

Challenges of Bilingualism in Higher Education: The Experience of the Languages Department at the Universidad Central in Bogotá, Colombia¹

Desafíos del Bilingüismo en Educación Superior:
La Experiencia del Departamento de Lenguas de la
Universidad Central en Bogotá, Colombia

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Abstract

Many of the actions of Colombia's National Programme for the Development of Foreign Languages (Programa Nacional de Desarrollo de Lenguas Extranjeras – PNDLE) have been carried out in elementary and secondary education, but there is not much information about its impact in institutions of higher education. The aim of this article is to present the initiatives taken as well as the challenges faced by the Languages Department in order to foster bilingualism at *Universidad Central* in Bogota, Colombia. To explain the reasons behind these initiatives, quality indicators for successful bilingual programs were used and the situation at the university in comparison to the indicators is described. It is concluded that the endeavour of graduating bilingual students will not be easy to achieve unless institutions incorporate models of bilingual education as indicators for accreditation and support the labours of languages departments.

Key words: higher education, bilingualism, languages departments, successful bilingual programs, quality indicators

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Resumen

Muchas de las acciones del *Programa Nacional de Desarrollo de Lenguas Extranjeras* – PNDLE han sido desarrolladas para educación primaria y secundaria, pero parece no existir mucha información acerca del impacto de estas acciones en las instituciones de educación superior. El objetivo de este artículo es presentar las iniciativas implementadas, así como los retos enfrentados por el Departamento de Lenguas de la *Universidad Central* en Bogotá, Colombia en relación con el fomento del bilingüismo. Para explicar las razones que apoyaron estas acciones, se utilizaron los indicadores para programas bilingües exitosos y se analizó la situación de la Universidad en comparación con esos indicadores. Se concluye que el esfuerzo para graduar estudiantes bilingües no será fácil a menos que las instituciones incorporen modelos de educación bilingüe con indicadores de acreditación y apoyen las labores realizadas por los departamentos de lenguas.

Palabras clave: educación superior, bilingüismo, departamentos de lenguas, programas bilingües exitosos, indicadores de calidad.

Resumo

Muitas das ações do Programa Nacional de Desenvolvimento de Línguas Estrangeiras – PNDLE foram desenvolvidas para educação primária e secundária, mas parece não existir muita informação sobre o impacto destas ações nas instituições de educação superior. O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar as iniciativas implantadas, bem como os retos enfrentados pelo Departamento de Línguas da Universidade Central em Bogotá, Colômbia em relação com o fomento do bilinguismo. Para explicar as razões que apoiaram estas ações, utilizaram-se os indicadores para programas bilíngues bem-sucedidos e analisou-se a situação da Universidade em comparação com esses indicadores. Conclui-se que o esforço para formar estudantes bilíngues não será fácil salvo que as instituições incorporem modelos de educação bilíngue com indicadores de credenciamento e apoiem os trabalhos realizados pelos departamentos de línguas.

Palavras chave: educação superior, bilinguismo, departamentos de línguas, programas bilíngues bem-sucedidos, indicadores de qualidade.

Introduction

Colombia has not escaped the world trend of the growing demand for learning and speaking English. In order to respond to this need and to encourage the competitiveness of the citizens, the government designed a language policy named the National Programme for the Development of Foreign Languages (*Programa Nacional de Desarrollo de Lenguas Extranjeras – PNDLE*), previously known as National Bilingualism Programme. This programme has four major points in which the educational actions are centred: a) the definition of basic competence standards in foreign language, in particular, English, b) the programme of professional development for English teachers, c) the accreditation of the programmes of non-formal education in foreign languages, and d) the assessment of competences in English in the different educational cycles.³

Within the framework of the II International Seminar in Professional Development for the Foreign Language Teachers, organised by the Language School at Universidad de Antioquia, the discussion about the linguistic policies in the national and international spheres played an important role. The Ministry of National Education presented the linguistic policy of Bilingual Colombia as an integral measure that has the intention of promoting two things: 1) the teaching of English based on international standards which include the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment, and 2) support the particular initiatives in the country regions to train in-service teachers.

Despite the different initiatives taken by the Ministry since the Programme was formulated, results in proficiency levels have been discrete. A study carried out by Sánchez-Jabba in 2012 concluded that the proficiency of high school students in Colombia was relatively low and that the number of students who could be considered bilingual was about 1%. Similarly, in the report of English Proficiency Index carried out by Education First, Colombia was ranked at 50 indicating a very low level of proficiency, similar to most countries in the region, with the exception of Argentina that ranked number 20 indicating a moderate level.

In 2013, Sánchez-Jabba conducted a study, similar to the one he did in 2012, for which he expanded the population and concluded that among high school students we could observe a serious problem

³ http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/articles-132560_recurso_pdf_programmea_nacional_bilinguismo.pdf

since 90% cannot reach levels beyond basic user (A-, A1 or A2), which implies that the goals established by the Ministry might be too ambitious given that the tendency shows few meaningful advances in students' proficiency in English. Likewise, the researcher mentions that for English teachers the results are also worrying since only 25% reach the level expected in the tests.

When exploring the literature related to bilingualism in Colombia, it can be noticed that many of the studies dealing with the impact of the PNDLE have been carried out in elementary and secondary education, as well as in the BA programmes in Modern Languages that prepare future English teachers; nonetheless, not much has been written in relation to the impact of the policies in the teaching and learning of English in other majors different from Modern Languages. This paper aims to share the experiences and challenges faced by the Languages Department at the *Universidad Central* in Bogotá, Colombia in order to respond to the needs set out by these linguistic policies.

For the purposes of the paper, the quality indicators for successful bilingual programmes established by McGroarty (2001) will be taken into consideration as well as some characteristics of effective bilingual programmes stated in the examples grouped in the case studies edited by Christian & Genesee (2001). These indicators will be intertwined with the different interventions the Languages Department at the *Universidad Central* carried out at different university levels with the purpose of fostering bilingualism and with the different challenges posed at the institutional level for the attainment of the goals established by the Ministry.

Based on this analysis, it will be argued that no bilingual education in higher education will be successful unless universities take serious actions in relation to policies, cross-curricular work, teacher training, budget allocation and community outreach, and that even though languages department are accountable for success in the students' learning of foreign languages, this responsibility is to be shared by the directing boards at universities since they are the ones to provide the support language departments need. Moreover, in order for universities to truly engage in a committed effort, an item in relation to bilingual education will have to be included as an accreditation criterion.

Criteria for Successful Bilingual Programmes

McGroarty (2001) presents the diversity of existing bilingual programmes and also acknowledges the fact that, depending on the contexts, there may be hybrid versions of these in which special

characteristics of each model may be mixed to respond to particular needs. Most of research in bilingualism and bilingual education has been carried out in primary or secondary education in the United States and Canada; however, the four criteria proposed by this author might as well work for tertiary education, which is why the situation of the Languages Department at *Universidad Central* in Bogotá is going to be analysed using that model. The criteria are availability of teachers and other school staff, sound curriculum and instructional organisation, appropriate regular assessment, and multiple channels of parent and community outreach.

Availability of Teachers and Other School Staff

This first indicator means that it is advisable for the institutions to count not only on a number of teachers with experience teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language, but also with professors who are experts in teaching content areas in English. Additionally, other members of the community such as university administrators committed to bilingual education and classroom assistants that help in the implementation of the models are needed to guarantee consistency in the instruction. Bostwick (2001), describing a successful programme in Japan, mentions teacher certification and recruitment as one of the features for the quality of the programme. In the same way Weber (2001), explaining a similar experience in Indiana, USA, specifies the need to engage and retain high quality staff in order to maintain effectiveness.

The situation at the *Universidad Central* is complex. It is very common that only the professors belonging to the Languages Department know another language, be that English, French, Portuguese or German. When taking a look at the other academic units, for instance, Engineering, Advertising, or Finance, it can be observed that most of the faculty is monolingual; that is to say, they only speak Spanish, and the few professors who speak English have not been trained to teach their disciplines in a foreign language. Needless to say, very few people in the administrative and support areas are bilingual.

In order to respond to this need, the Languages Department included in its offer courses specially tailored for teachers taking into consideration their time availability and schedule restrictions. Nonetheless, some other challenges emerged due to a combination of what could be reluctance on the part of the directing bodies and financial constraints which did not allow investment in teacher training either in English or in language pedagogy for non-English teachers.

This was translated in the fact that even though chancellors and deans encouraged the Languages Department to offer the service of language teaching to professors of other faculties as well as specific courses for English-speaking professors, the conditions for the professors to take those courses were not always the best since they had to pay for the courses themselves, or they were usually assigned such a heavy workload that they did not have the time to take them. It was also common that their schedules did not fit with the one for the course or that they simply were not willing to take them.

Despite these shortcomings, the Languages Department could offer an English course for a small group of professors of Advertising and Communication, a special course in Academic Writing for professors of Engineering, and two subsequent conversation clubs in which professors and students from different majors participated; however, the attendance to these courses decreased as time progressed due to the commitments related to the academic workload that participants had.

Sound Curriculum and Instructional Organisation

McGroarty (2001) mentions, in terms of primary and secondary education, that there needs to be a close articulation of grade and subject levels, flexible groupings, team teaching, appropriate teaching materials and collaborative staff planning, among other aspects. For university level, this would imply establishing a solid link between English and students' disciplinary areas, finding content area teachers willing to make a joint effort with language teachers in order to strengthen instruction not only in the content area but also in the use of English for learning that content. Baker (2011) also states for effective schools and classrooms for bilingual students, a curriculum which is challenging, coherent, meaningful and relevant. In the same line of thought, Urow & Sontag (2001) in a case study describing an experience in Chicago, mention as one factor of success the integration of language, content and research skills development in the bilingual programme.

250 Moreover, the author explains that for bilingual approaches, a plan for the allocation of languages throughout the school day and across the length of the school programme is needed since "if both languages are to be developed appropriately, both must be accorded the status of medium of instruction for a variety of curricular activities and (...) both may also be school subjects" (p. 351). Also, Baker (2011) specifies that one way for students to become bilingual is establishing 50% of instruction in both languages. For the case of the university, this would mean that in the long run English would have to be used

for teaching content areas in the majors, but also students will have to be guaranteed an English class and also opportunities to practice that language out of class.

One of the actions taken by the Languages Department in order to fulfill this indicator was the implementation of cross-curricular projects. One great challenge for the Languages Department is the fact of teaching English in a monolingual context; that is to say, students are not obliged to use English outside the classroom since in every context Spanish is used. That is why many do not see the need to learn the language, not even in their jobs; however, they are aware of the advantages in terms of competitiveness English creates for them. For this reason, the Department implemented, within the curriculum, cross-curricular projects in each one of the English levels offered.

Cross-curricular work consisted in establishing links between the foreign language and the professions of our students. In order to make this work more systematic, this job was organized in the following way: For the level Basic I, as students do not have enough tools in English, the activity developed is the creation of a glossary with the terms of the core area. For Basic II, students develop a reading activity but with specialized web pages.

The teacher explores the web pages that he or she considers appropriate for the level and core area of his or her students and elaborates a recognition guide of the web page, and later, the students will develop the activity in a multimedia session. For Basic 3, as the students are already capable of identifying the vocabulary related to their majors due to the job done in the previous levels, students work on a reading workshop designed by the teacher.

Finally, in Pre-intermediate 1, students develop a class project in which the topic is a problem assigned by the major or agreed with the students at the beginning of the semester. In this project, students should generate a product in which they involve the contents of their majors and the foreign language component, for example auditing companies, a handbook for the use of accounting software, web pages, advertising campaigns, among others.

Another action taken by the Languages Department was a joint effort between a few bilingual Advertising and Economics teachers as well as with some professors of the Languages Departments in order to offer lectures or workshops specifically addressed to students from these majors dealing with the contents of the disciplines. Nonetheless, this activity could not be sustained because some bilingual professors from the core areas changed jobs. Others experienced a change in

workload, and they did not have as much time available to continue in the project.

However successful this implementation of cross-curricular work has been, there have been some conditions affecting the curricular integration and instructional consistency in relation to teaching English at the university. Starting in 2001, higher education institutions started moving towards the system of academic credits in order to set up, as Restrepo (2005) explains, a common basis to facilitate students' mobility, the recognition and evaluation of achievements and curricular flexibility.

Due to the establishment of this system of credits (Decree 2566 of 2003, p.4⁴), the university decided to withdraw English from the academic programmes in the different majors; therefore, they affected the close articulation of disciplinary subjects and foreign language and started affecting the goal of bilingual students we are aiming to attain. In this respect, Dr. Carlos Javier Mosquera, representative of CONACES (*Comisión Nacional de Aseguramiento de la Calidad de la Educación Superior*)⁵ also informed during the I Interamerican Conference in Bilingual Education that only one major is attaining the foreign language proficiency expected: tourism. Also, having students learn English out of the curriculum ensures that they will not learn it since they are not using it for real purposes, but as an additional task.

Secondly, the number of hours allocated to the teaching of English at the university ranges between three and four per week; during a semester the number of hours cannot sufficiently cover the number established in the guidelines of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, as adopted by the Colombian Ministry of Education. For example, for reaching a level B2, students will need to comply with a range of 500 to 600 hours of face-to-face instruction, but in practice students take an average of four hours per week, and an academic term lasts sixteen weeks (64 hours of English per semester). It is important to bear in mind that students usually take four levels of English at the Languages Department, and the level they are trying to attain is just a little beyond A2; nonetheless, we have to subtract the hours taken off the subject by extra activities.

Third, one of the decisions the university made in order to overcome this problem was requiring the professors of all the areas to include and use references in English in their syllabi, but considering

⁴ http://www.mineducacion.gov.co/1621/articles-104846_archivo_pdf.pdf

⁵ National Committee of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

that most of the content area teachers do not speak a foreign language, as mentioned before, despite the good intention behind the decision, this has become a regulation that is not executed in real life. Professors do include references in English but they do not use them, or they assign the reading to students and they will usually try to find someone to translate the texts for them. Additionally, since most of the content area professors are not bilingual and those who are may not be able to work in a joint effort with language teachers (conflicting schedules, work overload, lack of will, etc.), the idea of implementation of team teaching is quite difficult to execute, as was experienced by the Languages Department.

All the elements composing this phenomenon may imply that unless there is an item in the criteria for accreditation and registration (*Registro Calificado*) in which institutions are seriously evaluated in relation to the model of bilingual education or the actions they are taking about teaching a foreign language, there will be very few graduate bilingual students. This means that the evaluation carried out by the Ministry and its evaluative entities will have to go beyond a review of curricular documents and university resolutions or decrees. Rather, peers will also have to truly observe how bilingual or foreign language teaching models are implemented in practice.

Appropriate Regular Assessment

McGroarty (2001) states that there is a systematic approach to assess students' progress not only in content areas but also in the foreign language in effective bilingual programmes; however, she also acknowledges that this assessment may vary based on national and local traditions and practices. Urow & Sontag (2001) mention the need to use classroom-based assessment since this will offer more accurate information about students' attainment because it is based on performance. This does not mean tests could not be used, but they will have to be complemented by other ways of assessment. These authors also explain the need to integrate instruction and assessment, which they do by means of content area journals. Some ways have to be explored at the university level so that students could be evaluated both in language proficiency and content areas.

In relation to assessment it can be affirmed that the university, as many others in Bogotá, takes a remedial approach to foreign language instruction; that is to say, students are required to demonstrate an English level at the end of their majors, but they are not obliged to take courses during specific moments in their programs. Therefore, they

wait until the very moment they are going to graduate to fulfill with the requirement, in which case the university tests them to demonstrate they have the level required. However, because of the factors mentioned before, many of them fail the exam, holding their graduation back due to English.

In order to change students' mentality about testing their English level only upon graduation, the Languages Department implemented regular assessment by using mock versions of standardised tests (PET) during sixth and seventh semesters. Nonetheless, one shortcoming of this decision was in relation to practicality due to the fact that it was very difficult to test about 1500 students' English proficiency in face-to-face conditions; therefore, a virtual exam was created by using the Moodle platform that had been acquired by the university. This brought up some other issues in terms of discrepancies in the results of the virtual tests and students' real performance when using the language and the subsequent questioning of students' honesty; i.e. impersonation, cheating, etc. Although this may be a good decision, it needs to be taken with a grain of salt. As there is a lack of articulation of the teaching of foreign language with all the rest of the curriculum, we may risk English teaching becoming "English teaching for the tests."

Multiple Channels of Parent and Community Outreach

At a school, this means guaranteeing the support of the school efforts towards bilingualism by involving parents and the surrounding community. Urow & Sontag (2001), Egger & Lardscheiner McLean (2001), and Baker (2011) mention how important it is to celebrate and serve the school community, if possible by involving different members who are bilingual to help support the school programme. Additionally, as the experiences of these authors are at primary and secondary school, this outreach also implies involving parents in the processes. For universities, this would mean establishing agreements with international institutions which could offer support by means of language assistants or with other universities that are in capacity of offering content area courses in the foreign language.

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In order to engage in processes of community outreach, the Languages Department designed a campaign that, apart from involving the cross-curricular work previously mentioned, also included other kind of activities such as showing TV programmes in foreign languages in the cafeterias. Also, together with University Welfare and the Graduate Office, the Languages Department organised an International Fair, to which embassies and agencies for international mobility were invited

as well as students who had the experience of studying or working abroad, with the purpose of informing the student community about those experiences.

Another action undertaken was the organization of immersion outings in which a few professors and students were invited to a place out of the city for a day to practise English through games and fun activities. Despite these joint efforts, it is necessary to recognise that most of the initiatives have emerged from members of the Languages Department on their own, and that on most occasions, university directors imply that it is only the job of this academic unit to work towards the fostering of English language proficiency.

For the Colombian context, one of the most evident problems is the lack of opportunities to practice English outside the university language class; but additionally, the leadership needed to reach the quality indicators presented by McGroarty (2001) has been carried out only by the Languages Department, occasionally with the help of the International Affairs Office and Student Welfare. Academic units, even directing boards, not directly related to the Languages Department seem not to consider English as part of their job and usually wash their hands of it, discharging all the responsibility on this academic unit unaware that for a bilingual programme to be successful, all the stakeholders need to contribute.

Conclusion

McGroarty (2001) states the need for concerted efforts among teachers, institutions, students and families for successful bilingual programmes; Baker (2011) talks about a shared vision, mission and goals among staff as well as the leadership of the institution as a critical factor of success; Egger and Lardscheiner McLean (2001) mention political compromise as a key aspect for success in their experience in Italy. What these professors are saying is that serious leadership is needed in order to set clear goals in terms of bilingualism, guaranteeing and evaluating quality in instructional designs, and offering opportunities for the educational communities (teachers, students, administration and surrounding strategic partners) to contribute to the quality and success of the programme.

This leadership also means that universities need to have a clear idea of what bilingualism means to them since most seem to take it as proficiency in the use of the (foreign) language (Rey de Castro & García, 1997), but it is not clear what that level of proficiency is. For

this particular case, even though the university has intended to create a language policy, this has not gone beyond establishing language degree requirements. Therefore, the university does not seem to have a clear institutional policy yet in relation to the learning of foreign languages.

What was established, in a similar way to other universities, is the demand for the student to attain a level B1 according to the Common European Framework, but they are not quite clear about the execution of the norm or about the mechanisms offered to students to attain the level. Additionally, in most of the cases, the Languages Department has not always counted on a consistent institutional support in the implementation of policies for the fostering of bilingualism.

At the *Universidad Central*, the Languages Department has made huge efforts in order to promote bilingualism, but in the institutional view, it seems that the job had to be undertaken only by this academic unit and nobody else. Therefore, a serious institutional commitment is required in order to obtain the support for these initiatives. As McGroarty (2001) explains, the quality conditions for bilingual programmes to be effective imply a sound curricular articulation, acquisition of resources in both languages, availability of qualified staff in both languages, a systematic assessment of the achievements attained, and the participation of the whole community: educational directors, administrative staff, teachers and students to create the conditions in which a person can become bilingual.

In brief, and based on these specific experiences of the Languages Department at the *Universidad Central*, it is necessary to affirm that even though these academic units are made of hardworking language professionals and that the effort they make in educating people will be continued, institutions cannot rely on them solely to make students bilingual. Taking a look at the current situation, we can affirm that “one swallow does not make a summer” and therefore, it is necessary for institutions to provide more sustained support if they want to attain the goals of internationalization and bilingualism stated in their Institutional Educational Projects (PEI).

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