



Toward Inclusive Plurilingualism: Adopting an Ethnography of Language Policy Approach at a Public University in Colombia

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Abstract

This paper describes an ethnographic approach to developing a formal language policy incorporating English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in a Colombian public higher education institution. This study aimed to document the process undertaken for developing an institutional language policy that goes beyond solely teaching English and focuses more broadly on the recognition and promotion of plurilingualism and inclusion. Data was gathered from an ethnography of language policy approach including participant observations, qualitative analysis of existing institutional language documentation, surveys, and focus groups. Results suggest that adopting an ethnographical approach to language policy development provides a more inclusive way of considering the plurilingual realities of the region and not just the necessities of EFL teaching. By focusing on a single institution's challenges, the paper sheds light on some considerations that other institutions can learn from, especially when recognizing the complex sociolinguistic context that is public higher education in Colombia.

Keywords: ethnography of language policy, EFL, language policy, plurilingualism, higher education

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Hacia un plurilingüismo inclusivo: la adopción de un enfoque etnográfico de la política lingüística en una universidad pública de Colombia

Resumen

Este artículo describe una aproximación etnográfica al desarrollo de una política lingüística formal que incorpora la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en una institución pública de educación superior colombiana. Este estudio pretende documentar el proceso emprendido para desarrollar una política lingüística institucional que vaya más allá de la mera enseñanza del inglés y se centre más ampliamente en el reconocimiento y la promoción del plurilingüismo y la inclusión. Los datos se recopilaban a partir de un enfoque etnográfico de la política lingüística que incluía observaciones de los participantes, análisis cualitativo de la documentación lingüística institucional existente, encuestas y grupos de discusión. Los resultados sugieren que la adopción de un enfoque etnográfico para el desarrollo de la política lingüística proporciona una forma más inclusiva de considerar las realidades plurilingües de la región y no sólo las necesidades de la enseñanza de EFL. Al centrarse en los retos de una sola institución, el artículo arroja luz sobre algunas consideraciones de las que otras instituciones pueden aprender, especialmente al reconocer el complejo contexto sociolingüístico que es la educación superior pública en Colombia.

Palabras clave: etnografía de la política lingüística, inglés como lengua extranjera, política lingüística, plurilingüismo, educación superior

Introduction

Additional languages are included in the curricula of all levels of education globally, and English is usually the first additional language introduced for a variety of reasons that have been explored extensively elsewhere ([Bamgbose, 2020](#); [Cenoz & Gorter, 2012](#); [Miranda et al., 2016](#); [Nelson et al., 2020](#)). While success is not guaranteed, the formal inclusion of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the curriculum is a common strategy aimed at improving proficiency in the global *lingua franca*. Colombian educational language policies have traditionally promoted the acquisition of dominant European languages, such as English and French, since at least the early 19th century ([García León & García León, 2012](#); [Miranda et al., 2024](#); [Mora et al., 2019](#)). This tendency remains largely unchanged: government-led bilingual education initiatives continue to focus almost exclusively on EFL instruction, notably through the National Program of Bilingualism (hereinafter referred to as PNB) ([de Mejía, 2011](#); [Fandiño Parra & Bermúdez Jiménez, 2016](#); [García León & García León, 2012](#); [Valencia, 2013](#)).

When we consider the inherent linguistic diversity in Colombia ([González de Pérez, 2010](#); [Montes Giraldo, 1982](#)), English-centric policies are even more significant. Discussing language policies in Colombia thus becomes a somewhat fraught proposition. Despite the country's multilingual reality, these policies have prioritized English, effectively marginalizing the many other languages and varieties that constitute Colombia's linguistic landscape ([Mora et al., 2019](#)). Nevertheless, Colombia has traditionally performed poorly on international English-language testing,² demonstrating that the policy has not achieved its intended outcomes.

This paper presents a case study describing the complexities involved in developing an institutional language policy (LP) —referred to as the *Política de Plurilingüismo* (Plurilingualism Policy)— at a public university in the Caribbean city of Santa Marta, Colombia. Contrary to national trends, this LP aims to go beyond the predominant emphasis on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the expense of all other languages, aligning with recent research that underscores the need for a plurilingual approach ([Miranda et al., 2024](#)). The institution is located in an inherently plurilingual region, yet historically it has not established consistent formal policies and strategies for promoting language acquisition. In this study I adopt the stance of “plurilingual approaches” which involves “looking beyond dichotomous language policies in current HE (Higher Education) and to offer a viable alternative to EMI (English as Medium of Instruction)” ([Duarte, 2022](#), p. 368). This approach is crucial as it embraces linguistic diversity and supports the complex, dynamic linguistic realities of individuals and communities. Moreover, bilingual policies usually prioritize the acquisition of a dominant language, such as English, resulting in narrow or limited linguistic outlooks. In contrast, plurilingual approaches recognize the multiple languages and dialects comprising peoples' linguistic repertoires, fostering a more inclusive framework for language use and learning in educational contexts ([García & Wei, 2014](#)).

Moreover, this perspective supports the view of linguistic diversity as a valuable resource to be celebrated. In this study, I describe the development of policy that includes all relevant stakeholders in constructing a top-down policy guided by bottom-up stakeholders' needs. This approach sheds light on crucial considerations when designing and implementing policies that formally acknowledge the need for English acquisition while also recognizing and celebrating all languages, particularly those Indigenous to the region.

All documents and citations quoted originally in Spanish are my own translations.

Background

The focal university is located in a context wrought with challenges, including generally poor levels of education ([Miranda et al., 2016](#)), below-average results in international testing ([PISA, 2019](#)), limited investment in education ([Usma Wilches, 2009](#)), social inequality ([Rangel & Lleras, 2010](#)), and poverty ([Meisel-Roca & Ricciuli-Marin, 2018](#)). This project initially emerged as an institutional initiative to develop a policy for the inclusion of English in all undergraduate programs, such as those implemented in numerous other Colombian higher-education institutions —in response to poor results in state standardized testing ([Miranda et al., 2016](#)). However, it quickly became apparent that an EFL policy alone

² For example, in the Education First English Proficiency Index, Colombia placed 81 out of 112 countries, ranking ‘very low’ in 2020.

was far too simplistic and likely would have resulted in the erasure of the plurilingual realities of the context. Indeed, a shift towards a more plurilingual approach in policy has started to gain momentum in Colombian higher education, exemplified by official policies like the Universidad de Sucre's *Multilingualism Policy* and the Universidad Popular del Cesar's *Language Policy*. These initiatives highlight a growing commitment to linguistic diversity and inclusion within the region's academic landscape. [Trillos Amaya \(2020\)](#) highlights the importance of adopting plurilingual policies in the Colombian context, stating that they "should guarantee legal equality for languages in different domains of use, in the interest of a balance between the social factors and the equality that the rules prescribe" (p. 189). Accordingly, the onus lies not only in developing not only a language policy that provides a framework for the learning and teaching of languages, but also in ensuring its practical implementation,, so that it does not remain a policy resigned to paper, as is so often the case.

The focal university is the largest in the department of Magdalena, being the only public institution in the city of Santa Marta, serving approximately 25,000 students. Located in a region of remarkable biological and linguistic diversity, the institution's responsibility is heightened. Within its area of influence are four Indigenous languages: *Kaugiañ* (Kogui), *Iktn* (Arhuaco), *Damana* (Wiwa), and *Kankuamo*— the latter of which has been reported as no longer having speakers. Most importantly, in terms of inclusion, 98% of students belong to the lowest socioeconomic groups,³ demonstrating the critical role of the university in providing pathways and opportunities for development in the region.

In Colombia, language policies can historically be classified into two broad groups: policies that regulate Spanish and minority languages and those centered on foreign languages ([García León & García León, 2012](#)). Regarding the former, the 1991 Constitution marked a turning point by officially recognizing Indigenous languages. Article 10 affirms that the languages and dialects of the different ethnic groups in the country were to be recognized as official in their territories, and that bilingual education should accompany this recognition. However, for a range of reasons, this has not come to fruition ([García León & García León, 2012](#), p. 53). More recently, Law No. 1381 of January 2010—commonly known as the "Languages Law"—was enacted "to guarantee the recognition, the protection, and the development of the linguistic, individual, and collective rights of ethnic groups who have their own linguistic tradition, as well as the promotion of the use and development of their languages" (Ley de Lenguas, 2010). Although this legislation provides a legal framework for the promotion and protection of minority languages in the country does exist, this is not always reflected in concrete actions taken in communities nor by the responsible authorities, resulting in significant gaps between policy and practice.

Theoretical framework

Language policy and planning and the Colombian context

The field of language planning and policy (LPP) initially focused on national language planning, particularly in the context of post-WWII and the emergence of newly independent nations that needed to be paired with "their language" ([Spolsky, 2012](#)). In broad terms, language policy can be defined as the implicit or explicit policies that determine what, where, and by whom languages or varieties are spoken in any given context ([Stemper & King, 2017](#)). Over the past decades, the field has grown substantially, with [Spolsky \(2004, 2012\)](#) proposing three core elements: language practices, language attitudes, and planning. Language policies can take shape as either *top-down* or *bottom-up* approaches ([Stemper & King, 2017](#)). While the present study primarily exemplifies the development of a top-down policy, I argue that it nevertheless seeks to incorporate the plurilingual realities of the actual language users affected by its implementation.

In Colombia, the study of foreign languages (read: English) has traditionally been the focus to compete in an ever-demanding international market ([Miranda et al., 2024](#)). Yet the "intertwining dynamic between on-the-ground LPP practices and top-down language policies can both open and close spaces favorable for minoritized languages and multilingualism" ([Hornberger et al., 2018](#), p. 161). The National Bilingualism Program (PNB in Spanish), for example, is a key case-in-point of the impact broad top-down policies can have on speakers, wherein objectives

3 In Colombia, the National Planning Department determines a system of social stratification called *estrato social*, which specifies people's socioeconomic level depending on where they reside. Based on this evaluation, the amount people pay for utilities, taxes, and services varies. The levels range from 0 to 6, and 98% of the focal University's students belong to levels 0, 1, 2, and 3, evidencing that they attend to the most disadvantaged students in the region.

may be unrealistic, and the absence of minority languages from policy discussions may further marginalize already vulnerable groups (de Mejia, 2011; Mora et al., 2019; Valencia, 2013). Many LPP frameworks have been criticized because “policies often create and sustain various forms of social inequality, and that policymakers usually promote the interests of dominant social groups” (Tollefson, 2006, p. 42). Thus, it is essential to note that LPs can exacerbate and perpetuate social inequality, highlighting the importance of planning from the bottom up that centers the users’ needs and context over the prevailing dominant discourses on internationalization or the purported social mobility that can be attained via learning English (Bettney, 2022). For example, Mackenzie (2022) observes that “while English may promote social mobility for some, it also reinforces the dominance of powerful interests in the global North and precipitates social injustices” (p. 15). This finding sharply contradicts the dominant tropes upon which the language policies are usually based. In developing language policy, Miranda et al. (2016) state that “participation of different actors in language policy-making legitimizes its creation” (p. 16), yet must be led by the policy agents who have the authority and power to lead the processes, in this way ensuring representativeness.

Whilst the national government explicitly promotes bilingualism and bilingual education through the PNB, the reality is this model reflects “hegemonic ideologies as it valorizes languages, expertise, and relationships from outside the Colombian context” thus favoring “English as a foreign language at the expense of local Indigenous languages and Spanish” (Bettney, 2022, p. 262). To put it simply, “in Colombia, it is not possible to speak of a national bilingualism plan, but instead of the promotion of English as a foreign language” (García León & García León, 2012, p. 49). This EFL-centric focus has led to the erasure of all other languages or varieties that make up the nation (Bettney, 2022; de Mejia, 2011; García León & García León, 2012). Despite the existence of a national language policy for EFL, success has been elusive, resulting in heightened tension between not only Indigenous languages and Spanish but also English (García León & García León, 2012).

Ethnography of language planning and policy

Language policy research has been criticized for erasing the agency of those involved in participating in the actual language practices on the ground, often focusing disproportionately on the role and impact of hegemonic top-down policy (Hornberger, 2020; Ricento, 2006). From these shortcomings, the ethnography of language planning and policy (ELPP) approach has emerged as “a methodology that compares critical discourse analyses of language policy texts with ethnographic data collected in some local educational context” (Johnson, 2009, p. 140). This approach usually includes the analysis of texts and official documents. However, as Hornberger and Johnson (2007, p. 528) state, it “must be based in an ethnographic understanding of some local context. The texts are nothing without the human agents who act as interpretive conduits between the language policy levels”. Moreover, the value of adopting an ELPP approach is evident as it sees

LPP activities and goals as scalar, multilayered, and complex phenomena, and examines different language planning types (corpus, status, and acquisition planning) and language policy processes (creation, interpretation, and appropriation of policies), attending to both policy texts and policy discourses as well as on-the-ground policy practices. (Hornberger et al., 2018, p. 159).

Therefore, this approach provides ample space for in-depth understanding of how language practices can complement or contradict official policy, allowing for the development of new policies based on language communities’ actual needs and sociolinguistic realities.

Plurilingualism vs bi- or multilingualism

Adopting a plurilingual approach over restrictive bilingual or multilingual frameworks has multiple benefits for language development, particularly within educational contexts in plurilingual regions. Unlike multilingualism and bilingualism, which generally view languages as separate systems and strive for balanced fluency, plurilingualism conceptualizes an individual’s complete linguistic repertoire as interconnected and adaptable (García & Wei, 2014). Plurilingual competence focuses on the individual’s ability to navigate and combine languages fluidly, making use of partial competencies across languages to meet communicative needs. This recognition of partial competencies validates diverse linguistic backgrounds, encouraging learners to utilize their full range of linguistic resources (Piccardo, 2013). In

contrast, traditional bilingual models often impose monolingual standards that marginalize less dominant languages (García & Wei, 2014). Furthermore, by promoting the maintenance of first languages alongside dominant national and/or foreign languages, plurilingual approaches can contribute to linguistic equality and tolerance while simultaneously strengthening minority languages.

Method

This study employed a participant observation methodology within ELPP framework (Hornberger *et al.*, 2018; Johnson, 2009). I occupied a dual role as both a participant and observer in the language-teaching and university management processes, being a lecturer and director at the focal institution. Instead of being a hindrance, this gave me a unique emic perspective on the issues at hand (Crocker & Heigham, 2009). As Miranda *et al.* (2016) explain, language policy is not only what is written on paper; it also includes the explicit and implicit actions and linguistic practices of the actual users, highlighting the importance of bottom-up perspectives which are central to this study. Adopting an ethnographical approach gave me an insightful framework for understanding “how people create, interpret, and at times resist LPP across layered ideological and implementational spaces” (Hornberger, 2020, p. 121).

Any LP developed relies partly on stakeholders’ ambivalent attitudes and relationships with languages and varieties; thus, it is an ideological process (Canagarajah, 2006). This involves understanding that stakeholders’ views may only sometimes coincide with researchers’, meaning that a critical approach is required to ensure that the resultant LP is as broad and inclusive as possible. ELPP provides a useful framework to describe the design and implementation of this LP at the focal university, importantly adopting the emic perspective, allowing for linking micro-level practices to macro-level structures and revealing the complexity of the process (Miranda *et al.*, 2016).

Johnson (2009) proposes a methodological heuristic composed of five key elements: (1) agents, (2) goals, (3) processes, (4) discourses, and (5) contexts (p. 144). *Agents* are those responsible for creating and implementing the policy. *Goals* represent the stated objectives behind the policy’s implementation. *Processes* encompass the steps taken to develop the policy and put it into practice. *Discourses* include the implicit and explicit ideas and ideologies embedded within the policy. Finally, *contexts* refer to the social, geographical, and historical factors that shape the policy’s development, interpretation, and application (Johnson (2009)). I applied this heuristic to the documentation analyses, using it to code and identify trends and patterns in the data. The documents examined included course syllabi, class planning, a methodological proposal for teaching English in one faculty, and existent Academic and Superior Agreements. These legal documents serve as formal guidelines that orient the processes of teaching and accrediting competencies in second languages in Colombian universities.

Importantly, participant observation was the “method of choice” in ethnographic approaches to LP research (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 156). Together with a colleague, 43 hours of observations of foreign language-teaching classrooms were conducted to comprehend better the methodologies and approaches being implemented. Participant observation provides the opportunity to uncover the actual practices of what people do, not just what they say. Moreover, it allows for data triangulation and permits the researcher to “make sense of complex situations” (Crocker & Heigham, 2009, p. 168).

As part of this ethnographic process, I also conducted several focus groups (Dörnyei, 2007), conceived as broader semi-structured group interviews involving multiple informants (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007). These are understood as spaces “where you guide group discussion through a particular set of topics so that you can observe how situational interactions take place, and how issues are conceptualized, worked out and negotiated in those contexts” (Mason, 2002, p. 64). These sessions were conducted in parallel for reliability (Dörnyei, 2007) with the different key stakeholders: language teachers, students in general, deaf students, and Indigenous students. The aim was to explore *what issues were critical to each*. In line with Dörnyei, 2007 recommendations, the deaf stakeholder group was made up of 12 participants, who were chosen based on their status as deaf, as well as the university’s only deaf teacher of Colombian Sign Language (LSC), and two of the university’s LSC interpreters. For the Indigenous student focus group, the 12 students participated who were chosen based on dialogue with the representative of the university’s Indigenous student association. Finally, the general student focus group included students predominantly from the Faculty of Business

Sciences because they were the only faculty at the time that had incorporated languages in some of their programs and for reasons of availability. The student representatives to the Academic and Superior Councils also participated. Finally, to ensure broader representativeness and to deepen the insights generated, I administered a short survey at the end of all sessions. The following table summarizes all the data types generated for analysis:

Table 1. *Data sources analyzed*

Data type	Actors involved	Date	Details
Superior Agreement 8 of 2008, Superior Agreement 12 of 2020, Superior Agreement 21 of 2017	Superior Council	May (2008). June 2017 July 2020	The earliest and most recent agreements establish the notion of accrediting competency in a second language (English) for teachers. The main Agreement for establishing strategies for inclusion for students with disability.
Academic Agreement 40 of 2017	Academic Council	July 2017	The most recent Agreement formalizes requirements for students accrediting competency in a second language to meet graduation requirements.
Classroom observations	Author and a peer EFL lecturer	August – November 2020	These observations were carried out throughout the semester to ascertain the predominant teaching methodologies being implemented and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of language teaching. In total, 43 hours of class were observed, with 38 of the 49 teachers employed at the time being observed. Most classes belonged to the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences.
Language teaching methodological proposal for Faculty of Business and Economics	Language teaching staff from the Faculty of Business and Economics	2013	A proposal for a methodological approach to teaching English in the faculty. Focus only on English and predominantly on the legal framework and hours of instruction.
Language teacher's focus group and survey	Author	November 2020	Used to gather qualitative data on teachers' perspectives on language teaching in the focal University. Twenty teachers participated in the focus group and filled out the post-meeting survey.
Students' focus groups and surveys	Author	December 2020	Used to gather qualitative data on students' perspectives on language teaching in the focal University. Twenty-six students participated in the focus group and filled out the post-meeting survey. Separate focus groups were held for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.
Institutional Language Teaching Assessment	Author	January – December 2020	Prior to development of the LP, the University commissioned the author to conduct an assessment of how languages were being taught and why optimal results were not being achieved with the aim of designing an action plan to counteract these.

All the above constitutes what [Canagarajah \(2006\)](#) refers to as the ethnographic method in LPP research. Once all the necessary documentation had been gathered, the development of the policy became quite clear. The project followed ethical research guidelines, with the option to retract any information or not participate always offered. Pseudonyms were used in any data included in publications, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Results and discussion

The resultant LP of the present study, the *Plurilingualism Policy*, was developed by engaging with key stakeholders, analyzing existent documentation and legislation, and evaluating existent language policies in Colombian institutions. In what follows, I discuss the results and analysis of the process involved in creating this LP using [Johnson's \(2009\)](#) heuristic of agents, goals, processes, discourses, and contexts. Given the complexity and number of elements involved in the study, I have included the most salient parts of the data in the analysis for reasons of space.

Agents: The university and its stakeholders

The agents —defined as “both the creators of the policy and those responsible for policy interpretation and appropriation” (Johnson, 2009, p. 144)— included a wide range of key stakeholders who were consulted and played a part in constructing the final policy. I led the language teaching assessment, focus groups, surveys, and the final writing up of the policy itself. However, the eclectic voices of those involved in development ensured that a bottom-up policy would emerge, even if legalized via top-down processes. The university’s president commissioned the entire process, while further support and input were provided by a team comprised of language-teaching peers, lawyers, and university management (academic vice-rector, faculty deans). Students were also central agents, participating in several focus groups: one group represented the general student population, another included students identifying as Indigenous, and a final group focused on deaf students. The last group of agents were the language teachers involved on a day-to-day basis in implementing such a policy, with focus groups held for English language teachers (more than 90% of language teacher staff). Given that this heuristic is not static but instead flexible (Johnson, 2009), I shall elaborate on the agentive role of language teachers in the following section.

Goals: Improving Language Acquisition Outcomes

Although multiple goals informed the LP, it is important to acknowledge the dominant role of standardized national testing in Colombian higher education. The LP project stemmed from the institution’s poor performance in the standardized national testing in the English component, which led to the university president commissioning the institutional language teaching assessment. This study found that language teaching in the focal university included an overreliance on certain pedagogical materials (i.e., the ‘textbook’) and the total amount of teaching hours for English. Some degree programs had as much as 768 hours of direct instruction over 5 years, yet from 2016 to 2020, only 16% of their graduates reached a B2 level in *Saber Pro*, a state-run standardized test.⁴

A review of the 2013 methodological proposal for language instruction from the Faculty of Business and Economic Sciences revealed a document focused exclusively on teaching English, uncovering a discourse that emphasized the perceived importance of English and the erasure of all other languages and perspectives. In terms of methodology, there was no discussion of *how* languages would be taught, apart from a brief mention of “the communicative approach.” But what exactly did this approach entail? Moreover, what were the official guidelines for implementing this methodology? The discourse described a simplistic view of what language teaching encompasses, lacking clearly defined goals and evidently resulting in confusion in the faculty’s actions in language teaching. Importantly, no other faculty had even stipulated or attempted to define any policy, goals, or objectives of language teaching. It is worth mentioning here that given the importance of EFL for business faculties in Colombian universities, they often lead language-teaching processes, which can generate challenges due to faculty and management’s lack of language-related expertise.

Institutionally, the only existing documentation was via Academic Agreements (e.g., Agreement 40 of 2017), which stipulated the end goal of *accreditation of competence* in English yet did not define the process of how to get there. How can an institution position itself as inclusive yet simultaneously impose accreditation of a foreign language without providing training in the language? This was one of the major areas for improvement in university discourses that needed to be addressed.

A related concern was the absence of guiding documentation for the language courses offered. What were the objectives, learning outcomes, methodologies, and pedagogical materials to be used? Before this LP was developed, this was managed at the program level, and in fact, the brunt of this responsibility fell on the shoulders of teachers themselves. From observations of language teaching, a clear trend emerged immediately: many teachers were adopting something of a hybrid between the direct and grammar-translation methods (Cook, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2001), resulting in “teacher-centric classes” that involved little to no student interaction. This approach involved an over-reliance on the students’ L1 and a focus on explicit grammar study, with little emphasis on speaking and interaction. For example, one observation noted: “there was too much use of Spanish, although it is useful to use the L1 and does provide students access they need to move away from in a bit more”.

⁴ *Saber 11* and *Saber Pro* are state-administered standardized tests given to students when they finish high school (*Saber 11*), used for university admission purposes, and again when they have completed at least 75% of their credits in their undergraduate degree (*Saber Pro*). They are used to, in theory, objectively measure the development of knowledge throughout the degree program.

In another class, the observer recorded: “The instructor was on task. However, there was very little use of English; all instructions and questions were in Spanish. There was no eliciting from students, and in only a few instances did students answer questions in English.” These excerpts are representative of the overall trend in the observation data, in which a “teacher-centric” approach was predominant, demonstrating some areas needed for methodological development. Having the educator be the center of attention for periods is not necessarily troublesome; however, in any language teaching model, there should be structured situations in which the students can use the language and interact with peers and instructors in meaningful ways, with the focus on the *learner* (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). This trend was particularly concerning given the lack of exposure to the target language in the focal University’s context. That is, students need opportunities to develop the L2 via interaction, where they can negotiate and interpret meaning (input) and produce messages (output) (Ortega, 2009). Evidently, there is no one single language teaching methodology that can be universally applied and guaranteed to work (Cook, 2008; Richards & Rodgers, 2014), but current trends prioritize student interaction and production, with task-based group activities focusing on communication without ignoring linguistic form (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ortega, 2009).

Importantly, these findings on methodology were corroborated by the other agents, namely the students, via the focus groups and surveys. For example, for the question “What would you leave just as it is in the way we teach languages at the University?,” several students responded, “Nothing,” “Honestly, it is really quite average”, and one even suggested, “Nothing. I think it has to be reformed.” The suggestion that reform is needed demonstrates complete disillusionment with the teaching process, which concurs with answers to the question about their perception of language teaching at the university, with nobody mentioning that it was excellent, and 50% stating that it was either deficient or average. As for the question “What would you change about how we teach languages at the University,” responses included comments such as “I don’t like that the English classes are based on resolving exercises in a platform instead of speaking and listening,” or “methodology and class dynamics,” or “that it be a bit more didactic and dynamic.” These are just snippets that were representative of the general perceptions, although it should be noted that while some students were positive in their views, the broader sentiment was primarily critical, with most concern regarding the teaching methodology and resources.

Unsurprisingly, the teacher’s focus group was less centered on methodology, as addressing it would essentially involve acknowledging their own shortcomings. Nevertheless, methodology emerged as an area of concern for teachers in various questions. For example, in response to the question, “What is your general perception of language teaching at the University?” a teacher stated, “I think that even though we have amazing students, teachers do not focus on what’s really important, which is making students users of the language, and they just focus on teaching the book and grammar instead.” Once more, these comments support the broader findings regarding language teaching methodology, in that most of the agents felt improvement, along with the establishment of clear goals and guidelines on language teaching in general, was urgently required.

The above findings fed into the shaping of the goals in the new plurilingualism policy, as language acquisition outcomes are undeniably a central aspect of the LP. These goals include improving language teaching approaches, internationalizing the curriculum, and obligatory study of a foreign language in all undergraduate degrees. The final version of the document will be discussed in more detail in the *Processes* section.

Discourse: The Existing Policies and Guidelines

In terms of discourses, I will present a snippet from documents that existed at the time of the study, summarized in [Table 1](#). Analysis of the existing documentation revealed that there was no formal LP that provided a framework for languages in the institution. Instead, there were sporadic and sometimes contradictory lower-level policies, such as AAs.

For example, Academic Agreement 40 of 2017, titled “By which the ... accreditation of communicative competencies in a second language is regulated,” provides a pertinent example of the focus on outcomes instead of how one was expected to reach such a goal. In this Agreement, Articles 3 to 12 outline the various mechanisms through which students may accredit their competence in a second language (in most cases, English), which is a national graduation requirement in Colombia. Article 3, for instance, states, “Students that have taken State-run exams and obtained at least B1 in the generic English competence module will be exempt from accrediting communicative

competence in a second language as a graduation requirement.” This article is the first of the section dealing with accreditation, and it places English at the front and center of the University’s language learning requirements. Yet, at the time, only the International Business program included second languages as part of the curriculum, and any student who wished to learn a language had to pay for classes on top of their usual study, demonstrating incoherence with the institution’s objectives of inclusive education.

Therefore, the above analysis shaped the final LP in that it demonstrated the need for the university to adopt an inclusive approach, one that provides students access to the study of second-language study without having to pay extra by including it in the study plans of each undergraduate degree. While the focus is undoubtedly on English, multiple mechanisms were created to promote broader plurilingualism, such as providing mechanisms for recognizing prior knowledge so students can study other additional languages, including Colombian Sign Language and Indigenous languages. This is a critical stance, underscoring that language acquisition outcomes are not solely tied to English and placing value on the learning of Colombian languages—an area previously overlooked and further discussed below.

Contexts: Inclusion and Linguistic Diversity

The two focus groups that were not focused on English were particularly insightful as they demonstrated how far the institution still has to go in terms of genuine inclusion and equality. The university’s Superior Agreement 21 from 2017 states that the goal is “to promote the real and effective inclusion of students with a disability,” yet only Article 5 mentions Colombian Sign Language. Unfortunately, this article only deals with accreditation of competence in a second language and makes no mention of providing constant support throughout their degrees. Regarding Indigenous students, the previously mentioned AA40 of 2017 merely exempts them from demonstrating competence in English, based on the assumption that they are already bilingual. This assumption is problematic and reveals the lack of comprehension of the linguistic realities of the region. As stated in AA40 of 2017:

ARTICLE SEVEN: Students whose native language differs from Spanish are exempt from demonstrating competence in a second language as a graduation requirement. Likewise, students with disabilities whose native language is different from Spanish will have this recognized as demonstrating competence in a second language as a graduation requirement. (p. 2)

Thus, once again, the university has set linguistic goals without the relevant processes in place to achieve them. Moreover, there is no recognition of the Indigenous students’ varying L1 and L2s, nor a provision of strategies to develop their linguistic skills throughout their degrees. The key finding of the analysis of agreements and existing regulations is that there was no formal support structure in place aside from the provision of interpreters to deaf students and the exemption from English accreditation for Indigenous students, which obviously needed to be addressed in the design of the LP.

Due to the pandemic, the Indigenous and deaf student focus groups met virtually in 2020. Several clear trends emerged from the sessions, primarily the lack of support they felt they were receiving from the institution regarding their L1 and support in their L2, i.e., Spanish. Regarding deaf students, it became clear that their academic challenges are in large part due to their limited knowledge of written Spanish. These linguistic limitations were evidenced in the survey via their responses (the questions were conducted in Spanish but with Colombian Sign Language video interpretations). The Indigenous student focus group also highlighted a need for more linguistic support to develop their written academic Spanish.

Moreover, participants highlighted that, aside from one elective course at the time, no Indigenous languages are offered at the university. It is important to note here that the linguistic competencies of each participant in the focus groups were not necessarily homogenous. While there were a lot of self-reported “balanced bilinguals,” further data is needed on the degrees of bilingualism of the university community members who belong to Indigenous groups and may or may not speak a different L1. Finally, critical Indigenous stakeholders suggested support is not only needed in Spanish but also in terms of their L1s, given the reported deficiencies in the so-called bilingual *etnoeducación* models implemented in the region in which Indigenous languages are treated as if they were foreign languages (Trillos Amaya, 2020).

Processes: Creation of the Final Policy

The significance of moving beyond English-Spanish bilingualism and adopting a plurilingual approach lies in the university acknowledging that although learning an international language like English is essential, so too is valuing the country's broader linguistic diversity. For better or worse, students *need* to learn English. Therefore, it is fundamental that EFL in policy depart from an inclusive standpoint. Otherwise, it will simply service the elite who have access to quality education ([Bamgbose, 2020](#)). By the focal university including EFL as part of the obligatory study plans without additional cost for students and by teaching it in ways adapted to the local context, it may be possible to break that vicious cycle of self-serving elitist policies that Tollefson described in the Philippines (2000, as cited by [Bamgbose, 2020](#)), which I would argue tends to be the norm in Colombia.

Recognizing diversity begins with the official acknowledgment of the other languages present in the sociocultural context, but it must go beyond mere recognition. For example, policy must be developed *for* Indigenous students, not just including them as an afterthought. This involves several elements, such as support in Spanish as an L2, developing a competency framework for teaching Indigenous languages that comprise its context (for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students), promoting intercultural communication, and collaborative research, among others. It is worth noting that the offering of language courses —meaning an official presence in the higher education system— can play a key role in broader maintenance and revitalization strategies ([Limerick, 2022](#)). One critical step in this journey is establishing a linguistic competence framework for teaching Indigenous languages at the university. The implementation of the CEFR in the PNB, for example, has been critiqued for its lack of contextualization or limited applicability to the Colombian context ([Bettney, 2022](#); [Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sanchez, 2016](#)), something which this activity aims to address, at least in part. Evidently, the objectives and outcomes of teaching an Indigenous language —official languages in the territories— cannot be assumed to be the same as teaching European languages. Developing an Indigenous language framework is challenging, but promising foundational work has been carried out in Canada with Algonquian languages, paving the way for others ([Planchon et al., 2022](#)). Thus, the goal is to develop a contextualized framework from which all Indigenous language courses could be designed, importantly both in dialogue and collaboration with the needs of each community. A special task force has already been established to achieve this, and work is underway.

Conclusion

What has become evident throughout the project is that any language policy implemented in this challenging context, whether implicit or explicit, must account for the rich linguistic diversity of the setting. By adopting an ELPP approach, I have shown that it is possible to develop a language policy that goes beyond superficial English-Spanish bilingualism and is attuned to the particularities and needs of the local context. Only time will tell how effectively the policy is implemented and whether the ambitious goals of the resultant plurilingualism policy will be achieved. The process undertaken in the present paper undoubtedly possesses some flaws, which are inevitably mine. At the same time, by adopting a plurilingual stance promoting and recognizing linguistic diversity, acquiring additional languages, and the core principles of plurilingualism themselves more broadly, one can only hope that the overall impact generated in the community will be positive.

By adopting a plurilingual —rather than a multi- or bilingual focus in developing LP— greater value is placed on the individual's linguistic repertoire. This perspective allows individuals to draw on varying levels of competence across multiple languages as needed, unlike multilingualism, which often treats languages as separate discrete entities and emphasizes complete fluency ([Piccardo, 2013](#)). However, of more significance to the present project is that plurilingual language policies can foster linguistic tolerance and inclusion by recognizing and valuing each language or variety within an individual's repertoire, as well as providing formal recognition of the right to maintain and develop one's first language alongside learning additional languages such as English. This point is crucial for a country like Colombia, where the onus has been on acquiring dominant foreign languages while turning a cold shoulder to its own linguistic and cultural diversity and heritage. A plurilingual language policy can provide the launchpad for change in this regard, even if it is slow and complex.

The focal university has positioned itself as one of those at the forefront in the Colombian context, moving beyond the simplistic and exclusionary binary of “English-Spanish” elite bilingualism (Ellis, 2016, p. 83), instead attempting to foster genuine intercultural plurilingual spaces. To my knowledge, the university’s Center for Plurilingualism is also unique. That is, I believe there is a need for more universities in the country, in particular the state-funded, to also position themselves as plurilingual via official language policy developed together with their stakeholders. Despite the apparent strength of Indigenous languages in the region, we cannot simply ignore the situation in terms of the longevity of the Indigenous languages in the focal university’s area of influence due to linguistic contact, possible language shift, the hegemonic role of Spanish, and further to this, English. Perhaps widely adopted plurilingual language policies in Colombian universities can become one small instigator of change in this regard. However, as Canagarajah (2006, p. 154) puts it, “Since community needs and attitudes may be ambivalent, the processes of implementing policy can be multifarious, and the outcomes of policy surprising.” Therefore, what will emerge from this process is, evidently, impossible to know. However, by adopting the plurilingual stance, one can hope for positive change and greater recognition of the region’s inherent linguistic and cultural diversity.

In November 2021, the Institution’s Superior Council approved Superior Agreement No. 12 of 2021, namely the *Política de Plurilingüismo*, which culminated the project’s policy-designing phase.

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