

Towards the Development of Bilingualism in the Colombian Context

Hacia el desarrollo del bilingüismo en el contexto colombiano

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Abstract

The promotion of bilingualism since the beginning of schooling has become one of the major goals of the Educational Policies in Colombia. Therefore the different educative Institutions around the country should go hand in hand towards that goal, through the training of their administrative and teaching staff. That training should

involve all implications that the implementation of bilingualism in the different levels of Basic Education entails. This article tackles some issues which can light and contribute to such implementation in the Colombian context.

Key Words: Bilingualism, Early and Late Bilingualism, Play-Based Activities, Interactional Spaces, Multilingualism.



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Resumen

La promoción y desarrollo del bilingüismo desde los primeros grados de básica primaria se ha convertido en una de las mayores metas de las políticas educacionales en Colombia. Por esta razón, las diferentes Instituciones educativas a lo largo del país deben ir a la par con dicho fin a través de la capacitación de su personal administrativo y de enseñanza en este tema. Dicho

entrenamiento debe involucrar todas las implicaciones que abarca la implementación del bilingüismo en los diferentes niveles de básica primaria. Este artículo aborda algunos aspectos que pueden contribuir a dicha implementación en el contexto colombiano.

Palabras clave: Bilingüismo, Bilingüismo temprano y tardío, Actividades basadas en el juego, Espacios interactivos, Multilingüismo.

Introduction

Bilingualism, understood as the capacity to communicate in two languages, is a topic with many folds, in which some teachers have submerged almost by inertia, without paying attention to the important implications this relevant topic has. The convenience, methods, curricular designs etc, almost all of them are built on the base of different levels of perceptions but each one with completely different features which make of the process of becoming bilingual an interesting one.

In Colombia bilingualism has been a concern for the state policies during the last decade. Bilingual education has evolved from being an option in the search for better opportunities of personal and academic growing, to the point of being mandatory for all educational institutions in the country. The National Bilingualism Program NBP has been created under the parameters of the Common European framework, in order to give the citizens more opportunities to be active agents in a globalize world.

Teachers should be aware of all the aspects that the process of achievement of students' bilingualism implies in a multilingual society like the Colombian one. On that account, this article is divided into four parts; first of all, it presents some ideas about bilingualism and its implications. A second part has to do with some aspects to take into consideration about the difference between bilingualism in children and in adolescents. Afterwards, I present some teaching suggestions for educators as

facilitators and mediators of the students' bilingual development and the fourth part embodies some concerns about the present situation of bilingualism in the Colombian context.

Some Concepts about Bilingualism

One of the most basic definitions of bilingualism is presented by Wenreich (1968) in which he says that «the practice of actively speak two languages is called bilingualism and the person involved bilingual». Some other specialists like Bloomfield (1933) added the notion with a certain degree of «perfection», in other words he states that a bilingual person has to have a native like competence in both languages.

Bloomfield's perception is considered by Baker (2001) as extreme and maximalist. On the other side, Baker presents a minimalist definition referred by Diebold (1964) which makes reference to «incipient bilingual», allowing people with a minimal competence into the category of bilinguals.

One can not go to the extremes; the ideal state is to be able to interact with other people by means of both languages. Having a native-like competence is not necessary but neither it is enough to know some loose words and sentences, the bilingual should be able to communicate even if the degree of competence is different for each language (it is always so). Nobody has a 100% of mastery of one or both languages, not even in the mother tongue, and nobody is equally



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proficient in both languages. The bilingual person uses one of both languages with a different degree of proficiency and in a determined sociocultural context.

On the other hand a person can be proficient in all or some of the four abilities, that is to say, in some more than the others. Baker (2001) makes reference to a fifth ability and it is the language used for inner thinking. This has to be differentiated with speaking because it is the use of language as a «tool of reflection». It has to do with Cummins' assertion in Baker (2001) in terms of bilingualism as the capacity to use one or both languages as a tool for reasoning and reflection both outside the classroom and inside it.

Making students to use the language as thinking tool, as a resource to express points of view and ways of seeing the life and not only for the production of daily-life utterances, should be one of our main goals as teachers. It has to do with critical thinking, enhancing the students to produce and support assumptions which give them a role in the society.

All these previous issues are just part of the extensive theory about bilingualism and which have to be analyzed in the searching of conceptualization and improvement. Forward I will refer to the implications of these factors in teaching.

Bilingualism in Childhood and Adolescence

I will refer to a relevant aspect to take into account when studying bilingualism and it is the difference between bilingualism in

children and adults. Kornakov (2000) makes a distinction between «early bilingualism» and «late bilingualism», periods which are also called «child and adult bilingualism». The age borders for each period have not been fully determined, but it is believed by theoreticians that «early» begins from two years to puberty, whilst «late» from puberty upwards. Likewise, Kornakov (2000) states that the terms early and late bilingualism are also used to refer to «natural and artificial bilingualism» respectively. The early bilingualism is also acquired in a natural way, whereas the artificial under formal instruction, that means, in a classroom.

These considerations led me to pose the following question: Which is the best period for learning a Foreign Language?

Genesse (2007) states that the earlier a person begins to learn a foreign language the easier to learn both properly. You can learn a foreign language adequately but the earlier you begin the better. For him, the interesting thing is that even when we talk about older students, when learning a foreign language they will also learn about their own language, for that reason learning a foreign language always brings positive consequences.

However, the fact that children do better than adults do not have enough evidence, what does have enough proof is that children have greater phonological and auditory abilities which enable them to understand and reproduce sounds better than adolescents. Besides, the articulatory apparatus of children is growing and developing, what makes it easier for them



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to produce some sounds whereas adults may experience phonetic interference from their first language. Such phonetic interference could be overcome with special training if there is enough motivation to do so.

Another aspect to take into account when studying the differences between bilingualism in children and adolescents is the greater analytical abilities of adolescents. They are more conscious about their process of learning so that they make use of their learning strategies. They are linguistically developed in terms of literacy, they have very clear instrumental reasons for learning a language and if they are motivated, they can achieve the same level of competence than someone who began before in early childhood.

Motivation then plays a remarkable role when becoming bilingual. «If we agree that language is a social activity, and if we accept that almost everyone is cognitively capable of acquiring or learning second (and subsequent) varieties, then it follows that the pressure of the situation and the attitudes it provokes in potential learners are central» (Kornakov, 2000: 14).

In short, the individual should have a positive attitude towards the benefits learning a foreign language brings whether for utilitarian purposes or for cultural matters, and part of the responsibility of the students' attitude whether good or not lies on the teacher.



For the answer to my previous question, we can not say that early bilingualism is better than late, we simply can not

compare them. Each period has specific features, for example, children have less inhibition, they make good mimics and a great capacity for learning by playing and adults are more conscious about their process, they have greater analytical abilities, they are plenty of reasons for learning a foreign language and are more self-managed. These features then should be seen as advantages and tools rather than obstacles in the process of becoming bilingual. Therefore the important aspect is to provide both types of learners with suitable conditions for learning rather than an early start.

Some Teaching Suggestions for the Development of Learners' Bilingualism

This section will present some teaching suggestions for promoting bilingualism in our students. I will not move towards the idea of teaching the students to become bilingual, but guiding them towards this goal. As Baker (2001) says the gap between naturally becoming bilingual and being taught to become bilingual may be very small, it should have cloudy borders.

Colombia is a multilingual country in terms of the minority languages but predominantly monolingual in terms of prestigious or majority languages, for that reason, in general the children begin to learn the foreign languages after 3 years, once they arrive to school. As a result, the role of the teacher as facilitator or mediator of such process becomes very relevant in our society since the very beginning.


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Haworth et al (2006) evidenced by a project developed in New Zealand, the important role of the teacher as mediator in the development of children bilingualism (a mediator facilitates the child's development by making it easier for the child to perform certain behaviors). Teachers should have a proactive role that enhances and challenges the bilingualism process in children.

Besides the crucial role of teachers, there are some other theoreticians such as Krashen in Haworth et al (2006) who highlights the need of exposure as crucial factor in foreign language. Krashen states that fluency in another language is got through a natural acquisition process or exposure, rather than through conscious learning.

Related to exposure, an aspect to bear in mind is the ease for children to learn through playing. The children may in fact acquire a new language if they are exposed and involved in **play-based activities**, which lead them to direct their behavior to problem-solving aspects of the environment. Play-based activities are a way to describe the way children explore and manage the world. Play-based learning is an important way to develop active learning. Active learning means using your brain in lots of ways, the children need to be encouraged to learn in this way, to use their brains finding and solving problem of the environment, which also helps to develop critical thinking.

In like manner, through play-based activities the children learn positive attitudes of self-motivation and self-

direction, self-confidence, cooperation and group values, curiosity, persistence and concentration and language and numeracy. Play may be structured, where someone else makes the rules and decisions and unstructured, where the child is self-directed or takes all the initiative.

Thus, teachers can encourage play based activities such as dance, music, children's games, story telling, family traditions, festivals and so on; providing a meaningful environment with enough and comfortable space, appropriate materials, role-modelling to encourage and extend ideas and challenging them with more complex thinking, novel ideas or experiences, so that that the children experience an intense period of learning by using all their senses.

Another relevant factor in students' bilingual development is the need of a collaborative work; both learners and teachers should work collaboratively to achieve bilingualism, alternating teaching and learning roles, being aware that they can learn from each other. Teachers need to become learners and identify with students. This implies that teachers need to learn about their students and change from the one-way learning that usually takes place in classrooms. They have to provide an environment of cooperation in which students learn by themselves, their classmates and their teachers and the teachers from themselves and from their students by means of observation and research.

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is the creation of **Interactional Spaces** in the school, where students are allowed for the free use of both languages with not restrictions, as well as to be exposed to the full range of bilingual language use, including code switching practices by a single speaker.

Lee et al (2008) carried out a study in a school which has a dual immersion program in California. These are programs which provide a context for students to engage in interactions using both languages, but which separate the languages by teacher and/or classroom. That is, they separate language instruction. However, according to the results, the strict separation of the two languages for instructional purposes appeared to be diminishing opportunities to use both codes as resources of problem solving. Besides, the separation of the two languages seems to lead to a stigmatizing of identities of teachers and students as speakers of either one language or the other, rather than bilingual speakers of two languages.

On the other hand, the expansion of teaching English not only to secondary learners but also to primary level learners or young learners plays an important role in our goal as well. Colombian policies go on that way through the National Bilingualism Program that I will refer later. This is then, a world wide phenomenon which needs to be taken seriously by the ELT field. Particularly, it has to be studied by secondary teachers and pre-service programs due to the impact that teaching children a foreign language brings.

Cameron (2003: 105) states, «for secondary teachers, there will be two


major areas of impact of the expansion of TEYL (teaching English to young learners): the need to cope with classes of mixed levels of language skills and knowledge, and the task of maintaining or restoring motivation over these long periods of language learning». Therefore, the teachers will be faced with different levels of competence and motivation. For instance they could find learners who think English lessons are boring or a waste of time, which means that the teacher has to think how to re-motivate them so that to succeed in language learning.

This is something that many secondary teachers in Colombia have had to face, since many primary schools are in the process of adapting their curricula for becoming bilingual; therefore, students' foreign language level of competence differ according to the school they come from.

It implies then, that all the children are different and there is the relevance of looking for the particular needs, so that later learning can build on the early stages. Teachers should have the ability to actively observe children, to identify their current state, their strengths and weaknesses in terms of language competence and reflect on these; in other words, teacher engagement and critical reflection over their job as mediators.

Bilingualism in the Colombian Context

Recently, in Colombia the state policies have favored the development of the mother tongue as well as the learning of a foreign language in the search of a


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«bilingual country». Therefore, the National Ministry of education - MEN (1999) - created the «National Bilingualism Program», under the parameters of the common European Framework; defining and socializing some standards for foreign languages, to be implemented in public schools.

The document «Estándares Básicos en Competencias en Lengua Extranjera» (2006) aims at achieving bilingual and bicultural learners, however, it did not give significant attention to the multiculturalism and multilingualism existing in our context, at least not until this year with a program that is being developed by the National Ministry of Education, which is named «Atención Pertinente a la Población Indígena en Edad Escolar» and which aims that all the educative institutions in Colombia guarantee conditions of equality and recognize ethnic and linguistic variations (Cely, 2007).

De Mejía (2004) makes reference to this concern arguing that in Colombia it may be noted while bilingualism in internationally prestigious languages, such as Spanish- English, Spanish-French and Spanish-German is considered worthy of investment of considerably sums of money, bilingualism in minority Amerindian or Creole languages (ethno education) leads, in most cases, to an invisible form of bilingualism in which the native language is undervalued and associated with underdevelopment and poverty.

All these accounts, then, evidence the importance for teachers to be trained in

an «intercultural pedagogy» and in the development of ethno education programs to be integrated into the school curriculum.

Aguado (2007) in <http://blog.educastur.es/rosarioaetwinning/2007/04/29/inmigracion-y-educacion-2/>, makes reference to the following definition of intercultural Pedagogy:

The reflection about education, understood as cultural elaboration, and based on the valuing of cultural diversity. It promotes educative practices addressed to all and each one of the members of the society as a whole. It proposes a model of analysis and performance that affects all the dimensions of the educative process. It refers to achieving equality in opportunities (understood as opportunities of election and access to social, economic and educative resources), the overcoming of racism and the acquisition of intercultural competence in everybody, whatever the cultural group of reference is¹

Therefore, schools and colleges of education need to provide prospective teachers with opportunities to reflect on all these issues before teaching children from diverse backgrounds. That means, to prepare them to respect and affirm the languages and identities of all the students who will be present in their classrooms in the coming years.

Similarly, de Mejía (2007) asserts that research has evidenced that in Colombia there is not knowledge of the principles of bilingualism, that is to say, teachers do not recognize the importance of those



¹ Translation made by
the author



principles and of researching on this area. It is left to empiric and logistic decisions like the number of bilingual teachers available in certain areas.

This implies then, the importance of promoting the formation of administrative and teaching staff in relation with the theory and practice in bilingual education according to an updated view in the field. Therefore, as I pointed out before, bilingualism is a concern that has to be taken seriously and has to be researched about and not simply followed as a force of habit to respond to the state policies.

Conclusions

Bilingualism refers to the ability of a person to use two languages in different contexts, to be able of establishing communication no matter if the person faces some minor lacks in the language to be managed. Therefore, once you can communicate with others in both languages you can consider yourself a bilingual.

Concerning the difference between early and late bilingualism, both have specific characteristics which can not be compared but which can be taken as advantages in the search of learners' bilingualism. Therefore, it is possible to reach competence in the target language at any age if we as teachers pay attention in the following aspects: self motivation, how much time is spent in the process, the teaching approach, and the particular needs.



The development of students' bilingualism depends among other

aspects, on the provision of a rich bilingual environment, suitable to learn by play and interaction, and on conscious and skillful teaching. Likewise, giving the students the opportunity to have interactional spaces, where both languages are used interchangeably by the same speaker for various purposes which foster the development of bilingual speakers. All these aspects are interesting and opened to be researched about as part of a reflective practice of teachers

It is vital that secondary teachers look for information about the learners who come to them from the primary sector, so that they can build on early language learning in effective and motivating ways.

The National Bilingualism Program of the National Ministry of Education has achieved a National motivation for the bilingualism phenomenon. However, to reflect its national characteristics, it is necessary to adopt a bigger view of what constitutes the bilingualism in the country, including the minority bilingual and multilingual communities, the state, and the private and public educational entities in the search of the bilingual programs of excellence.

Finally, teachers have to be prepared enough to match with the requirements of foreign languages schools and learners in a multilingual context as the Colombian one. In like manner, it is important to address pre-service teachers' interests not only in the majority languages but also in the language of the minorities, with the promise of social justice and equal educational opportunity for all students.


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