

Bilingualism, Educational Inequality, and English Teachers' Work in Colombia: Systematic Literature Review

Bilingüismo, desigualdad educativa y el trabajo de los profesores de inglés en Colombia: revisión sistemática de la literatura

Nelly Johana Álvarez Idarraga

Universidad de Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain

This article presents a systematic review of the literature on bilingualism, educational inequality, and the work of English teachers in Colombia. The study analyzed research published between 2012 and 2024 and includes a longitudinal analysis of the results of the English component of the Saber 11 test (2017–2024). The findings reveal persistent gaps between the public and private sectors, as well as between urban and rural contexts, where socioeconomic status and territorial conditions influence learning opportunities, teaching resources, teacher development, and institutional capacity. The article concludes that an equity-oriented bilingualism policy requires territorial differentiation, redistribution of conditions and resources, and contextualized professional development.

Keywords: bilingual education, Colombia, educational inequality, English language policy, socioeconomic status

Este artículo presenta una revisión sistemática de la literatura sobre el bilingüismo, la desigualdad educativa y el trabajo de los docentes de inglés en Colombia. El estudio analizó investigaciones publicadas entre 2012 y 2024 e incorporó un análisis longitudinal de los resultados del componente de inglés de la prueba Saber 11 (2017-2024). Los hallazgos muestran brechas persistentes entre los sectores público y privado, así como entre contextos urbanos y rurales, en los que el nivel socioeconómico y las condiciones territoriales influyen en las oportunidades de aprendizaje, los recursos de enseñanza, la formación docente y la capacidad institucional. Se concluye que una política de bilingüismo orientada a la equidad requiere diferenciación territorial, redistribución de condiciones y recursos, y desarrollo profesional contextualizado.

Palabras clave: Colombia, desigualdad educativa, educación bilingüe, nivel socioeconómico, política lingüística del inglés

Nelly Johana Álvarez Idarraga  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4581-3625> • Email: idu039826@usal.es

How to cite this article (APA, 7th ed.): Álvarez Idarraga, N. J. (2026). Bilingualism, educational inequality, and English teachers' work in Colombia: Systematic literature review. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 28(2), 217–236. <https://doi.org/10.15446/profile.v28n2.123643>

This article was received on October 30, 2025 and accepted on April 6, 2026.

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Introduction

Bilingual education has been a national priority in Colombia since the launch of the National Bilingualism Program (NBP) in 2004 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional [MEN], 2004, 2006). Its central aim was to raise students' English proficiency in line with international agendas that present English as a resource for competitiveness, employability, and social mobility (Casas Pedrosa & Rascón Moreno, 2023; Gómez Sará, 2017). Subsequent initiatives, such as the National English Program/Colombia Very Well (2015–2025; MEN, 2014), maintained this goal while strengthening teacher education, pedagogical materials, and the integration of digital resources and intercultural components (MEN, 2021). In this article, these policy stages are referred to collectively as the NBP.

Despite this continuity, empirical studies consistently report gaps in English learning by socioeconomic status, region, and school sector (Bastidas Arteaga & Muñoz Ibarra, 2020; Bonilla & Cruz-Arcila, 2014; Cardona-Escobar et al., 2021). To examine whether these gaps constitute a persistent pattern rather than a single-year snapshot, this study draws on national English assessment results from the Saber 11¹ examination over the 2017–2024 period (Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación² [ICFES], 2024, 2025). Across this period, schools operating under Calendar A³ (predominantly public) consistently concentrate the largest shares of students at the lowest performance ranges, whereas students in schools operating under Calendar B (predominantly private and urban) more frequently reach higher outcomes. This recurrent contrast supports the interpretation of

enduring public-private and territorial inequality in English outcomes.

Previous studies have linked these disparities to unequal teacher preparation in English and content and language integrated learning (CLIL), limited pedagogical and technological resources, reduced instructional time, and uneven school management capacity (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2021; Correa & González, 2016; Cruz-Arcila, 2018; McDougald & Pissarello, 2020). In this sense, although the NBP expanded the formal presence of English within the school system, it did not substantially alter the structural conditions that shape unequal learning opportunities across territories. Improvements in coverage and curricular alignment have therefore coexisted with limited progress in reducing achievement gaps over time.

From teachers' perspectives, inequality is also evident in the conditions under which English is taught (Correa & González, 2016; Cruz-Arcila, 2018, 2020). Rural and public-school teachers frequently work with fewer instructional hours, in multigrade or overcrowded classrooms, with limited connectivity, and with sporadic in-service development opportunities. By contrast, teachers in urban or better-resourced schools are more likely to access CLIL and assessment courses and benefit from stronger institutional support (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023; McDougald & Pissarello, 2020). As a result, the same policy framework demands greater pedagogical effort from teachers in disadvantaged contexts without offering proportional support.

Comparable patterns have been documented in national English programs in Chile, Mexico, and Spain, as well as in other contexts where language policies tend to favor groups with higher cultural and economic capital (Barahona, 2016; Hamid & Erling, 2016; Pérez-Cañado, 2012; Sayer, 2015; Valenzuela, 2005). This evidence suggests that the Colombian case is not an isolated implementation problem but rather part of a broader tendency to promote English as both symbolic and economic capital, without sufficient redistributive mechanisms to ensure equitable access.

¹ Saber 11 is Colombia's national standardized exam for secondary school graduates. It measures student competencies in multiple subjects, including English, and serves as a key indicator of educational quality and university access.

² Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education.

³ In Colombia, schools operate under two main academic calendars. Calendar A, primarily used by public schools, runs from January to November, while Calendar B, more common in private and urban institutions, generally runs from August to June.

To interpret this problem, the study draws on three complementary frameworks. Sen's (1999) capability approach foregrounds the question of whether language policies expand learners' real opportunities rather than focusing solely on test outcomes. Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural and symbolic capital helps explain how English functions as a marker of distinction when access to learning opportunities is stratified. These perspectives connect with Latin American debates on elite and peripheral bilingualisms (García & Li, 2014; López & Sichra, 2008) and with Fraser's (2008) emphasis on redistribution and recognition as core dimensions of educational justice.

Against this background, the present article examines the extent to which Colombian bilingualism policies have been responsive to socioeconomic and territorial diversity. It integrates a systematic review of studies published between 2012 and 2024 with a longitudinal analysis of English outcomes from the Saber 11 national examination for the 2017–2024 period (ICFES, 2024, 2025). In addition, descriptive distributions of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) performance levels, disaggregated by academic calendar for the same period, are used to illustrate how score gaps are reflected in proficiency bands. These assessment data are employed for triangulation purposes and not to infer longitudinal changes in proficiency, allowing the study to show that inequities identified in the literature remain visible in official outcomes.

The 2012–2024 time frame was selected because, from 2012 onward, there has been a visible growth of empirical and critical research on the NBP and on territorial inequality. The study addressed three research questions: (a) how socioeconomic and territorial conditions affect bilingual policy results in Colombia, (b) what adjustments the NBP requires to advance educational equity, and (c) how these conditions shape English teachers' work opportunities for professional development.

Method

A qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review examined how socioeconomic and territorial conditions intersect with the implementation and outcomes of bilingual and English-language education policies in Colombia, and identified policy-related factors that shape educational inequality and English teachers' work and opportunities for professional development.

Information Sources and Search Strategy

The search was conducted iteratively between late 2023 and early 2025 and targeted peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2012 and 2024. Web of Science and Scopus were selected due to their broad coverage of journals in education, applied linguistics, and language policy. Searches yielded 92 records in Web of Science and 24 in Scopus.

Search queries were conducted in Spanish and English, combining terms related to bilingual education or English-language education policy, Colombia, and educational equity or inequality. Descriptors such as *bilingual education*, *bilingualism policy*, *English education*, *Colombia*, *educational equity*, and *educational inequality* were linked through Boolean operators (AND/OR) and adapted to each database's syntax.

Because this strategy may underrepresent studies published exclusively in regional open-access repositories—particularly those focusing on rural, Indigenous, or intercultural education—such platforms were consulted only to retrieve full texts for records already identified in Web of Science or Scopus. To retrieve full manuscripts, when necessary, additional open-access platforms were consulted only to access the full text of records already identified in Web of Science or Scopus. No additional studies were incorporated through these platforms.

Eligibility Criteria

Document selection was guided by the study's research questions and by an adaptation of the PICO approach to language-in-education policy (Methley et al., 2014). Studies were eligible if they focused on Colombia and addressed bilingualism policy or English education policy, including the NBP in any of its phases, its enactment in rural or peripheral settings, or the social and ideological effects of English. To be included, studies also had to make an explicit connection to educational inequality, operationalized as socioeconomic disparities, rural-urban gaps, public-private contrasts, intercultural or ethnic education, or uneven institutional capacity.

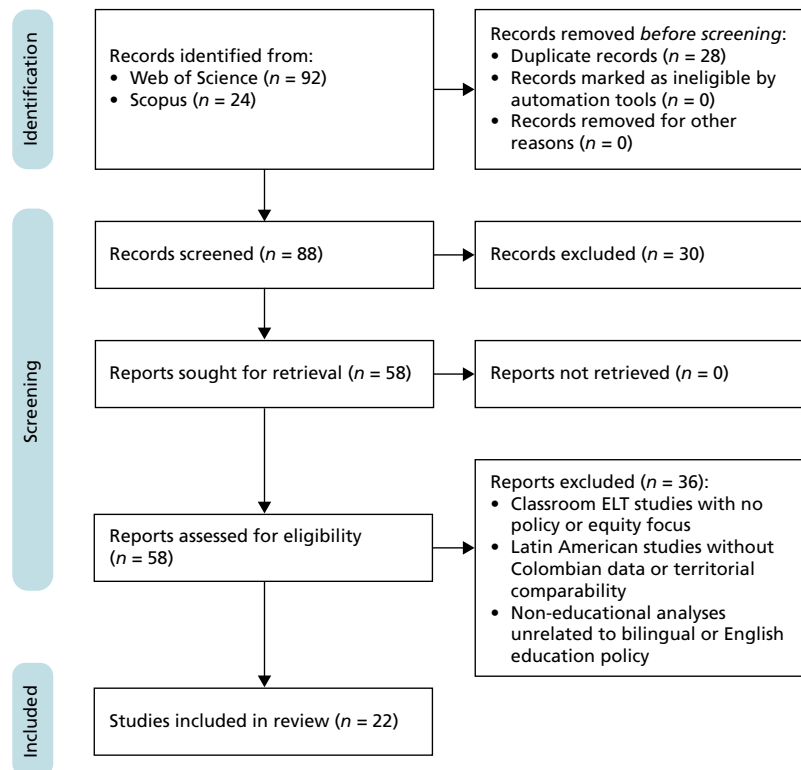
Two studies on educational inequality and spatial segregation in Colombia (Castro-Aristizábal et al., 2022; Fajardo et al., 2021) were retained despite not focusing specifically on bilingual education, as they

provide a structural context to interpret unequal English outcomes in Saber 11 and to support the analytical use of Sen's and Fraser's frameworks.

Selection Procedure

The study selection followed the PRISMA 2020 framework. Records identified through database searching were screened in successive stages to ensure temporal relevance, contextual focus on Colombia, and alignment with the study's analytical scope. Titles and abstracts were then reviewed to confirm that Colombia constituted the primary empirical or policy context and that the studies addressed bilingualism or English education policy in relation to educational inequality. Twenty-two studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the qualitative thematic synthesis (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Systematic Reviews



Note. Adapted from "The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews," by M. J. Page, J. E. McKenzie, P. M. Bossuyt, I. Boutron, T. C. Hoffmann, C. D. Mulrow, L. Shamseer, J. M. Tetzlaff, E. A. Akl, S. E. Brennan, R. Chou, J. Glanville, J. M. Grimshaw, A. Hróbjartsson, M. M. Lalu, T. Li, E. W. Loder, E. Mayo-Wilson, S. McDonald, . . . D. Moher, 2021, *International Journal of Surgery*, 88 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijsu.2021.105906>). Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0).

Data Extraction and Organization

Once the final corpus of studies had been defined, a data extraction matrix was developed to support systematic coding and qualitative synthesis. For each study, information was recorded on authorship and year of publication, publication outlet, educational level and territorial scope, methodological design, the type of equity or territorial dimension addressed, the English-achievement indicators reported, and the policy implications identified in relation to the NBP. These analytical categories were selected based on the research questions and align with the theoretical framework guiding the study. They capture dimensions related to redistribution, recognition, and stratified access to linguistic capital, which are central to understanding how bilingualism policy operates across unequal educational contexts.

The extraction matrix functioned as an organizational tool to ensure traceability between the included studies and the themes reported in the qualitative synthesis, supporting consistency in interpretation and transparency in the analytical process.

Qualitative Synthesis and Quality Assessment

The 22 included studies were analyzed through an inductive thematic synthesis. Full texts were read iteratively and coded to identify recurrent mechanisms, contextual conditions, and equity-related claims across

the corpus. This process resulted in three analytical axes: (a) bilingual education as a setting where structural inequality becomes visible, (b) socioeconomic status and differentiated access to English learning opportunities, and (c) teacher-centered implications for bilingualism policy enactment. The synthesis prioritized interpretive comparison across studies, focusing on how inequality is conceptualized, evidenced, and explained in relation to bilingualism and English education policy.

Methodological quality and risk of bias were appraised to strengthen transparency and interpretive rigor. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists (<https://casp-uk.net/>) were used for qualitative and documentary designs, and the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018) was used for quantitative and mixed-method studies. Quality appraisal was not used to exclude studies. Instead, all included studies contributed to the synthesis, while appraisal results were used to qualify the strength, scope, and transferability of the evidence.

When similar claims appeared across studies with different levels of methodological robustness, greater interpretive emphasis was placed on those with clearer design rationale, more explicit analytical procedures, and stronger alignment between data and conclusions. Table 1 summarizes the appraisal outcomes and the main methodological limitations identified for each study.

Table 1. Quality Appraisal of Included Studies (CASP/MMAT) and Key Methodological Limitations

Author(s)	Year	Analytical category	Design reported	Appraisal tool and level	Key methodological limitations
Benavides-Jimenez and Mora-Acosta	2019	Socioeconomic status and differentiated access to English learning opportunities	Qualitative (teacher education, intercultural focus)	CASP	Small focal sample, limited transferability beyond the study context

Author(s)	Year	Analytical category	Design reported	Appraisal tool and level	Key methodological limitations
Cadavid-Múnera	2022	Socioeconomic status and differentiated access to English learning opportunities	Qualitative (childhood education, multiple data collection techniques)	CASP	Limited transferability beyond the local context
Cardona-Escobar et al.	2023		Mixed methods (five sites, three schools)	MMAT: High	Moderate sample size
Castro-Aristizábal et al.	2022		Quantitative (national spatial analysis)	MMAT: Moderate	Use of spatial proxies, model assumptions
Fajardo et al.	2021		Quantitative (econometric analysis)	MMAT: Moderate	Partial model specification, potential omitted variables
Mackenzie	2022		Qualitative (higher education, disadvantaged students)	CASP	Findings limited to the higher education context
Vega-Carrero et al.	2017		Higher education case study (virtual education)	CASP	Digital divide, single-case design
Zwisler	2018	Teacher-centered implications for bilingualism policy enactment	Quantitative (cross-sectional perceptions study)	MMAT: Moderate	Indirect link to access English learning opportunities
Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez	2016		Critical policy essay	CASP	No primary data, reliance on secondary sources
Cardona-Escobar et al.	2021		Analytical and empirical policy study	MMAT: High	Evidence is uneven across policy components
Correa and González	2016		Policy essay and review	CASP	Limited systematic use of primary data
Cruz-Arcila	2018		Qualitative (rural teachers)	CASP	Context-specific findings, limited transferability
Cruz-Arcila	2020		Qualitative (teacher identities in rural contexts)	CASP	Limited transferability beyond rural settings
McDougald and Pissarello	2020		Quantitative (pre-post CLIL teacher training)	MMAT: Moderate	Limited controls; effects likely contingent on local resources

Author(s)	Year	Analytical category	Design reported	Appraisal tool and level	Key methodological limitations
Miranda et al.	2016	Teacher-centered implications for bilingualism policy enactment	University case study	CASP	Single institutional case
Ubaque-Casallas	2023		Qualitative narrative (translanguaging)	CASP	Emphasis on depth over breadth
Bettney	2022		Critical sociolinguistic analysis	CASP	Limited generalizability inherent to the analytical design
de Mejía	2017	Bilingual education as a setting where structural inequality becomes visible	State-of-the-art essay	CASP	Secondary analysis, no primary empirical data
Echeverri Sucerquia and Medina Rúa	2024		Critical policy analysis (urban focus)	CASP	No direct impact assessment
Mackenzie	2020		Critical theoretical essay (social justice)	CASP	Theoretical inferences without primary data
Miranda Montenegro	2012		Sociolinguistic essay	CASP	Earlier publication; secondary evidence
Roldán and Peláez-Henao	2017		Qualitative case study (rural policy)	CASP	Single-case design, restricted generalization

Note. Methodological quality was appraised using CASP (qualitative/documentary studies) and MMAT (quantitative and mixed-method designs). Appraisal results informed interpretation, but did not serve as exclusion criteria.

Results

The systematic review reveals a consistent pattern: bilingual and English education in Colombia continues to be shaped by socioeconomic and territorial inequalities that condition both access to learning opportunities and achievement outcomes. Disparities in resources, teacher preparation, instructional conditions, and institutional capacity are repeatedly documented. They are reflected in national assessment evidence, which shows limited overall improvement over time and a persistent concentration of achievement at basic proficiency levels.

The three analytical categories (see the Qualitative Synthesis and Quality Assessment section) enabled

systematic triangulation between the explanatory patterns identified in the literature (2012–2024) and the longitudinal and descriptive evidence from Saber 11 English results (2017–2024).

Bilingual Education as a Setting Where Structural Inequality Becomes Visible

In Colombia, bilingual education is framed as a policy field in which pre-existing structural inequalities become visible and, in many cases, reinforced. Bilingualism is not presented as a neutral pedagogical innovation, but as a reform whose outcomes are strongly mediated by territorial, institutional, and

socioeconomic conditions. In this sense, the implementation of bilingual and English education policies operates within an unequal educational landscape, where access to resources, instructional conditions, and institutional capacity vary markedly across school sectors and regions.

Empirical evidence shows that public schools—particularly those in rural and peripheral areas—face persistent constraints in infrastructure, teacher availability and specialization, continuity of instruction, and access to pedagogical and technological resources. These constraints limit the extent to which national bilingualism policy objectives can be translated into

sustained learning trajectories. In contrast, better-resourced institutions (more frequently associated with urban settings and private provision) are described as operating under more favorable conditions, including stable staffing, greater availability of instructional materials, and more systematic professional development opportunities for teachers. As a result, bilingual education functions as a differentiated policy space, in which the same formal objectives generate uneven outcomes across contexts. These structural patterns, repeatedly documented in the literature, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Empirical Evidence on Structural Inequalities in English Learning in Colombia

Study	Method/Participants	Location	Key findings
Bettney (2022)	Critical sociolinguistic analysis of language ideologies, policy discourse, and practices	Colombia (school system)	Monoglossic and hegemonic ideologies embedded in bilingual policy reproduce structural inequalities by privileging standardized forms of English and marginalizing local linguistic realities.
Mackenzie (2020)	Critical policy analysis focused on social justice implications; documentary and theoretical review	Colombia (national level)	The design and implementation of bilingualism policy reproduce social and territorial inequalities by prioritizing uniform goals over differentiated conditions and redistributive mechanisms.
Mackenzie (2022)	Qualitative study (capability approach); in-depth interviews with approximately 10 higher education students in vulnerable economic conditions	Colombia (universities)	English functions as an unevenly distributed capability; access to learning opportunities depends on socioeconomic background and institutional capital.
Cruz-Arcila (2018)	Qualitative study; interviews and observations with English teachers	Rural schools in Colombia	Rural schools enact bilingual policy under conditions of scarcity; limited resources and infrastructure reproduce urban–rural inequalities.

Study	Method/Participants	Location	Key findings
Roldán and Peláez-Henao (2017)	Qualitative case study; interviews and documentary analysis	Antioquia (rural area)	Mismatches between national policy objectives and local conditions (teacher training, infrastructure, social capital) undermine policy relevance and effectiveness.
Echeverri Sucerquia and Medina Rúa (2024)	Critical policy analysis (neoliberal perspective); documentary review	Medellín (urban context)	Market-oriented accountability mechanisms shape bilingualism policy and deepen urban inequalities through segregation of opportunities and resources.
Miranda Montenegro (2012)	Theoretical sociolinguistic analysis	Colombia (conceptual discussion)	Clarifies the social effects of bilingualism and bilingual education, framing tensions between policy discourse and sociocultural realities.
Correa and González (2016)	Critical policy review and synthesis of national programs since 2004	Colombia (public primary education)	Structural challenges related to teacher preparation, working conditions, and resources persist across policy cycles, producing differentiated impacts by socioeconomic context.
Vega-Carrero et al. (2017)	Case study; university English courses in virtual environments; teachers and students	Colombia (higher education, virtual modality)	Technological and institutional conditions mediate English learning; unequal access to digital resources reinforces structural inequalities.

National assessment data from the Saber 11 examination for the 2017–2024 period further reinforce this interpretation. As illustrated in Figure 2, the national mean score in English remains broadly stable over time, indicating limited cumulative improvement despite sustained policy implementation.

However, this apparent stability conceals substantial internal disparities. To examine how national outcomes translate into proficiency profiles, Figures 3 and 4 present the distribution of CEFR performance levels by academic calendar (A and B) for 2017–2024. The results show that Calendar A consistently concentrates the largest proportions of students in the lowest performance bands, whereas Calendar B exhibits markedly higher achievement profiles across the same years. These differences are not episodic but persistent across time, suggesting that structural inequalities at the system level are reproduced in assessment outcomes.

Figure 2. National Mean Score in English in the Saber 11 Examination (2017–2024)

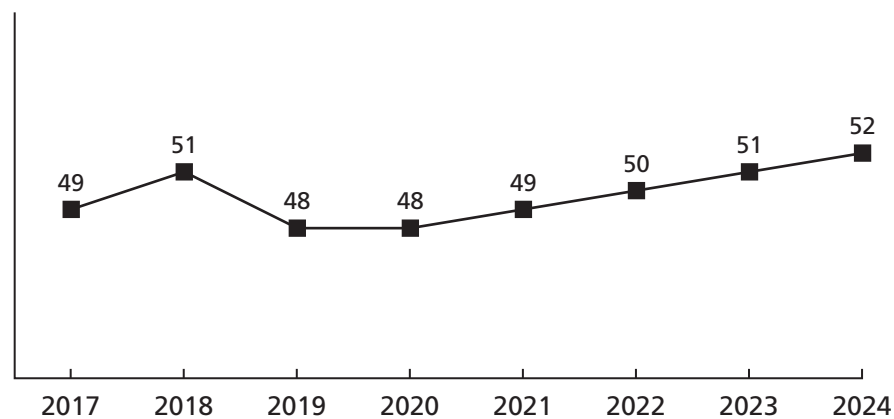


Figure 3. Distribution of CEFR Performance Levels in Saber 11 English, Calendar A (2017–2024)

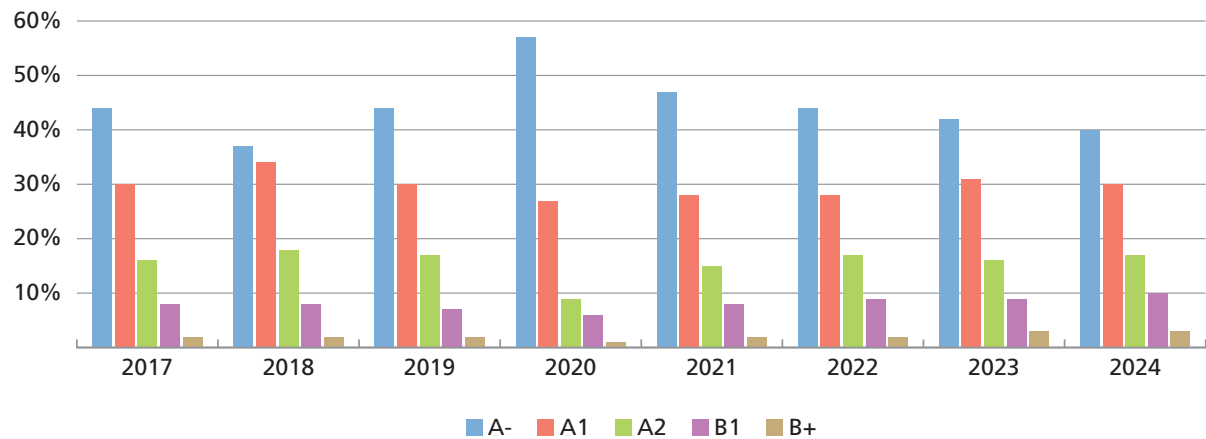
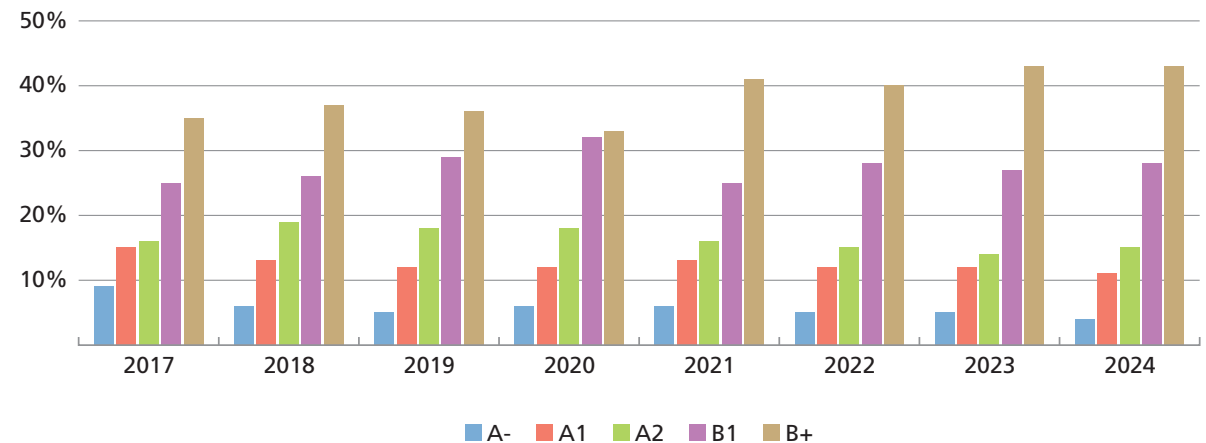


Figure 4. Distribution of CEFR Performance Levels in Saber 11 English, Calendar B (2017–2024)



The distribution observed for Calendar A shows a persistent concentration of students in the lowest CEFR bands (A- and A1), with only a marginal proportion reaching B1 or higher. This pattern reflects the structural constraints documented in public and rural schooling contexts and underscores the system's limited capacity to support upward trajectories of proficiency under unequal conditions.

In contrast, the distribution for Calendar B shows a markedly different proficiency profile, with a substantially higher concentration of students in the upper CEFR bands (B1 and B+), and a comparatively smaller proportion remaining at the lowest levels. This pattern is consistent across the period analyzed and reflects more favorable instructional conditions, greater continuity of English exposure, and stronger institutional capacity, which enable sustained progression toward functional and advanced levels of proficiency.

The convergence between the reviewed studies and the longitudinal assessment evidence indicates that bilingual education in Colombia operates as a site where structural inequality becomes measurable and visible. Rather than offsetting existing disparities, bilingualism policy outcomes reflect long-standing differences in institutional capacity, territorial conditions, and access to educational resources. This finding provides a necessary foundation for examining, in the following sections, how socioeconomic status shapes differentiated access to English learning opportunities and how teachers' work mediates the enactment of bilingualism policy across unequal contexts.

Socioeconomic Status and Differentiated Access to English Learning Opportunities

Across the reviewed studies, socioeconomic status (SES) emerges as a cross-cutting determinant of access to English learning opportunities and achievement. Qualitative, mixed-method, and macro-level analyses indicate that learners in low-SES contexts face cumu-

lative barriers associated with limited infrastructure and materials, restricted access to technology, fewer opportunities for out-of-school support, and uneven availability of qualified English instruction. These conditions constrain participation in higher-quality bilingual provision and reduce the likelihood of sustained exposure to English across schooling trajectories.

In contrast, students in middle- and higher-SES contexts more frequently access complementary resources, including private tutoring, extended exposure to English through extracurricular programs, and greater access to technology at home and at school. The reviewed literature consistently underscores that SES does not operate in isolation: it interacts with the school sector, territory, and institutional capacity, producing differentiated pathways of access and achievement in English.

Territorial conditions intersect with SES in systematic ways. In rural settings, English education is delivered under constraints of limited material and institutional capacity, with fewer instructional resources and weaker infrastructure than is typically reported in urban environments. In low-resource urban contexts, studies also show early differentiation in students' experiences and representations of English by school type and family context, suggesting that unequal exposure and unequal meanings attached to English emerge early and are reproduced over time.

National assessment evidence aligns with these patterns. While mean English scores remain broadly stable at the aggregate level (Figure 2), distributions of CEFR performance levels by academic calendar reveal persistent stratification in proficiency profiles (Figures 3 and 4). Calendar A concentrates the largest proportions of students in the lowest CEFR bands, whereas Calendar B shows substantially higher concentrations in B1 and B+. Although the calendar is not a direct proxy for SES, these distributions are consistent with the evidence reviewed on socioeconomic and sector-based differentiation in access to sustained,

higher-quality English learning opportunities. Table 3 synthesizes the empirical studies that most directly

document SES-linked disparities in access to English learning opportunities and outcomes.

Table 3. Empirical Evidence on Socioeconomic Status and Access to English in Colombia

Study	Method/Participants	Location	Key findings
de Mejía (2017)	Critical review of bilingual policy and practices; literature synthesis	Colombia (national)	Highlights the gap between policy discourse on diversity and actual practices; limited redistribution sustains unequal access to English learning opportunities.
Cadavid-Múnera (2022)	Qualitative study with approximately 60 children (grades 1, 3, and 5); drawings, symbolic play, interviews	Medellín (public and private primary schools)	Children's representations of English are shaped by school resources and socioeconomic context, evidencing early differentiation in access and experiences.
Cardona-Escobar et al. (2023)	Mixed-method study; teachers and students in three public primary classrooms	Colombia (public schools)	Uneven implementation of the NBP produces differentiated access to opportunities to accumulate linguistic capital; financing constraints hinder equity.
Castro-Aristizábal et al. (2022)	Quantitative spatial analysis of educational quality and segregation	Colombia (national)	Identifies spatial clustering of high- and low-quality education; territorial segregation is associated with unequal exposure to quality English instruction.
Fajardo et al. (2021)	Quantitative econometric analysis using socioeconomic indicators	Colombia (regional level)	Socioeconomic conditions significantly affect educational quality and outcomes; teacher preparation mitigates, but does not eliminate, SES-related disparities.
Benavides-Jiménez and Mora-Acosta (2019)	Qualitative intercultural comparison of bilingual teachers	Colombia (Indigenous and Western contexts)	Sociocultural and socioeconomic conditions shape differentiated access to bilingual education and influence how English is positioned within local communities.
Zwisler (2018)	Quantitative cross-sectional study on perceptions of English learning and identity	Colombia (national/regional sample)	Perceived value and meaning of English are socially differentiated; orientations toward English relate to stratified experiences and symbolic valuation, consistent with unequal access to linguistic capital.

Teacher-Centered Implications for Bilingualism Policy Enactment

Across the reviewed studies, teachers' working conditions and professional development opportunities emerge as central mechanisms through which socioeconomic and territorial inequalities shape the enactment of bilingual education policy. Evidence from rural and public-school contexts indicates that English teachers often work under reduced instructional time, limited access to pedagogical and technological resources, and organizational constraints that affect curriculum continuity, follow-up, and assessment practices (Correa & González, 2016; Cruz-Arcila, 2018, 2020).

The review also indicates that professional development opportunities are unevenly distributed across territories and school sectors. Teachers in better-resourced urban institutions report more frequent access to sustained development pathways related to CLIL, assessment, and program innovation, often supported by stronger leadership and institutional infrastructure. In contrast, teachers working in disadvantaged territories describe sporadic, short-term, or discontinuous education opportunities that are insufficient to offset structural constraints related to workload, time allocation, connectivity, and scarcity of teaching materials (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023; McDougald & Pissarello, 2020).

Several studies highlight teachers' agencies in sustaining policy enactment under conditions of scarcity. Teachers adapt curricular goals, mobilize locally available resources, and develop situated pedagogical strategies to maintain English instruction; however, these practices frequently rely on individual effort rather than stable institutional support, making implementation fragile and uneven (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2021; Cruz-Arcila, 2018). This evidence suggests that policy expectations are often enacted through intensified pedagogical labor in disadvantaged contexts, without proportional redistribution of resources or sustained professional support.

These findings speak directly to the role of teachers as mediators of bilingualism policy in unequal conditions. They show that differentiated working environments and uneven access to professional learning shape teachers' capacity to implement bilingual policy consistently and constrain the extent to which professional development can translate into improved student outcomes in historically disadvantaged settings. Table 4 summarizes the teacher-centered evidence on policy enactment under unequal conditions.

Discussion

The findings of this review, triangulated with national English assessment evidence from Saber 11, indicate that Colombia's bilingualism policy remains misaligned with its stated aims of equity and quality. Rather than narrowing opportunity gaps, the evidence points to the sustained reproduction of socioeconomic and territorial inequalities in English learning conditions and outcomes. As a result, bilingualism functions more as a mechanism of social differentiation than as a universal educational right. To substantiate equity-oriented implications, the discussion integrates the review's three analytical categories with the capability approach (Sen, 1999), cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and the redistribution-recognition framework of social justice (Fraser, 2008).

How Do Socioeconomic and Territorial Conditions Affect Bilingual Policy Results in Colombia?

Across the reviewed studies, socioeconomic and territorial conditions emerge as foundational determinants of who has access to sustained, high-quality opportunities to learn English and who is more likely to reach functional proficiency. The triangulation between empirical evidence and national assessment distributions shows that bilingual education operates within differentiated circuits that shape learning opportunities before, during, and beyond classroom instruction.

Table 4. Teacher-Centered Implications for Bilingualism Policy Enactment in Colombia

Study	Method/Participants	Location	Key findings
Cruz-Arcila (2018)	Qualitative study; interviews and observations with English teachers	Rural schools in Colombia	Teachers enact bilingual policy under conditions of scarcity; urban-rural inequalities are reproduced through constrained instructional environments.
Cruz-Arcila (2020)	Narrative qualitative study; rural English teachers	Rural Colombia	Teachers construct alternative professional identities and success narratives shaped by territorial constraints and limited institutional support.
Correa and González (2016)	Critical policy review and documentary analysis	Colombia (public primary education)	Structural limitations in professional development, working conditions, and resources persist despite policy reforms, constraining teachers' capacity to enact equity.
Cardona-Escobar et al. (2021)	Empirical policy study; documentary analysis and implementation evidence	Colombia (national)	Teachers mediate policy enactment unevenly across territories; accountability-oriented reforms intensify pedagogical labor in disadvantaged contexts.
McDougald and Pissarello (2020)	Quantitative pre-post study of CLIL professional development	Colombia (in-service teachers)	Professional development improves pedagogical knowledge, but structural barriers such as workload and resource constraints limit equitable implementation.
Ubaque-Casallas (2023)	Narrative qualitative research; teachers and students	Colombian school classrooms	Translanguaging practices foster inclusion, but their sustainability depends on institutional support and regulatory flexibility.
Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez (2016)	Critical review of language education policy; conceptual and documentary analysis	Colombia (school system)	Identifies unresolved policy questions and implementation gaps that shift responsibility to teachers and constrain equitable enactment across unequal school conditions.
Miranda et al. (2016)	Qualitative university case study; interviews and documentary analysis	Colombia (higher education)	Conflicting institutional interpretations of language policy shape uneven enactment; outcomes depend on institutional capacity and the support structures available to teachers and students.

At the system level, territorial segregation and academic clustering concentrate stronger institutional capacity, including specialized teachers, stable programs, and access to authentic materials, within specific school networks and urban circuits (Castro-Aristizábal et al., 2022; Roldán & Peláez-Henao, 2017). These dynamics are consistent with the literature documenting persistent disparities in instructional resources, continuity of English exposure, and infrastructure between public and private provision, particularly across rural-urban divides (Correa & González, 2016; Cruz-Arcila, 2018).

Within schooling, the conversion of instructional time into learning is shaped by structural differences in effective exposure hours, staffing stability, curriculum continuity, access to information and communication technologies, and the availability of sustained professional development. These conditions are systematically less favorable in disadvantaged public and rural contexts (Correa & González, 2016; Cruz-Arcila, 2018; McDougald & Pissarello, 2020). Beyond schooling, standardized evaluation and accountability incentives tend to reward institutions with greater accumulated capital, consolidating cycles of advantage and reinforcing stratified trajectories (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2021; Mackenzie, 2020; Miranda et al., 2016).

These mechanisms are reflected in Saber 11 English proficiency profiles. While mean scores show only limited variation at the aggregate level (ICFES, 2024, 2025), disaggregation by academic calendar reveals persistent stratification in CEFR distributions. Calendar A has the largest proportions of students in the lower bands, whereas Calendar B consistently shows higher concentrations in B1 and B+. Interpreted through the capability approach, the equity problem is not only the outcome gap but also the asymmetry in conversion factors that prevents formal access to English from translating into comparable real freedoms across contexts (Sen, 1999). Where schools operate with fewer effective hours, higher teacher turnover, limited materials and connectivity, and fewer immersion or enrichment opportunities, the same

formal policy promise yields substantially different learning returns (Correa & González, 2016; McDougald & Pissarello, 2020).

From a capital perspective, English functions as institutionalized cultural and symbolic capital, the acquisition of which depends on belonging to school networks with greater resource density. Once acquired, it is certified through assessments and educational trajectories that enable stratified positioning (Bourdieu, 1986). In this sense, English does not merely measure achievement. It also contributes to classification and distinction through unequal access to learning opportunities and unequal institutional capacity to support progression. This interpretation aligns with the reviewed evidence that structural inequality in bilingualism is not explained by individual deficits but by systemic configurations that organize supply, condition pedagogical mediation, and crystallize results (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2023; Cruz-Arcila, 2018).

What Adjustments Does the National Bilingualism Program Require to Advance Educational Equity?

The review indicates that equity-oriented adjustments to bilingualism policy require a shift from uniform standards and compliance-oriented monitoring toward territorial differentiated strategies that redistribute conditions for learning. Critical analyses suggest that the emphasis on CEFR alignment, standardization, and results-based accountability has often outweighed redistributive mechanisms that could address heterogeneity in baseline conditions (Bettney, 2022; Cardona-Escobar et al., 2021; Mackenzie, 2020). This design can structure expectations. However, it insufficiently addresses unequal institutional capacity and territorial variation in the conditions required to meet those expectations.

From a Fraserian perspective, advancing equity requires integrating redistribution and recognition

(Fraser, 2008). Redistribution implies differential funding, targeted strengthening of institutional capacity, guaranteed instructional time, stable teacher allocation, and access to materials and connectivity in the most disadvantaged territories. Without these conditions, policy goals remain formally universal but practically selective. Recognition implies validating local linguistic repertoires and pedagogical practices, rather than treating them as deficiencies. It also requires enabling context-responsive curricular and assessment decisions that expand meaningful participation. In this regard, studies emphasizing monoglossic policy orientations show that standardized frameworks can reproduce symbolic hierarchies unless plural and context-sensitive approaches are institutionally legitimized (Bettney, 2022; Ubaque-Casallas, 2023).

Accordingly, policy adjustment should prioritize territorially differentiated targets and implementation supports, equity-linked funding and incentives aimed at improving conversion conditions, and monitoring systems that track distributive improvement rather than only aggregate performance. The evidence suggests that equity in bilingualism is unlikely to result from further standardization alone. It requires regulatory architectures that preserve shared quality horizons while redistributing resources and decision-making capacity to contexts facing the highest structural barriers (Cardona-Escobar et al., 2021; Mackenzie, 2020; McDougald & Pissarello, 2020).

How Do These Conditions Shape English Teachers' Work and Opportunities for Professional Development?

A teacher-centered reading of the findings shows that policy misalignment is often first experienced in teachers' daily work. Studies on rural and disadvantaged contexts document that teachers enact bilingualism policy through situated translation, using available resources rather than those assumed by centralized

designs (Cruz-Arcila, 2018, 2020). This enactment becomes more demanding in low-SES and rural schools, where teachers must compensate for reduced exposure time, limited out-of-school access to English, and scarce pedagogical and technological resources (Correa & González, 2016; Cruz-Arcila, 2018).

Professional development is frequently positioned as a compensatory lever. Evidence indicates that in-service education in areas such as CLIL or assessment can strengthen pedagogical knowledge, yet its impact is mediated by workload, time allocation, leadership, and territorial support (McDougald & Pissarello, 2020). Consequently, equity-oriented bilingualism policies should territorialize teacher professional development. Teachers in rural and highly segregated urban contexts require longer, school-embedded programs, mentoring, and access to digital and pedagogical resources. By contrast, better-resourced contexts may benefit from specialization and innovation tracks. Without such differentiation, professional development can reproduce inequalities because advantaged institutions are better positioned to allocate time and infrastructure for participation.

Finally, the review suggests limited participation of teachers and communities in the design, adaptation, and monitoring of bilingualism initiatives, which constrains the recognition dimension of social justice (Fraser, 2008). Strengthening participatory mechanisms would enable inclusive practices developed in contexts of scarcity—such as translanguaging, multigrade strategies, and culturally responsive materials—to be recognized as legitimate and scalable forms of bilingual education in Colombia (Bettney, 2022; Ubaque-Casallas, 2023). In conclusion, teacher-centered policy enactment under unequal conditions underscores that educational equity in bilingualism depends not only on standards but on the redistribution of conditions and support that make sustained pedagogical work feasible in disadvantaged territories.

Conclusions

Although Colombia has maintained a relatively stable bilingualism policy framework since 2004 and has progressively incorporated discourses of inclusion and interculturality, these shifts have not been sufficient to offset the structural inequalities that shape English-learning opportunities across territories, school sectors, and socioeconomic groups. The reviewed studies, triangulated with national English results from the Saber 11 examination (2017–2024), consistently show that bilingual education outcomes remain stratified. Students in public, rural, and low-SES contexts experience reduced instructional exposure, more limited access to adequately prepared teachers, and weaker institutional conditions than their peers in private and better-resourced urban schools. In this sense, bilingualism continues to operate more as a mechanism of social differentiation than as a universally guaranteed educational right.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that advancing equity requires moving beyond uniform national targets and standardized alignment toward territorially differentiated strategies that redistribute the conditions enabling English learning. Such strategies should prioritize guaranteed instructional time, stable teacher allocation, access to pedagogical and digital resources, and strengthened school-level implementation capacity in contexts facing the greatest structural constraints. At the same time, an equity-oriented bilingualism policy must incorporate recognition-based measures that legitimate local linguistic repertoires and context-responsive pedagogies, preventing standardized frameworks from reproducing symbolic hierarchies and restricted participation.

A central contribution of this review lies in foregrounding teachers as key mediators of the enactment of bilingualism policy under unequal conditions. The evidence shows that policy expectations are frequently sustained through intensified pedagogical labor in disadvantaged settings, where professional develop-

ment opportunities are also more fragmented and less responsive to contextual demands. Accordingly, teacher education and in-service professional development should shift from generic, short-term provision toward equity-sensitive, long-term, and school-embedded programs, particularly in public, rural, and low-SES schools. These initiatives should be supported by dedicated time, mentoring, and access to pedagogical and technological resources, so that professional learning functions as a lever for equity rather than as another stratified opportunity.

Finally, this study is subject to limitations inherent to systematic reviews and secondary data analysis. The review was restricted to peer-reviewed publications indexed in Web of Science and Scopus, which may underrepresent locally produced research and practitioner-oriented knowledge. In addition, national assessment data were analyzed descriptively and cannot capture all dimensions of opportunity to learn. Future research would benefit from longitudinal and mixed-method designs that integrate achievement trends with indicators of instructional conditions, teacher stability, and resource allocation across territories. Strengthening participatory research approaches involving teachers and communities would further contribute to the design of bilingualism policies that are both contextually viable and socially just.

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About the Author

Nelly Johana Álvarez Idarraga holds an MA in Education from Universidad Autónoma de Bucaramanga (Colombia). She is currently completing her PhD in Advanced English Studies: Language and Cultures in Contact at Universidad de Salamanca (Spain). Her research interests focus on bilingualism and the professional practices of English teachers in Colombia.