Is Colombia Ready for "Bilingualism"?

¿Colombia está lista para el "bilingüismo"?

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Currently, the Colombian government is attempting to implement programs such as "Colombia Bilingüe". The effectiveness of this type of project depends on a number of factors, some of which do not have to do with policies or standardization, but with academic requirements and issues that might be neglected while focusing on the outcome rather than on the process of expecting foreign language learners to become proficient in a second or foreign language (L2). This paper examines the academic needs that have to be met in order to achieve government goals in a fair and rewarding way for teachers, students and stakeholders. Also, the way similar foreign language policies have been implemented in other countries is briefly described.

Key words: Foreign language teaching, bilingualism, language policy, methodology

En la actualidad el gobierno colombiano está tratando de implementar el programa "Colombia Bilingüe". El éxito de este tipo de iniciativas depende de varios factores, algunos de los cuales no están relacionados con políticas o con estándares, sino con factores y requisitos académicos que pueden estar siendo dejados a un lado. Este artículo trata sobre las necesidades académicas que deben resolverse para lograr las metas propuestas por el gobierno, pero de forma que el proceso sea justo y gratificante para estudiantes, profesores y directivas. Así mismo se aborda brevemente la forma como políticas sobre el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras se han puesto en marcha en otros países.

Palabras clave: Enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, bilingüismo, políticas lingüísticas, metodología

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This article was received on November 15th, 2007, and accepted on January 16th, 2008.

In Colombia, the General Education Act 115 (1994) states that one of the objectives of education should be the acquisition of speaking, reading and comprehension skills in at least one foreign language, making it the starting point for the creation of new regulations regarding the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Colombia. This objective is somewhat vague since in order to create curricula, syllabi, schedules, learning tasks and assessment, everyone should have a very clear idea of what we need to achieve in foreign language education. Another example of inadequate law implementation is the Resolución 2343 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia, 1996) which gave the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia or MEN) the authority to regulate curricula through the implementation of achievement indicators, and was later partially replaced with Ley 715 de 2001 in order to correct this situation. Schools seemed to have autonomy once more, but then the Basic Foreign Language Competence Standards: English (2006) were introduced to regulate teaching. As Lightbown & Spada (1999) express: "the decision about when to introduce second or foreign language instruction must depend on the objectives of the language program in the particular social context of the school" (p. 164). Has this discussion taken place in the academic settings of Colombia? Have the decisions concerning the optimal time to start foreign language instruction considered what research has to say about this topic?

The Colombian government then started a series of actions towards the achievement of what they refer to as bilingualism. According to MEN publication "Al Tablero" (October 2005), it is expected that the "Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo" (The national Bilingual Colombia Program) will be fully implemented by the year 2019. This project has focused on adapting standards from Europe to be applied in Colombia, a bold move given the fact that the similarities between that context and the Colombian one are basically non-existent, and that the Common European Framework (CEF) was created under different circumstances and with different purposes. Here a question arises: Why did MEN choose this option and not others which might have been more culturally sensitive to Colombian and even South American learners? Ayala & Álvarez (2005, p.12) address this issue as follows:

"Because Colombian standards for foreign language teaching are barely structured, attention has been given to foreign models. In general, standards have been obtained by importing the ones that were developed in other places, under different circumstances and contexts. Although those standards are valid and reliable for foreign academic communities, it does not mean that they would fit the particularities of our institutions, language learners and so on".

Bilingual programs are not recent. They have been applied in countries like Australia, Canada and the United States since the 1970s under the names of immigrant on-arrival programs or immersion education. The reasons for the appearance of these programs were related to the need to teach immigrants to develop competences to adapt to their new society and be able to get a job and/or perform in different contexts. More specifically,

in the case of Canada, the goals of the program included: "1) developing a high level of proficiency in the foreign language; 2) developing positive attitudes towards those who speak the foreign language and toward their culture(s); 3) developing English language skills commensurate with expectations for student's age and abilities; 4) gain designated skills and knowledge in the content areas of the curriculum" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001 p. 206).

These programs were and are successful not only because the people involved in them are highly motivated to become proficient in the language given their personal and professional needs, but also because the purposes were clear and they were developed under favorable conditions that include, among others: the use of theme-based syllabi chosen according to language and learning goals, the use of meaningful and authentic material, and a minimum number of hours to achieve the initial goals (Richards & Rodgers 2001, Morrow, 2004). It is necessary to stop for a moment and ask ourselves:

- What are the goals of language teaching in Colombia?
- Are teachers aware of the purposes of foreign language teaching in Colombia?

In the year 2006, the government introduced the "Estándares Básicos en Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés". They are a set of basic standards that English teachers should follow to guarantee the levels of proficiency the CEF presents for Europe. The Minister of Education, Cecilia Maria Velez White, in an open letter introducing the standards makes the following statement:

> The National Government has the fundamental commitment to create the conditions for Colombians to develop communicative competences in another language. Having a good proficiency level in English facilitates the access to job and education opportunities that help ensure quality of life. To be competent in another language is essential in a globalized world, which demands better communication, to open frontiers, to understand other contexts, to make knowledge your own and make it circulate, to understand and make yourself understood, to enrich your being and play a decisive role in the development of the country. Being bilingual broadens the opportunities to be more competent and competitive (translation of Estándares Básicos en Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés. MEN, 2006, p. 3).

If we take some time to analyze what the Minister of Education of Colombia says regarding the reasons why a good level of proficiency in English is needed in this country, it can be seen that she has certain goals in mind. The main reason for becoming bilingual is to facilitate access to employment and educational opportunities in a globalized world without any borders. Are English teachers aware of the reason why English is taught in Colombia? Are we all aware that the main purpose is to help students get a job or go to school? Cook (2001) makes an important distinction about the goals of teaching English. He classifies them into three major categories: local goals foster a second language within a society, international goals foster a second language for use outside the society, and individual goals develop qualities in the learner rather than language per se. (p. 173)

It is important to think about the goals students have in learning a foreign language and from this, the goals teachers have when teaching these students. Another important insight that Cook has is the conclusion that many times it is taken for granted that everyone knows why they are teaching the second language, a conjecture that may affect the way they teach. No assumptions must be made when it comes to teaching and learning. Clarity is key for designing a curriculum, a course, a syllabus, a lesson plan.

This seems to be the case in Colombia where policies are created in a top-down approach where only a few people (not necessarily teachers) know what "should be done and why" and the participation of school teachers in the creation of standards is virtually invisible. The first step in ensuring effective foreign language programs in Colombia should be to inform everyone about not only the goals but also the rationale behind the goals for L2 teaching in this context.

Creating a Conducive Context for Developing Bilingual Programs

It was suggested before that bilingual programs in other countries were developed under certain conditions that favored teaching and learning. If policy makers in Colombia truly want to be successful in their current endeavor they should pay less attention to the implementation of standards and more to the general learning conditions that are needed for the effective learning of a new language. Important researchers and writers in the field of SLA and TESOL (Clavijo, Guerrero, Torres, Ramírez & Torres, 2004; Cross, 2003; Ellis, 1994, 1997; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Cook, 2001; Savignon, 1991 & 2001; Rodgers, 2003 among others) have broadly discussed what it is that teachers, teacher educators, learners and administrators need to do and how to do it in order to achieve positive results in the task of acquiring a second/foreign language. It is not that Colombian teachers want to look the other way and reject any change, but rather that changes must be introduced in a fair and academic way, supported by sound policies. As Cárdenas (2006) states: "Schools and universities welcome the idea of placing teacher education at the cornerstone of the programme, but serious concerns have also risen because we do not see clear policies to make language teaching conditions appropriate for the attainment of the defined goals (p. 2)". Here are some of these ideas that may be useful when analyzing the demands made by the government and the reality of Colombian classrooms.

Exposure to the L2

First of all, in order to acquire an L2, it is necessary to have enough exposure to it. As Lightbown & Spada (1999) suggest as a result of extensive research, "one or two hours a week – even for seven or eight years – will not produce very advanced second language speakers. This 'drip-feed' approach often leads to frustration as learners feel that they have been studying 'for years' without making much progress" (p. 165).

One might expect that MEN would take this advice and reorganize the schedule assigned to foreign language classes weekly in public schools and maybe devote at

least four hours a week to the development of communicative competence in the L2. MEN, in its booklet presenting its standards, makes the following statement concerning the available time to expose learners to input in the Colombian context:

> In primary school education, some institutions have one hour a week devoted to English teaching and other institutions still have no assigned time. Even though the Secretaries of Education and each institution will decide, according to their possibilities, the way to do this job in the primary school, the design of the standards begins in the first grade in order to set goals in the long term for Colombian boys and girls (Translation of Estándares Básicos en Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés. MEN, 2006, p. 31)

And one wonders: how can teachers apply foreign language standards starting in first grade in institutions where a schedule for English classes does not exist? Clearly, more attention should be paid to research and current literature before making assumptions about standards-based education.

On the other hand, in the Ministry of Education publication "Al Tablero" on the Internet, one finds the following assertion:

> According to the study Key Data on Teaching Languages in Schools in Europe carried out in 2005 by the European Education Information Network (Eurydice), in the 25 countries of the European Union in the educational system, the average time devoted to the study of a foreign language is of eight years, with five to nine hours a week, since the student is eight years old. In Colombia the time devoted averages six years, from sixth to eleventh grade, beginning at the age of eleven, with three hours a week. A total of 270 hours devoted to the study of English, during junior and high school. This is enough for students to achieve the competence required in English (Translation of Bases para una nación bilingüe, MEN, 2005, p. 5).

Analyzing the numbers presented to support the use of the CEF, from five to nine hours a week adding up to 720 total hours, another question arises: If studies like the one mentioned above and even the framework adapted by MEN state minimum requirements to be met, then why are they not taken into consideration? And even more so given that it is clear that our country still has underprivileged conditions in certain sectors? Does it not seem that in our country we are taking the longest and bumpiest road? Besides, teaching and learning are processes that cannot be reduced to mathematical calculations; the total number of hours is irrelevant if the exposure to the language is not continuous. Learning conditions that are not easily met in a country that is, as Cárdenas (2006) mentions, "mostly monolingual –with 2% (approximately 450) indigenous communities– without the same reasons and motivations for communication in foreign languages (p.3).

Then again, the Standards brochure (MEN, 2006, p. 31) presents the statement cited below:

> During high and junior high school, English teaching is for an average of two to four hours a week. This number of hours allows students to achieve the standards. Therefore, it is crucial to take advantage to the fullest of class time, proposing adequate pedagogical activities and using multiple resources that meet the needs of the students and the objectives proposed by the teachers. In the same way, it is recommended to explore all the possibilities offered by today's modern world, using media, music, and the internet, among other aids, which

> are so relevant to the younger population (translation).

Unfortunately, even for MEN the number of hours of instruction and the conditions necessary for adequate foreign language teaching are still not clear. As Cárdenas (2006) remarks, "the analysis of a working document makes us wonder to what extent the proposal has considered those regions where English is not a priority for the educational system, e.g. very remote rural areas, regions suffering socio-political conflicts, or those with hardly any chance to use the language for authentic purposes" (p.3).

Methods and Approaches

Regarding methodology, the CEF seem to advocate the adaptation of communicative approaches in order to achieve communicative competence. It is directly stated that:

> …the emphasis…is on how languages are used and what learners/users can do with the language – on language being action-based, not knowledge-based… Language learning activities are based on the needs, motivations, and characteristics of learners:
>
> > What will they need to do with the language?
> >
> > What will they need to learn in order to do what they want?
> >
> > What makes them want to learn?
> >
> > What sort of people are they?
> >
> > What knowledge, skill, and experiences do their teachers possess?
> >
> > What access do they have to resources?
> >
> > How much time can they afford to spend? (CEF, 2001 p. 4)

It can be suggested, then, that approaches such as content-based instruction, communicative language teaching or competency-based language teaching are needed in Colombian classrooms, whether the goal is to achieve bilingualism or whether we just want to enhance foreign language teaching in this country at all levels.

The characteristics of communicative approaches to L2 teaching in general have been widely described by influential authors both internationally and locally (Brown, 2000; Galloway, 1993; Hedge, 2000; Littlewood, 1981; Nunan, 1987, 1999; Nieto, 2002; Reyes, 2002; Richards & Rodgers, 1986, 2001; Savignon 1983, 1984, 1991, 2001; Rodgers, 2003). It would take several pages to discuss these features, but the most recurrent can be summarized as follows:

First of all, learner needs are targeted. Teachers do not teach what they may be familiar with (grammar, vocabulary), but what learners need in order to perform different functions. As McNamara (2000) explains, the planning of the course, the syllabus, and the choice of materials are based on the real ways in which the L2 will be used outside the classroom.

Moreover, systematic attention to functional as well as structural aspects of language is considered. Focus on form is advocated as the most effective way to combine meaning and accuracy and to allow learners to discover grammar through real-life examples, rather than memorizing sterile rules. Teachers confirm the hypotheses about grammar set forward by their students rather than giving them the rules, increasing participation and involvement on the part of learners.

A wide variety of resources (especially task-based and authentic materials) are used. The textbook is a good support for a teacher and for the learners, but it is necessary to introduce additional authentic materials that are relevant and meaningful for learners. In an era of computer-mediated communication, teachers need to include in their instruction process materials related to technology: Internet, multimedia, text-messaging, the reading of multimodal texts, and chat in order to keep their classes updated and appealing for students who are computer savvy. As Farias, Obilinovic & Orrego (2007) highlight, reading and writing have been transformed by the multimodal revolution and texts come in different formats. Hypertexts and hyperstories, two common tools in the digital age, which have been thoroughly studied in Colombia, are seen as positive since they encourage creativity and they contribute to the improvement of the writing process in general. Resources are endless and teachers need to start profiting from them.

Teachers have to have an adequate L2 language proficiency since they need to perform different roles and to conduct a class entirely in the L2. It is no longer aceptable for a teacher to enter a classroom and explain what a certain page in a book says. Teachers are now needs-analysts and counselors, moving from direct instruction to be more learner-centered. These features are equally relevant for the Colombian setting, as evidenced in different pieces of research (González, Salazar & Sierra, 2005; Cárdenas, 2006; González, 2007) where the complexity of teaching is dealt with. The multiple needs and challenges posed for teachers are also addressed in these papers indicating that research and the creation of academic communities is a must for teachers and teacher educators. Finally, it is implied that prescriptive, top-down practices and policies make a poor contribution to the development of a critical view of foreign language education in Colombia.

The need for constant updating is clear for teachers. With the advent of post-method trends teachers also need to reinvent themselves inside the classroom. Stryker & Leaver (1993) quoted by Richards and Rodgers (2001) add some new roles for teachers in communicative and content-based instruction. Teachers are in charge of:

- Varying the format of classroom instruction
- Using group work and team-building techniques
- Defining the background knowledge and language skills required for student success
- Helping students to develop coping strategies, using process approaches to writing
- Using appropriate error correction techniques
- Developing and maintaining high levels of student esteem (p.214).

Students are expected to interact in pairs and groups and interaction is initiated not only by teachers, but also by students. As classes move from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness, learners are expected to become autonomous through the application of interactive tasks based on authentic materials, realia and particularly

project work, which requires students to collaborate, is focused on real-life topics and can be adapted to focus on formal aspects of language as Alan & Stoller (2005) propose.

Heyworth (2004) provides further sound reasons supporting the appropriateness of communicative approaches in the development of communicative competence:

> Communicative approaches to language teaching and learning offer opportunities to choose the topics to be addressed. Course books frequently reduce the content of language teaching to everyday banality and stereotyped situations and characters, whereas language teachers could choose to use the opportunity to provide useful information, stimulate reflection, address social issues, and promote values in ways which could contribute to both personal development and social awareness (p. 13).

A word of caution is needed here. Despite the many advantages of CLT, and as Tucker (1999), Yoon (2004) and Hiep (2005) mention, ESL settings differ from EFL ones and imported pedagogy can cause conflicts with learners' social and cultural conditions. Tucker calls it "Importation of models versus importation of cycles of discovery". That is, we need to focus on what processes have worked elsewhere, not on transferring finished products uncritically.

Assessment

Bilingual programs have made use of communicative approaches in order to guarantee the provision of opportunities for interaction. Communicative approaches also make use of different types of assessment that move beyond the traditional paper-and-pencil tests which commonly feature multiple-choice items, to a focus on receptive skills and questions with only one right answer (Brown, 2004). Foreign language programs that intend to develop communicative competence or bilingualism tend to focus more on alternative assessment and/or performance-based assessment. This may be a difficult step to take in Colombia where our learning experiences suggest constant use of the L1 in translation exercises in many tests, as well as directions written in Spanish. Immersion or bilingual programs are characterized by the exclusive use of the L2 during instruction and the productive use of this language in assessment tasks. Colombian teachers might need training in performance-based assessment which goes hand-in-hand with communicative methodology. Some of the salient features of this type of assessment are summarized by Brown (2004):

First of all, students make a constructed response, they also engage in higher-order thinking with open-ended tasks which are meaningful, engaging and authentic and that integrate skills. Finally both the process and the product are assessed and the depth of learners' knowledge is emphasized over breadth (p. 255).

Some activities explained by Tannenbaum (1996) and that Colombian teachers can use in order to foster the use of the L2 in meaningful assessment include portfolios (collections of students' essays, reports, journals, and notes and so on over a period of time and with a specific purpose), journals, observations, presentations, project-work, self-assessment and peer assessment, K-W-L charts (i.e.,

charts with three columns where learners write what they Know about a topic, what they Want to know about the topic and what they Learned during the class) and tests where students are expected to do something with the language rather than displaying their knowledge about formal aspects of language. Why should Colombian teachers start or continue to implement these assessment strategies? The answer is simple, but not easy: because the Colombian government is implementing standardized tests (KET, FCE, TKT) at different levels and production is what these tests demand from the test-takers. What makes this issue somewhat thorny is whether teachers can prepare learners to develop communicative competence and to face these tests successfully with the available time and resources in Colombian schools. A quick glance at the learning conditions in this context might suggest that major curricular changes need to take place before this can happen. As Hancock (1994) and Rodríguez (2007) suggest, alternative assessment and self-assessment encourage learners' participation, self-reflection and team work. Taking on a project such as one including self assessment requires a curricular transformation since it is no longer an isolated activity, but an integral part of instruction and the syllabus; and at the same time student training for the implementation of these strategies is needed.

Current Teaching and Learning Conditions in Colombia

Throughout this paper it has been suggested that bilingual programs can be and are successful in different countries. Some aspects of methodology and requirements have been discussed and it is clear that the Common European Framework is a well-organized, research-based document that comes from a 30-year process. Therefore, it must be clarified that the problem in Colombia is not the adoption of foreign language policy and standards, but the learning and teaching conditions which the government seems to overlook. González & Quinchía (2003) and González, Sierra & Salazar (2005) particularly explore the roles of teacher educators in Colombia and suggest that knowing the local realities is as relevant as having a good command of the L2 when it comes to professional development. The adoption of a foreign framework clearly contravenes this last idea. In Colombia, researchers like González & Quinchía (2003), Cárdenas (2006), de Mejía (2006) and González (2007) among others have analyzed the way language policy is carried out in Colombia and its implications regarding learning conditions in Colombia. The conclusion seems to be that Colombian idiosyncrasies were not fully considered when policy makers decided on the framework to be enforced and that multilingualism (rather than bilingualism), culture and identity need to be readdressed in order to achieve positive results in foreign language teaching.

Besides these general ideas on some of the issues that need to be analyzed in depth, here is a brief description of the characteristics of many EFL classrooms in Colombia. Class size is the most evident problem in our current context. Authors like Brown (2001), LoCastro (2001) and

Sarwar (2001) have analyzed the difficulties of managing large-sized classes. LoCastro (2001) provides a list of problems related to class size and language learning, organized in three categories: Among the pedagogical difficulties we find the carrying out of speaking, reading, and writing tasks, the provision of feedback and monitoring of work, the promotion of individual work, setting up of communicative tasks, and avoidance of demanding activities; regarding classroom management she mentions that correction of student compositions is virtually impossible, pair and group work are difficult to carry out, and there is a high noise level when classes are truly participative; finally, affective problems include not being able to learn students' names, not being able to establish good rapport with students, and problems with weaker students who may get lost (p. 494-495).

Another problem whose future consequences require research and analysis on the part of teacher educators and policy makers is the fact that L2 classes may be taught by people who are not foreign language teachers. Although native speakers or people from other professions have an outstanding proficiency, teaching is not only about being able to speak without an accent. Teaching encompasses many aspects that sciences like psychology, sociolinguistics, linguistics and second language acquisition have analyzed and that a real teacher needs to know in order to adapt suitable teaching and assessment practices. On the other hand, the fact that an architect or an engineer can teach mathematics shows the little respect that the government has for the teaching profession and for those involved in it in Colombia. But as González (2000) quoted in González & Quinchía (2003) points out, teachers also face challenges such as "improving their language proficiency, being prepared to teach in diverse contexts, teaching with and without resources, implementing classroom-based research, having access to professional development, networking, and educating teacher educators" (p.88), which complicate even more the conditions for EFL teachers.

When student-teachers are asked to observe classes as part of their preparation to become teachers, they find a commonplace element that needs to be addressed in order to enhance teaching and learning conditions in Colombia: foreign language classes are usually conducted in Spanish. This might be due to the above-mentioned problems (large classes), the lack of appropriate and available materials, or the lack of proficiency on the part of teachers (classes conducted by other professionals, not by foreign language teachers). The very fact of teaching a foreign language without using it extensively in the classroom limits the opportunities students have to be exposed to the L2, and hinder their chances for interaction and output production. Macaro (1997) quoted by Cook (2001) lists some purposes for teacher use of the mother tongue when teaching: for giving instructions, for translating and checking comprehension, to make individual comments to students, to give feedback and to maintain discipline (p.155). Although these are perfectly rational, we must remember that in order to learn a language, learners must be exposed to input and the teacher becomes the main provider of it in classrooms with limited available

materials and audiovisual resources, such as most public schools in Colombia.

A problem that was stated before has to do with the scarce time devoted in public schools to foreign language instruction. As it was stated before, the government acknowledges the fact that in some schools only one or two hours a week is devoted to foreign language classes. Instead of pushing standards that are difficult to achieve with this schedule, a reorganization of curriculum that gives English teachers more space for their professional practice should take place.

Finally, these crowded classrooms, with little time to carry out effective learning practices and assigned to a teacher who may or may not be a certified foreign language educator, also contain students of mixed levels of proficiency and mixed ages. One more question appears: Can teachers in Colombia have an effective control over all these variables, and should they continue being blamed for all the problems that take place inside a class like this? One thing is clear; policy alone does not guarantee success.

It may seem that the government holds the proficiency level of teachers responsible for everything that has to do with foreign language teaching. MEN reports on the "Colombia aprende" web page provide the following information:

> In a diagnosis carried out in Bogotá and Cundinamarca in 2003 and 2004, teachers in Bogotá are, on average, A2 level. 63% of the evaluated teachers show a basic level of mastery of English (A1 and A2 levels); 35% are located in intermediate level (B1, B2) and only 14% displayed an advanced proficiency level (C1, C2) (Translation).

These results, however, may not be the only basis on which to establish policies and implement changes in the way a country educates its people. Other elements must also be considered. Valencia (2007) gives important insights on the real situation. She states that "there is a pressing need for reflection on ELT pedagogy and school culture in order to adapt to the new realities teachers must face in schools. The apathy of students and their lack of interest in learning in institutional contexts need to be dealt with" (p.15). It is a matter of coming to terms with what is really taking place; communication has to be the starting point of change. Real communication is needed. One conclusion that Valencia (2007) adds is that "teachers in particular need to be critical of the discourses of investing in English and also need to be aware of the misconceptions and promises of 'bilingualism' as it is understood by those who promote it" (p.15).

Conclusions

It is true that teachers are essential in the teaching and learning process, but as has been explained, other factors can intervene in how successful foreign language instruction is. In the conditions described above, it does not matter if the teacher has reached a C2 level –an overcrowded classroom, scarce materials and students who might have different proficiency levels, ages and motivation, and a scant amount of hours per week for teaching are a challenge for any educator regardless of the goals set at the beginning of the instruction process. Therefore, the words of the Minister of Education may sound unfair when she

states that all we need are committed teachers:

> "… We can only achieve the set goals if we have convinced teachers, who are able to help students communicate in this language" (Translation Estándares Básicos en Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés. MEN, 2006, p. 3).

If the most essential tools are not at hand, no commitment on the part of teachers will be enough for developing successful foreign-language programs; needless to say, the goal of bilingualism looks more like a utopia than a feasible plan.

After this brief discussion in the light of what several authors in the fields of TESOL and SLA have to say about effective principles for the implementation of foreign-language teaching programs and policies, the implementation of standards for Colombia needs to be addressed. The first proposition is that starting a program like "Colombia Bilingüe" requires additional research, not just a simplistic enquiry done to evidence the weaknesses on the part of teachers and justify the alliance with external agents. It is important to say that having a document that serves as a reference for teachers is always positive if the document itself is sound and inclusive, and if it is the result of a well thought-out and academically oriented process.

The Colombian government started the "Colombia Bilingüe" project in 2004 (MEN, 2004) and according to "Al Tablero" it intends to finish its implementation by 2019. The booklet with the standards was published in 2006 which makes evident that the process in Colombia was significantly shorter comparison to similar processes undertaken in other countries. For instance, the implementation of the standards present in the Common European Framework was carried out after extensive work that spanned a number of years. Morrow states that: "…the 'Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment' – Common European Framework, or CEF for short…is a product of the aims and aspirations of the Council of Europe, and is the development of work in this area that began in the late 1950s" (p. 3). Similarly, the process that supported the publication of TESOL's ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students in 1997 was a long and participative one. Gómez (2000) describes this process: Since the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk, organizations such as TESOL, the Center for Applied Linguistics and expert meetings congregating policy makers, teacher educators, administrators, and most importantly, classroom teachers discussed strategies to develop standards. These strategies were made public through conferences and monitored by special groups. Only by 1994, when all the voices had been heard, was the conceptual framework for the ESL standards developed. Finally, a first draft was written by teams of experts and shared at the 1996 TESOL convention in Chicago. The feedback obtained here served to revise the draft and finally in 1997 the ESL standards were published in a book supported by an academic organization such as TESOL. The reaction to this publication was positive as Gómez (2000) describes:

> Finally, here was a document—published by a national professional organization for teachers of English—that defined what effective education for English language learners looked

> like. By reading the vignettes and seeing themselves mirrored in the pages of the ESL standards, many teachers felt validated that they were on the right track (Reaction section, 1).

A document that serves as a basis to unify teaching practices across the country is a positive step towards ensuring equal quality in foreign-language teaching, but when one compares the Colombian equivalent to the texts produced by The Council of Europe or TESOL one wonders if the document "Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lengua Extranjera: Inglés" (MEN, 2006) was the result of an equally comprehensive process.

What is needed right now, besides an overall improvement of the conditions under which teaching and learning takes place in Colombia and the serious revision of curricula at elementary and secondary levels in public schools, is the spread of information. In addition, teachers need to get support from the government so that, in turn, they can support the Government in fulfilling the long-term goals proposed.

The words of Braslavsky (2006) regarding the ten most relevant factors for ensuring quality education should be mentioned here since they encompass many of the issues discussed in this article and they show that in order to successfully implement education policies, imposition is not the way. Braslavsky summarizes a 2003 discussion and states that education should be pertinent for people; this leads us to self-esteem and conviction in learners and teachers Ethics, competent administrators, team-work, the creation of academic communities, an adequate planning of curricula, the quantity, quality and availability of educational resources, the plurality and quality of teaching methodologies, and finally material, cultural and social incentives for teachers are, according to the voices of many education experts, what is needed to make a real and long lasting change in education.

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