Bilingual Education in Colombia: Towards a Recognition of Languages, Cultures and Identities

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Abstract

In Colombia, there is a tendency to focus on English-Spanish bilingualism at the expense of bilingualism in other foreign languages, or in indigenous languages. This article will argue that there is a need for an equitable language policy which includes all the languages and cultures represented in the country. In addition, we will consider how far bilingual education programmes for majority language speakers in Colombia today actively help towards the creation of a more tolerant society. We will end by indicating implications for future developments.

Key Words: Bilingual Education, Language Policy, Cultures, Identities, Colombia

Resumen

En Colombia, existe una tendencia de privilegiar el bilingüismo inglés-español a expensas del bilingüismo en otras lenguas extranjeras o en lenguas indígenas. En este artículo argumentaré que hay necesidad de desarrollar una política lingüística equitativa, la cual incluye todas las lenguas y culturas representadas en el país. Además, consideraré hasta qué punto los programas de educación bilingüe para hablantes de lenguas mayoritarias en Colombia hoy en día ayuda activamente hacía la creación de una sociedad más tolerante. Terminaré indicando implicaciones para desarrollos futuros.

Palabras Claves: Educación Bilingüe, Política Lingüística, Culturas, Identidades, Colombia

Bilingualism, monolingualism, and multilingualism

Colombia has had a long tradition of including foreign languages in the school curriculum, languages such as French, German and Italian, as well as English. It is seen as important that Colombian school graduates develop a pluralist vision of the world, so that they are open to new ideas and have contact with different ways of thought and expression. The idea is that this recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity in our world may lead to recognition of the importance of tolerance and respect for the other. However, in reality, particularly during the last few years, when bilingualism or bilingual education are referred to, the central focus is on one particular language – English. As Silvia Valencia (2005: 1) explains,

> "As a result of globalisation and widespread use of English worldwide, the term 'bilingüismo' has acquired a different meaning in the Colombian context. It is used by many . . . to refer almost exclusively to Spanish/English bilingualism. . . . This focus on Spanish/English bilingualism now predominates and the other dimensions of multilingualism and cultural difference in Colombia are often ignored. The existence of other languages in different regions of the country is overlooked, particularly the languages of indigenous Colombian populations. The teaching of other modern languages (e.g. French . . .) has also been undermined by the spread of English and by people's increasing desire to 'invest' in English"

This is very true, especially if we think of the Ministry of Education (M.E.N.) promotion of the National Bilingual Programme (2004-2010) a project which aims at ensuring that,

"Colombian citizens will be able to communicate through English with internationally comparable standards. This will contribute to the insertion of the country in the processes of universal communication, the global economy and cultural openness" (M.E.N. presentation, 2006)

The emphasis here is very clearly stated: the reference is only to English and the aim is competitivity in international markets, though there is an interesting reference to cultural openness.

The notion of a `national bilingual programme` brings to the fore the concept of a national languages policy, particularly in view of the recognition of Colombia as a multiethnic and pluricultural nation in the Colombian Political

Constitution of 1991 (Article 7). The recognition of the status of vernacular community languages as co-official with Spanish in the area where these are spoken and the implementation of bilingual education in these same regions gave rise to initial optimism in relation to the spread of bilingualism in the country.

Although there has been some progress in the implementation of constitutional principles of linguistic and cultural diversity through the policy of ethnoeducation for the minority indigenous and Creole-speaking communities (Pineda, 1997), in reality bilingualism in internationally prestigious languages (particularly Spanish-English bilingualism) has been privileged. This is seen as providing access to a highly `visible`, socially-accepted form of bilingualism, leading to the possibility of employment in the global market-place. In contrast, bilingualism in minority Amerindian or Creole languages has been generally undervalued and associated with an `invisible` form of bilingualism related to underdevelopment, poverty and backwardness (de Mejía, 1996).

Colombia is not unique in this. A similar situation can be seen in a very different scenario, Brunei, where the discourse of linguistic and cultural inclusion related to a recognition of the multilingual nature of the country, is often subsumed in official pronouncements in favour of the importance of bilingualism in Malay (the official language of Brunei) and English (de Mejía, 2002).

There have been voices raised in support of a more inclusive vision. One of these is Melba Libia Cárdenas who has argued for the importance of including a more egalitarian viewpoint in relation to language policy. In a letter written in 2003 to Antánas Mockus, who at the time was the Mayor of Bogotá in relation to the policy of "Bogotá Bilingüe" she states:

> "A bilingual strategy would have to privilege, in equal conditions, the treatment given to the first, or the majority language of the population, as well as the language which is being promoted for academic or competitive goals. Even though there is an urgent need to be competent in English, the strategy that you have decided on for the city cannot be limited to two languages. An initiative, like the one taken by the city of Medellín regarding foreign languages, which respects plurality, would recognise the diversity of voices in a metropolis . . . and would provide the basis of a language policy, which for competitive reasons, would begin by giving preference to English. What

is more important, it would stimulate work with other languages, including Spanish and indigenous languages."[a]

I think it is very important to pay attention to the voices of these Colombian academics, who are warning against an exclusive concern with one language of power and   prestige, however important it may be on the international stage. A multicultural and plurilingual nation needs a language policy which takes into account not only exolingual, but also endolingual concerns. In other words, we need to look both outwards towards a globalised world, as well as inwards to focus on local complexities. The question we can ask is, thus, how far bilingual education programmes for majority language speakers in Colombia today are actively helping towards the creation of a more understanding, a more tolerant society and not only providing a way to better jobs and a higher standard of living for their graduates?

Interculturalism and biculturalism

If we look at how some bilingual schools see their mission we can see examples of different positionings in relation to issues of language and culture in these statements:

The German School in Medellín (1995) states that they aim to "prepare the student for encounters with other nations and cultures so that they will be open to the world in a spirit of international understanding." While Colegio Los Nogales, Bogotá (1996) attempts to inculcate in its students "the awareness and the pride of being Colombian within a universal context." The Colegio Colombo Británico in Cali (1998), for its part, offers a bilingual and a bicultural education"which strengthens the values and traditions of the students`own culture, stimulating respect for themselves, for others and for other nations and cultures, so that there may be a greater understanding among all."

In the two last formulations we see evidence of an intercultural approach to bilingual education. Muñoz (1995: 230) defines this as, "an active process of communication and interaction between cultures for purposes of mutual enrichment". The emphasis here seems to be on reciprocity, on inter-relationships. Both cultures benefit from the process. Mockus (1995:4) maintains that those who come into contact with different cultures should value 'the tension' generated by the contact between these traditions and see this as

"a mechanism which forces one to a certain degree of universality". Castañeda (1996: 7), on the other hand, warns against an over-emphasis on 'the foreign' as opposed to the 'native' as this may lead to the "creation of false expectations and stereotypes in relation to the foreign culture". However, he agrees with Mockus in that cultural understanding should result in the achievement of "a higher degree of generality which transcends not only one's own particularity, but also that of the other" (Gadamer 1972, cited in Castañeda, 1996: 11).

According to Grosjean (1993: 31), we all belong to a series of cultural networks (sub-groups and sub-cultures) even though we have had no contact with another majority or national culture, and we are all therefore necessarily "multicultural". He defines a bicultural individual as someone who, "participates, at least in part, in the life of two (majority) cultures . . . in a regular fashion". In addition, this individual knows how to adapt his/her behaviour and attitudes to a particular cultural environment, and can synthesise cultural characteristics from both cultures.

We may ask what exactly does this mean in practice. Can teachers really help their students towards becoming "intercultural speakers" (Byram, 1997:32), who are curious and open to other cultures, willing to question accepted cultural values, and aware of factors which may lead to misunderstandings among interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds, while being aware of their identity as Colombians?

For many years in Colombia, there has been little real concern about the implications of contact with other cultures. Teachers and parents whose children go to bilingual schools have tended to assume that a vision of cultural enrichment will result effortlessly from the contact with other languages and cultures. This view is exemplified in the following quotation from an article by Annie de Acevedo (2005: 62) in which she highlights the merits of bilingual education programmes for parents who want their children to become bilingual. She states, "Learning another language opens the doors for them to other cultures and allows them to enrich themselves."

In many well-established bilingual schools, there has been a noticeable tendency towards the adoption of an instrumental perspective, with a corresponding emphasis on the material and economic benefits of being bilingual in two internationally prestigious languages. Implications of cultural contact have traditionally been ignored, on the assumption that as students

generally come from the dominant elite, there is no problem in this respect. Thus, the topic of culture and cultural relations, while not totally unknown, is of relatively recent interest (de Mejía, 2005).

Nevertheless, clear references to interculturalism and multiculturalism can be found in the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Languages, which were published by the Ministry of Education in 1999. Interculturalism is portrayed here as "a vision . . . which accepts and promotes all cultural manifestations, requiring a receptivity towards the contributions of the language under study and the guarantee of the knowledge and ownership of our language and culture" (Curricular Guidelines in Foreign Languages, M.E.N.,1999: 23).

However, it is sometimes the case that knowledge of another culture is only developed at a superficial level, such as cultural celebrations involving different types of food, music, dress etc. without this leading to a deeper reflection on the significance of these differences or their implications. This reminds us of Fishman`s criticism (1977 cited in García, 1991: 12) of bilingual education programmes in the United States which led to "the trivialisation of biculturalism", and which limited their interest in cultural matters to singing and dancing routines.

In a study on bilingual schools in Bogotá, Medellín and Cali, carried out by Harvey Tejada and myself in 2000, we found that the majority of the 15 schools we visited stated that they promoted a vision of tolerance and openness towards other cultures as well as identification with the students` own culture, consistent with an intercultural approach. However, they were less sure about how to actually put these visions into practice on a daily basis in the school context, and particularly in curricular areas such as Social Sciences.

A similar observation was made by Hilda Buitrago in 1997, in a study she conducted in an English-Spanish bilingual school in Cali. She noted that the lack of clear institutional policies with regard to cultural aspects led to confusion and improvisation among the teachers as to how to manage cultural matters in their daily classroom practice.

One specific area of difficulty regarding the treatment of cultural relations reported by many teachers working in bilingual schools relates to the use of foreign textbooks, usually designed for native speakers of English, for use in USA, Canada or Britain. A rather worrying example comes from Bogotá. A

student of the Masters Programme in Education at Universidad de los Andes, Laura Fonseca, wrote a recent reflection on her experience as a teacher of Spanish at a prestigious bilingual school in Bogotá.

She refers specifically to the theme of "Narraciones del Asombro" which has to do with myths and legends and is closely related to the notions of plurality, identity, and respect for differences, as related in narratives produced by Precolombian communities. Although teachers and students proclaimed that they strongly agreed with these principles, and particularly valued the condition of Colombia as a multicultural nation, Laura gradually discovered that the reality was somewhat different. I will quote her actual words,

> "the students showed strong reservations towards the treatment of these topics, as they considered that these great narratives of our country `historias de indiecitos`, which were very distant from their own life experience."

Notice especially the use of the diminutive "indiecitos" indicating undervaluing of this type of narrative. In fact, some of the students said that these stories were from a different cultural background, obviously showing that they were unaware of the dominance of people of mestizo background in Colombia.

Laura continues:

> "As I advanced in my investigations, I discovered that even the textbooks for Social Science, which were imported from the United Kingdom, presented a terrible vision of our country. They tended to emphasize through pictures and commentary, poverty, technological backwardness and violence. This vision was in line with (accelerated) developmental paradigms which undermine the educational attempts to consolidate the students` self esteem through the construction of a solid identity in relation to their own reality."

When I asked her for more detail about the portrayal of Colombia in these textbooks, used for Social Science by Colombian students in seventh and eighth grade, Laura said that the images that predominated were pictures of massacres and drug mules. Furthermore, there was considerable space devoted to Colombia`s world economic position based on the proceeds of drug trafficking.   There was only a very brief reference to the coffee industry or Colombian fashion or tourism. No wonder that the students felt ashamed to be Colombian and wanted to distance themselves from this positioning!

As teachers and educators of future Colombian citizens, I think we need to seriously reflect on the wisdom of providing evidence of negative images of Colombian culture and identity from a foreign point of view, while paying lip service to the value of interculturalism and respect for difference at national level. These mixed messages may well create cultural disorientation, or anomie at best, or cultural rejection at worst.

An important general factor to take into consideration in bilingual programmes which necessarily involve some degree of contact with other cultures is how far the teacher is culturally attuned to the students, especially in the initial stages of schooling. This awareness will involve taking into account the values commonly associated with foreign cultures by parents and relatives. The advantages of employing native speakers of the foreign or second language in terms of models for language acquisition, particularly in the area of pronunciation, must be weighed up against their ability to relate to the children in their care, both linguistically and culturally. In this respect, the Canadian early immersion programmes have always insisted on the need for teachers of the initial grades to be bilingual in both French and English, so that they can understand and help children in difficulty. What has not often been stressed is the need for intercultural understanding.

Many teachers dealing with cultural aspects in their everyday practice are often not very aware of the implications of such aspects for their learners. They may be native speakers of the foreign or second language and yet not be "intercultural speakers" (Byram, 1998: 113). Thus, the first step is to raise their awareness of these issues. Byram (1998) suggest various ways that intercultural consciousness can be developed in bilingual classrooms such as, comparative analysis in pedagogically-appropriate ways of how different language express different cultures; understanding by the teacher of ways in which the explicit introduction of cultural elements from other cultures relativises and challenges what is taken for granted in the national or state curriculum; and that teachers should have developed "intercultural speaker intuitions" (Byram, 1998: 113).

Identities

The expression "losing one`s identity" is quite common in everyday speech. Sometimes people worry about the possibility of losing their identity when they

come into contact with a new cultural system, as if 'identity' were a valuable possession which can be 'lost' (and presumably can be 'found'). However, it is not quite so simple, as Barbour (1996: 42) concludes. He observes that "Human beings often have complex, multiple identities - local, regional, familial, religious . . . In parallel to their complex multiple identities, individuals also display complex and multi-faceted language use".

Poststructuralists draw attention to the idea that identities are constructed (rather than possessed) on multiple dimensions (e.g. age, gender, race, class, generation, institutional affiliation, social status) and that individuals often shift and adjust ways in which they identify and position themselves in different contexts (Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). Thus, identities are not static objects which can be lost and found, but are fluid and complex, changing and evolving over time in accordance with the influence of the different experiences we engage in.

In a recent article about bilingualism and identity Kanno (2000:2) following Taylor (1994) takes identity to mean "A person's understanding of whom they are". This understanding depends crucially on what others think of us. In other words, identity can be seen as socially constructed. In the case of bilinguals, as they inhabit different language communities, they often receive very different self-images from various cultural mirrors (Kanno, 2000). They are simultaneously involved in multiple discourses, thereby developing different identities that may contradict other identities which derive from other discourses (Peirce, 1995; McKay & Wong, 1996). This is when the problem of anomie or cultural disorientation may set in and the bilingual or multilingual person may feel they do not belong either here or there.

Up to now, we have considered the notion of identities mainly in relation to national identities. I would now like to turn to the idea of bilingual school identities. This is an interesting phenomenon which has not been widely researched up to now. I will give an example of what I mean from data collected from a bilingual school (The American School of Asunción –ASA-) in Asunción, Paraguay. This involves the relationship between code-switching and identity.

In 2002, Susan Spezzini carried out a study into processes of learning English and patterns of language use at 12th Grade level in this bilingual school in Paraguay.[b] One of the interesting things that the researcher observed in the

analysis of her interview data was that there was evidence of the creation of a special school language variety of both English and Spanish (Spanglish), and that this language variety symbolised for the students a specific school identity. As one of the students says,

> "When we speak English, we speak ASA English and when we speak Spanish we speak ASA Spanish. . .ASA talk is also unique because of the Guaraní words that ASA students use. . . I love the way students talk at ASA. It makes us different from other schools where the students just speak one language. The accents, words and expressions we use make it possible to identify an ASA student anywhere." (Spezzini, 2002:70-71)

As Spezzini says, these ASA students demonstrated an awareness of the symbolic value of language and its importance for social/group identity. She even speculates that successive generations of ASA graduates might be reproducing a non-native variety of English which has its roots in interlanguage and new World Englishes (Kachru and Nelson, 1996).

This observation is particularly relevant if we take into account the changing vision of `the native speaker` over the last decade. Davies (2003:215) considers that, "the fundamental opposition (between native and non-native speakers) is one of power and that . . . membership is determined by the non-native speaker's assumption of confidence and identity". In other words, the category of `native speaker` is, at least partially, a social construction.

Graddol (2006: 14), for his part, refers to the increasing "irrelevance of native speakers . . . (and) native speaker norms" in his review of the development of English as a global language. The rise of `New Englishes` (local varieties of English arising from the contact with vernacular languages) in many post colonial contexts in different parts of the world, added to the fact that increasingly fewer interactions involve native speakers of English, has contributed to the recognition of the non-native speaker who is a "fluent bilingual speaker, who retains a national identity in terms of accent, and who also has the special skills required to negotiate understanding with another non-native speaker" (Graddol, 2006: 87).

This change of perception and valoration of language `purity`, in favour of bilingual proficiency and language contact has important implications in relation to the recognition of code-switching and language borrowing as

legitimate evidence of a bilingual speaker`s linguistic repertoire and of his/her social identity. It also considerably widens the debate on what constitutes acceptable usage by students in bilingual programmes.

Implications for bilingual education in Colombia

So what implications can be drawn from this discussion in relation to the development of bilingual education programmes in Colombia? As we said at the beginning of this article, how can bilingual education programmes actively help towards the creation of a more understanding, a more tolerant society? I think there are several ways forward.

• Adoption of a critical perspective

First of all, as Silvia Valencia (2005:17) maintains, it is important to analyse the current discourse on investment in English from a critical point of view, in order to determine "who in reality benefits from the promotion of 'bilingualism'". At present, there is a tendency to accept uncritically the necessary connection between `bilingualism` (in other words, English language proficiency) and better employment prospects. However, as Lina De Brigard (who is involved in executive talent spotting for multinational companies in Colombia) observed recently[c], in fact, only 5% of the posts she deals with require bilingual staff. For the vast majority (95%), while English is desirable, it is not essential. However, she also notes that consciousness of the need for English has become "a way of thinking" for young professionals.

• Development of bilingual education programmes in the public or state sector

Silvia Valencia also warns, there is a real danger that the 'discourse on bilingualism' with English may lead to a widening of the gap between public and private education. This position was reinforced recently by Eduardo Muñoz, Vice Minister of Commerce, Industry and Tourism[d] who stated that it was necessary to close the gap with respect to bilingualism, between private and state schools in the country.

There is also the issue of the future development of bilingual education programmes in the public sector. This has not yet been taken on board by the

Ministry of Education in Colombia, even though there is recent evidence of the successful experience of bilingual programmes for students of low economic status in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

Brovetto et al. (2004) in Uruguay have documented two modalities of bilingual education programmes catering for two very different types of population in the state (public) sector. On the one hand, there are English-Spanish immersion programmes which cater for children from lower socio-economic groups set up by the Uruguayan Ministry of Education in 2001 The second initiative refers to Portuguese-Spanish provision for children, from similar socio-economic backgrounds who live on the Uruguayan-Brazilian border. In the first case, the modality adopted was partial immersion, while in the second, a type of dual immersion was implemented, to cater for children whose first language was a variety of Portuguese, as well as those who spoke Spanish at home.

Both programmes are in the process of being formally evaluated with respect to levels of achievement in Mathematics, Spanish language, and target language proficiency, as well as teacher and school administrator views. According to a preliminary survey carried out in 2003 there was a high level of student satisfaction reported with the English immersion programme, as well as a perception on the part of teachers that students had improved, particularly in reading and writing in both languages. In the dual immersion programme, parents particularly emphasized their satisfaction that students had been able to `correct` their language errors resulting from language contact phenomena (Brovetto et al., 2004). There is also a study in progress aimed at evaluating the impact of the bilingual programme on the development of writing in Spanish among children whose first language is Uruguayan Portuguese compared with the productions of a control group of monolingual Spanish speakers (Brovetto et al. 2005)

• Development of cultural sensitivity through appropriate professional development

As I have argued in this article, teachers need to be sensitive to the cultural implications of what they are teaching, not only in the area of Social Science but also in other content areas. They need to be able to help their students become aware of the value of different ways of seeing the world and, as Byram

(1997) says, to adopt a critical and comparative methodology towards different cultural practices and beliefs. In other words, teachers need to be able to help their students develop intercultural competence, as well as linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse competences.

In order to help students in the development of cultural sensitivity, teachers need to be helped to raise their awareness on such issues. Courses on teaching methodology need to be complemented by reflection on how different methodological options can be exploited to promote intercultural understanding.

• Development of coherent intercultural institutional policies

We have seen evidence that biculturalism is perceived as a threat to cultural identity by some people. There is also evidence of the opposite scenario where there is an almost exclusive focus on foreign language and culture at the expense of the students´ social and cultural roots, even though lip service may be paid to the importance of these. It is therefore important that bilingual schools develop coherent policies on intercultural relations, which would help students "reaffirm the esteem for our culture and the understanding of other cultures" (La Institutión Universitaria Colombo Americano, 2005).

• Revaluation of the role of Colombian bilingual teachers

Some schools (and some parents) tend to think that the idea of importing native speakers (of English) as teachers adds to the prestige of the school. Thus, they spend a large part of the school budget hiring teachers from USA or UK, Australia or Canada. Although many schools see foreign language monolingualism among their staff as an advantage, in that teachers will not be tempted to use the students` first language in their classes, this can also lead to difficulties of communication, especially with children who are in the initial stages of becoming bilingual.

While native English speaking teachers provide usefully language modelling, I would strongly advocate the importance of schools hiring highly competent Colombian bilingual teachers, particularly in view of the recent change in perception of the status of native speaker norms discussed above. They would act as bilingual role models for their students, and may also help to advise on possible conflicts of identity.

- **Understanding of basic principles of bilingualism and bilingual education**

I think it is increasingly evident that it is not enough to hire teachers who have a high level of foreign language proficiency to teach in bilingual schools. It is equally important that both teachers and school administrators understand the principles of bilingualism and bilingual education, so that they are able to make informed choices about academic and linguistic issues in their specific bilingual contexts. It is all very well, up to a point, to copy practices from established and prestigious bilingual schools. However, when parents, or policy makers ask for the reasons for these, teachers and administrators need to be able to justify their decisions, not only on logistic grounds, e.g. that the school has hired a bilingual teacher of Social Science and therefore the whole Social Science programme will be given in English, but also with reference to processes of bilingual and intercultural development. It is therefore encouraging to see that bilingual education programmes, like those offered by Universidad El Bosque and La Institutión Universitaria Colombo Americano, are having an impact on teachers who are already working in bilingual schools, or who are preparing to begin their teaching careers.

Conclusion

This discussion has centred on the relationship of bilingual education and the construction of a more tolerant society in Colombia. I have argued that restricting the notion of `bilingualism` to Spanish/English bilingualism leads to a distorted view of the complex interrelationships between languages, cultures and identities in the Colombian context. I also have suggested possible future directions for bilingual education programmes for majority language speakers, in order to help to enhance the recognition and valuing of linguistic and cultural diversity in the country. I would like to end with a quotation from Abadio Green Stocel, a linguist from the Nasa indigenous community, who works for the National Indian Organization of Colombia (ONIC). He states,

> "It is not enough to recognise `the other` in that dimension which interests us, or which seems correct, urgent or similar. In this case, we are looking at and projecting ourselves in the other, but we are not looking at the other as different"

> (Green Stocel, 1998)

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a   Author`s translation of this and other quotations from Spanish
b   In Paraguay there are two official languages: Spanish and Guaraní, an indigenous language spoken by the majority of the population.
c   At the "English Next Forum" organised by the British Council,, Bogotá, May 9, 2006.
d   At the "English Next Forum" organised by the British Council,, Bogotá, May 9, 2006.

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