

# The instrumentalized perception of english for competitiveness: a case study

La percepción instrumentalizada del inglés para la competitividad: un caso de estudio  
 A percepção instrumentalizada do inglês para a competitividade: um estudo de caso

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## Abstract

Linguistic policies in Colombia promote English as an essential language to be competitive in the global world, leaving out the cognitive and cultural perspective that language learning entails. Little is known about how this notion affects the pedagogical practices of teachers in training. The objective of the research is to understand the relationship between the instrumentalized vision of English and the development of teaching practices. The study was carried out under the interpretive paradigm. The study participants were three trainee teachers and two students. For the collection of information, the semi-structured interview and the focus group were used as techniques. It was found that the instrumentalized view of English promoted by language policies becomes an obstacle to its learning. In addition, it was found that teachers in training faced difficulties in becoming policy makers, that is, in appropriating policies according to the needs of the context. The study concluded that the failure to achieve the objectives set by language policies is perhaps due to this unfortunate conception that only promotes a structural and utilitarian view of language.

**Key words:** Instrumentalization of english; Language policies; Teaching processes; English learning.

## Resumen

Las políticas lingüísticas en Colombia promueven el inglés como una lengua esencial para ser competitivos en el mundo global, dejando por fuera la perspectiva cognitiva y cultural que acarrea consigo el aprendizaje de las lenguas. Poco se conoce acerca de cómo esta noción afecta las prácticas pedagógicas de los maestros en formación. El objetivo de la investigación es comprender la relación entre la visión instrumentalizada del inglés y el desarrollo de las prácticas docentes. El estudio se llevó a cabo bajo el paradigma interpretativo. Los participantes del estudio fueron tres maestros en formación y dos estudiantes. Para la recolección de la información se usó como técnica la entrevista semiestructurada y el grupo focal. Se halló que la visión instrumentalizada del inglés promovida por las políticas lingüísticas se convierten en un obstáculo para su aprendizaje. Además, se encontró que los maestros en formación se enfrentaron con dificultades para hacerse hacedores de política, es decir, para apropiarse las políticas de acuerdo a la necesidad del contexto. El estudio concluyó que la no obtención de los objetivos planteados por las políticas lingüísticas se debe quizás a esta infortunada concepción que solo promueve una visión estructural y utilitarista del idioma.

**Palabras Clave:** Instrumentalización del inglés; Políticas lingüísticas; Procesos de enseñanza; Aprendizaje del inglés.

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**Resumo**

As políticas linguísticas na Colômbia promovem o inglês como língua essencial para ser competitiva no mundo global, deixando de fora a perspectiva cognitiva e cultural que vem com a aprendizagem de línguas. Pouco se sabe sobre como esta noção afecta as práticas pedagógicas dos professores estagiários. O objectivo da investigação é compreender a relação entre a visão instrumentalizada do inglês e o desenvolvimento das práticas de ensino. O estudo foi conduzido sob o paradigma interpretativo. Os participantes do estudo eram três professores estagiários e dois estudantes. Foram utilizadas técnicas de entrevista semi-estruturada e de grupos focais para a recolha de dados. Verificou-se que a visão instrumentalizada do inglês promovida pelas políticas linguísticas se torna um obstáculo à aprendizagem do inglês. Além disso, verificou-se que os professores estagiários enfrentavam dificuldades para se tornarem decisores políticos, ou seja, para se apropriarem de políticas de acordo com a necessidade do contexto. O estudo concluiu que a incapacidade de alcançar os objectivos estabelecidos pelas políticas linguísticas se deve talvez a esta concepção infeliz que apenas promove uma visão estrutural e utilitária da língua.

**Palavras-chave:** Instrumentalização do inglês; Políticas linguísticas; Processos de ensino; Aprendizagem da língua inglesa.



## INTRODUCTION

Globalization has brought sweeping changes on all possible terrains worldwide. Colombia is not far-off from this reality. As presented by (Usma & Peláez, 2020) during recent years, negotiations of bi-national trade agreements with the United States and other countries in Europe, Asia, and the rest of the Americas, as well as profound examination and restructuring of the national government to become a member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), have involved the acceptance of economic and political reform packages. As is evident in recent policy documents and reform agendas in Colombia (OECD/World Bank, 2012), current models of education and language policy in the country include the enforcement of new accountability tools and indicators, the adoption of international standards, the recognition of the Program for International Student Assessment's (PISA) exams as a worldwide indicator of local and transnational education quality, and the promotion and enforcement of English as an international language across the whole educational system. From this perspective, education and language reforms not only respond to globalized agreements on what education means today, but also to international pressures connected to economic and political agendas.

In regards to the field of language policies, state officials have adopted international models of reform by introducing a far-reaching set of education and foreign language policies that include the National Bilingual Program 2004–2019 (MEN, 2004), the National Program for the Strengthening of Foreign Languages 2010–2014, the National Law of Bilingualism in 2013, and more recently, the National English Program 2015–2025, and Bilingual Colombia 2014–2018 (MEN, 2014). Programs and policies like these have made evident the special interest of the central government in promoting, improving, and regulating foreign language teaching, learning, and certification processes in the country in an effort to look more attractive to foreign investment in times of economic globalization, transnational policymaking, and international competitiveness (Peláez & Usma, 2017). At the same time these Language Policies are focused on making citizens to develop communicative skills in a foreign language, to compete in this interconnected world (MEN, 2005a).

Schools and universities are also permeated by globalization. Language policies have been formulated underlining the knowledge-based economy ideology, which highlights that English is crucial to be competitive in the globalized society. This instrumentalized view of language have permeated stakeholders in the education system.

Previous studies have approached elements related to the concern addressed in this paper. For instance, Usma (2015) talks about the instrumentalization not only of the language but also about the process of teaching and learning, mainly defining the utilitarian purpose of language connecting it to the application of knowledge to promote economic development, and showing how the national language policies have been focused on promoting this view, as well as how students and teachers have started to internalize it.

Moreover, this same author made a study in which he examines the National Bilingual Program in connection with other education and language reforms in Colombia, taking different aspects that have characterized these reforms which includes policy agendas, the externalization of policy discourses; the instrumentalization of languages; the stratification of groups, languages, and cultures; and the standardization and marketization of foreign language teaching and learning. And mainly highlight in the study how through schooling the stratification and exclusion are favored (Usma, 2009).



On the other hand, there is a study made by Quintero (2016) focused on pre-service teachers' practices, which shows how is the process of becoming transformative English teachers instead of mere passive technicians, while through their practices the pre-service teachers become aware of education and language as human and social practices and are thought from a perspective of intellectuals who can go beyond models of language education that are based on the notion of effective instruction.

Finally, Peláez (2021) in two qualitative studies carried out with administrative staff, teachers, and students at higher education level showed that analysis and reflection on language policies have enhanced the students' critical awareness regarding their role as policy makers and language policy appropriators. However, he conclusion call for further studies about the role of teachers as political subjects who should go beyond the appropriation of policies in the classroom to become agents of change towards the construction of a more equitable and just society.

Although these studies support the topic developed in this paper, showing the utilitarian view of the language, little is known about how this instrumentalized perception of the language permeates the way in which pre-service teachers develop their practices; that is why in this study, we pretend to reflect on how these different perceptions make the development of the practice a challenging process. So, in order to carry out this project, the concepts of language, language policy appropriation, teachers as policymakers, and pre-service teachers' practices will be developed in this paper.

There are three purposes for learning and teaching a language, and every purpose carries out a different concept of language: The first purpose is cultural, from this point of view the language allows a comprehensive attitude of the difference and the others; The second purpose is cognitive, from this perspective the language allows people to understand and name the world that surrounds them; and the third purpose is the utilitarian, from this point of view languages become a tool to serve mainly the economy and politics dimensions of society (Usma, 2015). This utilitarian view of the language is supported by initiatives such as the Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo (2004-2019) whose main objective is to promote among citizens the development of Communicative skills to break barriers, understand different contexts and prepare students for their future jobs (MEN, 2005b).

Taking into consideration the previous concepts in regards to language learning, it is important to establish that both teachers since their early practice and students are influenced by these perspectives of language. According to Peláez (2021) "analyzing and reflecting on official language policies is crucial in teachers' education programs to ensure they can develop a critical consciousness" (p. 7) and consequently, teachers can engage students in the classes by providing a language that makes them feel connected with their realities, something that can just be achievable not breaking the rules but knowing and applying them to promote social development.

The above suggests that in-service and pre-service teachers assume an important role as political subjects which according to Martínez (2006) implies being people able to take political stances, with the ability to construct knowledge and promote the development of autonomous and critical subjects; a person able to overcome the passivity and condition of technician with the courage to intervene in decisions about education and educational policy as well when they assume this role it allows them as (Peláez et al., 2020) conclude "carrying more critical and pedagogical ideas forward into action" (p.25) to accomplish their social commitment and seek the transformation.



English teachers can and should become policymakers, it means, social agents with the ability to adapt what is mandatory to the actual needs of the contexts in which they exert their profession, complying to their own beliefs in order to overcome the challenges that language reforms pose on them and that according to (Roldan & Peláez, 2017) “are countless and quite complex” (p.44). Also, when teachers become policy makers they are responding to the social commitment they have with society and understand that as English teachers they have a responsibility to raise cultural consciousness, to ensure social relevance in the second language (L2) as well as to execute his/her autonomy in the classroom (Kumaravadivelu, 1994) promoting the importance of recognizing that a language is not just a mean to make money but is also a mean to share with others.

Teachers have to be concerned with these different perceptions and ideas since they shape their pedagogical practices. According to Rauduvaitė et al., (2015) the teaching practice of pre-service teachers is “a period of studies when the initial professional steps are made, when the attitude towards teacher’s activity, rights, obligations, and responsibilities are shaped. It is the educational space where the quality of competencies acquired during the studies is revealed” (p.1049). This is the moment when their professional identity is going to be tested.

Furthermore, Sirmaci (2010) found that teachers’ belief that the practicum process allowed them to know how to make decisions in regards to the learning process, so it is important that pre-service teachers assume a reflective role in regards to their own practices, since it may result in new understandings and conceptions regarding planning and organization, pedagogical strategies, content knowledge, and classroom management. It can only emerge when teachers develop reflexive practices (Snyder, 2010). In addition, this attitude also enables teachers to “seek for fresh knowledge and competencies, which are needed to improve the teaching practice as well as to increase the professional motivation” (Rauduvaitė et al., 2015, p. 2).

With the intention to understand how the utilitarian view of English portrayed by the language policies permeates both pre-service teachers’ practices and students’ learning, in the following section the methodology is explained. Then findings, discussion and conclusions are presented.

## METHODOLOGY

Guba and Lincon (1994) suggest that qualitative research from a constructivist paradigm focuses on the subject, that is, on the human being with all the context and world (experiences) that surround the person, so that in this way the researcher can come to understand integrally the subject to be investigated. Since the qualitative research process is inductive, the case study is highly relevant to this project. From what Simons (2012) proposes, it is called an individual case study not because it is with a single person but with a group of people who share certain characteristics in common. In the same way, this hermeneutic historical research is an event or social aspect located in space and time, which allows studying multiple phenomena such as beliefs, practices, rites, attitudes, among many others, providing information in a deep way, and can be done by social units, that is, an individual, a role, a social group, etc.

The participants in this study were five people both students and pre-service teachers from a private university in Medellin, Colombia. In order to answer the question about their perceptions of English and how these imaginaries are related to the teaching and learning process, the information was collected through three semi-structured interviews that allowed for interpreting how the teaching-learning



process has been experienced by both, students and pre-service teachers from the institution selected and through a focus group. Consequently, the information analysis was carried out using the thematic analysis technique that according to Bardin (2002), emphasizes in the hidden dimensions, the latent meaning and the inference from the story emanated by the subjects. In relation to the above, the qualitative content analysis is not only intended to search for certain contents within a corpus, but to find the meaning that these contents have within the context.

## FINDINGS

After transcribing and systematizing the data throughout a matrix, we were able to start the analysis by initial coding. Then we group the codes that follow the same patterns into categories. In this way we could find themes as follows: (a) The instrumentalized view of language promoted by the language policies becomes an obstacle for the teaching and learning process; and (b) The struggles pre-service teachers encountered to become policymakers.

### **The instrumentalized view of language promoted by the language policies becomes an obstacle for the teaching and learning process:**

The instrumentalized vision of language becomes a problem when teaching and learning the language because it conveys pressure to study not for a cognitive and cultural achievement but for economic profitability as it is established by Ryuko Kubota (2011). The author presages about the consequences of developing skills in language in order to accomplish utilitarian objectives. This can be evidenced in the testimony of a participant who says that “the impact that English generates is the fact of gaining more learning, and with it more doors will open for you. I think that is the reason to study English” (A02). In that testimony the instrumentalized perception of learning English appears as the main reason or first motivation. Another participant also corroborates the same intention in learning English as it is presented:

English is one of the languages that is considered to be global, why? Because it is spoken in many countries of the world. So, in this case, the person who learns to speak English, many doors are open for he or she to study and work in other countries. English is used worldwide. (P03)

These imaginaries are nurtured by the neoliberal discourse where two assumptions are presented in regards to developing English communicative competences: first, a linguistic competence in English is essential in order to obtain, on a personal level, a good profit in labor terms, and second, in order for the country to achieve economic competitiveness, its population must develop strong skills in a foreign language (English) so that people can increase their economic performance (Ryuko Kubota, 2011).

Given the above, both, teachers and students, create imaginary vis-à-vis the process of teaching and learning the language. This imagined aspects which appear as the most suitable way of learning are: the knowledge or content to be assimilated, the most appropriate type of linguistic exposure, the ideal type of student body, the learning styles and the strategies to be adopted to favor the approach to the new linguistic knowledge. This is clear in the following testimony of another participant,

You learn better when the teacher’s activities are not so theoretical as well as writing, but are more oriented to the practice of speaking, speaking with classmates. So, let’s say that in that one if you



have the need to practice about how to pronounce the English language. In my case, it is very difficult for me. So, if I learn certain words, certain pronunciations, how certain letters or certain vowels are pronounced, practicing it is better and not simply remaining on a written paper. (P03)

And here is the testimony of another participant that corroborates the above premise,

The characteristic that I rescue from the process of teaching English learning is the teacher's way of explaining why it is useless for you to put someone in front of you and tell you something and that you remain without understanding. You see? There is nothing worse than the teacher gives you the structure of a sentence (subject plus verb plus complement) and explain it to you well as many times as necessary, but you did not understand anything. That happened to me (A02)

The above testimony clearly shows the difficulties that students may encounter in the process of learning. The knowledge and mastery of languages is more than just the drills or memorization of structures. No doubt that the lack of resources in public institutions plus the failure of language policies to provide programs to train primary school teachers becomes perhaps in one of the most urgent needs. Let us see the testimony:

A teacher who was not very expert, but also not knowledgeable on the subject, was the one who taught us in the fifth-grade classes on everything: science, social studies, math, everything, and even English, but she was not very expert on the subject, but she did her best in what we had to learn according to the grade in which I was. Of course, it was not her fault (J01).

As we can see in words of Usma (2015) "Teachers manifested to be trying to move from a tradition in which English is perceived as a structure disconnected from students, to a language that is closer to them, to their interests, needs, and future possibilities" (p.123). A goal that ends up being kind of unachievable because they are also supposed to respond to the demands and objectives proposed by the government, which are intended to promote the language as a tool for competitiveness and insert the country in the global market. As it is expressed in (Peláez et al., 2020), students end up finding English as no more than a subject that they must pass in order to finish school, or in the best case as a subject in which they are supposed to learn a bunch of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and a perfect pronunciation because their biggest desire is to speak like a native. English neither represents for students nor for society, in general, a mean by which can be shared perspectives and points of view in regards to the world that we inhabit (Cognitive purpose), as well as it does not help to have a better understanding of the others or more intercultural awareness (Cultural purpose).

As expressed above, English has been perceived by part of the society as a system, and this is the view that a big part of people demand, as it is reflected in the practicum experience of a participant:

I prefer to promote more interaction in my classes but today parents manifested to me their un-conformity because students have not written much on their notebooks, and they felt concerned because they did not know if they were actually learning something. They wanted that students were asked to write on the notebook the structure and the vocabulary that was worked during the class so they could study it at home. (PST1)

In another excerpt the participant claims that,



I proposed to my students to do a talent show and this talent show was very boring, just a few students attended the class because they did not find this activity useful at all, they preferred to go traveling with their family. This class was a total failure for me, I put so much effort in trying to make a beautiful show for my students in which we could have a nice time and they did not even attend. When I arrived home, I just cried feeling that this job was not worth it. (PST1).

In spite of participant trying to show students different means for using English, the concept that society has about the language in general terms and its learning, made more difficult for her to apply that what she believed was the right way to promote the language. She started to feel much pressure by those external demands and it affected the way in which she addressed her pedagogical practices. Let us see other testimony that reaffirms the same premise:

During the class, I realized that I had to change a lot of things of my planning because students need/want to learn topics that I did not contemplate as much and they were kind of demanding about the fact that they needed to learn about grammar rules, vocabulary that allow them to speak, as well as tools to speak like a native which makes me feel limited and so nervous, I had to start to take so much care of my pronunciation, I felt that I could not make any mistake because I was going to be categorized as a bad teacher. I stopped thinking about teaching English for social development and I started to be more focused on improving my grammar and my pronunciation to help my students to do exact the same. That class was so intimidating that my heart was beating so fast. Mistakes were not allowed for me. (PST1)

After all that, her self-esteem and empowerment were weakened and she fell into the belief that she needed to satisfy the demands of her students by focusing her classes on a grammar approach and letting aside his willingness to promote English from a social and cultural perspective. In addition, she fell into the belief that being a good English teacher is limited to pronunciation a thought not different to what the national language policies want to promote, when they established native speakers as if they were better competent to teach the language, or when they try to standardized national teachers and expect that they speak English according to the imported models.

In Addition, the experience of participant also is validated for other in-service teachers as can be seen in the study carried out by Usma (2015) where he found that “teachers not only lost their competence in English in a country where Spanish dominates all the spaces and English is never used in public spaces but also felt frustration as their initial goals could not be accomplished inside classrooms. In this manner, and even in those cases when teachers wanted to innovate in their classes and make them more interactive, they end up teaching in ways that saved their own energy, kept their students quiet, and avoided class disruptions”. (p. 108)

### **The struggles pre-service teachers encountered to become policymakers**

As we have seen along with this paper it is crucial for teachers to become policy makers if they really want their classrooms to be suitable places for their students so their specific needs can be supplied. However, teachers show a little interest in implementing and strengthening these plans in their classrooms. Because, these plans and reforms do not reflect the needs, priorities, and necessities of the community which means that the frustration of facing unreachable goals and the special interest of the government to promote an instrumentalized view of the language generates indifference and the loss



of the desires to appropriate or adapt the policies to be viable in schools (Peláez, 2021; Usma & Peláez, 2020). This situation can be portrayed in what participant said:

I just remembered that government preferred native speakers because in that way students had no option but to speak English, and in that way they made sure that the pronunciation and grammar they taught was correct, no matter if that teacher wants to promote the social component in the class, because at the end of the day what matters the most (according to the language policies) is that students acquire a language for the competitiveness and that allows them to have good grades in the national and international exams. However, my classes were not accomplishing that goal, I stopped thinking about the demands that were banal for me and began to focus on my children having fun in class. (PST2)

On the other hand, we do have the opposite situations. We have teachers who do not intend to put aside their role as policymakers and struggle daily to adapt politics to the contexts in which they find themselves, no matter how difficult or impossible this seems to be. As cited in Usma (2015) "Teachers and school communities used current reforms around English as an opportunity to engage students in formal educational processes that could motivate students towards formal schooling, while nurturing their formative process, supporting their emotional needs, and offering multiple and enriching alternatives to what they find in their neighborhood and homes" (p. 122).

Something that shows us that even though it might be difficult, teachers can actually make a difference without losing their desires of teaching students useful skills applicable in their regular life and at the same time take them to the point they are supposed to be in terms of what the government demands.

One of the pre-service teachers who was a participant in this study brought out an important experience that she had in his practice time and it allows corroborating what has been said here, this participant stated:

I do know about policies and I try to do my best in order to accomplish them as best as possible even though they strongly promote an instrumentalized view of the language and that is not my specific goal. What I care the most is that my students learn things that be useful for them in their lives and that connect with their context and background knowledge, that is why I always take to the classroom activities in which my students explore more social and cultural aspects of the language while I try to deal or cope at the same time with what the government proposes (PST3).

Both situations allow us to see that indeed the instrumentalized view of the language makes more difficult for students and pre-service teachers the process of becoming policymakers.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study provides a number of findings that have contributed to a better understanding about how the utilitarian view of English permeated pre-service teachers' practices. In addition, we could identify the struggles of pre-service teachers to become policymakers and the troubles they faced to promote the cultural and cognitive view of the language.

From those results, we could notice the confrontation that pre-service teachers have had between



the concepts of language that they have constructed, (the one they want to promote in their classrooms) and the demands that society expects they accomplished according to the instrumental concept with which they have categorized the language. It creates frustration and stress on them given that they start to lose the mastery of their own pedagogical practices.

The above mentioned, allowed us to conclude that these feelings and confrontations have started to create a tension between what actually teachers are and can do, and what they are expected to be and do; from that, according to Villaint (2007) is where identity crisis arises.

According to Nias (1989), identity is a crucial element in the way in which the teachers construct the nature of their work. This identity is linked to the social context and can be permeated by different educational reforms, policies and demands exerted by society to teachers. Demands and social knowledge that according to Villaint, (2007) can influence the redefinition of the teachers' work. Moreover, it is considered that something or someone is in crisis when the perception of the world, society, behavior and the expectations that they have, get out of adjustment, and in the case of education, it generally is caused by the changes presented on the cultural, social, economic and political context. Such factors are translated on demands that stipulate the change in the behavior to adapt oneself to that new situation. (Sacristán, 2007)

These considerations are not far away from what is happening with some pre-service teachers and even in-service teachers. As it was evidenced on the findings, the experience of participants and even other teachers reflect the decisions they have to take about redefining or changing their own pedagogical practices due to the pressure and different confrontations of beliefs that they faced. Such clashes are generated by the demands of society, the reforms, and decontextualized language policies that claim for the completion of different objectives that do not fit with the cultural, economic and social conditions of our country. In addition, these policies, as was said, only intent the promotion of a concept of language that leads to benefit only the global market. These factors in many cases affect the security of teachers and the empowerment.

That is why from school, teachers must begin to think themselves as political subjects because this allows them to be more critical in making decisions in regards to what is best for their students without letting society's perceptions permeate their practices (Peláez, 2021). Practicum period is the moment in which future teachers are supposed to see who they are as teachers. In those terms, it is necessary that teachers since their academic formation, be educated to be political agents under three aspects which are really important in this process such as: historicity and self-recognition, which implies that teachers recognize themselves as professional and their own stance as a subject; will of social action, in order to seek the transformation and, the empowerment of collective action (Martínez, 2006, p.4). In that way, they could be better prepared for their commitment to the transformation not only of the society but also of themselves being reflexive and critical thinkers in regards to what they do as professionals in charge of guiding students to build the life they want.

It is just when teachers assume their role as a political subject and start to appropriate policies that they can become policymakers, making decisions that allow them to give their students what they need according to the context in which they are immersed. It is important to have clear ideas and well-grounded beliefs about what they want to do in their classrooms and why they teach English. It is just in that way that they would not allow themselves to be ruined by the difficulties that arise along the journey



and by the different perceptions that society exerts towards what education really implies.

The process can be difficult but in order to face more critically those burdens, it is important that pre-service teachers start to reflect more about their practicum with the aim of acquiring more firm stances that allow them to face the difficulties they face in regards to the concerns presented on this study. The only possibility of changing the narrow perception that society has about the language, is through pedagogical practices that show the role of English and the importance of its learning as something that goes further than just a tool to get access to a job or a tool that offer better opportunities as it has been presented by the national language policies. It is important that people start to know and appropriate English as a language that allows a social and personal development, the strengthening of the cognition and the acquisition and development of more intercultural awareness.



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