



Education Policies for Bilingualism and Stakeholders' Views and Practices: A Multicase Study in West-Center Colombia Language Education¹

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Abstract

Bilingualism has become a major theme in language policies over the last decades, reflecting language ideologies and guidelines for practice. Yet, stakeholders have responded to these policies in diverse ways. This multi-case study explores the language and education ideologies of language policies and Colombian policy stakeholders. Specifically, it examines how stakeholders exercise their agency in the formulation and application of the policies was also explored. The data analyzed includes interviews with stakeholders (see Appendix 1)—such as policy makers, scholars, test designers, administrators of second-language teacher preparation programs and language centers, and teachers from various cities of West-Center Colombia and recent national policy documents. The study shows an emerging shift in stakeholder's ideologies, discourses, and practices towards alternative, heteroglossic bilingual oriented views. Additionally, the study evidences the active and relevant role of stakeholders in the enactment and appropriation of policies and points to the influence stakeholders have exerted on written policies and official discourses. These findings suggest the need for more participatory and context-sensitive policies focusing on learner's necessities, expand language curricula, and foster heteroglossic teaching and assessment practices.

Keywords: agency, bilingualism, language education, language policy

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Políticas educativas para el bilingüismo y visiones y prácticas de actores interesados: un estudio de caso múltiple en la educación en lenguas del centro occidente colombiano

Resumen

El bilingüismo se ha vuelto un tema protagónico en las políticas lingüísticas durante las últimas décadas, representando ideologías lingüísticas y pautas para la práctica. Sin embargo, las partes interesadas han respondido a estas políticas de diversas maneras. Este estudio de casos múltiples explora las ideologías tanto lingüísticas como educativas de las políticas lingüísticas y de los actores políticos colombianos, y cómo los actores ejercen su autonomía en la formulación y aplicación de estas políticas. Los datos recolectados incluyen entrevistas con actores involucrados, tales como responsables de políticas, académicos, diseñadores de exámenes, coordinadores de programas de licenciatura en segunda lengua y centros de idiomas, y profesores pertenecientes a diferentes ciudades del centro-occidente de Colombia y políticas lingüísticas nacionales recientes. La investigación muestra una transformación emergente en las ideologías, discursos y prácticas de los actores involucrados hacia enfoques alternativos, heteroglósicos y bilingües. También resalta el papel propositivo e importante de los actores en los procesos de apropiación de las políticas y propone, también, la influencia que estos actores han ejercido tanto en las políticas escritas como en los discursos oficiales. Estos hallazgos sugieren la necesidad de generar políticas más participativas y sensibles al contexto que prioricen los requerimientos de los estudiantes, amplíen los planes de estudio de idiomas y promuevan prácticas heteroglósicas de enseñanza y evaluación.

Palabras clave: agencia, bilingüismo, educación en lenguas, política lingüística

Introduction

Colombia Bilingüe has become more than a national project; it has evolved into a slogan in educational discourses and political agendas in the country, particularly since the launch of the *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* 2004–2019 ([Ministerio de Educación Nacional \[MEN\], 2005](#)). This policy aimed, among other objectives, to improve the learning and teaching of English as the target second language in most Colombian schools. While this policy is not in place anymore, it has been influential in both academic discussion and the development of future policies, making it a relevant starting point for analysis. This program has been widely criticized for its narrow definition of bilingualism, focusing solely on achieving proficiency in English alongside Spanish (despite the dozens of languages that are present in the country) ([Bonilla-Carvajal & Tejada-Sanchez, 2016](#); [Mackenzie, 2019](#)). Similarly, concerns have been raised regarding the uncritical adoption of foreign frameworks, with scholars such as [Ayala and Álvarez \(2005\)](#) and [Cadavid et al. \(2004\)](#) highlighting the potential mismatch between these standards and Colombia's specific educational context. Additionally, [Correa and Usma \(2013\)](#) point out a reinforcement of standardized testing and teacher accountability measures within the policy, potentially neglecting other valuable aspects of bilingual and multilingual education. It is important to note that this policy was replaced by the National English Program (2015–2025), framed in the Law 1651 'Bilingualism Law' (2013). The program, branded as Colombia Very Well, aimed to improve English proficiency across all educational levels and in the workforce by focusing on teacher training, pedagogical models, technology, and societal involvement. However, these policies were also criticized for their 'homogenizing view of bilingualism' ([Miranda et al., 2024](#)).

These policies overlook the true nature of bilingualism; bilinguals are not simply two monolinguals combined ([Escobar & Dillard-Paltrineri, 2015](#); [Grosjean, 1989](#); [Hamers & Blanc, 2004](#)). Instead, exposure to two languages creates unique mental and social dynamics for bilinguals, even in predominantly monolingual contexts like Colombia ([Grosjean, 1989](#)). Learning another language inherently involves cultural dimensions alongside linguistic ones, particularly given the increased global interaction today ([García, 2009](#)). Bilinguals further develop distinct communication strategies in bilingual settings, using all available resources like code-switching ([García, 2009](#)). These factors highlight the limitations of current policies that treat bilingualism as simply mastering grammatical rules and vocabulary in two languages.

Critics contend that current imported language policies suffer from two main issues. First, they have a narrow understanding of both language learning and bilingualism itself. Second, they fail to consider the specific social and economic realities of Colombia's education system ([Cadavid et al., 2004](#)). For example, the adoption of frameworks like the CEFR is criticized for being a one-size-fits-all approach that ignores the diverse backgrounds and needs of Colombian students ([Cadavid et al., 2004](#)). Additionally, these students are different from the populations the CEFR was originally designed for.

Several studies (e.g. [García & Velasco, 2012](#); [Peláez & Usma, 2017](#); [Usma, 2015](#)) recognize the contribution and relevance of stakeholders—defined as actors involved in all levels of the policy writing and execution dynamics—challenge top-down policy practices, and identify important separations between national or government-led decrees and local conditions; and they evidence the way stakeholders understand and assume language policies by (partly) conforming to them or opposing them. These studies are also relevant since they show the importance of involving both stakeholders from all levels and diverse contexts into the research process in order to account for the great intricacy of policy dynamics.

Studies such as those by [Copp \(2016\)](#), [Hopfenbeck et al. \(2015\)](#), [Hurie, \(2018\)](#), [Janssen and Meier \(2013\)](#), and [Mølstad et al. \(2020\)](#) analyze trends in language policy and assessment, highlighting a shift towards standardization, prioritization of outcomes, increased measurement, and an emphasis on accountability in the various countries that were examined—Canada, Norway, United Kingdom or Colombia. They call for: (1) the reduction of pressures exerted by language assessment policies on schools, teachers, and students, as such pressure often leads to “teaching to the test” at the expense of broader curriculum goals; (2) developing more context-sensitive language policies; and (3) the involvement of all stakeholders in language assessment policies, including the voice of students.

Furthermore, existing language policies in Colombia have been criticized for their great disregard of Colombian multilingualism and plurilingualism (e.g. [Guerrero, 2008](#); [Bonilla-Carvajal & Tejada-Sanchez, 2016](#)). While a large majority of the Colombian population speaks some variety of Spanish as their first language, there are thousands of people who speak at least one of the minoritized languages in the country, including over 64 indigenous languages, two creole languages, Romani, or Colombian sign language. Nonetheless, these languages have largely been ignored both by written and de-facto policies which create a sense hierarchy among languages, privileging foreign-prestigious ones over local ones.

Probably in response to some of these criticisms (e.g. [Herazo Rivera et al., 2012](#); and [Mackenzie, 2019](#)), Colombian policymakers have implemented changes. These include the development of a new suggested English language curriculum and a focus on “functional plurilingualism” in recent national programs ([MEN, 2016, 2021](#)). To understand how these changes are perceived and implemented, this research examined both some new policy documents and the perspectives of stakeholders -actors involved in policy making and enacting process- within the education system. This can contribute to a clearer picture of the present state of bilingualism and bilingual education in Colombia, including how bilingualism-multilingualism, bilingual education and language policies are currently viewed, and how stakeholders exercise their agency.

Therefore, the questions this article intends to answer are:

- What are the language and education ideologies underneath the recent language assessment policies of the Colombian Education system and stakeholders from the west-center side of the country?
- How do stakeholders in west-center Colombia education engage with, adapt, and influence language policies through their policy enactment?

The Complexities of Bilingualism and Multilingualism

Defining bilingualism, multilingualism is not as straightforward as it may seem at first. To start, while some scholars regard bilingualism as an umbrella term for those to learn and use two or more languages (e.g. [Houwer & Ortega, 2019](#)), others make clear distinctions between bilingualism (referring only to two languages) and multilingualism (learning and using three or more languages ([Kemp, 2009](#)). While several authors and the [Council of Europe \(2007\)](#) locate plurilingualism at the individual level and multilingualism at the geographical level, [De Mejía \(2016\)](#) argues that this distinction is not common in Colombia since Multilingualism can be both used for the geographical and individual level. Therefore in this paper, bilingualism and multilingualism may refer to both the individual and the social level.

Traditional views on individual bilingualism, as defined by [Bloomfield \(1935\)](#), assumed that individuals should be equally proficient in both languages, comparable to native speakers. However, these notions have been challenged by scholars like [Birdsong \(2015\)](#), [Grosjean \(1996\)](#), [Treffers-Daller \(2019\)](#), and [Silva-Corvalán and Treffers-Daller \(2015\)](#). They pointed out that native-like proficiency is subjective, and bilingual and multilingual competence can vary greatly. More recent perspectives, informed by [Grosjean \(1989\)](#), reconceptualize bilingualism as a spectrum, with frequent use of two languages being more important than achieving perfect fluency in each. Bilingual individuals, as [Grosjean \(1985\)](#) notes, develop unique language skills and communicative behaviors shaped by their specific language use contexts.

Understanding bilingualism and multilingualism requires considering several aspects, as outlined by [Hamers and Blanc \(2004\)](#). One key dimension is *competence*, where balanced bilinguals ([Lambert, 1955](#)) have similar proficiency in both languages, while dominant bilinguals have a stronger language (often their native tongue). *Skills* should also be considered, as bilingualism or multilingualism are not limited to speaking ([Döpke, 1992](#); [Schüppert & Gooskens, 2012](#)). Receptive bilinguals, for instance, can understand a language but struggle to produce it, while productive bilinguals can do both. Bilingual and multilingual needs also vary, depending on learning experiences and communication needs. Some may require all productive and receptive skills for everyday communication in all languages, while others could primarily require receptive skills (like reading) or productive skills (like speaking) in a given language depending on their profession, background or domain.

Another important factor is the *social status* of languages. *Elite bilingualism*, as defined by [Fishman \(1977\)](#), involves having a dominant language, often European, associated with prestige or economic advantage. In contrast, *folk bilingualism*, on the other hand, refers to bilinguals from marginalized groups, whose first language is undervalued by governments and institutions ([García, 2009](#)). It is worth noting that most users of a marginalized language are also users of the more prestigious one, in this case being Spanish, and therefore they are already bilinguals. Additionally, in Colombia it is common for users of a marginalized language to speak, either for educational or geographical reasons, other neighbor marginalized languages or two elite languages such as Spanish, English or Portuguese.

Critics like [Mackenzie \(2019\)](#) argue that Colombian language policies promote “elite bilingualism” by focusing on English-Spanish, neglecting the rich linguistic diversity within the country, including indigenous languages and sign language ([Gómez, 2017](#); [Guerrero, 2008](#); [Mora et al., 2019](#); [Quintero Polo, 2009](#)). This claim is supported by [De Mejía \(1996\)](#), who narrates how the bilingualism or Multilingualism in minority Creole or Amerindian languages has been undervalued and ignored, and has been related to underdevelopment and poverty.

While this study acknowledges the great diversity of Colombian Multilingual and plurilingual landscape, the scope of this study made it necessary to include participants who mainly work with English and Spanish on their daily basis, yet, several reflections on their views of bilingualism and multilingualism acknowledges the Colombian multilingual landscape that has been presented.

Monoglossic and Heteroglossic ideological Approaches to Bilingual Education

Traditionally, bilingual or multilingual education has been seen as simply using two languages for instruction ([Cazden & Snow, 1990](#)). However, contemporary scholarship recognizes the diversity of such educational models ([Baker, 2001](#)). It can target either majority or minority language speakers, with goals ranging from language acquisition to fostering tolerance ([García, 2009](#)). The key distinction may lie in its broader educational aims compared to traditional language programs focused solely on learning a second language ([García, 2009](#)).

Bilingual education models also differ in their languages ideologies. Language ideologies refer to “ideas about language structure and use that index political and economic interests of individuals and the social groups and nations to which they belong” ([Fuller, 2019](#), p.119). When analyzing ideologies, it is necessary to also consider power dynamics and hegemony. According to [Woolard \(1998\)](#), hegemony refers to a form of dominance in which power relations are depicted as irrefutable truths leading to... internalization” (as cited in [Fuller, 2019](#), p. 119). Some models of bilingual education—such as subtractive and additive—are based on separating the two languages, leaning towards hegemonic monolingual ideologies. In contrast, newer models such as the dynamic approach, acknowledge the interconnectedness of languages in today’s world ([García, 2009](#)) hence depicting heteroglossic ideologies. In Colombia, there has been a predominantly monoglossic approach to bilingual education since there has been an overemphasis on English at the expense of not only Spanish but the rest of local languages in the country, in this sense, heteroglossic views of languages and education could be considered as counterhegemonic move in response to the traditional one, aiming at more inclusive bilingual or multilingual education models. This shift towards a heteroglossic approach (dynamic, fluid, interrelated use of multiple languages) embraces the complexity of bilingual and multilingual education. In this study, the concept of bilingual education is also utilized aligning with the language of main Colombian language policies for English-Spanish bilingualism.

Approaches to Understand Language Policy in Colombia

Since its beginning as a field of study, language policy and planning focuses on deliberate efforts to “influence the behavior of others with respect to the acquisition, structure, or functional allocation of their language codes” ([Cooper, 1989](#), p. 45). One way in which these efforts manifest is through language policies in education, and they tend to translate into policies setting goals and guidelines for language structure, use, and learning within schools. But

language policy goes beyond official pronouncements. [Spolsky \(2004\)](#) identifies three key components: (1) the actual language practices within a community, (2) the values assigned to various language varieties, and (3) the efforts to influence language use.

Theories about how language policy is shaped vary. Some adopt a rationalist, top-down process focused on efficiency and control within educational institutions, emphasizing standardized teaching, assessment, and curriculum (e.g. [Perrow, 1986](#)). However, as [Usma \(2015\)](#) critiques this perspective as overly limited, advocating instead for a broader approach that considers the social dynamics, cultural characteristics, and historical context of language policy formation, which may imply considering comparative, critical and sociocultural perspectives of language policy.

[Tollefson \(2006\)](#) outlines three core dimensions of Critical Language Policy (CLP) research has three key meanings. On one hand, CLP critiques traditional research for neglecting the social and political aspects of language policies. Additionally, it aims for social justice by examining how language policies contribute to perpetuating inequality and by advocating for policies that improve people's conditions. Finally, according to the author, CLP is influenced by Critical Theory, a field of knowledge that explores how systems of inequality are created and maintained. In all these ways, it is evident that critical language policy research takes a stance against injustice and promotes social change. Some of the policy directions and language ideologies that CLP can analyze, and question relate to monolingual ideologies, standardization ideologies, native-speaker ideologies, and market-oriented ideologies ([Fuller, 2019](#)).

Finally, sociocultural approaches to Education Policy (e.g. [Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#)) and language policy (e.g. [Johnson, 2013](#)) view policy as a contested terrain where stakeholders actively participate and exercise agency when they enact policies through their interpretation, resistance, and appropriation. Therefore, local actors can adapt or resist imposed policies based on their needs ([Usma, 2015](#)) and ultimately, they may transform the enacted policy ([Ricento & Hornberger, 1996](#)). This approach acknowledges formal documents but looks beyond them to all influences on language use ([Spolsky, 2004](#)). It views language policy not just as a product but as a process -a verb- influenced by all language policy agents ([Johnson, 2013](#)).

Methodology

This qualitative research approach employed a multi-case study ([Stake, 1995, 2013](#)). Qualitative research allows for exploring and comprehending how individuals or groups interpret and assign meaning to social or human issues ([Creswell, 2014](#)) such as the complex perspectives and experiences of participants through the in-depth analysis of narrative data. A multi-case study was designed to allow for the analysis of different and diverse cases such as that of policymakers, test designers or administrators, institution administrators, and scholars from different contexts and their perspective in relation to the language policies and assessment practices. This study, rather than aiming at comparing cases that do not share a lot in common, aimed at exploring the unique experiences and perspectives of each stakeholder from their specific position in the chain of language policy appropriation ([Correa & Usma, 2013](#)). Drawing on critical ([Tollefson, 2006](#)), and sociocultural ([Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#)) perspectives, it examined the experiences of various stakeholders, including policymakers, teachers, and administrators ([Stake, 1995](#)). Ultimately, it sought to offer reflections from the complexities of language policy and Colombian Language education.

Context and Participants

The study examines the cases of nine stakeholders from various contexts within the system, including policymakers, test designers, scholars, language institution administrators, and teachers, all of whom are involved in assessment and language policies. These participants, some holding multiple roles, were purposefully selected from major cities across the region to ensure representation across different levels (national to classroom), sectors (public and private), and experience levels. The following table provides a brief description of the cases.

Table 1. *Case description*

Case	Role	Region	Experience
#1: PM-PB-DC	Policymaker	Bogotá (national)	Over 15 years in public/official sector, public administrator in education and bilingualism.
#2: TD/Ter-PB-RIS	Test-designer/Language Teacher	Risaralda	Over 13 years as a language teacher, experienced in test design and administration.
#3: Sch/TD-PV-DC	Scholar Test-Designer	Bogotá	Renowned scholar in language assessment, worked in bilingual schools, universities, and testing companies.
#4: Ter-PV-RIS	Language Teacher	Risaralda	Over 4 years as an English teacher, leader of the school's foreign languages team.
#5: Sch/Adm-PB-ANT	Scholar Administrator	Antioquia	Renowned scholar in professional development and language policies, administrator of a language institute.
#6: Sch/Adm-PB-CAL	Scholar Administrator	Caldas	Renowned scholar in professional development and language assessment literacy, director of a language education program.
#7: Ter-PB-RIS	Language Teacher	Risaralda	Provisional language teacher, working with students from rural areas.
#8: ADM-PV-VAC	Administrator	Valle del Cauca	Director of a language institute, involved in internationalization processes.
#9: PM/Adm-PB-QUI	Policymaker Administrator	Quindío	Local policymaker, held administrative positions at a public university, and worked as a professor in language teacher training.

Data collection methods

The data for this study consist of semi-structured interviews with all participants of the inquiry and two policy documents. Semi-structured interviews were selected since they serve to gather in-depth information from participants. This methodological choice is supported by [Johnson \(2013\)](#), who claims that “the best methods for understanding the actions of language policy agents include interviews with those who are involved with, or impacted by, language policy processes...” (p. 239). It is important to highlight that semi-structured interviews were piloted with people who held similar positions, which allowed for the improvement of the instruments. Most interviews lasted 40 minutes to an hour and were conducted in Spanish; the participants' native language, except for one conducted in English to accommodate the interviewee's preference. All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription and analysis. The interviews were designed to elicit narratives about their own views of bilingualism and language policies, personal and institutional language assessment practices, and challenges related to bilingual education policies. Additionally, the study also included two policy documents: Law 1651 (2013) outlining national bilingual education mandates and the Plan Sectorial 2018-2022 ([MEN, 2021](#)) detailing language development policies of the 2018-2022 government. [Johnson](#) also acknowledges the importance of analyzing documents as part of qualitative approaches to language policy studies. The analyses of the documents focused on mentions about language learning, the framing of bilingualism, and the presence or absence of multilingual perspectives. While the selected policy documents focus primarily on English as a foreign language, their implicit treatment (or omission) of Colombia's multilingual landscape was also analyzed, particularly in relation to how stakeholders navigate tensions between official discourses and local linguistic realities.

Data analysis

This study employs content analysis ([Fraenkel et al., 2011](#)) to analyze both interview data and policy documents. This method, as described by [Patton \(2002\)](#), involves making sense of qualitative materials by identifying key themes and meanings. It goes beyond surface content to uncover deeper underlying ideas ([Dörnyei, 2007](#)). The analysis follows a typical protocol involving coding, reducing, inferring and narrating the answer to the research question ([Krippendorff, 2004](#)). This process was carried out in the software Atlas.ti, after initial coding the process was validated with the advisor who would inspect the accuracy of the codes and selected fragments. The data visualization that emerged after the coding allowed for the better appraisal of tendencies in the data.

Findings

This section presents and discusses the study's main findings. It highlights different perspectives stakeholders have on bilingualism and bilingualism education, as well as how this view seems to be changing towards more heteroglossic ideologies. Also, a significant distance was identified between written policies, implemented policies and the actual views of stakeholders. Finally, I present the way in which stakeholders have managed to appropriate language policies and exercise their agency in the process.

Differing View of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education among stakeholders: The Challenges of Categorizing Language Education in Colombia

Stakeholders in Colombia's education system hold a wide range of perspectives on bilingualism, which in turn shape language assessment and evaluation practices. These views or biases can influence how students are assessed. While some hold monoglossic views on bilingualism, others hold more heteroglossic ones. For instance, Case #2 acknowledges the traditional view that "true" bilingualism requires equal fluency in both languages:

For me a bilingual person is a person who is capable of assimilating and reacting and interacting with the world in more than one language, not necessarily English in an equivalent way. (Case #2) ³

This traditional perspective sees the goal of bilingual education as having students achieve this balance. In a similar line, other stakeholders prioritize the target language, with some instructors even discouraging the presence of the first language in classrooms as other interviews evidenced. On the other hand, most of the interviewed stakeholders showcased a rather heteroglossic view of bilingualism as well as bilingual education, as the following participant evidences.

I am also familiar with and believe in the issue of bilingualism as a social phenomenon of named languages in contact that lead to communication processes between people from different countries that are obviously tied to immigration issues ... So, languages are living entities that are part of a society where humans interact, so learning a language is also learning that cultural part (Case #6)

As evidenced, some stakeholders see bilingualism as a social phenomenon linked to cultural exchange and immigration (Case #6). This perspective recognizes languages as constantly evolving and emphasizes the importance of intercultural communication. These extracts highlight the complexity of defining bilingualism, just as scholars like [Cazden and Snow \(1990\)](#) point out. The absence of a clear national policy likely contributes to the variety of opinions. Considering these diverse perspectives is crucial when examining assessment practices within Colombia's bilingual education system.

Stakeholder's Transforming views on Bilingualism and Language Education

Despite the variety of perspectives on bilingualism, a gradual shift towards more inclusive language ideologies is emerging. This reflects a "growing awareness the complexities of bilingualism and the need to embrace the diversity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds that learners bring to the classroom" ([Jaramillo-Calderón, 2023](#), p. 66). For instance, stakeholders are increasingly recognizing the value of the mother tongue and students' resources in their first language for teaching and assessing the second language. The following participants shed light on this:

We are also children of that paradigm where we thought that in our context student's Spanish was an impediment to learning English. This is already changing a little and we are thinking about how to devise, how to implement pedagogical strategies in which students use their Spanish to learn English effectively... How can I, as a teacher, make use of those genuine, legitimate and real linguistic resources that students have to assess English or help them to learn it? (Case #6)

³ All the presented data, except for case #9, has been translated from Spanish to the best of my knowledge.

This shift is also observed among stakeholders with high institutional power, who view language learning as a means of communication, learning, and task fulfillment. The next stakeholder highlights a holistic approach to English instruction in classrooms that expands beyond a single course.

You need spaces where you need to use the language to interact, to learn something, to fulfill a function, to fulfill a task. Well, that's what we have been trying to do with the training processes, with the materials we have produced, that English, more than an object of study, becomes an instrument to learn other things. (Case #1)

This aligns with the multilingual turn identified in Applied Linguistics and education coined by [Conteh and Meier \(2014\)](#) since more emphasis is placed on the dynamic nature of languages. It also suggests the influence of previous criticisms by scholars on policy making (e.g. [Correa & Usma, 2013](#); [De Mejía, 2011](#); and [Guerrero, 2008](#)) and the power stakeholders hold in the final enactment of policies ([Levinson & Sutton, 2001](#); [Usma, 2015](#)).

Written Policy Discourse vs executed Policy and Stakeholder's views

Additionally, a distance between policy discourses, policy implementation, and stakeholder views on the official approach to bilingualism and multilingualism was identified. For instance, while written policies talk about functional multilingualism and they claim to acknowledge the country's linguistic diversity, in practice, there is a hierarchy among languages. The National Bilingual Program (NBP)—the country's primary bilingual education initiative—focuses primarily on English, neglecting other languages, including indigenous ones. Additionally, there is a perceived distance between stated policies and the perspective stakeholders have about their implementation. The following extracts may serve as illustration:

Policy document

The Ministry is advancing in the establishment of a functional multilingualism approach that recognizes and promotes the cultural, ethnic and linguistic richness of the country with its more than 65 native languages, two Creole languages, ROM language and Colombian Sign Language, to foster the development of global citizenship and the cultural exchange that learning foreign languages, such as English, allows. (Plan Sectorial 2018-2022 MEN)

This excerpt suggests a move away from the traditional focus on English-Spanish bilingualism in Colombian policy, previously understood by many as the only type of bilingualism in Colombian language policy (e.g. [Guerrero, 2008](#); [Mackenzie, 2019](#)). In this newer discourse, the concept of “functional multilingualism” takes center stage, emphasizing valuing and maintaining Colombia's existing rich linguistic diversity, recognizing it as a core aspect of national identity. The policy also prioritizes fostering global citizenship and cultural exchange, thereby suggesting a broader view of language learning that transcends purely practical applications. This shift in the policy document reflects a more inclusive and heteroglossic approach to bilingual education, in line with recent trends that celebrate multiple languages (heteroglossic ideologies). Nonetheless, it's important to point out that this written policy may not always translate perfectly into practice, as the national policymaker suggests:

We must be more precise on the subject of bilingual education since bilingual education is a wide range. I only manage a part of that wide range, which is English as a foreign language in official educational institutions. The rest of it, what is understood as bilingual education in ethnographic terms and in terms of second languages, creole languages, sign language, is not within my reach because there are some teams and entities specifically in charge of native languages, sign language. And there is an area also here in the Ministry that is in charge of bilingual education in private schools, it is different ... we are only in charge of the National Bilingual Program... specifically of foreign languages in the official educational system. (Case #1)

While the policy excerpt from the Ministry of Education ([Plan Sectorial Mineducación 2018-2022](#)) mentions “functional plurilingualism,” which suggests a joined-up approach to language learning, there seems to be a gap between policy and practice. The NBP just focuses on foreign languages, primarily English. This creates a hierarchy where some foreign languages are more important than local ones. This narrow view ignores

Colombia's rich linguistic diversity, and the potential local languages have to help students achieve foreign language learning goals. The term functional-plurilingualism seems to serve as symbolic recognition rather than a guiding principle in curricular decisions. This highlights a persistent ideological gap, where written policies attempt to incorporate multilingualism discursively but remain largely monolingual in practice. Hence, the policy downplays the value and educational benefits of local languages for Colombian multilingual and plurilingual culture and identity, as the following stakeholder suggests.

One thing is bilingualism, and another one is the discourse, or the concept, or vision of bilingualism that the national government, the British Council and other institutions have been proposing in recent years. It is different, that is just the discourse that they have been promoting. But that does not mean that bilingualism itself is something bad, no, it is something desirable and something that we should promote. (Case #5)

These excerpts reveal a gap between what the latest language policies say and how stakeholders perceive them. Case #5 distinguishes between "true" bilingualism, a social phenomenon they see as desirable, regardless of the prestige of the languages involved, and the type historically promoted by the government and foreign institutions with heavy influence on Colombian language policy. This stakeholder criticizes these policies and their execution, arguing that they are not inclusive enough in practice. The stakeholder believes the policies fail to address Colombia's rich linguistic and cultural diversity, instead promoting a limited view of bilingualism (Treffers-Daller, 2019).

In short, the data shows that stakeholders perceive official approaches to bilingualism and multilingualism as limited, market-oriented, English-focused, and monoglossic. This demonstrates a gap between written policies and practices, where previous influential policies overshadow recent efforts to redefine bilingualism; therefore, at the end, official policies in practice continue to disregard Colombia's multilingualism as a dynamic phenomenon.

The previous observations suggest a disconnection between Colombia's recent language policies, their implementation, and stakeholder perception. As De Mejía (2011) urges, policies in multilingual and multicultural countries should consider both local and global languages. However, the NBP focus solely on English (and some French) reinforces an instrumental view of bilingualism (Usma, 2009), disregarding Colombia's multilingualism.

Stakeholders also reveal dissatisfaction with current policies since they perceive policies as disconnected from local contexts and lacking democratic participation. Studies by Pelaez and Usma (2017) highlight feelings of underfunding, centralization, and a lack of resources, leading to resistance and apathy within school communities. This suggests a need for the government to move beyond traditional, top-down approaches and engage stakeholders in creating more inclusive and theory-based multilingual education programs.

The study also suggests that while stakeholders hold diverse views on bilingualism and education, both their perspectives and official discourses are shifting towards more inclusive-heteroglossic approaches. This reflects the growing influence of scholarly work on multilingualism. However, a gap persists between written policies (promoting multilingualism) and their enactment, often monolingual and English-oriented (Jaramillo-Calderón, 2023)

Stakeholders' Active Engagement in Policy Enactment

While powerful traditional policies limit stakeholder influence, the research shows stakeholders "adopted various strategies to participate in policy discussions, exercise autonomy in their practices and actively engage in the policy enactment process" (Jaramillo-Calderón, 2023, 97). They question, debate, and resist policies they see as unfit for their local needs, pushing for more relevant approaches. Recent policies have included more stakeholder voices, but these efforts are still overshadowed by older, more dominant policies. This shows the necessity of ongoing stakeholder participation in formulating and implementing language policies that truly reflect local needs.

Issues such as evaluation, which is already very normalized, that is, there are rules for everything. Which tests are accepted? Which ones are not? What are the required levels? Why those tests? Where do these tests have to be presented? What are the scores, the relationship of the scores to the [Common European] Framework? all that is already normalized. ... In fact, we receive a lot of criticism because sometimes they say: "but if you are the University of Antioquia,

you have University autonomy. Why do you require, for example, a teacher to have a C1 [certificate] to be a teacher trainer here in the bachelor 's degree?" Man, because that is what the government demands. (Case #5)

Despite constraints imposed by powerful policies, as evidenced by Case #5, the scholar and administrator shows how policies related to evaluation and assessment are highly normalized and regulated, leaving little room for autonomous practices and some stakeholders must conform to these policies, even if they disagree. Nonetheless, data suggests that stakeholders have demonstrated agency by adopting "strategies to participate in policy discussions, exercise autonomy in their practices, and engage in policy enactment" processes ([Jaramillo-Calderón, 2023](#), p. 97).

We created an institutional policy a policy that helps us see where we are going in terms of foreign language. (Case #8)
If there is something that characterizes a space like this (the university), it is diversity; some professors do one thing and others do another, that is, there is no uniformity here, but that is simply part of the richness of the institutions. As dictatorial as a principal may be, it is very difficult for him to absolutely control the work of teachers. Yes, or at least in a country like Colombia it does not happen, maybe it's possible in other countries, yes, but in a country like Colombia it's very difficult. (Case #5)

The provided examples show how stakeholders actively participate in shaping language policies, particularly during the implementation stage, even when facing limitations from existing policies. Case #9 suggests stakeholders consider their local context and develop policy documents that address specific necessities of their communities. This allows them to adapt broader policies for their own purposes. Similarly, Case #5 acknowledges that restrictive policies cannot fully control stakeholder actions—particularly in diverse environments like universities. This stakeholder appreciates the helpful contribution of this heterogeneity to democracy and society.

Well, in general terms, we, as a university, have distanced ourselves from those official discourses around bilingualism. We do not share that view. And usually, we have had a critical position, and in our actions, we have marked a difference with those official discourses. We do not believe in them, but that doesn't mean ... that everything the government does is bad, no. (Case #5)

This stakeholder reveals a critical stance from an institution towards the government's approach to bilingualism. They don't simply follow "official discourses." The institution has analyzed government policies and actions and formed its own perspective on bilingualism, which differs from the government's. By distancing themselves from official discourses, stakeholders demonstrate agency and independent decision-making in their daily practices. They actively assess the advantages and possible consequences of top-down policies, suggesting a critical approach to policy enactment that goes beyond simply accepting or rejecting everything the government orders.

This participant aligns with research on language policies as social-cultural phenomena. As it has been evidenced, Stakeholders like teachers actively engage with policies, adapting them to local contexts ([Peláez & Usma, 2017](#)). This illustrates the complexity of policy making and the distance between national policies and local needs, making stakeholder involvement crucial in all the stages of policy-making ([García & Velasco, 2012](#); [Usma, 2015](#)).

The selected extracts demonstrate stakeholder awareness of policy limitations in real contexts; they actively resist and reinterpret these limitations through questioning and debate ([Honig, 2006](#); [Ozga, 2000](#)). This contributes to the idea that policy-making is a dynamic process ([Ricento & Hornberger, 1996](#)) where stakeholders are not passive executors of given policies but critical participants who can reshape policies to better suit their contextual needs. The data suggests stakeholders adapt and re-appropriate language policies to their local contexts, highlighting their ultimate role in shaping language education and assessment practices.

Conclusion

This research explored the complex connection between Colombian language policies and stakeholders in language education —teachers, test-designers, administrators, scholars, and policy-makers—as well as the underlying ideologies about language and language education. The analysis of policies through sociocultural and critical lenses

(Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Toffelson, 2006) showed the influential role of stakeholders, particularly high- and mid-level ones, in shaping policy implementation (Usma, 2015).

As the different cases illustrated, diverse perspectives on bilingualism and bilingual education emerged, with some stakeholders leaning towards monolingual ideologies and others rather embracing multilingualism and heteroglossic ones. This diversity reflects the growing influence of scholars in the field (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2018). However, a significant gap persists between the language views expressed in recent written policies (e.g., Plan Sectorial 2018-2022, MEN, 2021) and their implementation process. While official documents promote a “functional plurilingual” approach, practices often prioritize foreign languages, particularly English, over indigenous and sign languages. Additionally, data shows that “stakeholders [such as teachers, scholars, administrators and test-designers] perceive the policies... as market-led, monoglossic, and de-contextualized for some contexts of the country’s realities” (Jaramillo-Calderón, 2023, p. 106). This highlights the long-standing influence of traditional policies and assessments on language education in Colombia.

This study contributes to a deeper comprehension of Colombia’s complex policy dynamics, particularly the potential of stakeholders to influence policy enactment and planning. It also sheds light on the evolving language ideologies within the country’s bilingual education system. These findings call for further recommendations and suggestions, explored in the following sections.

The lack of a unified approach among stakeholders and across policies could lead to inconsistent efforts, fragmented stakeholder collaboration, and power imbalances. To bridge these gaps—particularly between lower-level stakeholders and policymakers—more inclusive conversations are needed. These conversations, involving policymakers, teachers, and potentially even students, should focus on collaboratively defining the goals and character of bilingual and multilingual education policies in the country, considering current theoretical and practical paradigms alongside the needs and experiences of local stakeholders. The study also recommends greater coherence between written policies and their implementation. Policymakers should ensure that official goals are reflected in practice, and they should re-evaluate the influence of traditional policies and assessments to avoid overshadowing newer initiatives. While the study sought to provide a mid-level understanding of the phenomenon, future research would benefit from broader studies at a national or international level as well as local studies that more deeply explore single cases of cities or educational institutions. Additionally, similar studies that take a closer look at the state of minoritized language education and stakeholders involved is of paramount importance.

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Appendix 1

Semi-structured interview protocol sample (Policymaker)

(Presentación personal y presentación del objetivo del proyecto)

(Presentación del Consentimiento informado y firma del mismo)

Icebreaker

¿Podría contarme un poco sobre su perfil profesional y su historia en este campo?

¿Cómo concibe el bilingüismo? ¿Qué rol cree que tiene en nuestra sociedad?

¿Cuál cree que es la importancia para un país como Colombia el aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera como el inglés?

¿Cuál es su opinión referente a la implementación de las políticas bilingües en Colombia?

¿Cuál es la relevancia de crear e implementar políticas encaminadas al aprendizaje y uso de una lengua extranjera como el inglés en el país?

¿Cómo es su participación en la creación de políticas lingüísticas en torno al bilingüismo y el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras?

¿(de acuerdo a las políticas actuales) Cómo cree que se debería evaluar el bilingüismo?

Desde su perspectiva, ¿cómo se configura la propuesta evaluativa de las políticas lingüísticas actuales del país?

¿Cómo cree que se pueden conciliar las políticas lingüísticas nacionales con las necesidades particulares de las diferentes regiones y localidades del país?

¿Cuál es la importancia del MCER en el proyecto de bilingüismo y su propuesta evaluativa?

(preguntar si no se menciona el tema) ¿Cómo coexisten las pruebas estandarizadas e internacionales con las políticas actuales en materia de bilingüismo?

¿Cómo cree que varían las necesidades educativas y lingüísticas de los estudiantes en los diferentes lugares del país?

¿Cuál es el papel del español en los procesos de valoración bilingüe en Colombia? ¿han participado en procesos de diseño de evaluación que contemplen la lengua materna de los estudiantes en el país?

