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Rethinking Bilingualism: A Holistic Approach beyond the Basics in EFL Colombian Settings

Repensar el bilingüismo: un enfoque integral más allá de los conceptos básicos en contextos de inglés como lengua extranjera en Colombia

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Abstract

In the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting in Colombia, bilingualism is often discussed but not always understood completely. This paper presents an alternative perspective on being bilingual in contrast to the traditional view of learning exclusively English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Colombia to be bilingual. Initially, current definitions of bilingualism in Colombian language programs are provided, highlighting the gaps and key elements that may influence the achievement of the National Program of Bilingualism (NPB) main goal. By exploring critical linguistic concepts such as ‘lengua’ and ‘lenguaje’ and the differences between foreign and second languages, this study introduces some essential concepts to understand comprehensively this construct. The study also aims at providing different types of bilingualism and the one suggested for Colombia while also looking at how culture impacts on the process of bilingualism. Finally, a potential definition for the Colombian setting is presented while arguing that it is through the understanding of all concepts concerning bilingualism that a practical, feasible and goal-oriented program of bilingualism can be designed to meet the needs of learners across Colombian EFL classrooms.

Key words: Bilingualism, lengua, lenguaje, Colombia, culture

Resumen

En el contexto del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en Colombia, a menudo se habla de bilingüismo, pero este término no siempre se comprende completamente. Este artículo presenta una perspectiva alternativa sobre ser bilingüe, en contraste con la visión tradicional de aprender exclusivamente inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en Colombia para ser bilingüe.

Inicialmente, se ofrecen definiciones actuales de bilingüismo en los programas de lenguas de Colombia, destacando las brechas y los elementos clave que pueden influir en el logro del objetivo principal del Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB). Al explorar conceptos lingüísticos críticos como "lengua" y "lenguaje" y las diferencias entre lenguas extranjeras y segundas lenguas, este estudio introduce algunos de los conceptos esenciales para comprender de manera integral este constructo. El estudio también busca proporcionar diferentes tipos de bilingüismo y el que se sugiere para Colombia, además de analizar cómo la cultura impacta en el proceso de bilingüismo. Finalmente, se presenta una definición potencial para el contexto colombiano, argumentando que es a través de la comprensión de todos los conceptos relacionados con el bilingüismo que se puede diseñar un programa práctico, factible y orientado a objetivos para satisfacer las necesidades de los aprendices en las aulas de EFL en Colombia.

Palabras clave: Bilingüismo, lengua, lenguaje, Colombia, cultura

Résumé

En Colombie, dans le cadre de l'apprentissage de l'anglais comme langue étrangère (EFL), le bilinguisme est souvent évoqué. Cependant, ce terme est fréquemment mal compris. Cet article propose une approche alternative sur le bilinguisme en contraste avec la vision traditionnelle du pays qui privilégie, pour l'atteindre, l'apprentissage exclusif de l'anglais comme langue étrangère. Les définitions actuelles du bilinguisme présentées dans les programmes linguistiques colombiens soulignent les lacunes et les éléments clés susceptibles d'influencer l'atteinte de l'objectif principal du Programme National de Bilinguisme (PNB). Cette étude examine également des concepts linguistiques fondamentaux, notamment langue et langage, et, de manière similaire, les différences entre langue étrangère et deuxième langue. En outre, l'étude suggère des possibilités au bilinguisme en Colombie. Précisément en examinant l'impact de la culture sur ce processus. Pour conclure, une définition du bilinguisme adaptée spécifiquement au contexte colombien est proposée. De toute évidence, la compréhension approfondie de tous les concepts relatifs au bilinguisme permettra la conception d'un programme pratique, réalisable et orienté vers des objectifs conçus pour répondre aux besoins des apprenants dans les classes EFL en Colombie.

Mots clés : Bilinguisme, langue, langage, Colombie, culture

Introduction

The concept of bilingualism has been widely implemented in Colombia's EFL setting, particularly during the design and implementation of national language policies intending to promote the development of English as a means of competitiveness and globalization (MEN, 2006; de Mejía, 2011; Usma, 2015). However, in spite of its spread use, bilingualism has been often incorporated without a clear or context-sensitive definition. This potential lack of a clear definition could have led to ambiguities in both policymaking and educational practices, which could potentially result in misaligned goals and limited impact in classroom EFL settings (Cárdenas, González, & Álvarez, 2010).

In Colombian, bilingualism is understood as the proficiency in English as foreign language disregarding, most of the time, the broader linguistic and sociocultural factors that shape language learning (Guerrero, 2008; Sánchez & Obando, 2008). Furthermore, distinctions between key constructs such as *lengua* and *lenguaje*, or the roles of foreign versus second languages are often overlooked, which may potentially complicate the development of effective programs of bilingualism. Considering this, a simplified definition of the term bilingualism may neglect Colombia's own multilingual reality, but also could limit the possibilities for reaching the objectives stated in these programs.

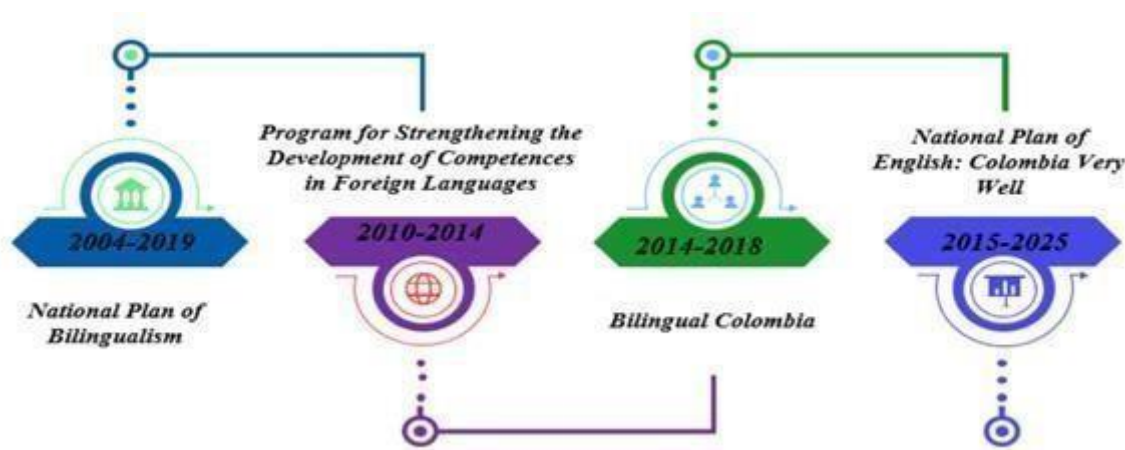
In this regard, the objective of this paper is to identify and analyze the complex, often overlooked factors contributing to bilingualism, with the aim of developing a more comprehensive approximation to a contextualized definition of the concept. By revisiting the definitions and dimensions of bilingualism and analyzing their implications for Colombian language policy, this paper may possibly contribute to the design of effective programs of bilingualism that could respond to Colombia's diverse educational needs.

The Colombian EFL Background: Bilingual Programs

Colombian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching has been significantly influenced by the different policies and programs of bilingualism that have been developed by the Ministry of Education (MEN) since 2004. These different programs have moved from the National Program of Bilingualism (2004) and the Colombia Very Well Program (2014) to the current Colombia Bilingüe Program (2015) (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sanchez, 2016), which as illustrated by Betancourt and de Sarmiento (2024) in the next infographic, is sometimes perceived as an extension of the Colombia Very Well Program.

Figure 1.

Chronological line of the Programs of Bilingualism in Colombia



Nota. Adapted from “Colombia Towards Bilingualism Policies, Achievements, Failures, and Challenges”, by Betancourt & de Sarmiento, 2024, *Kurdish Studies*, 12(2), 1277-1294.

These programs of bilingualism have been designed to achieve the following goal by the year 2025:

To form citizens able to communicate in English who can immerse the country in processes of universal communication, global economy, and cultural openness through internationally comparable standards (MEN, 2006, p. 6).

In pursuit of the elusive and ambitious goal (Betancourt & de Sarmiento, 2024) the programs have, on the one hand, introduced a standardized vision of bilingualism that emphasizes English as a key asset for socioeconomic development and international competitiveness (Usma, 2015). While on the other hand, according to their main goal, they have underscored a concerted effort by policymakers to position the country within an interconnected world, preparing students for professional, academic, and cultural exchanges that extend beyond national borders (MEN, 2006). Consequently, these programs of bilingualism have aimed at standardizing EFL teaching and assessment procedures in Colombia, stating that that students graduate with English proficiency levels comparable to international standards.

To provide a more suitable and contextualized support to the integration of English as the sole foreign language, the programs have also been complemented by several initiatives. These alternatives include partnerships with international organizations such as the British Council, professional development programs offered to teachers in public institutions, and the provision of teaching materials that incorporate the national curriculum main features (MEN, 2006).

From the previous information, it can be stated that the evolution of bilingualism policies in Colombia reflects a concerted national effort to position English proficiency as essential for EFL learners in Colombia. However, as the programs prioritize English as a foreign language, they promote a singular linguistic focus. This has prompted discussions regarding the need for a more contextually understanding of bilingualism, one that better reflects Colombia's singular linguistic diversity and educational needs.

The Problem

Analyzing the various versions of the program of bilingualism that have been implemented in EFL classrooms across Colombia and despite their focus on the idea of fostering bilingualism in the country, it is visible that these programs have consistently aimed at developing an “explicit English-dominant foreign language education policy” (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sanchez, 2016, p. 186). Consequently, English is perceived as the sole language that may bring success and economic benefits (Fandiño-Parra et al., 2012) for Colombian students. The implemented programs have centered around fostering a type of bilingualism focused exclusively on teaching English (Bermudez Jiménez & Fandiño-Parra, 2012; de Mejia, 2011; Betancourt & de Sarmiento, 2024). In this approach, the potential of Spanish as one of the stakeholders' first languages (L1) and the significance of Colombia's other 69 languages within its diverse linguistic landscape has received minimal or no attention (Vargas, Tejada, & Colmenares, 2008). This gap, as identified in various documents, is noted by Guerrero (2008) who asserts that for the MEN (2006; 2015) “Bilingualism means speaking English” while they also acknowledge that “bilingualism is the different levels of command that an individual uses to communicate in more than one language and culture on different contexts” (MEN, 2006 p. 5). In regard to this contradictory, poor and English hegemonic perspective of bilingualism in our country, the believe that these documents overlooked many of the elements needed to reach a comprehensive understanding of the term bilingualism, is spread. As a result, the approximation to the stated goal in the programs of bilingualism may be compromised.

To move toward the objective of this paper, the next section examines how the concept of bilingualism has been approached in Colombian language policies. It explores the key constructs involved, identifies the types of bilingualism present in the country, and considers the broader implications of adopting a more comprehensive understanding of this elusive term.

Bilingualism: A Comprehensive Approach

Linguistics Elements in Bilingualism

Achieving an extensive understanding of bilingualism begins with clearly defining the fundamental language constructs and terminologies that underpin the concept. The initial terms to be defined are “lengua” and “lenguaje”. On the one hand, “lenguaje” is considered a physical and biological process of ontogenetic and phylogenetic development, through which individuals manage to categorize and conceptualize the world based on their knowledge, ability, and skill to recognize themselves as a group, with common needs, motivations, and feelings (Aitchinson, 1992; Tobón, 1997). On the other hand, “lengua” is seen as a system of phonetic and morphological elements that is governed by rules, that presents levels and that can be differentiated in structural or meaningful order according to a community of speakers and the territories it occupies geographically and politically (Daza, 2005). In other words, while “lengua” refers to the specific, structured systems of communication used by particular communities such as Spanish, English, or Quechua, “lenguaje” refers to the capacity of humans to communicate using those “lenguas”. These two concepts strongly support the construct of bilingualism since they elucidate the type of language considered valid as bilingual communication. It means that communication between a computer or an artificial intelligence and a human being must not be considered as a bilingual interaction since this means of communication does not fit into the definition of language previously provided.

Following the same line of thought, the terms Mother Tongue or First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), Foreign Languages (FL) and Language Proficiency (LP) are identified as crucial elements of bilingualism. Brown (2014) argues that the first language a person uses to communicate is considered their mother tongue or first language. He also states that L1 is acquired through a natural process during early childhood. In the same vein, the term Second Language includes any additional language a person acquires or learns after their L1. Lightbown

and Spada (2021) discuss the acquisition of an L2 in various contexts, focusing on the role of immersion in environments where L2 is naturally used. They express how L2 learning or acquisition often happens when the person is more conscious of the learning or acquisition process. In contrast, Foreign Languages are related to the idea of learning a language different from L1 that is not spoken in contexts as the ones of L1. Supporting this, Richards and Schmidt (2013) define a FL as one that is not used for daily communication in the learner's home country (e.g., English in Colombia). Finally, a term that encompasses the previous definitions is Language Proficiency. This term has to do with the level the speaker belongs to when communicating in any language. The common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has established six levels of proficiency (i.e., A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2).

Once a holistic definition for these terms has been presented, it is evident that they are essential elements in a definition of bilingualism and relevant for designing and implementing an effective bilingualism program. First, recognizing the importance of the L1 ensures the preservation of cultural and linguistic identity, while knowing about L2 acquisition enhances practical language skills in familiar environments. Second, addressing the challenges of FL learning provides a better understanding of the limitations and challenges of teaching it. Finally, understanding language proficiency makes it reasonable to state what level of proficiency is needed to be considered bilingual.

Types of Bilingualism and a Suggested one for Colombia

Having established some essential terms and their relevance to bilingualism, it is crucial to explore the various types of bilingualism and examine how they are represented within the Colombian context. Broadly, bilingualism can be categorized based on language acquisition, context, and use (Wei & Garcia, 2022). Moradi (2014) states that regarding language acquisition, bilingualism can be either early or late, depending on the age at which an individual is first

exposed to the second (L2) or foreign language (FL). In contrast, bilingualism can also be simultaneous or sequential when considering the order of L1 and L2 acquisition. Similarly, it can be considered additive or subtractive depending on the role and relevance given to the L1. It means that when the L1 linguistic and cultural components are preserved and fostered together with the L2 ones the bilingualism is additive, if not, it is subtractive. Considering the context, it can be said that bilingualism can be formal/learned or informal/acquired to emphasize the process the person followed to be proficient in the L2. Additionally, Moradi (2014) argues that bilingualism can be categorized as a compound, coordinate, or subordinate based on how linguistic codes are stored. A compound bilingual person would have one set of linguistics codes for the L1 and the L2 while a coordinate bilingual would have two separate set of codes for each one of the languages, on the contrary, a subordinate bilingual would use and adapt the L1 linguistic codes to understand the L2 linguistic code (e.g., using translation). Finally, bilingualism can also be classified as folk or elite (Moradi, 2014; Guerrero, 2010). A folk bilingual as stated by Moradi (2014) and Guerrero (2010), would be part of a minority that want to speak a language of power to obtain social, cultural or economic benefits. On the other hand, the elite bilinguals already speak a dominant language; however, they learn or acquire an L2 that does not offer any privilege necessarily.

Having outlined the types of bilingualism, I will now explore how bilingual processes in Colombia might develop in light of the previously discussed information. From my perspective, I would affirm that, considering the particular conditions faced in EFL Colombian settings, the type of bilingualism that can be fostered across EFL Colombian classrooms must be: early, sequential, learned/formal, additive, coordinated, and elite. This classification takes into account the main elements I previously discussed and is supported by the features described by Moradi

(2014). By having this suggested bilingualism categorization, policies and programs of bilingualism may be more realistic and feasible.

Beyond Linguistics: The Role of Culture

Expanding beyond the linguistic aspects of bilingualism, it is pertinent to consider the significant role of culture in the bilingual experience. Although in most of the documents presented by the MEN in Colombia culture is not taken into consideration (Álvarez and Bonilla, 2009; de Mejía, 2004, 2011), the role that culture plays in the process of learning or acquiring an L2 is highly significant (Cruz, 2007). The phenomenon of abandoning one's own culture in favor of that associated with the L2 was termed by Quintero (2000), as cited in Wei & Garcia (2022), as “coloniality of language”. In response to the challenges posed by this issue, Garcia et al. (2017), as cited in Wei & Garcia (2022), coined the term “Translanguaging Juntos Stance”. This term refers to the necessity of not only being able to switch between L1 and L2 but also recognizing the speaker's culture, needs, and social and cognitive features. Following this line of thought, being bilingual does not only imply the linguistic elements previously discussed; it also includes, as stated before, culture as a paramount component. Thus, being bilingual may also refer to the process of acquiring the L2 culture, which interacts with and coexists alongside one's L1 culture, potentially leading to a process of biculturalization. From my point of view, this process needs to be urgently included in bilingual programs in Colombia to avoid the “coloniality of language” (Quintero, 2000) and to promote the preservation of the diverse cultures present in our country.

Conclusion

To conclude the exploration of this elusive and often misunderstood construct, it is essential to restate that there is a gap in the documents the MEN has presented supporting the different programs of bilingualism. This gap primarily revolves around the notion of

bilingualism as simply speaking two languages, which underscores the intentional or unintentional omission of many crucial elements necessary for a comprehensive definition and, consequently, a better understanding of the construct. The inclusion of all the discussed elements is essential for shaping the teaching of foreign languages in our country. However, I must acknowledge that arriving at a single, comprehensive definition that fully encompasses the extensive elements previously discussed is not a simple task. I recognize that, in many ways, it is as challenging and complex as the process of becoming bilingual itself. Having said that, I must emphasize that bilingualism is a multifaceted concept that must be adjusted and adapted to the specific context in which this phenomenon takes place. Thus, the definition may vary depending on the linguistic, social, cognitive and cultural characteristics of the participants involved in this acquisition or learning process. Nevertheless, the elements analyzed are presented as key terms that must be considered when trying to reach an accurate and comprehensive definition.

With the previous considerations in mind and to exemplify the articulation of the aspects within bilingualism, I propose a definition that, from my perspective, is suitable for the Colombian EFL setting: Bilingualism is a dynamic and complex phenomenon involving not only the ability of an individual or community to communicate effectively in two languages that interact, coexist, and contribute to one another, but also the integration of cultural, cognitive and social aspects related to that individual or community.

As a final thought, while I believe this definition contains most of the essential elements for understanding bilingualism, I want to emphasize my strong support for the development of an individual philosophy of bilingualism. I believe that there are socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions in teaching and learning practices that must not be ignored as stated by Ayala and Álvarez (2005). Consequently, a personal philosophy of bilingualism can effectively guide the teaching and learning of a second or foreign language, ideally extending from the

traditional view of bilingualism (monolingualism in English) to a more multilingual and plurilingual perspective on language teaching.

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