

# Reflections

## Reflections on English Language Teaching and Bilingualism in Colombia

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According to an article published by one of the leading British newspapers *The Daily Telegraph*, (27 October, 2010) “Leaders of India’s low-caste Dalits are to celebrate the opening of a temple shaped like a desktop computer to inspire “untouchable” children to improve their prospects in life by learning English,” believing that learning English will open up new opportunities for India’s 160 million Dalits in higher education and high-status government careers. This is mirrored by the assumption in Colombia and in other Latin American countries that English is the key to success, or citing the title of the successful English language programme adopted by the Ministry of Education in Chile, “InglésAbrePuertas”. In this article I would like to first critique this often unquestioned belief about the development of English and better life prospects. I will then talk briefly about the relationship between English Language Teaching (ELT) and the development of bilingualism. Finally I will discuss how far initiatives such as the English Immersion Programme in San Andrés help to develop bilingual teachers’ competencies.

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### **Bilingualism and better life prospects – a necessary connection?**

As is well known, the main objective of the National Bilingual Programme is:

“To have citizens who are capable of communicating in English, in order to be able to insert the country within processes of universal communication, within the global economy and cultural openness, through [the adopting of] internationally comparable standards”<sup>7</sup> (MEN, 2006: 6)

Thus, the emphasis is mainly on the improvement of English language proficiency within a vision

of competitiveness and global development. However, we may ask how far is it actually necessary to have a good level of English in order to be successful in life in Colombia? In this respect, Valencia Giraldo (2005:17) questions, “who in reality benefits from the promotion of ‘bilingualism’”, noting that there is a tendency to accept uncritically the necessary connection between ‘bilingualism’ (understood as English language proficiency) and better employment prospects. Lina de Brigard, an executive working for a talent spotting firm contracted by multilingual companies in Colombia, reinforced this vision in a talk in 2006, by saying that, in fact, only 5% of the posts dealt with require bilingual staff. For the vast majority, while English is desirable, it is not essential. However, she also observed

<sup>7</sup> Translations from Spanish to English by the author.

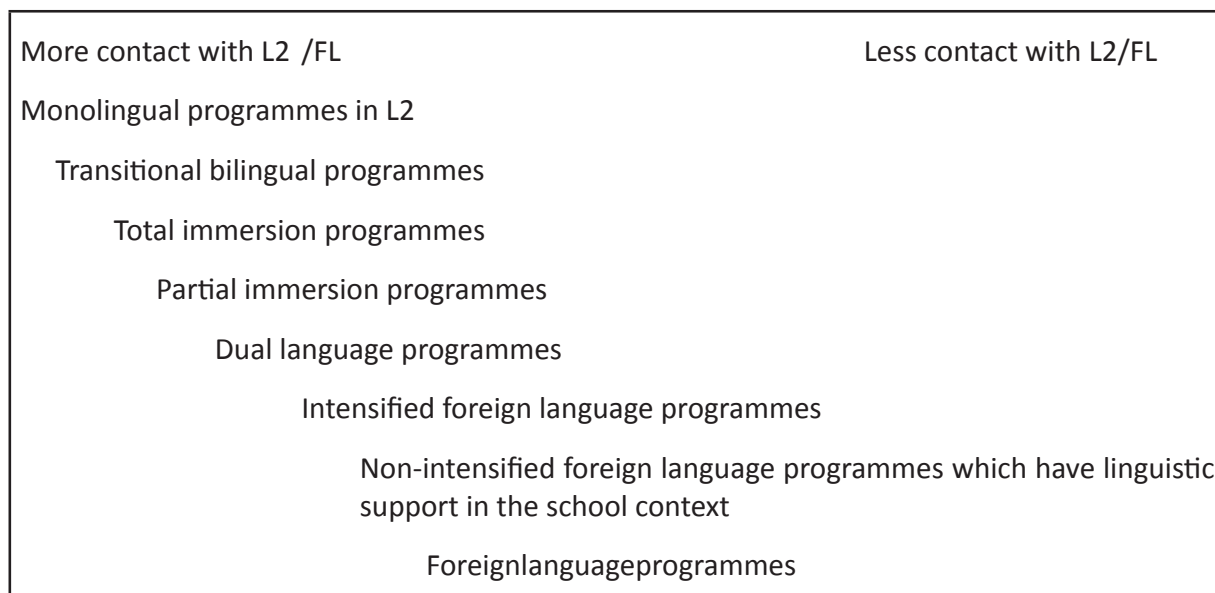
that consciousness of the need for English has become a “way of thinking” for many young professional people in the country.

Furthermore, Usma Wilches (2009:133) has associated this notion with a vision of the instrumentalisation of language learning. Instead of focussing on the potential of foreign language learning to help towards a deeper understanding of ‘the other’, it becomes rather, “another strategy to build a better resume, get better employment, be more competitive in the knowledge economy”. Usma Wilches condemns this vision as reductionist and draws attention to the multiple implications of language teaching and learning. In fact, however, this wider vision advocated by Usma Wilches, is also indicated in the quotation from the Ministry of Education cited above, where in addition to economic considerations, there is an emphasis on “cultural openness”.

## The relationship between ELT and the development of bilingualism in Colombia

According to experts, such as Met (1994) and Baker (2006) there are many different ways of developing bilingualism, depending on the different contexts involved and the type of bilingual proficiency aimed at. This has also been hinted at by the Gimnasio Moderno in Bogotá calling their English language programme “Nuestra manera de ser bilingües”, indicating the importance of each school or institution developing their foreign language programmes in the light of school philosophy and the student exit profile they are aiming at. Alberto Abouchaar and I recently tried to indicate some of these differing orientations, taking into account how far these were related to emphasis on foreign language teaching and learning. These are represented in the following diagram:

*Diagram 1: The continuum of education which promotes bilingualism.* (Adapted from Abouchaar and de Mejía, 2011)



As we can see here, there are a range of possibilities to how schools can approach bilingualism, some more effective than others. The type of educational provision that is more common in Colombia relate to the following modalities: total immersion, partial immersion, intensified foreign language programmes, non-intensified foreign language programmes which have linguistic support in the school context, and foreign language programmes. According to a study carried out by de Mejía, Ordoñez & Fonseca (2006) there is widespread belief in the country that only schools which intensify contact with English to cover at least 80% of the curriculum provide “true” bilingual education.

However, the development of proficiency in two or more languages is not merely a question of the number of hours per week devoted to the teaching and learning of English or any other foreign language. We also need to look at the classroom practices which characterise these interventions. In this respect, I think that a checklist for effective practices with English learners adapted from Freeman & Freeman (1999) gives a good idea of certain key aspects which are needed to ensure appropriate linguistic and cultural development. These may be summarized in the following questions:

- Are students involved in authentic reading and writing experiences?
- Is there an attempt to draw on student background knowledge and interests? Are students given choices?
- Is the content meaningful? Does it serve a purpose for the learners?
- Do students have opportunities to work collaboratively?
- Do students speak and listen as well as read and write during their learning experiences?
- Are students’ primary languages and cultures valued, supported and developed?

- Are students involved in activities that build their self esteem and provide them with opportunities to succeed?

### Teachers of ELT in primary

In this part of the discussion, we will discuss how far these aspects are evident in the teaching of English in Colombia. We will concentrate on the primary school level, as this has been recognised as critical, particularly in relation to the current lack of primary school English teachers and how to solve the teacher supply problem at primary level, as recognised by Rosa María Cely in a presentation in 2009.

In Medellín, a group of researchers at Universidad de Antioquia conducted an ethnographic study in seven public elementary schools in the city to establish by means of observation, document analysis and teacher interviews, the relationship of teachers’ methodological principles and practices. It was found that the 12 English teachers who participated in the project all held Bachelor of Education degrees: five in elementary or preschool education, four in areas such as Spanish, Maths, and Social Studies, and three in foreign languages. However, the latter had had no training in teaching English at primary school level (Cadavid Múnera, McNulty & Quinchia, 2004; Quinchia & Cadavid, 2006).

One of the findings from this research was that most of the class periods were spent on organisational or affective activities and were generally carried out in Spanish. As the authors noted, “Teachers tend to use the target language only when presenting a topic or reviewing vocabulary with children in class” (Cadavid Múnera et al., 2004:42). Teachers often modelled and organised, while the pupils generally answered the teacher’s questions, or repeated individually or chorally after the teacher. There was little pair or group work noted.

The researchers conclude that the teachers' generally low level of proficiency in English led to restricted use of the target language for basic vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation activities, while comprehension is assured mainly through translation into Spanish. They consider that,

"it is important for elementary school English teachers and policy makers to gain understanding of our reality if we are to attend our real needs and the specific challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in elementary public schools"

(Cadavid Múnera et al., 2004:45)

In a later presentation on the same topic (Quinchia&Cadavid, 2006:10) the authors observe,

"it is surprising to note the relevance of the results found here when sharing these findings with public school teachers in regional and national congresses...Teachers feel they are not sufficiently qualified to face a task they see as important in the education of boys and girls"

In the light of the diagnosis presented in the previous study, it is interesting to note Cristina Cadavid's (2003) comments on attempts to introduce a spiral thematic curriculum to teach English at primary school level. In Grade 1, the aim was to get the pupils to introduce themselves, talk about themselves, their pets and toys, while in Grade 2 the focus was expanded to include the school and the neighbourhood (Cadavid, 2003). In Grade 3, there was a stronger connection made with the area of Natural Science (the body, the senses and health). In Grades 4 and 5, the focus was on the country and the world.

The researcher found that the implementation of a thematic curriculum was an effective way of helping primary school children learn English and increase motivation towards the process. As a Grade 3 student commented,

"Sí me gusta [la clase de inglés] por la razón de lo que la profe Catalina nos enseña es para un vien (sic) de nosotros y si de pronto nos mandan para un país poder utilizar todo lo que nos enseñó"

*Yes I like [the English class] because the teacher, Catalina, teaches us things which are useful for us and if maybe we are sent to a country, we can use everything we have been taught "* (Cadavid, 2003:92)

However, there was a felt need for continuity in this process and articulation of this type of theme based approach with the teaching and learning of English at high school, as well as the need to increase the number of hours per week devoted to the target language. (During the study, the English classes were scheduled once a week for 45 minutes.) Furthermore, the author called for a greater degree of reflection among teachers with regard to their beliefs and practices in order to enhance understanding of a complex reality and help to "move towards a more enlightened approach to teaching" (Cadavid, 2003:96).

We can see here in the results of these studies carried out in Medellín that some of the questions posed earlier in relation to effective classroom practices seem to be touched upon, particularly the notions of providing authentic reading and writing experiences, drawing on student background knowledge and interests, and providing meaningful content. However, all this depends on teachers being able to use these ideas fruitfully in the classroom context, an issue involved in the type of professional development opportunities offered to practitioners.

### **Initiatives and concerns for teachers' professional development**

There has been criticism from various academics concerned with language teachers' professional development. Valencia Giraldo (2007), for example, has alluded to the type of pre-service

preparation offered to foreign language teachers (both primary and secondary) in universities, which often does not prepare them to face classroom realities and which sometimes engenders low self esteem in relation to the gulf perceived between by the teachers of their own level of foreign language proficiency and that of 'native speakers' held up as models. In similar vein, Melba Libia Cárdenas has condemned "the prescriptive practices for teaching and learning and the promotion of teacher qualification by the [National Bilingual Programme]" in contrast to "the critical dimension of language education" (Cárdenas, 2006:5).

Recently, there have been attempts to try to come to terms with some of these difficulties. In an initiative directed specifically at primary school teachers, two teacher educators at Universidad de Antioquia decided to implement a professional development course for six months aimed specifically at their needs (McNulty & Díaz, 2006), involving the exploration and reflection on their practice by the participating teachers, courses on the teaching and learning of foreign languages, as well as opportunities to develop foreign language skills. By means of group discussion, the presentation of methodological alternatives and the keeping of participant diaries, the teachers gradually got to the stage where they felt confident enough to try out some of the activities in their classrooms and report back on the experience. In general, this was seen as a very fruitful experience, as the researchers noted,

"Varios profesores compartieron que sus estudiantes disfrutaron las actividades que llevaron a la clase y parecían estar más motivados para aprender inglés"

*Various teachers shared that their students enjoyed the activities which they took to class and that they seemed more motivated to learn English*

(McNulty & Díaz, 2006: 12)

Another project related to primary school teachers, which is still ongoing, is concerned with finding out how teachers in Bogotá position themselves in relation to language policies, such as the National Bilingual Programme (Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto, in progress). The researchers maintain that the top down model applied in language and education planning in Colombia leaves many voices silenced and does not allow for participation in these processes. Therefore, they are interested in finding out how primary teachers, whose knowledge and experience is often undervalued, have reacted to developments of the National Bilingual Programme, and what their felt needs are for professional development. This project resonates with the concerns of researchers, such as Valencia Giraldo (2007) about the imposition of policy demands on teachers who are unprepared to assume the implications involved. Ignoring the contributions of in-service teachers and their perception of needs and experience, she maintains, results, in some cases, in tension between institutional expectations and teachers' perceived abilities to respond, and in others, in passivity and lack of commitment. This reflects Canagarajah's (2005) position on the use of central knowledge, disregarding the value of locally constructed knowledge on language teaching and teacher development. The developing, through pre-service and in-service courses, of a critical, reflective capacity (Pennycook, 2001) to evaluate current and new developments in language teaching approaches and methodologies should help teachers value their own constructed pedagogical knowledge and insights in relation to the knowledge and insights gained from the study of those working in different settings and help them to find ways of bringing students to the possibility of constructing their own knowledge and meanings, without imposing a particular frame of reference (Gieve & Margalhaes, 1994).

In an attempt to help teachers, schools and universities develop key areas of teacher education



programmes for bilingualism in foreign languages, the Ministry of Education commissioned a team of researchers in bilingualism at Universidad de los Andes to propose guidelines for the implementation of bilingual programmes (de Mejía & Fonseca Duque, 2009). Here I will make reference to some of the recommendations made to guide aspects of teacher training and development.

The first has to do with emphasizing the role of bilingual teachers as cultural and linguistic role models for the students. It is important that students see these bilingual teachers as people they can identify with and through this, they can explore different ways of developing their identities both as Colombians and as members of the global community.

A second recommendation has to do with teachers of the students' first language, normally Spanish. We would advocate providing teacher education and development for bilingualism and interculturalism to all language teachers, whether they teach the first language or a foreign language. This is based on the premise that a good level of proficiency in both languages is necessary to ensure productive bilingual processes. Very often "bilingualism" is associated only with the foreign language department. This does not do justice to a vision of bilingualism as communication in more than one language and culture (MEN, 2006).

As part of this process of staff development it is important that teachers should deepen their understanding of the basic principles of bilingual development and bilingual education. A school in which the administrative and teaching staff can explain to parents the reasons for decisions taken about the use of different languages in the curriculum, the amount of time dedicated to one or the other and why certain subjects are taught in the foreign language is in a better position than a school which has based its practices on

another bilingual establishment, without due reflection and adaptation.

A final recommendation has to do with the need to provide more teacher education programmes which focus on methodological principles which underlie the teaching of certain content area knowledge through English. In this respect, the Ministry of Education (2006:32) provides in the Standards document some useful examples of how, "the objectives established for the teaching of English support the school curriculum and how, at the same time, the curriculum supports the achievement of the English objectives". At present, most of the initial training and in-service programmes for teachers are geared to catering for foreign language teachers; there are relatively few which focus on provision for bilingual teachers who need to teach curriculum areas through the foreign language. As a headteacher of a bilingual school in Antioquia noted in a recent interview (de Mejía, Ordóñez y Fonseca, 2006),

"... conseguir profesores de inglés como tal, no es tan difícil. . . pero profesores que dicten áreas específicas en inglés es muy difícil. . . y sería maravilloso que de pronto el Ministerio de Educación pusiera eso dentro de las carreras de educación bilingüe."

*it is not difficult to get English teachers as such... but teachers who teach specific areas in English is very difficult... and it would be wonderful if perhaps the Ministry of Education would put that in the courses of bilingual education*

## Conclusion

So what can we conclude about initiatives such as the English immersion programme in San Andrés in relation to the developing of bilingual teachers' competences? First of all, I think we can see this as a positive step, not only in relation to helping to improve teachers' English language proficiency levels, but also because of the fact that they are

immersed in a multilingual context in San Andrés, where they come into contact potentially with three languages (Standard English, Creole and Spanish) on a daily basis. For many teachers, this contact with a multilingual environment should help them reflect on the impact and relationships of different languages in the local language ecology, as well as raising their awareness of the role of the first language in the development of bilingualism or multilingualism.

Furthermore, I think, a language immersion of the kind implemented in the Sede Caribe de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia could well help practitioners overcome the low esteem syndrome mentioned by Valencia Giraldo (2007) in relation to their perception of their level of foreign language proficiency and help teachers gain confidence in being able to use English not only as the object of language learning, but also as part of the process of helping their learners interact with each other in meaningful ways through the foreign language, as Cadavid Múnera et al. (2004) have recognised. However, it must also be recognised that these initiatives are valuable in as far as there is continuity in practice and use, which may be encouraged by the establishing of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998: 1), or in other words, “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” If teachers can be encouraged to exchange ideas and reflect on their practice on a regular basis, either in person, or through the use of ICT, there would be real opportunities for enriching processes of foreign language teaching and learning in Colombia, and for attaining appropriate levels of bilingual development for students in the public sector. Thus, through initiatives such as this, we can envisage a way forward for the development in Colombia of bilingualism, not only in English, but potentially in many of the different languages present in the national language ecology.

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