

Teaching English to Young Learners in Colombia: Policy, Practice and Challenges

Anne-Marie de Mejía Ph.D
Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia

Abstract

This article discusses the impact of a recent policy initiative, the *National Bilingual Programme*, aimed at helping all high school and university graduates in Colombia reach an acceptable level of English language proficiency at the end of their studies. After an initial overview of key developments in language and education policy over the last 200 years, there is a review of the current state of the teaching and learning of English in public elementary schools, as evidenced in recent research. This indicates that, although the bilingual policy covers all grade levels from elementary to high school, resources are concentrated mainly in the upper grades and therefore, primary school teachers suffer from a lack of opportunity to develop their expertise. The article concludes with a recommendation to value the voices of elementary school teachers in processes of decision taking to improve teaching of English to their young learners.

En este artículo se discute el impacto de una iniciativa reciente, *El Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo*, cuyo objetivo es ayudar a todos los graduados de los programas de bachillerato y de educación superior en Colombia a alcanzar un nivel aceptable de inglés al final de sus estudios. Después de una visión general de acontecimientos claves en las políticas lingüísticas y educativas durante los últimos 200 años, se presenta un análisis del estado actual de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del idioma inglés en los colegios públicos de nivel primaria, con base en los resultados de investigaciones recientes. El análisis indica que, aunque la política bilingüe abarca todos los niveles desde primaria hasta bachillerato, los recursos se concentran principalmente en el nivel de secundaria y por lo tanto, los profesores de primaria no tienen oportunidad de desarrollar sus habilidades de enseñanza. El artículo concluye con una recomendación: valorar las voces de los profesores de primaria en los procesos de toma de decisiones enfocados en el mejoramiento de la enseñanza del inglés a los alumnos de primaria.

Introduction

In contrast to the situation in most European countries, where the education system is mainly concerned with state or public education, Colombia has a strong tradition of private educational initiatives. Places in the state system are extremely limited in relation to demand so middle and upper middle class families generally decide to enroll their sons and daughters in private schools, which are often classed as bilingual. As Tomasovski (2004) notes,

In Colombia state investment in education is equal to private (investment); both represent nearly 4% of the GDP [Gross Domestic Product]...Nearly 30% of pupils are at private schools at primary level, 45% at secondary level and 75% in higher education. (p. 9)

According to figures released by the Ministry of Education in 2007, there are currently 15,723 public primary and secondary schools and 10,812 private schools in the country.

This article provides an overview of how initiatives within the recent *National Bilingual Programme* policy have affected the teaching of English at primary (elementary) school level in public schools in Colombia, a sector traditionally excluded from the successful development of English-Spanish bilingualism associated with the private sector. After a historical review of key events in the progress of languages within the Colombian educational system there will be a discussion of the current state of English Language Teaching (ELT) at public primary schools as detailed in recent research studies. Finally, there will be an assessment of positive and negative features of this initiative and a consideration of ways forward for the future.

The National Bilingual Programme was initiated by the Ministry of Education (MEN) in 2004 with the aim of offering all students in Colombia the possibility of becoming bilingual in English and Spanish, because, hitherto, as noted above, access to bilingualism had been the privilege of students in private schools catering for the higher socio-economic strata. According to the Ministry, "to be bilingual means to have more knowledge and opportunities to be competent and competitive and to improve the quality of life of all Colombians" (Al Tablero, 2005, p. 3).

Thus, the main objective of the National Bilingual Programme is:

To have citizens who are capable of communicating in English, in order to be able to integrate the country within processes of universal communication, within the global economy and cultural openness, through [the adopting of] internationally comparable standards. (MEN, 2006, p. 6)

As part of this policy, a document entitled *Basic Standards of Foreign Language Competences: English*, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), was drawn up in 2006. The idea was to adopt a common language in which to establish levels of language performance throughout the different stages of schooling. The CEFR was considered suitable as a model because it has been widely researched in the European context.

According to the Ministry of Education (2005), traditionally less than 1% of the population reaches a level of proficiency in English which allows them to understand and write different types of texts, express themselves fluently, or be able to achieve their social and professional goals through English. The need to do this is seen as related to the development of a social competitive capacity and a personal advantage relating to competence and competitiveness.

Bearing in mind the above, it can be seen that the National Bilingual Programme's aims are quite ambitious. The idea is that by 2019 (the commemoration of the second centenary of independent political life in Colombia) 100% of school graduates will reach a B1 standard (according to the scales of the CEFR, see following section for an explanation of these levels). Moreover, the goal is that all teachers of English in the public school system and all university graduates will reach a B2 level.

One of the big differences between previous formulations of language and education policies by the Ministry of Education in Colombia and the National Bilingual Programme is that for the first time, English language teaching and learning is a State policy (*Política de Estado*). As one of the advisors in the Department of Bilingualism at MEN, Rosa María Cely (2007) acknowledges,

For the first time English is State policy. [Before] there was not an established programme in the Ministry. There were only isolated strategies depending on who was there. Now, the programme will continue, independently of who will be the next government. (par. 32)

The Development of Bilingualism in Colombia

Although the National Bilingual Programme is a recent initiative, which is specifically directed to the development of Spanish-English bilingualism, bilingualism and multilingualism in indigenous languages have had a long history in Colombia. The plurilingual composition of Colombian society has been in evidence since the 15th Century and even today there are around 65 separate indigenous languages in existence, as well as two native Creoles, Colombian Sign Language and Romani. In the constitutional reform of 1991, the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country was officially recognised for the first time and indigenous languages were awarded co-official status in the territories where they are spoken (Title 1, Article 7, Article 10; Title XI, Article 286-287) (2). A policy of Ethnoeducation, sponsored by the Ministry of Education for the minority communities in Colombia, promotes the notion of, "a permanent social process of reflection and collective construction, by means of which the Indian communities would strengthen their autonomy within an intercultural framework" (Trillos, 1998, p.73).

During the period of the colonisation of Colombia, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Spanish was the principal language of education for the indigenous communities. Similarly, educational provision for the descendants of the Spanish settlers was in the hands of the Catholic missionaries who followed in the wake of the *conquistadores* (conquerors). Most schools were private and the languages taught were mainly Latin, Greek and Spanish. The sons and daughters of the wealthy were sent to study abroad, in France and England, and on their return, promoted the spread of these languages in the country, particularly French, which was considered the language of culture and society (Zuluaga, 1996).

Following independence from Spain in 1810, the *Escuelas de Primeras Letras* (First Letters Schools) were set up, based on liberal principles derived from the French Revolution. These later became primary schools. Then, the *Escuelas Superiores de Artes Liberales* (Higher Schools for the Liberal Arts) were established at secondary level.

After the Second World War, English became the most important foreign language in Colombia, due to economic expansion, social, political and economic influence and the technological development of the United States. It was taught at secondary school level, alternating with the use of French. Thus, in 1979, after a visit by the Colombian president to France, a decree was issued, making English compulsory for Grades 6 and 7 and French mandatory for Grades 10 and 11,

with a free choice of either English or French in Grades 8 and 9. As a report compiled by the British Council (1989) reveals,

The Colombian Ministry of National Education has no firm foreign language policy for the secondary school curriculum...concerning the place of English and French, with decisions being made as a result of political pressures rather than educational considerations. (p. 7)

In practice, most schools chose to teach English for four years and French for two, with an intensity of three hours per week at all levels, except the final two years, when foreign languages were taught for two hours.

More recently, with the General Education Law (1994) foreign languages were introduced at primary school level, usually in Third Grade Primary, and it was stated that at this level attention should be focused on: "The acquisition of elements of conversation and reading in at least one foreign language" (Article 21, m). Although no particular foreign language is specified by law, most institutions have adopted English.

As noted above, the publication of the *Basic Standards of Foreign Language Competences: English* envisages "the integrated gradual development of the language throughout the different levels of education" (MEN, 2006, p. 10). Thus, the levels have been grouped together from Grade 1 Primary onwards (see Table 1) in accordance with the desired levels of proficiency on the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR, see full description in Appendix A).

Table 4: Grade levels and expected CEFR proficiency levels

Grades 1-3	Beginner	A1
Grades 4-5	Basic 1	A2.1
Grades 6-7	Basic 2	A2.2
Grades 8-9	Pre Intermediate 1	B1.1
Grades 10-11	Pre Intermediate 2	B1.2

Each of the five levels has descriptors relating to the areas of listening, reading, writing, monologues and conversation. In addition, each descriptor is characterised as referring to linguistic competence, pragmatic competence or sociolinguistic competence (or all three). To give an example, by the end of primary school (Grade 5) students should be able to:

1. Read and understand simple authentic texts about concrete events associated with cultural traditions that I know (birthdays, Christmas, etc)
2. Write short texts which describe my state of mind and my preferences
3. Politely greet according to the age and status of my interlocutor

As can be noted, each of these descriptors is not only concerned with grammatical accuracy but also with sociolinguistic appropriacy.

For many schools, particularly inner city schools or country schools, these types of competences are new and demanding. In spite of calls since the 1980s to implement a communicative vision of language teaching and learning, many

schools still promote a formal, grammatical approach to English teaching. As Silvia Valencia (2005, p. 13) has noted, "Previous research has demonstrated how despite language policy reforms, traditional pedagogical orientations in ELT (e.g. Grammar Translation) still prevail. This observation has been confirmed in this study."

In addition, many of the teachers who have worked in the public school system for many years have not done well on the Ministry of Education tests based on the CEFR scales. In fact, the majority of those tested in the different regions of Colombia fall into the A1 and A2 ranges, as shown in Table 2.

Language level	Number of teachers per level	Percentages
A1	2,476,68	22%
A2	3,660,66	34%
B1	3,367,04	30%
B1+	1,559,48	14%
Total	11,063,86	100%

Table 5: Teachers' Language Levels (Adapted from Ministry of Education, 2008)

These figures do not differentiate between teachers who teach English at secondary school (high school) level and those who teach at primary school. However, there is evidence from a recent study carried out with 552 teachers in the country (Romero Medina, 2009) that the situation of primary school teachers is dramatic in terms of their low English language proficiency, as current educational policy is to concentrate resources at high school level.

The Ministry has taken a series of measures aimed at improving teachers' proficiency in English as well as helping them to analyse how to implement the English Standards in their particular contexts. Among these are English immersion workshops carried out in different parts of the country, particularly in the Caribbean island of San Andrés, where the native Islander population speak Standard English as well as Creole, English language courses offered by the local education authorities, and a teacher development programme sponsored by MEN.

The Current State of ELT in Public Primary Schools in Colombia

Although the Ministry of Education has not carried out studies specifically on the development of English in primary schools, there is some evidence of developments in different parts of the country, particularly in Medellín (in the northwest of the country), in Neiva (in the south) and in Bogotá.

In Medellín, a group of researchers at the Universidad de Antioquia conducted an ethnographic study in seven public elementary schools in the city to establish by means of observation, document analysis, and teacher interviews the relationship of teachers' methodological principles and practices. It was found that the 12 English teachers who participated in the project all held Bachelor of Education

degrees: five in elementary or preschool education, four in areas such as Spanish, Math, and Social Studies, and three in foreign languages. However, the latter had had no training in teaching English at primary school level (Cadavid, McNulty, & Quinchia, 2004; Quinchia & Cadavid, 2006). Hence, none of the 12 teachers had received training specifically for teaching English for younger learners. This situation is fairly typical of randomly-selected urban public school teachers at the present time.

One of the findings from this study was that most of the class periods were spent on organisational or affective activities, which were generally carried out in Spanish. As the authors noted, "Teachers tend to use the target language only when presenting a topic or reviewing vocabulary with children in class" (Cadavid et al., 2004, p. 42). Teachers often modelled and organised, while the pupils generally answered the teacher's questions, or repeated individually or chorally after the teacher. There was little pair or group work noted.

The researchers conclude that the teachers' generally low level of proficiency in English led to restricted use of the target language for basic vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation activities, while comprehension is assured mainly through translation into Spanish. They consider that, "it is important for elementary school English teachers and policy makers to gain understanding of our reality if we are to attend our real needs and the specific challenges of teaching English as a foreign language in elementary public schools" (Cadavid et al., 2004, p. 45). In a later presentation on the same topic (Quinchia & Cadavid, 2006, p. 10) the authors observe:

it is surprising to note the relevance of the results found here when sharing these findings with public school teachers in regional and national congresses...Teachers feel they are not sufficiently qualified to face a task they see as important in the education of boys and girls.

In the light of the diagnosis presented in the previous study, it is interesting to note Cadavid's (2003) comments on attempts to introduce a spiral thematic curriculum to teach English at primary school level. In Grade 1, the aim was to get the pupils to introduce themselves, talk about themselves, their pets and toys, while in Grade 2 the focus was expanded to include the school and the neighbourhood (Cadavid, 2003). In Grade 3, there was a stronger connection made with the area of Natural Science (the body, the senses and health). In Grades 4 and 5, the focus was on the country and the world.

The researcher found that the implementation of a thematic curriculum was an effective way of helping primary school children learn English and increase motivation towards the process. As a Grade 3 student commented, "Sí me gusta [la clase de inglés] por la razón de lo que la profe Catalina nos enseña es para un vien (sic) de nosotros y si de pronto nos mandan para un país poder utilizar todo lo que nos enseñó." (*Yes I like [the English class] because the teacher, Catalina, teaches us things which are useful for us and if maybe we are sent to a country, we can use everything we have been taught.*) (Cadavid, 2003, p. 32)

However, there was a felt need for continuity in this process and articulation of this type of theme based approach with the teaching and learning of English at

high school, as well as the need to increase the number of hours per week devoted to the target language. (During the study, the English classes were scheduled once a week for 45 minutes.) Furthermore, the author called for a greater degree of reflection among teachers with regard to their beliefs and practices in order to enhance understanding of a complex reality and help to “move towards a more enlightened approach to teaching” (Cadavid, 2003, p. 96).

A slightly earlier study, carried out by two teachers from the Universidad Surcolombiana in Neiva in 2002 confirmed many of the findings of the Medellín study. The researchers sent a questionnaire to 65 primary school teachers in the Department of Huila. They found that none of the 65 teachers who completed the questionnaire had been trained to teach English at primary school level and that they reported a wide variety of methodological practices, which ranged from translation and memorization to Total Physical Response (Guzmán Durán & Insuasty, 2002).

The authors concluded that English teachers at the primary school level needed an integrated professional development programme involving “the acquisition of communicative and linguistic skills in the foreign language, deepening of human development, the development of reflective skills and strategies, and exploration of methodological alternatives” (Guzmán Durán & Insuasty, 2002, p. 72).

Valencia Giraldo (2007) has also alluded to the type of pre-service preparation offered to foreign language teachers (both primary and secondary) in universities, which often does not prepare them to face classroom realities and which sometimes engenders low self-esteem in relation to the gulf perceived by the teachers between their own level of foreign language proficiency and that of “native speakers” held up as models. In a similar vein, Cárdenas has condemned “the prescriptive practices for teaching and learning and the promotion of teacher qualification by the [National Bilingual Programme]” in contrast to “the critical dimension of language education” (2006, p. 5).

Recently, there have been attempts to try to come to terms with some of these difficulties. In an initiative directed specifically at primary school teachers, two teacher educators at the Universidad de Antioquia decided to implement a professional development course for six months aimed specifically at their needs (McNulty & Díaz, 2006). This programme involved the exploration and reflection on their practice by the participating teachers, courses on the teaching and learning of foreign languages, as well as opportunities to develop foreign language skills. By means of group discussion, the presentation of methodological alternatives and the keeping of participant diaries, the teachers gradually got to the stage where they felt confident enough to try out some of the activities in their classrooms and report back on the experience. In general, this was seen as a very fruitful experience, as the researchers noted that, “various teachers shared that their students enjoyed the activities that they took to class and that they seemed to be more motivated to learn English” (McNulty & Díaz, 2006, p. 12).

Another project related to primary school teachers, which is still ongoing, is concerned with finding out how teachers in Bogotá position themselves in relation to language policies, such as the National Bilingual Programme (Quintero Polo &

Guerrero Nieto, in progress). The researchers maintain that the top-down model applied in language and education planning in Colombia leaves many voices silenced and does not allow for participation in these processes. Therefore, they are interested in finding out how primary teachers, whose knowledge and experience is often undervalued, have reacted to developments of the National Bilingual Programme, and what their felt needs are for professional development. This project resonates with the concerns of researchers such as Valencia Giraldo (2007) about the imposition of policy demands on teachers who are unprepared to assume the implications involved. Ignoring the contributions of in-service teachers and their perception of needs and experience, she maintains, results, in some cases, in tension between institutional expectations and teachers' perceived abilities to respond, and in others, in passivity and lack of commitment. As Canagarajah observes with regard to the value of locally constructed knowledge, "A clear grounding in our location gives us the confidence to engage with knowledge from other locations as we deconstruct and reconstruct them for our purposes" (2005, p. 15).

Discussion

Those who defend the introduction of the Standards for English in Colombia argue that they provide a common language to talk about different proficiency levels. Five years ago, if you had mentioned A2 or B1, people would not have known what this meant. Also, I would submit that the descriptors at the different levels have given teachers the possibility of sequencing and integrating their teaching in ways that perhaps they did not recognise before. So that now there is less excuse for the famous observation that students study the verb "to be" in different ways at different levels throughout their school career.

There have been criticisms too voiced about the use of the CEFR particularly with respect to contextual aspects, such as its use in remote rural areas, where there is little opportunity for students to use a foreign language for authentic purposes (Cárdenas, 2006). In addition, the country has more than three million internally displaced people as a result of the violence between left wing guerrilla forces, right wing paramilitaries and the drug mafias. In these circumstances, the development of bilingualism is not a priority for the education system.

According to Cárdenas (2006), there is also a tendency to depend only on the results of examinations based on the CEFR to make decisions about student foreign language proficiency, rather than to consider other indicators of the process of language learning. Furthermore, teachers, who frequently work in very difficult situations in remote areas, without access to material resources, are often blamed for their students' foreign language deficiencies based on performance on the standardised examinations and tests. Another criticism, this time taken from a recent critical discourse study refers to the standards as conceived for "an imagined and ideal group of students who differ greatly from the real students who attend schools" (Guerrero, 2008, p. 42).

However, it must be said that the initiative of the Ministry of Education has certainly helped to make bilingualism a household word in Colombia. Although official interest has centred on English-Spanish bilingualism, there have also been initiatives which demonstrate increased sensitivity towards other types of bilin-

gualism, particularly involving indigenous languages. Furthermore, the increased attention on developing bilingualism generated by the *National Bilingual Programme* has also had the positive side-effect of stimulating collaboration between the departments within the ministry that deal with Bilingual Education and those responsible for Indigenous Intercultural Ethnoeducation.

In addition, the National Bilingual Programme has helped to promote an inclusive vision of bilingualism by requiring that by 2019 all school and university graduates should reach a certain level of English language proficiency at the end of their studies (either B1 or B2). Thus, bilingualism is seen as a possibility for everyone, not just for graduates of private bilingual schools.

As always, though, the achievements of the initiative must be seen in the light of the challenges that remain. Cely (2009) referred to some of these in a recent presentation. Three of these relate particularly to the situation of primary English teachers:

1. The current lack of primary school English teachers.
2. How to solve the teacher supply problem at primary level.
3. A mismatch between stated National Standards and their implementation in the classroom.

As we have seen in our discussion, although there have been interesting initiatives in certain parts of the country aimed at helping primary school English teachers come to terms with the demands of the *National Bilingual Programme*, the fact that current Ministry policy is focused on the high school level means that the elementary school sector is under-resourced. This leads to the rather paradoxical situation where the Standards for English are formulated as applying from Grade 1, yet the training and development opportunities are largely available only to those who teach in Grades 6-11.

Although evidence in the age debate (Singleton & Lengyel, 1995) and from the evaluations of early and late immersion programmes (Genesee, 2004) indicates that a high level in second and foreign language proficiency may be achieved starting later, the prevailing belief in Colombia is that "the earlier, the better". As a teacher from the Atlantic Coast explains, "los niños vienen siendo trabajos desde maternal...Ellos no van a producir mucho sino que son como una esponja" (We have been working with the children since the beginning of preschool... They will not produce much but they are like a sponge) (de Mejía, Ordoñez & Fonseca, 2006, p. 51).

Conclusion

What can we conclude from the above considerations? First of all, I think there is evidence to suggest that the implementation of English language standards based on the European framework has helped educators to have clearer goals and common ways of talking about what they want students to achieve as a result of their EFL studies. There are, however, significant challenges which still remain and the 2019 goal of B1/B2 level for all may not be feasible for some students, particularly those who come from rural areas or from low socio-economic backgrounds.

The Ministry of Education recognises that the level of contact with English in the primary school is often very low, often just one hour a week, even though for most students this is the only point of contact with the language. Nevertheless, the idea is that, "mediante un proceso de equipo, en el cual se brindará formación y acompañamiento, tanto a los docentes como a las instituciones, sería posible, paulatinamente, formar nuevas generaciones que logren comunicarse en este idioma [inglés]" (By means of a team process in which training and accompaniment is provided, to the teachers as well as to the institutions, it will gradually become possible to educate new generations who will be able to communicate in this language.) (MEN, 2006, p. 31).

If this is to become a reality in a situation in which primary teachers are the least prepared of all teachers to take on the challenge of teaching English to their young learners and who also receive few opportunities to develop their expertise, I submit that it is important to focus at least as many resources on teacher education and development at this level as those designated for high school teachers. Furthermore, it is time to begin working in concerted fashion with both pre-service and in-service elementary school English teachers so that they may be helped to channel their efforts and that their voices may be heard and valued in the taking of decisions for the improvement of English language teaching and learning in Colombia.

Notes

1. Author's translation of this and other quotations from the Spanish original
2. Title 1, Article 7 of the Colombian Constitution states, "The State recognises and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian nation." Article 10 states, "Spanish is the official language of Colombia. The languages and dialects of the ethnic groups are also official in their territories. The teaching in communities with their own linguistic traditions will be bilingual." Title XI, Articles 286 and 287 state, "The Departments, Districts, Municipalities and the Indian territories are territorial bodies. . . Territorial bodies enjoy autonomy in the management of their interests, and within the limits of the constitution and the law."

References

- British Council (1989). *A Survey of English Language Teaching and Learning in Colombia: A Guide to the Market*. London: English Language Promotion Unit.
- Cadavid, C. (2003). Teaching English in primary school through a spiral thematic curriculum. *Īkala. Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura*, 8(14), 81-97.
- Cadavid, C., McNulty, M., & Quinchía, D. I. (2004). Elementary English language instruction: Colombian teachers' classroom practices. *Profile*, 5, 37-55.
- Canagarajah, A.S. (2005). *Reclaiming the Local in Language Policy and Practice*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cárdenas, M.L. (2006). Bilingual Colombia: Are we ready for it? What is needed? Presentation at 19th Annual English Australia. Education Conference
- Cely, R.M. (2007). Una Colombia bilingüe. Entrevista con Rosa María Cely. *El Educador*. Retrieved June 8, 2009 from <http://www.eleducador.com/col/contenido/contenido.aspx?catID=107&conID=205>

- Cely, R.M. (2009). How are current ELT Policy and Practices Generating Transformations in the Colombian Education System? Presentation in the 12th National ELT Conference, April, 2009.
- de Mejía, A.M., Ordoñez, C. & Fonseca, L. (2006). Estudio Investigativo sobre la Actualidad de la Educación Bilingüe (inglés-español) en Colombia. Informe de Investigación sin publicar. MEN/Universidad de los Andes.
- Genesee, F. (2004). What do we know about Bilingual Education for Majority Language Students? In T.K. Bhatia & W. Ritchie (Eds.) *Handbook of Bilingualism and Multiculturalism*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.
- Guerrero, C.H. (2008). Bilingual Colombia: What does it mean to be bilingual within the Framework of the National Plan of Bilingualism? *Profile 10*, 27-45.
- Guzmán Durán, N. & Insuasty, E.A. (2002). *Propuesta Curricular Integral para la Enseñanza-aprendizaje del Inglés en la Educación Básica Primaria*. Neiva: Universidad Surcolombiana de Neiva.
- McNulty, M. & Díaz, C. (2006). Un Enfoque Holístico para el Desarrollo Profesional de Maestros de Inglés de la Básica Primaria. *Memorias Bilinglatam II*, Bogotá octubre, 2006.
- Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2005). *Educación: Visión 2019*.
- Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2005). *Al Tablero*. 37, octubre-diciembre 2005.
- Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2006). *Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés*. Bogotá: Ministerio de Educación Nacional.
- Quinchia, D.I. & Cadavid, C. (2006). Enseñanza del Inglés en la Básica Primaria: Una Mirada a la Realidad. *Memorias Bilinglatam II*, Bogotá octubre, 2006.
- Quintero Polo & Guerrero Nieto (in progress). *Las Voces de los Maestros de Primaria en las políticas lingüísticas de Colombia: ¿la ilusión de la democracia?* Proyecto de investigación. Bogotá: Universidad Distrital "Francisco José de Caldas".
- Romero Medina, R. (2009). National Bilingual Program: Perceptions and Realities. Presentation at the 12th National ELT Conference, April, 2009.
- Singleton, D. & Lengyel, Z. (1995). *The Age Factor in Second Language Acquisition*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Tomasovski, K. (2004). *Los Derechos Económicos, Sociales y Culturales. El Derecho a la Educación. Informe de la Relatora Especial. (Misión a Colombia del 1º A 10 de octubre de 2003)*. Consejo Económico y Social, Comisión de Derechos Humanos. Naciones Unidas. Febrero, 2004.
- Trillos, M. (1998). Conclusiones. In M.Trillos (Ed.) *Educación Endógena frente a Educación Formal*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Centro Colombiano de Estudios de Lenguas Aborígenes.
- Valencia Giraldo, S. (2005). *Bilingualism and English Language Teaching in Colombia: A Critical Outlook*. Presentation at the Conference on English Language Teaching in Colombia, Universidad del Quindío, octubre, 2005.
- Valencia Giraldo, S. (2007). Empowerment and English language teaching (ELT) in public education in Colombia. Presentation in Language, Education and Diversity Conference, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, November 21-25.
- Zuluaga, O. (1996). *La Enseñanza de Lenguas Extranjeras en Colombia en 500 Años*. Popayan: Taller Editorial, Unicauca.

About the Author

Anne-Marie de Mejía, holds a Ph.D in Linguistics in the area of Bilingual Education from Lancaster University, U.K. She works at Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Colombia and her research interests include bilingual classroom interaction, processes of empowerment and bilingual teacher development. She is author of *Power, Prestige and Bilingualism* (2002), co-author of *Empowerment. Empoderamiento y Procesos de Construcción Curricular Bilingüe* (2006), editor of *Bilingual Education in South America* (2005) and co-editor of *Forging Multilingual Spaces* (2008).

Appendix A. Common European Framework for Languages

Common European Framework of Language Scales	
Level	Description
A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.
A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in the most complex situations.