

Book Review

<http://dx.doi.org/10.19183/how.24.2.347>

From Transnational Language Policy Transfer to Local Appropriation: The Case of the National Bilingual Program in Medellín, Colombia*

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Usma Wilches, J. A. (2015). *From transnational language policy transfer to local appropriation: The case of the National Bilingual Program in Medellín, Colombia*. Deep University Press.

158 pages

ISBN-10: 1939755204

ISBN-13: 978-1939755209

From Transnational Language Policy Transfer to Local Appropriation: The Case of the National Bilingual Program in Medellín, Colombia reveals the transition from international language policy transfer and foreign language education policymaking at the state level to local policy appropriation. From a comparative, critical, and sociocultural perspective, Usma skillfully unveils how Colombian policy agents, including teachers, create and enact the National Bilingual Program (NBP). The book is published after a decade of the language education policy announcement, at a crucial time when Colombian society reflects on each one's role in the challenging but hopeful post-conflict era. In its ten chapters, the volume makes us ponder the relevance of adopting transnational discourses in a country that has not yet solved some of its structural, social, and educational issues.

The introduction contextualizes the study and contents of the book by describing Colombian political and education system, economy, and linguistic profile, and by providing some background information about the department of Antioquia and the city of Medellín, where the study took place. From the beginning, the portrayal of the context anticipates the excessive character of the demands posed by an English as a foreign language learning

* How to cite this article (APA 6th ed.):

Miranda, N. (2017). Review of the book *From transnational language policy transfer to local appropriation: The case of the National Bilingual Program in Medellín, Colombia*, by J. A. Usma Wilches. *HOW*, 24(2), 179-182. <http://dx.doi.org/10.19183/how.24.2.347>.

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policy that centers on supporting the country's macroeconomic endeavors to become part of the global market rather than on adopting measures that attend student needs, learning in general, and language learning in particular. Rates of social and gender inequality, violence, unemployment and underemployment are still high while social mobility remains low in the country as a whole and in Medellín, the second largest city.

Chapter two briefly revisits the different approaches to policy research and analysis, starting from the rational to critical and sociocultural perspectives. The traditional rational view of policy as a set of norms to be closely followed and whose outcomes stringently resembling policy goals are then evaluated has shifted to a recognition of policy as a complex process of understanding and enacting norms in different ways. The various modes in which policies are appropriated are linked to different interpretations and contextual factors influencing policy enactments. The comparative, critical, and sociocultural stance that Usma adopts for the study of foreign language learning policy not only recognizes the power of transnational forces in policymaking but also acknowledges the agency of policy actors at different layers of the policy onion (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). This perspective, according to the author, might contribute to more democratic policymaking processes.

The proceeding chapter sets the stage for the analysis by explaining how the economic, political, and cultural facets of globalization pervade education policies in Colombia. In this respect, Usma brilliantly connects the global and the local. He makes clear that, while the focus on education as a priority might seem a noble goal, it draws attention away from other very oppressive issues such as the extreme poverty and insufficient employment in the country. Besides, the NBP might contribute to maintain the privileges of a small group of people who possess the social and cultural capital needed to succeed academically and economically (Bourdieu, 1986), over those who have traditionally been left out of opportunities for a better quality of life.

The research methodology is the focus of chapter four. The study employed a multilevel and comparative vertical case study design which allowed for tracing the path of policymaking in the central offices of the Ministry of Education to local interpretations, adaptations or just disregard in the city administration and schools. The combination of document analysis, interviews, participant observation, and field notes ensures sufficient sources of data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the NBP in its different layers. Noteworthy is the author's engagement in different school activities to aid teachers in developing a sounder curriculum and better language teaching processes while researching policy appropriation during the ethnographic stage of the study.

The subsequent five chapters present the results of the study. Readers looking for a summary of English as a foreign language education policy in Colombia will find chapter five instructive. Usma presents a review of three decades of language policy as well as the four

flaws in the conception of the NBP and its impact, namely: the exclusion of local knowledge in policymaking decisions, the stratification of languages, the instrumentalization of the English language teaching, and the standardization and marketization of foreign language teaching and learning. From the author's analysis, the NBP reproduces a big narrative where English is sold by international organizations to “help” countries develop their human capital and knowledge economy in order to become more competitive in the global market. As the author concludes, this has resulted in “an amalgam of international [borrowed] discourses adopted, adapted and resisted at the local level”.

At this local level, Medellín has grounded its language policies on the ideals of development defined by the local administration. As chapter seven unfolds, the focus on English language teaching came along with the transformation of Medellín into a service-oriented city and the purpose of making it internationally attractive. The history of drug cartels and violence has slowly been replaced by a new facet of innovation and development, with education as a priority. Nevertheless, despite the efforts made by the city administration, evidenced in the investment in education in general and in foreign language in particular, the social inequity still affecting thousands of people reflects a gap between policies and realities. While the language policy is meant for all Colombian students, the unfavorable school environment for foreign language learning in low socioeconomic strata and the harsh living conditions of a great majority of students who experience social exclusion and the inherited urban violence, have a negative impact on their interest, learning, and results.

In chapter eight, Usma provides strong evidence for the economically deprived students' low results in the English section of the 2013 state-applied high school exit exam. Statistical data show a breach in English levels between the rich and the poor in Medellín. While less than 1% of the students living in socioeconomic stratum 1 attain the desired policy target level of B1 or B+, more than 79% of the students in stratum 6 reach this level. The positive correlation between English proficiency and socioeconomic status is clear: the lower the stratum, the lower the level. The author also confirmed the gap between public and private schools found in other studies (e.g., Alonso, Casasbuenas, Gallo, & Torres, 2012).

Within the precarious living conditions lived by students in public schools, teachers appropriate the policy by taking either a nurturing or an academic approach to language teaching. Chapter nine is devoted to explaining these two kinds of policy enactment. Overwhelmed by the difficult lives of their young students, teachers, taking a nurturing approach, focus on building a rich environment that caters to their students' emotional, behavioral, and personal needs. Teaching English mostly becomes raising awareness and building motivation to learn the language, while teachers try to implement new interactive methods that emphasize communication. Although small in number, some teachers adopt an academic perspective, concentrating on students' achievement and contributing to schools'

academic profile. Not surprisingly, the academic-type of appropriation was found in schools located in safer places and having better conditions for learning in general.

The last chapter of the book summarizes the main findings of the study: National language policies respond to international agendas, policy appropriation process at the local level is linked to contextual factors and student needs, and teachers exercise their agency to appropriate policy differently, based on their own judgment of what is best for their students.

In sum, *From Transnational Language Policy Transfer to Local Appropriation: The Case of the National Bilingual Program in Medellín, Colombia* is a great contribution to language policy study as it informs how the NBP was conceived and formulated at the national level, what factors made the city of Medellín plan efforts and implement actions to cater to English language teaching, and what processes teachers follow when appropriating the policy. Two of the great strengths of the book are the links it establishes between the different layers of the language policy onion and the awareness it raises towards factors apparently outside the realm of English language teaching. As a whole, the volume helps us understand the complex processes involved in policymaking, interpretation, and appropriation and it also reminds us that language learning does not happen in isolation; it is an entrenched part of a society as a whole and as such, it benefits from and contributes to its advancements, but it also suffers from its limitations.

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