

Chapter 5

Designing an English Curriculum for Everyone

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors demonstrate a practical view of a foreign language curriculum development in Colombia. Within the chapter, they give a brief description of language policies that guided the curriculum; a discussion of the research framework, methods, and data collection; and a reflection of the choices made with regard to education, language, and language learning. By triangulating existing policies, contextual and conceptual needs analyses, and existing classroom practices, the authors demonstrate a collaborative and flexible means of meeting foreign language teaching across a broad spectrum of inconsistencies. Conclusions review and discuss the importance of maintaining an open and adaptable perspective throughout foreign language curriculum design while establishing and creating a working, flexible English language curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Colombian Ministry of Education (MEN), English language learning could provide better opportunities for employment, traveling abroad, and/or improving the quality of life of Colombian citizens (MEN, 2006). Yet, the inequity in terms of quality of education in primary and secondary state schools in Colombia has helped perpetuate the academic divide particularly within the area of English language learning. Most Colombian state schools lack coherent language programs, tools, and materials

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failing to provide quality language education. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate to teacher educators and classroom language teachers a practical view of how a team of experts constructed an innovative, flexible, and adaptable curriculum to meet the needs of students in 6th through 11th grades, their teachers, their programs, and their institutions in Colombia.

The idea set forth recognizes the importance of research and planning to address a multitude of attitudes, beliefs, and needs throughout a program design paradigm. The chapter begins with a reflection upon the challenges of language policy in Colombia including the current national bilingual program (Colombia Bilingüe, 2014-2018). Then, the chapter details the research process through models, concepts and framework development toward an equitable approach to language learning for the country. This chapter also offers a description and analysis of the key concepts of approaches to education, language learning, language learning education models, language teaching methods, and varied concepts related to assessment methodologies that guided this project. Conclusions will demonstrate the need to consider varying approaches to learning and teaching, the importance of differentiating learning from the onset of curriculum and program design, and the need for established program assessment and evaluation procedures.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In countries, such as Colombia, foreign language teaching has shifted in an effort to remain viable in international realms (Bertolin & Leite, 2008; MEN, 2006). In the efforts to become more competitive economically, a series of actions were implemented to raise the level of education and skills development. The General Education Law 115 (Congress of Colombia, 1994) mandated the learning of a foreign language as part of graduation requirements for high school and university. English as a foreign language has thus become the desired foreign language in academic, scientific and business areas. Consequently, more resources were invested to promote the learning of English (MEN, 2006).

In 2005, the government launched a national bilingual program as a strategy to attempt to increase the English language level of Colombians (MEN, 2005) which ultimately evolved into the current Colombia Bilingüe Plan (2014-2018). Since the 2005 implementation, the program has established a series of actions targeted toward students, teachers and institutions (González, 2007; Herazo, Jerez, & Lorduy, 2012). Among these actions, the creation and implementation of language standards called the *Basic Standards for Competences in Foreign Language: English* and skill levels per grade occurred (MEN, 2006). These standards were adapted from the Common European Framework of References (Council of Europe, 2001; MEN, 2006). However, after a number of years of implementation and various criticisms, these levels were considered ambitious given the realities of the Colombian educational context (Ayala & Alvarez, 2005; Cárdenas & Hernandez, 2011; González, 2009; Usma, 2009). Scholars' claims included that the competence standards were designed and implemented without validation and input from local experts (Sánchez & Obando, 2008). Further commentary regarded state teachers' English language levels, the number of instructional hours, the number of students per classroom, and school infrastructures (Bastidas & Ibarra, 2011; Usma, 2009). Hence, the discussion urged revision and restructuring of the national bilingual program including the design of a suggested curriculum for high school which was proposed in the Colombian National Development Plan (2014 – 2018) (National Planning Department, 2015).

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