

Emergence and Development of a Research Area in Language Education Policies: Our Contribution to Setting the Grounds for a Local Perspective on Policymaking

Surgimiento y Desarrollo de un Área de Investigación en Políticas Educativas del Lenguaje: Nuestra Contribución a la Definición de unas Bases para una Perspectiva Local acerca de la Formulación de Políticas

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Abstract

This article presents our narration of the emergence and development of a research area about the teaching and learning of the English language in Colombia and the creation of a research group named Critical Studies of Colombian Education Policies. The narration includes a description of the bilingual education policy in Colombia and a literature review of how the themes *Different Shades of the Colombian National Plan of Bilingualism* and *Theoretical and Practical Concerns over Bilingualism* have been

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addressed by authors of local journals, such as *How*, *Profile*, *Íkala*, and *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, in the issues published from 2008 to 2020. The description and literature review link the life stories of our growth as teachers and researchers as related to the research area and research group mentioned above. A final part of the narration refers to our contributions to the ELT field in Colombia through the following two themes: *Dimensions of Language Policies: A Political Discourse Perspective* and *Making Teachers' Agency Relevant: Bottom-up Approaches to the Study of Language Education Policies*.

Keywords: bilingualism, bilingual education, Colombia, ELT, language policies, political discourse

Resumen

Este artículo presenta nuestra narración del surgimiento y desarrollo de un área de investigación sobre la enseñanza y aprendizaje del idioma inglés en Colombia y la creación de un grupo de investigación denominado Estudios Críticos de Políticas Educativas Colombianas. La narración incluye una descripción de la política de educación bilingüe en Colombia y una revisión de la literatura de cómo los temas *Diferentes Matices del Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo de Colombia* y *Preocupaciones Teóricas y Prácticas acerca del Bilingüismo* han sido abordados por autores de revistas locales, como *How*, *Profile*, *Íkala* y *Revista Colombiana de Lingüística Aplicada*, en los números publicados entre 2008 y 2020. La descripción y revisión de la literatura se vincula con las historias de vida de nuestro crecimiento como docentes e investigadores en relación con el área de investigación y grupo de investigación mencionado anteriormente. Una parte final de la narración se refiere a nuestras contribuciones al campo de ELT en Colombia a través de los siguientes temas *Dimensiones de las Políticas Lingüísticas: Una Perspectiva del Discurso Político* y *Haciendo Relevante la Agencia de los Docentes: Enfoques Bottom-Up para el Estudio de las Políticas Educativas del Lenguaje*.

Palabras clave: bilingüismo, Colombia, educación bilingüe, ELT, discurso político, políticas lingüísticas

Introduction

Policymaking has typically been considered a job of political science with a focus on technocratic top-down decisions and actions. The feelings and thoughts of actors other than decision makers have seldom represented significance in the formulation of public policies. This has been the case of language education policies. It has prompted research agendas with a critical spirit that acknowledges what language teachers have to say and do about programs, plans, and projects that make up policies. Thus, we present here an account of the emergence and development of a research area about language education policies, with special emphasis on the teaching and learning of the English language in the Colombian context.

The contents of this text show firstly, a brief description of the beginnings of the research area that studies public language education policies. Secondly, the themes *Different Shades of the Colombian National Plan of Bilingualism* and *Theoretical and Practical Concerns over Bilingualism* are discussed as the result of a review of research and reflection articles published in the Colombian journals: *How*, *Profile*, *Íkala*, and *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*,

in the period from 2008 to 2020. Thirdly, this manuscript includes our two life stories that relate to our growth as teacher researchers, along with the research area mentioned above, and as the creators of the research group Critical Studies of Colombian Education Policies. Fourthly, the themes *Dimensions of Language Policies: A Political Discourse Perspective* and *Making Teachers' Agency Relevant: Bottom-up Approaches to the Study of Language Education Policies* condense our contributions to the ELT field in Colombia. Finally, concluding remarks close the article.

Milestones of the Beginnings of a Research Area

We would like to start by mentioning a number of milestones that indicate the origin of the research area in question. The analysis of public policies begins to be structured as a discipline, with several theoretical and methodological perspectives, in the mid-twentieth century in contexts other than Colombia (Cuervo, 2010). In Colombia, public policy analysis initially entered the academic agenda in the mid-90s in the context of the 1991 National Constitution. It is a fact that public policies related to language education in Colombia began to be regulated from Article 10 of that Constitution, in which Spanish is presented as the official language in every place of Colombia while local and ethnic languages are official in their own territories, without yet referring to what would later be called foreign languages. Thus, in 1994, the General Law of Education, or Law 115, appears, and in its Article 21, it orders that educational institutions offer the teaching of a foreign language beginning with the primary school level. The term foreign language, for the Ministry of National Education (MEN by its acronym in Spanish), was conceived as synonymous with the English language because, among other things, the conception of bilingualism for the MEN was equivalent to speaking English, not another foreign language. In fact, this concept of bilingualism would later cause controversy and begin to generate criticism from scholars in Colombian universities. In 1999, the MEN issued the “Curriculum Guidelines for Foreign Languages” which kept the concept of English as being the foreign language. In 2004, what was called the “National Bilingualism Program” was launched along with the publication of Guide #22 “Basic Standards of Foreign Language Skills: English” in 2006 with the guidance of the British Council. In 2010, this program was renamed “Program to Strengthen the Development of Skills in Foreign Languages” which later had, in 2013, a strong regulatory support with the issuing of the Bilingualism Law or Law 1651. In 2015, the name changed to “National Program of English: Colombia Very Well!” which is the one that is currently valid. Despite the different denominations of the program, we will always refer to it as the National Bilingualism Program or PNB (by its acronym in Spanish). Simultaneously, with the consolidation of government practices related to bilingualism in Colombia, research agendas have been emerging that have questioned those practices because they are influenced by external factors associated with agreements or impositions, not necessarily linked to education, and based on a neoliberal demand for economic growth to obtain international recognition (Nussbaum, 2012). Those factors occur unidirectionally and are based, among other things, on a desirable “optimum”, i.e., standardization.

The fortunate emergence of research agendas proposed by Colombian teachers as a valid and transformative alternative constitutes an initial emphasis that evolves from the instrumental to the critical in academic works that explore cultural, social, and political issues, within which the theme of educational and linguistic policies is dealt with from a local perspective (cf. Álvarez, 2009; Cárdenas, 2004; Cortés, Cárdenas, & Nieto, 2013). Those agendas have been forging a pluralistic critical community of public policy analysis in different university centers. The challenge of that community has been to understand the reality of political, social, and institutional contexts and to adjust its theoretical models and analysis methodologies to the requirement to move from the adoption of official discourses to the questioning of them.

In the face of this, a critical attitude has been necessary. It is imperative to assign Colombian educational institutions and their actors the central role of knowledge generators. Knowledge that has taken the form of participation in academic forums (for example, ASOCOPI) of publications prepared by Colombian teacher-researchers for Colombian educators, such as in the case of the Colombian journals: *How*, *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal*, *Íkala*, and *Profile*. In a review of the research or reflection articles in those journals in relation to the large category of educational and linguistic policies, in the period from 2008 to 2020, we found that the following two macro themes stand out, under the recurrence criteria: (1) Different Shades of the PNB and (2) Theoretical and Practical Concerns over Bilingualism.

Different Shades of the PNB

The shades that are found within this macro theme are standardization; policymakers' construction of teachers; the teaching and learning of the English language for indigenous populations; and neoliberal ideology in ELT in Colombia.

Standardization

This topic is associated with the implementation of the parameters set up by the Common European Framework of Reference to decide distinct levels of ability in English language proficiency through courses and tests that use uniform patterns of mass application. Standardization is seen as problematic because, for example, for authors such as Sánchez and Obando (2008), standardization should not be the only factor for the effectiveness of PNB and, further, that mainly academic aspects that account for the process, not only the product, of learning processes should be considered. On the other hand, González (2009) argues that the need for certification supplied by models of teacher professional development, such as the In-Service Certificate in English Language Teaching (ICELT) and the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) can represent standardization and inequity due to ignorance of local realities.

Policymakers' Construction of Teachers

The image of teachers in education policy in general is that of clerks similar to those of a factory. Quintero Polo and Guerrero Nieto (2013) argue that the guidelines of the PNB hide a tendency to delegate to teachers the responsibility of the implementation and realization of official agendas, which leads one to think of situations where teachers are forming a group of docile workers in the service of faceless agents or foreigners who occupy the realities of their students and their environments. According to Gómez-Vásquez and Guerrero Nieto (2018), this reality ignores the professional subjectivities of teachers as authorities within their classrooms, as teachers see themselves as adequate and capable professionals when it comes to their knowledge. This knowledge includes not only knowing about the topic they teach, but also knowing who their students are, what their needs are, and how best to serve them.

Teaching and Learning the English Language for Indigenous Populations

For the MEN, English or bilingualism represents capital and as such for them it is worthy of investment, promotion and incentives; contrary to what happens with the Colombian indigenous languages. Usma, Ortiz, and Gutierrez (2018) imply and further assert that despite the fact that in 1991, in the Colombian Constitution, indigenous communities and minority groups were recognized as legitimate Colombian citizens and their languages as official in indigenous territories, the requirement to demonstrate a level of proficiency in the English language for entry or exit of university programs blocks the opportunity for members of indigenous populations to access tertiary education.

Neoliberal Ideology in ELT in Colombia

The PNB is still in force because of the ideological hegemony of neoliberalism. This is explained by Hurie (2018), who assures that although there has been a lot of criticism from Colombian scholars, the PNB, influenced by impositions on a demand for economic growth (such as foreign intervention implicit in free trade agreements) (Valencia, 2013), finds legitimacy in neoliberalism.

Theoretical and Practical Concerns over Bilingualism

After an analysis of the articles found in the journals mentioned above, we found two trends: In search of a definition of bilingualism and implementing bilingualism in real settings.

In Search of a Definition of Bilingualism

There is an interest in trying to define and understand what bilingualism is in the context of the PNB. The first reference we found within the four Colombian journals was the one by Guerrero (2008) in which she set out to uncover the hidden meanings of bilingualism in the handbook “Basic Standards of Foreign Language Skills: English”. By conducting critical discourse analysis, Guerrero (2008) found that bilingualism has been constructed within this document as basically related to speaking English. With this very same aim, another group of scholars has published research reports that explore the views on bilingualism of different members of the school community. Lastra (2009) conducted a focus-groups study to uncover the understandings of bilingualism in her school community. She found that there was a strong relationship between bilingualism and a high number of English classes at school. In this same line of thought, Camargo (2018) and Benavides-Jimenez and Mora-Acosta (2019) attempt to bring to the surface the ways in which teachers understand or define bilingualism. Also, there is yet another set of research which is more of a theoretical nature, but which intends to approach the problem of defining bilingualism, as found by Guerrero (2010) and Miranda Montenegro (2012). This account of articles allows us to see that there is still an interest in trying to define and understand what bilingualism is.

Implementing Bilingualism in Real Settings

In this trend, we grouped the research studies that deal with different takes concerning the actual implementation of the PNB in real settings. Here we found three articles whose goal is to show how to implement CLIL, which in some contexts has come to be equated as the norm to teach content in English. The first piece in this regard is the one by Rodríguez Bonces (2012) that presents a critical exploration of how CLIL is being implemented and proffers four elements needed to achieve bilingualism in Colombian schools. Mancipe Triviño and Ramírez Valenzuela (2019) report on using CLIL to teach natural science in a bilingual school in Colombia. McDougald and Pissarello (2020) conducted a teacher training course on CLIL and concluded that teachers found similarities between CLIL and bilingualism.

In a different take, we found three other research studies that documented experiences in the implementation of bilingual practices in the classroom. Leon and Calderon (2010) conducted a study with teachers of three schools for deaf children, who were bilingual in sign language and written language. The results show the struggles teachers face to teach arithmetic in this bilingual context. Miranda and Echeverry (2010) examined the impact that school infrastructure might have in the implementation (and success) of the bilingual program in some private schools in Cali (Colombia). Ordoñez (2011) shares the results of implementing a bilingual syllabus in a private school and as part of her results, offers the concept of Education for Bilingualism as a counter concept for Bilingual Education. These

studies allow us to see that Colombian scholars are interested in trying out strategies, either ready-made (like CLIL) or self-generated (as the other studies reported here) to try to achieve the goals of the Ministry of Education.

After the account of the origin and development of the research area of the study of language education policies, we deem it important to weave our own life stories as to how we have grown as researchers and mingle with other colleagues in the creation of a research group named Critical Studies of Colombian Education Policies (ESTUPOLI by its acronym in Spanish).

Carmen Helena's Life Story: All Roads Lead to Rome

Prior to creating this line of research, the authors of this article had been engaged in other research projects that, together, we either published or presented at national conferences. The first one was a small-scale study in which we explored the role of two in-service teachers in the development of their undergraduate students' literacy dimensions (Guerrero & Quintero, 2004). Shortly after this, I obtained a Fulbright scholarship to pursue my Ph.D. at the University of Arizona. Right before leaving for the United States, the debate about the implementation of the PNB was really heated and had divided the community of ELT in Colombia between those who fully supported this plan and those who had serious questions about its design. Once I started my doctoral studies, my initial interest was still focused on teacher education. But being aware of the discussions that were taking place in Colombia about the PNB, I switched my interest towards the exploration of some elements of this plan. I decided to undertake a critical discourse analysis of one of the documents produced within the framework of this policy in order to analyze in depth what it meant for Colombia to be "bilingual". As a result of this work, I published a number of articles and gave several talks in Colombia and in other countries. Writing my doctoral dissertation taught me many things about language policies but, more importantly, about the inequities they have brought to many Colombians throughout history.

Upon my return to Colombia, Alvaro and I developed another research project together (Quintero & Guerrero, 2010) in which we aimed at analyzing how a group of student-teachers, enrolled in our classes, made sense of some principles of critical pedagogy while conducting their teaching practicum. This study opened a window into the relevance of listening to teachers' voices regarding education and external aspects that have an incidence in what happens in the classroom; we are aware that many macro-structures intersect not only with teachers practices within the scope of their teaching but also in their personal doings as well. These experiences, plus the interest in language policies infused in me through my doctoral work and the conversations held with teachers enrolled in the master's programs in which I taught (in various public and private universities), set the grounds that led Alvaro

and I to create the research group Critical Studies of Colombian Education Policies whose main interest would be to listen to teachers' conceptions, ideas, fears, positions, among other concerns, in regard to educational policies.

Since then, we have conducted several studies in which we have tried to map out how teachers appropriate, adapt, resist, make sense of, or deal with educational policies. As the result of those studies, we have published a book (Guerrero & Quintero, 2016), articles (Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto, 2013; Guerrero & Quintero, 2021), and have given several national and international talks. This research group has welcomed master students who are interested in working in the same epistemological horizon and their theses have enriched the ways in which we inform our field of study.

Álvaro's Life Story: A Transition to a Social and Critical Outlook as regards the Colombian English Language Policies

In my growth as a professional of, first, English language teaching and, later, of language teacher education, my ideas, beliefs, and practices have been changing. At first, I thought that teaching English was an innocent activity that consisted simply of making linguistic structures known through drilling. Then, as a teacher educator, I naively fell into the "training" models that emphasized the *know-how* (Giroux, 1988) of teaching. They became trendy due to some public policies; for instance, Woodward (1991) or Richards and Lockhart's (1994) models claimed to be reflective and persisted in achieving the "ideal instructor" in technical terms. Aware of the fact that the so-called reflective models failed to lead teachers to create their own voice about their own practice and the factors that controlled them, I encouraged novice teachers' studies to account for educational transformations and situated pedagogical knowledge (Piñeros & Quintero, 2006). This contrasted with traditional training models in which others decided what teachers should do and know (González, Montoya, & Sierra, 2002).

The above routed me to a conception of education as a social practice that demanded problematization beyond the conventional. I also became interested in addressing such a discrepancy between the technical and the human nature of teachers' self-as-teachers and their language pedagogical practices (Quintero, 2012, 2014, 2016). That problematization implied looking beyond the language classroom from a discursive perspective for studying power exertion on teachers' personal, academic, and professional identities. That was how a major issue that subjugated Colombian teachers arose, that of the Colombian English language policies that forced a view of the English language as neutral through some standards and made teachers and students invisible (Guerrero & Quintero, 2009). Consequently, a need to vindicate what teachers had to say and do about themselves and the external factors such as public policies surfaced. Thus, our research needed to be emancipatory and to consider

alternative methods for data collection and analysis (e.g., Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto, 2013; Guerrero & Quintero, 2016). With this initiative as well as not wanting to remain as mere spectators of the Colombian education system, we founded the research group ESTUPOLI.

As the activities of our new research group evolved, new needs appeared. For instance, the field of public policy analysis posed a personal interest that moved me to examine several agendas of elite groups and their tendency to maintain the status quo through political rhetoric that managed to support the powerful by undermining the interests of those who had no power. This was also a major motivation for two further activities: creating an under/graduate course named Political Discourse and Colombian Education, and doing a doctoral dissertation titled Political Discourse in Colombian Education: Study of Power Relations in the Program *La Revolución Educativa* of the Colombian Ministry of Education in the Presidential Period 2002-2010 (Quintero, 2019). Both activities had in common the intention to understand how (political) discourse was created by society, but in turn how (political) discourse created and reconfigured itself through the exercise of symbolic power. The focus was on those in power and their dominant ideologies (van Dijk, 1997) or their discourse and its persuasive function that sought to change the minds of recipients in a way that seemed consistent with their beliefs, intentions, and purposes.

In what follows, our contributions to the ELT field in Colombia will be described and explained under two main themes: (1) Dimensions of Language Policies: A Political Discourse Perspective, and (2) Making Teachers' Agency Relevant: Bottom-up Approaches to the Study of Language Education Policies.

Dimensions of Language Policies: A Political Discourse Perspective

Our research efforts to analyze the Colombian English language policy have opted for an argumentative and interpretive approach. This has been so in order to challenge public policy definitions with an emphasis on the perspective of leaders rather than the perspective of beneficiaries or those affected by government practices. In relation to it, in the field of public policy analysis, attention has been paid to the leaders' works and not to their rhetoric. Consequently, our research initiatives have questioned the fact that the actions of leaders perpetuate a hierarchical model and divert the attention that should be paid to what actors other than government representatives say and do with those actions that regulate their social, cultural, and economic practices. Lasswell (1959) argues that leaders belong to the elite and their rhetoric – words, gestures, codes, symbols, signs, or images – covers up the ideology of an established regime; in other words, the rhetoric or discourse of leaders takes on forms and functions. In terms of forms, we can mention the statements, stories,

or texts that can be grouped into categories of discourse. In terms of functions, we can name inducing, convincing, and legitimizing, among others. Regarding language education policy, our studies prioritize the analysis of how power is resisted or distributed rather than how power is exercised; different from a political tendency that shows, based on test results, the effectiveness of decisions and actions of policymakers, it became possible for us to study political discourse from an alternative approach that brings together an argumentative approach with critical discourse analysis (CDA).

The articulation between power and discourse in language policy analysis corresponds to the political and ideological dimensions in the Colombian education system. We have studied it on the basis of our understanding that critical analysis of social practice (i.e., discourse)—associated with education—focuses on language as a cultural instrument that, in turn, is a mediator of power and privilege relationships in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge (Gee, 1999), and that in the making of public policies, there are relations of power. Normative elements of people's practices that imply the execution of political power of some over others, either in a practical and concrete way or in an abstract and subtle way, denote asymmetry among social actors.

The above statements have demanded from us research alternatives that focus on hybrid designs of an argumentative approach and a critical approach to the study of domination relations from a perspective that is in favor of dominated groups (i.e., English language teachers). This involves taking on non-neutral positions for the examination of the construction, distribution, and consumption of a political discourse that reproduces inequalities among social actors and that goes against the education of sensitive and critical human beings. All this indicates that to analyze political discourse is to engage in social analysis (van Dijk, 2009); in other words, the discursive reproduction of power must be studied not as the power of a person but, rather, as a power that is a constituent part of the power of a social organization.

Making Teachers' Agency Relevant: Bottom-up Approaches to the Study of Language Education Policies

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Our work as members of the ELT community in Colombia, but specially as teacher educators and as researchers, has provided us with rich opportunities to know, first hand, what teachers have to say and do in regard to policymaking, policy implementation, and ways in which policies can be subverted and/or resisted. In the same line of thought, we have learned from teachers' own voices how policies have intersected with their identities, their subjectivities, and their professional beings at large.

HOW

The conversations we have had with teachers along these years, either as participants in our research projects or as graduate and undergraduate students have unveiled for us the multiple dimensions in which they face educational policies. We have seen that many of them are actively engaged in the different events in which the *Secretaría de Educación del Distrito* presents their new policies. To these meetings they bring proposals, make contributions, give ideas that, in their own words, are rarely taken into account; but despite this, they keep on attending, keep on hoping that someday their voices will be heard. We could also give evidence that teachers do really care about their students, they put them first and give prevalence to their human dimension (Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto, 2013; Guerrero & Quintero, 2016, 2021). For teachers, students are not numbers or codes, they are human beings with stories, fears, and dreams. Being a teacher, for them, spans beyond the classroom and beyond the school. They try their best to equip their students to be able to face life, to make good decisions, to fly far and become the better versions of themselves. In the same line of thought, teachers do not blindly follow teaching methodologies but base their practices on their academic preparation as well as on their professional experience. They encompass what Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls situated practice i.e., they are able to pick and choose what is offered by state mandates and adapt the best they can to their own contexts (Guerrero & Quintero, 2021).

In a detour, we have also researched how language (and other educational) policies have intersected with teachers' identities and subjectivities. This has made us understand that in fact, the way policies are brought to the schools do play an influence in the way teachers construct themselves as professionals. In Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto (2013), we conducted a study to explore the intersection between educational policies and teachers' identities and found that in fact teachers had what we called "oscillating identities" meaning that their identities were influenced by policies and constructed intersubjectively. The interest for the intersection between language policies and teachers' subjectivity was the core of a research study conducted from 2016 to 2018 in which we were able to characterize how teachers shaped and reshaped their subjectivities as the result of their interaction with covert or overt language policies that could also be national or institutional (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero-Nieto, 2018).

Being in close contact with teachers has been an enormous privilege for us because it has opened a window into the multilayered ways in which teachers interact with policies, make sense of them, translate them into actual teaching practices and make them work. To us, exploring the issue of language/educational policies from a bottom-up perspective might be one of the most relevant contributions we bring to the ELT field in Colombia, particularly because we have tried to listen carefully to teachers' voices to turn them up, as Aldana (2021) would say.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of public policies of language education has emerged and continues to develop as a research area, but its insertion in government discourse is still incipient, unequal, and ambiguous. The dissonant voices have not been heard and the PNB has gone ahead under different names but with pretty much the same content. To the extent that the studies of this area have a relationship with public entities through direct works, dissemination of their works or consultancies, we hope that the voices of teacher researchers will radiate throughout the government work.

In the meantime, as teacher educators and as researchers we have devoted a great deal of our careers toward unearthing teachers' perspectives, concerns, ideas, doings, practices, beliefs, and so on to serve as amplifiers of their ways of dealing with educational and language policies. Along this path, we have inspired and been inspired by other colleagues, teachers, and students aiming at promoting a bottom-up approach as regards the study of language policy hoping that at some point these voices and the official ones will meet mid-way.

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