Elite Vs. Folk Bilingualism: The Mismatch between Theories and Educational and Social Conditions

Bilingüismo élite vs. popular: el desacople entre las teorías y las prácticas educativas y sociales

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This article aims at contributing to the ongoing discussion about how bilingualism is understood in the current National Bilingualism Plan (PNB for its initials in Spanish). Based on previous research and discussions held at academic events, it is evident that the promoters of the PNB use the term "bilingualism" in a rather indiscriminate way, without adopting a clear approach or definition. This ambiguity in conceptualization has serious consequences in the way the PNB is implemented around the country. The main contribution of this reflection article is, then, to explore from a theoretical perspective two opposite types of bilingualism: elite/folk bilingualism to show that even though on the surface the PNB seems to aim at an elite bilingualism, the educational and social conditions show otherwise.

Key words: Bilingualism, bilingual education, bilingual education in Colombia, elite/folk bilingualism, types of bilingualism

Este artículo busca contribuir a la discusión acerca de qué se entiende por bilingüismo en el Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB). Basados en investigaciones previas y en discusiones que se han llevado a cabo en eventos académicos, se hace evidente que los promotores del PNB usan el término "bilingüismo" de una manera más bien indiscriminada, sin adoptar un enfoque o una definición clara. Esta ambigüedad en la conceptualización trae serias consecuencias en la forma como el PNB se está implementando en el país. La mayor contribución de este artículo de reflexión, es, entonces, explorar, desde la teoría, dos tipos de bilingüismo: elitista/popular para demostrar que, aunque desde la superficie parezca que en Colombia se va a implementar un bilingüismo elitista, las condiciones educativas y sociales muestran lo contrario.

Palabras clave: bilingüe elitista vs. popular, bilingüismo, educación bilingüe, educación bilingüe en Colombia, tipos de bilingüismo

HOW 17, December 2010, ISSN 0120-5927. Bogotá, Colombia. Pages 165-179

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Introduction

The field of bilingualism is very complex and that, in part, makes defining what it is more difficult. Definitions come from different disciplines including linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, educationists, and international studies. The expected outcome is that each discipline places emphasis on one aspect and neglects others (Romaine, 1989), thus making any definition incomplete.

Within each field there are different perspectives, too. De Mejía (2002) reports how sociolinguists like Fishman and Hornberger are interested in relating the concept of bilingualism to the context of situation; psycholinguists like Grosjean and Cummins are interested in how bilinguals acquire and process their languages; and educationists like Baker, Collier, and Ovando explore how children and adults become bilingual in educational settings.

Besides the interdisciplinary nature of the field, another issue that contributes to the difficulty of defining bilingualism is that it has multiple dimensions and depending on which dimension is considered, there are different types of bilinguals. There are *balanced* or *dominant* bilinguals (depending on their proficiency in each language); *compound*, *coordinate*, or *subordinate* (according to the organization of linguistic codes and meaning in the brain); *early*, *simultaneous*, *sequential*, or *late* (age of acquisition); *incipient*, *receptive*, or *productive* (functional ability); *additive* or *subtractive* (effect of L1 on learning of and retention of L2); and *elite/folk*, *circumstantial/elective* (language status, circumstances leading to bilingualism) (Baker, 2001; Baker & Jones, 1998; Butler & Hakuta, 2004; Grosjean, 1994; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). It is important to mention that these classifications do not constitute clear cut dichotomies but rather a continuum in which all the taxonomies interplay in endless ways (as illustrated by Hornberger, 1991 and Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2003).

In Colombia, the Ministry of Education is running its National Bilingualism Plan (henceforth PNB for its initials in Spanish) and a common concern among various Colombian academics is the absence of a definition of what bilingualism means for this program (Cárdenas, 2006a, 2006b, 2010; Escobar, 2010; Guerrero, 2008; Lastra, 2009; Usma, 2009) This absence brings as a consequence a great confusion of what institutions should do and how to do it. The size of the confusion is such that during an interview, when asked if taking an hour a week of English class at school could be

called "bilingualism", Rosa María Cely, one of the academic advisors for the PNB stated the following:

> Bilingüismo son muchas cosas, si ves la relación acá (señalando la cartilla y la última edición de la revista Magisterio) dice lo que se entiende por bilingüismo; no se está hablando de ciudadanos absolutamente bilingües, esa no es la pretensión del programa. Dentro del concepto de "Bilingüismo" que el Ministerio viene manejando caben diversas formas de "bilingüismo": bilingüismo para sordos, con comunidades indígenas, trilingüismo en el Archipiélago, el bilingüismo de la comunidad gitana, principalmente. (2011)

> Bilingualism is many things if you see the relationship here (pointing to the handbook and the latest edition of the journal Magisterio) it says what is understood by bilingualism; we are not talking about completely bilingual citizens, that is not the intention of the program. Within the concept of "bilingualism" that the Ministry is managing, various forms of "bilingualism" fit: bilingualism for the deaf, indigenous communities, trilingualism in the Archipelago, the bilingualism of the gypsies, mainly. (2011)

Her answer shows a lack of understanding of the MEN in terms of the Project they are implementing nationwide. This situation has consequences in terms of what is expected from students and teachers proficiency-wise and, accordingly, what society in general expects from its nationals.

In order to contribute to the ongoing discussion set by Colombian academics in relation to the issue, in this article I will deal with the definitions of *elite/folk* bilingualism to show that educational practices derived from educational policies contradict what theories state. To do so, I will present the definitions given by various authors of these two types of bilingualism, then very briefly describe three main models of bilingual education, and lastly confront what theory states about elite bilingualism with its practices in third world countries, including Colombia.

Elite/Folk Bilingualism: What Theorists Have Said

In her definition of elite and folk bilingualism, Paulston (1980) cites Gaarder (n.d), who characterizes elitist bilingualism as the trademark of upper-class intellectuals and educated people in many societies and which is a matter of choice.

That is, people choose the language they want to learn. On the other hand, folk bilingualism is the result of the contact of ethnic groups who have to become bilingual involuntarily in order to survive; here they do not have a choice, they just have to learn the language of the setting where they live. Harding-Esch and Riley (1986) disagree with Paulston (1980) because they consider that elitist bilingualism is no longer a characteristic exclusive of middle and upper-classes; graduate students and professionals (teachers, translators, technicians, etc.) who move temporarily to other countries with their families cannot afford private bilingual education for their children, and still, they learn the language of the host country and keep their mother tongue. In this respect, Baker and Jones (1998) coined the term *privileged* bilingualism to refer to those who travel abroad regularly due to work or study and speak two languages, one of which can (but not necessarily) be a minority language.

In the same line of thought maintained by Paulston (1980), Valdés and Figueroa (1994) state that elite bilingualism refers to those who choose to learn another language in formal or informal settings but who will remain most of their lives in the community where their L1 is spoken; the two languages involved have high status within the context. The opposite typology, circumstantial bilinguals, is composed of those who due to circumstances need to learn another language to survive. These individuals find themselves living in a context in which their language is not the majority language and who, in order to participate in that society, have to learn the language of the host country.

Fishman (1976, 1977) adds a shade on elite bilingualism and states that elite bilinguals should learn the language of the minorities instead of choosing another language of wider communication. He calls this *enrichment* bilingualism to mean that economically advantaged children could profit from this type of bilingualism in the sense that in this way they could better get an understanding of the world around them. He proposes that American schools should implement this type of bilingualism for majority language speakers, but so far, his proposal has not held up. As Baker (2001) states, the languages an individual speaks (or decides to speak) bring up issues of power, status, and prestige.

In this sense, there is a close relationship between *elite* and *additive* bilingualism, and *folk* and *subtractive* bilingualism. Elite bilinguals acquire another language and maintain their L1, as happens in additive bilingualism; this is possible because the L2 has great prestige and is used by the majority of speakers for most activities in the

context where they live (De Mejía, 2002; García, 1997; Hornberger, 1989; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994). Their L2 embodies an advantage in social and economic terms. Folk or circumstantial bilingualism could be associated with subtractive bilingualism in that individuals acquire an L2 and tend to lose the L1 because the latter has low prestige in the context where the individuals live; hence, a likely consequence of subtractive is monolingualism (García, 1997; Martin-Jones, 2007; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994).

Drawing from the definitions presented above, we understand elite bilingualism to have various characteristics: it is voluntary, which means individuals choose to learn an additional language and what language they want to learn; it involves two languages of wider communication; it involves majority groups; it has high social prestige; and it leads to additive bilingualism. Valdés and Figueroa (1994) add one more characteristic: it is individual while folk or circumstantial bilingualism is collective.

Besides this last characteristic, folk bilingualism exhibits all the opposite characteristics of elite bilingualism. Individuals are forced by circumstances to learn the L2 of the place where they live. It is the language of the majority. In most cases, their L1 does not have high status in the community which leads individuals to lose it.

Models for Bilingual Education

Although languages can be acquired in natural settings, provisions are made in education for the acquisition of an L2, whether to attain elite bilingualism or folk bilingualism, and in some cases, enrichment bilingualism. Three basic bilingual education models[1] have been identified in the literature: transitional, maintenance, and enrichment bilingual education.

In transitional models the schools provide bilingual education to children of minority groups with the aim that these children learn the L2 as fast and efficiently as possible in order to become assimilated into the L2 language and culture at the expense of losing their L1 (Fishman, 1977; Paulston, 1980). Generally, minority children are

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1   Hornberger (1991) establishes the difference between bilingual education models and program types. The former is broader and more abstract; they are defined by their goals in relation to language, culture and society. The latter have to do with student population, teachers and program structure.

taught all the school subjects in their native language while learning the L2. When they are considered proficient enough in the L2, they are incorporated into mainstream classrooms. (Baker, 2001; García, 1997; De Mejía, 2002; Hornberger, 1991) This model is widely used in bilingual public schools in Arizona, The United States, and is one that serves immigrant children, particularly those of Hispanic origin.

Unlike the transitional model, the maintenance model's aim is to maintain students' L1; both languages are used throughout the education of minority groups. These programs are conducive to additive bilingualism, which implies that not only the language is preserved, but also individuals' cultural identity and the affirmation of their civil rights. In this model students receive content-subject instruction in both L1 and L2 in order to accomplish proficient literacy skills in both languages (Baker, 2001; García, 1997; De Mejía, 2002; Hornberger, 1991).

Enrichment models go beyond maintenance models in which the goal is to develop the L1 and promote cultural pluralism and social autonomy; the main difference with maintenance models is that in the enrichment models, speaking the language of the minorities is acknowledged as a right of its speakers and as a resource for majorities (Baker, 2001; De Mejía, 2002; Hornberger, 1991). Unfortunately, this model, in the same way as enrichment bilingualism has been implemented in very few settings and withdrawn despite its positive results. Hornberger (1987) reports the results of a bilingual policy in Peru implemented in 1977. This policy was ambiguously conceived due to the different orientations (Ruíz, 1984) some of the policy makers hold, but despite that, the results were very positive. Hornberger conducted classroom observations and found that children (whose mother tongue was Quechua) participated actively in class discussions, read avidly, and in general showed advancement in their education. Unfortunately, there were some circumstances that hindered the full implementation of the project like a lack of resources, a lack of teachers, constructed ideas about the importance of Spanish instruction in the minds of Quechua communities, and a historical and cultural separation of school and community. This type of programs takes an enrichment approach in the sense that speakers of the language of wider communication learn the language of the minorities and benefit (become enriched) from the experience of learning about and from the other.

Bilingual education around the world responds to different reasons like immigration, civil rights, language rights, or nationalism (Baker, 2001); the stratification

of society as well as both geographic and socio-occupational mobility are important reasons for bilingual education (Lewis, 1980); and power, economy, and politics also determine the direction of language policies because in general terms they tend to favor the ideologies and interests of the powerful groups (Paulston, 1980; Paulston, 1988; Hamers & Blanc, 2000; Romaine, 1989). These different factors play a role in the way governments see the need for bilingual education. Countries where there are high numbers of immigrants are forced to take measures either to incorporate or to marginalize the newcomers into/from society, especially when immigration becomes one's living permanently in the host country. As a consequence, bilingual education models look different depending on the context in which they are implemented. A bilingual program in the Southwestern United States where republicans have a negative perception as regards immigration is not the same. They prefer transitional bilingual programs over bilingual programs in Central Europe where there is a tendency to favor maintenance bilingual education programs.

Elite and Folk Bilingualism around the World: The Mismatches

After reviewing and analyzing some case studies of the implementation of elite and folk bilingualism in various countries, I found that the definitions presented above do not necessarily resemble the actual practices in some settings. Elite bilingualism in Europe and Canada is different from elite bilingualism in Colombia, China, or South Africa, especially if it is a provision made by the state. In the same way, elite and folk bilingualism involve ideological differences that tend to pigeonhole students into specific roles in society.

As discussed above, elite bilingualism shares some characteristics. In the same way, the normal expectation is that elite bilingualism would be similar anywhere in the world, but despite the apparent similarity between elite bilingual programs in Canada (Genesse, 1995), Germany (Masch, 1993), the European school model (Baetens Beardsmore, 1993; 1995) and elite bilingual programs in Colombia (Cárdenas 2006a, 2006b, 2010; De Mejía, 2005; Guerrero, 2008; Ordoñez, 2005; Usma, 2009;), China (Feng, 2005) and South Africa (Probyn, 2006), there are subtle differences between these two worlds; I have identified three major differences. The first group of countries belongs to the first world and shares cultural patterns embodied in discourse practices as well as in classroom, school, and social practices. This implies that when children are

immersed in an elite bilingual program in one of these countries they do not have the extra burden of learning how to act, behave, and participate in the culture of L2 because it is similar to their own. This is not the case in the second group, elite bilingual education in Colombia, where the cultural practices are very different from the Anglo-American ones. In the latter case, children do need to learn how to greet, to behave, to address people, and a whole set of discourse practices that differ from what they are used to. Besides, while in the first group of countries (and models) children have the possibility of choosing the additional language, in the models of the second group, children do have to learn English as their L2.

The relevance and appropriateness of materials and textbooks are other aspects that make a difference. These are produced in first world countries (Canagarajah, 2005; Pennycook, 2000) and the contents address the needs and interests of European and Canadian students (in the two cases discussed). In Colombia, elite bilingual schools are private institutions and are not fully regulated by the state, which gives them freedom to implement their own curriculum (Banfi & Day, 2005; De Mejía, 2005). As in many other countries of the developing world, elite bilingual schools import textbooks and other materials from American and British publishers. These materials are produced massively without taking into consideration the specific context of application; as a consequence, these materials contribute to educate students who grow up detached from the reality of their countries (MEN, 2006).

A third difference has to do with identity and self-esteem. In the first group, all cultural groups enjoy a high degree of privilege internationally (English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish from Spain, which enjoys status because it is a European language). They regard the others as equals and their goals are aimed towards the promotion of a European identity (Baetens Beardsmore, 1993; Masch, 1993). In Colombia, despite Spanish being the dominant language, we belong to the third world, to the underdeveloped countries; these facts generate identity issues in which some students want to assimilate into the American or British cultural patterns and others resist it (De Mejía, 2005; Ordoñez, 2005).

Elite bilingualism looks even more different in the periphery countries (as Kachru, 1985 calls them) when the initiative is not private but established by the state. The cases reviewed are China (Feng, 2005); South Africa (Probyn, 2006); and Colombia (Ministry of Education - MEN, 2006). The characteristics these programs share with elite bilingualism are that they serve majority language speakers - Chinese

in China, Spanish in Latin America, and any of the 11 official languages in South Africa - in the context of implementation and that instruction is conducted in the L2 (English). Nonetheless, these programs share major features with folk bilingualism.

One similarity with folk bilingualism is that even though the L1 is the dominant language (in number of speakers) and the aim of bilingual education is explicitly towards additive bilingualism (De Mejía, 2005; Lai & Byram, 2003; Probyn, 2006), English has much more prestige because it is associated with economic success. In the long run, the aim is a weak transitional bilingualism (Lai, & Byram, 2003) because (the same happens with minority groups) the choice of the medium of instruction (MOI) will predict the language choice of the group (Lai & Byram M, 2003; Paulston, 1980). In Hong Kong, as reported by Lai and Byram (2003), private bilingual schools are perceived to be better than government run schools, although during the colonial times most of the instruction was in Chinese when in fact it was supposed to be in English. Nonetheless, their reputation grew stronger and now parents demand the right to send their children to those schools. Those who attend the English bilingual schools are regarded as "able" while students who attend Chinese schools are considered inferior; as such, English is regarded as the language of power and prestige while Chinese is the language of shame. Despite the fact that after 1997 the government institutionalized Chinese as the language of instruction, English continues to be the means of communication for finance, trade, business, and tourism. Chinese is used for all the other matters. Without being deterministic but realistic, the roles of these students in society are being influenced or determined from school.

As stated above, one of the characteristics of elite bilingualism is that it is voluntary; people are free to make the choice of learning an L2; they learn an additional language for personal or professional purposes, not to survive or because circumstances lead them to, as happens in folk bilingualism. This is true in Canada and in the European schools; in Canada the immersion used to be available only in English-French but nowadays there is a variety of languages available (Genessee, 1995). In Germany, children can choose German-French, German-Spanish, German-Dutch, German-Italian[2] (Masch, 1993), and in the European School model

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2   It is interesting to note that there is no mention of the German-Turkish population despite there being a huge number of Turks in Germany. It is understandable from the point of view of asymmetrical power relationships and who is regarded as an equal and who is not.

children can learn Danish, Dutch, and Greek besides the languages mentioned above (Baetens Beardsmore, 1993).

Elite bilingualism in China (Feng, 2005), South Africa (Probyn, 2006), and Colombia (MEN, 2006) is not voluntary. Children are "forced" by circumstances to receive instruction in English. The motivation of the governments of these countries to adopt English-based bilingualism responds to an economic interest, different from the interest of European schools and Germany whose motivation is to construct community and partnership (Baetens Beardsmore, 1993; Masch, 1993). In Colombia, the aim is towards competitiveness and productivity (Castillo, 2003); in China the interest is to educate elites to promote the social and economic development of the country (Feng, 2005), and in South Africa, the interest is in providing English as the language of power and access (Probyn, 2006).

The populations served by elite bilingualism are middle-class and upper-middle class; this is true in the Canadian, European, and Colombian programs (when the initiative is private). But in China, Colombia, and South Africa, the intention of the government is to serve all students of the country; the problem is that the target population is widely heterogeneous in linguistic, social, cultural, and economic capital.

In South Africa, there are 11 native official languages, plus two colonial languages acknowledged as official too: English and Afrikaans. Schools are recommended to use children's home (native) languages to teach. Besides this home language, schools can choose either English or Afrikaans as a Medium of Instruction (MOI) after initial education (fifth grade) has been taught in one indigenous language. Although the policy is to promote additive bilingualism –that is, after 5th grade- schools are introducing English as the MOI earlier (4th grade) and in some cases even in 1st grade. Given the multilingual composition of South Africa, minorities are at a disadvantage compared to elites because while English and Afrikaans speakers learn in their native language, other children learn in a second language.

In the area where the authors conducted the aforementioned study, the researchers established that children do not have contact with English outside school; rather, they use their mother tongue Xhosa for all matters and there are no chances for interaction in English; besides, there are no reading materials and no access to libraries (83% of the schools do not have libraries). Despite all of this, the

instruction is in English and the predictable result is poor language skills in this language (Probyn, 2006).

In Colombia, there is an initiative promoted by the Ministry of Education (MEN) and the British Council (BC) whose aim as published by the MEN (2006) is that students achieve certain levels of proficiency in English (the parameters are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2001). To attain this objective, students should learn English as a subject matter[3], but the MEN has not made all the provisions necessary for this to happen. The government has not taken into account the improbability that this project cannot be implemented in many parts of the country because just as in South Africa, rural areas (and some urban areas alike) in Colombia are impoverished, some schools do not have electricity or water, the geographical access is very difficult, and the situation of violence caused by guerrilla and paramilitary groups makes this enterprise very difficult, almost impossible. In this condition, a national program in bilingual education (English-Spanish) will increase the gap between the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor.

As can be seen, elite bilingualism in the two cases presented of Canada and Europe responds to different motivations from bilingualism in the cases presented about China, Colombia and South Africa. In the former cases, the motivation is to promote the use of L1 and L2 in the understanding that both enjoy great prestige and speakers will maintain their L1 as they acquire the L2. In the latter scenario, for the three cases discussed (China, Latin America and South Africa), the motivation for elite bilingualism is to perpetuate the idea that English is better, and while it is quite impossible that speakers give up their L1, there is a sentiment that it will not help them move upwards on the social ladder.

Conclusions

Taking into account the cases discussed, I argue that the type of bilingualism offered in China, Colombia, and South Africa seems, on the surface, to have the characteristics of elite bilingualism but a deeper exploration of the characteristics of its implementation shows more affinity to folk bilingualism. To start with, in China,

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3   This means teaching English as a subject, not teaching content of other subjects in English.

Colombia, and South Africa, the additional language (L2) is not freely chosen by students but imposed by the government. Secondly, even though the L1 is the language of the majority, it does not enjoy the same prestige of the L2 (English for the three cases). Thirdly, the conditions in which the L2 is being taught and used puts the population which does not have the material, economic, or human resources to access the L2 at a disadvantage.

By and large, the context in which elite bilingualism is implemented plays a crucial role in how it is actualized in school and in social practices. Policy makers should be aware that what functions in Canada and Europe will not necessarily work in the periphery due to the deep social, cultural, political and economic differences that make each country's situation particular. Instead, policies should be situated to respond to the needs of the various sectors of the population and not only of those in power. The uncritical adoption of bilingual models brings to light, as a consequence, that the good intention of giving everybody access to a language of power ends in an even more unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources. In the long run, there could be an inner, outer, and expanding circle of L2 speakers within the same society, which would increase the social gap that already exists.

Finally, governments and their policy makers should adopt a situated approach to design and implement their policies. It is widely demonstrated that inequality only leads to more inequality and if governments, especially in the third world, want to overcome poverty, they need to guarantee the opportunity of education for all its citizens.

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Acknowledgements