



The National Bilingualism Plan (PNB) and the Challenge of Internationalization in Colombia: Background and Perspectives

El Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB) y el reto de la internacionalización en Colombia: Antecedentes y Perspectivas

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ABSTRACT. This article intends to analyze the interdependence between the National Bilingualism Plan of Colombia and the challenge of internationalization of higher education in the country, as public policies that aim to improve the quality of education at different levels. The first focuses on strengthening the teaching of foreign languages in primary, basic, and secondary education; the latter, in higher education with the promotion of regional and global agreements for the recognition of studies, titles, and diplomas to promote access to greater academic and cultural opportunities for students, which would contribute to the economic development and the insertion of the country in the global context in a competitive manner. It aims to understand the challenge of internationalization and its deep connection with economic globalization and to establish its link with the teaching of foreign languages and the promotion of bilingualism. The National Bilingualism Plan and the development of the learning of foreign languages in Colombia are explored, and then the disconnection between both programs as a possible cause of the truncated development of bilingualism in the country is analyzed.

Keywords: Education; bilingualism; internationalization; national bilingualism plan; bilingual education.

RESUMEN. Este artículo pretende analizar la interdependencia entre el Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo de Colombia y el reto de la internacionalización de la educación superior en el país, como políticas públicas que buscan mejorar la calidad de la educación en diferentes niveles. El primero se enfoca en el fortalecimiento de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en la educación primaria, básica y media; el segundo, en la educación superior con la promoción de acuerdos regionales y globales para el reconocimiento de estudios, títulos y diplomas que promuevan el acceso a mayores oportunidades académicas y culturales para los estudiantes, lo que contribuiría al desarrollo económico y a la inserción del país en el contexto global de manera competitiva. Pretende comprender el desafío de la internacionalización y su profunda conexión con la globalización económica y establecer su vínculo con la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras y la promoción del bilingüismo. Se explora el Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo y el desarrollo del aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en Colombia, para luego analizar la desconexión entre ambos programas como posible causa del truncado desarrollo del bilingüismo en el país.

Palabras clave: educación; bilingüismo; internacionalización; Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo; enseñanza bilingüe.

Introduction

Nowadays, worldwide, we are still immersed in an evident, prevailing reality, probably unstoppable since the 1980s, called globalization, which has exerted a great influence on higher education, as well as in all other aspects of the lives of the countries. This social, political, economic, and cultural phenomenon is characterized by an increasingly integrated global economy, where new information and communication technologies predominate in all human activities, and the existence of an extensive network of international knowledge, in addition to the dominance of the English language. All the aforementioned factors are beyond the control of academic institutions. Thus, one of the challenges that arise to respond to this situation in higher education is internationalization, which seeks to meet the demands of globalization and is made up of all the policies and programs that universities and governments implement in the face of the global challenge (Altbach et al. (2009), cited by de Wit, 2009).

On the other hand, economic globalization and the internationalization of the economy on a world scale have managed to break through all fields of society, which constitutes a paradox since it shows that the contradictions of democratic systems such as equality, equity, social justice, the eradication of poverty and illiteracy, lack of opportunities, unemployment, etc. derive from those economic policies and investments that national states develop for improving their societies so that they are more competitive and innovative, pushing to respond to the requirements of international policies in a globalized world (Martínez, 2014).

In the context of globalization, we have been able to witness how education has also been subject to transnationalization, internationalization, privatization, and foreign investment, distinctive actions of free market economies. Therefore, the educational indicators became an imposed condition intended to measure and evaluate the learning processes in schools, universities, and other educational institutions, in quantitative terms. In other words, it is a quality control-imposed policy that operates based on measurable, observable, and quantifiable indicators that conform to international quality standards, mostly

homogenizing and coming from the countries of the North (G-7) towards the countries of South America (Martínez, 2014).

The widespread use of new information and communication technologies, the creation of international knowledge networks and the global use of the English language have inevitably influenced the teaching and learning processes of higher education, regardless of the control of institutions and states. In response to globalization, universities and governments have developed a set of policies and programs known as internationalization (Altbach et al, 2009). According to López (2018), an additional trait of globalization consistent with the existence of internationalization is the increasing mobility of people, goods, and services, which goes hand in hand with the widespread use of new information and communication technologies across the globe.

According to the International Association of Universities (2012, cited by López, 2018), internationalization constitutes a process in continuous evolution subject to social changes in every context, and highlights globalization as the contextual aspect that most significantly influences internationalization processes currently, since it is characterized by the correlation between countries and is reflected in the cultural, political, economic, social, and academic dimensions. We can affirm that globalization marks processes of change in local contexts that condition international relations in the different activities and fields of exchange between countries.

Therefore, we can affirm there is a complex relationship between internationalization and globalization. According to van Vught et al. (2002), in reality and in the field of perceptions, internationalization is closer to the old tradition of cooperation and international mobility, based on the principles of quality and excellence in education, while globalization is more connected to competitive relations, hence, in globalization, higher education is perceived as a commercial product, mostly private that “challenges the concept of higher education as a public good” (p.17). In the age of globalization, education starts losing its core as a human right and becomes a service to which only those who can pay have access.

Thus, Romero and Sánchez (2022) claim that from a decolonizing vision of internationalization and away from the market demands imposed by globalization, it is important to conceive education as a public

good, understood as a human right, which as such must be exercised and guaranteed for all people regardless of their economic capacities, location, ethnic origin, gender, that is, following all the criteria for including education as a right.

In other words, governments must consider this type of policy from a perspective that prioritizes the objectives of educational systems that favor the education needs of people regardless of socioeconomic circumstances and extend the right to education to policies such as internationalization so that their *raison d'être* and their development are not defined exclusively by the forces of globalization, but that it gives governments control over the decision-making and influence in them to favor their population.

If internationalization in higher education is defined as the process that seeks to incorporate an international, intercultural, or global dimension within its objectives and goals, the functions, and the exercise of post-secondary education for improving the quality of education and research, it has the participation of students and teachers, researchers, and administrators, that is, the entire educational community (de Wit and Altbach, 2021). In addition, it is expected that internationalization will go beyond its contribution to society, i.e., that it will serve a social function in institutions, thereby becoming, not only a means but also an objective that strengthens the educational system in terms of coverage and quality.

Likewise, authors such as de Wit and Altbach (2021), advocate for higher education institutions to find a balance between the global profile and the conservation of national identity through an understanding of their own culture, history, and possibilities in the future. This would be the basis for institutions to position and adapt themselves globally in a diverse world (MEN, 2022).

Even so, internationalization as a public policy only contemplates higher education, which includes several lines of action: internationalization abroad, meaning the mobility of people, institutions, services, and policies; internationalization at home including the internationalization of the curriculum, the creation of an academic community, research, and extension; cooperation networks and strategic alliances in search of knowledge generation.

On the other hand, it is remarkable how digital technology supports internationalization to establish virtual mobility, COIL projects (collaborative online international learning), mirror classes, etc. (MEN, 2022). In fact, technology has promoted internationalization, thanks to information and communication technologies many people have benefited from remote education, investigative networks, events, etc. As we could see in the confinements due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, many higher education institutions managed to get their educational communities to maintain their work virtually.

Among the other benefits of the internationalization of higher education is that it offers new components to the curricula aligned with international standards; and manages to improve institutional management and identity given the need to enter global contexts. Additionally, it benefits teaching-learning processes, research, and extension processes by projecting internationally. It also increases the value of educational proposals; it promotes the development of international and intercultural skills in a global context for the citizens of the twenty-first century. By raising the demand, human talent in training becomes more competent at a global level; the academic mobility of students and professors gets improved; permanent interaction and recognition in the international academic community are achieved, all of which leads to the academic, economic, and social development of the country (MEN, 2022).

There are political, economic, academic, cultural, and social justifications for asserting that internationalization plays a significant role in the development of educational institutions. Higher education contributes to the global positioning of the country from a political standpoint, therefore, incentives such as scholarships awarded to students are appreciated as a “political investment” that reverts gains to institutions in terms of knowledge and empathy (Guido & Guzmán, 2012).

In addition, internationalization provides economic benefits to universities that accept international students, whose payments generate profits that enable the universities to develop other projects in the institutions. Regarding academic reasons, thanks to internationalization, high international academic standards are acquired in terms of teaching, research, and social action, which, in turn, have a positive impact on the national and international accreditation and recognition

processes. Institutions also implement strategies to strengthen teaching and learning and therefore increase the quality of education (Guido & Guzmán, 2012).

The appreciation of the national culture and language in addition to the foreign ones is influenced by cultural and social factors. When internationalization is established as a transversal axis of a curriculum, however, the languages and values of other cultures must be considered with tolerance, as well as their own, i.e., the tasks of representing, strengthening, and projecting their own culture abroad. Therefore, the issue of national and cultural identity becomes relevant since the history of a country, its different cultures, its resources, and its values condition its response and the quality of its relations with other countries (López, 2018).

English Proficiency as Part of the Internationalization Process

The significance of communicative competence in foreign languages has been widely recognized as a determining factor in the internationalization processes of educational institutions. Given its predominant role as the lingua franca, communicative proficiency in the English language is primarily recognized. This concept refers to a method of communication between speakers of different mother tongues. Firth (1996) defines it as the contact established between the languages of people who do not share a native language or a national culture and for whom English is the foreign language chosen to communicate.

In addition, an important mission of education is to prepare people to interact, cooperate, and collaborate effectively in a globalized world, where there is an undeniable advance in information and communication technologies, an increase in mass migration, and changes in the educational discourse where learning of “values related to globalization and highlighting the role of communication skills and interpersonal relationships” are prioritized (Gacel-Avila, 2017, p.45).

The development of language proficiency and a global perspective during higher education enables individuals to better adapt to new

circumstances and function in the global community. This difficulty also represents a greater emphasis, effort, and regulation of foreign language instruction in higher education, particularly English. Thus, the importance of having proficiency in English for students who participate in international educational processes and professionals from all areas of knowledge is not only based on internationalization, according to España (2010):

In the specific case of English, valued as a key ingredient and in growing demand due to the omnipresent globalization and technological revolution that surrounds us; the very expression of the economic and social system of the contemporary Western world, the modernization processes and their link with mass media, and the incidence of these processes in industrialized society, which influences educational, social, economic and politics of our countries (p. 64).

English is the vernacular used in the mass media, in social networks, on the Internet, in businesses that serve the entire global population.

Similarly, the social and economic development of a country depends in part on the educational policies and practices it establishes, therefore students who intend to enter the labor market must meet the requirements of managing their disciplinary knowledge and training in a second language. This training will provide them with a competitive professional profile, the result of a comprehensive curricular vision such as that demanded by socioeconomic development to face globalization (España, 2010).

On the other hand, according to Gutiérrez et al. (2010), even though statistics show it is not the language with the largest number of native speakers in the world, English is spoken in 75 countries by two billion people, 400 million as their first language and 750 million as a second language. Regarding the field of education, it has positioned itself with the British Council, which in 2002 had offices in 109 countries, to promote cultural, educational, and technical cooperation: in addition to the administration of international exams, taken by 400,000 candidates.

Currently, the command of English as a second language no longer constitutes an added value but, on the contrary, has become a linguistic competence that people must develop to integrate effectively and efficiently into the new dynamics of the world, which were defined by UNESCO as globalization, understood as the result of a social and

therefore educational transformation, impacted by the opening of markets and technological development as a result of globalization (España, 2010).

If a country wishes to participate in the academic, social, cultural, political, and commercial dynamics of the international community, its citizens must be proficient in English. This need relegates the first language, as well as its communicative competence, especially in Latin America, a region considered to be developing and that follows the vision and development models of the first world hegemons. The MEN (Ministry of National Education) in Colombia reaffirms the commitment of the national government to strengthen Colombia's strategic position in the world, within the framework of free trade agreements, cultural globalization, and the development of the knowledge society, and to promote the development of communication skills in a second language (Soto & Martínez, 2018).

To review the problem of proficiency in English as a second language, the English Proficiency Index conducted by Education First (2021) is used to measure the skills of countries in this language through an online exam that evaluates the abilities of listening and reading; however, writing and speaking are not assessed. The qualification classifies those who take it into one of the six levels established by the Common European Framework of Reference (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2), and this scale goes ascending from A1 to C1.

In 2023, the level of English as a second language was assessed in 113 countries on five continents, and thirteen countries, all European, had a very high level. First place was obtained by the Netherlands. At a high level, there are 18 countries, mostly European except for Kenya (position 19), Hong Kong (position 29), the Philippines (position 20), and Argentina (position 28). At the medium level, there are 26 countries, divided between Asia, a few Europeans (Spain and Italy), Latin America (10 countries, Costa Rica with the highest, position 38), and Africa. At a low level, are 27 countries from Asia, Latin America (Colombia with one of the lowest score, position 75), and Africa. At a very low level, there are 25 countries from Africa and Asia, and Mexico is the only Latin American country, in position 92. Yemen obtained the lowest score with position 112 (Education First, 2023).

In contrast, in Europe, only 2% of countries have a very high level of English, including Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Germany. It is obvious the most developed countries are the ones with the highest scores, while the developing countries obtain the lowest, which allows us to conclude that there is a proportional relationship between the level of English proficiency and the degree of economic development of each country (Education First, 2023).

Bilingualism as Educational Policy

Several Latin American countries have made reforms to their educational systems and have formulated policies associated with strengthening the English language, to increase their levels of competitiveness in the international context and attract more foreign investment. Some examples of this are Chile, Mexico, Colombia, and Costa Rica, which have promoted programs such as the Open Doors English Program (Chile), National Program of English for Basic Education (Mexico), Multilingual Costa Rica, and National Bilingualism Plan (Colombia). The purpose of these projects has been mainly the promotion of English learning throughout the educational system, which begins in basic primary education, in the public and private sectors (Correa et al., 2014).

UNESCO (1989) for its part, proposed three modalities for bilingual education. First, in rural schools, where teachers instruct in the children's indigenous mother tongue of children, certain contents will be presented in Spanish in the future. On the other hand, it proposes the development of curricula in the mother tongue and in the second language to help students acquire proficiency in both languages. The report concludes with a proposal to work on a planned educational process that preserves both languages and cultures, working on content from both cultures to guarantee the preservation of the mother tongue.

It is false that language study is a legal requirement in Colombia. This goal is influenced by a variety of factors relating to regional development gaps, as well as the socioeconomic condition and the cultural and educational level of the families, which can enhance or delay the learning processes of the foreign language (Soto & Martinez, 2018).

On the other hand, bilingualism's position as one of the measurable indicators in the educational field is undeniable, both as a communicative competence for mastering and acquiring a second language and as a categorical requirement for the positioning of students and teachers in the global market and in scenarios of international competitiveness of scientific research and innovation in a second language (Martínez & Álvarez, 2014).

The National Bilingualism Plan Background, Characteristics and Objectives

Consequently, the Colombian government established the National Bilingualism Plan (PNB, for its initials in Spanish) aimed at strengthening the teaching and learning of foreign languages in Preschool, Basic and Secondary Education to guarantee comprehensive training, the development of citizen skills in globality and the twenty-first century, and promote cultural, academic, social and professional opportunities for students consistent with educational institutions and regions (SED, 2019), and beyond promoting a "bilingual Colombia", seeks to highlight the existence of cultural and linguistic wealth in the country, so that it becomes a multilingual and multicultural one, which already has native and creole languages, but that at the same time is open to the construction of global citizenship through foreign languages (SED, 2019).

In the Spanish-speaking world, the promotion of bilingualism in educational systems is a relatively new initiative. In the nineties of the 20th century, this trend emerged in Colombia as a result of the country's economic opening policy, which implied a complete reversal in international relations, in which foreign languages, particularly English were given increased value.

Previously, bilingual education had been a privilege of the ruling classes, who had access to prestigious languages and cultures through the training provided in international bilingual schools where English was the majority language of instruction (de Mejía, 2002). Moreover, in a world trending toward globalization, the relations between different cultures, even when they were connected through the new

information and communication technologies, did not present conditions of equality and mutual benefit, clearly some cultures maintained a dominant position and their world vision and language spread from a hegemonic conception of Western thought as universal. Particularly, the conception of North American culture, and therefore, the English language became the medium that transmitted the cultural products of that society and made it possible to subordinate other cultures (Siguán, 2001).

Thus, the selection of languages in academic fields responded to political, economic, and cultural demands that coincided with the adoption of English as a language of international use, which established it as the predominant language in the world.

In the final quarter of the twentieth century, an international process began to pressure on governments of Europe to establish the English for Everyone (EFE) program into school curricula, which benefited the large publishers. English in the international market, including Blackwell, Cambridge University Press, Longman, Macmillan, Oxford University Press, and Routledge, and their offerings of language titles such as grammar books, dictionaries, textbooks, videos, etc. (Tavré, 2014). Thus, the promotion of the English language benefited businesses that produce pedagogic materials and satisfied the cultural requirements of nations that desired to integrate into the globalized world.

In the Colombian case, the language policies that preceded the National Bilingualism Program date back to the Colony, after independence from Spain when the new ruling elite sent their children to study in Europe, which was accompanied by the importation of books in French, German, and English. Later, in 1934, the Tunja School of Education was inaugurated, where the professional teaching of foreign languages began to be included, extending to the curricula of Colombian educational institutions (Cárdenas, 2018).

In 1979, the compulsory education of English in grades 6 and 7, and French for grades 10 and 11 were implemented. It is also essential to mention the COFE (Colombian Framework for English) which was developed in teacher training programs at some universities in the country between 1991 and 1996, in collaboration between the United Kingdom and the MEN. This project was completed despite some obstacles, such as limited resources, the lack of experience of the

teachers in research, and the absence of leadership among the program coordinators (Cárdenas, 2018).

Starting in 1994 with the General Law of Education, the emphasis on bilingualism in school curricula began a period of greater institutional and official presence, which formulated, for the elementary school level, learning of elements of conversation and reading in at least one foreign language, and in the secondary school an understanding and ability to express oneself in a foreign language were expected. The humanities, Spanish language and foreign languages were also established as compulsory and fundamental areas. In 1997, the Ministry of National Education announced the creation of the National Bilingualism Program, designed to extend the proficiency of English in the official schools of the country (Truscott, 2006).

In 2005, the Ministry of National Education formulated the National Bilingualism Program 2004-2019, which was part of the five actions of the education sector aimed at achieving innovation, competitiveness, and peace with the objective of “having competent citizens to communicate in English, with internationally comparable standards, that insert the country in the processes of universal communication, in the global economy and in cultural openness” (MEN, 2006, p. 12). Also, it was proposed as a commitment to respond to a bilingual environment, improve national competitiveness, and promote, and protect the use of other languages in ethnic, racial and border populations. It also adopted the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, which allowed the adoption of the proficiency standards of 17 languages and constituted a reference framework for choosing foreign language teaching methods with a multilingual and multicultural vision (MEN, 2006).

Subsequently, the Colombia Bilingual Program 2014-2018 was established to strengthen the teaching and learning processes of English in basic and secondary education in the country. In its implementation, it achieved equity goals in the learning of English and an increase in the bilingualism indicator, which is measured with the State Test (Prueba SABER). The Ministry of National Education prepared the suggested English curriculum for secondary, then for transition and primary, based on the standards document and other documents that had been made for the construction of programs and best practices in

English teaching and learning. From the suggested curriculum, a series of textbooks for grades 6, 7, and 8 were published, which included teaching methods that promoted the use of twenty-first century strategies (SED, 2019).

Unfortunately, the country's lagging status in terms of bilingualism has been confirmed (Télez and Langebaek, 2015; Martínez, 2015), making it difficult to develop an international curriculum (Jaramillo, 2003; Salmi, 2015). Despite the government's efforts with the PNB. Other authors (Prieto, Valderrama and Allain-Muñoz, 2015) believe that the model of the plan and the proposed standards do not correspond to the requirements of the Colombian context and were copied from other nations.

The Disarticulation between the Requirements of Internationalization and the PNB

In reality, we can demonstrate that failures in learning a foreign language have a negatively impact the quality of education in a globalized context given that learning English complements and is of vital importance in professional training, and people's careers, since it is a demand of the world labor market. In other words, the teaching of English contributes to and unifies the criteria of quality and internationalization in world education (España, 2010).

Therefore, to ensure the quality of teaching English as a second language, it is necessary to have the official support of a public policy. According to España (2010), the social and economic development of a country is closely linked to the educational policies and practices that its government defines, so that people who wish to join the labor market professionally and receive an education with disciplinary knowledge and training in a second language, can have a competitive profile. This is the product of a comprehensive curricular vision that responds to the demands of the current socioeconomic context to face globalization.

The effective learning of a foreign language as a condition for the success of the internationalization process is a process that is

frequently truncated; Roldán (2016) ensures that the factors that hinder the learning of English are the lack of resources, which the state must provide, the deficient training of teachers; culturally decontextualized texts for students; and also considering the foreign language just a subject and not a means of communication. And all of the above cause tension in the classroom. Not to mention the lack of interest of the students, the outdated materials and the little personalized attention given to the students. To achieve effective learning, it is required to have a calm environment, devoid of elements that generate stress and anxiety and that favor learning.

We can affirm that a very similar phenomenon occurs in basic and secondary education in public schools, the target population of the PNB, despite the efforts made by the program to solve it in its different lines of action. They have tried to train teachers, and the results in international tests have improved, but there are still very low rates of English proficiency among teachers, as well as among students, and those who enter universities are already lagging for students that come from private schools. Also, they have created a series of downloadable materials at colombiaprende.edu.co in addition to the same printed books that have been sent to some schools, but their use is not widespread. And finally, the large number of students in groups in public schools also hinders effective learning.

While it is true that some public universities have achieved results thanks to academic rigor, private ones are still at the forefront, as Alzate and Galarza (2022) affirm:

Even so, in Colombia, some public universities go hand in hand with private ones without the same resources and it is evidenced in the effectiveness of their programs when students take standardized tests. Their English levels usually reach the B2 standard (Intermediate-Advanced English) with greater rigor, for example, the scores of the National University of Colombia, the Francisco José de Caldas District University, and the private Pontificia Universidad Javeriana de Bogotá and University of Los Andes demonstrate who are the ones who lead bilingual education at a higher level in Colombia (p. 18).

Thus, effective teaching plays an important role in the success of the results of some students in those exams.

Recommendations

In Colombia, the PNB (National Bilingualism Plan) would serve as an initial bridge if it had high standards and quality results, it would facilitate learning processes in higher education, which could facilitate the process of internationalization of higher education, reducing large financial costs and efforts on the part of all the actors in the process.

To comply with the high standards required to succeed, the government should really increase the hours of instruction in the curriculum from the first levels of formal education upwards. Also, it is important to strengthen assessment that is tracked over time by adjusting evaluation for all students at entrance and exit with exams that assess communication and language skills in the foreign language.

Concerning teachers, the bilingual policy should focus on their command of the language by implementing mandatory training at different stages and according to their individual needs, paying special attention to all new teachers, not only English, and their initial training in the language. Experienced teachers should also be retrained and assessed consistently to reinforce their skills and update their methods. Besides, resources, new information and communication technologies, internet connection and proper maintenance should be handed in timely for educators to work with them.

In addition, the government should provide more assistance to higher education institutions to strengthen their foreign language learning processes in the various faculties of public universities. These institutions should be provided with a sufficient budget to meet the needs for hiring English teachers; resources, including new information and communication technologies for teaching and learning a second language, equipment, and appropriate educational media.

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