

Problematizing Local English Immersion Programs: Unpacking their Training Mechanisms

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Abstract

Colombian teachers of English (CTE) are overdiagnosed since we have always been judged to have a deficit perspective, based on international standards, like the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which do not take into account the reality of our lives, (Ayala & Alvarez, 2005), knowledge or experiences. Additionally, Colombian English Language Teaching policies, like the National Bilingualism Program (NBP) replicate and perpetuate imported practices (Sánchez and Obando, 2008). CTE use them to find “professional alternatives to achieve higher standards in their jobs”, mainly in two aspects: the linguistic (Gonzalez, Montoya & Sierra, 2001) and the pedagogical. In 2015, through the Ministry of Education (MoEd), the previous administration encouraged CTE to participate in Local English Immersion Programs (LEIP) to improve those two skills. This chapter focuses on their experiences of a colonial mechanism like the LEIP.

Introduction

To start with, I will present my thoughts on the local realities to do with the subject of this study, in the form of a narrative which touches on the Local English Immersion Programs (LEIP) and language teaching in Colombia in general in Colombia and also includes some studies of other geo-political

contexts that will serve to reveal the finer shades of what it means to be a Colombian teacher of English who participates in immersion programs, mainly on the basis of my own experience of learning English, the methods I was taught as a student-teacher, and how they influenced my own subjectivity as a teacher, trainer of teachers and academic coordinator.

The first section, *How it all started*, describes the issue of the institutional power to impose such methods I faced as a trainee teacher, which were based on Eurocentric models (Arias, 2018) of linguistic and pedagogical skills. The second, *Normalizing Practices*, explains how my practice as a teacher and teacher trainer repeated the concepts I had been taught as a student-teacher (Clavijo, 2000), which was further evidence of the strong influence and standardization of the Eurocentric models used in Colombia: ones which include other forms of knowledge (e.g. experiential) and *other ways of being*. For Shatzky, 2002 this social practice represents stability, understood as one of the three conceptions of social order, being the other two, regularity and interdependence. Stability refers to “the repetition of given components of social life” (p. 7). The third, *Turning monolingual-training into bilingualism*, is a narrative (Barkhuizen, 2016) about five Local Immersion Programs (LEIP) I coordinated, which are an example of the imposition of these Eurocentric programs (Shatzky, 2002). It is worth stressing that these programs do not respond to local interests: on the contrary, *they ignore or deny the validity of the local knowledge and ways of being of CTE*. They homogenize knowledge in line with the standard of policy-makers and exclude the personhood, humanity and agency of the Colombian teacher of English. The fourth section, *Locating the wounds*, analyzes the power relations and normalized practices in the LEIP are worth studying, especially the approach to ELT in the Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación in relation with its research line on Identities, power and Inequity.

In short, this chapter discusses how the implementation of LEIP in Colombia has imposed a single way of learning and teaching that ignores the previous knowledge and experience of Colombian teachers and fails to make their realities the foundation of these programs, because it sets up the native-speaker as a role model. To address this problem, our study then asks: What do Colombian Teachers of English say about their participation in the Local English Immersion Programs?

To do that, I employ the notion of the “epistemic decolonial turn” to throw light on the standardized idea of Colombian teachers of English, who are

located in the “not-yet” zone. Based on the fallacy that the native speaker is the model for language teaching, CTE are required to show strong linguistic skills (comparable to those of native speakers), as if proficiency were the only qualification for a language teacher.

In other words, you can never be a “good” language teacher unless you are a native speaker. In addition, we are obliged to show a constant improvement, validated by professional certifications, to prove that our teaching practices are effective, measurements based on our students’ evaluations results and not on what they have actually learned. These, among other requisites, make the personhood of the teacher invisible and invalidate the knowledge we impart. Consequently, relations of power, a denial of our existence (as CTE) and a disdain for other kinds of knowledge are at the core of the ILEP.

How it All Started

After twenty years of teaching English at various universities and language institutes, I became the academic coordinator of a series of English Language Immersion programs for, among other institutions: the UPN (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional), SENA (Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje-National Apprenticeship Service⁷), MINCIT (Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Tourism) and MoEd (National Ministry of Education). This post, which was funded by the MoEd, made me reflect upon the path which had led me from being an English teacher to a *leader* of programs for guiding English teachers.

When I was an undergraduate student of English, I never thought I would teach in the same way that my teachers were teaching me, nor did I realize how much (apart from the linguistic aspect) I would learn from my teachers and later replicate as a professional, nor that the teaching methodologies and materials I used then would later shape my own work as a teacher.

Most important, I did not understand that those methodologies and materials were part of a standardized practice. (see Richards and Rodgers, 1986). I learned British and American English -- their pronunciation, linguistic similarities and cultural features. The textbooks were for speakers of English as a Second Language rather than for student-teachers of English and they

⁷ The SENA is a national institution funded by the State whose aim is to train a qualified labor force in various fields; it has national and international agreements to provide well-trained interns to companies.

did not teach us to speak English in a natural setting. They are still used in teacher training programs.

That is, the curriculum did not take the needs of future English teachers into account: it imposed one kind of English and one way of learning and favored one culture, the *English* culture. It did not consider our language, our culture: it was a monolingual and mono-cultural environment. Whether directly or indirectly, that teaching method made my teachers invisible and therefore made me invisible too (as a person, student and future teacher).

Along with twenty-one other universities, mine (a public university in Bogotá) was part of the COFE (Colombian Framework for English) project, sponsored by the British Council (BC), which, according to Rubiano, C. I., Frodden, C. & Cardona, G. (2000) aimed at *improving* the teaching of English in the early 90's. Therefore, I was strongly influenced by my teacher trainers, who, in turn, were influenced by those Eurocentric concepts which had proven to be effective in the Third World.

However, it was only years after I graduated that I realized I was using the same methodology as my teachers (Communicative Language Teaching- CLT). It had been imported from England, where the COFE sent some Colombian English teachers (including a few of mine) to hone their teaching skills with *the newest, most efficient and effective methods*.

In the words of Taylor (1993, cited in Li, 1998) "CLT is characterized by 1. a focus on communicative functions; 2. a focus on meaningful tasks rather than on language (e.g., grammar or vocabulary study); 3. efforts to make tasks and language relevant to a target group of learners through an *analysis of genuine, realistic situations*; 4. *the use of authentic, from-life materials*; 5. the use of group activities; and 6. the attempt to create a secure, non-threatening atmosphere".

As usual, this sounds doable in theory until you confront real people, real students, who have different goals and maybe different motivations (or none), that is, it was not possible to use the above six points of the method I was using when teaching a heterogeneous group of students. What Li (1998) found in Korea, was exactly what I found in Colombia. There was no connection between those theories and the reality of the classroom, because the methodology tended to generalize, as if all teachers and students were the same and regardless of the context. It assumed that the circumstances surrounding education are the same in the First World as in the Third World

(which Colombia belongs to). Those models excluded the possibility of including local characteristics and forms of knowledge, as many studies have shown (Ayala & Álvarez, 2005; Gonzalez 2005; Guerrero, 2010; Usma, 2009; Bonilla & Tejada 2016; Mosquera, O. A., Cárdenas, M. L., & Nieto, M. C.2018).

So, when I became a trainer of teachers, I perpetuated the model used by the teachers who had trained me and this is probably true of Colombian ELT in general: a model which excludes the possibility of different individuals and contexts.

The LEIP followed the same method, with the same principles, same activities and same materials which CTE were familiar with: a standardized practice they then perpetuated. Thus, talking about it may explain who Colombian teachers of English are, who we are like, where we come from and what we may do in our classes.

Along the same line of thought, Viáfara González, J. J., & Ariza Ariza, J. A. (2015) concluded that a crucial part of understanding a foreign language is an exposure to the culture it belongs to. Therefore, cultural awareness should be included in the teaching curriculum. The question here is how to do so, if the students are not given the opportunity to *use* the language as a means of communication, rather than an object of study, which usually happens in Colombia and is not remedied by the LEIP. Gonzalez, A. (2005) recommends teaching programs, based on our social, cultural and economic conditions, which are created in our country and give a priority to our own methods and knowledge. Similarly, Guerrero (2010) denounces our acceptance of a hegemonic knowledge produced in other latitudes. That is, those three studies argue that ELT in Colombia must stop importing foreign practices which are not suitable for our teaching English here. This replication is a feature of LEIP and influences CTE. The mistake of these pedagogical policies is that they assume that practices which have been effective in one context can be replicated in another, with the same results.

This is clearly evident in the LEIP, where the models, materials and an emphasis on the skills of the native speaker are reproduced by the CTE without further reflection on their suitability to our socio-cultural context. These practices do not permit the teachers to do what they know is meaningful for their students: on the contrary, teachers are forced to teach as they have been taught, in order to be regarded as *good teachers*.

Standardizing Practices

It does not seem that the implementation of a National Bilingualism Program (BNP) in 2004 was the result of an informed decision, if we take into account, first (see Sanchez and Obando 2008), the likelihood that bilingual Colombians will find a suitable job. And the second (see Cárdenas, 2006), the readiness of Colombia to be bilingual. As Sanchez and Obando (2008) and Cárdenas (2006) further point out, the implementation of BNP indicates that it was launched without a rigorous planning, another example of the mechanical repetition of models that were effective in other contexts but not in our own, mainly because it was successful in other countries. As Correa & Usma (2013) state, the National Program of Bilingualism (NPB) “was not connected to the actual needs of public schools and the people who worked and studied in them”.

The same seems true of the LEIP component of the NBP, which was financed by the Ministry of Education (MoEd) for the schools which focused on teaching English. Therefore, it is understandable that the policy, its implementation, methodologies and teacher training programs (which prescribe the pedagogical materials and activities) were not based on a thorough study and do not correspond to the needs of the students or teachers. It is just the opposite; they repeat models which ignore our local realities and have become standardized practices which the subjects of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Colombia accept unthinkingly. In the words of Schatzky (2002) “Social order is the repetition of given components of social life”, and this is evident in the field of ELT. The aim of this study is to focus on the Local English Immersion Programs conducted in Colombia in terms of the type of activities and the profile of the participants. A clear evidence of this is provided by Gil (2013), who discusses an immersion program used in part of his class in 1967. After he obtained an M.A. in an English-speaking country and began to teach English in Colombia, he noticed his students’ lack of confidence and low participation in his classes, compared to what he himself had experienced as a *student*. So, he decided to give his students the opportunity to openly speak about various topics in a relaxed setting. This was done over a weekend in the countryside, far from the stultifying atmosphere of a classroom, with the accompaniment of some native speakers who informally interacted with his students. Additionally, the topics of the sessions were songs, music and their cultural interests. This project was conducted in English and meant to encourage his students to familiarize themselves with the language and later

transfer what they learned to the classroom. It was based on the context in which studied English, which he had found to be meaningful and effective: what he had experienced as a student he put into practice as a teacher, following the principles of CLT.

Some aspects caught his attention in this event. First, his students were not as accomplished as he expected (compared to his own progress in an English-only context). He expected that once they were away from the classroom and in a relaxed atmosphere, his students would use the language more naturally. Second, the native speakers dominated the discussion of the cultural aspects of English. In both cases, the problem was similar to that found in the LEIP: the replication of models that seemed to be successful in one context did not yield the same results in another, despite the willingness of the participants.

Based on the above experience, one could then define the immersion method as the activities of a group of students or teachers in a relaxed, yet artificial setting, who, accompanied by native speakers, talk about such topics as music, food or the culture of the native speakers. Although the concept of immersion has not been clearly defined in Colombia, those who are responsible for educational policies here have understood and put it into practice, as is seen in the growing number of such programs for ELT in the country.

These programs were based on the methods used to teach English to immigrants in Canada, the United States and Australia during the 1960's (Cummings, 1998) and their aim was to integrate those foreigners into the respective local societies, with the support of their governments. In Colombia, by contrast, they are an example of the strong influence of international agendas, like the one of the British Council, which has overseen English teaching programs in the country (Bonilla and Tejada, 2016) since the COFE project in the early 90's.

In Canada, an officially bi-lingual nation, French was taught to English-speaking Canadian children so they would have better opportunities for education and employment. The aim of the program was to provide them with the same linguistic and cultural skills in both languages. Due to the strong demand for these programs, three models of immersion were created, all the result of an analysis of the local realities. The only common feature of the three was that at least 50% of the teaching was done in the target language (French). The first, called "early immersion", was for children in kindergarten

or the first grade of primary school. There was also a “middle immersion” program for those in the fourth grade and a “late immersion” one for children in the seventh grade. After they graduated from high school, the children’s knowledge of both languages qualified them to work in the government. It is worth noting that these programs included the families of the children as well. Extensive studies of these programs have been done by Barik, H., & Swain, M. (1976), Cummins, J. (1998), Safty, A. (1988), Day, E., & Shapson, S. (1988). My point here is that these programs in Canada were carefully planned, in accordance with local realities.

By contrast, in the United States, In the *Harvard Law Review*, in its Vol 116. No 8 (June 2003) it is stated that despite, “the resurgence of bilingual education policy “took place in the context of [the] civil rights movement. Broadening the scope of civil rights, Congress passed the Bi- lingual Education Act of 1968 to offer financial support for bilingual education programs serving national origin minorities” there are still some states against this Act favoring monolingual education, as it can be seen with the Act in 2001 No Child Left Behind. As a result, these opposite ideas intensify the debate about the implementation of immersion, transition or bilingual programs for immigrants or minority groups. According to the *Harvard Law Review* (2003), such a policy explicitly imposes the American way of life on foreigners. There, the situation is much more complex, since there are many more immigrants than in Colombia, with as many backgrounds as languages. Hence, these bilingual or immersion programs should have been more carefully designed and implemented, but, unlike Canada, it did not happen in the United States: it seems it was easier to establish a law that fits all, without considering differences, with the idea that everyone would become American.

In Colombia, it was not until 2015 that these LEIP began to be used by teachers. However, since 2004 the MoEd has sponsored those programs on the Colombian island of San Andrés, where English is an official language. To implement them, Colombian teachers of English stayed for a month in the homes of one hundred native families (whose members are called *raizales*), where they attended classes in the morning and interacted with the locals in the afternoon, with the idea that they would replicate the scheme when they returned to their respective schools. As Gil did with his students in 1967, the program *recreated an artificial setting* to improve their knowledge of English.

To sum up, the standardized immersion programs used around the world, including Colombia, are based on ones previously tested in bilingual countries

like Canada, which are constantly being studied and evaluated. The programs currently carried out in Colombia basically have two main components (Gil, 2013): the presence of native speakers and a location far from the conventional classroom. Thus, they might be called monolingual programs which are meant to improve the teaching skills of Colombian teachers.

Having discussed the above, I will now show how the LEIP and the activities which revolve around them have become a colonial practice which rests on exclusion and the rejection of local knowledge and pedagogy.

Paving the Way for Monolingual-Training to Improve Bilingualism: The Consequences of the Standardization of LEIP

I will start this section with two quotes that show why it is important to understand LEIP as a social practice within the framework of the Colombian NBP:

In order to understand language teaching and learning we need to understand teachers; and in order to understand teachers, we need to have a clearer sense of who they are; the professional, cultural, political, and individual identities which they claim or which are assigned to them (Varghese et al, 2005.p 22).

That is, it is important to understand the reality of the teachers and students, which is what the LEIP, NPB and other programs and policies should be based on, rather than the adoption of alien practices.

a) The absence of a clear definition

The second quote is from Peláez and Usma (2017): "With Spolsky (2004) we define foreign language education policies as those implicit and explicit norms or regulations that shape what, when, and how languages, and in this case, foreign languages, are taught and learned in the school system" (p. 122). In other words, it is important to understand how the State defines LEIP and determine whether or not it fits the participants. Such immersion programs

have been successful in bilingual contexts. As Torres-Guzman & Etxeberria, citing De Jesús, 2008, note: “Dual language programs are proliferating in the United States, Canada, and even in the Basque country of Spain”. The Associated Press (2007) reported that “the proliferation of programs in the US is dramatic. This increase is so rapid that there is now a shortage of qualified language teachers”. This does not mean that the same results can be expected in our Colombian socio-cultural context, even though the current NPB has been put into practice since 2004. Still, it seems that meeting these objectives was guaranteed by the LEIP and it is now regarded as the program which solves all the linguistic and pedagogical problems in ELT.

For the purposes of this study, the definitions of bilingual education, immersion programs, dual immersion and two-way immersion are the same as those used when those programs were inaugurated in Canada in the 1960’s, namely, they are a method of education which promotes additive bilingualism. According to Lucido, F & Montague, N. (2008) “bilingual programs operate with the objective of producing communicative and literate children who can negotiate between two languages in their daily interactions”. This shows how each analyst uses his/her own previous knowledge and experience to define the core concepts of this study.

In Spain, there is a Linguistic Immersion Program as well, run by the Department of Education (Jimenez, 2012). It is worth noting, first, that this program is meant for immigrants, studying in Spanish schools, who do not speak Spanish and its purpose is to integrate them into Spanish society and second, the NPB in Colombia is also meant for immigrants whose first language is not Spanish, with the similar aim of inclusion, though they are still excluded for the most part.

b) The conditions of existence

Gil (2013) states that an English immersion program at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC) in Paipa, Department of Boyacá, in 1967 was aimed at familiarizing the participants with the native speaker’s culture in a natural and spontaneous way. Now, two decades after Gil’s program, the same basic components are still found in the current LEIP of the NBP. One is that the use of term “immersion” turns the same class into an immersion program. Another is that when the classes are held outdoors, that too is a method of immersion. Further, there is the mistaken belief that the participation in and/or leadership of a class by native speakers means

that they can teach the culture just because they know their own language, an example of what Shatzky (2002) calls the concept of regularity. Therefore, based on what we have heard, the underlying idea is that the linguistic proficiency of a Colombian student will only be recognized when he or she can effectively communicate with native speakers. The problem this raises is that a Colombian who has studied or lived in an English-speaking country may not necessarily speak English like a native. These programs seem to be aimed at those who have a need that must be met: persons who are in deficit, the zone of the “not yet”.

The current LEIP aims at:

1. Teachers in public schools.
2. Teachers whose linguistic competence is considered to be insufficient (though it is not clear by whom) or based on *another* international standard (see Ayala & Alvarez, 2005) (Common European Framework of Reference) demonstrating a B1 level or lower.
3. Teachers who do not teach English, but require a knowledge of English for other subjects they teach.
4. Teachers who work for focalized ⁸ schools.
5. Teachers who have been recognized by an international immersion authority and thus qualify to teach in local immersion programs.

Similarly, the application for certification has various requisites, like the presentation of a project that would benefit the applicant’s students when he or she participates in the LEIP (the application procedure uses technologies like the internet and video recordings). This turns the LEIP into another device of exclusion. The LEIP and the NBP are only for those who earn the right to be in them. It creates a need which the applicant must satisfy and if you do not meet the requirements, you simply do not exist, you cannot participate, although in theory the NBP is meant for all teachers. There are no requirements to take part in it and it does not include ALL institutions.

⁸ Public schools that based their results on national standardized tests and complied with certain administrative, geographical and socio-economical requirements are supported by the local and national educational authorities: they can participate in professional development programs and receive closer accompaniment and assessment.

c) Being Native or not being

The tendency in Colombia is to replicate imported practices and, in that way, to perpetuate our belief that since those practices are apparently effective elsewhere, they will be appropriate for our ELT programs as well. As the academic coordinator of the Local English Immersion Programs during 2006 and 2007, I was asked to create an immersion program for Colombian teachers of English whose proficiency was B1 and above. The main aims were to improve their linguistic competence and knowledge of English culture. The participants interacted with a group of native speakers with a variety of backgrounds and nationalities. However, there were some whose first language was not English. Most of the *Formadores Nativos Extranjeros* (FNE) or English Native Speakers did not have any teaching experience, but they were volunteers⁹ who served as language role models for the CTE. From the participants remarks at the end of the program, I would say that the objectives were met within two or three weeks.

I noticed various aspects that really matter for the implementation of such programs, and as a result, for the NBP during the development of the LEIP. For example, the mistaken belief that it is best to learn a foreign language from native speakers and if the student can interact with them, he or she will reach an acceptable proficiency. Second, the participants had to match the linguistic skills of their language role models (native speakers). Despite some of those Volunteers were not native speakers they were given that condition which somehow made them conceal their own background and identity. And third, language was placed over pedagogy and experience: the measurement of the good teacher was his or her linguistic skills rather than his or her talent at or experience of teaching. The presence of native speakers thus imparts a hierarchical notion of knowledge to the participants: native speakers are in the top rank and non-native speakers below.

Locating the Wounds: The Invisible, “Not Yet” Members of the LEIP

So far, I have focused on the perpetuation of certain social practices to do with the preference given to native speakers. I now turn to the way in which

⁹ Foreigners who came Colombia to work as co-teachers of English were paid almost twice the minimal legal national wage: their responsibilities were not the same as those of the homeroom teachers.

Colombian teachers of English participate in a local immersion program which excludes their prior knowledge and experience. Inclusive immersion programs use both languages and cultures. Those Colombian immersion programs, which are led by native speakers, are meant to promote effective communication, but make the knowledge of language and pedagogy of Colombian teachers invisible (Guerrero, 2010).

The LEIP insists that the target language and culture are the only means of communication, despite the fact that, in various contexts, inclusive immersion programs do more to promote the interaction of both languages and cultures. Thus, it is worth analyzing how these Colombian LEIP foster exclusion and leave no room for the local language or knowledge (Mosquera, O. A., Cárdenas, M. L., & Nieto, M. C., 2018).

In the words of Castañeda-Peña (2018), "English language teaching and learning is simply an established hierarchy, traditionally imposed by a European / capitalist / military / Christian / patriarchal / white / heterosexual / male ideology, as part of the global policy which dominates the teaching of English in Colombia". (p.27) Therefore, it is easy to understand why Colombian teachers, as non-native speakers, suffer from the notion of a deficit, since you are either a native speaker or you are not. LEIP in Colombia is based on that hierarchy, which places Colombian teachers of English in the "not yet" zone.

De Souza Santos, (2016) defines colonialism as a system which disregards differences in order to justify hierarchies, the domination and oppression of one culture by another and the inferiority of certain nations. These LEIP have been designed for those who are thought to be inferior, and whose knowledge has to be corrected (Castañeda-Londoño, 2017). They assume that their teaching does not meet the required standard and they need to be *immersed, in order to live, learn, and satisfy their needs*. That is to say, to become someone else, leave who they are behind, accept a knowledge that is imposed and forget their own. Colombian teachers of English are regarded as inferior and must accept the imposition, despite their prior knowledge and experience.

As Guerrero (2008) points out, there is only one policy, as if one size fits us all and only certain kinds of knowledge and practice are acceptable, hence the justification for the LEIP as a way to improve the work of Colombian teachers of English with those standardized practices, regardless of their realities and teaching contexts. The importance of the first language, first culture and

local realities should be at the core of LEIP, since they are the pillars of the subjectivities of Colombian teachers, but they are not included in the design and implementation of the LEIP, which makes it a colonial mechanism to eliminate the linguistic and cultural knowledge of the CTE.

Walsh (2009) believes that we should think of inclusion as the exchange of cultures through a direct contact, that is to say, an exchange of values, practices, knowledge and cultural traditions; thus, both cultures and languages should be equally important in the LEIP, since they nourish each other. In this view, the co-existence of both languages and cultures (L1 and L2, and C1 and C2) should be encouraged by the LEIP and included in national language policies. But this equal relation between the two cultures does not exist in LEIP.

García (2012) speaks of two kinds of bilingualism: one additive and the other a variety where the mother tongue or first language should only be used at home. This latter, of course, may not be used for academic purposes, which once again tries to erase all traces of the immigrants' culture. This is exactly what happens in the LEIP, which does not allow the participants to use their native language. On the contrary, they are penalized for using it to communicate, learn or even exist.

Colombian students, parents, teachers, school administrators and businessmen should be alerted to the expectations of such programs and should have a say in their design. If that were to happen, the collective identity of teachers would be actually closer to who they really are rather than an identity which lives up to the expectations of policy-makers.

Maintaining the stability of the social order (Shatzki, 2012) is another feature of social practices implemented by the LEIP. The Secretaries of Education (SoEd-Regional Entities) have copied this model from the MoEd, consequently, schools have created their own immersion programs and, on a smaller scale, language institutes and private classes have as well. This is an example on how models are adopted, without any consideration of their influence on teachers. Likewise, under the leadership of the British Council, the SoEd in Bogotá (the capital of Colombia) has launched *immersion strategies* for public schools in the city. It would be interesting to learn more about the British Council's agenda in this respect, the extent to which it takes the actual reality of teachers and students into account and how it contributes to ELT in Colombia.

The immersion program trend has taken over ELT: it is thought to be the best way to improve linguistic proficiency. It is popular but promotes exclusion, since it places Colombian teachers in the “not yet” zone. It limits the possibility of their using other methods and is based on a stereotyped idea of the role of the teacher in society.

The Significance of Professional Development

It is not only important but necessary to understand the impact, on the professional development of Colombian teachers, of language immersion programs based on the concept of bilingualism. It is equally important to show that those concepts have not resulted from a thorough study of their efficacy, and thus such policies, which lack rigor, perpetuate practices that ignore our own culture and language and pedagogical knowledge(s). It would likewise be interesting to reveal the hidden agendas of government policies which promote those LEIP, since, according to Zarate (2014) the State and certain NGOs and international bodies, foster a dominant, globalized discourse which reaches to the teaching of English.

As a corollary, one would have to investigate the key role of teachers in the construction of these programs, in terms of the latter’s objectives, methodology, cultural activities, use of native speakers and standards. Why do teachers participate in them, how do they see their relation with their colleagues and leaders, what do they feel about their students and their own experiences? We need to understand immersion programs as a place where a) teachers are expected to meet certain objectives and study how this affects the image their students and colleagues have of them and b) advances professional development, language skills, ideas, feelings and beliefs which can be put into practice, all of which lead to knowledge. These are the concerns which have driven my study of the subject and turned the construction of my own subjectivity into a struggle.

The fact that I was a leader of a colonial approach (LEIP) to ELT and am thus familiar with local English immersion programs has made me realize how important it is to raise awareness of the construction of teachers’ subjectivities, in order to help to do away with the erasure of one’s existence, validate local knowledge and expose the hierarchical social relations in ELT.

In view of the above situation of English immersion programs in Colombia and their relation to our socio-economic reality (since the target population are Colombian in-service teachers of English), my research seeks to answer the following question:

What do those teachers think about their participation in local English immersion programs?

Its objective is to analyze the stories they tell about their participation in LEIP.

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