Impact of a policy-driven test effort on foreign language programs in Colombian universities

Alexis López

In 2005, the Ministry of National Education in Colombia developed a nationwide program to improve and strengthen the teaching and learning of English. The Ministry began the project to develop two English tests aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This chapter presents the findings from a study that examined the impact of one of the new national English test on foreign language programs in Colombian universities. The findings suggest that the test has little to no consequences on teaching and learning. We discuss three factors that prevent the test from having any kind of impact on the educational system and how universities act as arbiters of the implementation of the new policy.

1 Introduction

Over the last decade, language standards, such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), have become widely applied to language tests and language programs around Europe and beyond. Some of the more well-known CEFR-based cultural-institution host language programs and language exams (Alliance française 2008, CambridgeESOL 2008, ETS 2008, Hungarian Cultural Centre 2008, Instituto Cervantes 2008, Società Dante Alighieri 2008, Svenska institutet 2008, Test DaF, 2008). This shows how widespread these CEFR-based programs are, in term of numbers of countries, and tests whose alignment to the CEFR is being established.

The CEFR was constructed for several reasons, as described in the following passage from the Council of Europe (2001):

[The CEFR] describe[s] in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively… The Framework defines levels of proficiency which allow learner’s progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis (Council of Europe, 2001:1 in Figueras et al 2005: 263-4).

De Jong (2004 in Figueras et al 2005:270) summarizes the CEFR as rendering for stakeholders both a qualitative and quantitative description of a language user abilities across both language-skill groupings and six ability levels, offering ‘considerably greater explicitness than most curricular documents.’ Now there is a trend to align language programs and exams to CEFR levels and descriptors. This is due most likely to educational reform initiatives and to educational accountability systems.
From an educational perspective, reform may be sought as an ‘expression of concern with how well schools are functioning and the quality of educational outcomes and/or student learning’ (Chalhoub-Deville 2008). Educational reform might try to achieve ‘the closing of gaps in achievement among racial/ethnic groups and between economically disadvantaged students and their more affluent counterparts’ (Linn, 2006:23). Furthermore, educational reform might signal a deep belief that ‘education lies at the heart of economic development, international competitiveness, and social harmony’ (Chalhoub-Deville 2008). Conversely, Linn (2006) explains test-based accountability as the ‘engine’ of educational reform. These tests are created and used for various reasons: attractiveness to stakeholders such as the public, politicians, and policymakers, cost-effectiveness, or tangibility: teachers and administrators can be held responsible for gains or losses described by test scores (Chalhoub-Deville 2008, Linn 2006).

The above-described discussions of the CEFR, educational reform, and test-based accountability are not limited solely to the European context; indeed, these three topics are also important current issues in Colombia. There have been former laws, such as Law 115 of 1994, which called for ‘the acquisition of elements of conversation, reading, comprehension, and the capacity to express oneself in at least one foreign language’ (in Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005). Nonetheless, only in the more recent 2004 mandate from the Colombian National Ministry of Education Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019 [National Program for Bilingualism, 2004-2019], or as it is more popularly known, Colombia Bilingüe [Bilingual Colombia] has CEFR-based programming and language testing gathered force in Colombia (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005). Colombia Bilingüe documentation rationalizes Colombian Spanish-English bilingualism as a reaction to global economic pressures: In times of globalization, the country needs to develop the capacity of its citizens to be proficient in a foreign language. In this context, the Ministry of National Education created the Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo 2004-2019, [National Bilingualism Program 2004-2019] which includes new standards of communicative competencies in a foreign language: English’ (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005). The four-page Ministry of National Education (2005) document further substantiates its decision for the Colombia Bilingüe program in at least 10 other places in terms of potential future economic gains.

It is hoped that Colombia Bilingüe and the inclusion of the CEFR-aligned instruction and exams in its educational system will bring many things to Colombia’s educational system. The governmental educational body ICFES (Instituto Colombiano para el Fomento de la Educación Superior [Colombian Institute for the Promotion of Higher Education]) writes that the use of the CEFR will ‘Act as a source of information in the construction of evaluative indicators in service of the educational sector, so as to encourage the assessment of institutional processes, policy formulation and facilitate the decision making process in all levels of the educational system’ (2008).

By virtue of the CEFR and the related exams, the government and other stakeholders will also be able to ‘assess the degree of development of student abilities who are in their last year of undergraduate [and high school] academic programs offered by institutions of higher education’ (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005). Other reasons include that stating that the CEFR levels and skill descriptions will improve and
strengthen [focus] the teaching and learning of English within the country (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005).

To gauge this change in English language proficiency, the Ministry of National Education has included in Colombia Bilingüe CEFR-based measurement standards. For example, according to this plan, by 2019, all graduating high school students should perform in English at a CEFR B1 level, while graduating college students will do so at a CEFR B2 level (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005). Other Colombia Bilingüe CEFR-based target language levels are shown in Table 1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>CEFR Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic education English teachers</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic education primary teachers, and teachers in other areas</td>
<td>A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th grade students [high school graduates]</td>
<td>B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education graduates</td>
<td>B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language major graduates</td>
<td>B2-C1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Colombia Bilingüe’s CEFR English Language Target Levels (Modified from (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005)

Finally, to ascertain whether or not students have met the two above-stated Colombia Bilingüe goals, the Ministry of National Education has also mandated the design and implementation of two CEFR-based English proficiency exams (Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2005). Under direction of ICFES and in collaboration with the British Council-Colombia and Cambridge ESOL, teams of local item-writers created the Examen de Estado [Exam of the State] English Exam, based on reading sections from Cambridge’s B1-level Key English Test (KET) exam. The Examen de Estado English exam is designed to be taken by all high school students as part of a suite of exams given during the last year of high school.

The other exam similarly and simultaneously developed was the ECAES (Los Exámenes de la Calidad de la Educación Superior [Superior Education Quality Exams]), based on reading sections of Cambridge ESOL’s B1 level Key English Test (KET) and B2 level Preliminary English Test (PET). The ECAES is designed to be taken by undergraduates as a part of a suite of exams given during the last year of university. This study focused on the ECAES, as it directly relates to the university English language studies. In particular, we tried to answer the following two research questions:

1. What is the impact of the ECAES exam on foreign language programs in universities in Colombia?
2. What factors mediate the quality and degree of the impact?

2 The test
The ECAES exams consist of 54 different versions. Students take this test during their last year in university. Students take a battery of three exams, one of which is related to their fields of study to prove proficiency in the subject area. The other two exams are the same for all students: the Spanish reading exam and the English exam. The ECAES English Exam [ECAES] is a seven part, multiple-choice exam that tests reading proficiency skills in many ways similar or identical to the portions of the reading parts Cambridge ESOL’S KET and PET exams (Cambridge ESOL 2005a, Cambridge ESOL 2005b, McGeary 1998). The following chart displays the format, the task, and the task difficulty of each ECAES part, as compared to both the KET and PET exams. A full sample ECAES test downloaded from the ICFES website.

2.1 Part 1
The task is identical to PET Part 1. The five three-option items ask students to identify where a sign would be seen. Lexical differences aside, ECAES Part 1 is more difficult than KET Part 1 as this part contains five three-option items, not five items matching to an eight-option bank. KET Part 1 allows for more process-of-elimination than the corresponding ECAES part does. ECAES Part 1, however, is not as difficult as PET Part 1. PET Part 1, in the same five/three-option item format, challenges test-takers to read a short text for main ideas, not simply gist understanding (KET Handbook 2005, PET Handbook 2005)

2.2 Part 2
The five item/eight option bank part is identical in format to PET Part 2 and KET Part 1. The task is somewhat similar to KET Part 6, this part asks students to match definitions to a list of options from one lexical category. However, unlike KET Part 6, which asks test-takers to recall the option from memory and then spell the word, ECAES test-takers have a bank of word-options from which to choose. This part is also somewhat similar to PET Part 2, which asks test-takers to match a short description of a person/people with a longer, matching passage.

2.3 Part 3
This task is identical to KET Part 3. The five three-option items ask test-takers to ‘complete the conversation.’ This is identical to KET Part 3-Section 1, ‘complete the conversation.’ There is no analogue to KET Part 3-Section 2, tasking test-takers to complete a continuous conversation. There is no similar part in PET.

2.4 Part 4
The format is identical to KET Part 5. This part is a grammatically oriented, eight three-option item cloze exercise in a modified, authentic text. It is somewhat similar to PET Part 7, except that PET Part 7 has a ten four-option item cloze set, which tests both grammatically and lexically oriented items.
2.5 Part 5
The format is sometimes similar to KET Part 4. This part is a seven three-option item multiple-choice reading comprehension task. It is similar in that in some test formats, all multiple choice answers will be the same three options. Other formats of KET Part 4 do not have the same three options as their answers.

2.6 Part 6
This part has the identical five four-option item format as Part 4 of the PET, which challenges students to answer reading comprehension questions based on a modified authentic text: author’s purpose, author’s opinion, inferred meaning, recalling details, or global meaning. This part has the same difficulty as the PET Part 4 has, due to identical format and test tasks.

2.7 Part 7
This part has the same ten four-option item multiple-choice cloze exercises as the PET, Part 5: to complete a cloze exercise of grammar and vocabulary oriented items within a modified, authentic text. This part has the same difficulty as in the test task as the PET Part 5, due to identical format and test tasks.

3 Review of the literature
3.1 Test impact
Tests are powerful instruments because they have the power to inform and the power to influence (Li 1990). This power stems from tests providing feedback to different stakeholders and causing teachers and students to do things they would not normally do. Tests also serve a number of functions in society. For instance, Shohamy (1998) mentions that tests are used among other things: to define membership; to classify people; for developing curricula and textbooks, to determine criteria for success and failure; for power and control; and to influence teaching and learning. Now there is a widespread use of language assessment as an instrument in government policy (Davies 1997, Shohamy 2001). There has also been an increase in the language testing community in recognizing the social and political context of testing. Hawthorne (1997) claims that the main purpose of many tests is largely political. In fact, many of the testing systems in the world are mostly political activities and show that there is a close relation between testing and politics and that there are often political reasons behind education reform initiatives. *Colombia Bilingüe* could be considered as an example of this phenomenon. Messick (1981) claims that tests are closely connected to a whole set of political and social values that affect the teaching, learning, the curriculum, the materials, politics, social classes and knowledge. But these political reasons are often in conflict with using tests to inform the learning process (Brindley 1998). He argues that politicians need to consult with educators about such initiatives.
Moreover, tests and testing systems are subject to abuse because test scores and test interpretations are put to a host of different uses (Hamp-Lyons, 1997a). Sometimes the consequences of a test are different from the consequences that they originally intended because the consequences of a test could be the result of both overt and covert intentions of the test makers and test developers. Therefore, it is very important to examine both intended and unintended consequences of language tests.

High-stakes standardized tests are often used a way to enforce educational reforms that are aimed at improving teaching and learning, and to hold teachers and schools accountable for student achievement (Linn 2006, Thompson 2001). Consequently, a lot of the instruction time is spent preparing students for the test, on focusing more on the content that is on going to tested, and on teaching test-taking skills (Thompson 2001). There is also a tendency for teachers to narrow the curriculum by only focusing on the content areas and skills that are assessed on the test (Shepard 1990).

3.2 Washback

In applied linguistics and in language testing, washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall 1993). It is also known by other names, such as backwash, test impact, measurement-driven instruction, curriculum alignment, and test feedback (Brown and Hudson 1998). Tests can change the teachers’ attitudes and the activities they engage in the classroom, and can also affect the amount and quality of learning (Wall 2000). For instance, language testing can encourage innovative teaching practices (Li 1990). Bailey (1996) makes a distinction between washback to the learners and washback to the program. The former is the result of supplying test-derived information to the test takers and the latter is the result of supplying information to all of the other participants in the education system.

Many times the terms washback and impact are used interchangeably to refer to the effects that tests have on instruction and learning. But Hamp-Lyons (1997b) makes a distinction between washback and impact. Impact is in fact a broader definition of washback. She defines impact as the effect that tests have on society at large, not just on the individuals or on the educational system. In a way, her definition is pointing to the political and ethical issues surrounding the use and interpretation of tests.

Washback has been shown to be a very complex phenomenon, meaning that the relationship between a test and the subsequent changes in instructional practices is not straightforward (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons 1996, Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, and Ferman 1996, Wall and Alderson 1993). In fact, there are a variety of factors intervening between test and impact (Saville and Hawkey 2004). So defining washback simply as the effect that tests have on teaching and learning seems a little bit simplistic. Messick (1996) provided a more elaborate definition of washback. He argued that washback ‘refers to the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit learning’ (1996:241). For this study, we are adopting Andrews’s (2004) definition of washback. He argues that washback refers ‘to the effects of tests on teaching and learning, the educational system, and the various stakeholders in the education process’ (2004:37).
There have been several studies in different countries examining the washback effect of tests on teaching and learning. For instance, Alderson and Wall (1993) examined the washback of a new language test in Sri Lanka. Shohamy et al (1996) studied the washback effect of a test over time in Israel. Cheng (1997, 1998) examined national school examinations in Hong Kong. Watanabe (1996) examined university entrance examinations in Japan. Li (1990) examined the impact of a language test in China, and Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) examined TOEFL preparation courses. But only very few studies have focused on the washback or impact of language tests in Latin America (Cheng, 2008).

Several studies have pointed out that there are many factors affecting the impact of a test. For instance, the status of the subject in the curriculum, the feedback mechanisms between the testing agency and the schools and the amount of time that has passed since the introduction of a test (Shohamy et al 1996); the stakeness of the test (Alderson and Wall 1993, Lopez, 2008); teacher style, commitment and willingness to innovate (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons 1996); teacher background (Lopez 2008, Watanabe 1996); the general social and political context (Wall 1996); seasonality – washback is more evident the closer you get to the test (Alderson and Wall 1993, Bailey 1996, Lopez 2008); and the role of publishers in material design and teacher training (Cheng 1997).

4 Method

In this study we examined the different ways in which the ECAES has an impact on foreign language teaching in Colombian universities. In particular we examined the impact of this test on foreign language programs in public and private universities in Colombia. The purpose of the study was to understand how the test shapes the teaching of English, how the test is used and the consequences it has. We used a questionnaire to survey universities in Colombia about how ECAES and other English language proficiency tests are used within their language programs. We then used this information to design questions for our interviews with foreign language program coordinators.

4.1 Participants

Colombia has approximately 350 higher education institutions, including universities, and technical and technological institutions. For this study, we only included universities because the new language education policy only applies to this type of institutions. We wanted a sample that would be representative of the diversity in Colombia. It is important to mention that foreign language programs in Colombian universities vary tremendously from institution to institution in terms of number of courses offered, the content of the courses, the skills that are developed, the methodology, the way they use assessments, and the language exit requirements, and the way the students can meet these requirements. So it is quite difficult to make generalizations about these foreign language programs.

We selected five foreign language coordinators who we interviewed in depth about the impact of the ECAES. The coordinators were selected purposely, based on the comments they made in the survey. We felt that these participants could provide a lot of
information about their language programs and their perceived impact of the ECAES. Table 2 provides further information about the coordinators that were interviewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type of Institution</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Years as Coordinator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Augusto</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivan</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kattia</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tania</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Participants Background Information

4.2 Data Collection

Data was gathered using surveys and interviews. We surveyed 38 university foreign language programs at universities to collect information about their programs, their teaching philosophies, the way they used assessments in their programs and about their perceived impact of external forces. Twenty of those surveys were completed via email, 11 via phone and the other five in person. We concluded that the information in the surveys did not allow us to fully understand this complex phenomenon, so we decided then to use the data in the surveys to inform us about what to focus on in the interviews.

We interviewed five foreign language program coordinators to collect information about their language programs. Through these interviews we wanted to obtain the participants’ perspectives, feelings, claims, and concerns about the impact of the ECAES exam on individuals, programs, curricula, methodology, class content, and materials. Each semi-structured interview was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Two of the interviews were conducted in person and the other three were conducted via telephone. All the interviews were tape recorded to ensure that the whole interview session was captured and provided data for analysis.

4.3 Data Analysis

The surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics to help us understand the context and to try to find us common themes to be developed further using the interviews. The interviews were analyzed qualitatively. We engaged in a grounded theory approach to
analyzing data (Strauss and Corbin 1994). After all the interviews were transcribed, we analyzed the data through a process of coding. We read and reread the data to identify emergent categories and common themes (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). The categories and concepts and themes were not pre-set and emerged directly from the data as issues and ideas that were important and relevant to the participants. The common themes that were identified were the construct of the test, the resistance to the CEFR, and problems with the implementation of the new language education policy. We developed each of these themes in more detail by providing supporting evidence from the interviews.

In order to ensure that the data analysis was valid and reliable, we employed member checking and peer debriefing (Lincoln and Guba 1985) to improve the likelihood that our findings and interpretations were credible. We presented the analysis of the data to the participants for their confirmation and revision, and we also presented the data analysis to two different researchers to explore inquirer biases and to clarify the meanings and the biases for interpretations.

5 Findings and discussion

The results of our study suggest that the ECAES carries minor implications for language education in university language programs and their stakeholders. We found no evidence that the ECAES has had major influence on language programs, on curricula, on teaching or on learning. The very little impact that this test has is neutral, in the sense that its consequences are neither positive nor negative. In a way, our findings contradict Stobart’s (2003) ideas about tests not being neutral processes and always carrying some consequences on the educational system or for its stakeholders.

The ECAES is a low-stakes test. The ECAES is simply used to inform the public about how the new language education policy is working. Although it is not the intention of the new policy, a small portion of the public uses this information to make inferences about the quality of the programs. The majority of the universities that were surveyed feel that there are other factors are used to assess the quality of their programs, including information about graduating students, faculty, research projects, courses offered, curriculum, and the impact on the community among others. Also, we found that most of the universities use tests to make high-stake decisions (eg placement, graduation), but none of them uses the ECAES as an indicator. We also found that the new language education policy does not hold anyone accountable for student achievement. In the following sections we discuss different factors that minimize the impact of this reform-based test initiative. In this discussion, we question the purpose and use of the ECAES and question the politics behind it.

5.1 Construct of the test

Our study shows that there is a lack of alignment between the content of the ECAES and the content of the majority of foreign language programs. We did find that the ECAES is aligned to parts of the CEFR and to two commercial CEFR-based tests (ie KET and PET), but it is not aligned to foreign language programs at Colombian universities in terms of content and emphasis. The lack of alignment could be attributed to the construct
of the ECAES. Our content analysis showed that this test only assesses some reading, grammar and vocabulary skills, and does not provide any information about the students’ productive skills. The coordinators we interviewed felt that the ECAES does not reflect all the skills their students are learning in their programs. For example, Augusto explained that his institution teaches ‘all four skills, so we want to use a test that assesses all these skills.’ As a result, some universities prefer to use tests that are developed internally, to ensure that these are aligned to their programs, while others prefer to adopt commercial tests (eg PET, KET, FCE). But some universities officials stated that they are realizing that it is best to simply ask students to take standardized tests so students can use these scores to study abroad or for other purposes. We believe that other tests are in a way shaping foreign language programs. Martha commented that they use a lot of preparation materials for the PET and that they provide test-like materials to use in class. Ivan also explained that they started offering preparation courses to take different standardized tests (eg PET, TOEFL, IELTS), but these courses are not mandatory.

By examining the content of the ECAES, we conclude that the ECAES has construct underrepresentation (Messick 1989). The construct underrepresentation of the test prevents most universities from using it for any purpose. All their decision-making process is based on other criteria. In a way, we can argue that universities do not have a lot of credibility on the results of this test. This lack of credibility stems from different reasons. For instance all the universities in Colombia have a foreign language requirement that students have to meet in order to graduate. Some require students to simply take a specific number of language courses, others require students to take a language proficiency test, and others ask students to either take courses or take a test or both. The language courses are mostly non-credit courses (ie students do not get a grade; they simply pass or fail the course, so the courses do not affect their cumulative grade point averages). Only the students in language training courses or in specific areas such as international business or international law take languages courses for credit. This is problematic in Colombia because most students are grade-oriented, meaning that they do not invest a lot of time on these courses. For instance, attendance and the time spent working on this class tends to be low. Augusto explained that ‘the majority of the students don’t take these courses seriously because they know that their grades won’t be affected. They’ll just do as little as possible to pass the class. Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do about it.’

This grade-oriented perspective is also reflected in the ECAES. Language program coordinators also argued that many of their students do not take this exam seriously. Although most of the universities require students to register and take the test, there is no minimum score required. Ivan stated that some of his students claim that they just simply get their tests, write their names on it and leave. This is in part one of the reasons why none of the universities allow students to use the ECAES to meet their foreign language requirements. Tania also explained that students tend to take commercial tests more seriously, ‘they work hard to take these tests. They know that a good score will open many doors for them.’ We feel that students use the scores on commercial tests as social and linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1989). Students truly believe that the scores on these tests will help them to meet their foreign language requirement and at the same time, they could help them get better jobs, get accepted at an international university and even get a scholarship.
The above situation leads us to believe that the scores on the ECAES are not valid measures of the students’ English language proficiency. Consequently, the scores have to be interpreted with a lot of caution. We can only make inferences about specific reading, grammar and vocabulary skills, but not about their oral or writing abilities. So it is crucial that the Ministry of National Education in Colombia, policy makers, universities, students, and the public in general have a clear understanding of the limitations of the test so that they can interpret the results of the ECAES in an appropriate manner. This belief is also shared by many universities. For instance, Martha explained that there is a general understanding that ‘the ECAES is not a very good measure of English abilities because it doesn’t assess language production.’

5.2 Resistance to the CEFR

One of the main features of the new language education policy, Colombia Bilingüe, is the adoption of the CEFR to guide the teaching and learning of English. The Ministry of National Education in Colombia has developed a set of standards that are aligned to the CEFR at the primary and secondary level, but there are no standards guiding the teaching and learning of English at the university level, so each institution has complete autonomy to develop foreign language programs that best suit their needs. Even though there no national standards for higher education institutions, there are national expectations or goals for the level that students must achieve when they finish their undergraduate programs. We will discuss how diverse these foreign language programs are below, when we discuss how universities are implementing the new language education policy.

The Ministry of National Education justifies the adoption of the CEFR by explaining that they needed a frame to guide their policy and a set of standards to establish the goals of the policy in terms of language proficiency levels (Ministerio de Educacion Nacional 2005). This view is supported by Martyniuk and Noijons (2007), who state that ‘In general the CEFR seems to have a major impact on language education. It is used – often as the exclusive neutral reference – in all educational sectors.’ But the foreign language coordinators explain that a lot of university professors are rejecting the idea of using the CEFR to guide the implementation of the new language education policy. They claim that the CEFR is not neutral and that the Ministry of National Education has not made any provisions to modify and adapt the CEFR to reflect the uniqueness of the Colombian context, and thus, it has not been able to make it work effectively. Teachers argue that the CEFR, in this case, does not take into account that students are not able to use English outside the classroom. They also argue that the Ministry of National Education is putting too much emphasis on CEFR-based tests to make important decisions about foreign language education in Colombia. Finally, teachers argue that the expectations of Colombia Bilingüe are unrealistic (high school graduates achieving a CEFR B1 level and undergraduates students a CEFR B2 level), specially when the conditions and resources are not the most appropriate. In a way, we can say that the Ministry of National Education is abusing the CEFR. These abuses are also highlighted by Martyniuk and Noijons (2007),

‘There are consistent signs that the CEFR is susceptible to being misused in a number of ways:… misunderstandings regarding the CEFR status, which where
no contextualization takes place, may result in homogeneity contrary to this instrument’s goals; shortcomings in the training process and in the explanations given to… users, which may result in superficial use and even poor understanding of the tool, sometimes leading to its rejection.’

We believe that this is exactly the case in Colombia. The new language education policy has not been fully explicated and therefore there is a lot of confusion and lack of trust on what the government is trying to accomplish. Also, there is a lot of resistance to adopting the CEFR, not so much because universities believe they have a philosophical issue against the CEFR, but because they feel Colombia Bilingüe is a top-down policy. Many institutions reported that there is some resistance to the CEFR as they view it as an imposition. In fact, we could argue that some institutions view the adoption of the CEFR as a form of linguistic or language imperialism (Phillipson 1992). We found that there is a lot of dissatisfaction from many stakeholders on how the government came about this new language education policy and how it is being implemented. Tania stated that, ‘nobody consulted us about what we were doing, or about our strengths and limitations, or about our opinions about this matter.’

As a result of this dissatisfaction, many university foreign language programs have done little to align their foreign language programs to the CEFR. Although we did find that some universities are starting to align their programs to the CEFR. This alignment is more in terms of describing their program or course objectives using CEFR levels. Other universities align their programs to the CEFT by adopting texts that are supposedly aligned to the CEFR or by asking students to take CEFR-based tests (eg PET, CEF). Thus, it is important to highlight that we found that there is little knowledge about what the CEFR levels actually mean or how they could guide their programs.

5.3 Implementation of the new language education policy

Many universities perceive the new language education policy, Colombia Bilingüe, as an imposition from the Ministry of National Education, especially universities that have language training programs. These institutions feel that the government has completely ignored all the work they have done for so many years training language teachers in Colombia. They also feel that the government did not take into account their experience in this field, their realities, and their special needs. Kattia stated that, ‘The government is telling us to do something without consulting with us what we are actually doing. Our programs are based on many years of experience and based on the needs of the Colombian context. Now the government is telling us to do something different and we are not sure why.’

It is evident that Colombia Bilingüe is in fact a top-down practice that that is attempting to use a national test to promote a political agenda and as a way to communicate their policies, but it did not consider the realities of foreign language programs in Colombia or the opinions of its stakeholders. Shohamy (2001) views this practice as undemocratic and not serving the purpose of the test takers. In the case of Colombia, the universities, the language programs, the teachers and the students.
Another problem with the implementation of *Colombia Bilingüe* is that there is no clear understanding about the purpose of this new language education policy. From the survey we conducted, we found that there is not a lot of communication between policy makers and the universities. Also, the coordinators feel there is no accountability system. Ivan explained that if ‘the national provisions are not enforced, no changes will occur.’ From this study, we are not completely sure what the purpose of the new language education policy is and how it being enforced. There is also a lack of information about the new test. This lack of knowledge about the test minimizes any effect it can have on foreign language programs. Tania stated, ‘I had no idea there was a new ECAES English test. I think this shows the lack of communication from the government and a lack of interest from us, the universities. We feel we don’t need the government to validate our programs. We are very pleased with our programs and the students do well on the exams.’

Finally, universities feel that by making English the official language of Colombia Bilingüe, the Ministry of National Education is sending a message that only legitimizes the teaching and learning of English and, in certain way, it ignores other languages that are traditionally taught in foreign language programs in Colombia universities. Foreign language learning has a lot of prestige in Colombia and it is seen as a social capital (Bourdieu 1991) which allows learners to gain social status and enhance opportunities for advancement. Consequently, many universities promote the learning of any foreign language and offer language courses in French, German, Italian, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, Chinese and Arabic. Martha commented that Chinese and Portuguese are becoming very popular among students. They worry that this new language education policy could make it very difficult for many students to study other foreign languages because they are required to demonstrate proficiency in English. Some of these universities even allow students to meet their foreign language requirements with languages other than English. We believe this is another issue that is creating tension between universities and Colombia Bilingüe. Kattia stated,

‘Colombia Bilingüe only talks about English. It ignores all the other languages that we teach at our university. And some of the languages we teach are not part of the languages of the Common European Council, so there is not a lot of guidance on how to align these languages to the CEFR. Since we have institutional guidelines for the teaching of all foreign languages, we have decided not to align our program to the CEFR. We do ask all of our students to demonstrate a B1 level in English, but we can’t really say that our English courses are aligned to the CEFR. We just do it, to kind of comply with the new policy.’

This perception about the new language education policy as a form of linguistic colonialism or imperialism exposes the politics, biases, and legitimated discourses of power of the Ministry of Education in Colombia, which overtly informs higher education institutions what foreign languages to teach and what to consider as successful. In a way, we can view the language programs’ perceptions as a direct challenge to the so-called ‘educational experts’ who seek to keep the issues of power and social struggle outside the purview of education.
6 Concluding thoughts

The Colombia Bilingüe language education policy is embedded within the ECAES. The policy is implicit rather than explicit, but it is not shaping changes in foreign language programs in Colombian universities. We believe that the main reason for this is that the implications of the language education policy are not clearly understood by the stakeholders in the higher educational system in Colombia. This leads us to believe that this policy-driven test effort does not have the consequences intended by the Ministry of National Education in Colombia. In a way, we can say that universities in Colombia have become arbiters of the implementation of the new language education policy.

7 References


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