

Analysis of bilingualism policies in Colombia: Immersion and teacher training

Análisis a las políticas de bilingüismo en Colombia: Inmersión y formación docente



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Abstract

This article critically analyzes bilingualism policies in Colombia, focusing on higher education, language immersion, and teacher training. Through a systematic PRISMA review, milestones and approaches of programs like the PNB and “Colombia, Very Well” were examined. Results reveal efforts to strengthen English proficiency, but also implementation challenges. The effectiveness of immersion and the need for robust, contextualized teacher training are discussed. It concludes that future success depends on investing in educators and adapting strategies to Colombian realities, offering recommendations for more effective and sustainable policies.

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Keywords: Bilingualism, Colombia, Higher Education, Language Immersion, Teacher Training, Educational Policies.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza críticamente las políticas de bilingüismo en Colombia, enfocándose en la educación superior, la inmersión lingüística y la formación docente. Mediante una revisión sistemática PRISMA, se examinaron hitos y enfoques de programas como el PNB y “Colombia, Very Well”. Los resultados revelan esfuerzos por fortalecer el inglés, pero también desafíos en la implementación. Se discute la efectividad de la inmersión y la necesidad de una formación docente robusta y contextualizada. Se concluye que el éxito futuro depende de la inversión en educadores y la adaptación de estrategias a la realidad colombiana, ofreciendo recomendaciones para políticas más efectivas y sostenibles.

Palabras clave: Bilingüismo, Colombia, Educación Superior, Inmersión Lingüística, Formación Docente, Políticas Educativas.

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Introduction

Bilingualism is understood as the ability to communicate in two languages. Furthermore, it is a vital competency in the context of globalization and the knowledge economy (Fandiño et al., 2012). In Colombia, there are over sixty indigenous languages spoken throughout the national territory, which makes it linguistically diverse. This reality has led to the formulation and implementation of various language policies aimed at strengthening the mastery of a second language, primarily English, among its citizens. Thus, Congress passed the General Education Law of 1994, which recognizes the country as a multilingual and pluricultural nation.

However, there are more recent programs such as the *National Bilingualism Program (NBP) and 'Colombia, Very Well'*, through which the National Government has sought to provide an education aligned with the demands of an interconnected world. Likewise, state examinations conducted by the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) in 2004 indicate that ninety-nine percent of students chose English for the college entrance exam (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006).

Nevertheless, the development of these policies has generated significant debates and challenges, particularly in the sphere of higher education and teacher training. The effectiveness of pedagogical strategies, such as language immersion, and the preparation of educators to meet the requirements of a bilingual curriculum are aspects that merit critical and reflective analysis.

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This research article aims to critically analyze the evolution and impact of bilingualism policies in Colombia, with an emphasis on higher education, language immersion, and teacher training. To this end, it identifies the main milestones and approaches of these policies, evaluates the effectiveness of language immersion as a pedagogical strategy in the Colombian context, and analyzes the role and preparation of teachers in the implementation of such policies. Finally, it generates recommendations for future bilingualism policies in the country.

The central question guiding this reflection is: How have bilingualism policies in Colombia evolved, and what has been their impact on higher education, language immersion, and teacher training? Through a systematic literature review and a critical analysis of government documents and programs, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive perspective on this issue of vital importance for Colombia's educational and social development.

Methodology

In preparing this article, a systematic literature review methodology was employed, following the principles of the PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) statement. This approach enabled a rigorous search, selection, and analysis of relevant scientific literature, ensuring transparency and replicability of the process.

Search criteria

The literature search was conducted using a combination of keywords in Spanish and English, which included: "*bilingualism policies Colombia*," "*higher education bilingualism*," "*language immersion Colombia*," "*teacher training bilingualism*," and "*bilingualism impact education*." These keywords were

combined with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to maximize the retrieval of pertinent articles.

Information sources

The databases consulted were Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Priority was given to identifying articles published in journals within the fields of linguistics, applied linguistics, education, and bilingualism, in order to ensure the quality and impact of the selected literature. The search was restricted to publications from the last ten years (2015-2025).

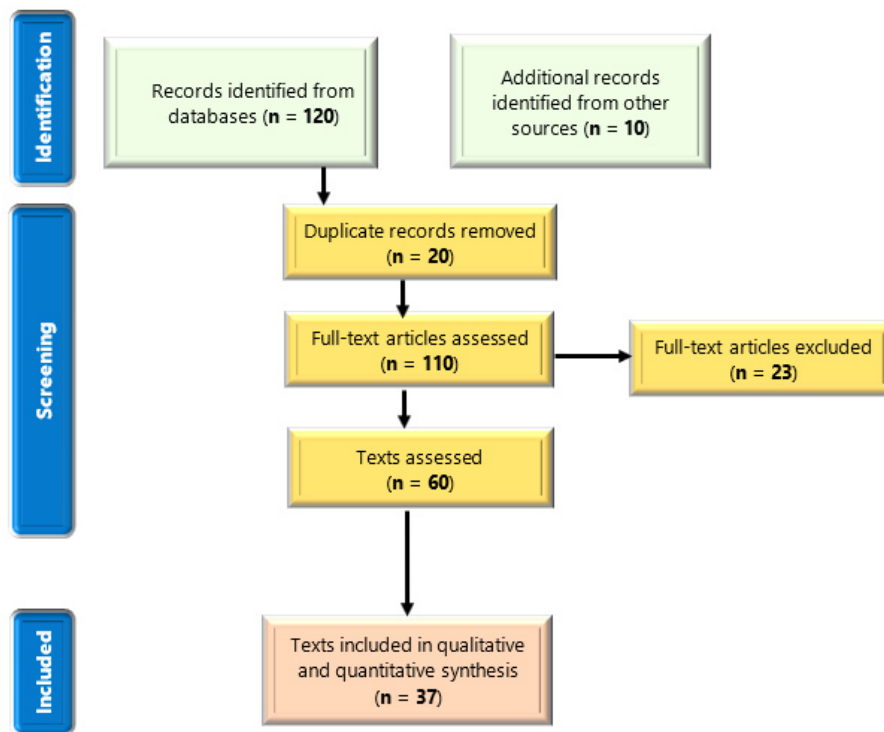
Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Included were original research articles, systematic reviews, case studies, and reflective articles addressing bilingualism policies in Colombia, their implementation, impact on higher education, or teacher training. Publications prior to 2015, articles not related to the Colombian context, studies on bilingualism in non-educational or non-policy settings, and opinion pieces lacking solid empirical or theoretical support were excluded.

Selection process and data extraction

The selection process was carried out in two phases, following a systematic approach that can be represented using a PRISMA flow diagram. Initially, a total of 120 articles were identified through the Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar databases, using the predefined keywords and filters.

Figure 1
PRISMA flow diagram



Note: The researcher (2026).

In the *identification phase*, 120 records were located in databases and 10 additional records were identified through other sources. After removing 20 duplicates (e.g., not related to Colombia, outside the date range, or not pertinent to the topic), 110 records remained for screening. This resulted in 150 articles for full-text review.

In the *screening stage*, these 110 records were reviewed by title and abstract, excluding 50 for not meeting relevance criteria, such as lack of relevant data, inadequate methodology, or not directly addressing bilingualism policies in Colombia, leaving 60 full-text articles for analysis. During the eligibility assessment, these 60 full-text articles were evaluated, of which 23 were excluded for not conforming to the established criteria.

Finally, 37 articles met all the inclusion criteria and were used for the analysis and synthesis of this reflective article. Relevant data from each article, such as authors, year of publication, objectives, methodology, results, and conclusions, were extracted and synthesized for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis

The information analysis was conducted qualitatively, identifying recurring themes, trends, challenges, and opportunities in the implementation of bilingualism policies in Colombia. Special attention was paid to the discussion on the effectiveness of language immersion and the role of teacher training, contrasting the findings with the provided government documents and the existing literature.

Results and discussion

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Bilingualism policies in Colombia have undergone a significant evolution since the 1990s, driven by the growing importance of a second language in the global context. Initially, the General Education Law of 1994 laid the foundations for recognizing the nation as multilingual and pluricultural, promoting bilingual and intercultural ethno-education, along with the teaching of foreign languages. However, the main focus has centered on English, seeking the country's insertion into the global economy and universal communication ([Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006](#)).

Milestones and approaches of bilingualism policies from a detailed retrospective

Undoubtedly, the political trajectory of bilingualism in Colombia reflects the evolutionary nature of national priorities and global influences. The Political Constitution of 1991 establishes in Article 10 that the official language is Spanish, but in "those communities with their own linguistic traditions, [education] will be bilingual" ([Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, 1991](#)). There is a fundamental reason for this purpose: the country's ethnic and cultural diversity, hence the need to respect and promote native languages. However, the phenomenon of globalization and the increase in economic and cultural interconnectedness have exerted a shift in focus toward the mastery of foreign languages such as English ([De Mejía, 2006](#)).

Precisely, the governing body of these educational policies has been the Ministry of National Education, charting the roadmap through programs and documents for bilingualism in Colombia. In 2004, the NBP was launched as a comprehensive long-term vision. This required not only teacher training but also the monitoring of English teaching and learning processes in the country. The stated purpose was the comprehensive education of students to have citizens capable of communicating in English

(NBP, 2004; Díaz & Carmona, 2010).

Subsequently, in 2006, the Basic Standards of Competencies in Foreign Languages: English were added. This document set the goal that students, upon completing secondary education, would have an intermediate B1 level of English. Likewise, teachers were expected to have an upper-intermediate B2 level, and newly graduated language teachers a minimum advanced level of C2 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006). These levels were comparable to the B1 and B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In this sense, the central approach was established under a Curriculum for Academic Excellence and Comprehensive Education, which required going beyond the acquisition of linguistic structures.

The *Program for the Strengthening of Foreign Languages (PSFL) 2010-2014* sought to develop communicative competencies in English among educators and students within the educational system to favor the insertion of human capital into the knowledge economy. The stated purpose was to complement classroom work for secondary education students through the development of a mass English program (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2013). In this regard, the evaluation of English competencies through the SABER tests in grades 5 and 9 was included. Meanwhile, at the higher education level, the Saber Pro tests were promoted so that students about to graduate or graduates of professional university programs would achieve the B1 level, that is, reading, grammar, and lexical tasks according to the Common European Framework (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2022).

Likewise, the program developed accompaniment in the improvement processes for undergraduate programs that trained English teachers. At the same time, certification of the quality of institutions with programs for work-oriented and human development training focused on English teaching was carried out. Tutoring for secondary school students in a second language was also included. Furthermore, the use of new technologies in English teaching was promoted.

Another important milestone was the enactment of Law 1651 in 2013, also known as the Law for the Strengthening of English Teaching in Colombia. This law served as a complement to Law 115 of 1994. This legal norm was oriented within public educational policy to improve the quality and competitiveness of citizens through the mastery of English as a second language. This law applies to all levels of the Colombian educational system, from preschool to higher education. Likewise, it establishes training and professional development programs so that teachers can teach English with quality, following international standards such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. It also sets forth the evaluation of communicative competencies in English through national and international tests.

Likewise, the program developed accompaniment in the improvement processes for undergraduate programs that trained English teachers. At the same time, certification of the quality of institutions with programs for work-oriented and human development training focused on English teaching was carried out. Tutoring for secondary school students in a second language was also included. Furthermore, the use of new technologies in English teaching was promoted.

Another important milestone has been the *National English Program (NEP) 2015-2025*, known by the slogan "Colombia Very Well," which is an initiative of the Ministry of National Education to strengthen

the learning of English as a foreign language at all levels of the educational system so that Colombia can achieve international standards and benefit from greater opportunities in education, employment, and international mobility ([Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2014](#)).

Impact on higher education and language immersion

Language immersion is understood as a pedagogical approach in which a second language is used as the medium of instruction to teach academic content in order to develop linguistic competence ([Genesee, 1987](#)). However, [Bostwick \(n.d.\)](#) argues that this new language is not only the medium of instruction but also the object of it. In this sense, in immersion, the foreign language is used as a tool that enables the learning of other disciplines, thus creating an authentic and meaningful environment.

It should be noted that the impact of these policies on higher education has been mixed. While the teaching of English and the pursuit of higher proficiency levels (B1, B2 according to the CEFR) have been encouraged, the effectiveness of language immersion as a pedagogical strategy has been the subject of debate. Immersion, which seeks to maximize student exposure to learning in a second language (L2) in academic and everyday contexts, has proven effective in other contexts for developing additive bilingual competence ([Cummins, 2000](#)).

However, in Colombia, the implementation of immersion programs has faced challenges related to the availability of qualified teachers, adequate resources, and the homogeneity of students' entry levels. As well as the fact that not all institutions meet the required standards because they lack the necessary resources to facilitate teaching and learning processes to achieve communicative competencies in English ([García et al., 2018](#)). Likewise, it has been found that beliefs about foreign language learning play a significant role, especially in promoting the development of communicative competence ([Gómez, 2018](#)). It should be noted that debates and criticisms have arisen regarding this positioning of English as the dominant language to be learned throughout the educational system and as a tool for international competitiveness ([Roux & Soler Millán, 2023](#)).

Recent studies indicate that the goal of achieving bilingualism in Colombia by 2025 seems unattainable ([Ramos et al., 2021](#)). Other research maintains that not only does the achievement of this goal remain very low, but also no significant improvement is observed ([Benavides, 2021](#)). But what is the reason behind this situation? It appears that one of the most predominant factors is the lack of continuity in its implementation, from a structural point of view. However, at the specific or operational level, it has been pointed out that the weaknesses lie in the "number of hours and methodological and evaluation practices that affect program contents and student performance" ([Jiménez et al., 2017](#)). Nevertheless, there are those who consider that there are few opportunities for teachers provided by the MEN ([Bastidas & Muñoz, 2015](#)). Likewise, the level of students upon completing their university studies has not shown significant improvement in recent years ([Benavides, 2021](#)).

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that Colombia ranks among the lowest in terms of bilingualism, occupying 74th place out of 116 countries, and at the Latin American level, it ranks 17th out of 21 ([EF English Proficiency Index, 2025](#)). Furthermore, 43% of teachers in Colombia are trained in English, and only 5% of eleventh-grade students ([Milanés, 2025](#)). The ICFES tests indicate low levels in English, and this is due to formative and cultural processes that have not achieved an optimal level

in students, with the majority at the basic level (A1) (Amaya & Osorio, 2021).

For their part, Estrada et al. (2015) and Sánchez et al. (2016) point out that there is limitation and lack of teacher quality, which calls for the development of formative scenarios that favor bilingual learning in students. Likewise, it has been found that participants' beliefs about language learning are related to the impact on motivation and academic performance (Sierra et al., 2024).

Also at the structural level, the literature suggests that foreign language acquisition depends on exposure to communicative situations in which students can understand the message, even without fully mastering the linguistic structure (Krashen, 1982). This implies that an effective immersion environment must provide real opportunities for interaction in the language, which is not always achieved in the Colombian educational system due to factors such as class sizes, lack of authenticity in materials, and limited exposure outside the classroom.

The role of teacher training

The author of this article agrees with Vergara and Gómez (2020) that to teach a language, whether native or foreign, the teacher must have both linguistic and pedagogical training. These elements are fundamental because bilingualism serves as a bridge between language and identity. Moreover, bilingual learning enhances not only cognitive development but also self-esteem (Gupa, 2019).

Achieving the aforementioned goals requires teacher training. Galindo and Moreno (2019) state that in Colombia, academic events have been held twice a year, such as regional, national, and international conferences for foreign language development, but there are also language refresher programs developed by institutions. Likewise, language level certification has been carried out.

In this sense, "the Ministry of National Education of Colombia, in its pursuit of improving the quality of national education, has committed to the continuous training of teachers" (Osorio, 2016, p. 47). It follows from this that in Colombia there is a shortage of English teachers that fails to cover the entire student population, and this makes it necessary to consider both initial and ongoing teacher training. Teacher training is defined as "constant learning, bringing it closer to the development of professional activities and to professional practice, and from it" (Imbernón, 2007, p. 11). This teacher training implicitly includes continuous training because the teacher is "a professional capable of mastering their own evolution, building new competencies and knowledge based on what they have acquired and their own experience" (Perrenoud, 2007, p. 23).

Thus, the Ministry of National Education, as the governing body of educational policies of the Colombian government, has set itself the great goal of a Bilingual Colombia, and therefore teacher training is a way to sensitize and raise awareness among English teachers about their responsibility and commitment to the State and the country in the formation of new generations, which is why they must train themselves and achieve English proficiency levels. This is why, as Vaillant and Marcelo (2015) affirm, in training, both the capacity and the will of each person are key elements in formative processes.

According to official MEN documents, various efforts have been made in Colombia to strengthen English teaching. One of the main objectives set is to ensure that "100% of English teachers are at the

B2 level" (Colombia, MEN, 2012). To advance toward this goal, the Ministry established, in partnership with a training institution, the so-called "English Training Strategy in Cascade Scheme," which seeks to train and benefit a group of 3,000 teachers throughout the country, thus promoting a significant improvement in their linguistic competencies and in the quality of education they offer to students.

Conclusions

Bilingualism policies in Colombia have demonstrated a clear intention to position the country within a globalized context, prioritizing the learning of English as a second language. However, the critical analysis of their evolution and impact reveals a gap between the stated objectives and the results achieved, particularly in higher education and with regard to teacher training.

Language immersion, although recognized as an effective pedagogical strategy, has encountered limitations in its application due to the lack of resources, the heterogeneity of student proficiency levels, and, fundamentally, the insufficient preparation of teachers. The success of these policies cannot depend solely on the enactment of laws and programs but requires substantial and sustained investment in the professional development of educators. It is imperative that teacher training transcends mere language proficiency and focuses on second language teaching methodologies, including immersion pedagogy, assessment, and curricular adaptation.

For future bilingualism policies in Colombia, the following recommendations are put forward: (a) Strengthen initial and ongoing teacher training in second language didactics and bilingualism, ensuring that teachers acquire not only linguistic but also pedagogical competence. (b) Develop language immersion programs contextualized to the Colombian reality, considering the particularities of each region and educational level. (c) Promote research on the effectiveness of different second language teaching strategies in the Colombian context. (d) Establish rigorous evaluation and monitoring mechanisms that allow policies to be adjusted based on results and the needs of the educational system. (e) Promote a more inclusive vision of bilingualism that also values and strengthens the country's indigenous and creole languages, in line with its multilingual and pluricultural character.

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