

# English Language Teaching in Colombia: A Necessary Paradigm Shift<sup>1</sup>

## Enseñanza del inglés en Colombia: un cambio necesario de paradigma

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### Abstract

In a first step, this article presents a reflection on the current state of the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Colombia. Analysing teachers' certification and teacher training, methodologies, language policies, and materials used, the text discusses how these processes essentially rely on technology importation. In a second step, the article introduces the sociocritical approach (SA), a recent development in Foreign Language Teaching which would contribute to the aforementioned issue since SA implies a shift in current policies from a private to a public orientation, from a top-down to a bottom-up approach in order to implement a context-based and adapted English Language Teaching (ELT) in Colombia.

**Keywords:** *Colombia, context-based English learning, English as a Foreign Language, English Language Teaching, linguistic policy, sociocritical approach*

### Resumen

En primera instancia, este artículo presenta una reflexión sobre el estado de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en Colombia. A través del análisis de las certificaciones y formaciones de docentes, las metodologías, las políticas lingüísticas y los materiales usados, el texto discute cómo estos procesos dependen esencialmente de importaciones tecnológicas. En segundo lugar, el artículo presenta el abordaje socio-crítico, un desarrollo reciente en el área de lenguas extranjeras que podría resolver el problema de las importaciones tecnológicas dado que este abordaje implica cambiar las políticas actuales de una orientación privada a pública, de un enfoque “arriba-abajo” a “abajo-arriba” para

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implementar un abordaje del Inglés como lengua extranjera basado en el contexto local colombiano.

**Palabras claves:** *Colombia, aprendizaje contextualizado del inglés, inglés como lengua extranjera, enseñanza del inglés, políticas lingüísticas, abordaje socio-crítico*

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Regardless of the context, ELT is never a mere pedagogic and technological activity detached from its environment, but a complex phenomenon intertwined with sociopolitical and sociocultural issues.

In a first step, this article presents a reflection on the current state of the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Colombia. Analysing teachers' certification and teacher training, methodologies, language policies, and materials used, the text discusses how these processes essentially rely on technology importation. In a second step, the article introduces the sociocritical approach (SA), a recent development in Foreign Language Teaching which would contribute to the aforementioned issue since SA implies a shift in current policies from a private to a public orientation, from a top-down to a bottom-up approach in order to implement a context-based and adapted English Language Teaching (ELT) in Colombia.

In this paper the current situation of ELT in Colombia will be discussed from such a critical perspective to emphasize its unhealthy dependency on foreign technologies and expertise. The issue has already been the object of various critical studies (González, 2007, 2009; De Mejía, 2005; Usma, 2009a, 2009b; Valencia, 2013) which all acknowledge the foreign influence in different aspects of the ELT process: González regarding teacher training (2007, see also Clavijo-Olarte, 2007) and certifications (2009), Usma (2009a, 2009b) and others (Ayala & Alvarez, 2005; De Mejía, 2005; González, 2007; Guerrero, 2008, 2010; Sánchez & Obando, 2008; Valencia, 2013) about linguistic policies and methodologies. This text synthesizes these contributions and addresses the issue of pedagogic materials, showing how ELT in Colombia can be deemed to fall under "technology importation" (Holliday, 1994). This expression –in the broad sense of

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“technology” – refers to institutions and agents relying on imported technical knowledge, methodologies and skills in order to achieve local processes. Indeed, the major elements of ELT in Colombia (methodologies, teachers training, curriculum, and materials) originate primarily from NABA (North America, Britain, Australia, and especially the U.S. and U.K.) and Europe with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2005). Based on a literature review and on his experience as a foreign researcher, English instructor and teacher trainer in different Colombian institutions for five years, the author will discuss the rationale underlying this dependency situation and introduce a Sociocritical Approach (SA) to shift the paradigm.

## **The importation of technological resources for ELT**

The Colombian dependency situation regarding teacher training and certification, methodologies, linguistic policies and materials will now be addressed.

### **Imported teacher certification and teacher training**

In 2006, the Colombian Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the British Council, instituted the “Basic Standards of Competence in Foreign Languages: English” (*Estándares Básicos en Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés*), (British Council, 2015). In line with the *Common European Framework*, these new linguistic standards determined that by 2019, teachers of primary and secondary education should possess a B2 English level while students should leave *colegios* with a B1 competence (*Ministerio de Educación*, 2017a, 2017b; British Council, 2015). While such action can be deemed adequate, the primary economic beneficiaries are the multinational corporations providing the tests. Indeed, Colombia, like other Latin American countries such as Mexico (Mora, Trejo & Roux, 2014), has not developed its own national certificates to assess teachers’ knowledge of English. Institutions therefore require EFL teachers and candidates to take expensive international exams such as IELTS, Cambridge University exams or a TOEFL of the Educational Testing Service. Teachers with a low proficiency are then pushed towards training courses designed by the British Council and Cambridge University.

Likewise, the Ministry of Education, with the purpose of improving (future) English instructors’ teaching skills, has imported models of teacher certification such as the *In-service Certificate in English Language Teaching (ICELT)* and the *Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT)* awarded by the University of Cambridge (González, 2009). These evaluations are mandatory for all English teachers who wish to certify their teaching ability regardless of their academic training. This questionable measure has been proposed by a foreign agency—the British Council—in order to have all Colombian teachers of English be tested for their proficiency level with the tests designed exclusively by Cambridge University. The option is unfortunate since ICELT and TKT then operate as additional and alternative certifications for teachers, rendering universities’ bachelors’ degrees dispensable (González, 2009) and discrediting them. Indeed, international corporate tests, with their established reputation, reliability and accountability, have a higher profile on the labor

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market in the eyes of the employers. Ramírez Ospina (2012) shows how Colombian directors and executives of private English institutes tend to rely more on foreign certifications than on university degrees they distrust. This phenomenon should be examined in the light of the low linguistic and pedagogical level of many ELT graduates, especially those coming from specific private universities and colleges: in the private sector, many teachers remain below the B1 level (British Council, 2015, p. 22).

Entrusting overseas companies with national assessment constitutes a patent example of technology importation. Empowering corporations also marks a “marketization” and “businessification of education” (González, 2009, p. 183, 194; McLaren, Martin, Farahmandpur & Jaramillo, 2004), also labelled “edu-business” (Hill, 2006, p. 6) and “corporatization” (Hadley, 2014, p. 208). “Businessification” refers to the global tendency observed in Colombia and many other contexts in which education becomes a for-profit activity adopted by corporations. “Corporatization” suits the aforementioned practices of the Colombian Ministry of Education and points at the emulation by educational institutions of practices and organizational cultures of service and manufacturing industries, such as reducing the costs at all levels (with multiple choice exams) or “managing” teachers so that they generate more benefits.

Drawing on an analysis of licensing examinations in ten countries, Libman (2009, p. 7) contends that licensing and certification systems “generally exist where the graduates of training programs are considered problematic as far as quality is concerned”. This is evidenced in Colombia where the decision to adopt international certifications stems from the fact that the English proficiency, the methodologies used by Colombian graduates and the local universities are not considered satisfactory by the Ministry of Education which therefore endorses an international organization such as the British Council (González, 2009). In that sense, the literature offers consistent arguments in favor of teacher licensing examinations: Libman (2009), sums up that, with their standards, licensing examinations emphasize the essential goals of teaching, set a clear route for teachers—especially novices—by defining what is expected of them and making them aware of what they need to improve. As they represent an additional barrier on the path of prospective teachers, licensing examinations limits the selection to the best candidates, thus raising the level in the profession. Also, examinations are motivational as they exert pressure on candidates and foster professional discourse in the community of educators, contributing to creating a common language, “sharing ideas, building consensus, and strengthening professional identity” (Libman, 2009, p. 9).

On the other hand, Libman counter-argues that licensing examinations, in their search for efficiency and free competition in the academic market, set up a clear marketization of education, which is by no means neutral. Corporations have been tasked to evaluate Colombian teachers’ pedagogic skills, a usually not-for-profit activity traditionally assumed by universities. Secondly, it is difficult to clearly define and measure the skills required of a novice teacher to ensure the quality of his/her teaching. Thirdly, the discourse on teachers’ competence distracts attention from the need to improve the school system as a whole

(Libman, 2009, p. 10).

Likewise, the last bilingualism government plan *Colombia Very Well 2015-2025* (Ministerio de Educación, 2017a, 2017b) entrusts private companies such as the British Council (2016) and Cambridge University Press for the training of Colombian teachers instead of empowering public universities (González, 2009). This option should be questioned in the light of Canagarajah's thesis (2009) that adaptation and relevance problems will arise when a methodology developed in a given context is transplanted into another without being duly adapted to local specificities and that—as the book's title goes—decision-makers need to “reclaim the local in language policy and practice”. For example, Halbach's study (2003) showed how the reflective approach to teacher training provided mixed results in an undergraduate ELT methodology course in Spain. She urges those who design teachers training programs to pay attention to cultural and personal factors as well as students' educational background (Halbach, 2003). This implies challenging the idea of “methodology exportation” and carefully analyzing the context to evaluate whether or not, and to which extent, a technology can be imported. For example, autonomous learning may be suitable for Western societies while facing numerous problems in Eastern cultures.

Finally, these tests and trainings represent a hefty load for Colombian teachers, especially for those at the beginning of their career, because of their high costs (Usma, 2009a). A person on the Colombian minimum wage would require a full month of work to pay for the IELTS test and two months to pay for the course.

González (2007, p. 327), drawing on a study of Colombian teachers' professional development model conveyed in the last national program *Colombia Bilingüe*, considers that this model “is a representation of colonial, traditional, and central discourses in ELT”. Indeed, *Colombia Bilingüe*, designed in association with the British Council—a center institution here working in a peripheral context—advocates the superiority of the native speaker and favors British English (a prestigious variety of the inner circle [Kachru, 1982], i.e. the countries whose inhabitants have English as their first language) over Colombian and International English through textbooks, tests and test preparation guides produced by British publishers and authors (González, 2007). This linguistic policy fosters linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) since it adheres to “power and colonial discourses that perpetuate the dominant status of the culture and speakers of English” (González, 2010, p. 338; see also Canagarajah 1999a; Pennycook 1994, 1997, 1998, 2001).

By entrusting the British Council with teacher training and linguistic policy, the Colombian government missed the opportunity to take ownership of its educational system by a long-term investment in its local community of ELT scholars and language teaching specialists. It also leaves aside the valuable local knowledge—vital for the success of any policy—of national academics who could competently have developed teacher training programs (González, 2007), thus strengthening their competences in the matter had they been tasked. All the more so as universities, especially public, have traditionally been the

institutions in charge of teachers' professional development, conducting local studies and developing inter-institutional networks such as the *COFE project (Colombian Framework for English)* (Rubiano, Frodden & Cardona, 2000), which led to systematization of successful experiences (González, 2007, p. 315).

### **Imported methodologies**

From its beginnings, ELT in Colombia, as in a large majority of developing countries, has relied on foreign methodologies: Grammar-Translation Approach, Audiolingual Approach, Direct Method, Communicative Approach, Task-Based Language Learning and Teaching have all been successively adopted without any real contextualization. While on one hand it definitely makes sense to take advantage of the latest developments, theories and research in the field to help build more modern and efficient teaching and learning practices, contextual (sociological, technological, sociocultural) specificities should be placed at the forefront at the time of importing methodologies. As contended by important authors on the basis of their work in a variety of contexts (Bax, 2004; Blanchet & Chardenet, 2011; Canagarajah, 2009; Jarvis & Atsilarat, 2004; Holliday, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006), imported technologies have to be mediated in light of environmental parameters and especially of sociocultural factors, as extensively discussed in the literature (Byram & Grundy, 2003; Byram & Risager, 1999; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Hinkel, 1999, 2005; Kramsch, 1995, 2008; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lantolf, 2000). Socio-economic (Grin, 2008) and psychological aspects (Gardner, 1985; Williams & Burden, 2003) should also be analyzed and taken into account. For example, it is a lot harder to work within a Task-Based Learning or communicative framework when there are forty learners per classroom as is the case in many Colombian public schools. How can teachers rely on audio and video resources when the school does not have the corresponding equipment?

Also, as Holliday (1994, p. 12) emphasized, ELT methodologies are based on research conducted in NABA. Therefore, Colombian educational institutions should not just adopt foreign methodologies but adapt, contextualize them or, better, develop their own methodology based on local research and context analysis.

### **Linguistic policies under foreign influence**

Various language education policies such as the 1982 *Programa de Inglés* (English Syllabus), the 1994 *Ley General de Education* (General Law of Education), the 1997 *Proyecto Educativo Institucional* (Institutional Educational Project), the 1999 *Indicadores de Logros* (Attainment Targets), and the 2000 *Revolución Educativa* (Educational Revolution) were issued to improve ELT in Colombia (Valencia, 2006). These linguistic policies intended to implement foreign frameworks and theories (Task-Based Language Learning, the Common European Framework) and to rely on international cooperation. Valencia (2006, p. 13) concluded that these policies “have not produced the changes expected”.

The most recent policy, the National Bilingual Program (NBP, *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo, Colombia 2004-2019*, Ministerio de Educación, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, renamed the Foreign Languages Competencies Development Program in 2012 [*Proyecto de Fortalecimiento al Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras*, PFDCLE] to acknowledge Colombia's *de facto* bilingualism: the country counts 60 indigenous languages, along with Creole and Spanish) has been elaborated in cooperation with the British Council, which greatly benefits from the resulting sales of tests, pedagogic materials and courses. With its limitations and implications, the PFDCLE has attracted important criticism. Negative reviews came from academics (Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014; De Mejía, 2005; González, 2007; Guerrero, 2008, 2010; Sánchez & Obando, 2008; Usma, 2009a, 2009b) as well as from "the public sphere" which comprises learners, parents and all the stakeholders who do not possess any specialized knowledge or training in second language education (SLE). Valencia (2013), relying on the expression "manufacture of consent" used by Herman and Chomsky (1988, p. 306) to explain how media are used to fabricate public opinion in favor of "the political requirements of social order" (p. xi), argues that the PFDCLE generated an inclination towards international intervention in Colombia.

Foreign influence can also be identified in the adoption of the *Common European Framework* as the guiding norm for the NBP reform (Usma, 2009a; Valencia, 2013). The framework, regardless of its qualities, has been most specifically designed for the European context, which led Ayala and Alvarez (2005) to argue that the important differences between Colombia and Europe make the CEFR implementation a complex task.

Another problematic aspect of NBP stressed by González (2007, 2009) is the focus on tests for students (*Prueba de Estado* and ECAES exams [Ministerio de Educación, 2017]) which entails an examination-driven nature of the teaching. Instructors have to "teach the test" since exam results are institutionally conceived of as the evaluation that counts most. Shohamy (2001) has shown that in most contexts the focus on tests is prejudicial to the whole teaching and learning process.

Finally, NBP also relies on a global discourse about bilingualism, presenting it as an ultimate component of competitiveness for the labor market (Usma, 2009a) when the claim has consistently been challenged (Valencia, 2013). English is almost uniquely presented as a mean to access wonders, at expense of cognitive and sociocultural rationales. Relying on ideological assumptions, NBP reduced bilingualism to the knowledge of Spanish and English (Guerrero, 2008; Valencia, 2013), the latter mythically conceived of as a somewhat unique gateway to employment opportunities and a better life, not accounting for the fact that its popularity makes competition fiercer between learners.

## **Imported materials**

ELT textbooks hold a vital importance in second language classrooms all over the world (Harwood, 2014; Richards, 2005). On a general basis, textbooks can be classified in

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two types: generalists or “global” (Freeman, 2014; Tomlinson, 1998, 2008) and specific or “local”. In the first case, one edition is distributed in many different countries, disregarding learners and contextual differences (Le Gal, 2013b, 2016). Local textbooks, usually produced by a national publisher in collaboration with a city, a region, state or a country’s government, have been designed for a specific context and audience.

Regarding the ELT materials used in Colombia, the trend towards importation is also to be observed although progress—with the edition of local textbooks—has to be acknowledged. Following the businessification and corporatization of ELT described earlier, most of the textbooks (no figures could be retrieved) used in Colombia are “global textbooks” edited in the U.S. and Great Britain by major publishers. It is indeed the type of material favored by private institutions, which hold a significant share of the Colombian ELT market. Global textbooks can also be found in some public universities. In spite of their editorial quality these textbooks are first and foremost commercial products that have not been “written for learners from a particular culture or country but intended for use by any class of learners in the specified level and age group anywhere in the world” (Tomlinson, 1998, x). Therefore, they are not adapted to Colombian learners’ linguistic (syntactic, morphological), phonetic (phonologic), pragmatic, and sociocultural specific needs. Studies in other contexts have affirmed these pedagogic shortcomings of global textbooks’ (Le Gal, 2016; Tomlinson, 2008; Boriboon, 2004), such as the lack of adaptation of linguistic and communicative contents, lack of sociocultural adaptation (Gray, 2013; Lee & Park, 2008), particularly to the local “culture of learning” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999).

Regarding linguistic competence, global textbooks do not address cross-linguistic differences (Courtillon, 2003) and the difficulties that spring from them, such as not integrating works about linguistic contrast and interlanguage (Vogel, 1995). For example, local textbooks should rely on similarities between Spanish and English to help students understand certain structures, while stressing certain differences (for e.g. regarding prepositions values and use, or the adjective positions) will help learners to avoid future mistakes.

Regarding phonetics, for any learner, pronouncing phonemes that do not exist in one’s mother tongue is difficult and requires specific work. A textbook that has not been designed specifically for Spanish speakers will not be able to tackle their difficulties with English pronunciation whereas a local textbook can address these through tailor-designed activities. Spanish speakers have difficulties with the “th” sounds and the seven extra vowel sounds (English has twelve vowel sounds whereas Spanish has five [Bradlow, 1995; Sun-Alperin & Wang, 2008]). On a sociocultural plan, as shown in another study (Le Gal, 2016), various foreign textbooks’ offer contents which do not match Colombian—especially young—learners’ interests as they refer to sports and activities (paragliding, hockey in the first draft of *English Please!* [Ministerio de Educación, 2016]) or present a European family model distant to Colombian public high school learners’ reality as in *World Link 1* (Stempleski, 2010).

There is therefore a need in Colombia to invest in locally-designed materials and initiatives such as *You too! 3, English Textbook* (Gomez Rodriguez, 2009) designed at the *Universidad Pedagógica Nacional* or *Breaking through* (Ramos Holguin, 2007) elaborated in the *Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia*, which should be supported by the Ministry of Education to reach a higher editorial quality. Recently, this institution, through its national program *Colombia Very Well* (Ministerio de Educación, 2017a, 2017b) and in collaboration with the British Council, has edited *English Please!* (Ministerio de Educación, 2016). The textbook is available online for free and is context-based to suit Colombian learners' needs and interests. Teachers' feedbacks seem positive.

### **Imported “teachers”**

In 2015, within the framework of the last ELT policy *Colombia Bilingüe 2015-2018* and the *English Teaching Fellowship* program of the Colombian Ministry of Education, 124 foreigners arrived in Colombia (124 extranjeros llegan a Colombia, 2015) to co-teach in 71 *colegios* of different townships across the country for the benefit of 30,240 students of 9th, 10th, and 11th grades. In 2016, 600 arrived (Aroca, 2016).

Although the Ministry repeatedly advertises the arrival of “native teachers”, only some of the instructors are actually native English speakers and few of those have qualifications (the author personally met participants to the program). The majority are non-native English speakers with an advanced level of proficiency in English. While welcoming foreigners is a great opportunity for cultural exchange and will certainly help improve students' and teachers' English skills, it is hard not to question the way public money is spent. Indeed, the program seems to stem from the still lively “native speaker fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992; Canagarajah, 1999b) which positions native speakers as the reference and objective for learners and teachers.

Acknowledging the generally low linguistic and pedagogic levels (with great variations) of English teachers graduated from Colombian universities, it would appear more relevant to invest public funds in improving current teachers training programs as well as financing some training for in-service teachers who need professional updating. The initiative to bring foreigners—who will generally stay less than a year—to enhance ELT in Colombia is more an ephemeral initiative which better serves public communication purposes than as an effective and sustainable action to improve ELT in the country.

To conclude, these “technology importation” at all levels of the ELT process have weak didactic justification; they are more likely to be understood from an economic (liberalism, corporatization of ELT) and hegemonic discourse perspective (dominance of native speaker and central methodologies of the inner circle countries in peripheral classrooms [Canagarajah, 2001]). A paradigm shift is therefore necessary.

## **Shifting paradigm: Adopting a Sociocritical Approach**

In face of the Colombian dependence situation, the Sociocritical Approach (SA) appears well suited to contextualize and localize ELT in the country. Recently developed in the field of French as a Foreign Language (Blanchet & Chardenet, 2011; Blanchet, Moore & Asselah-Rahal, 2008; Cortier, 2009; Cortier & Puren, 2008; Le Gal, 2011, 2012, 2013a; Rispaïl, 2003a, 2003b, 2006; Rispaïl & Blanchet, 2011), it is indeed a non-hegemonic, bottom-up, context-based approach to language teaching and learning which is prone to provide solutions to Colombia's dependency on foreign technologies.

### **Introducing the Sociocritical Approach**

Although it has been elaborated in the field of French, SA's principles are not bounded to this domain and can relevantly contribute to other language teaching and learning situations. According to the two main orientations of Second Language Acquisition research identified by Firth and Wagner (1997): cognitive/individual and "social-anthropological", SA resolutely belongs to the latter. It is also completely consistent with ELT's context-based approach (Bax, 2004; Canagarajah, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2012, 2003, 2006), critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001) and sociocultural approach (Kramsch, 1995, 2008; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Possibly the most defining feature of SA is its focus on and connection with the context. Within SA, language teaching and learning design is seen as stemming from an ecological analysis/perspective (Pallotti, 2002 drawn from Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which takes into consideration the parameters it considers the most impacting on the language acquisition process. The sociolinguistic, socio-economic, political, institutional, sociocultural and psychological parameters are conceived as the most determinant of Second Language Acquisition, along with linguistic and social dimensions, cross-linguistic and interdialectal variety and variation (Cortier & Puren, 2008, p. 76). SA's stance on contextual factors also seeks to address language learning situations not only at the micro level (the immediate surroundings, interactional context, the teacher, learners and materials) but at the macro level too, by taking into account the cultural and subcultural issues, beliefs system and ideology, social influences and determinisms such as linguistic and educational policies, educational systems, current and historical statuses of languages in presence (Porquier & Py, 2004, p. 58).

Among the different lenses the SA relies on, undoubtedly the most defining is the sociolinguistic perspective, because its blending with language teaching gave birth to this approach (Blanchet & Chardenet, 2011). SA views language learning as a modality of appropriation blended in with the sociolinguistic and social contexts. As in the CEFR, speakers are primarily conceived as social agents and their communication as social interaction. Research within SA relies on methods of sociolinguistic research such as participant observation, questionnaires and semi-directed interviews, linguistic biographies and the observation of contextualized social practices (Blanchet & Chardenet, 2011).

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SA also pays particular attention to the psychological dimensions of language learning (Gardner, 1985; Williams & Burden, 1997) and especially dynamics such as attitudes and motivation, learners' and teachers' beliefs. Indeed, a psychological approach, whether cognitive or social, enables teachers to take into account students' learning styles (Oxford, 1990), logics (Kramsch, 2008, p. 244-245) and social representations. This concept, carved by Moscovici (1961) and drawn from social psychology, has proved very relevant to comprehend language teaching and learning processes (Castellotti & Moore, 2002; Moore, 2001; Zarate & Candelier, 1997) and is often used in SA. In effect, mental constructs related to language acquisition and learning determine the learning strategies adopted. Likewise, representations of English and its speakers have a strong influence on learners' motivation. This perception is itself determined by the economic and political relationships with English-speaking countries, and past and present cooperation.

Complementary to that perspective, another major focus of SA is the prime attention it gives to sociocultural factors at the time of understanding language teaching and learning. The concept of "culture of learning" (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 749) is another privileged gateway to understand students' and teachers' behaviors. The concept has been defined as:

the socially transmitted expectations, beliefs, and values about what good learning is. [...] usually taken-for-granted cultural ideas about the roles and relations of teachers and learners, about appropriate teaching and learning styles and methods, about the use of textbooks and materials, and about what constitutes good work in classrooms (Jin & Cortazzi, 1998, p. 749).

SA also integrates the legacy of Bourdieu's critical sociology and sociolinguistics since it pays attention to learners' "*habitus*" and considers the linguistic varieties of the mother tongue and the English communicative competence as "cultural capital", "social capital" and "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1986a, 1986b, 1991; De Mejía, 2002).

## **Implementing the Sociocritical Approach in Colombia**

As a foreword, it should be reminded that the SA, being a theory and set of principles, provides the general guidelines for the course of action but that, following post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2006), each specific situation and process requires a particular analysis and set of strategies.

Adopting the SA would imply definite changes at the different levels of the Colombian ELT process previously discussed. It would lead to the development of more adapted teaching methodology and materials, teacher training and certifications, linguistic policy based on a thorough context analysis. Specifically, teaching contents and objectives would stem from a careful study of the sociolinguistic context and "linguistic landscape" of Colombian learners. The concept has been defined as:

The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration (Landry & Bourhis, 1997)

and it has been shown that these linguistic elements can effectively be used as pedagogical resources (Sayer, 2016). Indeed, identifying the presence of English in learners' environment provides teachers and decision-makers with local and engaging materials and resources. Adopting the SA means that this sociolinguistic analysis would be at the basis of the whole ELT process: identifying learners' exposure to the language (including in the media) and the situations where they will use English and the corresponding speech acts sets a clear route to design courses, competencies, materials, policies and pedagogy. For example, most students have little opportunity to speak with foreigners in their immediate environment, so a suitable classroom project would be to show visitors their neighborhood or to go to a touristic part of town to interview travelers and take them for a visit. In the same line, teachers could rely on ICT to set up an online language exchange with a class from another country, thus updating the pen friend practice. Such projects, targeting actual interactions, would provide the curriculum for the whole year or semester, training and engaging learners to complete a set of meaningful tasks. To a lesser extent, SA's commitment to plurilingualism means that ELT classes would include sporadic comparisons with other languages and elements of introduction to local indigenous language(s).

On a macro level, at the time of designing programs, the adoption of SA would lead decision-makers to take into account the economic, political and cultural relationships Colombia has with English-speaking countries. This analysis would lead to agendas and projects that answer current necessities and foster opportunities. For example, there is a great need to implement English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes programs in order to address the needs of tourism workers and higher education students.

Regarding methodology, the SA, as echoed in ELT (Bax, 2004; Canagarajah, 2009; Holliday, 1994) implies relying on local researchers (Blanchet & Chardenet, 2011; Blanchet et al., 2008) to design context-adapted methodologies, policies and materials. For example, a project such as the *Colombian Framework for English* (COFE) which involved the public universities, the best ELT specialists in Colombia, experienced teachers and private sector representatives, would be pursued and consolidated through public funds. The COFE would establish the standards for teachers and support research to identify the Colombian culture of learning (Le Gal, 2017) in order to evaluate to what extent and which components of Task-Based Learning and of the *CEFR* are suitable and can be adapted for Colombian learners. In close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, the network and especially the English departments would design, based on their sociolinguistic needs, the standards for learners: the sets of communicative competencies to be achieved for each grade. Following this contextualization, acquisition and teaching objectives would be reoriented towards International and Colombian English.

Indeed, in spite of various eloquent works on English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2011), English as a global (Crystal, 1997) international Language (Sharifian, 2009) and World Englishes (McArthur, 2002) which rendered the teaching of American and British English is inappropriate in many situations, many ELT courses and materials in Colombia still focus on these linguistic varieties. A shift from British and American English to local varieties of English is therefore urgent due to its multi-level implications.

At the teaching level, this implies moving away from the native speaker hegemony/fallacy, replacing the native speaker as model and objective by the Colombian proficient speaker. Practically, it means that teachers welcome structures differing from native ones (calques), specific regional Spanish vocabulary (González, 2010) and local accents and pronunciation, setting international comprehension as their prime objective. As with *English, Please!* (Ministerio de Educación, 2016), the Ministry of Education would invest important funds to pursue its effort to design quality Colombian English textbooks displaying International and Colombian English and targeting morphology and syntax challenges specific to Spanish-speaking learners. In the medium term, these textbooks could achieve a high quality to rival the products of major publishers, gaining a share of the market and generating substantial profits.

At the evaluation level the shift to SA and International English implies designing quality and reasonably priced exams that will assess learners' and teachers' proficiency in International and Colombian English. This task would be assumed by public universities, initially supported by the Ministry of Education, until the exam's recognition in the academic and professional spheres brings in a large number of candidates to make them financially self-sustainable. Economic balance would be guaranteed by making this test a graduation requirement (achieving a B1 level) for any university student. Future English teachers should achieve a C1 or B2 level. Running these tests will bolster public universities' competencies in evaluation while providing them with part of the massive incomes generated by English tests. This capital could be invested in research and development for the production of local materials, courses and syllabi (to prepare for the Colombian test), linguistic policy and teacher training. Developing Colombian exams would represent a substantive investment in Colombia's ELT educational system, emancipating it from foreign expertise and resources, fostering its autonomy and sustainability.

Instead of foreign corporations, public universities with teacher training programs would be endorsed and empowered with their traditional activity, but also with running pedagogic certifications equivalent of the TKT and ICALT. As regards teacher training, adopting SA also means that future instructors develop a critical perspective towards foreign ELT methodologies, learning how to adapt them to the local context and merge them with "indigenous methods". In-training students will learn how to conduct a sociolinguistic analysis of learners' needs and context to be able to design tailor-made

courses able to engage Colombian learners. They will also learn how to work on learners' social representations on English and its acquisition.

### **Concluding remarks**

Following a global trend towards a “marketization”, “businessification” of education and the neo-colonialist agenda of neoliberalism, ELT in Colombia involves significant foreign private interests. This dependency on foreign technologies calls for a reappropriation of ELT by governmental institutions and for a model characterized by collective construction, where self-elaborated knowledge is of prime importance.

Since the first language policy for English in Colombia in the 1940s through the cooperation with American and British governments (García et al., 2007), ELT in Colombia can indeed be considered to have adopted a top-down approach, relying on foreign theories and research to determine practices within the social reality of classrooms and institutions. However, conclusions drawn from past linguistic policies mixed results (Usma, 2009a, 2009b) legitimize a bottom-up, sociocritical approach for ELT in Colombia which sets the social context at the foreground of the ELT process.

While importing foreign educational technologies and relying on foreign expertise can be beneficial to ELT in Colombia to some extent, that transfer should be realized in a mediated and collaborative fashion. Governments should value and rely first on local knowledge given its competence to address Colombia's specific problems and develop “indigenous methodologies”. As Canagarajah assesses, the local should be the “primary and critical force in the construction of contextually relevant knowledge” (2009, p. xiv). The brilliant Indian scholar words a necessary paradigm shift which particularly applies to Colombia: from global to local (2009). However, since in the globalization era there is not much local as such (i. e. untouched by foreign influence) left, a “glocal” approach should be the aim and the Sociocritical Approach totally suits the role.

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