



**Title of Project:**

Colombian Education Policy for the Teaching of English  
as a Foreign Language: Its Appropriation in the Classroom

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**Final Report**

**Motivation for the Research**

Akin to most countries around the world (Cha & Ham, 2008, 2011), Colombian educational policy made English a compulsory subject in the official curricula. The Ministry of Education has established educational standards, recommended teaching methodologies, created curricular guidelines and published teaching materials seeking to improve students' proficiency level (MEN, 2006a, 2014c, 2016a, 2016b, 2016e). Most language policy research in EFL contexts has focused on the macro level (Beke, 2015; Canale, 2011; Glas, 2008; Hu, 2007; Plagianiri Cox & Assis-Peterson, 2008; Valencia, 2013) and studies at the meso and micro layers have analyzed policy agents' accounts (Basurto Santos & Weathers, 2016; Griva & Iliadou, 2011; Machida & Walsh, 2015; Pearson, 2014; Tejada & Samacá, 2012; Usma Wilches, 2015). However, up to now, there has been a dearth of research in the area of policy appropriation in the classroom, particularly through the use of the official textbook, the accompanying pedagogical practices, and classroom discourse. This doctoral research sheds light on the ways in which national and local policy actions and discourses impact teachers' pedagogical decisions and practices and reveals teachers' agency during times of centralized curriculum reforms. Findings in a setting where English is considered a foreign language, such as Colombia, might resonate with other parts of the world that share similar characteristics in their school systems.

**Research Questions**

Main question:

- How do English teachers interpret and appropriate the Bilingual Colombia program in the Secondary classroom of public schools?

Sub-questions:

- How do English teachers in public schools interpret Colombian educational language policy goals and what does this interpretation reveal of the current educational context?



- What pedagogical practices do English teachers employ in public schools and what do these routines indicate in terms of adoption, adaptation or rejection of the Colombian educational language policy?
- To what extent do English teaching and learning practices reflect teacher agency in policy appropriation or creation of classroom micro-policies?
- What connections can be identified between teachers' interpretations of the educational language policy and their policy appropriation practices?
- What ideologies underlie the documents and discourses of the national educational language policy within the current sociopolitical and economic context and how do teachers' discourses reflect these ideologies?

### **Research Methodology**

I used a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Johnson, 2009) to examine the interpretation and appropriation of Colombian EFL policy. The incorporation of two cases (Stake, 2006, 2010) allowed for the identification of both particularities and similarities of policy enactment at the micro level.

**Context and participants.** The research sites included two state-funded schools in Santiago de Cali, a city in the southwestern region of Colombia. As one of the participating schools (Melida Zamora School) was part of the group of institutions selected by the Ministry of Education for policy implementation, it was recipient of the different official policy plans: teacher development programs, the presence of a foreign language assistant and curriculum guidelines, and teaching materials. The other participating institution, Lideres School, did not count on such policy implementation strategies. Two 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teachers from these schools were part of the study. Other participants included 11<sup>th</sup> grade students, Heads of English departments, school principals, teachers of other areas and parents, as well as representatives from the Secretariat of Education in Cali and the Colombian Ministry of Education.

**Data collection and analysis.** Data were sourced using field notes; individual and group interviews with policy agents in the different policy layers; observation, video, and audio recordings of English classes; and document analysis, including the schools' educational project, 11<sup>th</sup> grade syllabi for English, student works, official ELT policy documents and macro-level policy agents' pronouncements. The analysis of the information was guided by ethnographic analysis (Copland & Creese, 2015), critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2006; Fairclough & Wodak, 2010) and classroom discourse analysis (Martin-Jones, 2015; Valencia Giraldo, 2006, 2017). The analysis involved reading and coding the information, grouping codes into families, and identifying salient themes. For classroom discourse, I selected, transcribed, and completed microanalysis of significant segments. Upon completion of the analysis of each school, I did cross-case analysis that allowed me to make assertions based on the similarities and divergences between the cases. Intertextuality was an important tool to connect analysis among policy layers.

### **Summary of Findings**

Research findings show that although teachers adhere to the instrumentalist discourse (Tollefson, 2013) about English language learning promulgated by the official documents and discourses, they exert flexibility towards the official language policy goals, adjusting them to perceived student needs and school contexts. Oral ability in the A2 proficiency level or below instead of the mandate B1 level is seen



by teachers as an achievable target for their classes. Regarding appropriation, teachers' pedagogical practices reveal the impact of the state-exam in curriculum enactment and the use of the recently published official English textbook as an instrument to negotiate the educational language policy in the classroom. More than a recipe, both teachers used the textbook as a resource, but they followed different paths while using, adding, deleting, or adapting content, which ultimately represents forms of policy adoption, adaptation, and resistance. In this process of teachers' interaction with the textbook, and in other activities of their lives in schools, teachers exercise curricular, extracurricular, and professional agency, which emerges as a combination of their own resources and, more importantly, their evaluation of the contextual situation and its demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Findings reveal that a significant factor of policy contradiction comes from the "focalization" strategy implemented by the Ministry of Education to allocate policy resources to a small group of schools, while aiming at education equity. Focalization seems to be creating a breach within the school system, between those public institutions that count on resources and programs and those that do not.

### **Implications**

A revision and evaluation of the focalization strategy by the Ministry of Education is urgently needed to ensure that official policy actions reach all schools and that the adequate conditions for proper English language teaching and learning are provided. It does not seem fair to demand the same results from all schools when there is significant disparity in terms of learning opportunities among the school contexts.

Meanwhile, given that current policy actions are not present in all schools, it is recommended that teachers seek, explore, and analyze the new policy documents and materials by themselves, preferably in teams. This strategic action by teachers would allow them to get to know the available resources and request their provision to the schools from the authorized entities. Only after knowing and evaluating the available materials can teachers appropriate them in the classroom.

The English component of the 11<sup>th</sup> grade state-exam should be redesigned to include all communicative skills if it is to continue to be used as the benchmark to evaluate the advancement of the language policy goals. While official discourses claim that the development of oral skills is an important aspect in the ELT policy, the content of the current state exam sends a contradictory message to teachers and institutions by focusing solely on reading, grammar and vocabulary.

Given that school contexts play a major role in policy appropriation, it would be expected that school administrators support ELT teacher initiatives to develop improvement projects. Teachers' voices need to be heard, not only by policy agents at the macro level, but also in their own schools where summative small changes matter for the creation of a new culture of English language learning.

Most teachers complain that most administrative posts in state-run schools are filled by professionals in areas other than in languages, resulting in English being treated as the "Cinderella" subject. It is time for English teachers to engage in administrative positions that allow them to lead projects that benefit English language teaching.



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