



Surfing over the concept of Bilingualism/ Bilingual Education in Colombia: A systematic review in local academic journals

Miguel Martínez-Luengas¹ 
Lizette Antonia Mendoza Huertas² 

Citation: Martínez-Luengas, M. & Mendoza Huertas, L. A. (2026). Surfing over the concept of Bilingualism/Bilingual Education in Colombia: A systematic review in local academic journals. *Colomb. Appl. Linguistic. J.*, 28(2), pp. 1-18.

Received: 26-Jul.-2025 / **Accepted:** 02-Jun.-2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14483/22487085.23947>

Abstract

This systematic review explores how the concept of bilingualism has been defined and interpreted in Colombian academic journals between 2004 and 2024, a period strongly shaped by national bilingualism policies. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, the review analyzed 58 peer-reviewed articles. Thematic and frequency analyses revealed four recurrent conceptual trends related to personal, sociocultural, educational, and institutional dimensions of bilingualism. Findings reveal a shift from proficiency-based definitions to more sociocultural and critical perspectives. Ultimately, the study contributes to the national dialogue on bilingualism by providing a clearer, more diverse picture of how it is conceptualized in research and how this shapes educational practices and ideologies in the local field.

Keywords: bilingualism; bilingual education; Colombian academic journals; language policy; systematic review.

1 Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá D. C., Colombia, Email: lmartinezlu@unal.edu.co

2 Fundación Universitaria Monserrate, Bogotá D. C., Colombia, Email: direccionbilingue@unimonserate.edu.co



Navegando por el concepto de Bilingüismo/ Educación Bilingüe en Colombia: Una revisión sistemática en revistas académicas locales

Resumen

Esta revisión sistemática explora cómo se ha definido e interpretado el concepto de bilingüismo en revistas académicas colombianas entre 2004 y 2024, un periodo marcado por las políticas nacionales de bilingüismo. El estudio analiza 58 artículos revisados por pares, siguiendo los lineamientos de PRISMA 2020. Los análisis temáticos y de frecuencia revelaron cuatro tendencias conceptuales recurrentes relacionadas con las dimensiones personal, sociocultural, educativa e institucional del bilingüismo. Los hallazgos revelaron una transición desde las definiciones basadas en la competencia lingüística hacia perspectivas más socioculturales y críticas. Finalmente, el estudio contribuye al diálogo nacional sobre el bilingüismo al proporcionar una imagen más clara y diversa de cómo se conceptualiza en la investigación y cómo esto configura las prácticas e ideologías educativas en el ámbito local.

Palabras clave: bilingüe; bilingüismo; política de lengua; revisión sistemática; revistas académicas colombianas.

Introduction

For more than two decades, bilingualism has been a core concept in educational policy and academic research, but even though it has its relevance, the term is defined in divergent and sometimes conflicting ways. For this reason, it is necessary to examine the concept to understand how bilingualism has been framed and how it has influenced educational practices at national level.

In this review, bilingualism is understood as a dynamic category molded by cognitive, sociocultural, and political dimensions. From a psychological perspective, bilingualism implies mental processes involved in the acquisition and use of two languages, including aspects such as memory, attention, and problem-solving. On the other hand, the sociolinguistic perspective considers bilingualism as a phenomenon that reflects and is influenced by social, identity-related processes and power factors in a community.

From a sociocultural focus, language policies involve linguistic ideologies, attitudes, and practices of a community (Johnson, 2013). Additionally, we are all inherently “multicultural” even without direct contact with other cultures, according to Grosjean (1993), who defines bilingualism as a collection of cultural networks.

The Colombian Ministry of National Education (MEN) since 2004 has viewed bilingualism as a strategic commitment for boosting competitiveness. The entity has examined this phenomenon from a variety of perspectives, including teaching Spanish as a second language to minority communities through ethno-education, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in public schools, and teaching English as a second language (ESL) in bilingual schools. These ideas were put into practice through programs as the National Bilingualism Program 2004-2019, the Program to Strengthen the Development of Competencies in Foreign Languages, the National English Program: Colombia Very Well 2015-2025 and Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2018³.

Bilingualism, understood as the ability to use two or more languages in daily life, goes beyond simple linguistic competence to examine identity and cultural aspects. In the educational context, bilingual education refers to the use of two languages to deliver academic content, with objectives that may range from communicative competence to cultural preservation. In Colombia, the concept of bilingualism has been marked by national policies that associate it principally with the English language, a fact that has generated debates about its scope and implementation.

Despite policy efforts, debates continue regarding the real impact of bilingual education, including the evaluation of its cognitive benefits and the comprehension of the complex theoretical perspectives that frame bilingualism in Colombia. Besides these challenges, it is important to recognize that bilingualism is relevant for multiple reasons, for example, it has been demonstrated that the cognitive development in bilingual people is more flexible and active, which allows them to comprehend mathematics concepts and solve problems more easily. Due to professional competitiveness, bilingualism can be a competitive aspect in the professional field, which enables stronger connections with clients, consultants, and colleagues from other countries and facilitates language learning. Above all, in the educational field, bilingualism can influence the academic and personal development of students.

The study examines how bilingualism and bilingual education have been defined in Colombia through a review of local academic journals. It aims to identify dominant concepts, debates, and contradictions, as well as to consider how these ideas have become embedded in educational and cultural practices. Although government policies such as the PNB encourage bilingualism to improve English skills for global

3 Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB) 2004-2019: Aimed to improve national competitiveness through English learning, establishing standards and teachers training, Program for the fostering of proficiency in foreign languages: Complementary to PNB, focused on the development of linguistic competence. Colombia very well 2015-2025: Intended to enhance the quality of English teaching, especially in public education. Colombia Bilingüe 2014-2018: Initiative that promoted English teaching in educational institutions, with emphasis in teachers training and evaluation.

competitiveness, they focus solely on English, leading to significant gaps and ambiguities about what bilingualism truly means in Colombia.

By the same token, this review seeks to compile and reframe the contributions of those who have explored and debated about this topic over the past two decades. It is necessary to put these theories and arguments on the table to establish meaningful and clear relationships with this concept. The bilingualism of English language policies is critically stated through perspectives such as linguistic imperialism, where English is seen as a mechanism of domination that endangers minority languages ([de Mejía, 2017](#)),

This systematic review identifies gaps and limitations in existing literature on bilingualism and bilingual education. It helps guide future studies and highlights the need to further explore and clarify bilingualism.

Accordingly, we state a research question and objective that guides all research procedures, ensuring clarity, relevance, and focus.

- Which patterns or trends emerge from the concept of bilingualism and bilingual education in Colombia?
- To point out the relevance of categorizing definitions-concepts of bilingualism/bilingual education in Colombia.

Thus, this systematic review minimizes bias in study selection and synthesis through rigorous and transparent methodology.

Methodology

Using a method of documentary research and comprehensive analysis of various articles in local journals, this systematic review aims to find, assess, and integrate the evidence of bilingualism and bilingual education. [Chong and Plonsky \(2024\)](#) affirm that a systematic review is one of various forms of literature revisions in applied linguistics.

A systematic literature review, or “research synthesis,” can be research- or practice-oriented. Practice-focused reviews evaluate difficulties in implementing a practice and argue for it ([Macaro et al., 2018](#)), while research-focused reviews assess the extent of prior research and offer updated searches to guide future studies. Literature search methods are carefully considered, and the selection process is precise. This review summarizes studies on the concepts of bilingualism/bilingual education using a systematic method and predefined eligibility criteria. It involves identifying, selecting, evaluating, and summarizing the hallmarks of studies exploring these concepts.

It is worth noting that this literature search dates to 2004, when government initiatives and academic interest began to emphasize the relevance and criticism of bilingualism in education.

This systematic review had as purpose to analyze how the concept of bilingualism, including bilingual education, has been defined and interpreted in Colombian academic journals among the years 2004 and 2024. The review followed a structured and transparent search strategy designed to ensure depth, coherence, and traceability throughout the analysis aligned with PRISMA 2020 guidelines ([Page et al., 2021](#))

The review focused on literature published between 2004 and 2024, beginning with the launch of Colombia’s National Bilingualism Program. Boolean operators and keywords were used in both English and Spanish, including terms such as “bilingualism,” “bilingual education,” “bilingüismo,” and “educación bilingüe,” to capture a wide range of relevant publications and conceptual variations. The search was carried out across multiple academic databases indexing Colombian journals including the number of articles that were traced back on.

As a result, a final corpus of 58 articles was built. The matrix included categories such as title, authors, year, journal name, institutional affiliation, keywords, type of article, theoretical framework, the concept of bilingualism manifested and analytical observations.

The journals were selected based on pertinence, trajectory, and relevance in the publishing of research on bilingualism. The systematic search was made between February and July 2025, using the search string “bilingüismo” OR “educación bilingüe” OR “bilingualism” OR “bilingual education”. We also applied filters per period (2004-2024) and research articles. The corpus included articles of the following journals at [table 1](#):

Table 1. *Distribution of the Selected Articles by Academic Journal*

Institutional Repositories	# Articles	Repository Access link
UD (CALJ Journal)	9	Portal de Revistas UD
UNAL (ProfileJournal)	9	Portal de Revistas UNAL
UdeA (Íkala Journal)	9	Portal de Revistas UdeA
Unisalle (HOW Journal)	10	Portal de Revistas Unisalle
UPN (Folios Journal)	7	Portal de Revistas UPN
Univalle (Lenguaje Journal)	5	Portal de Revistas Univalle
UPTC (Enletawa Journal)	5	Portal de Revistas UPTC
UPB (GIST Journal)	2	Portal de Revistas Única
UNISABANA (LACLIL Journal)	1	Portal de Revistas U SABANA
Uninorte (Zona Próxima Journal)	1	Portal de Revistas Uninorte
Total	58	

Source: Own elaboration.

Articles were accessed through the official institutional repositories of each journal to ensure direct access to the final published version of each article and to maintain a homogeneous and replicable search strategy.⁴

Data Analysis

To organize the findings systematically, we developed a data matrix that included the following categories: title, authors, journal, institutional affiliation, year of publication, access link, keywords, abstract, article type, theoretical framework, and the concept of bilingualism.

This matrix allowed us to code, compare, and identify trends across studies, laying the foundation for a robust qualitative analysis. The complete corpus is available in Excel format, titled Corpus Local Journals File.

The review process followed PRISMA 2020 ([Page et al., 2021](#)) guidelines to ensure clarity, replicability, and methodological transparency. Studies were evaluated ([Table 2](#)) based on a set of inclusion and exclusion criteria, as outlined below:

Table 2. *Inclusion and exclusion criteria.*

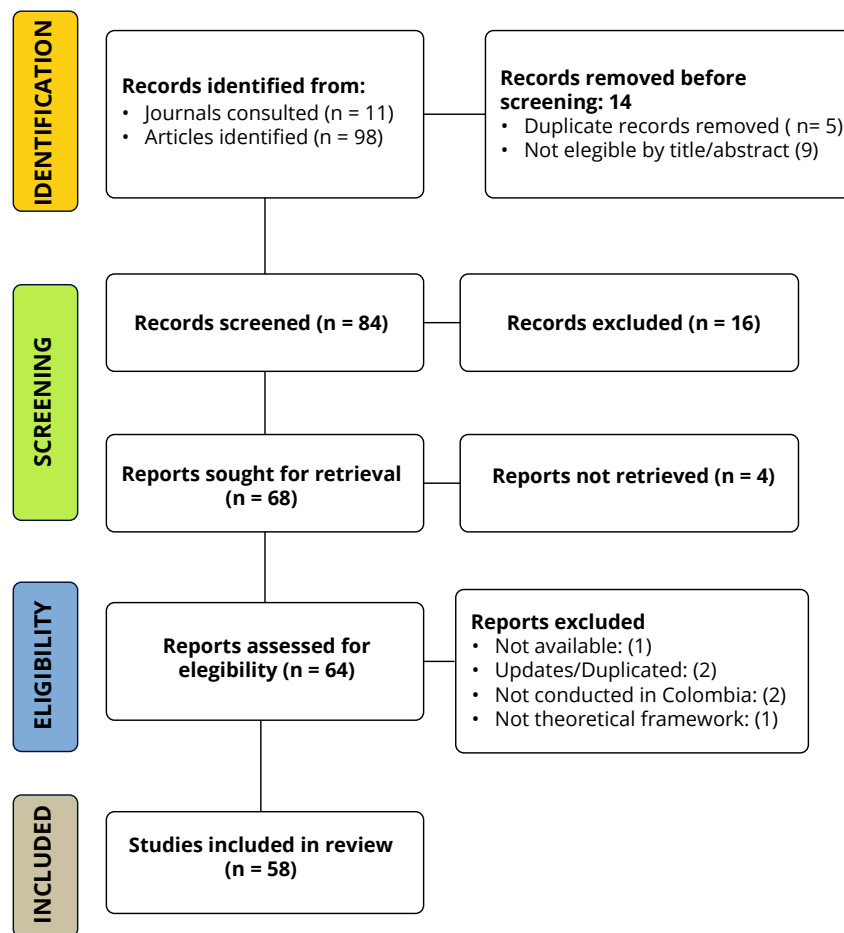
Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Explicit focus on bilingualism or bilingual education	Mentions bilingualism only tangentially
Published in Colombian peer-reviewed research journals	Published outside of Colombian academic contexts
Offers clear theoretical and/or methodological grounding	Lacks critical depth or theoretical support
Addresses issues related to policy, identity, affect, or context	Focuses on unrelated educational or linguistic themes

Source: Own elaboration.

⁴ These articles are also indexed in academic databases such as SciELO, Redalyc, and Dialnet; however, the links provided refer to the institutional repositories (journal portals) that served as the primary source for this review.

The search in 10 key journals identified 98 potentially relevant articles. After eliminating 14 duplicate or not eligible registers because of title, 84 abstracts were screened and 16, which did not accomplish the criteria, were excluded. 68 full texts were retrieved, although 4 could not be obtained. 64 were evaluated for eligibility. Finally, 6 studies were excluded for specific reasons, resulting in 58 articles that accomplished all the criteria for the systematic review. The full selection process is illustrated in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram ([Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1. Adapted PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for systematic reviews.



Source: Own elaboration.

After following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a total of 58 articles met all inclusion criteria and were included in the thematic and frequency analysis.

The concept of bilingualism emerged from an integral textual analysis. From deep reading of each article definitions were excerpted, both explicit ones (manifested directly by authors) and implicit ones (inferred from the contextual use of the term in theoretical frameworks, objectives, results and discussion). Then, these conceptualizations were synthesized and configured as the basis for thematic analysis.

We coded and categorized recurring themes, theoretical approaches, and policy positions across the studies. This method of concept identification is consistent with the inductive thematic analysis by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#) in which themes emerged from the data, with the qualitative content analysis by [Mayring](#)

(2000) which seeks latent meanings in texts, and with the hermeneutic tradition of qualitative research which values the contextual interpretation. Subsequently, we did an open and axial codification to identify recurrent patterns. This process allowed each of the 58 articles to be assigned to one primary conceptual category according to its predominant focus: individual, sociocultural, educational, or institutional. Secondary thematic intersections were recorded separately to avoid double counting.

These categories helped organize the findings and highlight how the concept of bilingualism has evolved within Colombian academic discourse over the past 20 years. To ensure the reliability of the thematic analysis, two researchers did an independent codification. Discrepancies were solved through discussion and consensus adjusting the categories definitions when necessary. This process of cross-validation allowed refinement of the system of categories and increased the consistency of the analysis, which ensured that the identification of the bilingualism concept was systematic.

To contextualize the identified conceptual trends, we also did a biometric analysis which offered a general view of the evolution of the field during the last twenty years. This analysis characterized the production per period, journals, authors, institutions, and thematic categories which provided transparency to the corpus and evidenced patterns and gaps.

Results

The thematic analysis of the final corpus of 58 articles identified four main categories. Twelve studies (20.7%) primarily addressed individual and social bilingualism; 15 studies (25.9%) focused on bilingualism and identity; 18 studies (31.0%) examined bilingual education in programs and local policies; and 13 studies (22.4%) addressed contextual issues concerning institutional and individual awareness. Each article was assigned to one primary category to avoid double counting, although secondary thematic intersections were also identified.

From the thematic analysis of the final corpus of 58 articles, we identified four main themes emerged from the thematic analysis: Twelve studies (20.7%) addressed individual and social bilingualism, 15 studies (25.9%) focused on bilingualism and identity, 18 studies (31%) addressed bilingual education in programs and local policies, and 13 studies; and (22.4%) examined contextual issues regarding institutional and individual awareness. We assigned each article one primary category, but the secondary ones we also identified, were incorporated in the discussion and conclusion section as a plus to feed the systematic review procedure. This can be seen from [table 3](#) as follows.

Table 3. *Evolution of the bilingualism field.*

Year Range	N° Articles	Main Trends
2004–2008	13	Early debate on bilingual policies
2009–2013	21	Critical peak following the 2004 PNB
2014–2018	19	Consolidation of critical approaches
2019–2024	22	Focus on interculturality and diversity

Source: Own elaboration.

Of the 84 abstracts screened, 58 articles were selected for the final analysis, which revealed this evolution from an instrumental conception motivated by policies to structural criticisms, then to alternative proposals focused on identity, and finally to decolonial and integrative perspectives. This suggests an increasing refinement in the academic analysis of bilingualism in Colombia as identified in [table 4](#).

Table 4. *Quantitative Biometric summary*

Years of publication	2004–2024, with peaks in 2012–2016 and 2021–2024
Predominant methodologies	Qualitative (interviews, case studies, discourse analysis), documentary review, policy analysis
Geographic focus	Primarily Colombia (regions: Boyacá, Antioquia, Quindío, Cali, Bogotá, San Andrés). Some studies in Latin America or comparative contexts.
Most common participants	English teachers, pre-service teachers, students, school administrators, Indigenous and deaf communities, policymakers.

Source: Own elaboration.

This analysis shows research in Colombia has been constant in two decades with critical and contextual studies increasing after 2015. Qualitative and critical approaches are predominant reflecting the interest in local realities. [Table 5](#) shows that teachers are the most studied participants showing research seeks to impact education practices.

Table 5. *Trends analysis by category.*

(a) Individual and social bilingualism (12 studies)
(b) Bilingualism and Identity (15 studies)
(c) Bilingual education in programs and local policies (18 studies)
(d) Contextual issues regarding Bilingualism (13 studies)

Source: Own elaboration.

Most of the articles fit into two categories, but they were classified according to their focus. categories c and d are the most numerous reflecting a strong interest in educational policies and contextual challenges in Colombia. category b is also predominant, showing an academic concern for identity and culture as dimensions of bilingualism.

Below, we go over each notion, using relational illustrations to highlight different national and regional circumstances.

Individual / Social Bilingualism

First, it is essential to recognize that social bilingualism is associated with the fact that there are two languages in a community or society; individual bilingualism essentially refers to the ability that allows an individual to use various languages effectively, or at least, similarly. This category includes 12 articles primarily focused on individual and social bilingualism. In clear justification, Ramos and Vargas (2014) point out that social bilingualism takes place when two languages are coming up and one of these is the most spoken in a social group. The languages used by these people are used in multiple settings and are not frequently covered in schools. Individual bilingualism is addressed however, if there are bilingual people in a monolingual social group. They claim that it is critical to distinguish between individual and social bilingualism. When there are bilingual speakers, their proficiency, or L1 / L2 policies to fulfill their requirements, this distinction is essential and must always be made (p. 25).

Given the country's conditions, we could argue that the concept of individual bilingualism is the most pertinent, even though there may be settings for bilingual practice, and the group relates mostly to its native tongue but not to another. As a result, the review process yielded six studies specifically addressing individual bilingualism, discussed below. Individual means to evolve in a dynamic of particularities and in keeping with the needs of the people who are involved. [Miranda \(2017\)](#) also focused on individual bilingualism, pointing out that a learner's specific characteristics and the conditions in which they perform and

acquire the language both influence the factors that obstruct learning a second language. Accordingly, she claimed that from a social point of view, bilingualism also has an impact on speech communities or societies; in this instance, an atmosphere where two languages are spoken or where some or all the members are bilingual can be referred to as a bilingual community. At this point, we were able to determine that social and individual bilingualism is related to performance, learning processes, and community interactions.

As an outcome, researching the concept of bilingual education or bilingualism in Colombia requires an understanding of the specific circumstances and requirements of the country at large. According to [Fandiño \(2014\)](#), a comprehensive vision of bilingualism considers multiple factors beyond the pure linguistic. Then, given that we identify people who come close to this ideal, we might conclude that such a definition would be useful. Additionally, he sets out a few basic principles regulating individual bilingualism.

We now contrast the notion of individual bilingualism with the idea of social bilingualism, which we consider to be an essential and worthy characteristic of attention in Colombia. According to recent findings by [Ikizer and Ramirez-Esparza \(2017\)](#), bilinguals exhibit greater social versatility than monolinguals. Although social flexibility is important in this context, we emphasize social bilinguals' ability to manifest, which is the ease with which individuals may move between and adjust to multiple social contexts. Out of the five authors/studies, we identified the concept of social bilingualism. [Bermúdez Jiménez and Fandiño-Parra \(2012\)](#) argue that bilingualism must be defined or understood holistically, considering the linguistic perspective as well as psychological, social, and cultural aspects. This is shown in the country's diverse regions and local territories, where speaking two languages can have significant implications for society; as well as [Lastra \(2009\)](#) highlighted the conditions that permeate bilingualism (contextual, critical and geographical).

To sum up this section of the thematic analysis, it is necessary to cite [Guerrero \(2006\)](#), who developed a critical discourse analysis of Basic standards for competences in foreign languages: English. Teaching in foreign languages: The challenge! (2006). She brought out the critical importance of bilingualism in Colombia: 1) Speaking English is a requirement for being bilingual; 2) The idea of bilingualism is compressed, unchanged, and monolithic. She does, however, demonstrate how social structures influence discourse form and how discourse impacts social structures. She focuses on analyzing the interaction between bilingual materials and texts and the social context from an epistemological perspective of social bilingualism to understand how a text may perpetuate or inquire about social systems, particularly with relation to power issues. This "power," as we understand it both regionally and experientially, is the development of strong cognitive abilities, such as integrating argumentation, concentrating, remembering, and making decisions.

This concept of individual and social bilingualism is permeated by different cases; this is how we noticed a tendency to involve context (real situations) within bilingual education processes. For example, [Baquero and Silva \(2014\)](#) showed the evolution of French teaching at "La Candelaria" school in Bogotá and the perceptions of all the actors involved in this bilingual educational process and where the French language has a social function at the school and offers the possibility of being used as an educational tool; [Cárdenas et al. \(2010\)](#) suggested the inclusion of development and training strategies, individual and social perspectives of learning and teaching, post-method theory, knowledge creation in school and social contexts and learning and significant English practice among teachers; [Castañeda \(2006\)](#) noted that several higher education institutions in Bogotá, in particular the administrative units of foreign language programs, are considered the main reference for the design of language programs, application of tests, elaboration of materials, etc., without considering that this was conceived based on social and economic reality, in addition to the needs of learning foreign languages, typical of the European population. Therefore, it is evident that both organizations, contexts, and the country's own reality are necessary to allow the notion of individual and social bilingualism to come into being.

Bilingualism and Identity

This category consists of 15 articles primarily focused on bilingualism and identity. From a sociolinguistic perspective, it is linked to situations beyond those that are just related to language and society since it is

intrinsically linked to the individual and the process of creating both individual and social identities. Scholars attempt to address a range of concerns related to the phenomena of bilingualism in different ways. Some of the general questions that are typically addressed include the following, among many others: Should bilinguals be seen as possessing two separate personalities or as having two personalities in one? What processes are involved in language switching? What role does the environment play in language learning? Since the definition of bilingualism varies from author to author, as was previously mentioned, there may be some variations in the suggestions provided. A very broad definition is offered by Grosjean (2008) who proposes that “bilingualism is the regular use of two or more languages (or dialects), and bilinguals are those people who use two or more languages (or dialects) in their everyday lives” (p. 10)

Besides such broad definitions, there are also those according to which reference should be made not only to the sociolinguistic perspective, but also the socio-psychological one.

According to [Escobar and Gómez \(2010\)](#), Nasayuwe implies the ability to express and share one’s own cultural heritage, including but not limited to language and religion, which is one of the primary sources of cultural identification for the Nasa community. This issue, consequently, sets off an identity-related matter affirmed by affiliations established through a common language, a common history and, in general, socio-cultural aspects ([Foucault, 1988](#)). Also, [Swain \(2000\)](#) mentions that physical and semiotic tools mediate our interaction with the physical and social environment.

Also, Canagarajah, 2005 stated, “Perhaps there is no return for anyone to a native land- only field notes for its reinvention” It seems that we (the community) have the right to decide to be different or not; according to the participants’ narratives on their local contexts.

However, the relationship between bilingualism and identity is rich and complex, both as a concept and as a formative process. It suggests increasing familiarity with the culture and experiences connected to each language and goes beyond simply being able to speak two languages. Being bilingual may improve one’s knowledge of other cultures, strengthen one’s sense of identity, and, in certain scenarios, provide a sense of belonging to both one’s own culture and the culture of the language being acquired.

As a contribution, it can be said that bilingualism allows people to navigate between different cultural expressions and, consequently, can shape identity in a more complex way. From a sociolinguistic perspective, bilingualism is linked to situations outside language and society since it is inherently connected to the individual and the process of creating both individual and collective identities.

Along these lines, another found paper deals with the relationship between bilingualism and ways of expressing emotions and thoughts. [Bakić and Škifić \(2017\)](#) published the results of their research in a Colombian journal on bilingual processes related to the emotional situations of the participants. The reflections on the research offer definitions of bilingualism and how bilingualism is connected to the construction of identity. For this purpose, we have been able to determine that identity construction and reflection, emotion experience, and reality comprehension all take place through (bilingual) language. By exposing a person to a variety of languages and cultures, bilingualism may affect how emotions are perceived and communicated as well as how identity builds up.

To close this category of Bilingualism and Identity, it is important to specify that there are several topics that are questioned and proposed, such as Interculturality, [Duque et al. \(2024\)](#); Identity of Indigenous English Language Teachers, [Arias \(2020\)](#); identity, and social equity, [Guerrero \(2010\)](#). Similarly, selecting which language to employ in various communication contexts may be a means of expressing one’s identity, demonstrating one’s self-perception, and desired image to others. Finally, since people who are bilingual can develop their identity through interaction with many linguistic and cultural groups, we cannot ignore linguistic identity, which is the representation of oneself and others through language, so, after tracing back this literature it is pertinent to notice that a deeper, more complex understanding of oneself and the world is made possible by language’s inherent connection to culture and self-perception.

Bilingual education in programs and local policies

In Colombia, the understanding of bilingualism has largely been shaped by policies and programs that emphasize measurable outcomes, often linked to international competitiveness. Since the launch of the National Bilingualism Plan in 2004, initiatives have promoted English teaching as a vehicle for global integration. However, this functional and standardized approach has tended to ignore the sociocultural, plurilingual, and cognitive dimensions that are essential to an inclusive vision of bilingual education. In a country as linguistically and culturally diverse as Colombia, such omissions are not trivial, they point out significant concerns around equity, access, and relevance.

This category includes 18 articles predominantly focused on bilingual education programs and local policies. These studies reveal fundamental tensions in the implementation of such policies. [Guerrero \(2010a\)](#) distinguishes between elite bilingualism, often associated with cultural capital and global mobility, and folk bilingualism, which tends to be imposed on marginalized populations. Even though the National Bilingualism Plan appears to aim for elite bilingualism, in real practices its application has replicated the own characteristic of the model imposed on vulnerable communities. [Gómez \(2017\)](#) supports this view by showing how national programs like Colombia Bilingüe have prioritized English Spanish language over multilingual realities, sidelining indigenous and Creole languages in the process.

The concept of bilingualism, as interpreted in local Colombian programs and policies, often reflects tensions between the aspirational discourse of national policy and the realities of the classroom. [Herazo et al. \(2012\)](#) shows that the ambitious goals of the policy are not achieved since its implementation is given under a narrow concept of bilingualism, and with persistent inequalities and limitations such as funding issues, low teachers' proficiency, and evaluation omitting intercultural awareness. In this vein of language policies; this systematic review considers the demands of local learners when learning foreign languages, in contrast to those of European students. This ensures that the common European Framework, while a valuable source of theoretical knowledge, is not adopted arbitrarily, as [Castañeda \(2006\)](#) and [Rodríguez Bonces, et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest.

At the level of school practice, [Lastra \(2009\)](#) documents how bilingualism is frequently associated with increased hours of English class, the hiring of native speakers, and lack of engage with interculturality or local needs. In the field of teacher development, [González \(2007\)](#) advises against the persistence of "native-speakerism" and colonial ideologies that shape teacher training, often excluding educators from meaningful participation in program design. Meanwhile, [Correa and Usma \(2013\)](#) argue bilingual policies tend to adopt bureaucratic and technocratic models, centered on benchmarks like CEFR, without acknowledging the everyday linguistic realities of communities. Similarly, [Usma \(2009\)](#) demonstrates how the implementation of global frameworks can deepen inequalities, favoring schools with access to resources while leaving others behind. [De Mejía \(2006\)](#) invites educators to rethink the dominant ways in which bilingualism has been understood, which frequently reduce it to a narrow focus on English-Spanish proficiency, and to pay attention to Colombia's linguistic diversity, it means to embrace a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding that acknowledges Colombia's multilingual heritage as a vital foundation for revising bilingual education beyond a utilitarian perspective on education.

In terms of curriculum design, [Ordóñez \(2011\)](#) highlights the mismatch between the aspirations of bilingual education policies and the realities of curricular implementation in Colombian schools. It reveals the challenges teachers face as they struggle to work within strict national guidelines while responding to their communities' realities. This contradiction is more evident in public institutions with limitations of resources, where bilingualism uses to be reduced to more English class hours assigned, without a real relation to students' mother tongue or their sociocultural contexts.

[Benavides and Mora-Acosta \(2019\)](#) examine how teacher beliefs evolve within culturally diverse classroom settings. Findings highlight the importance teacher identity has in the construction of pedagogical practices focused on bilingualism as well as the importance of involving teachers in shaping professional development experiences that reflect their classroom realities. Instead of adopting homogeneous

bilingualism concepts, this study proposes the creation of spaces for teachers to construct contextualized comprehension interacting with the cultural and educative realities in their communities.

In a similar way, [Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez \(2016\)](#) critically examine the assumptions that support the Colombian foreign languages policy. They argue that positioning English as the only indicator of bilingualism, not only limits the scope of education, but also minimizes the country's rich linguistic heritage, including indigenous and Afro-Colombian languages. Their proposal promotes a deep analysis of how linguistic policies are understood, applied with emphasis on inclusive approaches suited to local realities.

Extending this reflection, [Duque et al. \(2024\)](#) focus more specifically on educational realities in rural Latin American areas. They explore both the everyday and conceptual difficulties of bilingual education in multicultural rural settings. The authors emphasize that bilingualism is closely linked to the specific cultural context, identity, and collective knowledge, and remind us that educational policies must be co-constructed with communities.

This thematic review evidences the constant tensions related to the development of bilingual education in Colombia. Although educational policies and programs are still shaped by centralized approaches that prioritize English, there is an emerging vision that emphasizes teacher agency, local context, and linguistic diversity. From this critical view, bilingualism is no longer understood just as a technical or economic outcome, to be assumed as a commitment to social and cultural dimensions of education. Such an approach insists that true bilingual education must come from the experience of educational actors, not just from policy documents. Beyond centering on achieving international standards, this view promotes the reflection on the meaning of teaching with a bilingual approach.

Contextual issues regarding Bilingualism (Subject and Institutional awareness)

This thematic review reveals how teachers and institutions in Colombia understand and respond to bilingualism in real practices. These studies do not give a single or simplified view; these studies highlight a variety of teachers and institutional responses that reflect the challenges of language education in socially and economically unequal communities. An important insight is that personal perspectives play a key role in how language policies take shape in real educational contexts. Teachers are not just passive recipients of policy; they often interpret and adjust these frameworks, especially when they do not reflect the real situation their students live in.

In [Gómez \(2017\)](#) study, for instance, we see teachers questioning the relevance of applying frameworks like the CEFR in under-resourced public schools. These actions do not reflect resistance, but thoughtful critiques based on their commitment to teaching that respond to their students' needs and realities. Similarly, [Guerrero \(2010\)](#) and [Usma \(2009\)](#) affirm that teachers' identity is influenced by ongoing tensions between institutional expectations and the sense of responsibility they feel towards their communities. These tensions show up in daily classroom practices, in the decisions teachers make, and in how they manage teaching despite difficult situations.

It appears that institutional awareness of bilingualism is understood in different and complex ways. While some schools reduce bilingualism to more English hours or the hiring of native speakers ([Lastra, 2009](#)), others, like those presented by [Rodríguez Bonces et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Correa and Usma \(2013\)](#), approach it as an opportunity for empowering teachers and promoting reflection on their practices. This transition shows how professional development can become a collaborative, transformative practice. [González \(2007\)](#) adds to this perspective by showing that teachers' training continues to be shaped by colonial influences, highlighting the urgent need to rethink language educators' preparation with an intercultural and inclusive emphasis.

This category consists of 13 articles predominantly focused on contextual issues regarding bilingualism. These studies call for teachers' roles to be recognized as extending beyond technical aspects, valuing

them instead as active cultural, intellectual mediators and community referents. Bilingualism, from this perspective, is not understood as a policy aim; it is a site of tension, creativity, resistance, and potential transformation. The studies also remind us that both personal and institutional awareness are cultivated in the daily interactions between teachers, students, policies, etc. This awareness is supported by research that pays close attention to teachers and communities' perspectives and experiences.

Building on these perspectives, [Hernández, et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Duque, et al. \(2024\)](#) explore intercultural bilingual education stressing that its success depends on how it reflects the real languages and cultures of the communities. Their work makes it clear that policies, no matter how well they are designed, fail to meet their goals when ignoring local contexts. Similarly, [Morales Llano \(2022\)](#) reflects on how English teachers in Colombia face challenges when balancing international frameworks and standards with the diverse conditions of Colombian contexts. The findings of this study show the importance of training teachers not only to follow the policy, but to contribute to its creation based on teachers' reflections and informed practices.

Finally, [García and Reyes \(2022\)](#) examines the experience of Escuela Nueva teachers in Quindío who must adjust national curriculum demands to fit the specific needs of their classrooms. Their study is a powerful reminder that institutional awareness on bilingualism requires engaging with the specific needs and realities of each educational context. These contributions invite us to rethink bilingual education not as a universal prescription, but as a situated, collaborative, and context-sensitive process.

Teachers are considered not as passive recipients of external demands, but as reflective professionals who engage with educational policies, identity construction, and pedagogical practices based on the particularities of their social and cultural contexts. By the same token, there have been other issues that impact the contextual issues; for instance, according to [Valencia-Méndez \(2022\)](#), some linguistic differences may also be related to an interlanguage and a transference from Colombian sign language. This is comparable to what occurs with hearing bilingual learners, but the Deaf community is a minority in language use, with distinct modalities and social status. In this same vein, [García and Reyes \(2022\)](#) argue that despite the opportunities this area has had because of the introduction of new initiatives whose primary goal is to strengthen English teaching-learning processes, the difficulties in teaching languages in rural contexts persist. This demonstrates clearly the way bilingualism permeates contextually situated dynamics.

As researchers and educators, we are reminded that any conversation about bilingualism must begin with paying attention to the perceptions and experiences expressed by teachers in their classrooms, to the complexities of the contexts, and to the histories that shape what language means in each community. Only then can bilingual education evolve into a truly inclusive and socially responsive project.

Discussion – *The concept of bilingualism in Colombia*

The present systematic review identifies four central thematic axes surrounding the concept of bilingualism: individual and social bilingualism; bilingualism and identity; bilingual education in national and local policies; and contextual influences, including institutional and learner awareness, in Colombian academic discourse from 2004 to 2024. However, rather than demonstrating conceptual backgrounds, these findings reveal recurrent tensions and ideological disputes over what bilingualism means in the Colombian context. While government policies such as the National Bilingualism Program promote a reductionist view focuses on English proficiency for global competitiveness, the literature consistently challenges this narrow framing. As [Guerrero \(2010\)](#) argues, bilingualism is often constructed as a "packed, monolithic and homogeneous concept," which obscures the sociocultural and political dimensions of language use. This tension suggests that the issue is not merely definitional or conceptual, but deeply rooted in competing agendas about language, identity, and development.

From a critical perspective, the dominance of Spanish/English bilingualism reflects broader neoliberal and colonial logics that prioritize economic utility over linguistic diversity. Although Colombia is inherently

multilingual due to its Indigenous and Afro-Colombian languages, state-driven initiatives continue to marginalize these linguistic realities and socio-political practices. The institutionalization of bilingualism through the Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (MEN, 2006) reinforces a hierarchical language model in which English is positioned as the language of progress, while other languages are rendered invisible or secondary. As [Guerrero \(2010b\)](#) notes, this approach neglects the country's multilingual nature and reproduces unequal power relations. Consequently, local scholarly critiques ([Cárdenas, 2007](#); [Miranda, 2017](#); [Ramos and Vargas, 2014](#); [Rodríguez Bonces et al., 2021](#); [Usma, 2009](#)) go beyond description to question the ideological underpinnings of bilingual policies, arguing that they instrumentalize English language as a pathway to economic mobility while overlooking its implications for cultural identity, social equity, and epistemic diversity.

- Besides, as part of our discussion in this article, it is relevant to bring up some examples of how the concept and the notion of bilingualism become prevalent in our own territories:
- Urban Schools: To promote immersion, science and math classes are taught in part in English in many private and prestigious public institutions that have integrated strong English programs. [Bettney, E. \(2022\)](#); [Miranda, & Echeverry \(2011\)](#); [Sánchez, et al. \(2008\)](#); [Cárdenas, et al. \(2010\)](#).
- Rural Areas: The disparities in the implementation of bilingual policies are highlighted by the fact that teachers in rural areas sometimes lack the resources or training needed to teach English successfully. [Duque et al. \(2024\)](#)
- Ethnolinguistic Communities: Although bilingualism may include Spanish and an Indigenous or Afro-Colombian language (such as Wayunaiki or Palenquero) in areas like the Amazon or the Pacific coast, these types of bilingualism are not given much official support. [Benavides-Jimenez & Mora-Acosta, Y. L. \(2019\)](#); [Fandiño, Y. J. \(2014\)](#)
- Bringing National Bilingual Policies into practice: Implementing government initiatives like the (PNB), which aims to raise students' English proficiency to boost national competitiveness, involves bilingual teacher education. "The success of bilingual policies depends largely on the quality of teacher education programs and their ability to respond to local realities." [González \(2007, p. 319\)](#)

Therefore, the point is not simply the need for a clear definition of bilingualism in Colombia, but a critical interrogation of who defines it, for what purposes, and under which ideological standpoints. Framing bilingualism as a neutral or technical concept blurred its entanglement with geopolitical, cultural, and educational power relations. While local policy discourses often call for conceptual clarity to guide curriculum and teacher education, such clarity risks reinforcing hegemonic assumptions if it remains unexamined. In practice, dominant definitions have privileged a Spanish/English paradigm aligned with global economic agendas, and systematically marginalizing Colombia's multilingual realities. Thus, rather than merely seeking a unified definition, it is necessary to problematize how prevailing conceptualizations of bilingualism reproduce exclusionary strategies and limit more plural, context-sensitive understandings of language and education.

Conclusion

This systematic review reveals that the conceptualization of bilingualism in Colombia is marked by a persistent tension between two competing paradigms ([Bonilla Carvajal and Tejada-Sánchez, 2016](#); [Buendía, X. P., & Macías, D. F. 2019](#); & [Cárdenas, et al. 2010](#)). On one side lies a dominant narrative promoted by the government that equates bilingualism almost exclusively with English proficiency, shaped by globalization and driven by economic imperatives ([Correa & Usma, 2014](#); [De Mejía, 2006](#)). Then, this vision is evident in national policies, which position English as the primary gateway to competitiveness, mobility, and integration into global markets ([Ayala Zárate, et al. 2005](#))

On the other hand, academic research presents a more critical, pluralistic, and context-aware understanding. Over these 58 studies in local academic journal across the reviewed corpus challenge the reductive association of bilingualism with English/Spanish proficiency and advocate instead for models that honor

Colombia's complex sociolinguistic fabric, including Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and local linguistic ecologies. Scholars call attention to the marginalization of these languages under homogenizing policies and question the neutrality of English as a language of instruction, often highlighting its role in perpetuating colonial hierarchies and symbolic domination.

What these previous themes/reflections evoke is that the reviewed studies agree on a key idea: the evolution of bilingualism in Colombia depends on the deep understanding of the complex realities teachers, institutions and communities face. Subjective institutional perception is not merely a theoretical category; it is expressed in everyday experiences characterized by tensions, adaptations, and decisions that demand constant negotiation.

Similarly, bilingual education and the connection of teaching sciences is another situation identified in this research. Some issues brought up regarding the incorporation of the bilingualism concept in educational science class settings are also relevant in the learning process. [Mancipe and Ramírez \(2019\)](#). Then, the language plays a role in creating explanations in bilingual science classes as well as the use of teaching's own bilingual didactic ways.

Nevertheless, the literature review allows us to pinpoint a potential perspective regarding "sign language users" as bilingual opportunities. In their final year of high school in Cali, Colombia, four bilingual hearing-impaired students who are also Colombian sign language users describe their written Spanish as a second language in an article by [Valencia-Méndez \(2022\)](#). A collection of the students' written texts and interviews with them were part of the descriptive study. The information provided facilitated us looking at the sociolinguistic background of the students as well as the acts of different words. Since this kind of intervention focuses on alternative methods of reflection and analysis, it also contributes to the discussion about bilingual education in Colombia.

Through the analysis of 58 peer-reviewed studies, the four key themes emerged do not function in isolation; rather, they reveal the multidimensionality of bilingualism in Colombia, shaped by ideologies, power structures, histories, and evolving educational practices. The evidence suggests that Colombia stands at a crossroads. While progress has been made in expanding access to English language education, such efforts remain insufficient if they do not embrace multilingualism as both a right and a resource. True bilingual education must go beyond linguistic metrics and technocratic benchmarks to engage with the lived realities of learners and educators, particularly those in underserved, rural, and ethnolinguistic communities.

Finally, the article's overview lets readers comprehend that the concept of bilingualism is essential for acknowledging its possible impact on the individuals and society in a country; additionally, it is pertinent to stress that the value of linguistic diversity and the many benefits linked to having the ability to interact in two or more languages. Allowing people's relationships and sense of cultural identity are principles of bilingualism/bilingual education which take place in a territory/setting that requires this concept to be clear enough.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

AI is used to support the revision of academic writing, specifically to adjust grammar, punctuation and sentence-organization. The following sections were used: Results (first and last paragraph), Discussion (third paragraph), and Conclusions (first two paragraphs). The tool used is <https://quillbot.com/paraphrasing-tool>. The responsibility for the use of this tool is acquired by the authors of this article.

- AI was not used to generate research data, methodology, or to create images derived from the research results.

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