Nivel de suficiencia y percepciones de profesores de inglés: Implementación de una política de bilingüismo

Proficiency level and perceptions of English teachers: Implementation of a bilingualism policy

Nível de proficiência e percepções dos professores de inglês: Implementação de uma política de bilinguismo

- Artículo de investigación -

Lizeth Ramos Acosta[1]
Unidad Central del Valle del Cauca

Resumen

El propósito principal de este estudio es analizar el nivel de competencia de los docentes de inglés en Tuluá y su percepción sobre la implementación de una política pública bilingüe. Se utilizó un enfoque de métodos mixtos con instrumentos cuantitativos y cualitativos para la recolección de datos. Los hallazgos de este estudio revelan la necesidad de fortalecer la formación de los docentes más allá del conocimiento de las metodologías. Se confirma que otras necesidades deben ser consideradas como parte de la implementación de los programas de bilingüismo en Colombia, tales como el acceso a internet y los recursos digitales. Este estudio podría ser el punto de partida para nuevas investigaciones sobre la implementación de políticas locales bilingües.

[1] iramos@uceva.edu.co
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9035-1992

Palabras clave: política educativa, inglés, competencias del docente, formación de docentes, percepción

Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the level of competence of English teachers in Tuluá and their perception of the implementation of a bilingual public policy. A mixed methods approach with quantitative and qualitative instruments was used for data collection. The findings of this study reveal the need to strengthen teacher training beyond knowledge of methodologies. It is confirmed that other needs must be considered as part of the implementation of bilingualism programs in Colombia, such as access to the internet and digital resources. This study could be the starting point for new research on the implementation of local bilingual policies.

Keywords: educational policy, english, teacher, teacher qualifications, teacher development, perception

Resumo

O objetivo principal deste estudo é analisar o nível de competência dos professores de inglês em Tuluá e sua percepção sobre a implementação de uma política pública bilíngue. Para a coleta de dados foi utilizada uma abordagem de métodos mistos com instrumentos quantitativos e qualitativos. Os achados deste estudo revelam a necessidade de fortalecer a formação docente para além do conhecimento de metodologias. Confirma-se que outras necessidades devem ser consideradas como parte da implementação de programas de bilinguismo na Colômbia, como o acesso à internet e aos recursos digitais. Este estudo poderá ser o ponto de partida para novas pesquisas sobre a implementação de políticas bilíngues locais.

Palavras-chave: política educativa, inglês, competências dos professores, formação de professores, formação de professores, percepções

Introduction

One of the main challenges in implementing bilingual projects in Colombia is the proficiency level of English teachers. Many authors have highlighted the importance of assessing the English proficiency levels of educators to achieve the objectives stated in the national bilingual policies (Fandiño-Parra et al., 2014; Ramos, 2019; Fandiño-Parra et al., 2012). The bilingual national policy "Colombia Bilingüe 2004-2019" (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2004) states that English teachers should demonstrate a B2 level of proficiency, whereas high school graduates should reach B1. However, the low results in both the national standardized tests, such as Saber 11 and Saber Pro (which evaluate different areas of knowledge including English), and international examinations like the PISA tests, demonstrate that the proficiency level of English teachers is one of the obstacles preventing the achievement of the expected outcomes declared in the national bilingual program.

Several studies confirm the need to assess the English proficiency levels of teachers (Cárdenas & Cháves, 2013; Cháves & Guapacha, 2016) and to identify their perceptions regarding the implementation of the national bilingual programs (Álvarez et al., 2011; Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014; Gómez Sará, 2017; Maturana, 2011; Miranda & Echeverry, 2011). One of the main reasons for researching teachers' perceptions and proficiency levels is that professional development is a key aspect of successful language teaching processes (Hakuta et al., 1998). In addition, Miranda and Echeverry (2011) state that language teachers develop communicative competence throughout their professional careers and grow in pedagogical and didactic knowledge.

In recent years, teacher education in Colombia has become the core subject in public policies about language teaching and learning. The Ministry of Education has created several plans and projects to boost language proficiency certifications: Fortalecimiento de una segunda lengua, Plan Sectorial de Educación 2004-2008-Bogotá una gran escuela (Secretaria Distrital de Educación, 2004), Plan Decenal de

Educación 2006-2015 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006), Plan Sectorial de Educación 2008-2012 (Secretaria Distrital Bogotá, 2008), Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2004), Programa de Fortalecimiento al Desarrollo de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras 2010-2014 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional MEN, 2010), and Plan Nacional de Inglés 2015-2025 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2015). With the requirements established in these public policies, English teachers must demonstrate a good command of the language to obtain better job opportunities and salary differentiation (Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014). Moreover, the government has passed a law requiring international standardized tests for future graduates of language programs in the country (Resolución 18583, 2017). Nevertheless, the language proficiency of pre-service and in-service English teachers continues to be an issue in Colombia.

At the national level, English teachers have demonstrated low levels of proficiency in the foreign language. According to a diagnosis made by Galvis (2020) from the British Council, a total of 4,265 English teachers from Barranquilla, Bucaramanga, Bogotá, Manizales, and Medellín participated in this study. Of the total number of English teachers who participated in the diagnosis, 1,583 are graduates in foreign languages. According to this diagnosis, 43% of English teachers have an A2 level of proficiency, 7.5% reach a B2 level, and almost 2% have C1. A very small percentage of teachers in the country reach C2 (0.3%).

This requirement is not fulfilled due to many factors. One is that once teachers enter the job market and secure a stable job, they do not receive a formal assessment of their English level. Another factor is the low participation of teachers in training programs designed to improve their language proficiency. For instance, teachers who participated in the current research indicated that they had not attended conferences, seminars, or other teacher education programs. In Tuluá, a municipality in Valle del Cauca, English teachers have not been tested on their foreign language level in the last three years, despite their participation in national bilingual programs led by the Ministry of Education (Bureau of Education, 2020).

According to the aims established by the Ministry of Education in 2016, by 2018, 22% of English teachers in the public sector should have reached B2. A diagnosis of the English teachers' proficiency levels and their perceptions of the implementation of bilingual programs in the educational institutions of Tuluá becomes a necessity to strengthen teacher education towards an improvement of language performance. It has been proven that teachers must have a higher proficiency level in the target language to educate learners on the correct use of the foreign language (Richards, 1998).

This article aims to present a comparative analysis of the English proficiency levels of teachers in Tuluá and their perceptions of the implementation of bilingual policies at the local level. This study seeks to answer the following question: What are English teachers' levels of proficiency and their perceptions about the implementation of the bilingual policy in Tuluá? This document results from a research project led by the author as a participant of the Bilingualism Alliance in Tuluá, with contributions from many public and private institutions interested in improving bilingualism in the northern-central region of Valle del Cauca.

Proficiency

The concept of proficiency is considered one of the main skills that teachers need to develop along with other methodological and pedagogical abilities to teach effectively (Farrell & Richards, 2007; Karas & Faez, 2017). According to theoretical assumptions about the nature of language and language learning (Harsch, 2017; Hulstijn, 2015), proficiency may be considered the goal of language learning in many methods and approaches, such as the Direct Method and the Natural Approach. In the 1980s, the notion of proficiency became popular in the language teaching field with Canale and Swain's (1981) statements describing what learners could do in a particular context, following a sociolinguistic view of language. Other authors related the concept of proficiency with competence and performance (Taylor, 1988; Vollmer,

1981). In the 1990s, Bachman (1990) introduced the concept of interactive ability, referring to the reciprocal process of the speaker's proficiency elements in a context. Conversely, Brumfit (1984) presented the concept of proficiency as embedded in other notions such as fluency and accuracy.

Similarly, the Council of Europe defined proficiency as "what someone can do/knows about the application of the subject in the real world" (p.183), which resembles Bachman and Palmer's (1996) definition of proficiency as the appropriate application of the speaker's communicative competence.

With the incorporation of the notion of communicative competence in language teaching methodology and assessment, proficiency gained significant relevance since the 1970s. The concept of proficiency began to be the core of research about testing. The need to establish a foundation to describe what speakers can do with the language rather than what they know about the language made proficiency a fundamental aspect to be included in documents like the first version of the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001). This document provided academics, teachers, and students with standardized descriptors of productive, receptive, and interactive skills, including grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) substantially contributed to the understanding and measurement of language proficiency. Recently, an updated version of the CEFR appeared in 2020, defining proficiency as a notion that describes what learners can do with the language in real-world communicative encounters instead of placing proficiency as a concept that highlighted what learners have not reached in terms of their communicative competence. This new perspective on the concept of proficiency is described as a circular process in the CEFR, in which the learner performs activities to develop competencies and acquire strategies for language learning.

Nowadays, language proficiency is considered a complex and multidimensional concept (Harsch, 2017). For instance, Karas and Faez (2020) explain that the

conceptualization of proficiency made by researchers and policymakers is directed toward the concept and its relationship with language learning in the classroom. Similarly, Richards (2010) and Seidlhofer (1999) state that proficiency is an aspect that influences language teachers' confidence. A teacher with a high level of proficiency is more likely to depict strong confidence in his/her teaching performance. In addition, language proficiency is one of the requirements teachers need to develop as part of any training or teacher education process (Richards, 1998). Similarly, Valderruten and Ramos (2014) state that language proficiency measured by standardized tests can evidence a precise language level of the speaker. Therefore, knowledge of the discipline, contextual knowledge, pedagogical reasoning, and communicative competence of the target language determine how teachers will perform in the classroom. Proficiency is unquestionably a key factor in the success of students' language learning processes.

Perceptions

Perception is a concept that has been widely used and studied in different fields such as psychology and, more recently, in other areas of knowledge such as anthropology. In psychology, the concept of perception has been defined as a cognitive process that involves recognizing, interpreting, and making sense of sensory stimuli in context. These stimuli are influenced by culture and social representations that give meaning to each sensation. In other disciplines, the notion of perception is equated with other concepts such as attitudes or social values of a given group.

According to Vargas (1994), perception is related to physical stimuli and the way these stimuli are interpreted based on the cultural knowledge acquired by being part of a community. The author also states that the concept of perception is associated with the space and time in which the stimuli are generated. Thus, each society shapes reality based on its perception of not only objects and phenomena that are perceptible through the senses but also other events or phenomena of everyday life.

In this sense, perception is part of the evaluation of social reality in which analytical elements constitute a way of understanding phenomena.

Additionally, Rivera et al. (2000) consider that the notion of perception is an individual construction based on emotions, motivations, and experiences taken from real life at a given moment. Perceptions are built in specific moments in which a situation is interpreted based on the individual's participation in events. Perception is the result of a process of information transformation carried out by a subject in a conscious manner. People's perceptions of a phenomenon can be classified into categories, which can then generate the classification of common elements of the stimuli that the subject or a community of subjects perceives. The mind carries out the process of giving meaning to what the subject perceives (Arias Castilla, 2006).

Bilingualism policies in Colombia

Colombia is a multicultural country, as stated in its Constitution (Congreso Nacional de Colombia, 1991). Following the approval of this document, several laws have been passed to reinforce the presence of bilingualism in the country. The first law introducing elements related to bilingual education in teaching a foreign language is the General Law of Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 1994). This document formally establishes English as the target language to be taught from elementary to high school.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education launched the National Bilingualism Program 2004-2019 (PNB for its acronym in Spanish) as a strategy to foster bilingualism in the country. Its main objective was to promote foreign language teaching and learning while also cultivating native languages and etnoeducation. Previously, Law 70 (Congreso Nacional de Colombia, 1193) and the Ten-Year Plan of Education (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006) emphasized the recognition and protection of Colombian cultural identity and equality for all ethnic groups. The National Bilingualism Program (2004-2019) was structured in different areas, primarily

focusing on the development of language skills to enhance global economic competitiveness.

Two years later, another public policy supporting bilingualism initiatives was the Ten-Year Education Plan (2006-2015). This plan aimed to promote both foreign and first language learning in the country. As a result of this plan, specific levels of proficiency were established (B1 for high school graduates, B2-C1 for English teachers).

Despite the plans and projects, the English proficiency level of language graduates, teachers, and students in Colombia did not show significant progress. Sánchez-Jabba (2013) demonstrates that the expected level of English teachers for 2019 was B2, but only 25% of Colombian English teachers reached B+. The same author suggests that the low results of students are directly associated with teachers' proficiency levels. One of the reasons for this phenomenon stems from the Bachelor of Arts in Languages program, where about 40% of graduates reached B1 in the national standardized test Saber Pro in 2012.

Another program led by the Ministry of Education to diagnose English teachers' proficiency levels was Teach Challenge in 2014. The diagnosis revealed that 20% of English teachers in the country needed guidance to teach the language and better communicative and ICT competencies to deliver more effective classes.

In 2015, a new national bilingual project was launched: Colombia Very Well (2015-2025). This bilingual program aims to strengthen teacher education, increase the number of hours of English teaching at schools, and promote ICT use in language teaching. The program expects to achieve better results by 2025 than previous national bilingual projects. Although the Colombia Very Well program sets new goals for students and teachers (graduate students from the B.A. in Languages must reach C1), no recent diagnosis of English teachers' proficiency level has been conducted at a national level in the last two years.

Methodology

This study followed a mixed-methods research approach. According to Creswell (2014), the mixed-methods approach combines the best of the quantitative and qualitative research approaches by comparing, explaining, understanding, and developing a more complex view of the research problem. The mixed-methods research approach has been recently adopted in the EFL field. The decision to use the mixed-methods approach was based on the nature of the research problem because proficiency levels are measured with standardized tests that provide statistical data, while perceptions are usually identified through interviews.

The design used for this study was the convergent parallel design. This type of design allows for the collection of data through quantitative and qualitative instruments in one phase (Pardede, 2018). A combination of quantitative (English test) and qualitative (focus groups/interview questionnaire with three open-ended questions) instruments was used for data collection (see Appendix 1). The data were analyzed separately to contrast findings afterward. One way of analyzing data is by using the side-by-side comparison approach. In this approach, quantitative statistical results are reported first, and then qualitative results are discussed (Creswell, 2014).

Instruments were selected after defining the research approach and design. Using a free online standardized test (EF Set 50 minutes), the English proficiency level of foreign language teachers in the municipality of Tuluá was established. The EF Set is an exam developed by English First (EF), a company dedicated to estimating English proficiency levels worldwide (English Proficiency Index). The EF Set design process began in 2012 with the assistance of language assessment experts such as Lyle Bachman and Mari Pearlman. The EF Set was created following the Assessment Use Argument (AUA) and Design Statement, followed by a 15-month initial trial and successive trials to ensure the test's validity and reliability. The AUA, defined by Bachman and Palmer (2010), is a strategy to justify the decisions test developers make based on theoretical concepts, design, and development of an

exam. The EF Set is a computer-adaptive multi-stage exam that tests two abilities: listening and reading comprehension. The exam is aligned with the bands and descriptors of the CEFR.

English teachers were asked to take the exam in person in a computer room in September 2021 at Unidad Central del Valle del Cauca (UCEVA). Immediately after taking the test, a group of teachers was interviewed using the focus group technique with six participants selected at the researcher's convenience. A questionnaire of open-ended questions on the implementation of the public policy of bilingualism in Tuluá was used. Questions were taken from an instrument developed by an English teacher from a public school in Tuluá, adapted and validated by a research group at UCEVA.

Tuluá has sixty English teachers in both urban and rural areas. The municipality of Tuluá has eighteen public schools, each with at least one English teacher in high school. The largest public school in the municipality has six English teachers, while rural institutions have only one English teacher each. A total of 46 teachers from public and private educational institutions (38 from public schools and 9 from private schools) voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. There are also forty private schools in Tuluá with a significant number of English teachers at all educational levels (pre-school, elementary, and high school). Since the objective of this study is to analyze teachers' perceptions of the implementation of bilingual programs in Tuluá, English teachers who work at private schools were not included in the scope of this research.

The criteria for selecting subjects were as follows:

. English teachers with more than five years of experience.
. English teachers working in public schools.
. English teachers willing to participate in the study.

Once the information was collected, the results of the diagnostic English test were analyzed using the levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. To consolidate the information, a grid was used to record the name of the participant, the institution to which he/she belongs, and the level reached. Statistical analysis of the quantitative data was performed using a free Excel application (EZ Analyze).

Regarding qualitative data, content analysis was selected as the technique to examine participants' responses. Hernández et al. (1998) affirm that content analysis is a useful procedure to examine communicative processes in various contexts. The recordings of the focus groups were transcribed, and an emerging data grid was used to identify frequently mentioned aspects or common themes. The following section presents the findings, focusing on English teachers' proficiency levels and their opinions on the implementation of bilingual policies.

Results

One way to shed light on the implementation of the bilingual policy in the municipality of Tuluá and the English proficiency level of teachers is by analyzing the results of a standardized test and the responses of teachers regarding local bilingual programs. The results of the EF Set test present a fresh perspective on language teachers' proficiency levels. Furthermore, teachers' perceptions about the implementation of the bilingualism program in the municipality of Tuluá are reported in this section.

English teacher's proficiency level

The results of the current research done in the municipality of Tuluá are presented in Table 1. The results obtained by English teachers in the EF Set test show the level of proficiency according to the CEFR.Proin pharetra nonummy pede.

Table 1. English proficiency level of teachers in Tuluá according to the CEFR

English teachers' proficiency level according to CEFR	Number of teachers	Percentage	Mean	Media	Mode
A1	13	28.2%	7.6	6	10
A2	6	13%	7.6	6	10
B1	3	6.5%	7.6	6	10
B2	10	21.7%	7.6	6	10
C1	10	21.7%	7.6	6	10
C2	4	8.9%	7.6	6	10
Total	46	100%			

Source: Own elaboration

English teachers' proficiency level in Tuluá, is slightly above the national average having more than 42% of teachers who are considered independent users of the target language. Even some of them (8.9%) reach a C2 level. There is a significant percentage of teachers who have an A1 level (28.2%) which corresponds to elementary school teachers. Tuluá seems to be an exception to the national situation

since a good number of English teachers from the public schools who participated in this investigation reached an upper-intermediate and high level of proficiency. For further studies, a standardized test may be used if all skills want to be tested and analyzed.

English teachers' perceptions of the implementation of a local bilingualism policy

Conversely, this study aimed at not only identifying the proficiency levels of English teachers but their perceptions about the implementation of a bilingual policy. The following lines will show how they have been part of the national bilingual plans and projects as well as the local initiatives in terms of teacher education. Six teachers participated in this data collection strategy using the focus group technique. A total of three open-ended questions were asked to know teachers' perceptions about the implementation of the local public policies on bilingualism (Tuluá loves English).

Participants' discourse has not been modified to maintain their true opinions about the implementation of the local bilingual policy. The first category drawn from the English teachers' responses corresponds to their experiences with the Tulua loves English program. Three teachers considered that the program is pertinent and has contributed to the institutions that were selected to participate in the activities led by the municipal government. One of the teachers took an active part in the program. The rest of the interviewees considered that the program failed to respond to the real necessities of teachers and learners and one of them answered that the program did not have any positive impact since the training activities did not meet their expectations. Some of the teachers' responses are presented below.

Teacher 1: Yes, I believe that the program is relevant, but for this relevance to be seen, the teacher, his or her knowledge of the area, and initiative, have a lot to do with it. (sic)
Teacher 5: I do not know the program. (sic)
Teacher 4: The program generated some kind of expectations among students, but

it was not implemented optimally.

Teacher 2: It has not contributed, because it does not give teachers the possibility to have real and relevant training. (sic)

It is evident that teachers are not aware of the bilingual program in the municipality of Tuluá or have a negative perception of its implementation. These appreciations show that the Municipal Secretary of Education should make greater efforts concerning the socialization of the bilingualism program in educational institutions. According to Shohamy (2009), language teachers need to be active members in the implementation of a linguistic policy since they have knowledge, experiences, and ideas that can be used in the process of accomplishing the goals set in the public policy.

Another category identified from the English teachers' responses regarding the implementation of the bilingual program at the local level was its contribution of it to educational institutions. Some of the teachers' answers were as follows:

Teacher 3: "The program did not end. In Tuluá loves English only a few institutions were targeted. The new mayor's office does not have a program and has not been able to demonstrate important results of these programs, they focused on students in tenth and eleventh grades. Students from all grades were not included. In the educational institution where I am, there is no significant experience". (sic)
Teacher 1: "I don't know any significant experience".

Only one of the interviewees affirmed that there was a significant contribution to the bilingual program in her institution. Most respondents negatively perceive the implementation of the local bilingual program.

The following category identified in the focus group was teacher education. This is a fundamental aspect English teachers accentuated in their responses. Half of them considered the need to emphasize both language proficiency and methodological

aspects to make their teaching practice more effective. Participants responded affirmatively to the need of having a training program in English teaching methodology that allows for dynamizing the L2 learning processes. At present, the municipality of Tuluá does not have a professional development program for foreign language teachers; therefore, English teachers are not updated in new methodologies for teaching L2 or the use of technological resources that allow them to change the ways of teaching their classes. Examples of the teachers' answers are as follows:

Teacher 6: "We need more language teacher education programs but in how I teach, and how I motivate the child, teacher education programs focused on didactics". (sic)

Teacher 4: "More practices, tools, and teaching methods beyond theory are required". (sic)

Teacher 1: This would help the teacher in terms of training (grammar and speaking). I believe that the main lack is speaking and teacher education programs that generate a taste for English among teachers. Teachers shy away from English, especially elementary school teachers who have a heavy academic load and responsibilities in other subjects. (sic)

Novozhenina and López Pinzón (2018) highlight the need of paying attention to teacher education beyond their language proficiency just as English teachers from Tuluá.

Finally, the last category identified is related to the materials, the use of technology, and the conditions to make language learning more successful. Most teachers' answers focused on the necessity of having better teaching and learning conditions as it can be shown in the following narratives.

Teachers 1 & 2: "Improve in terms of physical material, and audiovisual material. There are no computers in the institution and the systems room remains closed". "More than programs, improve audiovisual tools: speakers, video beam, TV, English lab. Currently, I don't even have the internet in the classroom".

Teacher 3: "Optimal conditions in each institution, a language room is necessary, resources. In the institutions, there are teachers with a lot of knowledge, but we need to have more tools: audio, screens, and videos". (sic)

The physical conditions and resources of the public educational institutions in the municipality of Tuluá are not the most adequate for the teaching and learning process of English. In summary, these results show that there is a gap between what is planned by the municipal government and the actual implementation of the public policy. Also, teachers have explicitly requested teacher development programs to improve not only their teaching skills but also their foreign language proficiency level. A more robust program with the participation of all stakeholders may provide a better construction of a local bilingual program. Besides that, proper conditions in the classrooms must be a priority for future bilingual projects in the municipality of Tuluá.

Discussion

This study set out to highlight the relationship between the language proficiency of teachers in Tuluá and their perceptions of the implementation of bilingualism projects. It is evident that the Ministry of Education has developed a set of plans and programs to foster bilingualism in the country, however, English teachers perceive a disconnection between what is planned and the effective implementation of a linguistic policy. Some of the reasons for this situation are teachers' low participation in teacher education programs and institutional conditions to implement bilingualism (Jung & Norton, 2002). A solid public policy on bilingualism must assure stable and permanent procedures to guarantee teachers' active participation. A successful teacher education program is a long-term process. Therefore, the implementation of

the national bilingual programs and/ or local plans requires a democratic process including all participants to confirm the efficacy of a linguistic policy (Shohamy, 2006; González-Moncada, 2021).

Regarding the focus on language proficiency, Imbernon (2007) criticizes public policies designed to address teacher education based on diagnostic tests just like the national bilingual programs have been structured. The idea that the quality of education will be improved based on the betterment of language proficiency levels of teachers limits teacher development to a mere technical issue. Shohamy (2006) explains that testing is a powerful mechanism in linguistic policy implementation. Just like Sierra (2015), the current research study has shown that English teachers affirm their perception of the implementation of the national bilingual programs based on diagnostic tests. The findings of this study unveil the need to strengthen teacher education beyond teachers' knowledge of methodologies. Other needs should be considered as part of the implementation of the bilingual programs in Colombia such as access to the internet and digital resources.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea of the implementation of a linguistic policy based on the contradiction between the scarce participation of teachers in the construction of the national bilingual programs and their institutional reality. Moreover, the results of the implementation of bilingual projects in Colombia have demonstrated very little progress in the teachers' level of proficiency. One of the reasons for these poor results is that teacher education programs have been designed following an approach that generates tensions among participants.

Cangarajah (2005) considers that these tensions come from the differences between those who create the policy and the expectations and practices of the people who implement the policy. The findings in this research project regarding the implementation of the bilingual program in Tuluá show a disconnection between what teachers expect from the public policy and what is done for reaching the established goals. A more democratic process is needed to open spaces for

teachers to openly express what they need for the betterment of bilingualism in Tuluá.

Although this study presents positive results regarding the language proficiency level of English teachers in Tuluá, there is a need to establish from the local government a more structured program to promote teachers' development of communicative competencies in the target language. The Secretary of Education in the municipality establishes a plan for teacher development annually. This plan is designed without the participation of teachers and on a very low budget. As a result of this situation, for 2022, only six out of eighteen public institutions will benefit from the annual bilingual plan in Tuluá. Thus, 66,6% of public institutions in the municipality will not participate in the strategies or activities planned for the rest of the public schools. In the interviews, teachers answered they did not know any relevant or significant experience in their institutions. They even reported not knowing the program. As stated by Gonzalez & Quinchía (2003), English teachers should display not only a mastery of the target language but other skills including pedagogical, methodological, and intercultural abilities to respond to the current challenges of educating the new generations. A teacher development program must consider teachers' needs and challenges because of the reality of our contexts.

Finally, this research shows how important teachers' perceptions are. One unexpected outcome of this study was the information participants reported on the conditions needed to improve language teaching and learning. Both physical and technological resources seem to be one of the major necessities educational institutions face in the municipality of Tuluá. Internet connection, materials, computer rooms, language labs, and digital resources must be provided to boost language learning.

Conclusions

After analyzing the data and considering the findings emerging from the research it is worth stating that English teachers in the municipality of Tuluá perceive a gap between what they have experienced and what the local government has proposed in the bilingual policy. One of the key factors to be addressed in this situation is the necessity to involve English teachers in the process of planning and designing bilingual projects. Besides that, teacher education programs in Tuluá should continue to strengthen language proficiency levels including those teachers in elementary school who oversee teaching English, but they are not foreign language graduates.

Other initiatives to boost the language proficiency levels of teachers in the municipality of Tuluá are being implemented by the local government and private institutions which are interested in supporting bilingualism in the region. The results of those actions need to be tested soon.

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