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Achievements of a Bilingual Policy: The Colombian Journey

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Abstract

The Colombian journey to become a country with an educational system that develops bilingual skills in students began in 1979. More recently, Colombia National Ministry of Education presented Colombia's National Bilingualism Program 2004–2019, a policy that recognized for the first time that mastering English was a matter of advantages in competitiveness for the country. Two important goals were established under this policy for 2014. First, 40% of secondary graduates should achieve at least an intermediate level—B1 or threshold or independent user following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). Second, 20% of Bachelor degree (under) graduates should achieve at least a vantage or upper intermediate—B2 level. A descriptive approach was applied to the data and it was found that the neither goal was met. The impact of the different programs implemented should be evaluated, so goals proposed for 2025 can be achieved.

Keywords: bilingualism public policy, Colombia, language test, higher education and secondary education

1. Introduction

Colombia is a multilingual and multicultural country. The government recognizes the coexistence of different native languages and Spanish in the same territory, as well as the importance of teaching a foreign language, especially English. Spanish is Colombia's most widely spoken official language, which is present in all high schools' levels and university curriculums, and the Ministry of National Education (MEN) has set standards for its teaching as well as measures of students' performance at the end of high school and college.

The MEN has stated main objectives for language's instruction (Spanish as a first language) that high-school graduates should be able to communicate in oral and written form, transmit information, represent reality, express feelings and esthetic properties, be responsible citizens and give meaning to their existence.

The MEN has also issued standards to suggest what needs to be taught in every grade. Although the suggested curriculum states that Spanish needs to be taught based on five factors (text production, text comprehension and interpretation, literature, communication media, and other symbolic systems and ethics of communication), the mandatory exit standardized exams only test critical reading. The oral component and literature as fundamental aspects of language are not being assessed.

MEN has found that reading and writing are being taught more systematically and efficiently, whereas the teaching of literature and oral skills have been less methodical and rigorous [1]. MEN also found that narrative texts were the types of texts mostly used by teachers. This means that all the other kinds of texts have been taught less. Despite the fact that Spanish being the primary official language, more research needs to be done to understand Spanish's learning processes and teaching in high schools and colleges.

Whereas there are basic standards of what students should be able to do at the end of each grade in Spanish, and MEN fully describes the competencies, there is nothing remotely similar for Native Languages. The MEN has not developed a curriculum to be taught nor has it included a standardized test to measure the competencies as it does in Spanish (and English). There is a route to be followed by communities to present proposals for the construction of an education program for ethnic groups. Although the mechanism exists, by 2014 only 30% of towns had submitted projects and 20% had implemented the proposals to improve the quality of their ethnic education models [2].

The Ministry of Culture has been in charge of promoting native languages, but has done so from a cultural perspective and not from an educational one. There are at least four different types of native tongues that are recognized: Amerindian languages (around 68 languages) from indigenous populations, Romani spoken by the gypsies, creole languages from African-American descent groups in San Basilio de Palenque—near Cartagena—and in San Andres Island [3]. The Colombian government, through the Ministry of Culture, has made significant efforts to acknowledge, protect, and develop native languages through Law 1381 of 2010, also known as the Law of Native Languages. Although the law seeks to promote these languages and it states that education should be bilingual where necessary, the Ministry of Culture does not ensure such educational processes. In charge of bilingual education is the Ministry of National Education (MEN), which in 2013 undertook a modification of the current Law of Education, adding items related to bilingualism. Broadly, the law states that all public schools should teach at least one foreign language and that this should not interfere with the teaching of Spanish or native languages. The law also explains that English should be considered the most important foreign language.

The Ministry of Culture has funded research to find out what is the state of each native language (how many people use it, understand it, and how are they). This Ministry has also

promoted and tried to preserve native language by translating into many of those languages, the peace agreements (the process that Colombia has been living for a few years now). These initiatives hope to keep languages alive, promoting its use, and keeping people who use them informed of important political, economic, and social issues. Nonetheless, since these actions for information dissemination do not come accompanied by a pedagogical strategy to promote education in these languages or even make sure that they are being taught in schools, preservation, and promotion of the native languages have not been happening.

Colombian Government and society have not developed strategies to follow up on the application of the Law of Native Languages. There are, however, explicit efforts and policies to improve English proficiency levels within the Colombian population mainly for economic reasons. Colombian policymakers have made clear different reasons to implement a successful bilingual (English) program. First, there is substantial evidence of a positive and statistically significant relationship between English proficiency and critical economic variables. For example, [4] found a relationship between higher levels of English proficiency in population and positive economic growth. Several studies [5–7] provide evidence on the relationship of English proficiency levels of the population and international trade development. In the same vein, [5] documented the relationship between people's English proficiency levels and a higher level of integration with the global economy and a greater level of competitiveness.

Second, the Colombian Government wants to implement strategies and programs for internationalization of its economy. One condition for these to be successful is to guarantee that national citizens dominate the mastery of English, the language of international businesses, so they can truly take advantage of the opportunities of an internationalized economy. For example, to benefit from the activities carried out through ProColombia (Tourism, Foreign Investment, and Exports Promotion Agency) such as international fairs, business agendas, macro business rounds, and other promotional activities [8], it is necessary that Colombian entrepreneurs must be fluent in English.

Third, the Colombian government has implemented the Productive Transformation Program (PTP), which has identified key sectors that should propel Colombia's economic competitiveness, increase employment and productivity [9]. Some of these sectors have a close relationship with Colombian labor force English proficiency. For example, one of the selected sectors is the business processes outsourcing (BPO), which can offer accounting services among other online worldwide services. However, to reach the English-speaking market, Colombian accountants need to exhibit a good level of English to communicate with clients. Belkaoui [10] documented that the communication problem that occurs between accountants from different countries, who do not speak the same language, affects the success of the accounting process.

Another selected sector in the PTP is tourism. The Colombian government has adopted a strategy to position the country as a destination for Health and Welfare Tourism; it hopes to achieve a share between 20 and 30% of the medical tourism market by 2032. One of the strategies proposed to meet this goal is to increase health professionals' English proficiency level [11]. Additionally, Colombia was the second country recommend by **Lonely Travel** as a holiday destination because of its natural diversity, number of national parks and cultural events,

historic attractions, and for the warm hospitality of Colombians [12]. Throughout 2016, United States was the main country of origin of the tourists, with 498.960 people and a share of 24% of the total tourists that visited the country [13]. Thus, to boost the tourism sector, Colombia needs a higher English proficiency level in its labor force related to this economic sector.

Furthermore, there are numerous reasons for the implementation of a successful bilingual (English) program other than the economic ones, many of which are also aligned with the Colombian government interests. The academic literature has documented cognitive, cultural, and social benefits of being bilingual. Bialystok, from the Department of Psychology at York University in Canada, has found that bilinguals have better control of visual attention; they show advantages in various tasks where executive function is required; they have a wider range of expressive vocabulary and faster access to words as well as improved flexibility in task switching [14]. Lazaruk [15] found that bilingualism was associated with “heightened mental flexibility and creative thinking skills, enhanced metalinguistic awareness, and greater communicative sensitivity.” Also, it has been proven that bilingualism can slow the effects of old age, such as the effects of dementia or Alzheimer’s. Additional to the individual benefits of being a bilingual, there are social benefits. Bilinguals are believed to be more empathic, open-minded, and tolerant to difference.

The Colombian government has not been unaware of the benefits of bilingualism for almost four decades; the first public policy was designed in 1979 to strengthen English proficiency. From that year until now, MEN has promoted different public policies to increase the English language level of high school students’ and teachers’. In 2005, during the program “Educational Revolution,” the MEN presented Colombia’s National Bilingualism Program 2004–2019, a policy that recognized for the first time that mastering English was a matter of advantages in competitiveness for the country. As a part of that initiative, the MEN developed the Program for Strengthening the Development of Foreign Language Communication Skills (PFDCLE). Under the PFDCLE, the Colombian Government established two important goals for 2014. First, 40% of secondary graduates should achieve at least an intermediate level—B1, threshold, or independent user following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). Second, 20% of Bachelor degree (under) graduates should achieve at least a vantage or upper intermediate—B2 level.

To establish whether the goals of English Language proficiency levels are met, the government applies the SABER 11¹ test for high school students and SABER PRO test for students finishing their university program. These tests include a section that measures the level of English in reading comprehension and language use. In 2007, the test’s results were aligned with the standards proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL). Since this framework is the most used worldwide, the government decided, initially to use it to assess the level of the students and teachers, and afterward as a guideline for teaching processes.

¹Saber 11 and Saber PRO are part of the set of standardized test used in Colombia that seeks to assure the quality of education in the country. These sets of tests are called Pruebas Saber (Knowledge Tests) and are taken by students in third grade (SABER 3), fifth grade (SABER 5), ninth grade (SABER 9), before graduation in eleventh grade (SABER 11) and at the end of professional programs at University (SABER PRO).

This decision has made it possible for researchers, investors, educators, government entities, among others, to know the level of English in a standard that can be compared with and equal to international standards. The CEFRL describes what language users should be able to do at the different stages without being language specific. Therefore, it does not consider aspects related to specific languages, like English grammar or French pronunciation, but the communicative tasks that a person can develop in their learning process. Additionally, it describes different communicative functions at the various stages.

The PRUEBA SABER¹ presents its results using this standard, so there is an international framework to interpret them. Results classify Colombian students according to the CEFRL in the following levels: A1 Breakthrough (beginner user), A2 Waystage (basic user), B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate), and B+, which it is supposed to include the higher levels: B2 Vantage (intermediate), C1 Effective operational proficiency, and C2 Mastery. Although the CEFRL refers in general to the ability to communicate considering the four skills (writing, reading, listening, and speaking) and the standards for teaching English issued by the Ministry of National Education do so too, the Colombian tests only measure reading comprehension and language use.²

The goal of this chapter is to determine whether students met the goals established for 2014. In particular, the aim is to determine if graduates from high school and undergraduate university programs accomplished the goal of bilingualism for 2014. To do that, this chapter describes different achievements accomplished in the main cities of Colombia (Bogotá, Medellín, Cali, Cartagena, Barranquilla, and others) and compares the types of institutions (private vs. public). Additionally, it aims to contribute to the discussion of how to implement a bilingual program in a developing country.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 covers the history of Colombian Bilingualism Policy (history) from 1979 to 2015, Section 2 focuses on presenting and analyzing the results for graduates from high school and university undergraduate programs, and Section 3 contains some final remarks.

2. Colombian bilingualism policy

For over 40 years, the Colombian Policy Makers have designed policies to strengthen English language proficiency and teaching in the country. In 1979, the Colombian Government, through the MEN, issued a decree making the teaching of English compulsory in secondary education. The teaching of English became mandatory for grades 6 and 7 and the teaching

²This does not necessarily mean that the schools should only teach reading comprehension, but it certainly indicates to schools what they will be measured on, and focus their efforts on. There is a difference in what is stated in the Laws and what is taught in the schools. The conception of bilingualism behind the policy advocates for a communicative approach, where students can use the language in oral and written form to communicate at different levels. It does not pretend for students to develop mastery in the foreign language similar to the one they have in their first language, but it does hope for students to be able to start communicating in English, in addition to Spanish. The reality of what is expected and what is taught is not comparable.

of French mandatory for grades 10 and 11. The decree let schools choose whether to teach English or French in grades 8 and 9 [16].

In 1982, the MEN, supported by the British Council and the Centro Colombo Americano, created the program named “The English Syllabus” (TES). TES introduced a universal English syllabus for grades 6 and 9 and 10 and 11. Under this program, the teaching of English remained mandatory only for grades 6 and 7. According to Valencia (2006), TES was the first time that policy makers established reading comprehension as the main long-term objective in the teaching of English in Colombia [17].

This program was followed by the project “Colombian Framework for English” (COFE) carried by the MEN between 1991 and 1996. As documented by USMA (2009), this project was part of a broader bilateral cooperation program between Colombia and the UK [18]. The MEN designed this project to improve the training of English teachers.

The COFE project came at the same time of a great institutional change in Colombia. In 1991, a new National Constitution was adopted. The new constitution decentralized some responsibilities, the expenditure on education being one of them. Under the new constitution, each local government (Departments and Municipalities) had a budget for, including but not limited to, security, education, planning, and development as well as the monitoring and evaluation of existing programs.

In 1994, the Colombian Parliament voted the General Education Law (GEL), which was developed after the new constitution. The GEL regulated the supply of the public service of education by private and public institutions. The GEL also introduced the notion of school autonomy, created school governance, and gave school communities the ability to define their curriculum and pedagogical processes within a general set of guidelines included in it [19]. In this new scenario, a national mandatory English Syllabus was part of the past.

The GEL included the need for a foreign language as a compulsory subject from third grade onwards. In Article 21, the policy makers make it clear that the objective of this foreign language instruction was the development of elements of conversation and reading in at least one foreign language. This law was the first sign of recognition of the importance of English proficiency for Colombian economic growth and its inclusion in a globalized economy [20].

In 1999, the MEN published the “Curricular Guidelines for Foreign languages” (Lineamientos Curriculares Lenguas Extranjeras) [21] and in 2004, they launched the “National Bilingual Program” (NBP), which was initially designed to run from 2004 to 2019. This program was explicitly designed to improve Colombian human capital to facilitate economic development. It recognized the need of English proficiency in Colombian work force for economic growth and development. The NBP adopted the CEFRL, produced the tools to evaluate students (PRUEBA SABER) and developed projects for public school teachers and standards for the teaching of English. This program was the first in Colombia that established measurable goals. For example, it stated that by 2019, all high school graduates should be at B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate) level, while all university graduates should be at B2 Vantage (intermediate) level.

In 2010, the MEN transformed the NBP in the Foreign Languages Competencies Development Program (PFDCLE), which aimed to train “citizens who were able to communicate in English with internationally comparable standards, to insert the country in universal communication processes, in global economy with cultural openness.” The PFDCLE kept the goals established in the NBP for 2019, but it added intermediate goals for the period 2010–2014. The goals for 2014 were: 40% of high school graduates should achieve at least B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate) level, while 20% university graduates should be at B2 Vantage (intermediate) level. The PFDCLE established four priorities: in-service teacher training and coaching, pedagogical support, evaluation and assessment, and institutional capacity building.

In 2013, the Colombian government issued the Bilingualism Law (Law 1651) that modifies the GEL making it clear that the new goal of English instruction is to “develop communication skills so students can read, understand, write, listen, speak and express themselves correctly in a foreign language” [22].

Under the PFDCLE, the MEN continued to develop programs for public school teachers, helped local governments to adopt local bilingual public policies, designed an educational curriculum and content for upper-secondary schools, and continued the assessment with SABER tests. The MEN has also promoted local programs to extend school hours for primary and secondary public schools as well as access to digital resources for students and teachers.

3. Results

The analysis carried out in this section employs the public databases containing the results of a graduation-required standardized test for high school and university undergraduate students: Saber 11 and Saber Pro. These tests are applied by the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education (ICFES) and are comparable in their English component. As indicated above, this test classifies student’s English reading comprehension skills according to the CEFRL in the following levels: A1 Breakthrough (beginner user), A2 Waystage (basic user), B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate), and B+, which it is supposed to include the higher levels: B2 Vantage (high intermediate), C1 Effective operational proficiency, and C2 Mastery.

Colombia has a centralized administrative structure (political organization), with 1118 municipalities grouped in 32 departments. Bogota serves as its capital. The five biggest cities are Bogota, Cali, Medellin, Barranquilla, and Cartagena. These five cities account for about 30% of all the people living in Colombia, with 16% of the Colombian population living in Bogota. The rest of the chapter shows results for the national level and for these five municipalities.

3.1. Secondary Education: Saber 11

Table 1 shows the main statistics of the variables employed in this subsection. The main source of information is Saber 11 2014 test provided by the Colombian Institute for Educational Evaluation. Information recorded by the Ministry of National Education and the National

City	Sector	Num. of students	Num. of schools	Mean students per school	SD students per school	Min. students per school	Max. students per school
Barranquilla	Private	6288	265	23.7	33.9	1	241
Barranquilla	Public	10,837	274	39.6	44.6	1	207
Bogota	Private	53,651	1405	38.2	66.4	1	1255
Bogota	Public	52,812	998	52.9	85.3	1	566
Cali	Private	16,330	594	27.5	40	1	275
Cali	Public	13,488	424	31.8	75.5	1	780
Cartagena	Private	4702	155	30.3	52	1	485
Cartagena	Public	9470	176	53.8	72.4	1	332
Medellin	Private	15,023	371	40.5	95.9	1	929
Medellin	Public	18,770	492	38.2	69.1	1	916
Other cities	Private	84,171	2944	28.6	37.1	1	474
Other cities	Public	331,797	5961	55.7	61.8	1	682

Source: Authors' calculations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics higher education, Saber 11 2014.

Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) about bilingual programs implemented per city and its characteristics is used.

About 32% of the country's high school graduates come from the five biggest Colombian cities, 17% of students that presented Saber 11 in 2014 were from Bogota, 5% were from Cali, another 5% were from Medellin, 3% from Barranquilla, and 2% from Cartagena, and the rest were from other towns and cities. The participation of private high school graduates is uneven across cities. For example, in Bogota, it was around 50% in 2014, while in the rest of Colombia was 20% at most. In the towns such as Cali, it was 55% and in Medellin (was) 44%, Barranquilla 37%, and Cartagena 33%.

The goal proposed by the Ministry of National Education of 40% of secondary education graduates achieving an intermediate level – B1 or independent user following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), was not achieved in 2014. Only 41,477 (6.7% of 617,536) students achieved an intermediate level (B1) or independent level (B+) (see **Figure 1**). This striking result is a signal that either the goal was very ambitious or there is a structural problem in the way English is taught in secondary education, or both. Plea for the first reason, is that the English test taken by English teachers in 2013 showed that only 43% achieved a B+ level (MEN, 2014). Therefore, it is quite difficult to expect 40% of students to achieve a B1 or B+ level. Unluckily, no information for basic education is available for doing further comparisons, which could give a better idea if young children are achieving the expected English level for their age, and if not, how severe is this deficiency.

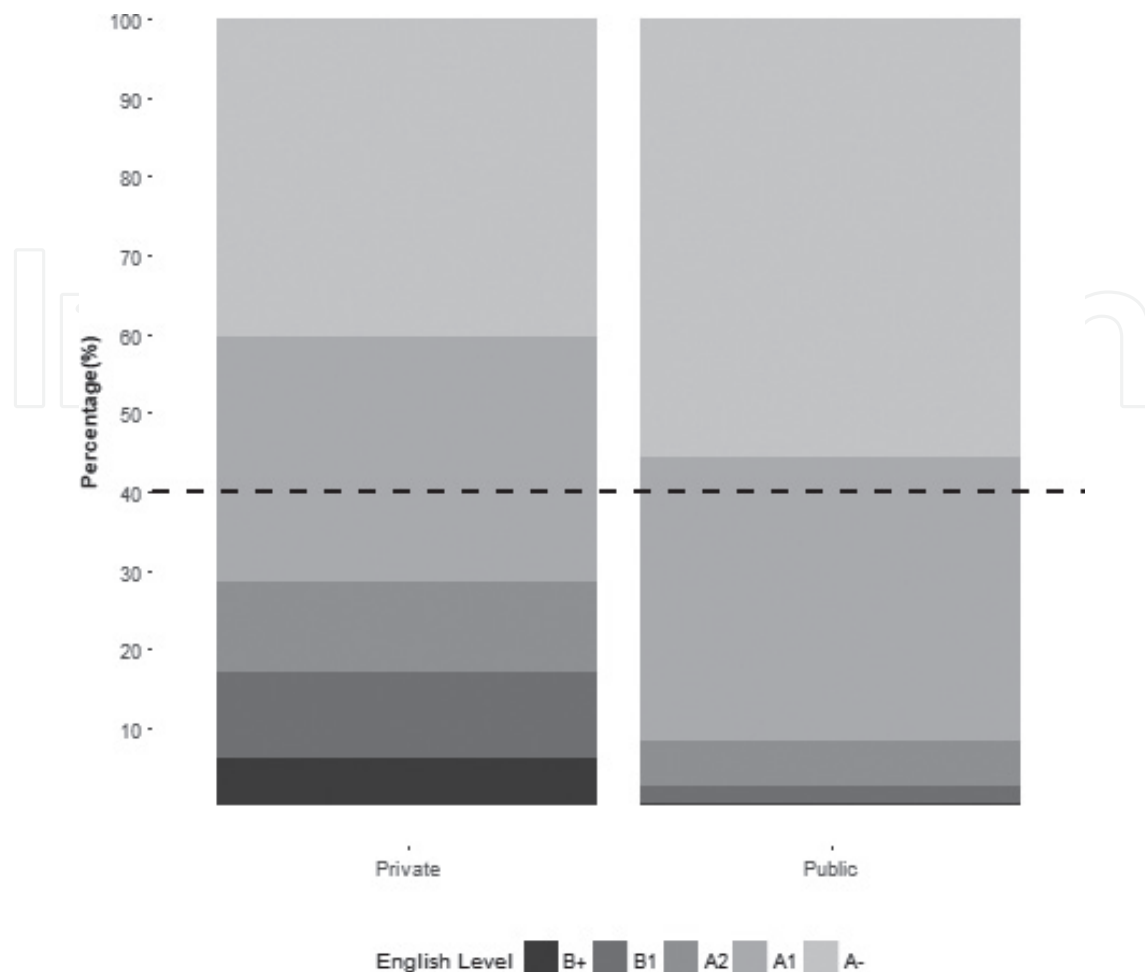


Figure 1. English levels in private and public schools, 2014.

Besides, from the goal not being reached, the information also raises a concern regarding the huge gap between the achievements made by students from private schools vs. students from public schools: 17 vs. 2.5% achieved B1 or B+, and 11.6% students from private schools achieved A2 vs. 5.8% from public schools (see **Figure 1**). Since more than two-thirds of secondary students study in public schools (71% or 437,350 students in 2014 according to Saber 11 2014), it generates many doubts as to the efficiency of the actions implemented during the Program for Strengthening the Development of Foreign Language Communication Skills (PFDCLE). Some of the strategies sought to train 9500 teachers, certifying 94 Secretaries of Education in language and methodology; they intended to implement a pedagogical program for learning English called “English, Please!” in 9th, 10th, and 11th grade in public schools, among others. Policy makers designed all these actions directed toward public schools, and they did not formally evaluate the effectiveness of these measures.

Figure 2 shows the results per city. No city achieved the government’s goal. On the one hand, the cities that presented the highest percentage of students that classified in B1 and B+ were Bogota (14.3% of 106,950 students) and Barranquilla (12.6% of 17,227 students), while the city with the lowest percentage was Cartagena with 6.8%. On the other hand, almost 50% of students

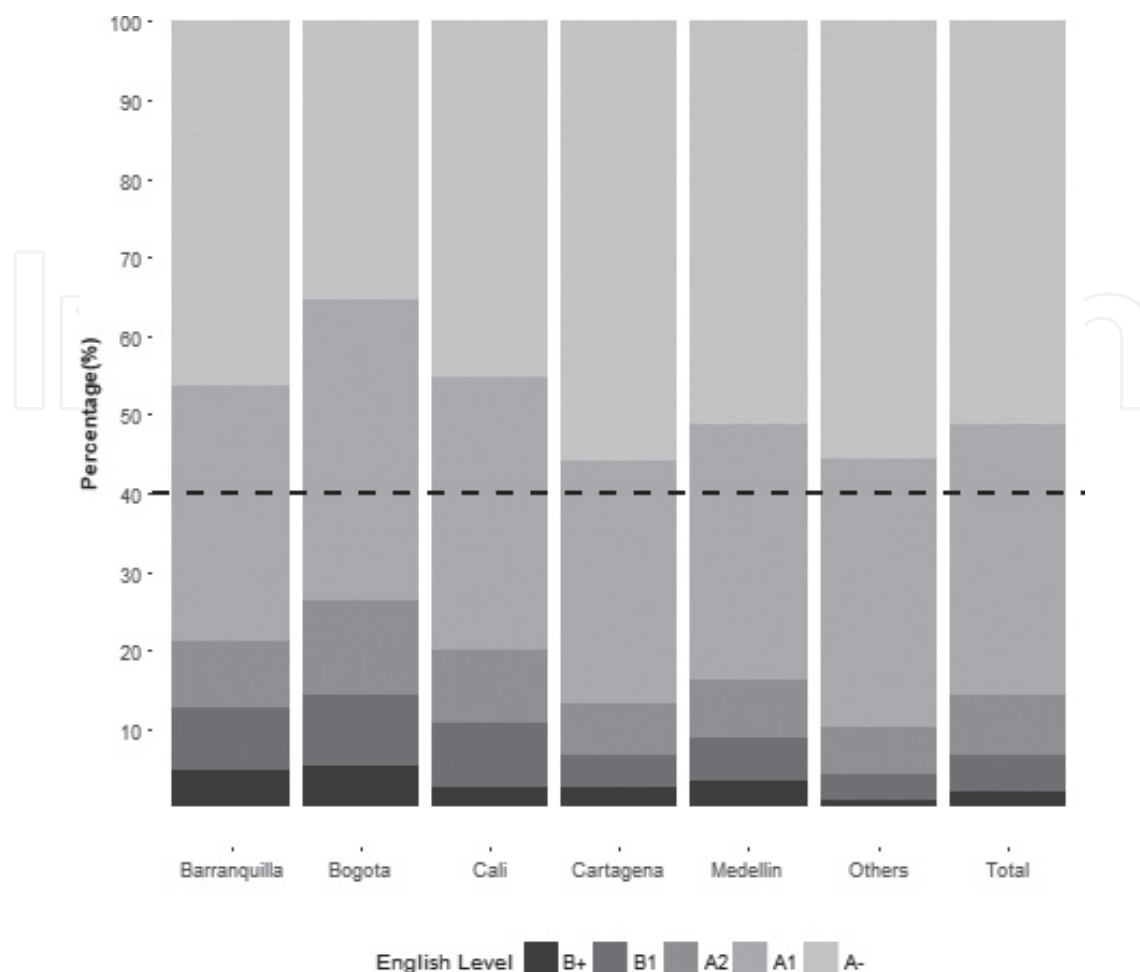


Figure 2. English levels in secondary education by main cities, others cities, and total.

of each city, except Bogota, had an A-level, this means that they have not developed the communicative competencies of a basic user, such as understanding simple phrases, asking or giving basic personal information, among others. Barranquilla's results might be related with public policy implemented during 2012–2015 "Barranquilla Bilingue" [23, 24].

Analyzing results from all cities and school sectors at the same time, it is clear that more students from private schools achieved a B1 or B+ level. However, the percentage of students in these levels was distant from the goal proposed by the government (40%) (see **Figure 3**). Barranquilla had 26.6% of students from private schools in B1 and B+, followed by Bogota with 24.5%, Cali with 17.0%, Cartagena 15.9%, and others cities with 11.9%, that does not appear to be a great difference between cities in the achievements attained by students from public schools. Cartagena is an exception because only 1.4% (133 in 9479) of students achieved B1 or B+ compared to the 4% of students who attained an intermediate level in the other main cities considered (Bogota, Barranquilla, Cali, and Medellin). Even though for the whole country, English proficiency is essential, it is of great concern that Cartagena achieved such low percentage in B1 and B+, since this city hosts one of the largest ocean terminals of the country

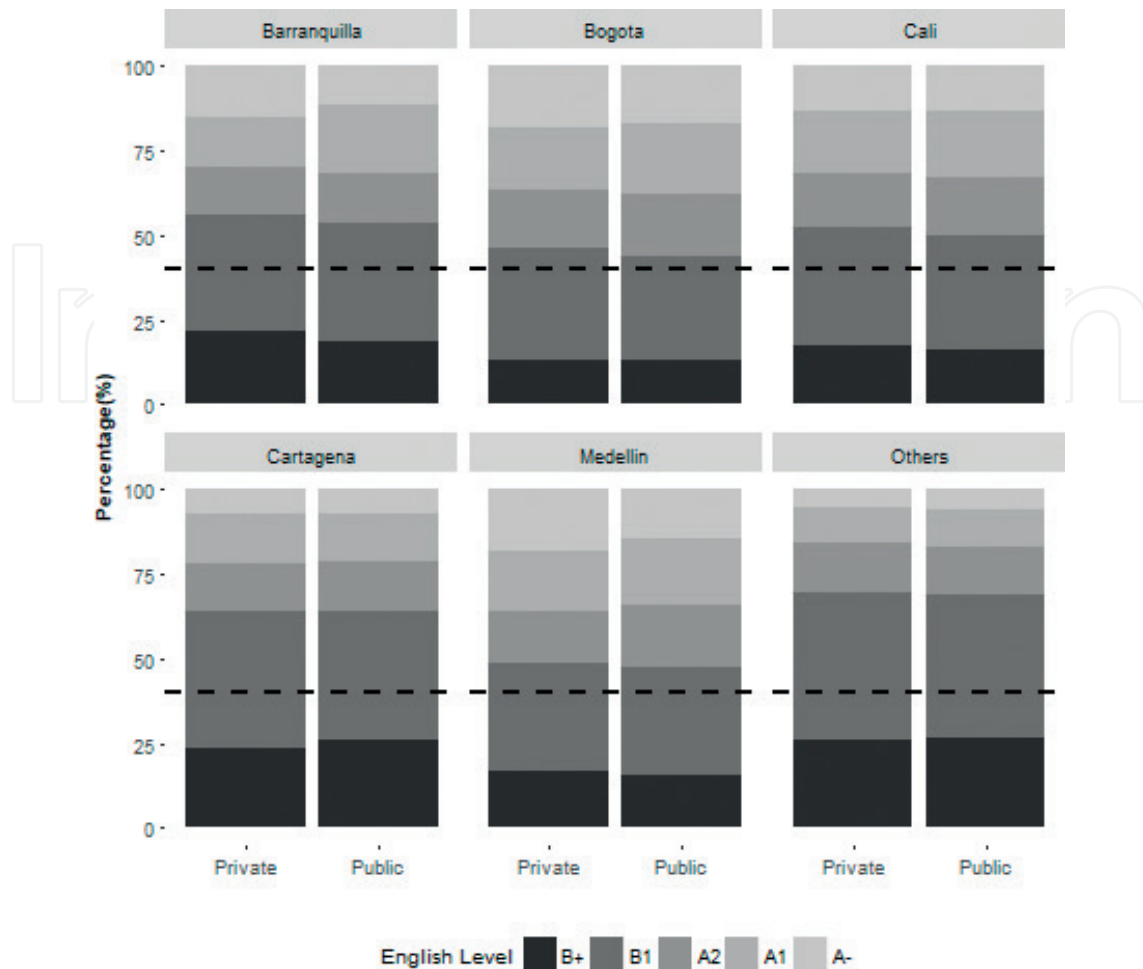


Figure 3. English levels in secondary education by main cities and others cities and type of school.

and it is the most famous tourist destination of the country. This city is a key for international trade operations and tourism in Colombia.

3.2. Higher Education: Saber Pro

Table 2 shows the main statistics of the variables from Saber Pro 2014 test provided by ICFES. It indicates that 30% of students that presented Saber Pro in 2014 were from Bogota, 7% were from Medellin, 5% were from Cali, 4% from Barranquilla, and 3% from Cartagena, and the rest were from other cities. In other words, 49% of university graduates come from the five biggest cities in the country. The participation of higher education graduates from private institutions is larger, even more than in secondary education. Bogota had the highest participation of private colleges and universities, and Cartagena had the lowest with 58%; in other cities of the country, the percentage is around 46%. Alternatively, the number of higher education institutions available for studying is higher in Bogota than in any of the other main and small cities (see Figure 4).

City	Sector	Num. of students	Num. of college	Mean students per college	SD students per college	Min. students per college	Max. students per college
Barranquilla	Private	6403	45	142.3	330.1	1	1321
Barranquilla	Public	2024	18	112.4	434.6	1	1853
Bogota	Private	49,520	108	458.5	771.2	1	4127
Bogota	Public	13,130	49	268	630.9	1	3015
Cali	Private	7766	53	146.5	345.9	1	1892
Cali	Public	3253	26	125.1	358	1	1823
Cartagena	Private	3828	47	81.4	153.9	1	662
Cartagena	Public	2770	22	125.9	407.6	1	1908
Medellin	Private	9632	56	172	296.8	1	1226
Medellin	Public	5522	34	162.4	390.6	1	1919
Other cities	Private	49,863	152	328	493.3	1	3240
Other cities	Public	58,072	67	866.7	1178.3	4	7292

Source: Authors' calculations.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics Saber 11 2014.

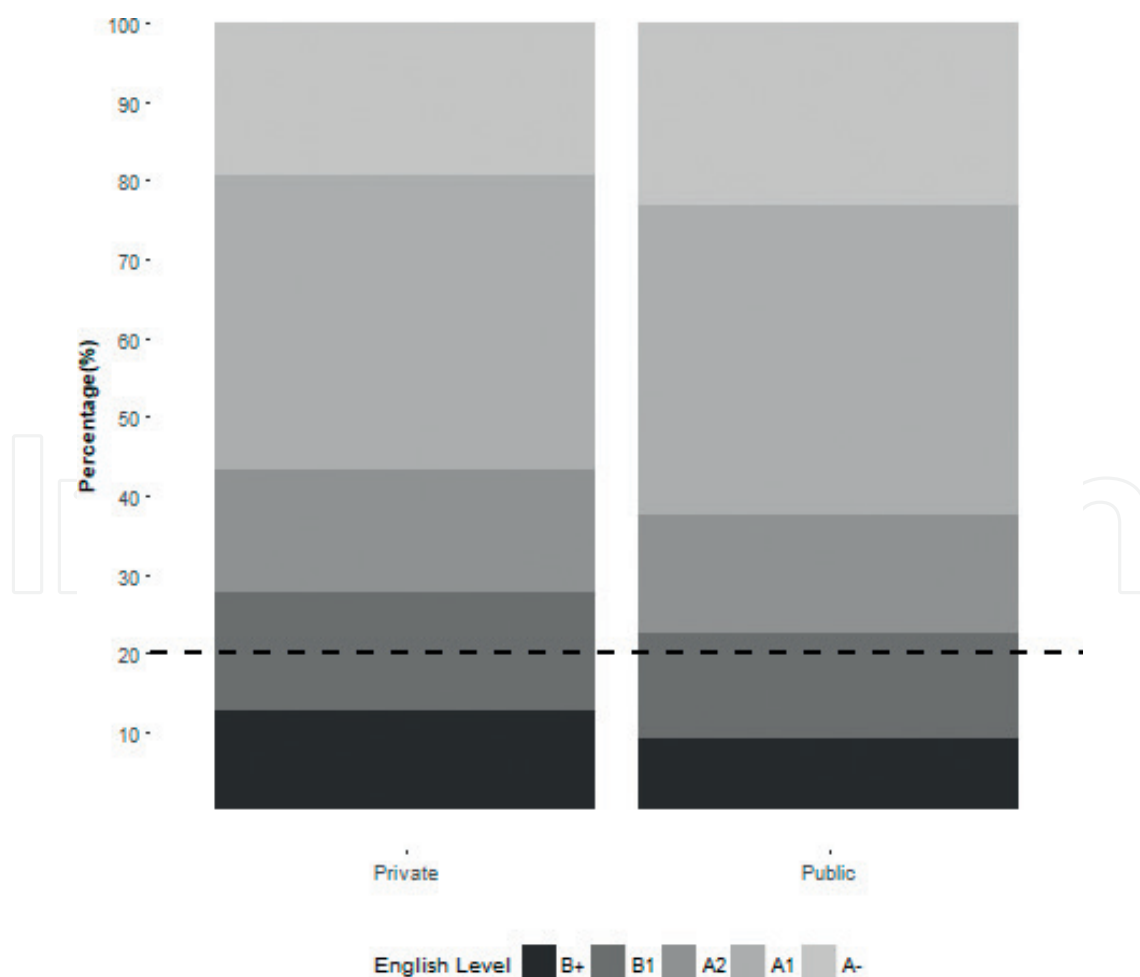


Figure 4. English levels in private and public universities, 2014.

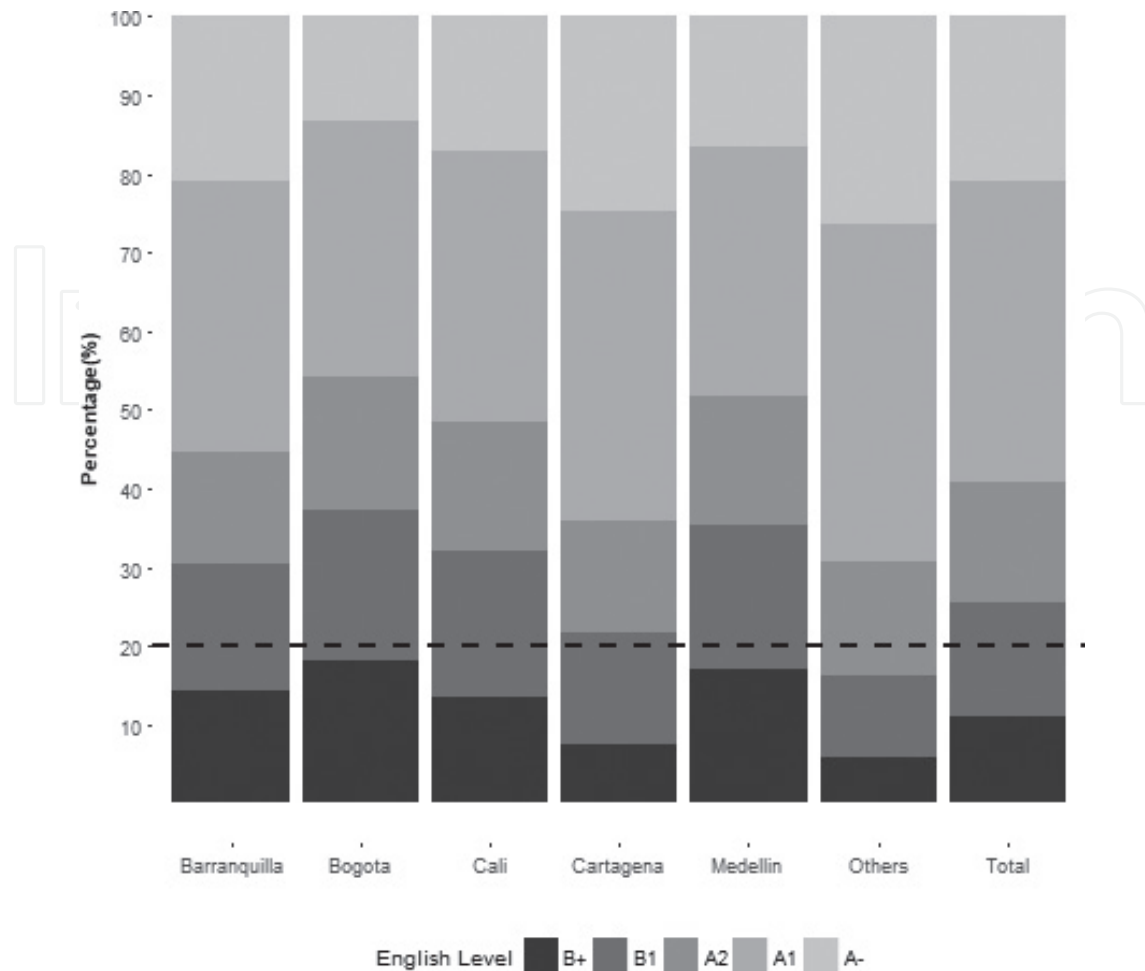


Figure 5. English levels in higher education by main cities, others cities and total.

Results by cities show the same pattern: there was not a city, which achieved the goal. The city that was closer to reaching the objective was Bogota (18.1%), and then Medellin (17.0%), followed by Barranquilla (14.2%), Cali (13.4%), and at finally, Cartagena with only 7.5% (see **Figure 5**). This value is almost 10 percentage points below the percentage of students from Bogota that attained a B+ in the English module of Saber Pro 2014. This result evidences the vast difference in education outcomes that exists among Colombian cities. On the other hand, cities with the highest percentage of students in A- were Cartagena (24.7%) and Barranquilla (20.9%). Again, as argued before, these results are troublesome for the case of Cartagena.

Figure 6 shows that more students from the private sector achieved the B+ level. However, the percentage of students in these levels is far from reaching the goal proposed by the government (20%), except for students from private colleges in Bogota (18.4%) and Medellin (18.4%). Besides that, a relevant difference between the results achieved by persons who studied in the main cities and those who studied in others cities can be seen in **Figure 6**. The average of students that attained a B+ level in main cities was 13.7% and in other cities, it was 5.9%. The gap remains when comparing the outcomes from private and public institutions: 14.5% of students from private institutions from main cities achieved a B+ level and in other cities 5.5%. In public institutions, the average in main cities was 12.9% and in other cities 6.2%. It is also interesting to note that in Cali and other cities, the public institutions are the ones that have a higher percentage of students in B+.

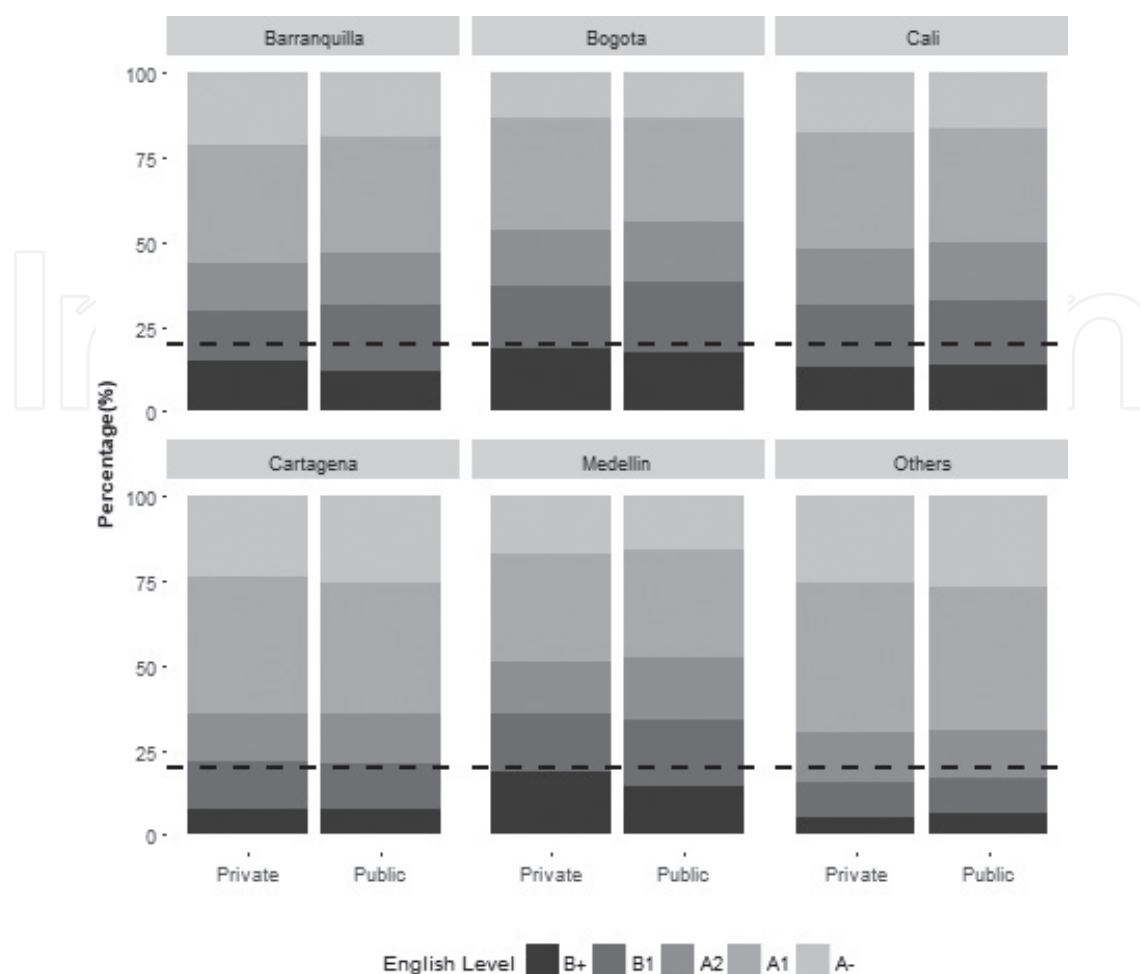


Figure 6. English levels in higher education by main cities and others cities and type of school.

4. Final observations

The Colombian journey to become a country with an educational system that “develops communication skills in order for students to be able to read, understand, write, listen, speak, and express themselves correctly in a foreign language” [22] began in 1979. Thirty-five years later, in 2004, the MEN set long-term quantitative goals to be achieved in 2019. In 2010, the MEN established intermediate goals for 2014 that could serve as a sign of how close the country was (of) to having all high school graduates at B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate) level, while all university graduates were supposed to be at a B2 Vantage (high intermediate) level.

The results presented here show that the intermediate goals were not met. By 2014, only 6.7% of the high school graduates had achieved a B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate). The goal was 40%. In other words, only 16.8% of the target was reached. On the other hand, 11.1% of university graduates were at a B2 Vantage (intermediate) level. The goal was 20%. In this case, the goal was met in only 55.5%.

What about the English Level in neighboring countries? No assessments have been made in Latin American countries that are comparable to the Colombian context; besides most

of the neighboring countries have only recently proposed an English Policy. For example, Chile proposed the National English Strategy 2014–2030 [25], with the English Open Doors Program (PIAP); Peru's English policy has the Gates to the World program (2015–2021) [26] and Uruguay has the English CEIBAL PLAN since 2012. In all three countries, the policies have focused on improving students' performance in English at the initial (primary and secondary) levels of education.

Colombian results show that it is was not feasible to reach the targets set for 2019. Colombia still needs a labor force that can integrate into a globalized economy. The MEN established in 2015 a new program to assess the situation: "National English Program (2015–2025), Colombia Very Well" [27].

The National English Program (NEP) established challenging goals for 2025 for the secondary education: 50% of high school graduates should achieve at least a B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate) level. While for higher education, the goals for 2025 are similar to the ones that were not met: 30% of university graduates should be at a B1 Threshold (pre-intermediate) and 25% at a B2 Vantage (high intermediate). In this case, the MEN did not set intermediate goals, which proved to be useful to reformulate the public policy.

Although these 2025 goals do not appear to be ambitious, the recent history and results show that Colombian government and society should change their policies drastically to reach them.

During 2016 and 2017, the MEN has carried out different programs under the NEP, such as:

- English courses and incentives plans for short internships abroad for teachers from 120 targeted educational institutes [28].
- Accompaniment by foreign native English trainers to educational institutions under the methodology of co-teaching [28].
- Creation of English curriculum, which aims at helping structure English learning during the transition and primary education [28].
- Deliver the "Colombia Bilingual English Kit" (22,000 in total) to official schools of the country. This kit is a pedagogical tool aimed at strengthening methodologies and classroom practices for teaching English. It contains the Basic English Language Rights (DBA) for grades 6–11, the suggested curriculum and pedagogical principles for teaching English, and the basic standards for foreign language competence in English [29].

The impact of these programs should be evaluated. We presented in this chapter a macro view of the policy, but it is clear that to reach the goals set for 2025, further research to evaluate and formulate specific programs is needed.

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