lack of well-defined objectives. Since general education policies it is notices an awareness to be inclusive, these plans have been carried out mainly with public constitutions since they deal with populations with fewer opportunities to learn a foreign language. However, it is important to examine how effective and inclusive the policies have been in the implementation of the programs.

At this point, Gómez Sará, Mary Mily. (2017) state that the constant changes in the bilingualisms programs have altered the continuity, reliability, and articulation of the strategies,

resulting in a slow work speed and a feeling of low-achievement and dissatisfaction. There seems to be no clear connection between bilingualism policies and the social and cultural realities of the country. All this has caused frustration, loss of economic and human resources invested for so many years.

Teaching Contexts, Teacher's Experiences, and Perceptions about the Bilingualism Policies

The data collected from surveys and interviews let me identify five emerging categories as it is showed above.



English Language Teaching in Public Institutions: Challenges for Teachers

The Bilingualism plans in Colombia and the document "Basic Standards of Foreign Language Competences: English" promote foreign language teaching. Their guidelines, objectives and strategies carried out seem to want to ensure a good level of language proficiency in adulthood by pointing to an integration between language instruction and the general curriculum of the Colombian education system. It is also evident the investment the Ministry of Education has made in multilateral agreements to promote de development of communicative competencies in the country. There is also an intention to have inclusive policies since public educational institutions do not have the same resources to develop foreign language processes as private institutions do.

However, there are obstacles in the implementation and administration of these programs. In some cases, investments are made in resources that are not used effectively. In other cases, schools do not have the human resources to carry out the implementation of the initiatives of the Ministry of education and there is not enough staff to implement them.

When asked about the number of students per class and the teaching conditions, teachers reported that the high number of students per group is concerned. The average number of students per group is around 35 students in primary school and 40 students in secondary school. This number greatly affects the effectively develop students' communication and listening skills. Correa & Montoya (2014).

Observing the reality of these educational contexts, only a few institutions have been involved in the programs and projects led by the MEN. As it was mentioned in the session before the program named Bilingual Colombia 2014- 2018 was also accomplished in 120 schools from 36 cities with no clear criteria of section. Bilingualism policies usually select institutions as pilot

schools for bilingual studies but there is no continuity afterwards. In the case of textbooks designed for secondary students, *Way to go* and *English Please* The implementation was started with a consistent program of accompaniment and training of teachers for its implementation, but this was only done in selected institutions, nowadays, following simple surveys in some schools, these texts remain in the libraries without use, what is worse, some public schools never knew of their existence.

Regarding to the technological resources, opinions were divided, 40% of the teachers interviewed stated that they did not have adequate technological resources in their schools and that activities such as listening could not be carried out due to lack of equipment. The 60% of the participants responded that there are technological resources in the school, however they are not easily accessible, the resources are provided by one person in a closed room, not accessible to the teachers. One of the participants mentioned:

[We know that there is a computer room but the procedure to have access to it takes so long that sometimes one prefers to do the class in the traditional way". (Teacher from a public school)]

Another teacher stated:

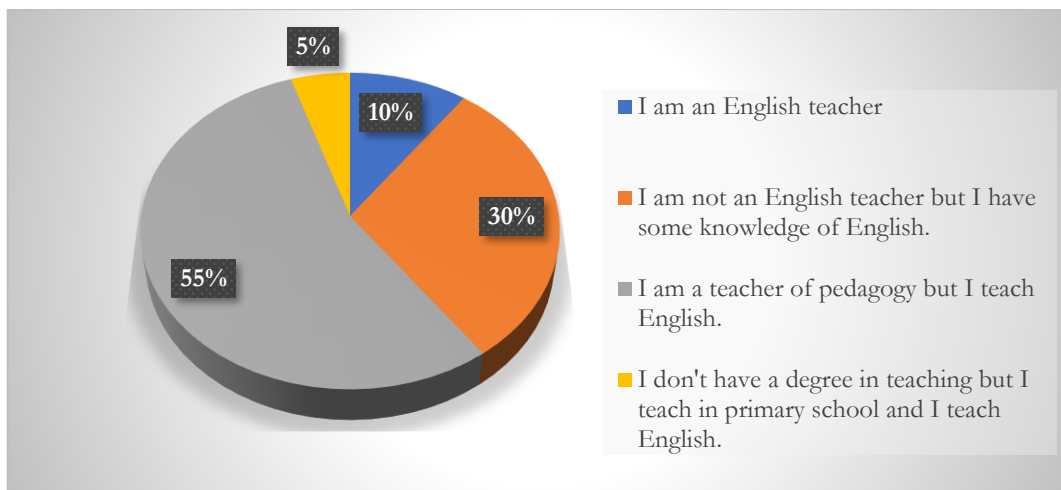
[in the classrooms we do not have any resources, although there is a room with resources such as tape recorders and computers but sometimes the person in charge is not there, so it is difficult to have access to the resources]. (Teacher from a public school)

Galvis (2014) mentions that there are public institutions with good technology equipment such as laptops, audio, and video projection equipment, there also institutions with specialized computer rooms and even bilingualism rooms. It means that the investments and efforts to include technology in education represent significant expenditures. Galvis (2014) states that the availability of the resources is not an issue but their administration since teachers do not have practical access to.

Concerning the human resources, in public institutions it is observed that professionals from other fields have educational tasks that should only be done exclusively by pedagogues. Even teachers from other areas with no foreign language training oversee teaching English classes. Galvis (2014). Schools do not have enough teachers to guide English classes. In secondary schools, students have only 2 or maximum 4 hours of English classes per week. In primary schools, many institutions have no English teachers on some institutions, teachers of pedagogy with no training in English teaching cope with teaching English.

Cobo & Valencia (2020). State that in the primary school cycle, the responsibility of teaching English lies with teachers with little or no training in foreign languages. This makes it difficult to take advantage of students' capacities in their first years of life and the plasticity of their brains for the acquisition of a second language. In addition, the Ministry of National Education has been forced to rethink the goals and strategies proposed since 2004 due to the poor results obtained in these projects.

Even though teachers are offered ongoing training to improve their teaching and communication skills, training is usually offered to full time teachers, not to teachers with temporary contracts or teachers who were five years for retirement withdrawals. This meant that many of them could not even aspire to participate in the trainings, Correa & Montoya (2014).

Graphic N

As can be seen in the graph above, in the case of primary school, there is a significant number of teachers who do not have a degree in English, some teachers from other fields of knowledge with some knowledge of English oversee the guidance of these courses, which does not ensure good educational processes in the learning of a foreign language. From this perspective, it is not enough to have the intention to be inclusive in the teaching of foreign languages from the MEN's policies, but to administer the plans more effectively, considering the realities of the educational contexts.

Teaching in Rural Areas: A Neglected Sector in Bilingualism Policies

Another big issue in inclusivity is the rural context. Colombia is a republic that has experienced a crisis of violence for more than 50 years, which in one way or another has affected the educational processes, especially in rural areas where these situations have been more frequent. The teachers interviewed mentioned that it is difficult to motivate students to learn a language when they come from home with family conflicts, caused by forced displacement and violence they have been victims of.

According to Roldan & Pelaéz (2017) a rural context tends to be hit by violence due to forced displacement brought about by excessive population growth, which consequently causes children and young people to drop out of school or show poor academic performance. All these factors are also affected by the lack of: Resources, hourly intensity, and motivation by the students, that although they are present in the entire Colombian context, they stand out much more in the rural context and this is not taken in account by the Colombian government.

Participants reports that these specific contexts have not been considered in the developing of bilingual policies, and that is the main reason why the program has not progressed as it should. It seems that programs are not design to Colombians, and this can be reflected in the students' results and in the teachers' opinions. Roldan & Pelaéz (2017).

In addition to the social problems that have been increasing and affecting the regions, the financial, technological, or didactic resources of most of the rural institutions are scarce. One of the participants mentioned that the bilingualism programs have been created and carried out in the big cities, in the rural sector they don't even know about the policies and don't even get to know the strategies. In this sense bilingualism policies promoted by the national government

do not have much scope in these scenarios, widening the gap in terms of lack of resources. Niño & Moreno (2020).

On the other hand, teachers in rural contexts have not been fully considered in bilingualism strategies and policies. These contexts have particularities which have not been considered in bilingualism plans and programs. Participants mentioned that in the rural area there is a lack of technology, internet access and didactic material that could make the classes more dynamic, in this sense the English class only focuses on learning some basic vocabulary or structures. Holguín, B. R., & Morales, J. A. (2016) state that there are most teachers that come from cities and find it very difficult to adapt to the isolated environment of rural areas, since these settings have shortcomings that is why more efforts and changes are needed to advance in the conditions of disadvantaged areas in order to achieve the goals established in the (NBP), Holguín, B. R., & Morales, J. A. (2016).

Teaching to Students with Special Needs: Challenges for Teachers

Another situation related to the teaching of English as a foreign language in the framework of the bilingualism policies concerns the teaching of populations with special needs. When speaking about bilingualism or bilingual education in Colombian context, the main emphasis is on the learning of foreign languages. It often leads institutions to neglect the development of the mother tongue, De Mejía, & Fonseca (2008). In Colombia bilingualism is often used to refer almost exclusively to English-Spanish bilingualism but the minority communities in Colombia, such as the deaf and blind community, have been excluded from the bilingualism policies in the country to offer equal opportunities.

In the case of teaching visually impaired people, some small advances have been made. The National Institute for the Blind (INCI) published a booklet with strategies for teaching communicative skills in English in 2020. However, there are no materials available in the schools and teachers are not trained to teach Braille to blind or visually impaired people.

Reina & Lara (2020) state that despite the efforts made by the Colombian government, educational institutions, teachers and researchers, more research on teaching English to inclusive students is still needed to ensure quality education for this student population. Reina & Lara (2020)

In the case of the deaf and hearing-impaired population, studies show that they do not have easy access to learn a foreign language. According to the bilingualism policies in Colombia, it is very important that students master a foreign language. For schools it is relevant that their students master their mother tongue and could know and study a foreign language, such as English, Italian, or French, among others. Unfortunately, the deaf population does not have this opportunity, as their first language is Colombian Sign Language and their second language is Spanish, with no institutes to teach them a third language. Molina Ramírez (2020).

In 1996, Colombian Sign Language was officially recognized, thus facilitating the development of bilingual programs for deaf children in Colombian Sign Language and Spanish. Bilingualism for this population has been limited, as mentioned above, there are no resources for teaching English as a foreign language to this population, nor are the English teachers trained to carry out this task. These considerations were not studied when the bilingualism policies were developed in the country.

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to deaf students is a challenging mission for teachers today, Khasawneh (2021). For this reason, a training and coaching plan is required for

the teachers who would oversee this responsibility and consider these other possibilities of bilingualism.

67% of the participants reported having experience teaching people with diverse neurological people, however they have received no preparation for teaching English, have no materials and sometimes these students had to be excluded during the English class because teachers did not have knowledge about sign language, braille or how to teach students with special need. 10 participants reported that they have had initiatives to teach English to the visually impaired population, however these initiatives have remained at a basic level with no continuity due to lack of support from institutions and the government.

The bilingualism programs in Colombia have not supported English language teaching for students with disabilities. As mentioned above, the programs have been created to encourage the teaching of English to all Colombian students over the next ten years, all documents propose practices and resources for only some types of populations and institutions and do not include what a student with disabilities should achieve and how, despite their goal of raising bilingualism among all Colombian students, those with disabilities are being excluded. Ochoa, D. (2016)

The official documents that regulate bilingualism in Colombia need to include in their policies the language of inclusion which speaks to all members of society, encouraging them to accept differences and become involved in mutual learning communities, where all the students are welcome despite their physical or mental conditions. Ochoa, D. (2016, p. 81).

Bilingualisms and the Exclusion of Aboriginal Languages

Colombia, as a country characterized by its ethnic diversity, cultural and territorial, it “has the existence of 65 indigenous languages, 2 Creole languages, and the Romanesque language”, Ministerio de Cultura (2022, p.9). Indigenous languages play a fundamental role in our country since they contribute to the development of our Colombian identity as well as containing cultural, historical, and linguistic richness that identifies us as a nation, León, (2012).

The policies of the national bilingualism program in Colombia have not considered the cultural and linguistic diversity of the country. Bilingualism through government policies in Colombia, sociolinguistic reality has not been sufficiently illustrated, where native speakers of indigenous languages, Creole languages, the language of the hearing impaired and Romani have - for glotopolitical reasons - had to rely on Spanish not only as a vehicular language, but also, as a language of culture, Cisneros & Mahecha, (2020).

The participants mentioned that there is a misconception of bilingualism in Colombia, given that it is only understood from Spanish English, leaving aside the linguistic richness of the country. The participants mentioned that teacher training programs have concentrated on the teaching of English as a foreign language from an imperialist point of view, undervaluing the aboriginal languages.

Regarding to the question: Do you agree that language policies should focus on the teaching of Spanish and English? 11 % agree because English is the universally recognised language, 89 / say that it is important to learn English and that it is a language that should be taught, but it cannot be the only one, nor can the indigenous languages of the country be forgotten.

As it was mentioned previously, bilingualism policies in Colombia are concerned in improving the communicative competencies in foreign languages (English) including different strategies

which aim to get better results on international standards for Colombian students. However, ethno-education is not one of the main focuses of this program. Although, native languages are recognized in the bilingualism policies, these do not have a transcendental role that allows the strengthening of them.

Cisneros & Mahecha, (2020), state that no language policy has been designed in accordance with the dynamics of the country's socio-cultural reality. Government initiatives have tried to outline partial language policies in the educational sphere under the name of bilingualism not on the bilingual phenomenon as a cultural process, but on the creation of ideal conditions for Colombians to demonstrate high levels of English to be competitive in the global world.

In the concern to demonstrate bilingualism programs in the country to accomplish the global demands of the internationalization of education, the particularities, and realities of the Colombian context in terms of its linguistic and cultural richness have not been considered. Bilingualism policies have been exclusive in this respect. There is a double perception which deepens inequality and exclusion since there is a positive perception of bilingualism Spanish-English bilingualism versus a negative perception of Spanish-ethnic language bilingualism, De Mejía (2006) as cited by Bastidas Muñoz, & Jiménez (2021). Furthermore, policies and documents have not considered the needs and role of minority and immigrant communities in Colombia. Mora & Zapata (2019).

Usma (2009) states that bilingualism programs bring opportunities for some groups and individuals but above all it generates processes of inequality, exclusion and social stratification with the new discourses and practices that are adopted. The notion of Spanish-English bilingualism not only excludes indigenous and other foreign languages, but also imposes discourses and practices imported into the country to the detriment of local knowledge.

The Exclusion of Teachers in the Bilingual Policies Decisions

Another excluding aspect of the bilingualism policies is the involvement of teachers in the decisions and the creation of bilingualism policies. For years, the Ministry of Education has been approaching external institutions as advisors in the government's decisions and plans to implement the education policies. Policies and guidelines always come in a top-down approach, where a group of experts create, decide and order and English teachers are called upon to participate, their voices are silenced and substituted by foreign views of education Usma (2009).

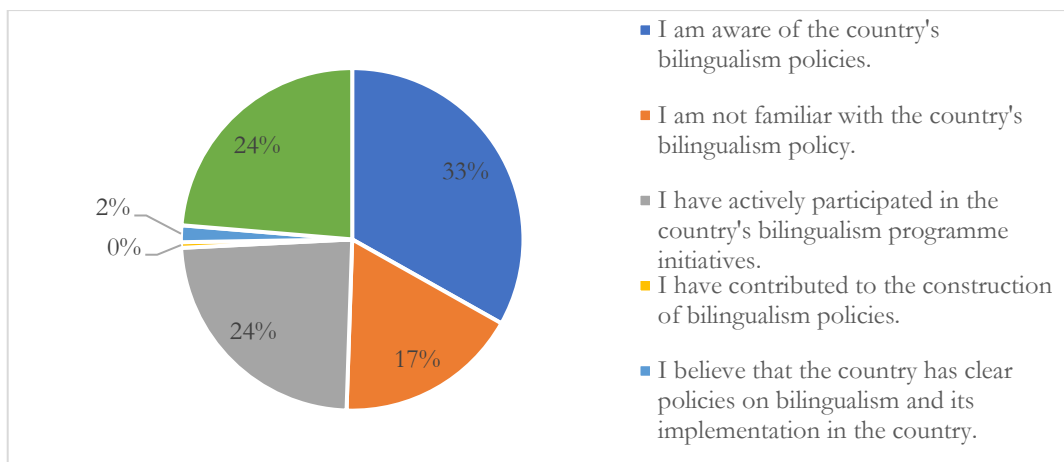
On the other hand, as there is no clarity in the bilingualism policies, new guidelines and policies appear, as I mentioned at the beginning, the bilingualism plans are constantly overlapping with each other. This causes teachers to become confused about the guidelines they should follow.

Each two years the government comes up with something new and just when teachers are starting to get familiar with one model, the government demands the implementation of a new one, and so on and so forth. It seems that teachers are so used to these dynamics that they develop some “coping mechanisms” that allow them to evaluate what is relevant in this or that model and to make the most of it to benefit their students. Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto (2013, p. 200).

Bilingualism policies have been delegated to external institutions that do not understand the realities of the country and the educational context, and for this reason they have not been entirely successful. In this sense, former educators have strongly criticized these policies since they consider as the imposition of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages context. On the other hand, the disregard of local knowledge and expertise in

informing global perspectives, as well as the exclusion of other types of bilingualism, have been severely questioned, De Mejía (2011).

When asked about the knowledge and participation in the construction of the country's bilingualism policies, the participants stated that there was little clarity on the part of the national government with respect to bilingualism policies, and it was also evident that none of the participants had participated in the construction of the policy and only some of them, 24% had participated in the strategies and had received training in the teaching of foreign languages.



According to the graphic above 33% of the participants know the bilingualism policies and 24% have received training in teaching English as a foreign language and 2% believe that the bilingualism policies are clear and 24% have actively participate in the bilingualism programs. On the other hand, the 0% that corresponds to 3 participants, have contributed to the construction of bilingualism policies. These results were compared with the responses of the interviewees, 25% of the participants mentioned recognizing the country's bilingualism policies, having received training in English language teaching and having participated in various initiatives, only one teacher reported having participated in an immersion program in the USA as part of the bilingualism project's initiatives in 2017. 75% of the participants say that they have difficulties in teaching English due to lack of resources, lack of teaching conditions and the lack of motivation of the students due to the social and family situations they have at home.

Colombia's Situation in the Global Context in Terms of Communication Skills in English; From Policy to Reality

One of the objectives of this research was to investigate the level of English of the Colombian population according to international referents, for this purpose the statistical data published by EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) 2022. According to the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) 2022, being ranked 77/100 countries and having a "very low" proficiency level along with countries such as Egypt, Ivory Coast, Iraq, and Thailand. The immediate challenge is to surpass the indices of Latin American countries, as we are 17th out of 19, only above Ecuador and Mexico. level of English in Colombia is characterized as "very low", it is understood that Colombians could manage simple conversations, with basic words and key expressions that turn out to be of the first order; tools to go sightseeing and survive along the way.

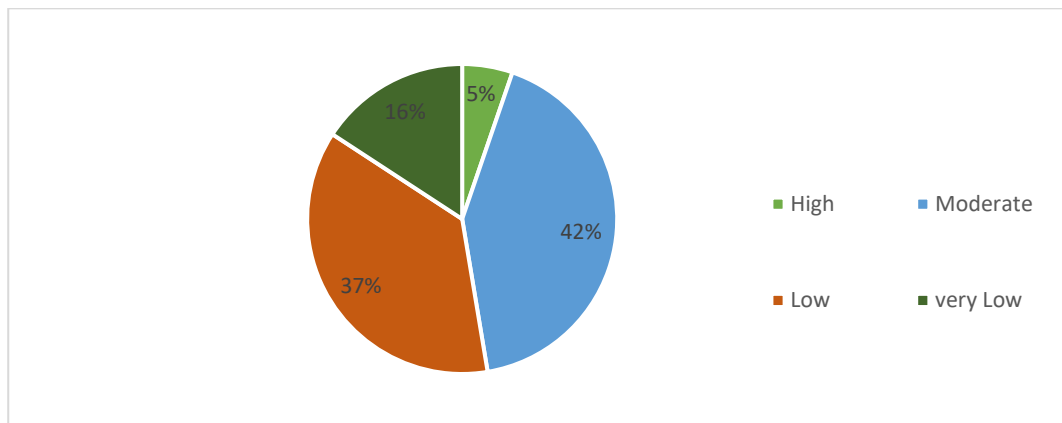
EF SET 2022 investigated how and where English proficiency is developing around the world, they analysed the results of 2.1 million adults who took the EF SET English tests in 2021. This report shows that Colombia is ranked 77 in the world among 111 countries in the world. According to the results in South American countries, it can be said that Colombia is ranked 17 among 19 countries. The table below shows the results obtained by Latin American countries.

Table 1: Scores of the Level of English in Countries in Latin America.

| Country | Score | Level Of English |
|----------------------|-------|------------------|
| Argentina | 566 | High |
| Costa Rica | 530 | Moderate |
| Chile | 523 | Moderate |
| Paraguay | 517 | Moderate |
| Cuba | 512 | Moderate |
| Bolivia | 504 | Moderate |
| República Dominicana | 499 | Moderate |
| Honduras | 498 | Moderate |
| Uruguay | 494 | Moderate |
| Brasil | 490 | Low |
| Panamá | 483 | Low |
| El Salvador | 483 | Low |
| Perú | 482 | Low |
| Guatemala | 476 | Low |
| Venezuela | 471 | Low |
| Nicaragua | 455 | Low |
| Colombia | 448 | Very Low |
| Mexico | 440 | Very Low |
| Ecuador | 411 | Very Low |

Note: This Table Shows the Score At Level Obtained by Countries in English Proficiency.

Graphic N. 2 English Level in Latin America



Note: The Graphic Shows the Percentages and English Level in America Latina.

Sánchez Jabba (2019) affirms that the results of bilingualism tests in 2011 are relatively low, especially among students in secondary education. According to the results of the tests carried

out by the Ministry of Education to determine the level of English of Colombian students in 2011, it was found that 90% of the secondary school graduates reached A1 level; in higher education, the proportion was 60%. Only 2% of high school graduates reaching B1 level and 6.5% of higher education students reaching B+ level.

Research carried out in Colombia shows that English scores remain low, which confirms the findings of the EF SET 2022. Regarding to In-service English teachers in the public sector, 25% reached level B+ and 35% reached level B1; 12.4% reached level A2, 12.7% level A1 and 14.4% level A-. Sánchez Jabba, A. (2019). Although these data correspond to results obtained about 10 years ago, the current results have not improved.

In reviewing these results, policies have not been successful in Colombia. Torres (2018) states that education must play a leading role in the orientation of society towards sustainable human development. In the same way Gómez (2000) states that each society requires that its educational systems be oriented to respond to the demands and needs that society demands. Hernández (2012) as cited by Cely (2021), affirms that in Latin America, the teaching and learning of a foreign language continues to be a challenge. Regarding to the teachers of bachelor's degree programs in foreign languages, they should demonstrate a level of C1 or C2. At this respect, a study carried out by Cely (2023), which explored the communicative competences of teachers in bachelor's degree programmes, 96% of teachers showed that they have high communicative competences, which qualify them for teaching, 96% stated that they have a C1 level and the remaining 4% a B2 level, which means, there are more opportunities for improvement.

Discussion

The conception of bilingualism in the country has been quite biased since it only conceives of Spanish-English bilingualism, leaving aside other forms of bilingualism experienced by the Colombian population and the creation of national standards are based on foreign models that reveals a simplified but rigid view of bilingualism Cruz (2012).

Although the policies and plans for bilingualism in Colombia have tried to give the sense that they are inclusive, they are not. The following is a more detailed review of sensitive aspects and socio-cultural realities that have influenced English language teaching in Colombia. To show whether the bilingualism policies of the country are truly inclusive, it is important to reflect on: English language teaching in public institutions; teaching English in rural areas; teaching English to children with special needs; the situation of indigenous languages and finally; the inclusion of the ideas and opinions of foreign language teachers in the decisions and policies of bilingualism in the country.

In Colombia, the importance of English is reflected in the implementation of a growing number of policies, bilingualism programs and multilateral agreements with Anglo speaking countries such as United States, the European Union, EFTA (European Free Trade Association) (Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, and Liechtenstein), Turkey, Japan, Israel, Korea, and Canada, among others, Sánchez Jabba (2019). However, all these initiatives do not seem to have been significant in achieving good results in the country's English language communication competencies.

Although in Colombia inclusion policies have recognized diversity, bilingualism programs have generated exclusion and social stratification. Policies and strategies are offered only to a sector

of the education system, to students with standard conditions, however, the racial minorities, the population with disabilities have been left aside. The least favoured people do not have easy access to foreign language training, which has created social inequality.

Conclusion

Even though Colombia has made great progress in the creation of policies of equal opportunities and has a clear vision of strengthening its educational competences in English as a foreign language, the creation of these policies has not been entirely clear to the teachers in charge of implementing them. Although Colombia has greatly advanced in including strategies to provide equal opportunities for everyone, especially the least favored populations, it has been noticed that policies have been exclusionary rather than inclusive and there is still room for improvement.

On the one hand, the policies of bilingualism have been created by external entities that are unaware of the social, linguistic, and cultural realities of the country. Vivas (2017) states that a commitment to bilingualism is incomprehensible during misery, poverty, hunger, inequality, and the lack of opportunities in a country where poverty, hunger, inequality, and the absence of opportunities. Since this is a reality in Colombia, not all the population has had the opportunity to have access to training in foreign English languages, which implies the involvement of economic factors. The national government has implemented initiatives to provide opportunities and close the gap of inequality among the population, however, it is noted that these resources have sometimes not been well managed and end up as a waste of economic resources without any impact.

The policies of equal opportunities are exclusionary because they do not consider the realities of education in rural contexts, students with special needs, indigenous communities who have their own languages, and what is even more striking, English teachers themselves have been excluded from participation in the creation of education policies, there are not listened and their interests, needs and experiences are not recognized.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that even though there has been a large increase in economic resources and there have been initiatives to have a population proficient in English communication skills, the country continues to have very low results and ranks among the last in Latin American countries in terms of English language proficiency.

In Colombia, bilingualism is approached with more emphasis on English and Spanish, ignoring that there is a rich linguistic wealth thanks to the existence of indigenous languages that make us a multilingual country. In addition, the importance of other foreign languages such as Portuguese, which could well be reinforced due to the proximity and the international cooperation agreements with Brazil, as well as French, among others that have been ignored.

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