

Language Policy and the Manufacturing of Consent for Foreign Intervention in Colombia

La política lingüística y la fabricación del consentimiento
para la intervención extranjera en Colombia

Marlon Valencia*

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Canada

The present paper provides a critical analysis of Colombia's National Program of Bilingualism focusing on the ideologies behind it, how it facilitates the manufacturing of Colombian citizens' consent for foreign intervention through free trade agreements, and the progressive dismantling of public education. The program is analyzed with a critical language policy lens that brings into consideration the historical and socio-political factors of the Colombian context. For this purpose, several news articles, policy documents, and academic essays are discussed. Connections are made between this language policy, the interests of transnational companies, and how this policy helps portray the Colombian public education system as inadequate to fulfill the government's educational goals.

Key words: Colombian language policy, education policy, free trade agreements, manufacturing consent, transnational companies.

El siguiente análisis crítico del Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB) en Colombia hace énfasis en las ideologías que hay detrás de dicho programa y como este facilita la fabricación del consentimiento de los ciudadanos colombianos para la intervención extranjera a través de los tratados de libre comercio, al igual que la privatización progresiva de la educación pública. Se analiza el programa de manera crítica teniendo en cuenta los factores históricos y sociopolíticos del contexto. Para este propósito se discuten artículos de noticias, documentos del programa y análisis académicos. El artículo establece relaciones entre el programa, los intereses de compañías multinacionales y la manera como dicha política lingüística pone de manifiesto la insuficiencia del sistema educativo público colombiano para alcanzar sus propias metas.

Palabras clave: compañías multinacionales, fabricación del consentimiento, política educativa, política lingüística colombiana, tratados de libre comercio.

* E-mail: marlonval24@yahoo.com

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Introduction

In a globalized world, the role of English as a mediational¹ tool among different nation states (Kachru, 1992) has encouraged non-native English speaking countries to re-examine their foreign language policies in order to accommodate the new demands of a globalized community that uses English to generate knowledge through intense and simultaneous interaction (Graddol, 2007; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007; Matear, 2008; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Lee, Wha, & McKerrow, 2010). Colombia is one of the many countries currently fostering substantial changes to strengthen English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction all over the national territory, as a response to globalization, while also attempting to revitalize indigenous languages in a project that the government calls *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019* (NPB = National Program of Bilingualism; Ministerio de Educación, 2006b, p. 5). This language policy (LP) was presented in late 2005 (Usma, 2009a) as a subproject of the Colombian Ministry of Education's (Ministerio de Educación Nacional = MEN) Education Revolution (*Revolución Educativa*), a macro-project that aims to expand the educational system's coverage by offering quality education to Colombians (González, 2007).

The NPB appeared as the first long term LP that established specific goals to be reached in the whole educational system by 2019. The announcement of these goals produced an immediate reaction from practitioners and researchers, who started providing multiple critical analyses of the NPB (De Mejía, 2005;

Cárdenas, 2006; González, 2007; Guerrero, 2008, 2010; Usma, 2009a, 2009b) as well as from 'the public sphere' (Valdés, 2004), which in the case of Colombia comprises students, parents, school administrators, professional associations, employers, and any Colombian citizen without any kind of specialized knowledge or training in second language education (SLE). Moreover, the MEN's *laissez faire* approach with regard to disseminating, mainly among members of the public sphere², what the NPB envisions as bilingualism and bilingual education has resulted in a myriad of interpretations of these concepts and what SLE implies. These multiple interpretations of the NPB are commonly reproduced by Colombian media, precisely because as Holborow (1999) puts it "(...) language is something about which everyone has an opinion because every speaker knows something about it" (p. 151). The multiple conversations and understandings of SLE presented in the media are the main motivation for the present paper. The objective of this essay is to contribute to the existing scholarship on the NPB by analyzing the socio-political context in which this policy was created in order to understand the ideologies and interests behind it. A substantial part of this critical policy analysis (Tollefson, 1991; 2006) involves a discussion of the role of media in manufacturing Colombian citizens' consent for international intervention through free trade agreements, as well as the progressive dismantling of public education by magnifying the flaws of the public education system and presenting the Colombian state as incapable of providing quality public education.

This article begins by presenting its theoretical orientation and methodology, which are followed

¹ I use sociocultural theory of the mind's (SCT) term "mediational tool" in this case to highlight the role of English as human-made artifact, which may allow individuals and groups (or not, depending on their particular circumstances e.g. sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.) from different linguistic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds not only to communicate and exchange information, but also to satisfy their needs or accomplish their projected goals (i.e. gaining access to higher education or more job opportunities in a globalized economy, etc.) (see Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011 for more on mediation and SCT).

² De Mejía and Fonseca (2008) provide a comprehensive set of guidelines aimed at clarifying theoretical concepts, issues as well as the types of bilingual education commonly found in Spanish-speaking majority contexts in Colombia. However, this document was created as a set of "guidelines for educational institutions wanting to offer [bilingual education]" (p. 5, my translation), not to inform members of the public sphere about the NPB.

by a brief description of the linguistic and political neoliberal context in which this LP was created. Next, the discussion is followed by an analysis of the ideologies and interests behind the NPB, as well as how the media produce discourses which may serve to manufacture consent for the inadequacy of public education and foreign intervention through international trade agreements.

Theoretical Orientation and Methodology

In discussing these issues, I will use a critical language policy (CLP) lens to analyze the data presented. For Tollefson (2006), CLP falls within the “growing field of critical applied linguistics” (p. 42), a field that includes critical discourse analysis (CDA), literacy studies, and critical pedagogy. He identifies three main components of CLP: (a) a critical position with regard to traditional mainstream approaches to LP analysis, (b) CLP includes research that attempts to produce social change and (c) CLP research is influenced by the use of critical theory (2006, p. 42), which in the case of this essay also involves CDA as a theoretical lens that allows a critical view and understanding of the power relations present in the multiple discourses (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000) regarding English language proficiency and English language education in Colombia. CLP engages in a historical-structural analysis of the sociopolitical and economic contexts in which language policies are created and applied, whereas the *neoclassical approach* (Tollefson’s term for traditional research in LP) sees language planning as a response to planners’ perception of the language situation without taking into consideration LP’s stakeholders’ histories (Tollefson, 1991). In short, the *historical-structural approach* sees LP research as “inescapably political” (Tollefson, 2006, p. 49) and highlights the active participation of researchers in discussions that should lead to the creation of policies. Consequently, for the purpose of this essay,

the historical-structural approach to LP provides a holistic view that encompasses a wider range of factors that may inform the ideology/ies behind the NPB due to its emphasis on “the origins of the costs and benefits confronting individuals and groups” (Tollefson, 1991, p. 32) when learning or using a language, instead of looking at LP as if it occurred in a vacuum. In addition, Bourdieu’s (1991) notion of language as a form of cultural and symbolic capital, as well as the concepts of ideology and hegemony will also facilitate data analysis.

Language as Cultural Capital

For Bourdieu (1991), linguistic skills, such as language proficiency, cultural knowledge, or any type of specialized skills, are all forms of cultural capital that can be exchanged in a “marketplace of social interaction” (De Mejía, 2002, p. 36). This “marketplace” of interaction is a linguistic market in which a particular language, language variety or legitimate competence is highly valued over any other types of language competence or language varieties. As Bourdieu (1991) puts it: “The constitution of a linguistic market creates conditions for an objective competition in and through which the legitimate competence can function as linguistic capital, producing a profit of distinction on the occasion of each social exchange” (p. 55).

The current symbolic value of English can be attributed to the importance of this language as a meditational tool (Kachru, 1992; Graddol, 2007; Tsui & Tollefson, 2007; Matear, 2008; Menard-Warwick, 2008; Lee et al., 2010) to exchange and construct information, as well as to gain access to education and job opportunities; furthermore, the politics of global English are also closely related to the politics of globalization, as English is often regarded as the language of globalization (Sonntag, 2003). As a result, English becomes a symbolic resource (De Mejía, 2002). Therefore, individuals that possess the symbolic resource

of being highly competent in English could easily gain access to other valuable, educational and material or symbolic resources (De Mejía, 2002), and such resources can “acquire a value of their own and become sources of power and prestige in their own right” (Heller, 1994, as cited in De Mejía, 2002, p. 36). This accumulated prestige of being proficient in English would be what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic capital; in other words, cultural and symbolic capital present privileged individuals with access to material capital such as opportunities for upward mobility (Bourdieu, 1991).

Hegemony and Ideology

Hegemonic practices are defined by Gramsci (1998) as “institutional practices that ensure that power remains in the hands of a few” (as cited in Tollefson, 2006, p. 47). CLP analyzes the practices that become invisible because society often regards them as natural and they commonly occur without being questioned (Tollefson, 2006). Tollefson (1991) argues that ideology “refers to normally unconscious assumptions that come to be seen as common sense” (p. 10). It is these common sense assumptions that get built into the institutions of society and work by legitimatizing what should be considered natural conditions that marginalized individuals and groups will not even question due to the characteristics inherent in or natural to ideologies that result in the manufacture of consent by the oppressed (Tollefson, 1991). The term “manufacture of consent” was coined by Lippman in the early 1920s and was further used by Herman and Chomsky (1988) to explain how media are used to fabricate public opinion in favor of “the political requirements of social order” (p. xi).

One ideology present in ELT that is of particular interest to this study is the ‘common sense’ assumption that English can be used as a tool for upward mobility in education or the job market, which Tollefson (1991) argues is right at the core of the language education

ideology. Moreover, the relationship between language and ideology lies within the inextricable social nature of language since both language and ideologies are social constructs, or as Holborow (2006) puts it, it is language’s “social rootedness” (p. 24) that makes it overlap with ideology. Accordingly, it is through ideologies that hegemonic practices are built. Moreover, Tollefson (2006) explains the relationship between power and ideologies in Bourdieu’s terms by saying that through hegemonic practices, the structures of social institutions make the linguistic capital of dominant and non-dominant groups unequal.

Data Collection and Analysis

This LP analysis discusses not only this LP and its guidelines, but also takes into consideration other documents created by the MEN, newspaper articles, newscasts, a fictional video clip widely circulated through electronic social media (Colombia 2005, 2009), as well as critical analyses written by Colombian academics (De Mejía, 2005; Cárdenas, 2006; González, 2007; Guerrero, 2008, 2010; Usma 2009a, 2009b).

Data are analyzed using the framework discussed above in order to come to an interpretation within the tradition of CLP.

Linguistic and Political Context

Colombia is a country with a great linguistic diversity in which minority language groups speak Spanish as a second language and have either a native Amerindian language or a Creole version based on English or Spanish as their first language (L1) (De Mejía, 2005). Nation-wide, Spanish is the majority language, a language that has dominated education, as well as political, cultural and most public domains since colonial times; therefore, Spanish has constantly threatened Colombia’s indigenous languages.

The NPB was created during the first presidential period of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who was in office from 2002 until 2010. The Uribe Government was well known for introducing several important changes in Colombian legislation, many of them particularly benefitting national and transnational companies. In late 2002, the government created a labor reform as an attempt to give corporations a break with expectations that they could offer more jobs to unemployed Colombian citizens (“Reforma laboral”, 2007). The labor reform, also known as *Law 789* of 2002, extended day hours, depriving workers of earning night pay or holiday pay. Hence, day hours that before *Law 789* went from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM, were changed to go from 6:00 AM until 10:00 PM. This law also reduced the amount of termination pay that employers must pay in the case of wrongful dismissal. These employee pay cuts were made with the intention of giving 640,000 more people nationwide employment.

The effectiveness of *Law 789* in reducing unemployment rates was to be followed by a committee formed by two members of the Senate, two members of the Chamber of Representatives, The Minister of Social Protection and the Director of the State’s agency of statistics DANE. However, in 2007, due to this committee’s long silence in reporting the success or failure of the law, the Central Union of Workers (*Central Unitaria de Trabajadores*, CUT) hired a group of researchers from The National University (*Universidad Nacional de Colombia*) to do a follow up on the policy. This ad hoc group of researchers reported that unemployment rates did not decrease even though employers were saving approximately 4 trillion Colombian Pesos³ (CP)

3 As of July 17th, 2012, 1 American dollar is equivalent to \$1778.42 Colombian pesos according to Colombia’s National Bank, *Banco de la República*. All further conversions were made using this exchange rate. http://www.banrep.gov.co/series-estadisticas/see_ts_tm.htm#cotización

per year by not paying their employees the wages that the 1991 Constitution had previously granted them. These savings resulted in national and transnational companies becoming richer since *Law 789* came out (“Reforma laboral”, 2007).

The Uribe Government also continued the legacy of previous presidents that established unequal agreements with transnational companies and foreign governments. These agreements in many cases contained clauses that invalidated international treaties that Colombia had previously signed to protect its economy and biodiversity. Ramírez (2005) mentions how treaties and alliances with foreign companies and governments not only tended to undermine local unions, but also included many unilateral benefits for the foreign investors that were detrimental to Colombia’s products, its economy, its citizens and the environment, as can be seen in Ramírez’s words when he refers to the “preferential agreements” that transnational companies usually get:

Other legal changes included tariff rebates, preferential agreements—which are not applied reciprocally to products produced in our country—tax exemptions, tax parity between national and foreign industries, facilitation of profit repatriation, compensation for nationalization, and special guarantees in the case of lawsuits against transnationals. Cases of litigation between the State and private parties are referred to private arbitration tribunals whose decisions always end up favoring the rights of multinationals over the rights of the nation, resulting in enormous losses for the public treasury. (p. 35)

This linguistic and political overview of Colombia provides contextual information that helps to understand the possible motivations that the Uribe Government had to create the NPB and the connection between this LP and neoliberal practices that favor the exploitation of Colombia’s natural resources and its citizens by transnational companies.

The National Program of Bilingualism (NPB)

In 2004, The British Council (BC), as the specialized institution leading the NPB, advised the MEN on setting language competence goals for students and teachers using the proficiency levels established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF) as benchmarks (Ministerio de Educación, 2006b, n.d.). Accordingly, by 2019, all secondary graduates from both public and private schools are expected to reach the B1 level, a threshold level, which implies that language users can easily access and understand familiar matters regularly encountered in school, work and leisure activities (Council of Europe, 2001). University graduates and current EFL schoolteachers must reach the B2 level, which according to the CEF is a “vantage level” and implies a higher degree of complexity in the information that can be understood, which can include vocabulary on technical matters, while it also requires more elaborate writing skills. Finally, with regard to teacher education, new graduates of these programs must reach the C1 level which is described as users who possess an effective operational proficiency. This last level expects language users to be able to produce more complex texts and interact efficiently in most academic and technical matters (Council of Europe, 2001). It is important to highlight that C1 comes right before C2, which is the highest level of proficiency presented by the CEF.

ELT Directives Supporting the NPB

In 2006, legislators introduced *Law 1064* as a norm “for the support and strengthening of education for work and human development” (Ministerio de Educación, 2006c), a type of education that had been known as non-formal education up until that time (Usma, 2009a). *Law 1064* not only changed the name of non-formal education through its Article 1, but it also established that taxpayers’ money could

go to accredited private institutions for the provision of educational services. At the same time, legislation encouraged more regulated and goal focused EFL instruction throughout the country.

As mentioned above, even though the MEN had adopted the CEF as the benchmarks for language learning, teaching and assessment in Colombia since 2004, this adoption came to be legislated only through *Decree 3870 of 2006*’s Article 2 (Ministerio de Educación, 2006d). This decree also required non-formal institutions that offer foreign language classes to establish clear goals, contents, methodologies, course schedules for their language programs, as well as the accreditation of language programs offered by universities (Art. 3-6). Thus, both public and private universities started assessing and reshaping their EFL programs to accommodate the new requirements of the Ministry of Education (Universia, 2008; UNAB, 2009; Universidad del Tolima, 2009; Profesores de inglés, 2011; Universidad de los Llanos, n.d.). However, not all institutions must be accredited since *Decree 3870*’s Article 7 established that “programs offered by organisms of cooperation (...) would not require any certification” (Ministerio de Educación, 2006d, as cited in Usma, 2009a, p. 129), which implies that the BC does not require any type of certification to advise the MEN for the NPB.

Decree 3870 was soon followed by the publication of the MEN’s *Estándares* (Standards), a document providing guidelines for the teaching of EFL for elementary and secondary schools as shown by a press release. This press release announced the application of tests in accordance with the CEF and stated that 50% of the country’s English teachers were expected to reach the B2 level by 2010 and 100% by 2019 (Ministerio de Educación, 2007, as cited by Usma, 2009a). Nevertheless, the results of the English Proficiency Diagnostic Test for Teachers (*Prueba diagnóstica de inglés para docentes*) administered on June 12, 2011, showed that out of 3,270 teachers who

took the test, only 496 were at the B2 level, which is 15% of the total (Ministerio de Educación, 2011).

The language policy laid out by the NPB through the proficiency just described is currently reflected on standardized national tests. This is precisely why ICFES, the governmental organization in charge of assessing education and educational institutions, has made English a compulsory component of two of its five standardized tests known as *Pruebas Saber* (Knowledge Tests): *Prueba Saber 11* and *Prueba Saber Pro*⁴ (Ministerio de Educación, 2006a, 2011). The first standardized test is administered to students at the end of secondary school in Grade 11, and is a requirement for access to postsecondary education, while *Prueba Saber Pro* is the standardized test for specific academic areas that new professionals must take in their last year of their undergraduate degree. These two standardized tests already require basic level English proficiency; nevertheless, the MEN has been progressively adjusting its standardized tests to reflect the projected language competence goals⁵ (Ministerio de Educación, 2006a).

Ideologies and Implications of this Policy

Bilingualism According to the NPB

In her critical discourse analysis of *Estándares* Guerrero (2008) points to several discourse features of this document that present an essentialist notion of bilingualism which equals bilingualism to speaking Spanish and English. First, Guerrero points to the document's title: Basic Foreign Language Competence Standards: English, as well as the document's subtitle for its cover: Teaching foreign languages: English.

⁴ These two standardized tests were formerly known as ICFES and ECAES.

⁵ Even though the revamping of *Pruebas Saber* in 2012 added an initial 3rd Grade English test to the existing tests for 5th, 9th and 11th Grades, English has not been included as one of the areas to be tested in Grades 3, 5, and 9. See www.icfes.gov.co

The challenge! Accordingly, the word English after the colon could mean two things: (a) there are more documents in the series that will establish standards for the teaching, learning and evaluation of other languages, or (b) English is the quintessential foreign language that should be taught while other languages can be disregarded (Vélez-Rendón, 2003, as cited in Guerrero, 2008). Besides, Guerrero also points to the collocation of the phrases “being bilingual” and “globalized world” in the rationale presented by *Estándares* for choosing English. She argues that the document equates bilingualism with globalization and then presents being a speaker of English as tantamount to becoming a recipient of the positive benefits associated with globalization, such as “broader communication, economic power, capitalism, multinational companies, foreign investors, better jobs, better living conditions, no geographical boundaries” (p. 32), among many others. The assumption that English is a universal language could easily be challenged in Colombia, a country where children in remote rural areas often suffer violence and displacement due to the country's internal armed conflict. Thus, not all citizens of a low-income country such as Colombia may see English language proficiency as a priority (Bruthiaux, 2002). This holds true especially for children living in communities under cross-fire, taking into consideration that Colombia is second in the world only to Sudan in the number of people displaced by violence (Cárdenas, 2006; Guerrero, 2008).

Another interesting fact about *Estándares* discussed by Guerrero is that in the document's rationale for choosing English, the authors distance themselves from their deliberate choice by mentioning the importance of this language in a globalized world, and presenting arguments that make their choice agentless. This implies that the MEN should not be held accountable for this choice because English is chosen as the language for bilingualism based on arguments

that “everybody knows” (Guerrero, 2008, p. 32) about. Therefore, the decision of choosing English for the NPB is presented as common sense since the MEN is only responding to the needs of the modern world.

The MEN’s intention to avoid the responsibility of choosing English as the foreign language for the NPB can also be seen when the Ministry states that English was chosen because it reflects students’ and schools’ preferences given the autonomy that schools had to offer a foreign language of their choice since *Law 115*’s introduction of Article 21, which states that instruction in at least one foreign language must be offered (Guerrero, 2008). In other words, *Estándares* presents the choice of English as if schools and students had been given autonomy to study any foreign language and chose English, but there is no mention of the historical processes of foreign language teaching policies in Colombia that led to the teaching of English as the predominant foreign language in elementary, secondary, and tertiary education (see Usma, 2009a and De Mejía, 2002).

English: Spanish Bilingualism = Common Sense

As discussed above, in *Estándares* the MEN is reducing bilingualism and bilingual education to the teaching and learning of English in majority Spanish language contexts, an assumption which is presented as an unquestioned decision due to the important role of English as regards globalization. Through this unquestioned assumption, the MEN presents English: Spanish bilingualism not only as the most prominent option for the NPB, but the entity also legitimizes this reductionist notion of bilingualism. The legitimization of such restrictive understanding of bilingualism leads to a manufacturing of consent in which ideologies become invisible for the Colombian citizens marginalized by the NPB since the government introduces its arguments in favor of English/Spanish bilingualism in *Estándares* as rarely questioned because they are presented as if they

simply were common sense (see Tollefson, 1991). In the case of Colombia the ideology behind the NPB leads to an institutionalization of English as an “elitist resource” (Tsui & Tollefson, 2007, p. 2) due to the significant lack of economic, linguistic and human resources that public and especially rural educational institutions have to deal with in order to reach the NPB’s proficiency goals (Sánchez & Obando, 2008).

Manufacturing Consent: Colombian Media and Public Sphere’s Reaction to the NPB

There are three recurrent themes that commonly appear on Colombian media⁶ when referring to bilingualism or the NPB, and these are: (a) unrealistic expectations from parents, employers or professional associations about the proficiency that students and professionals should have, (b) an unclear notion of bilingualism, which often leads to inaccurate assumptions about the learning and teaching of foreign languages and (c) a tendency to disregard the value of learners’ and teachers’ Spanish competence. These three common assumptions are a result of misinformation among members of the public sphere with regard to what the MEN presents as bilingualism, as well as their lack of participation in the creation of a top-down policy like the NPB.

With regard to the public sphere’s unrealistic expectations about language proficiency, an article published by *El País* (Peláez, 2009), a national newspaper from the city of Cali, mentions how “finding a bilingual professional in the city of Cali is a tough job,” which is further emphasized by how the article describes English as “the universal language for business.” In fact, finding a bilingual professional may seem challenging for employers like the Selection and

⁶ All excerpts taken from Colombian media (from both newspapers and television) are my translation since they originally appeared in Spanish, except for Colombia 2025, which has an English-subtitled version.

Development Manager of FANALCA (The National Automobile Parts Manufacturer), interviewed for this article, as she observes that “not even graduates of bilingual schools or universities where other languages are spoken have a perfect command of the language.” Thus, for this employer, bilingualism not only means gaining a certain degree of proficiency in English, as argued by the MEN’s reductionist definition, but it also implies having “a perfect command.” This common understanding of bilingualism as a perfectly balanced competence in a bilingual person’s first (L1) and second language (L2), where L1 competence is simply taken for granted, generates false expectations in what Colombians in the public sphere may expect from the NPB. Another source of concern is that chief executive officers of professional associations, such as the President of the Colombian Human Resources Association ACRIP, consider “not being fluent in English” as “an obstacle for upward mobility in a company and its future projections” (Peláez, 2009), which implies that non-balanced English/Spanish bilinguals might not be hired by like-minded employers. These examples show how terms such as “*command of the language*”, *competence* and *fluency* are used in different contexts and often conveying different meanings, which suggests that for some people being fluent may imply being able to use English for specific purposes (i.e. English for working as a flight attendant...) or in some other cases it could refer to balanced bilinguals with a “perfect command” of the language, something certainly beyond the scope of the NPB, especially when the notion of ‘perfect’ fails to account for the complexity of second language proficiency, and balanced bilinguals are far from being the norm (Cummins, 1989, 2001; Cook, 1992, 1999; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Ortega, 2009; Guerrero, 2010).

The lack of information that the public sphere has about the NPB, as well as the restrictive notion of bilingualism that this policy promotes are producing

inaccurate assumptions about what bilingualism is and what learning or teaching a foreign language implies. Some of these inaccurate assumptions about bilingualism can be seen in the article “Bilingualism: Benefits everywhere you look”, published in the newspaper *El Heraldo* (Bilingüismo: beneficios, 2008). In this article, a private school owner, paradoxically introduced by the reporter as an SLE specialist due to her certification in Educational Administration and having an Applied Degree in Math, explains how “bilingual people control the two languages to such degree that when they pronounce a word they make sure it is in the right language.” She further explains that at an early age a “child listens and reproduces all sounds perfectly, an ability that is progressively lost beyond the age of 11 or 12.” These comments again reinforce the idea that bilingualism implies a perfect command of the language or even worse, an assumption that students from bilingual schools should graduate “speaking 100% English” (“Fontibón se la juega”, 2009), which could be interpreted as a subtractive form of bilingualism (Cummins, 1989; 2001; Guerrero, 2010) and links successful bilingualism to the *Critical Period Hypothesis* (see Muñoz & Singleton, 2011, for a critical review of the CPH and Guerrero, 2010 for a discussion of how the MEN uses the term bilingualism in the NPB).

Colombian media also echo the assumption that teachers should be held accountable for students’ limited English language proficiency, as suggested by the BC’s three diagnostic studies that are mentioned by the MEN as the *raison d’être* to create the NPB (MEN, 2005; 2006a). In an article about the teacher training option offered by the BC, one of the BC’s teacher training coordinator says that “many times, the cause of the [students’] shortcomings is not in the [teaching] tools per se, but in knowing how to use them” (“Fontibón se la juega”, 2009). Furthermore, teachers appear as the culprits of students’ poor performance in more recent national results of *Pruebas Saber* published in

a newspaper article whose headline reads “English Teachers Also Fail” (“Profesores de inglés”, 2011), which additionally mentions how Colombia appears ranked as number 41 out of 44 countries in Education First’s (EF, a Swedish transnational company specialized in language training) English Proficiency Index (EPI). According to EF, the EPI provides transnational and comparable data on adults’ English proficiency gathered through four “free online English tests” voluntarily taken by over two million adults in 44 different countries (EF, 2011). In addition to this, in an interview, the Minister of Education mentions how *Pruebas Saber 2011* show that 11 out of 100 school students have a pre-intermediate level of English language proficiency, which she, again, attributes to teachers’ English proficiency, and she points particularly to pre-service teachers currently attending second language teacher education programs across the country (RCN, 2011). As discussed here, media often portray teachers as the only culprits of students’ struggles to reach the proficiency goals set six years ago when the NPB was launched; however, what the media fail to acknowledge are the many challenges that teachers encounter to teach their classes in public schools due to a lack of resources, professional development opportunities and administrative support (Marulanda & Berdugo, 2005; Hernández & Faustino, 2006; Sánchez & Obando, 2008).

The NPB, Neoliberal Reform and Transnational Corporations

Perhaps the MEN’s motivation for the NPB can be best understood by examining the Colombian governments’ close relationships with transnational companies, and the governments of Canada and the U.S., two developed inner circle English speaking countries (Kachru, 1992) with which Colombia has free trade agreements (Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, 2012; Office of the United States Trade Representative, 2012). According to

President Santos, *The Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement* ‘will speed-up Colombia’s economy,’ (Presidencia de la República, 2012a, my translation) and *The U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement* ‘means less poverty and more job opportunities’ for Colombia (Presidencia de la República, 2012b⁷, my translation). It is precisely in this political and economic context where globalization discourses favor English as a tool for economic development in outer circle and expanding circle countries (Kachru, 1992) that see English as a tool for development (Bruthiaux, 2002), especially due to the opportunities that it presents for process outsourcing as part of these free trade agreements (Matear, 2008).

Even prior to the signing of both trade agreements, the influence of the governments of these two countries had played an important role in shaping the existing policies for exploiting mineral resources in Colombia (Ramírez, 2005). In fact, *Plan Colombia*, a U.S. initiative to combat drug trafficking and guerrillas in Colombia, was lobbied at the U.S. Congress by Occidental Petroleum and other U.S. companies that had helped finance George W. Bush’s campaign (Ramírez, 2005). This plan required the placement of Colombian military anti-narcotics bases in three different zones of the country. The first base was located in the South of Bolívar, where there has been an ongoing dispute between transnational companies and small-scale miners over one of the richest deposits of gold in the world; the second base was placed in Norte de Santander, alongside Caño Limón-Coveñas, an oil pipeline that belongs to Occidental Petroleum; and the third base was established near Ataco, in Departamento del Tolima (Tolima State) where transnational companies have also shown an interest in the deposits of gold and

⁷ The Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement came into force on August 15, 2011, and the U.S.-Colombia Trade Agreement started on May 15, 2012 (Ministerio de Comercio Industria y Comercio, 2012).

other precious minerals found in this area. Massacres and other violent attacks perpetrated by military and paramilitary groups supported by U.S. transnationals became common occurrences in these three mineral-rich zones (Ramírez, 2004). Situations like these were also seen in Putumayo, where agencies of the U.S. government, paramilitaries and the army have acted to protect Harken Energy's investment in developing and exploiting one of Colombia's largest gas reserves (Ramírez, 2005).

On the other hand, the government of Canada, "a country that has earned a reputation for strengthening legislation in favor of human rights" (Ramírez, 2005, p. 38), has also played an important role in the creation of a mining code that benefits Canadian mining transnational companies over the interests of Colombia. This is the case of agencies such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Canadian Energy Research Institute (CERI). CIDA and CERI became actively involved in Colombia during the 1996-1998 period when new legislation for mining, petroleum and environmental regulations for mineral extraction was being created. Both CERI and CIDA contributed to the creation and enactment of laws that favored Canadian transnational companies such as Corona Goldfields and Grey Star. CIDA and CERI played a key role in giving Canadian transnational companies 73% of the mineral exploitation contracts to the detriment of Colombia's economy, society and environment by pushing tax cuts, tax exemptions, lack of environmental controls and alliances with transnational companies that made the state petroleum agency, *Ecopetrol*, nearly disappear, as well as the state telecommunications agency, *Telecom*, which was merged with *Nortel* and three other multinationals (Ramírez, 2005).

The Canadian transnational mining company Corona Goldfields offered to buy the properties of small and medium-scale miners of Marmato, Departamento de Caldas (Caldas State), but ended

up paying only 50% or even 20% of the value agreed on the lands. Therefore, even though local small and medium-scale miners were not paid what they were promised, they could not do any mining activity on those lands either because they had already forfeited their rights to those lands, a situation that would legally make them trespassers on lands that they were never fully paid for (Ramírez, 2005). More recently, in 2007, the Colombian Government attempted to pass new legislation that favored multinational companies by providing them with significant tax cuts, which went from 36.9% of the profits made on the minerals extracted in 2003 to 25.5% in 2008 (Robledo, 2007). These new legislative changes would also go against the interests of small-scale miners by establishing standards that could be met by only transnational companies (Robledo, 2009).

The British Council (BC) must also be mentioned in the discussion of the beneficiaries of the NPB because the leading role of this institution is already generating significant revenue for this "multinational academic empire" (González, 2007, p. 312). As Usma (2009a) points out, in 2008 the BC advertised its IELTS exam (International Testing System) for 416,500 CP (234.20 USD), practice materials for a cost of 95,000 CP (53.42 USD), a preparation book for 90,000 CP (50.61 USD), and a preparation course for 935,000 CP (525.75 USD). All of these exam-related costs in a country where the minimum wage in 2008 was 461,500 CP (259.50 USD) a month⁸, which implies that a person on the minimum wage would require a full month of work to pay for the IELTS test, two months to pay for a course and half a month to pay for the book and practice materials. On the other hand,

8 For 2012 the minimum wage in Colombia is \$566,700 CP (318.65 USD) (Ministerio del Trabajo, 2012). The cost of the IELTS test, as of April, 2012 is \$485,000 CP (272.71 USD), practice materials cost \$98,500 CP (55.39 USD), and there are two options for test preparation: (1) One-day IELTS Workshops for \$180,000 CP (101.21 USD), and (2) the IELTS preparation course for \$1,075,000 CP (604.47 USD).

the BC could be making over 652,500,000,000, CP (366,898,707 USD), considering that in one year more than 1.5 million people take their tests offered in more than 100 countries (British Council, 2008, as cited in Usma, 2009a). This sum, according to Usma (2009a) was five times Colombia's national budget for research in 2008.

The Colombian government's motivations to create the NPB can also be analyzed in *Colombia 2025*, a futuristic video clip produced by the Office of the Vice-President in 2009, which was widely shared through online social networks, web 2.0, and video-sharing websites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook* and *Wikispaces*. This video projects Colombia as the richest country in Latin America by 2025, and it mentions how the country's success is based on alliances between private and government owned industries, as well as transnational companies such as British Petroleum, Fox, Microsoft, Dreamworks, Pixar, Sony, Shell, among many others. Indeed, Fox has already been producing television shows in Colombia, as in the case of *Mental*, a show filmed in Bogotá for a fictional story that takes place in Los Angeles ("Mental' llega a la tv", 2009). Moreover, the English subtitled version of *Colombia 2025* predicted that in 2010 "large North American animation companies [will] come to our country and find creative capabilities, valuable talent and (a) committed Government." By 2017, the video predicts that "entertainment multinationals" will "increase their stake in our market", which is why this video clip envisions that Universal and Sony will "establish their headquarters for the (South American) region in Bogotá." *Colombia 2025* constantly places an emphasis on the exploitation of natural resources as a tool for the country's economic development. This can be seen in the following statement: "Our biodiversity becomes actual wealth." The narrator also mentions that Colombia's success could only happen "thanks to visionary leadership, audacious decisions and great national consensuses", which suggest

that all Colombians must accept the government's creation and application of policies like the NPB, and other neoliberal reforms. Even though *Colombia 2025* is mostly fiction, it provides valuable insights concerning what the Uribe Administration projected for the future of Colombia, whose legacy can also be seen in the present Administration of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2014), even though their relationships are currently tense⁹. Santos introduced a controversial reform to tertiary education, which academics, unionists and students view as a direct response to Colombia's free trade agreement with the U.S., and highly linked to the agendas of multiple transnational corporations. The government argued that this reform aimed to change the existing *Law 30* of 1992 of higher education and expand access by providing greater autonomy to educational institutions through deregulation, encouraging the participation of private industry in funding public institutions as well as the creation of for-profit educational institutions, and, thirdly, providing a system of financial aid in which Colombian citizens could get loans to pay for their education (Arango, 2011). However, this reform was overturned by a grassroots student movement, which was in great part fueled by a fellow student movement resisting neoliberal tertiary education policy in Chile (Barrio Nuevo, 2011; "Desde los 70", 2011).

Concluding Remarks

The main objective of this paper was to provide an overview of the socio-political context in which the

⁹ The relationship between Uribe and Santos has been progressively deteriorating since Santos took office ("Entre Santos y Uribe," 2011), especially after Uribe had a meeting with his political allies (July, 2012) to form an opposition coalition arguing that Santos' policies had 'abandoned' and 'eroded' what Uribe had achieved with his 'Democratic Security' program ("Álvaro Uribe oficializa su oposición," 2012). However, in terms of economic and social matters, Uribe's and Santos' policies are very similar since both of them favor international interests (Angoso, 2012), which is why opposition Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo simply puts in these words: "Uribe and Santos represent the same, the extreme right" (Angoso, 2012).

NPB was created with the intention of analyzing the ideologies and motivations behind this policy. This LP was envisioned as a response to globalization which aimed to allow Colombian citizens to participate in the rapid creation and exchange of knowledge and information made possible by English language proficiency. However, as devised, not only does this policy generate processes of exclusion and stratification through the standardization and marketization of English language teaching (see Usma, 2009a), but it also serves as a means to manufacture consent among Colombians for the intervention of foreign governments and transnational companies, as well as the implementation of neoliberal education reforms aimed at dismantling publicly funded education. This can be seen in the presentation of incomplete or superficial data on standardized test results in the media, which portray public schools and teachers unfavorably, without informing Colombian citizens (in the public sphere) of the multiple challenges that EFL teachers and public schools face to reach the NPB's projected goals. Consequently, this LP, as well as the proposed reform to tertiary education, can lead the education system to ultimately serve the interests of transnational companies that require both highly-skilled and less-skilled workers. Thus, elite private bilingual school students that possess the language competence legitimized by the market will be able to get high profile jobs if the government's transnational outsourcing and natural resource exploitation projects go as planned, whereas students from public schools, urban areas and lower-middle class schools will face a challenge to meet the established proficiency requirements, something that could result in turning public schools students into a *reserve army* of unskilled labor (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; 2002).

Due to space limitations this paper focused only on the NPB and the Colombian context. However, a comparison between LP and education policy reform in Chile with its English Opens Doors Program (Matear,

2008; Menard-Warwick, 2008), as well as how student movements in both countries have been actively collaborating with each other to resist neoliberal education policies is an area that presents valuable opportunities for future research due to the observed effectiveness of these transnational student movements in resisting top-down education policies associated with globalization. Further research should also analyze the *Law of Bilingualism* (Congreso, 2012) recently discussed in the Colombian Congress and its future implications.

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About the Author

Marlon Valencia is a PhD candidate in Second Language Education, as well as in Comparative International and Developing Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (Canada). His research interests include second language teacher education, language policy and planning, multiliteracies, and social identities in language education.

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