


# Incorporating an intercultural path in the National Bi/multilingual Program: The challenge

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## Abstract

Bringing interculturality into bi/multilingual language programs is increasingly called for by Colombian researchers in the field of English Language Teaching and Language Teaching-Learning. This article seeks to examine the role of interculturality in language programs, specifically in the National Bilingual Program in my country of Colombia (Colombia Bilingüe 2018- 2022), and its impact at school level. The methodology entails a literature review of articles from Colombian and international journals on English language teaching, as well as national policy documents regarding bilingual education in Colombia. The results reveal four challenges in the articulation of interculturality and Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022. The conclusions support calls by Colombian scholars to more closely articulate interculturality and language education, inviting stakeholders in education to address the challenges identified and embed interculturality into the National Bilingual Program.

**Key Words:** interculturality; national language programs; public school challenges; Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022; L2 language learning; EFL education policy; bilingualism.

## Resumen

### Integrando un camino intercultural en el Programa Nacional Bilingüe: El reto

La integración de interculturalidad con los programas bi/plurilingües de idiomas es una demanda creciente de los investigadores colombianos del campo de la Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés y la Enseñanza-Aprendizaje de Idiomas. Este artículo responde una pregunta sobre el rol de la interculturalidad en los programas de idiomas, con más precisión en el Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo de mi país (Colombia Bilingüe 2018-

2022) y su impacto en los colegios. La metodología implica revisión de revistas académicas colombianas e internacionales sobre la enseñanza del inglés y lenguas, así como documentos oficiales de la política nacional para el bilingüismo. Los resultados revelan cuatro retos en la articulación de la interculturalidad y Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022. Finalmente, las conclusiones respaldan el llamado de los académicos sobre la articulación de interculturalidad y educación de idiomas e invitan los actores involucrados a asumir los retos identificados para emprender un camino intercultural en el Programa Nacional de bilingüismo.

**Palabras claves:** interculturalidad; programas nacionales de lenguas; retos en la escuela pública; Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022; aprendizaje de idiomas L2; política de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera; bilingüismo.

### Résumé

#### **Incorporer un parcours interculturel dans le Programme National Bilingue : Le défi**

L'intégration de l'interculturalité aux programmes de langues bi/multilingues est une revendication croissante des chercheurs colombiens dans les domaines de l'enseignement de l'anglais et de l'enseignement-apprentissage des langues. Le but principal de cet article est de répondre à une question concernant le rôle de l'interculturalité dans les programmes de langues, plus précisément, le Programme National Bilingue de mon pays (Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022) et son impact au niveau scolaire. La méthodologie implique la révision des principales revues colombiennes et internationales d'enseignement d'anglais et de langues, ainsi que des documents nationaux concernés par la politique de bilinguisme en Colombie. Les résultats révèlent quatre défis dans l'articulation de l'interculturalité et du programme Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022. Enfin, les conclusions soutiennent la demande des académiciens colombiens concernant l'interculturalité dans l'enseignement des langues et lancent un appel aux parties prenantes pour relever les défis identifiés et s'engager sur une voie interculturelle dans le Programme National Bilingue.

**Mots clés :** interculturalité ; programmes nationaux de langues ; défis des écoles publiques ; Colombie bilangue 2018-2022 ; apprentissage des langues L2 ; politique d'enseignement de l'anglais comme langue étrangère ; bilinguisme.

## **SOBRE LA AUTORA**

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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of incorporating interculturality in bi/multilingual language programs has been raised by Colombian scholars in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) nationwide, who specifically call for a greater articulation of interculturality in Colombia's National Bilingual Program. This article seeks to explore the role of interculturality in language programs, more precisely, in the National Bilingual Program (NBP) in my country of Colombia, (the Colombia Bilingüe or Bilingual Colombia policy of 2018- 2022), and its impact at school level. It provides an overview and description of the program's purpose, lines of action, and strategies, and considers the impacts on the country's public schools, where the program has been most widely implemented, and the relevance of interculturality in such bi/multilingual language programs.

Firstly, a conceptual overview is presented, focusing on two main aspects: a review of national policy documents on bilingualism in order to provide a description of the Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022 policy; and a literature review of articles from key Colombian and international ELT journals to highlight contributions and developments related to interculturality and bi/multilingual language programs.

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Secondly, I respond to the guiding question through an analysis of the literature reviewed on interculturality in language programs. As a result of this analysis, I found some emerging challenges in terms of interculturality in connection with the National Bilingual Program (NBP).

By way of conclusion, the perspective from Colombian ELT scholars is presented that calls for the national bi/multilingual language program to take an intercultural perspective, and that interculturality be embedded in the objectives, lines of work, and policy actions of the program. It is also a call for the NBP to address the obstacles to interculturality identified in this article in order to reorient Colombia's NBP.

### **Official policy documents concerning bilingualism and *Colombia Bilingüe* 2018- 2022**

Colombia's National Bilingual Program (NBP) has prioritized strategies for the teaching and learning of English above other languages in recent years. The current program, Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022, is implemented almost entirely in state-run schools and therefore these educational institutions and their communities of teachers and learners are those most impacted by the program. However, for the first time, in contrast to previous initiatives, the present policy recognizes Colombia as a country with great cultural and linguistic wealth. It presents Colombia as a multilingual and multicultural nation, recognizing Indigenous, and Creole languages, while opening the door to the construction of global citizenship through foreign languages as well. It also establishes the aim of including interculturality in teaching and learning processes in other languages

already present in the educational system (Ministerio Nacional de Educación [MEN], 2019). However, despite the promising goals, current efforts and indicators from policy actions reveal a lack of opportunities to implement an integrated intercultural strategy.

In the first part of this conceptual overview, I focus on the current NBP, Colombia Bilingüe 2018- 2022. In Tables 1 and 2, eleven official documents concerned with national policy for Bilingualism and Colombia Bilingüe 2018- 2022 are summarized in order to present an overview of the program's main aims and lines of action.

**Table 1.** Colombia Bilingüe Program 2018–2022: Key aims and actions

<b>NBP Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022.</b>	To strengthen schools' teaching and learning of foreign languages to promote 21st-century skills.
<b>Major Aims</b>	For students to attain an English level B1 as determined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), 2001 by the end of high school (11 <sup>th</sup> grade).  The promotion of spaces and exposure to languages for intercultural practices.  Articulation between the Certified Territorial Entities (ETCs in Spanish, the local educational authorities responsible for public education provision) and schools (Educational Institutions).
<b>Educational Materials provided by the NBP for use in state schools</b>	The textbook provided for public schools nationwide by the Ministry of National Education in Colombia in partnership with the British Council is the series <i>Way to go!</i> , a free English textbook distributed for the first time in 2016 for 6 <sup>th</sup> , 7 <sup>th</sup> , and 8 <sup>th</sup> grades (MEN, 2017).  <i>English Please!</i> is another textbook series designed by the previous NBP and distributed in 9 <sup>th</sup> , 10 <sup>th</sup> , and 11 <sup>th</sup> grades.
<b>School students' language proficiency goal established by the NBP</b>	B1 proficiency level in English based on the CEFR by the end of secondary level.  A 10% reduction in the number of students at A0 and A1 levels in the national standardized test, <i>SABER 11</i> .  The <i>SABER 11</i> test. Regulated by the Ministry of Education standards (MEN, 2007), and the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) through the government's institute for evaluating

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	educational quality, the ICFES ( <i>Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Calidad de la Educación</i> ).
<b>Teachers’ Professional Development Programs (TPD) offered by the NBP</b>	<i>Immersion course in the methodology and pedagogy of English teaching</i> in the English and Foreign Languages Department at EFLU University in the city of Hyderabad, India (MEN, 2021a).  <i>Inspiring Teachers</i> , a teacher training initiative with the Quadrennial Goal of impacting 8,000 teachers nationwide. (MEN, 2021a).

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Note: Author’s own summary.

Table 1 indicates that Colombia’s NBP has partnered with the British Council to provide materials to public schools. The India exchange program also brings an intercultural perspective as language teachers have the opportunity to interact with cultural perspectives from a different context. However, it can be noted that the intercultural perspective in the program remains superficial in some of its aims. The SABER 11 standardized test is also mentioned which is used to assess students’ language proficiency in five different areas, including lexical, pragmatic, and grammatical knowledge. Intercultural competence is not included as an area of evaluation. This implies that despite some efforts to incorporate intercultural elements, they stand isolated from the program’s aims and actions as indicated in Table 1.

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**Table 2.** Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022: Lines of action

<i>Colombia Bilingüe</i> (2018–2022) lines of action	Quadrennia I (4-year) goals	2021
<i>Inspiring Teachers</i> - Training program for English teachers to strengthen their bilingualism on topics related to methodology, use of MEN materials, curriculum, leadership, and formative assessment.	8,000 teachers. MEN (2021a)	1,200 teachers.
<i>School to School</i> - Program to strengthen bilingualism and English language programs in the ‘Escuelas Normales Superiores’ (ENS), Colombia’s traditional teacher training schools.	35 ENS	24 ENS
<i>Target B1</i>	260,000 students.	200,000 students.

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- Design and implementation of a gamification strategy through the digital App, “Be The One Challenge”, for students to learn English, prepare for standardized tests, and complete formative assessments.	3.2 million	738, 677
- Design of the <i>Way To Go!</i> series of English textbooks for grades 9, 10, and 11.	textbooks.	textbooks.

*Connecting Cultures*

- Connecting Colombian Educational Institutions with English-speaking classrooms abroad for cultural exchanges in English and Spanish as a foreign language. Language-exchange conversation clubs: US Embassy, YMCA, Instituto Colombo Americano, Peace Corps, and Cisco. Talkativ-E CLUBS –English conversation.	2.000 teachers.	2.000 teachers.
- Global Classroom: classrooms connected with international exchanges.	320 IE	120 IE

*Bilingual Ecosystem*

- Intersectoral articulation to support local educational authorities (ETCs) in their local bilingualism plans as well as to implement national policies and use teaching resources provided.	96 ETC	30ETC
- For 2021: a strategy called FranCo has been proposed to promote the teaching of French in secondary education.		

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*Note:* Author’s own summary.

Table 2 provides an overview of the lines of action, quadrennial goals, and progress as of 2021 of the Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022 program. Table 2 reveals progress in various areas of the program in terms of teacher involvement, textbook distribution, cultural exchanges, and intersectoral collaboration within the bilingual ecosystem. But also implies the need for continued efforts in order to reach the intended targets and goals related to a deeper and more coherent intercultural perspective in all lines of action.

**Interculturality in ELT and language programs in Colombia**

In the second part of this conceptual overview, I briefly discuss interculturality in connection with bi/multilingual language programs based on a review of empirical studies and non-empirical academic papers published in national and international academic journals. This literature review is focused on interculturality, Colombian ELT, the National Bilingual Program as well as international voices discussing the role of interculturality in the development of language programs.

In 1995, Colombia's Ministry of Education defined interculturality as the ability to know one's own culture and other cultures that interact and enrich each other dynamically and reciprocally, helping construct a social reality of coexistence under values of equity and mutual respect (Presidencia de la República de Colombia, 1995, art. 2). It seems the Ministry of Education (MEN) and the program itself were open to the challenge of Promoting Intercultural encounters at the school and national level as well. As seen in Tables 1 and 2, the aims of the current bilingual program in the country, Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022, include a recognition of interculturality as part of the program's new strategies (MEN, 2019). One of the objectives is to promote spaces for exposure to English and other foreign languages connected with intercultural practices; however, this goal has yet to be achieved as the actions related to it have not been fully implemented. There is a line of action in Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022 called Connecting Cultures aimed at connecting Colombian educational institutions with schools abroad to allow for language and cultural exchange in English and Spanish as foreign languages. Based on a report of the current program (MEN, 2021b), this policy action will soon be initiated.

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Similarly, the review of studies by Colombian scholars reveals researchers advocating for language and multilingual programs to recognize and emphasize the value of our country's own linguistic and cultural diversity. Scholars such as Álvarez (2014); Arbeláez and Vélez (2008); Álvarez and Miranda (2022); de Mejía and Tejada (2020); Granados (2016); Usma et al. (2018), acknowledge the relevance of bridging the gap between teaching languages and interculturality, as well as the importance of the intercultural relationship between diverse communities and the languages they are exposed to. Likewise, there is the recognition of intercultural sensitivity in bilingual teaching and learning as an agenda that should be considered imperative at all academic levels and for all groups that form part of a nation. Álvarez (2014) questions the idea of finding a place for other foreign and local languages that may reconfigure the conceptualizations of culture and intercultural communication.

In this regard, Colombian publications concerning ELT reveal that interculturality is associated with different cultural backgrounds that favor multicultural and multilingual contexts (Fandiño, 2014; Álvarez, 2014). This position rejects programs that may risk perpetuating the idea of a single dominant language, or that promote English as the only foreign language. In line with this, Fandiño (2014) suggests that teaching culture



is not synonymous with promoting English language sociocultural domination or adapting ethnocentric practices, but mainly represents approaching and reflecting upon the beliefs of oneself and others, as well as attitudes, and behaviors which are intertwined with the language itself. Such views can encourage Colombian English teachers to explore and implement strategies to help learners interact successfully with others through their languages and cultures. Likewise, scholars such as Dix (2022) and Tejada-Sánchez and de Mejía (2022), argue that there is an urgency to bring interculturality into the language teaching and learning field to contribute to the renewal of goals in language programs and to facilitate international and local contextual understanding.

The intercultural framework proposed by Colombian scholars also opens space for interculturality concerning processes of bi/multilingualism. García and García (2014) present some theoretical principles claiming that bilingual education in a globalized society should be based on a critical intercultural perspective. Therefore, according to these researchers, it is possible to educate not only in diversity and plurality but also to problematize the balance of power that maintains relations of inequality among speakers of different languages and the goals behind a National Bilingual Program. The authors contribute to the discussion of bilingual education from a critical intercultural perspective by arguing that since two or more languages and cultures come into play in bilingual education, it is necessary to treat them with the same respect and equality. The NBP in Colombia (see Tables 1 and 2) directly impacts school students and teachers in Colombian public school settings which is why some practices at this academic level are able to reflect the impact of those aims of the Bilingual Colombia Program which have already been established in relation to interculturality. It seems, however, that there is a gap between the aims and policy actions implemented concerning an intercultural perspective and, as a consequence, the plan generates more challenges than it resolves.

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### **View of Interculturality and National Bi/multilingual Language Programs**

International voices such as Byram (2006); Coulby (2006); Kramersch (2013); Dai and Chen (2015), regarding interculturality and languages join and broaden this discussion around the articulation of language and culture and thus highlight the significance of including intercultural components in national language programs. The authors are in consensus about the importance of interculturality and its integration into language education.

Byram (2006) asserts that interculturality and bilingualism educate individuals capable of living in a pluralistic society. This aligns with Coulby's (2006) view that interculturality should not be isolated to a specific academic subject but should be incorporated across all subjects and education levels. Dai and Chen (2015) and Kramersch (2013) interrelate culture and language, emphasizing the importance of valuing different languages and customs in each context. The authors define interculturality as a concept

that seeks to reduce cultural distance, negotiate shared meanings, and foster intercultural harmony through interaction. In the same manner, Dervin (2016) states that language use is central to working with interculturality, and this relationship requires the use of not only one language but different languages as well as non-verbal forms of communication. In addition, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) argue that the relationship between languages and interculturality implies flexibility that considers context-sensitive positions from which to view the world. Dervin (2020) affirms that language education is intercultural in each educational context. According to Liddicoat (2019, 2020), intercultural language teaching and learning is one manifestation of a critical turn in language education, as well as an opportunity to rethink ideas about languages and cultures.

The authors emphasize the importance of interculturality in national language programs. They argue that integrating intercultural components into language education is essential for fostering understanding, respect, and harmony in diverse societies. The authors support an intercultural stance as a means to understanding the diversity of cultures, and to develop the ability to navigate global challenges in a linguistically and culturally diverse world.

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Scholars in Latin America (Granados, 2016; Granados, 2022; King, 2004; Spezzini, 2004; Tubino, 2004; Walsh, 2009; Zárata, 2014) state that interculturality in national language programs has now incorporated a decolonial perspective which argues against monolingual structures and institutions. Along the same line, many researchers agree that an intercultural perspective in language programs may lead to interaction and multi-lingual networks developing among speakers of different languages engaged in different cultural practices. As López (2010) states, intercultural education acknowledges pluralities in societal patterns and cultures, and languages are not seen from a perspective of segregation or opposition.

Similarly, a critical position about interculturality and its link to languages is established by asserting that language speakers are social actors with the ability to transform all forms of domination by advocating approaches to education that include a focus on diversity and interaction involving all national languages, without privileging some or only one of them (Walsh, 2007, 2009, 2012). Based on this information, it could be said that the process of interculturality and national language programs is an ongoing transformation, a project, and an opportunity to face the challenges required to pave the way for an intercultural and national language program. López and Küper (1999) report findings about intercultural bilingual education in studies conducted in different countries in Latin America with similar contexts to that of Colombia. The most important findings show how intercultural bilingual education is having a positive impact on school students.

López and Sichra (2008) report that in Guatemala, Peru, and Ecuador, intercultural bilingual education contributes to an increase in the levels of schooling and student

participation in class. It has also been found that in Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru, intercultural bilingual education has improved the proficiency of learners in mathematics, and improved students' ability to communicate their beliefs and traditions with other students in academic contexts and with their families at home. Scholars in Latin America advocate for a decolonial perspective that questions the dominance of monolingual structures and institutions, emphasizing the importance of an intercultural perspective in language programs to foster interaction among speakers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In addition, it is possible to infer that embracing interculturality in language programs may serve as a step toward fostering greater cross-cultural understanding.

## **METHOD**

This article is the result of a systematic review protocol of publications concerning interculturality and the National Bilingual Program (NBP), along with official documents for bilingualism in Colombia. The main purpose of this literature review was to answer the following research question from a set of guiding questions for a fourth-year doctoral study: What does a review of Colombian and international publications in the area of ELT and language programs tell us about the role of interculturality and bi/multilingual programs, more precisely the NBP in my country, Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022, and its impact at the school level?

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As eligibility criteria, this review considered ELT Colombian academic journals (Language and Intercultural Communication, Colombian Applied Linguistics, Profile, Folios, Concepts and Comparisons, Issues in Teachers' Professional Development, Ruta Maestra, and HOW), and several international journals. In terms of publication type and language, the search was limited to journal articles and book chapters in Spanish and English. I also reviewed key national policy for bilingualism related to the current Colombia Bilingüe National Program (2018–2022). Keywords for the search included: interculturality, National Language Programs, public school, language policy, Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022.

Articles were selected based on the eligibility criteria, resulting in a total of nine official documents for bilingualism and 50 published articles, after deleting any duplicate results. Data was gathered into an Excel sheet with the following fields or data items: APA, type of publication, author(s), abstract, research question, objectives, methodology, data collection methods, participants, and findings related to interculturality in language programs.

The official documents for bilingualism in Colombia were also analyzed, with each given a summary description of the general purpose and lines of work for Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022 (Table 1 and Table 2). Next to each data item, I made a

conceptualization of international and national voices with regard to interculturality in language programs, and language teaching and learning. Finally, in the process of answering the research question about the role of interculturality in language programs, specifically in the national program in my country, some emergent categories were identified that are explained below in the findings section of this article.

## FINDINGS

### Giving an answer to my question

In this second section, I shall now answer my guiding question: What does a review of Colombian and international publications in the area of ELT and language programs tell us about the role of interculturality and programs, more precisely, the NBP in my country, Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022, and its impact at school level?

427 The response will be based on recent studies by national and international scholars, as well as the official document from the Ministry of Education about the current bilingual program. As we have seen, the literature acknowledges the relevance of including interculturality in language teaching-learning and bi/multilingual programs and, although an intercultural strategy is visible in the current NBP, the role of interculturality in NBPs in general in Colombia is still emerging amid multiple challenges. I will now focus on the role and impact that a National Bilingual Program may have on realities at the school level and the major challenges identified from the literature. The latter relate to the lack of intercultural policy action concerning the indicators, goals, and lines of work within Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022.

### Major Challenges in the Articulation of Interculturality and the National Bilingual Program

Interculturality in the area of foreign language teaching in Colombia is an increasing focus of study for researchers (Álvarez & Bonilla, 2009; Álvarez, 2023, Álvarez, 2014; Álvarez & Michelson, 2022; Arismendi, 2016; Barletta, 2009; Cárdenas et al., 2010; Cardozo & Lozano, 2020; de Mejía, 2006; Fandiño et al., 2017; Gómez, 2015; Giraldo et al., 2022; Guerrero, 2008; Henao et al., 2019; Núñez-Pardo, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2019; Oviedo & Álvarez, 2019; Rojas-Barreto, 2019; Soto-Molina & Méndez, 2020), who agree that the Colombian academic literature demonstrates a continued interest in topics such as multilingualism, culture teaching-learning, interculturality, and bilingual education. The work of these scholars is

connected to four key challenges I identified from the literature that constitute the emerging categories used in my data analysis. These categories underscore the lack of alignment between the objectives outlined in the Colombia Bilingüe 2018–2022 program and intercultural policy action.

### **Promotion of cultural encounters at school from the NBP**

The challenge of articulating interculturality and the NBP increases with Colombian scholars advocating for the inclusion of culture in EFL classrooms at all academic levels. In line with this, de Mejía (2006) states that dimensions of multilingualism and cultural difference in Colombia are often ignored. The author maintains that many teachers dealing with cultural aspects in their everyday practice are often unaware of the implications of such aspects for their learners. Even if language teachers are bilingual speakers, they are not necessarily intercultural speakers and based on Byram (2006), de Mejía (2006) explains the importance for teachers to be aware of intercultural aspects in bilingual classrooms.

Álvarez (2014) refers to the concept of intercultural communication concerning bilingualism, and even more so multilingualism, with the purpose of finding a place for other foreign and local languages to reconfigure the conceptualization of intercultural communication. Rojas-Barreto (2019) reveals Colombian school language teachers' conceptions, beliefs, and practices regarding the development of intercultural competence (IC) in the EFL classroom. The author finds that teachers are not very aware of IC, due to their lack of training on how to integrate an intercultural perspective in the classroom. This is the reason for the challenges noted in articulating the NBP and the development of intercultural competence. However, it is hoped that this policy initiative may directly impact school scenarios and their participants by opening the door to intercultural spaces and encounters in the school context. The growth and exploration of interculturality in the EFL context generates new challenges for a National Bi/multilingual program.

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### **Pedagogical materials used at schools and provided by the NBP**

Based on the description of the textbooks provided for Colombia Bilingüe 2018-2022, we can say that there is an increasing effort to include cultural aspects in school textbooks. The *The Way to go!* textbooks for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades present a sociocultural approach that promotes meaningful learning experiences in EFL classrooms, based on peer interaction and teacher mediation. The series proposes a collaborative framework, exposing students to different learning environments related to their own cultures and related language(s). The series was edited in collaboration with Colombian authors, who recognize the particularities and contrasts between different regions of the country, and

it therefore presents flexible content designed to reach a broad and multicultural audience. However, the results from empirical studies conclude that the EFL textbooks in Colombia continue to promote superficial aspects of culture rather than presenting a deeper cultural vision of the multiple contexts and diverse realities.

Colombian scholars acknowledge the importance of considering interculturality, Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), or cultural elements in EFL textbooks and pedagogical materials. Álvarez and Bonilla (2009), and Oviedo and Álvarez (2019) emphasize the importance of including cultural and intercultural elements in EFL lessons. Gómez (2015) is explicit about the need to seek, adapt, and design culture-based materials through which EFL learners are encouraged to address deep culture in such a way that, instead of a received version of culture, students are able to assume a critical position towards cultural realities, seeing them as transformative and heterogeneous, rather than homogenous.

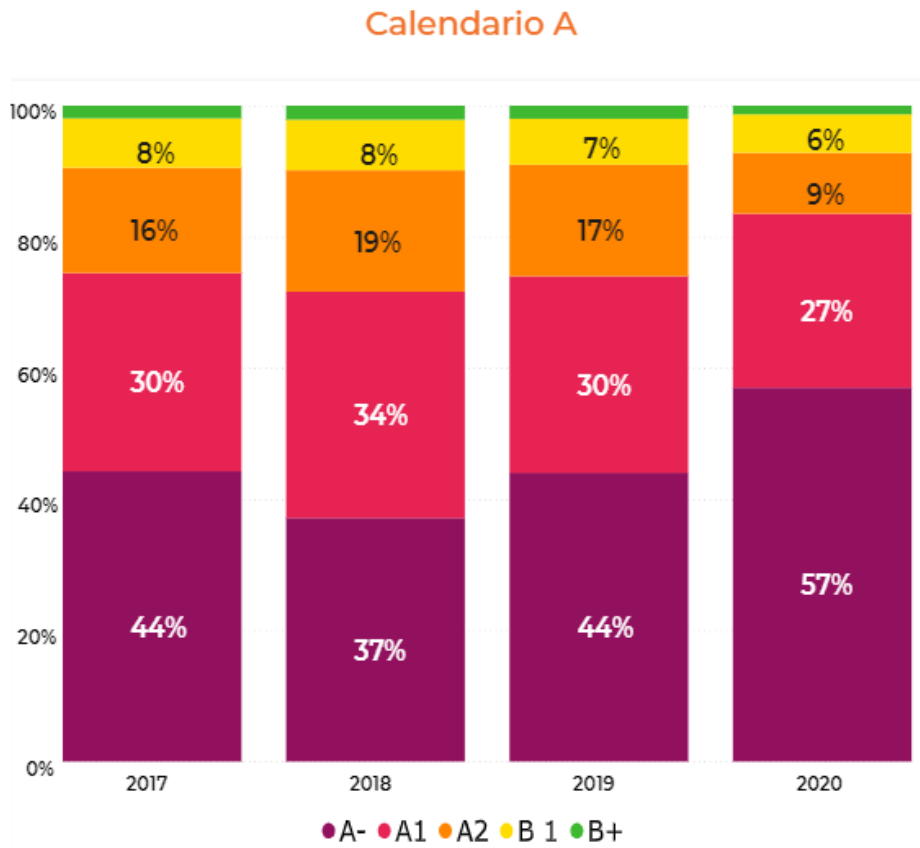
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Other studies have analyzed policies of interculturality and ICC in relation to textbooks (Cardozo & Lozano, 2020; Henao et al., 2019; Núñez-Pardo, 2020; Soto-Molina & Méndez, 2020). These researchers agree that the inclusion of interculturality in EFL pedagogical materials is needed to prevent perpetuating relations of power, in which North American and European knowledge is privileged through the use of English and English language textbooks. In sum, the studies highlight the fact that EFL pedagogical materials are usually the main source of input in the process of learning a language. These are the reasons why EFL textbooks produced by the Colombian Ministry of Education and distributed by the National Bilingual Program to public schools constitute a challenge: how can interculturality be embedded in EFL teaching for learners to develop intercultural competencies if key textbooks are lacking this perspective?

### **Interculturality Integrated with Assessment Instruments at School**

A study by the MEN (2018) indicates that the standardized national test, SABER 11, has not produced a clear picture of student proficiency in English listening comprehension and oral production, skills which are typically most impacted by the implementation of bilingual program strategies. This study recommends that SABER 11 should be reviewed, validated, and piloted by experts in evaluation (MEN, 2018, p. 48). Although a key aim of the NBP is for students to reach an English proficiency level of B1 by 11th grade, results reveal that this goal has never been achieved. In fact, a decrease in student language proficiency levels was reported during the years 2018- 2022.

As presented in Figure 1, according to the ICFES (2021) national results report, 57% of the students who took the English test in Calendar A reached a performance level of A- with an increasing trend from 2018 onwards.



**Figure 1:** National results of the SABER 11 test as reported by ICFES (2021)

One of the recommendations from a study carried out by the MEN (2018) and the British Council was to include linguistic competencies (grammar, vocabulary, and phonetics), communicative competencies (oral and written dimensions), and interculturality in the SABER 11 examination. Another recommendation was to adopt evaluation criteria based on intercultural contexts in public policy, taking into account different educational contexts.

By implementing a language program with an intercultural perspective, it is possible that student learning outcomes may be outside that which is typically evaluated in conventional standardized testing (namely in the SABER 11). Adequately evaluating interculturality in foreign language learning remains a challenge. While interculturality has been established as a strategic line in the NBP, it seems there is no place for intercultural competence to be assessed in the SABER 11 test. Barletta (2009) highlighted the need to address many questions around this topic, to face the challenge of intercultural inclusion in the evaluation process of languages at school level. The author mentions issues such as which and whose criteria to use and how to avoid homogenized views of foreign language culture and stereotypes, and what tasks to design to assess cultural awareness and competence. She further questions whether intercultural competence

should be evaluated separately from linguistic competence, and how levels of intercultural competence could be defined (Barletta, 2009).

### **Intercultural Approach and Perspectives involved in TPD**

Based on the literature reviewed relating to interculturality and Teachers' Professional Development (TPD) programs, and the conceptualization of TPD offered by the NBP, I consider intercultural competence for TPD to be one of the major challenges of a National Bi/multilingual Program. Little attempt has been made to include intercultural competence or interculturality in the programs provided for language teachers by the NBP and this is evidenced in the literature review which found that Colombia has yet to design a TPD training for in-service school teachers which addresses interculturality or intercultural communicative competence.

When discussing TDPs with regard to bilingualism and language programs at a local level, some Colombian researchers (Buendía & Macías, 2019; Cárdenas et al., 2010; Fandiño et al., 2017; Guerrero, 2008) agree that these programs are used mainly for the implementation of educational language policies, ignoring the local context in which they are implemented, as well as teachers' experiences, and the views of stakeholders who execute the language policy in bilingual programs in the country. In addition, Colombian scholars such as Arismendi (2016) point to the need to look for spaces in language teacher training programs where the diversity of our own culture and languages can be recognized and valued. Likewise, Cuartas (2020) highlights the importance of understanding the intercultural component in language teaching and calls for the promotion of intercultural competence as a useful strategy for teachers to develop professionally.

Taking into account this background, we can see that the challenge arises within the context of moving away from traditional teacher-centered models towards practices that encourage teachers to analyze their specific context and needs according to critical local alternatives, as stated by Buendía and Macías (2009). Moreover, in line with the discussion in this article, there is the challenge of incorporating scholars' suggestions relating to ICC and interculturality in language teaching and learning with the design and implementation of TPD for language school teachers. This may impact intercultural encounters, which is another challenge presented in this critically reflexive article.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The NBP is called upon to confront many challenges concerning intercultural components that directly impact cultural practices in school settings. To achieve this, it is necessary to



move away from designing isolated strategies for cultural encounters and instead integrate all lines of action with the NBP's stated aims in a coherent manner. Key aspects in this integration include the categories identified in this article such as the promotion of cultural encounters at school, an assessment of the pedagogical materials provided for schools, the integration of interculturality with assessment instruments at school and an intercultural approach taken in the design of language teachers' professional development programs.

Overcoming the challenges identified in this paper and succeeding in the articulation of interculturality and the National Bilingual Program may contribute to improving intercultural relationships between teachers and students in schools. It may also provide a better understanding of students' and teachers' realities, beliefs, practices, identity, society, context, languages, and needs at the school level. Latin American researchers report that Intercultural Bilingual Programs (IBP) have positive impacts on schools such as increasing student participation and improving their performance in different subject areas.

The literature reviewed emphasizes the importance of integrating interculturality into national language programs, highlighting that the inclusion of intercultural elements in language education is indispensable for fostering cultural and linguistic diversity within schools and societies. An intercultural perspective within bi/multilingual programs makes a valuable contribution to the second/foreign language teaching and learning field, as it enables students in educational settings to effectively navigate the challenges encountered in bi/multilingual language interactions. Furthermore, intercultural spaces and communication afford students the opportunity to engage with diverse cultural perspectives, enhancing their language learning experiences.

My stance on this subject aligns with the Latin American scholars cited in this paper who advocate for a decolonial standpoint, challenging monolingual structures while highlighting the importance of an intercultural perspective in language programs to facilitate interaction among speakers of diverse languages and cultural practices. In addition, Colombian researchers have acknowledged that a multicultural country deserves a multicultural education system and they highlight the importance of the National Bilingual Program in promoting an understanding of cultural diversity and intercultural aspects throughout society and its educational institutions. While the study of intercultural relations remains an ongoing endeavor in Colombia, it is imperative to listen to the voice of our national scholars and embark on the journey of integrating interculturality into foreign language education and bi/multilingual national language programs. By doing so, we can pave the way for a more inclusive, multilingual, and culturally responsive educational landscape.

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