Introduction

In Colombia, as in many other South American nations (see King, this volume), there exists a traditional divide between policy, practice and research into bilingualism and bilingual education programmes for majority language speakers, and modalities offered for minority language speakers. Thus, teachers and researchers who work in schools offering bilingual programmes in international languages, such as English, French and German, normally have little contact with researchers and practitioners who are concerned with bilingual education programmes for the ethnic minorities. Indeed, bilingual education programmes for the ethnic minorities are officially referred to as programmes of Etnoeducación (Ethnoeducation) rather than Bilingual Education. This separation leads to a necessarily limited view of the progress of bilingualism and bilingual education within the country as a whole, and means that linguistic and pedagogical insights and perceptions from each tradition are not available to inform future general developments in the field.

The visions of the communities that support bilingualism in these two traditions are also very different. Bilingual education in majority language contexts is associated with foreign language teaching and, as such, is connected with input from foreign-based organisations, such as the British Council, Goethe Institut, and L’Alliance Française. The families who send their children to bilingual schools come from the Colombian middle- and upper-middle-classes, the international community, and those working for multinational
organisations, particularly in the capital, Bogotá. In contrast, those who work with the ethnic minority communities are generally Colombian anthropologists, ethnographers and more recently ethnolinguists, due to the influence of the Colombian Centre for Studies in Indigenous Languages (CCELA). The families whose children study in Ethnoeducation programmes are generally of peasant origin, and come from isolated rural communities, often caught between the demands of the left-wing guerrilla groups and the right-wing paramilitary organisations.

Furthermore, in Colombia it may be noted that while bilingualism in internationally prestigious languages, such as Spanish–English, Spanish–French, and Spanish–German is considered worthy of investment of considerable sums of money, as it provides access to a highly ‘visible’, socially accepted form of bilingualism, leading to the possibility of employment in the global marketplace, bilingualism in minority Amerindian or Creole languages leads, in most cases, to an ‘invisible’ form of bilingualism in which the native language is undervalued and associated with underdevelopment, poverty and backwardness (de Mejía, 1998).

In spite of these obvious differences, these two traditions have one thing in common: both of them may be seen as minority phenomena, if considered within mainstream Colombian education. As Iriarte (1997: 73) observes:

> Except for a few exceptions – pilot experiences of bilingual intercultural education in Indian regions and some foreign schools in the main cities in the country – primary and secondary education in Colombia has developed based on Spanish ... as the first language of 93% of the Colombian population. Therefore, it is not possible to talk about bilingualism in Colombia as a generalised issue.2

Bearing in mind the above, and considering these two traditions as part of the same continuum, in this paper, after situating developments in relation to the sociolinguistic context of language use in the country, I will discuss the historical origins of these two different groupings. I will then go on to relate them to present-day developments in the area, noting both advances and certain difficulties which need to be resolved if bilingual programmes are to become more effective in the future. I will also attempt to indicate some areas of convergence between the two types of bilingual education provision as an illustration of the importance of considering the development of bilingual and multilingual provision within Colombia as an integrated phenomenon which goes beyond the separatist tendencies characteristic of present-day discussions.

**Sociolinguistic Context of Language Use in Colombia**

From a sociolinguistic point of view, minority language groups in Colombia generally speak Spanish as a second language and have a minority community language as mother tongue, either a native Amerindian language or an English or Spanish-based Creole. Majority language speakers of Spanish as a first language are usually interested in becoming bilingual in an international language, such as English, French, German, Italian and Hebrew (see de Mejía, 2002).
A great boost was given to the status and use of the Amerindian and Afro-Colombian (Creole) languages in the Colombian Constitution of 1991, where it was officially recognised, for the first time, that Colombia is a multi-ethnic and pluricultural nation (Article 7) and that the languages of the minority communities would be co-official with Spanish in the areas where these were spoken. Furthermore, the new constitution recognised bilingual education as the form of education to be implemented in these communities.

Although official recognition was hailed by the communities as a great step forward, this did not immediately change ingrained attitudes towards these minority languages, particularly the Creole languages, which are often considered examples of badly-spoken, or ‘broken’ English or Spanish. However, as noted by Dieck (1998) there is recent evidence of change in this area, in that members of the Palenquero (Spanish-based Creole) community and the English Creole speakers of the Caribbean islands of San Andrés and Old Providence are beginning to revalue their languages as part of their cultural heritage which needs to be preserved.

In the case of majority languages, English is the foreign language which enjoys the highest status in the country, particularly in the domains of education, business and tourism (Zuluaga, 1996). North American English is generally the most favoured variety due to the ‘overwhelming attraction of the USA by dint of historical connections, family and teacher connection, proximity and of sheer glamour image’ (British Council, 1989: 10). Except for its use as a means of communication in small expatriate communities, mainly found in the capital, Santafé de Bogotá, neither English, nor any of the other foreign languages referred to above, is generally used as a means of communication within the country.

**Bilingual Education in Minority Language Contexts**

**Amerindian communities**

After the Spanish conquest of Colombia in the 16th century and continuing into the 19th century, the education of the indigenous ethnic groups in Colombia was the responsibility of Catholic missionaries, whose objective, as expressed in the signing of a treaty with the State in 1888 was ‘the colonisation and christianisation of the whole of the (country’s) periphery’ (Jiménez, 1998: 37). The priority of the religious orders at this time was the evangelisation of the Indian tribes according to Roman Catholic doctrine, as well as spreading the use of Spanish as the language of education (castellanización).

In the 1930s, a system of religious boarding schools using Spanish as the language of teaching and learning, was established for selected Indian students from different ethnic communities. As a consequence, Spanish continued to be consolidated as the main language of education and prestige within the Indian communities.

The year 1978 marked an important change of emphasis in educational provision for the Indian communities in the country. For the first time, the specificities of the type of education considered appropriate for their needs was officially recognised (Decree 1142) and it was seen as important to design curricula which took into account ‘the educational experiences of the communities
themselves, within a respect for their cultural heritage . . . and the selection of teachers who should be bilingual’ (Jiménez, 1998: 38).

The Education Law of 1994 followed this breakthrough by establishing a policy of Ethnoeducation for the minority communities in Colombia, characterising this as ‘a permanent social process of reflection and collective construction, by means of which the Indian communities would strengthen their autonomy within an intercultural framework’ (Trillos, 1998: 73).

In spite of these important advances in legislation, the current situation of Indian education in the country is still difficult. Some of the problems noted in the development of Ethnoeducation programmes with the 66 different Indian language groups derive from linguistic sources, while others are a result of educational difficulties. We will examine a few of these in more detail below.

A common problem encountered by linguists and anthropologists working with the communities is that many of the teachers whose experience of primary education derives from what they were taught by the missionaries, have no experience of ‘intercultural pedagogy’ (Trillos, 1998: 337) and do not know what exactly is meant by the concept of ‘bilingual education’. Thus, while Ethnoeducation programmes continue to be officially promoted as ‘a good idea’, in many cases they ‘lack an active commitment to put them into practice; being conceptualised at national level in limited fashion and not being integrated into the school curriculum, where supposedly they should be the foundation, because they have no practical value’ (Trillos, 1998: 332).

Another frequent difficulty for teachers and pupils is that there is an almost complete lack of written materials in native Indian languages, which can be used as classroom resources. Initiatives to translate standard textbooks written in Spanish into Indian vernaculars, such as Camsá (a language spoken in the Southern Department of Putumayo), have not always respected the phonological particularities of the native languages in their concern to develop a common alphabet for both Spanish and the Indian languages (Jamiyo, 1998).

The heterogeneous levels of linguistic proficiency of children in the same classroom is another common source of difficulty for both practitioners and students. This has been documented by Bomba (2000) in his study of language use in Nasa community 5th Grade classrooms in the Southeastern Department of Cauca, in relation to Indian and Mestizo (Mixed Race) students, where Mestizo children generally have a more proficient use of Spanish than Indian children. However, the same researcher notes the progress of Nasa Indian students after working with a bilingual Indian teacher who gave explanations in their first language, of classroom activities previously carried out in Spanish. After the first four months of this type of bilingual intervention the Indian children began to smile and participate in Spanish in the class, as well as talking openly in their native language (Nasa Yuwe). Furthermore, in the breaks (recess) there was evidence of the Mestizo children asking how to say things in Nasa Yuwe, and imitating their Indian classmates in what they said.

The lack of appropriate preservice and inservice teacher education courses, and the fact that many Indian teachers have not kept up with or have rejected their community traditions has led to teacher resistance to the cultural and linguistic demands involved in Ethnoeducation programmes. Thus, although there are many primary schools which are officially referred to as bilingual,
intercultural schools, many of these teach the official pensum almost completely in Spanish, without designing alternative curricular proposals (Jamioy, 1998). In addition, according to Montes (1998: 270) many Indian teachers ‘feel insecure with regard to the community, who may well reproach them for their low level of knowledge of their culture in a demanding ethnoeducation situation’.

In an attempt to help solve some of these difficulties, various Colombian Universities, particularly those in the South of the country, such as Universidad de la Amazonía (in Florencia, Caquetá) and Universidad del Cauca (in Popayán, Cauca), have designed distance learning programmes aimed at training Indian teachers to work in community bilingual education initiatives. The teacher training programme at the Universidad de la Amazonía, for example, is currently working with 36 students who come mainly from seven different Indian communities and who have had experience working in bilingual community schools.

**Afro-Caribbean communities**

*Palenque de San Basilio*

The education of the Afro-Caribbean inhabitants of Palenque de San Basilio in the northern state of Bolívar, descendants of runaway African slaves, who in the 17th century constructed fortified settlements or *palenques* from which they resisted attempts by the Spanish authorities to recapture them, has traditionally been carried out in Spanish. This ignores the fact that community members generally speak *Palenquero* as their first language, which has the distinction of being ‘the only Spanish-based Creole language which has survived in the Caribbean’ (Dieck, 1998: 324). However, the fact that the language was only recognised as such in 1970, is one reason for its long exclusion from the educational domain. Another is its traditional low status, both within the community and in the surrounding neighbourhood which has led to teachers repressing the use of what they considered ‘badly-spoken Spanish’ (Dieck, 1998: 329).

However, since 1986, there has been a move by the regional authorities to develop educational provision based on the needs and cultural characteristics of the community, through initiatives such as the Black Communities Ethnoeducation Programme ‘Education for Identity’ which has produced the first reader in *Palenquero* for initial literacy purposes (Gobernación del Departamento de Bolivar, 2001). Since the mid-80s *Palenquero* has been used in the schools in the locality and has had a positive impact on both students and parents, leading to a revaluation by the community due to its legitimisation as a language for education (Pérez, forthcoming). Furthermore, the local authorities are currently backing an ambitious project aimed at a corpus-based, linguistic analysis of the language with the aim of producing a bilingual *Palenquero*-Spanish dictionary, a *Palenquero* grammar, and an anthology, as well as pedagogical material.

*The island of San Andrés*

This Caribbean island has a long history of multilingualism, since its original colonisation by a group of English Puritan settlers in 1631, whose tobacco and
sugar plantations were worked by African slaves. After the Spanish conquered
the island in 1786, the English-speaking native inhabitants were allowed to
remain, provided they swore allegiance to the Spanish Crown, converted to
Catholicism and communicated in Spanish. While there was nominal acquies-
cence to these demands, in reality language and religion became means of resis-
tance to Spanish domination (O’Flynn de Chaves, 1998).

The multilingual reality of language use is reflected in the education system.
The majority of schools cater for Spanish speaking ‘Continents’ and use
Spanish as the medium for teaching and learning. However, seven primary
schools and three secondary schools are officially recognised as bilingual
institutions, where teaching and learning is carried out in Standard Caribbean
English and in Spanish. The English-based Creole used by the majority of the
native Islander population has not been considered, until recently, a language
appropriate to be used in Education and has been relegated to informal, family
domains.

However, in 1998 the Christian University of San Andrés, under the
auspices of the Baptist churches of the Southern United States, together with
representatives of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, designed a pilot pro-
ject for the production of pedagogical material in ‘Islander English’ (Creole)
to be used in three Baptist primary schools on the Island at the level of pre-
school and Grade 1. The idea was to begin literacy in Creole and then change
to reading and writing in Standard English in Grades 2 and 3. Literacy in
Spanish would begin in Grades 3 and 4, ending up with approximately 50% of
Teaching and learning in English and 50% in Spanish in Grade 5.

Preliminary results indicate that both teachers and students feel more
motivated working in Creole on familiar topics, which are easily understood by
pupils. Teachers have been encouraged to produce other materials using Creole
and feel proud of ‘being able to write in their family and community language,
using their cultural knowledge and feelings’ (Bowie & Dittmann, forthcoming).
The project has also helped them to become more consciously aware of separat-
ing their use of Creole from Standard English in the classroom.

The problems noted so far in the project are connected with the lack of real
financial support from the local Educational Authorities, as well as the need to
familiarise both parents and members of the local government with the aims
and methodology of the project. There is also need to provide better physical
conditions and equipment for the participating schools.

Bilingual Education Provision in Majority Language Contexts

Historical developments

In similar fashion to the situation in the Indian communities, educational
provision for the descendants of the Spanish settlers in Colombia was in the
hands of the Catholic missionaries who followed in the wake of the conquista-
dores (conquerors). At this time, the languages taught in these schools were
mainly Greek, Latin and Spanish. Later, after independence from Spain in 1810,
the ruling class, based mainly in Santafé de Bogotá, Popayán and
Cartagena de Indias, sent their children to study in France and England. They,
in turn, brought back books which they had translated into Spanish, thus
paving the way for the teaching and learning of these languages in Colombia (Zuluaga, 1996).

In more recent times, after the Second World War in 1945, as in many other South American countries, English became the most important foreign language in Colombia, due to economic expansion, social, political and economic influence and the technological development of the United States (Zuluaga, 1996). It was taught at secondary school level, alternating with the use of French.

In 1979, after a visit by the Colombian president to France, a decree was issued, making English compulsory for Grades 6 and 7 and French mandatory for Grades 10 and 11, with a free choice of either English or French in Grades 8 and 9. In practice, most schools chose to teach English for four years and French for two, with an intensity of three hours per week at all levels, except the final two years, when foreign languages were taught for two hours. As a report compiled by the British Council (1989) revealed:

The Colombian Ministry of National Education has no firm foreign language policy for the secondary school curriculum ... concerning the place of English and French, with decisions being made as a result of political pressures rather than educational considerations. (British Council, 1989: 7)

More recently, with the General Education Law (1994) foreign languages were introduced for the first time at primary school level, generally from Third Grade onwards. It was stated that at this level attention should be focused on ‘The acquisition of elements of conversation and reading in at least one foreign language’ (Article 21, m). According to Rey de Castro and García (1997: 5), ‘The new law gives clear signs of official recognition of the importance of English to support: (i) the development of the Colombian economy; (ii) the education systems to enhance Colombian opportunities in the era of globalisation’.

Due to these developments, in recent years, the profile of language teaching, especially English Language teaching, has become more prominent in the country and there have been several initiatives at the level of the Ministry of Education aimed at raising standards in this area. One of the most recent was the ‘National New Technology and Bilingual Programme’ (1996–7) which promoted the setting up of 1500 computer multimedia classrooms connected to the Internet, throughout the country, to help students learn to use scientific and technological information in English. The programme also provided a three-month stay for 3200 selected teachers in the United States, in order that they might become familiarised with the use of information technology in language teaching.

**Present situation**

Bilingual education in Colombia is associated principally with private bilingual schools set up to cater for the middle- and upper-middle-classes (de Mejía, 2002). These are found mainly in urban areas, particularly in the cities of Santafé de Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cartagena and Barranquilla and have increased greatly in demand over the last decade. There are around 40–50 bilingual schools currently in existence in the country, most of them
providing English–Spanish bilingualism. The longest established institutions were founded in the 1910s and 1920s in order to provide the sons and daughters of the representatives of multinational companies stationed in Colombia and members of the expatriate communities with access to suitable bilingual and bicultural programmes.

Since then, this type of educational provision has been extended to cater for Colombian nationals and today most of the students in bilingual schools come from monolingual Colombian families who wish to do postgraduate study abroad (de Mejía, 1994). According to preliminary results from this study, the majority of parents surveyed wanted a bilingual education for their children to enable them to study abroad at university level and to have better job opportunities when they returned.

Although in the country there is no consensus as to what is precisely meant by the term ‘bilingualism’, most people take it to mean ‘proficiency in the use of the (foreign) language’ (Rey de Castro & García, 1997: 5). A similar lack of precision can be seen in the designation of what is meant by the term ‘bilingual schools’. While most of the long-established bilingual schools use both Spanish and a foreign language as media of instruction in their programmes, there are many more recent bilingual educational institutions which, in fact, provide an intensive foreign language programme (usually ranging from between 8–20 hours per week), rather than offering bilingual content-based teaching and learning.

According to a recent survey (de Mejía & Tejada, 2001) present-day bilingual schools can be divided roughly into two groups. The first group consists of those schools which have a strong foreign connection, such as The German School, with branches in Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla, and the Colombo Británico School in Cali. This type of school has close contacts with foreign governments and often receives direct financial support, or the appointment of foreign teachers to work in the schools. The headteachers are usually foreign nationals and many of the materials and books used are imported from abroad. Students often have the opportunity for direct contact with the foreign country through exchanges or supervised visits organised by the schools, and international exams like the German Sprachdiplom or the International Baccalaureate are offered, as well as the Colombian High School Diploma.

The second group of bilingual schools are national institutions which aim at a high level of student proficiency in at least one foreign language, usually English, in addition to the first language, Spanish. Most of these establishments were founded by individuals or small groups of people, generally Colombians (Araújo & Corominas, 1996). Some examples of these schools are The Montessori School in Medellín and Los Nogales School in Bogotá. Some of these schools may be classified as bilingual institutions, in the sense that they have a high degree of contact with the foreign language, foreign teachers and use two languages as vehicles of teaching and learning, yet they do not class themselves openly as such, because they wish to emphasise their role as educators of Colombian citizens. The headteachers are generally Colombian and are conscious of the importance of social and ethical values in education to counterbalance what they see as a strong tendency towards social disintegration in the country.
English–Spanish Bilingual Schools

Programmes and participants

As can be seen from the above discussion, there is great variety in the programmes and practices of the different private bilingual schools in the country, which makes generalisation difficult. I will, therefore, take one example of a bilingual (English–Spanish) school in Cali, which may be considered fairly typical in relation to language and subject distribution at different moments in the curriculum, and try to characterise certain design features of this programme. Most of the information reported here comes from two studies: Cosh (1998) and de Mejía and Tejada (2001).

The bilingual school in question is divided into three sections: pre-primary (children aged 4–6 years old); primary (Grades 1–5, children aged 7–11 years old); and secondary (Grades 6–11, students aged 12–17 years old). The bilingual programme begins in pre-primary and continues through to 11th Grade, where the students are encouraged to present the International Baccalaureate. Thus, the total length is 14 years. The programme may be considered an enrichment modality (Hornberger, 1991) in which the student’s first language is valued and supported at the same time as the foreign language is developed. Figure 1 gives an idea of the longitudinal distribution of both English and Spanish throughout the curriculum.

Figure 1 Bilingual education-immersion programme in Cali school
Pre-primary
In pre-primary there are three levels: A, B, C. In level A the language distribution is approximately 30% English: 70% Spanish; in level B there is approximately 50% English and 50% Spanish; and in level C there is 80% English and 20% Spanish. Thus, throughout pre-primary there is a gradual reversal of the language balance from Spanish towards English. The areas of the curriculum where Spanish is used at this level are: Music, Library, Physical Education, Games and Assembly. The other subjects are given in English.

Primary
In the primary school from Grades 1–4 there is an approximate language distribution of 50% English and 50% Spanish. In Grade 5 this changes to an approximate ratio of 40% English: 60% Spanish. At this level, Spanish Language, Social Studies, Religion, Art, Music and Physical Education are given in Spanish, while English Language, Mathematics and Science are taught in English.

Secondary
In secondary school there is a notable change. From Grades 6–11 there is an approximate language distribution of 25% English to 75% Spanish. Thus, it can be seen that whereas the first four years of primary school are focused on developing proficiency in both languages, for the rest of their school career, the students will have more contact with Spanish than with English. At secondary level, the subject division is as follows: Spanish Language, Social Studies, Art/Music, Philosophy/Religion, Physical Education, two thirds of the Mathematics programme, and approximately one third of the Natural Science programme (Biology, Chemistry and Physics) is taught in Spanish, while English Language, one third of the Mathematics Programme and two thirds of the Natural Science programme are taught in English.

Over the entire school programme the approximate contact ratio between the two languages is Spanish 9825 hours: English 5262 hours. It may be considered as a type of partial immersion programme of a progressive nature, albeit with a variation in the relative ratios of language distribution proposed in the Canadian partial immersion model, which according to Baker (1996) favours a 50% balance at all grade levels.

Many of the theoretical principles underlying programme design, especially at pre-primary level, are based on the work of Dodson (1985), who gave a seminar at the school in 1990. Dodson maintains that all individuals who are in the process of acquiring a foreign or second language, have a preferred language and another language that they use in specific domains. Proficiency in the foreign language may be increased by means of a bilingual communication between the preferred language and the other language if there is primary emphasis on the message rather than on the form.

While the initial emphasis is on reception rather than production, by the third year of pre-primary the children are encouraged to develop suitable output in English as well as understanding what is said to them. Another key tenet of the bilingual programme described above is that the teaching and learning of English does not exclude the development of the children’s first
language. New concepts at pre-primary level are introduced in the first language and then reinforced and consolidated in the foreign language (Cosh, 1998). Classroom language use at this level is characterised by extensive code-switching, though generally it has been noted that English is used as the language of pedagogy, for classroom management and control, while Spanish is used for the introduction of academic concepts, for initial literacy, and as the affective language of contact between Colombian teachers and children (de Mejía, 1998).

At primary level the emphasis is on providing the children with sufficient contact with the foreign language within the school, taking into account that English is not generally used as a means of communication in Colombian society. For this reason there is a general balance of 50% in the two languages used, and a separation approach is advocated.

In secondary school, the development of English is conceived as a spiral throughout the curriculum. A separation approach to language use is advocated. The International Baccalaureate is a strong influence on the curriculum in the last two years (10th and 11th Grade), particularly in helping students to become more analytical and more autonomous in their learning.

At present, Colombian Labour Law (Article 74C1) specifies that a maximum of 20% of teachers in any school may be foreigners brought into the country for the purpose of teaching in the school; the rest must be local. This ruling may be modified, by applying for permission to bring in extra teachers up to a limit of approximately 30% of the total staff. However, expatriate teachers living and working in Colombia are classed as local residents and therefore the numbers of foreign nationals working at any one time may be much higher than the 20% stipulated by the law.

As a result of this situation, there are three different categories of teachers who work in most bilingual schools. First, there is the privileged class of foreign teachers contracted abroad, usually in USA or Britain, in the case of English–Spanish bilingual schools. Then there are foreign residents in Colombia, and finally there are a large number of Colombian nationals. There is a corresponding language continuum which goes from monolingual foreign language speakers, through bilingual speakers, to monolingual Spanish speakers. This differential in language proficiency is reflected in the areas the teachers work in. Generally foreign staff and national bilingual teachers teach Foreign Languages, Science, Maths and Economics in the foreign language, while Colombian monolingual staff teach Spanish language and literature, Physical Education, Art, Music and Religion in the first language.

Although many schools see foreign language monolingualism among the staff as an advantage, in that the teachers will not be tempted to use Spanish in their classes, this can lead to difficulties of communication, especially with children who are in the initial stages of becoming bilingual. In general, school administrators value foreign language skills more highly in their staff than knowledge of the first language, and this is often reflected in differential rates of pay.

According to the General Law of Education (1994), all Colombian staff need to have a recognised qualification in education (Article 198). Foreign staff, however, may be hired if they are qualified in areas other than education (Arti-
Many of the latter have training and experience in the teaching of English and other subjects to first language speakers. Relatively few, however, have been trained to deal with foreign language speakers of English, and while there is some in-service provision given, this is generally insufficient.

In the case of language teachers, some bilingual schools require proof of foreign language proficiency of potential bilingual Colombian staff, such as the Michigan Test or the TOEFL, but this depends on the individual establishment. Few schools seem interested in what teachers know about the theory and practice of bilingual education, according to reports from graduates from the Postgraduate Diploma Programme in Bilingual Education at Universidad del Valle (1997). The focus of most bilingual schools is on the development of foreign language proficiency in the students and this is assumed to depend largely upon the level of the teachers’ foreign language proficiency.

In work carried out as part of a recent ethnographic, participatory research programme in Colombian private schools which are in the process of becoming bilingual (de Mejía & Tejada, 2001), several important factors which have an influence on the spread of bilingual education in majority languages in the country have become apparent, as well as various difficulties. These will be summarised below.

One fundamental factor influencing the success of bilingual educational programmes in Colombia is the potentially high reward of foreign language proficiency in terms of prestigious positions in business, science and technology, political institutions and academia. Due to the recent economic opening up of the country in response to globalising and internationalising tendencies, career advancement is dependent to a large degree on English language proficiency, and bilingual education is seen as the key to foreign language development. Thus, prestigious or ‘elite’ bilingualism has a very high profile among the Colombian middle and upper classes and there is increasing demand for bilingual programmes (especially English–Spanish provision). Parental support for bilingual education is thus very strong and attending a bilingual school is considered to be high status.

Paradoxically, much of the success of the private bilingual schools in Colombia is that there is, as yet, no national bilingual education policy. While this situation leads to potential negative consequences with regard to consistency and co-ordination of bilingual provision at national level, it also allows schools the freedom to adapt features of established models to their own needs and philosophies and thus to cater more appropriately to the wishes of their students and parents. As noted by John Whitehead, British Council English Language Officer in Bogotá in 1991:

> the differences between a private bilingual school in Bogotá (the capital) where English is taught at pre-Kinder level and a state school in Villavicencio (a provincial city in the underdeveloped southern Department of Meta) ... is huge. (personal communication)

This flexibility is very much in accordance with current educational thinking in the country, as reflected in the General Education Law of 1994 which gave educational communities the autonomy to develop their own Institutional Educational Projects, taking into account Ministry guidelines.
However, according to the results of a recent survey carried out on a selec-
tion of bilingual schools in the three largest cities in the country (de Mejía &
Tejada, 2001), there is a need in each institution for a coherent school bilingual
policy, which is incorporated into the Institutional Educational Project, where
language distribution throughout the curriculum is justified both on academic
and contextual grounds, and where the treatment of cultural aspects, from a
multicultural, bicultural or intercultural perspective is contemplated. As yet,
very few bilingual institutions in Colombia have policy documents of this
kind.

In the project referred to above (de Mejía & Tejada, 2001), it was noted
that many schools see the idea of biculturalism as a threat to school philo-
sophy and national identity. Certain binational institutions are seen as the
only possible cultural model, and these are rejected by many, as leading
to acculturation at best, and anomic and identity crises at worst. There is,
thus, a great need for more knowledge about alternative linguistic and cul-
tural models which could be adapted to the specific needs of bilingual
schools in Colombia.

In this respect, and considering the experience of many bilingual schools
which contract foreign staff, it is important that schools which intend to
become bilingual consider the implications of hiring foreign staff, whose
presence, because of superior rates of pay and conditions, may cause
division in the institution. While foreign expertise is often highly valued
by both parents and school administrators as a sign of school status, foreign
teachers are, in general, a transient population, who often do not have time
to identify with the institution or its wider aims. The financial burden
involved in hiring foreign staff often means that there are not sufficient
financial resources for the professional and language development of the
Colombian teachers. Furthermore, this dependence on foreign expertise
has the disadvantage of potentially perpetuating a mentality of underdeve-
lopment, in that foreign staff are often considered the principal purveyors of
new ideas and methodologies.

A further key condition for the development of successful and effective
bilingual education programmes in Colombia, which has been recognised
more clearly in the state sector than in the private domain, is the need for
appropriate teacher training and development in this area. The traditional
divide between language teachers and subject specialists needs to be bridged,
either by team teaching arrangements or by qualifying bilingual teachers who
are subject specialists and therefore able to teach content areas in two or more
languages and who have an understanding of the basic tenets of bilingual
education. As yet, bilingual teacher training and development programmes
are in their infancy in Colombia, although the Postgraduate Diploma in
Bilingual Education run by Universidad del Valle in Cali provides in-service
training for teachers who are working in bilingual contexts.

Conclusions

Bearing in mind the above, in this final section I will attempt to indicate
some areas of convergence between the two traditional visions of bilingualism
and bilingual education, which may act as reference for future policy initiatives aimed at the integration of these two areas.

First of all, it is important to note that questions of the maintenance and loss of cultural identity are a preoccupation of both groups. In the case of the Indian communities, this concern has led to a reconsideration of the traditional function of schooling, which has tended to be centred on ‘the insertion of the new generations within the dominant culture, without taking into account the uses and the customs of the culture of origin’ (Trillos, 1998: 328). During the last 10 years, the Indian communities and their organisations, the National Indian Organisation of Colombia (ONIC) and the Indian Regional Council of Cauca (CRIC) among others, have supported moves to preserve traditional values and cultural models ‘which have remained hidden under the Europeanising influence which arrived with the Spanish’ (Trillos, 1998: 327). The spread of Ethnoeducation programmes, based on the concept of a multicultural and plurilingual nation, aim at providing students with competence in five main areas: biculturalism, or the ability to act appropriately both in the national society and in their own community; bilingualism, or proficiency in more than one language; knowledge of the main values of both cultures; positive attitudes to different linguistic and cultural groups; and equality of opportunity for children from minority communities (Trillos, 1998).

Those working in bilingual education programmes for majority language speakers have traditionally ignored the implications of cultural contact, assuming that as students generally come from the dominant group there is no difficulty in this respect. However, as a recent article demonstrates (de Mejía & Tejada, 2002), several teachers in a school which was in the process of becoming bilingual ‘felt threatened by what they perceived as a loss of cultural identity. They feared that in the development of the project, the national culture … would be displaced or substituted by Anglo-Saxon culture’ (de Mejia & Tejada, 2002: 111). It has also been reported by teachers in binational schools that due to the immense prestige of US culture among middle and upper-class Colombians, some students in these type of schools have developed signs of cultural disorientation and anomie.

A second area of convergence has to do with the status and development of the first language in both types of bilingual programmes. In majority as well as minority language contexts, there has been traditional emphasis on the importance of the development of the second or the foreign language, while the maintenance and development of the first language has been considered of secondary importance. In majority situations, the view is that as Spanish is the dominant language of the society, the children will ‘pick it up naturally’, without needing to spend time developing language skills in their first language when they might, more profitably be studying through the medium of the foreign language. In ethnic minority situations, as we have indicated, community languages have traditionally been categorised as low-prestige ‘dialects’, of little use and value for education (Landaburu, 1998: 308).

In both cases, there has been a recent revaluation of the importance of the first language in the process of becoming bilingual, particularly in the initial stages of language learning. In the case of majority bilingual provision, teacher investigators at pre-school level in Cali (Araújo & Corominas, 1996) have
recommended the parallel development of both languages, so that children are helped to associate advances in the foreign language with previous experience in their first language. In minority programmes, the increasing tendency towards constructing written systems for oral languages has had a positive effect on changing perceptions towards the status of oral vernaculars (Landaburu, 1998).

Thirdly, official emphasis in the two traditions of the importance of incorporating specific concerns of the educational communities involved within bilingual education programmes is coherent with the flexible policies advocated by the Ministry of Education. It is recognised that each institution should adapt the type of bilingual programme offered, to the particular context of implementation, bearing in mind, in Baetens Beardsmore’s words, that it is important not to adopt:

any single model, no matter how well-tried, without the necessary modifications to specific local circumstances . . . merely because the research background has proved (its) effectiveness in the context for which (it was) developed. (1995: 140)

However, as has been discussed above, there are few concrete guidelines about how to operationalise principles in classroom practice. Thus, teachers in ethnic minority contexts often feel insecure about how to teach from an intercultural standpoint, while those who work on majority language provision are often equally unsure of what is entailed by a programme of bilingual education.

Consequently, those who work in both minority and majority bilingual education are increasingly aware that the provision of appropriate pre-service and in-service teacher development courses is vital to the success of these programmes. In minority situations, staff training and development needs to help teachers to learn to ‘integrate their cultures within the curriculum as well as maintaining the majority culture, though not from an ethnocentric position . . . according to the situation and real needs of the communities’ (Trillos, 1998: 335). In majority situations, as has been noted, teachers need preparation that will help them understand the principles of bilingual and bicultural or intercultural development so that they may be able to cope with the challenges of educating individuals who can function appropriately in both their languages and cultures.

Finally, it can be seen that as bilingual education programmes for majority and minority language speakers are concerned with language and cultural contact at regional, national, or international level, it is important to develop positive attitudes towards difference and diversity among those involved in these programmes. Increased contact and opportunities for sharing the results of research projects and pedagogical initiatives may help to avoid the danger of fragmentation and compartmentalisation which have characterised the development of bilingualism both in ethnic communities and in elite bilingual schools, and lead to greater understanding of common points of interest. As Genoveva Iriarte (1997: 79) aptly observes, ‘Educar en la diversidad es educar para la tolerancia’ (To educate from the standpoint of diversity is to educate towards tolerance).
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Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to Dr Anne-Marie de Mejía, c/o Escuela de Ciencias del Lenguaje, Universidad del Valle, A A 2188, Cali, Colombia (annemariemejia@hotmail.com).

Notes

1. For more detail about this notion see Section Three.
2. Author’s translation of this and subsequent quotations in Spanish in the original.
3. Recently this organisation changed its name to ‘the Wycliffe Bible Translators’.
4. Universidad del Valle in Cali has gone some way to providing a forum for researchers and teachers working in both traditions through the organisation of three symposia on bilingualism and bilingual education in recent years.

References


