The elusive pervasiveness of english in higher education: the case of Colombia

La evasiva omnipresencia del inglés en la educación terciaria: el caso de Colombia

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Abstract
This article aims at describing how the educational actors of a private university make sense of language policies.The research was guided under a qualitative approach taking the historic-hermeneutic perspective as a paradigm. The data collected consists of news and information about the National Foreign Language Policy, the text corpus supporting the institutional policy, and semi-structured interviews. The results show how participants, albeit the pervasiveness of language policies in all the national educational system, conceive English far off from being necessary for professional life as the government intends. The study concluded that is imperative to take stances in the analysis and the enactment of language policies in order to obtain better results.
key words: english, globalization, higher education, language policies.

Resumen
Este artículo tiene como objetivo describir cómo los actores educativos de una universidad apropian las políticas lingüísticas. La investigación se guió bajo un enfoque cualitativo tomando la perspectiva histórico-hermenéutica como paradigma. Los datos recopilados consisten en noticias e información sobre las políticas lingüísticas nacionales, el corpus de texto que respalda la política institucional y entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados muestran cómo los participantes, a pesar de la omnipresencia de las políticas lingüísticas en todo el sistema educativo nacional, conciben el inglés lejos de ser necesario para la vida profesional como pretende el gobierno. El estudio concluyó que es imperativo adoptar posturas críticas en el análisis y la apropiación de políticas lingüísticas para obtener mejores resultados.
Palabras clave: educación terciaria, globalización, inglés, políticas lingüísticas.

1. Introduction

Without a doubt, the importance of English is closely tied up with globalization. From its extensive use as a language of tourism, business and trade, sciences, popular culture, diplomacy, academics, and international communication, English is not only used across the globe, but it has also all too often been assumed to promise social advance and economic competitiveness. With the premise that language education is a major instrument for economic growth and poverty reduction, Colombia and other countries in Latin America and around the globe promote the teaching of English. A study carried out by the OECD and World Bank (2012), aiming at measuring

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the increase in teaching foreign languages in Latin America, shows that 77 percent of the universities surveyed have foreign languages learning as an obligatory subject. Half of the private institutions and just 13 percent of public ones, expect students to have a command of English before commencing studies. Another important finding in the study concludes that two-thirds of public institutions and 86 percent of private institutions require their students to acquire credits in a foreign language as a requirement for graduating. But only 9 percent of public and 28 percent of private universities demand a higher level of proficiency upon graduation than at matriculation. These findings suggest language requirements for universities in Latin America probably work more as an administrative obligation than a genuine attempt to promote the learning of foreign languages. In addition, most of the countries studied identify the lack of proficiency in foreign languages among students, faculty, and staff. According to the World Bank, this has a negative impact on the international competencies of Latin American students and scholars and on their ability to take advantage of opportunities for international cooperation. The study concludes that the teaching of English as a second language is crucial nowadays. (De Wit, et al., 2005)

Yet any critical analysis suggests that despite the many policies and initiatives underlining the benefits of English, it is also an exclusionary class discourse, favoring particular people, countries, cultures, forms of knowledge and possibilities of development; it is a language which creates barriers as much as it presents possibilities, Such dichotomy is well described by Tollefson (2000), as he claims:

> The economic value of the language translates directly into greater opportunities in education, business, and employment. For those who must learn English, however, particularly those who do not have access to high-quality English language education, the spread of English presents a formidable obstacle to education, employment, and other activities requiring English proficiency. (p. 9)

Tollefson's claim seems to describe the Colombian case, where inequality is visible in terms of who is able to access education and other public services. As an example of the gap learning English can bring and based on official data from the national tests, the overall English level obtained by students is directly related to the socioeconomic stratum where they live. Less than 1% of students in socioeconomic stratum 1, reach the expected level B1 or B+, while 79,1% in socioeconomic stratum 5 reach the same level (Usma, 2015, p, 118).

As part of the process for the accession of Colombia to the OECD in 2012, and the acceptance on May, 2018, Colombia has undergone in-depth reviews in all the relevant areas of the Organization's work, including a comprehensive review of the education system, from early childhood education and care to tertiary education (OECD, 2016). Several strengths in higher education are highlighted in a report presented by this organization: (i) The number of students, programs and institutions has increased extraordinarily, (ii) Disadvantaged students now have a greater chance to obtain a tertiary diploma through a well-established student loan scheme and recent scholarship initiatives for the talented, such as Hard Work Pays Off, (iii) well-developed information systems are in place and Colombia is a pioneer of standardized student assessments and value-added measures. Among many other issues, these processes have drawn attention to the importance of improving the quality of the entire school system. One quality indicator emphasized is the development of communicative competences in foreign languages, as it is evident in the objective of the National Bilingualism Program and which seems to be common to all the other programs that emerge after it:

> to have citizens able to communicate in English, in such a way that they can insert the country in the processes of universal communication, in the global economy and in cultural openness, with internationally comparable standards and thus contribute to have a competitive country and improve the quality of life of all citizens (MEN, 2005).

However, despite these national efforts, the results are not significant. According to various reports on the results of the national test of English, factors such as the lack of connection among the different programs offered, the nonexistent continuity of the proposals, the disconnection between the programs and the real needs of teachers and institutions, and the different structural problems have not allowed the resources invested to translate into better performance levels of teachers and students (Roldán & Peláez, 2017; Peláez & Usma, 2017; Correa & Usma, 2013).

Not only nationally but locally, these processes of globalization or internationalization have exerted forceful pressure throughout education reforms and language policies, so institutions have been demanded to incorporate English into their curriculum (Peláez et al., 2020). Although only a minority of institutions hold the voluntary high-quality accreditation, most of them have promoted the teaching of English as an indicator of high quality, since the Accreditation Nacional Council measures the quality of the program throughout the academic productivity of its teachers, national and international visibility, and insertion in academic networks, which implies a requirement of competence in English.

At the local level, only one public university has carried out a study that shows the relationship between the national language education policy and its impact on the institutional educational programs. The analysis reveals that only 7% of future professionals in that Institution reach the goals stated by the ministry of education. That is why it is crucial to understand how education actors from other institutions are making sense of national language policies. Even in similar universities, the nuances of local context can cumulatively make a considerable difference in how stakeholders are dealing with national language policies in their institutions, especially when they assume the challenge of the integral formation of human beings who, at the same time, should be capable of transforming their contexts that demand academic, professional and investigative development and also be able to contribute to the construction of a more just and humane society.

This study was carried out in a private university that has established in its Institutional Educational Project the philosophy of an ethical formation, giving emphasis to the guidelines proposed by the Ministry of Education for tertiary education. Education has the essential mission of forming, developing and transforming integrally people and society; and is conceived as an indispensable condition to stop poverty, injustice, inequity, violence, corruption, war and the deterioration of the natural environment. In this process of internationalization and intellectual production, foreign language proficiency, and particularly English is crucial to achieving this goal.

1.1. Theoretical framework

This study attempts to describe how directives of a private university make sense of national education language policies within their institution. Drawing on previous studies on policy appropriation (Usma, 2015; Peláez & Usma, 2017), this study embraces a comparative, critical, and sociocultural perspective to the study of foreign language policy. This perspective recognizes that language education policy texts in Colombia respond to transnational policy agendas, which are then "appropriated" (Levinson, 2004; Levinson et al., 2009; Sutton & Levinson, 2001) and reconfigured (Hart, 2002) across institutional levels according to the actual conditions, needs, and interests of the local communities and school actors (Steiner- Khamsi, 2004).

This perspective acknowledges the multiple layers of governance and agents inside and outside schools interplaying in policymaking processes and considers their active roles in the final enactment of initially stated policies (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). From this perspective, we embrace the concept of education policy that goes beyond the mere idea that policy is formulated to solve a problem. Whereas policies are initially written by government experts, the negotiation, interpretation, and resolution of struggles related to the policy enactment involves different groups and actors, as argued by Ball et al., (2012); "in this sense, policymaking is a democratic, diverse and contested process, subjected to different interpretations" (p. 2). This is how the concept of policy

appropriation gives relevance to the agency of educational actors, whether as teachers or administrative since their practices represent the policies.

As explained by Levinson and Sutton (2001) and elaborated upon by Peláez and Usma (2017), this concept responds to the limitations of rational approaches that usually minimize the power of the different stakeholders in the recreation of policy discourses and texts. Our stance is that educational actors are policymakers rather than passive implementers (Menken & García, 2010). Therefore, "language policies cannot be truly understood without studying actual practices" (Menken & García, 2010, p. 2). this study considers policy as a social practice and school actors as policymakers who exercise agency in their contexts. The policy involves innovative processes further than passive implementation of texts where the interpretation and re-contextualization of norms, initiatives, laws and plans, demand positionality, and creativity from actors at the bottom of the school system. As it is argued by Ball et al., (2012), in sociocultural perspectives, the context and social interaction are relevant, and it is precisely with the diverse and complex ways in which sets of education policies are made sense of, mediated and struggled over, and sometimes ignored that this research is centrally concerned.

2. Methodology

The Study was carried out in a private university located in Medellin.The Institution was founded in 1981 as a universitarian foundation and recognized as a university by the Ministry of Education (MEN) in 2016. By the same year, the National Council of Accreditation had granted high-quality accreditation to four academic programs, one of which is the Teaching Program of English. Despite being a relatively young higher education institution, it ranks the 67th place nationwide according to the MEN. The University offers 47 academic programs, including 22 professional programs, 18 specializations, 6 MA and MSC, and one doctoral program. The university serves about 16892 students, most of them enrolled in undergraduate programs in Medellín. About 91% of faculty members hold at least a specialization degree. Regarding language education, the Language Department serves the mandatory English courses to all undergraduate students alongside other foreign language courses, and it offers some English classes to faculty members and staff.

The data collected consist of news and information about the National Foreign Language Policy published in the MEN websites Al Tablero and Colombia Aprende, the text corpus supporting the institutional policy, and semi-structured interviews. Documents include the institutional regulatory acts regulating the policy gathered from the Language Department and the University President's office. Seven semi-structured interviews with deans and academic directors were conducted. They volunteered to share their perspectives about national and institutional foreign language policy and signed an informed consent.

The data analysis drew on grounded theory (Strauss, A., & Corbin, J.,1998) and an hermeneutical analysis. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to be coded following the two main techniques suggested in grounded theory. Besides, the analysis of the data comprehended an intersubjective interpretational exercise essential in qualitative research. An initial line-by-line coding was carried out on the transcribed interviews attempting to understand in detail the information shared by participants and to start conceptualizing our ideas about their perceptions on the foreign language policies discussed. Then, the second coding technique was focused on trying to group, organize, and summarize the total amount of data collected through the interviews. Meanwhile, information about the national policies and the institutional text corpus were read and compared to find intertextual connections in national and institutional policies. Along with the coding and intertextual comparison, and as part of member checking, memos were written when patterns in the coding and comparison started to emerge. The memos served three purposes: one, to identify the beliefs, values, and feelings about language policies participants hold; two, to identify the circulating discourses in the policy documents and participants interviews; and three, to compare congruences and disagreements present in the vested meanings

and discourses already identified in the data. The focus coding was run various times before defining the last categories.

The first time, eleven categories emerged out of the interviews. They all were obtained through content data analysis. Then, these initial categories were revised again and compared to the analysis of the national and institutional policies. It was easy to identify that the discourses present in the policy and most of the interviews coincide. As the second coding technique was repeated and triangulation continued, it was evident that despite agreements with the policy discourse, participants actually criticized flaws in the policy. Finally, a third category emerged as alternative discourses to the official stance on language education started to appear. For this third category, researchers drew on language ecology theory. Nevertheless, following Chazman' (2006) advice not to force interviews into prescribed categories, the analysis never laid on this concept, but it rather seemed convenient as various codes revealed the participants' focus on the organic dynamics of languages. Consequently, three categories resulted from constant dialogues with the members of the research team, going back to the data to check codes, recategorize, and keep track of the main insights through memos.

3. Results

This study was set out to explore how policy actors at a private university in Medellín, Colombia make sense of foreign language policies produced by the MEN and the institution. As policy actors shared their perspectives on national policies, they revealed the meaning these policies carry for them from three different perspectives. First, they adopt the policy rationale. Second, they denounce the policy failures. The description of these two perspectives to the national foreign language policies show how policy actors appropriate an official discourse that they have adopted and accepted, but find illusory.

3.1. Adopting the policy rationale

The way participants referred to the policies, English learning, and higher education reveals how deeply the policy discourse has permeated policy actors at this university. In general terms, they have adopted the official discourse as presented in the policy documents. They explicitly and repetitively associate English to competitiveness and globalization, and they value the language for its instrumental relevance in the academic sphere. In brief, policy actors accept the official discourse that defines English as an essential tool for the institution and its community.

Accepting the official discourse reveals alignment of participants' perspectives. On the one hand, participants recognize the raising importance of learning English, since this language has become an asset to the academy, as the Ministry of Education (MEN) and the OCDE have highlighted before (MEN, 2004; OECD and World Bank, 2012). On the other hand, they talk in terms of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) language level as presented by the MEN in various documents, such as *Guia 22: Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés (MEN*, 2006) the Technical Norm 5580, and the Suggested Curriculum (MEN, 2016). Moreover, they believe achieving the expected proficiency levels is possible without faculty members or students leaving the country, which is in alignment with the official discourse.

Participants agree that English has become an essential tool in the academy for several factors, such as scholarships, international internships, access to literature, and becoming more competitive, which is the argument the MEN and OECD have maintained in various of their public reports and communications. Consequently, when comparing this university to others in the city, English appears especially important as a marker of prestige and quality, as one of the participants illustrates when discussing the case of International Business programs in three universities of the city:

> It is fundamental for me that International Business students from Luis Amigó certify their English proficiency. What are the minimum competencies in English nowadays? EAFIT and Medellín University require an internship to certify English… So, if we do not meet the requirements, we would be at a disadvantage. (Interview 7)

As the participant states, English becomes a must for the University to guarantee a successful International Business program. His reflection focuses on leading universities in the city having an advantage over this university. Consequently, participants regard the language as a necessity. The rationale behind these kind of claims seems to respond to the symbolic power that English holds being regarded as a quintessential support for the success of the university. Knowing the language helps the faculty and students approach new leading knowledge in science and technology usually published in English. For instance, a participant explains:

> "[English is important] to access updated information, for sure, and to be able to apply it, to learn it from other cultures that are producing knowledge in all fields at the technological, social, and environmental level" (Interview 2).

On the contrary, not knowing English only brings limitations, such as delaying students' graduation or obstructing the faculty's everyday work when essential information comes only in this foreign language. Hence, learning English offers participants the opportunity to enrich their academic background by exploring topics that they have not even explored in Spanish yet, as this participant recounts:

> When I studied English for Professionals, we studied a term only on diseases. I learned how to say 'my stomach aches'. In fact, we learned how to say a lot of advanced information. We learned about AIDS, about the flu and H1N1, and where it all came from. I still didn't know what these meant when studying etiology since I had learned them in English first (interview 2).

Consequently, approaching academic literacies in English encompasses real stakes for the University because neither its undergraduate programs nor its students can be considered competitive if the University misses the expected results, as it was concluded in the OECD and World Bank 2012 report on Colombia tertiary education (OCDE, 2012). In addition, since 2007 and including the last national English program, the Ministry has urged higher education institutions to include English courses and certification in their academic programs. The following testimony summarizes this concerns:

> If we do not meet the expected level, we will be at a disadvantage. English is important for reading in the teaching programs. Understanding texts is essential for psychologists as there is a lot of literature in English. So, I suggest to take advantage of the opportunity the university provides by incorporating English courses in the curricula (Interview 7).

These demands for postgraduate education appear as well in the guidelines for accreditation and in the MIDE Model (MEN, 2018). Likewise, teachers need to be accepted into master's or doctorate programs to stay in the institution or to improve their contractual conditions as stated in the institutional action plan 2017 (Universidad Catolica Luis Amigo, 2017). Postgraduate programs demand candidates to certify proficiency in a foreign language, preferably English. Besides, the amount of reading graduate students must cover includes a lot of literature published in English.

In brief, participants consider that neither the university nor the teachers or researchers can avoid the pressure the academic world imposes upon them to learn and certify English. Moreover, they insist that to compete in the labor market, to gain a scholarship or to study abroad, university students need English. Some participants also agree on the importance of knowing foreign languages to better qualify oneself for potential employers and universities. Otherwise, not knowing the language implies missing opportunities for further education and work.

These perspectives resonate with the discourses maintained during more than a decade by the national government as it appears in Guía 22, in the 2012 OECD and World Bank report on Colombia Tertiary Education, in Altablero 2005, and many other publications that praise the presence of English in the academic and professional spheres of the Country.

In accordance with the appraisal participants made of English, they have accepted and adopted the nomenclature the national policy uses to describe language proficiency. The language labels proposed in the Common European Framework of References introduced to Colombia in 2006 through the National Plan of Bilingualism have become common knowledge among participants. Then, listening to policy actors saying A1 or C1 to convey what level they believed the university should target and achieve was recurrent. They have not only adopted the policy terminology for language, but also accepted as reasonable the policy proposal for the university, their teachers, researchers, and students. Participants frequently expressed their arguments in terms of language proficiency levels and stated their concerns in terms of what level should be achieved in the Pruebas Saber Pro test, as the following participant's concerns demonstrate:

> [Knowing English] would be essential as graduate students in various areas of Education are demanded to certify a C1 level. Graduates in Education should pass the Prueba Saber Pro test and certify C1 [or] C2 to contribute to better language learning in schools (Interview 7).

As the excerpt shows, this participant states his argument in terms of C1 being the level future teachers should achieve as a strategy to guarantee language learning. He even argues for teachers to reach a C2 level. Finally, he is convinced that having teachers proficient in English will improve English language education in school, which is the same argument the government presents for the teaching programs reform (MEN, 2016). In essence, targeting basic levels of English add little value to the university and does not help the institution nor their teachers and researchers to meet the demands the institution faces.

This dynamic makes English for general purposes irrelevant for the institution. Having a language level that merely allows speakers to hold a basic everyday conversation or even reading for the gist does not satisfy the language needs the University has. The expectation for English language achievement does not stop at the faculty level but it also reaches students. Some participants have appropriated the discourse the policy promotes as they recognize the need of preparing students to learn English to easily interact in different contexts with different people while being aware of the most appropriate language register to employ (MEN, 2016). They urge for students to develop communicative competence to freely navigate along almost any kind of interaction they encounter. In this regard, one participant states his expectations about university students.

> In English, I believe a student should know what a child of ten or twelve years knows, [a child] who has reached an age in which he has been able to interact in many scenarios. He already knows how to interact with family members; he has learnt (…) to meet people in different contexts. For instance, what happens if I am with people close to me? But what about if the person is an elder? I am talking about a child, right? The kid, if he is at home, is told how to address and elder or another person (Interview 3).

In sum, participants in this study have accepted and adopted the discourse supporting the national bilingual policy. They agree on the relevance of English and consider that no university actor can avoid learning it. English has gained instrumental relevance for them to compete in the academy and the job market successfully and to use technology properly. They share the urge for new generations to learn English. However, the data analysis also shows disagreements regarding participants' perspectives on the real achievements of the policy so far as well as on the role of other languages within the University.

3.2. Denouncing the failures of language policy

Despite the widespread adoption of the official discourse by policy actors, they criticize the failures to raise English proficiency in Colombia. For them, a general resistance to the language and to the policy, as well as inadequate teachers and language teaching methodologies, have hindered the policy objectives. As participants see it, the resistance against learning English has spread widely. During generations, most students have not experienced a real use of the language, so students have usually shown no passion for learning English. Today's university students belong to generations of Colombians for whom English was never a priority but an irksome requirement, leaving them with the feeling of wasting their time. For them, English lessons in elementary school are not demanding but quite chaotic, whereas in language centers, they have learned informal language that do not really responds to their expectations or needs. Finally, English courses at the university have become a requisite for graduation instead of an opportunity to learn and practice the language.

Moreover, participants' dissatisfaction relates to the difficulty of learning English since it cannot be learned naturally in context with relatives and friends. On the contrary, learning the language requires methods, which make the process complex. Furthermore, the adult brain is not as flexible as it was in childhood when the mother tongue was learned. These statements enclose policy actors' beliefs about learning languages. The following excerpt evidences this issue.

> ... Naturally, listening, practicing in context but, when it is in another scenery, the language becomes [unnatural]... The methods to learn the language have to be very different, they are not so natural anymore; and that's why it's often complex. Then, in high school, I was able to familiarize myself with the whole subject of English and assimilate it. It was a class that one enjoyed but at the same time suffered. (interview # 2)

Likewise, participants explain that the inability to say the most elementary sentences in English discourage them. They are unable to express the most simple ideas in English, which demand them effort and time. A slow progress full of mumble jumble and broken English is the real process participants have experienced despite their desire to learn fast and use the language accurately. In addition, they claim to have little opportunities to use it in Latin America. As one participant perceived it, the only foreign language for them to learn in the continent is Portuguese, but it is distant for Colombians:

> A European speaks easily five languages; it is very easy for them. [The languages] are very easy to learn. Here, we (...) have all the neighbors who speak Spanish, and only one down there who speaks Portuguese. So, that remoteness makes us more vulnerable to language learning. (Interview #)

Besides the difficulty that learning the language evokes, participants consider the policy fails at reaching the expected results because of weak strategies to promote the language. Policy actors in this university consider that the policy ignores issues of social inequity hampering students' learning. There are schools with no resources, students facing difficult social conditions to find English useful, and teachers with no opportunity to implement innovative teaching practices.

For instance, the issue of how important English is for students in rural areas or indigenous communities has never been really answered. For many students in the rural area, the priority is to complete their high school to start working, but not to prepare for higher education or travelling. Participants also notice that the policy has ignored the bilingualism of indigenous students:

> In Tarazá [English] is not really so important on a daily basis. Maybe [students] even belong to a tribe. So, it may be better to identify what would be the scenery or the possible individuals in society that actually require [English] (...). Maybe, it can be very interesting because we are preparing that person so

> tomorrow she would come out having none of these difficulties; but it is better to teach that student on how to administer a farm instead of giving some English classes. (interview #3)

This claim shows that participants consider the policy decontextualized to really motivate students to learn English. For them, the policy actually represents the interests of three main cities but not those of the Country in its whole complexity. Colombian students come not only from urban areas and close towns but from towns far away from cities as well. Participants argue that families frequently come from rural areas and have not absorb the values of academic and professional competitiveness cities supposedly foster. In brief, not every student shares the social and economic conditions the policy depicts since it actually stereotypes the Country and ignores students' particularities. A participant criticizes this centralized image of the country:

> Colombia seems to be Bogotá, Medellin, Cali, [and] Cartagena, and the rest of the country dissolves away. They read the capitals, not the people. [If] we are not from the city, or if we are from the nearby towns or from the very distant villages, or if our parents come from there, then that is an aggression against us. (Interview 6)

Nevertheless, students for whom the foreign language policy does not mean much reach universities in the cities without really having found a reason to learn English. Then, the institutional foreign language policy fails at convincing students of the importance of learning English. On the one hand, In fact, the institution demands students to develop language skills that many of their professors have not developed yet. For instance, the institutional Development Plan 2012-2022 envisions students graduating in B1 level; however, the same document states that, by 2015, 50% of the faculty members would achieve that same level. Hence, not all instructors are at the level students are expected to achieve. Therefore, the message the University wants to convey is not convincing. Not even the undergraduate programs emphasize on learning the language, especially programs in social sciences and humanities

> (…) what I have noticed among our students and in most of the universities where I have been able to work is that they do not have English as a priority (...). [Learning English] is for certain careers, for instance, international business, but for social careers [English] is not presented as a priority (Interview 6).

On the other hand, policy practitioners consider it necessary to think of strategies other than assigning credits to the English courses as the Institution has done so far. Up to this moment, the university has assigned credits to the courses trying to make sense of the number of hours the CEFR suggests. The more credits a student takes the more the student moves from level A to level B. Nevertheless, credits and class hours cannot compete with the fact that on an everyday basis English is not needed. Participants have the feeling that assigning credits do not solve the core issue of learning the language:

> How many credits are there? What are two credits, two credits in class and in our institution equals 32 hours, so if I do, I forgot four credits, then I am already at the level the CEFR says, I do not know which...I'm already in B1. So, if I add, dedicating myself full time for a semester, I reach (do not ask me what) the "A". I said, well no, I'm sure that here in Medellin it is not because I'm listening to them in English, I guess those hours will be all in English, I'll leave class, but at home the need is not so much (...) I speak in Spanish. (Interview #1)

Although participants acknowledge that assigning credits is important as an institutional policy, they urge for actions that allow the academic community to have an experiential approach to English. Participants claim that interaction in the foreign language has actually been ignored by the policy as language education focuses on reaching scores in the national English test *Pruebas Saber*. A participant denounces this narrow scope of the policy:

> At an age such as 10 or 12 years old, a child is already able to interact, that would be ideal. When I insist, one thing is the academy, which is our matter [...] the courses and content, I do not know what else, to pass the Saber Pro Tests and measurements and standards. But I do believe that this can be achieved in other ways (Interview # 3).

Besides highlighting the lack of English for academic purposes, decontextualization, and discontinuity as key flaws in the policy, participants make teachers particularly responsible for the policy failures. Policy actors believe teachers of English either ignore appropriate methods to teach the language or the pedagogy to engage students. The methods teachers of English implement do not equipt students with the necessary competences to interact or communicate in society, and they teach the same way for years without really improving students' language ability. In high school, students barely listen to English, but at the university level they are overwhelmed by the demands of the English course. As this participant explains, English classes at the University are rather intimidating and forster no much participation:

> I attend a class and I find a teacher who speaks to me (...) and find a teacher who during the whole class speaks to me in English, explains things to me, shows how it is and zero participation from students, because they are afraid to raise their hands, because I do not know how [a word] is pronounced (Interview 3).

Participants advocate for English classes that address the specificities that each academic department wants their students to develop. This ideal requires thoroughly prepared teachers of English to engage students in two fronts: one front relates to raising awareness among students that English is part of their professional ethos and the second front regards engaging students in learning English for specific purposes. Specificity implies to teach the English that each professional would need in their everyday jobs and equip students and the academic community with the skills and vocabulary they need in their areas. For participants, teaching English for specific purposes answers to the questions students and the academic community have about learning English. The following excerpt shows this opinion:

> There is a moment where there is a multiplication of careers, of engineering, in this case, and each one goes for the specific thing, it should be done the same way (...) We should do something very similar; where to a certain extent it is the basics, and from there a separation of fields is made, where I suppose, careers would have expert professionals in the area able to handle the language, so that it can be understood (Interview # 2).

To conclude, this finding depicts the critical stance policy practitioners take in regards to what they perceive as the flaws and shortcomings of the policy. They recognize that the policy has not achieved the expected results because of a general resistance to English and the policy, the narrow scope of expectations and strategies, and the limitations of teachers, methods and pedagogies to respond to expectations and challenges of teaching English. Even more, this finding shows participants see the illusion the policy has created in contrast to the acceptance and adoption of the policy discourse they have undergone. Therefore, it seems appropriate to conclude that policy actors in this University believe in the policy but have no faith in it as the promising discourse turns into disappointing failure. Such apparent contradiction in their perceptions of the policy suggests policy actors open spaces to complex language relations existing in the University.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings underscore the lack of a consistent stance on foreign language policies and English learning in participants' perspectives. Participants reproduce the common sense and acceptable discourses implicit in policies about language instrumentalization, neoliberalism and standardization. At the same time, deans and

directors interviewed show how the institutional discussion towards English learning is far off from achieving the goal, or at least from an interest in integrating English into the daily life of the University. Although the University undeniably complies with official policy proposals to promote the learning of English according to governmental requirements and a well known discourse of global market demands, English in the institution becomes an idealistic scenery. English is a dream others should materialize, while everybody considers it somehow imaginary. Learning and using English actually becomes an impossible reality to achieve for participants because of bad school experiences, incapable language teachers, the irrelevance of English for the tough Colombian conditions and its lack of pertinence in a multilingual and multicultural world of academic traditions. As a consequence of this analysis, we contend that successful foreign language policies require the Institution to adopt a consistent academic stance on foreing language discourses. Otherwise, feeble positions on language policy will obscure the path to follow.

Weak stances from the University on foreign language policies blur any policy implementation because it depends on the positioning agents take regarding the policy (Meken & Garcia, 2010; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Usma, 2015). For this reason, this discussion will address three implications derived from the participants' perspectives on language policies. First, the lack of critical stance on language policy hinders the University's goals by limiting participants' agency for social change. Second, the permeation of neoliberal discourses in the institutional context needs to be questioned to take an institutional stance on foreign language policies. Third, adopting one critical and coherent institutional stance on language policies leads to purposeful practices. Discussing these implications aims to invite the University policy agents to adopt a consistent discourse for the University success.

4.1. Practitioners agency and university goals

Lacking a concrete stance on foreign language policies hampers the University attempts and purpose for teaching English and other languages despite the actions already taken. Not even in this university where compliance with national policies demonstrates institutional diligence, the policy centers only on the official documents. Quite on the contrary, policies enactment depends on the appropriation policy practitioners make of them (Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Johnson & Johnson, 2014). They hold the power to carry on with their interests (Miranda, N., & Giraldo, S. V. 2019). They perform activities and implement strategies to put the policy into action using the individual and institutional interests and motivations as well as the logics of their contexts. In other words, they use their agency to recreate the policy taking in some elements and letting out others (Levinson & Sutton, 2001). Because appropriation processes depend on practitioners' agency to reificate the policy, individual agencies should converge on one consistent institutional stance on foreign language policies for the achievement of the University ideological goals.

To meet its mission, pursue its vision, and achieve its objectives, the should find alternatives to foreign language policy that reflect its values and principles. Fostering Critical, ethical, and social awareness should lead policy practitioners discussions beyond the dominating neoliberal discourses of language instrumentalization, which support the rationale behind national policies (Guerrero, 2010; Usma & Pelaez, 2017). Pretending to seal higher Education off from the permeation of neoliberalism discourses on English seems naïve, but neglecting the possibility of changing the discourse implies disregarding participants' critical capacity for social change (Canagarajah, 2017). The University's social responsibility should motivate practitioners to solve issues regarding the role of English and foreign languages, especially in times of internationalization as (Preisler, B., & Fabricius, A., 2011) urges. The inconclusive discussion on learning English to read academic papers and prepare for postgraduate studies prevents the University from addressign curricular issues on global citizens education, plurilingual perspectives, ethnosphere, and the global self and otherness. These issues encompass part of the international education and global challenges for higher education institutions (Preisler, B. & Fabricius, A., 2011).

Inviting practitioners to exercise their agency as policy actors does not entail resistance against the national language policy or governmental regulations. Resistance and agency frequently intermingle in Ricento, (2006) critical language policy and other critical perspectives on Language policy and policy agency (Pennycook, 2001; Shohamy 2006; Spolsky, 2004). With this invitation, the authors recognize the participants' predicaments and unfavoring positions (Canagarajah, 2005). We understand that their agency is conditioned by hierarchical structures of power at the different levels of the policy (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). Nevertheless, participants in this study wield power because of their position at the top level of their departments and, therefore, at the top of the policy interpretation and appropriation. Consequently, even if the possibilities they have to act are bound to the power of the policy, their agency has the power to bring social change. Accordingly, we invite practitioners to recognize their power as policy arbiters to interpret and appropriate the policy at the top levels of the institutional structure.

Ignoring their power as arbiters of the policy and lacking consensus in their interpretations, practitioners directly affect the policy process causing the emergence of *de facto* policies that may hinder the University policy pursuits. The policy is influenced at all levels of its creation, implementation, and appropriation by the language discourses practitioners maintain and repeat. Consequently, practitioner's interpretations of the policy and circulating discourses have the power to affect the ideology, ecology and management of the language (Shohamy, 2006; Spolsky, 2004). If these three constituting elements of the policy stand on feeble discourses on the language, *de facto* policies will come crosscurrent against the main purpose of the institutional policy. Our invitation, therefore, urges practitioners to question discourses wildly spread on language instrumentalization, neoliberalism, and standardization, and focus on purposeful practices to imagine alternatives to the mandated policy in order to achieve the University goals (Levinson & Sutton, 2001).

4.2. Discourse permeation and pervasiveness

The alignment of policy agent's interpretations with the discourses of the British Council and the Ministry of Education has been a phenomenon reported by other authors such as Guerrero (2010), Canagarajah (2018), and Jhonson and Jhonson (2014). For instance, Guerrero (2010) analysis of data unveiled a uniform discourse about the economic and professional privileges associated with knowing English. Her analysis makes sense as neoliberal discourses motivate the interaction with languages based on material interest and the production of profit (Canagarajah, 2018). This focus on raising capital bestows English high prestige as the necessary key to succeed (Guerrero, 2010; Usma, 2009, 2015; Valencia, 2013). Succeeding means developing the cognitive, social, and cultural dispositions to raise human capital (Canagarajah, 2018). Because capital growth discourses pervade deeply public and private lives, they hinder participants' capacity to criticize the neutrality and historicity conceded to English (Canagarajah, 2018; Hurie, 2018). As a result, dominant discourses make actions aligned with them amply accepted (Hornberger and Johnson 2007) because they fit what is socially expected. Social expectations of legitimacy are constructed upon the language of the dominant discourses (Fiss and Hirsch, 2005). Discourses widespread through the construction of collective vocabularies shaping the general understanding in the public speech (Fiss and Hirsch, 2005). Their influence on policy agents determines their social constructions of reality and the everyday practices they accept as legitimate (Fiss and Hirsch, 2005). As a result, most policy makers use vocabularies associated with dominant discourses to support their decisions, and educators aligned with them gain privileges as they normalized relations of power promoted through the policy (Jhonson & Jhonson, 2014). In other words, language collides with the dominant discourse because it not only spreads ideas but also influences policy agents' actions (Hurie, 2018).

Given the permeation and pervasiveness of neoliberal discourses fostering language instrumentalization, it is reasonable that participants in this study not only reproduce them but also adopt the CEFR level labels. The reference level labels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2) have become the most popular features of the CEFR and labels

represent currency for governments, policy makers, teachers and the public in general, (Figueras 2012). To illustrate the widespread popularity of the CEFR labels, it is worthy to mention that they are available in 39 languages as well as in sign language. Additionally, they have allured governments outside the European Union and become part of everyday practices (Figueras 2012). Participants in this study demonstrated high value to the reference labels because they express their concerns and expectations in terms of C1 and C2. Even more worrisome, they use the labels in isolation without the descriptors as the data showed. This finding is alarming because this suggests that University policy agents do not necessarily understand the labels meaning, which has become an issue that research on the CEFR had already demonstrated (Figueras 2012). Studies on the CEFR have also warned of the foul use of the language proficiency labels as one of the main concerns forums on CEFR commonly address (Figueras 2012).

Avoiding this misuse and actually understanding their labels and descriptions constitute the user's responsibility. As users of the CEFR, policy agents should inquire about the unbalance and dynamic relationship between language learners' individual agency in the acquisition processes and social and cultural conditions embedded in the interaction of languages inside University (Piccardo, 2018). On the one hand, this discussion emerged from the data collected because participants recognized the language ecology within the University. Although they appraise the instrumental value of English, they also question other language purposes and the pertinence of other languages. On the other hand, the CEFR comprehends more than level labels and language proficiency descriptors. The CEFR actually emphasizes plurilingualism and pluriculturalism as complex competences language learners may use (Piccardo, 2018). The discussion on what competences students and faculty members should develop to purposefully use English, or any other language, for academic and professional success comprise participants' concerns regarding language ecology inside the University.

4.3. University agency

In brief, the reproduction of common place vocabularies supporting widespread instrumental discourses on languages like the CEFR labels prevent participants from adopting a coherent clear stance on language policies. This university policy agents need to imagine their own alternative discourses to foster the university goals. Otherwise, their individual agencies will recreate competing *de facto* policies in spite of their compliant actions responding to official guidelines. Framing the problem at hand, our invitation, therefore, urges the university to take three specific actions to synchronize individual agencies with one University agency capable of confronting what Jhonson & Jhonson (2014) denounce as the formidable influence of policy as a discourse.

To overcome the overwhelming influence of dominant discourses, the university needs to identify the boundaries of neoliberal discourses, recognize the multilingual resources the institution has, and empower collective interests as Canagarajah (2018) urges to do. Being able to carry on with these actions, the University will redirect individual agencies towards an institutional perspective on policies. The neoliberal discourse appears in the practitioners discourses fragmented and participants are neither clear whether they acknowledge it nor to what extent they agree. The data shows that they all are aware at different levels and agree with competing views on English learning. Consequently, adopting an institutional discourse requires the university agents to cultivate their confidence, curiosity, tolerance towards vulnerability and uncertainty, and openness to new policies (Preisler, B., & Fabricius, A., 2011).

The adoption of discourses drawing on the multicultural resources present in the institution requires confidence for policy agents to believe in their existing contextual resources. Various foreign language courses, a language department, a language teaching program and an academic community with a vast cultural background regarding languages exemplify the institutional multicultural richness as the data analysis revealed. Drawing on

this richness to strengthen agency demands curiosity to explore, unveil and benefit from language contextual realities as well as tolerance to vulnerability because adopting alternative discourses will expose the university.

Nevertheless, this is the University's responsibility to deal with the uncertainties of building a strong institutional agency, and this endeavour implies to deal with the liquid and turbulent temporality of global discourses participants face (Preisler, B., & Fabricius, A., 2011). On the one hand, globalization challenges are inevitable as the University attempts at joining international dynamics of higher education as findings revealed. On the other hand, fluidity and temporality among dominant discourses open possibilities University policy agents to identify positions of choice rather than mere compliance despite the limits policies and structures set. Policies themselves come and go in the most fluid way and structures change with each new reform. Just as a matter of fact, as we write this paper, the mandatory accreditation of teaching programs (Colombia, Congreso de la República, 2013) which also demanded universities to certify graduates' proficiency in a foreign language, was derogated after only three years of its implementation because a new National Plan of Development has been issued by the new government. Consequently, the University should guarantee purposeful actions to comply with their goals first instead of drifting across the ocean of ever changing discourses.

Reproduction of dominant discourses, misguided agencies, and an uncompromising stance on language policy comprehend the issues this study unveiled in the perspectives participants hold on language policies in this university. For the University to achieve its objectives regarding language policies, we urged the university to take action to redress individual agencies towards one coherent and purposeful institutional discourse on language education. Such enterprise, we argued, requires the University to resist dominant discourses and adopt its own drawing on their multilingual resources and institutional goals because dominant discourses are fluid and temporal in the global arena. Nevertheless, this study only inquired the perspectives of policy agents in top positions within the university structure and cannot account for the complete faculty or students community' opinions or actions. This is why we advocate for further studies on teachers' and students' perspectives and actions towards foreign language policies at the meso and micro level of university structures.

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