




Neoliberal Agendas in English Language Education in Urban Latin America: The Case of Medellín, Colombia

Paula Andrea Echeverri Sucerquia^{1,2}  · Cristian Andrés Medina Rúa¹

Accepted: 3 July 2024
© The Author(s) 2024

Abstract

In this article we discuss the findings of a diagnostic study of (foreign and native) language use in the department of Antioquia, in the Northwest region of Colombia; we specifically focus on the findings pertaining to the largest urban area of the department, Medellín, along with its metropolis. We discuss how the current development agenda, centered around turning the city into a technological and business hub, intertwined with a bilingualism program, poses challenges to language education. In addition, we discuss how city development plans that have an effect on education are influenced by neoliberal discourses centered on ideas of economic development and competition.

Keywords: Bilingualism · Multilingualism · ELT · Urban development · Urban education

Introduction

The city of Medellín and its metropolitan area in Colombia were once marked as the epicenter of drug cartel violence. In the last decade, and more specifically, after the signing of Peace Agreements during the government of President Juan Manuel Santos in 2016, this urban area has experienced a gradual transformation. Despite persistent violence, especially in some neighborhoods, the number of violent acts has diminished. Local governments have invested ever since in urban projects, transforming the landscape. Private and public institutions have devoted themselves to fostering international cooperation and investment and strengthening the confidence

✉ Paula Andrea Echeverri Sucerquia
paula.echeverri@udea.edu.co

¹ School of Languages, Universidad de Antioquia, Escuela de Idiomas, bloque 11, Ciudad Universitaria, Medellín, Colombia

² School of Languages, Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia

of international markets as a way to support social and economic development, and empower communities and citizens.

In this context, we developed a study to diagnose (foreign and native) language use in the department of Antioquia, in the Northwest region of Colombia. This department is second in the country in terms of economic development, with great relevance in terms of agriculture and mining. While this is the case for most parts of Antioquia, the metropolitan area, on the other hand, along with the capital city, Medellín, has a service, commerce and manufacturing oriented economy. Results of this diagnostic study illustrate the relationship between the region's specific potential and multilingualism.

In the present article we focus on the findings pertaining to this subregion of Antioquia; we discuss how the current development agenda centered around turning the city into a technological and business hub, intertwined with a bilingualism program, poses challenges to language education. In addition, we discuss how city development plans that have an effect on education are influenced by neoliberal discourses centered on ideas of economic development and competition.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify what we mean by 'neoliberal discourses.' Neoliberalism generally refers to a political-economic philosophy that emphasizes free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reduction in government spending. In the context of this article, 'neoliberal discourses' pertain to the ways in which these neoliberal principles are embedded in the policies, conversations, and strategies that drive the adoption of certain educational reforms and investments. This includes prioritizing economic efficiency, competition, and the commodification of education as a tool for global competitiveness.

Relevant Literature

Bilingualism in Developing Countries: Between Discourses of Empowerment and Marginalization

Today, the English language is associated with material success, economic development, and social inclusion, which justifies its dominance (Park, 2011); as Clinging-smith (2006) points out, "language affects a variety of economic outcomes, such as trade, economic growth, and the provision of public goods." (p. 1). In the global market, English is associated with autonomy and competitiveness, which are presented as beneficial for everyone (Shin, 2016). Thus, as Soto and Pérez-Milans (2018) state, English has become the institutionalized language either as an add-on subject or as the medium of instruction, based on discourses that emphasize the preparation of citizens to compete in the global market, or who, as described by Ricento (2015), a highly educated English speaking workforce who can join the multinational corporations that move to countries with favorable corporate taxation policies.

In the context of developing countries, bilingualism English-mother tongue engenders possibilities of empowerment and marginalization (Stroud, 2002). On the one hand, Stroud (2002) argues that languages empower people as they are resources "to constitute and transform social and personal identities and by providing access

to important socio-economic and political markets.” (p.7). Clingingsmith (2014) explains that economic productivity is higher when workers can communicate with each other. Clingingsmith goes on to express that because urban residents interact and use markets more than their rural counterparts, there are greater incentives to learn new languages in urban contexts. In his research about language shift and economic growth in India, he shows that industrialization does indeed lead to greater investment in learning a new language.

In the Latin American context, where English is associated with social mobility and better job opportunities, Matear (2008) maintains that the symbolic function of this language “in branding and advertising suggests prestige, sophistication, and modernity and among the upper income groups it is a means of denoting higher social status” (p. 131). For authors like Barahona (2016) the broader offering of English, particularly at the primary level, has had an important democratizing effect, at least in the case of Chile. It has been somewhat effective in allowing children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to access a global language and a potential world of opportunities previously only available to students attending wealthy private institutions.

Conversely, bilingualism can also engender disempowerment and marginalization. Park (2011) argues that the promise of English as a commodity is a fallacy. According to this author, the commodification of English reinforces neoliberal ideologies that shape a new ideal global citizen (in his case, a new Korean-global citizen). Stroud (2002) indicates that languages can disempower individuals when speaking a minority language means that they are going to be stigmatized, discriminated against, or won't be provided with opportunities to access institutions and markets because they do not speak the appropriate language. In fact, as argued by Clingingsmith (2014), economic development might decrease linguistic heterogeneity as it may motivate the losing of one's mother tongue at the expense of the new language. In this scenario, the knowledge of English in contexts like Latin America, constitutes a marker of the social gap between the rich and the poor (Matear, 2008). Authors like Katznelson & Bernstein (2017) question the extent to which multilingualism policies that rely on neoliberalism ideals do in fact contribute to social justice, equity and plurality.

Neoliberal Discourses that Influence Additional Language (L2) Planning and Use

There are numerous publications around the world that address the nexus between neoliberal discourses and international languages, especially English. These languages have become a symbolic index for competitiveness in a world where the push for internationalization increases (Soto & Pérez-Milans, 2018). For example, Sayer (2015) indicates that the global pressure to improve English proficiency in developing countries has led to the implementation of English teaching programs since elementary school. This shift in language education policy, particularly in Southeast Asia and Latin America, is a move from elite English bilingualism to policies aimed at promoting general proficiency in English. The author views this policy change as a response to the modernization and internationalization of public education systems and as part of the alignment with neoliberal policies. Sayer (2015) uses the example of Mexico's national English program to illustrate this issue. Mexico's language poli-

cies are also addressed by Puón-Castro and Mendoza-Valladares (2022), who assert that macro international organizations have had a significant impact on Mexico's domestic education policy and ELT policy over the past three decades.

Another example of the influence of neoliberal discourses on language educational policies is the one discussed by Price (2014), who examines the relationship between neoliberalization, globalization and the spread of English. Through a case study of the implementation of English-language education policies in Taiwan between 2000–2008, the author attempts to demonstrate how neoliberal notions of competition, choice, and the free market shape national policies and discourse towards a global language. There are similar examples in the literature, some of them mentioned previously (Barahona, 2016; and Matear, 2008 in Chile; Clingingsmith, 2014 in India; Park, 2011, in South Korea, among many others).

Colombia's national bilingualism program is another example to add to this list. Guerrero-Nieto and Quintero-Polo (2021) explain that the Colombian government's decisions concerning bilingualism are based on a "neoliberal demand for economic growth to obtain international recognition" (p. 121), and that the bilingualism program is still in force due to the ideological hegemony of liberalism. Correa and Usma (2013) argue that the discourses on which the national plan was based are deceiving; they focus on satisfying the needs of a global world, where English is a commodity to get better jobs and for social mobility in general. These language education policies have called forth research agendas with a critical spirit (Guerrero-Nieto & Quintero-Polo, 2021), taking into account not only their drive towards competitiveness, but also their positioning teachers as clerks who have the role of implementing and realizing official agendas that ignore the teachers' subjectivities (Guerrero-Nieto & Quintero-Polo, 2021).

Bilingualism, Technology and Urban Economic Development

As mentioned earlier, urban residents have easier access to markets compared to their rural counterparts (Clingingsmith, 2014). In the current information-based society, this is inextricably linked to accessing and interacting with technologies of communication and information. In this context, English has a dominant role since competences in both this language and technology have become a new form of literacy in a globalized world (Matear, 2008). Among discourses related to this new form of literacy, there often is a nexus to the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), a term first coined by the World Economic Forum (WEF) executive chairman Klaus Schwab. The 4IR can be described as "the advent of "cyber-physical systems" involving entirely new capabilities for people and machines" (p.2). This industrial revolution is disrupting the industry at a faster pace compared to the previous ones, as it is changing entire systems of production, governance and management (Xu, David, & Kim, 2018). According to leading researchers on the topic, people cannot predict how much change this revolution will effect; however, Xu, David, and Kim (2018) identify some opportunities that come with it: "1) lower barriers between inventors and markets, 2) more active role for artificial intelligence (AI), 3) integration of different techniques and domains (fusion), 4) improved quality of our lives (robotics) and 5) connected life (Internet) (p. 91).

Moll (2022) argues that the concept of the fourth industrial revolution serves to further the interests of social and economic elites and reinforces a neoliberal ideology despite lack of evidence for such a revolution across global institutions. He goes on to argue that the notion of the 4IR is a hegemonic ideology that is accepted by many across the political spectrum, but that there is no evidence of a grand confluence of digital technologies that is transforming work, society, and global power beyond the defining characteristics of the Third Industrial Revolution (3IR). In alignment with this idea, we find Gilwald's (2019) example of South Africa and their focus on the 4IR. She argues that the 4IR is distracting the country from addressing inequality and creating the necessary conditions for an inclusive digital economy and society. The author asserts that the WEF's reductionist conception of industrial development ignores the rich tradition of thought on complex and revolutionary change over time. The author also warns that there is nothing inherent in 4IR technologies that will necessarily lead to economic growth, job creation, or empowerment of the marginalized.

Medellín and its metropolitan area, the context of the analysis we present in this article, incarnates the articulation of the issues previously mentioned: a drive for the 4IR, materialized in an agenda to trigger technological advancement coupled with bilingualism, and thus dynamize the city's economic and social development.

Medellín, the Most Innovative City

Diverse authors have addressed the gradual social change of Medellín in the last decade. Corburn et al. (2020) explains that Medellín's transformation from a violent and unequal place to a more safe, inclusive, and healthy city was driven by a combination of interrelated factors, including civil society mobilization, urban governance reforms, and investments in public spaces within the poorest neighborhoods. This has resulted, among other things, in the touristification of the city, including some of its peripheral neighborhoods that were built by war-displaced populations (Naef, 2018), specifically the urban areas commonly referred to as "comunas". Franz (2017) argues that the description of Medellín's development as an "urban miracle" is not accurate and is missing important political and economic implications. The author also asserts that these reforms, including increased economic activity in the tertiary sector, flexible labor markets, and incorporation into the global economy at the lower end of the value chain, have not led to sustainable growth for the city. The author also highlights that Medellín still faces high rates of unemployment and income inequality and therefore cannot be considered a "miracle."

As inhabitants of this city, the authors of this article have witnessed the changes it is experiencing and the profound impact it has had on the urban landscape, on people, on the environment, and of particular interest to us, on education. In our research about multilingualism in Antioquia, the department of which Medellín is the capital city, we gathered evidence of the contrasting discourses surrounding these changes and the rationale behind them.

Study Context

The Aburrá Valley, covering 1,152 km², is home to 3,866,165 inhabitants, accounting for 58.4% of the total population of the department of Antioquia in Colombia (Cámara de Comercio de Medellín para Antioquia, 2019). The majority of the population in the Aburrá Valley resides in urban areas, with Medellín being the most populous city, followed by Bello, Itagüí, and Envigado. The population concentration in the valley has increased rapidly since the mid-20th century, primarily due to industrial development that led to the conurbation of Medellín with its surrounding municipalities. This growth has transformed this area into a regional center, providing collective services and specialized health and education services to the local population and beyond.

The Aburrá Valley also operates as a metropolitan area, which entails decisions on territorial planning, mobility, and the environment. It has the best living conditions in the department of Antioquia and contributes significantly to the region's GDP. Despite its urbanization, the rural area remains a strategic metropolitan land reserve, contributing to food security, social stability, and the preservation of traditional rural landscapes. However, the subregion faces challenges such as climate change, which poses potential risks to food security, and a high demand for agricultural and livestock products that cannot be met by local production alone (FOLU, 2021).

Medellín and its surrounding municipalities have a complex history, marked by rapid economic growth during the first half of the 20th century, followed by an industrial decline, socio-economic inequality, with the rise of drug cartels and violence in the 1980s and 1990s. The city was once known as the murder capital of the world. In recent years, however, it has managed to significantly reduce poverty, unemployment, and violence, being touted as “the most innovative city in the world.”

Unlike other subregions of Antioquia, the Aburrá Valley's economy is not primarily based on agriculture and mining, but on manufacturing, financial and business services, with six strategic clusters driving economic development: fashion and advanced manufacturing, sustainable energy, business tourism, sustainable habitat, digital businesses, and health. Moreover, the region's exports related to “Industry 4.0” generated a value of 76.6 million USD in 2018, making Antioquia the second-largest department in this sector. Additionally, the influx of foreign direct investment (FDI) and international tourists has contributed to the region's international projection.

In all these sectors, English language education has become an intersecting axis for development; thus, national bilingualism policies play an essential role. The Ministry of National Education has issued various regulations and documents related to language teaching and learning, such as the General Education Law 115 (1994), the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Languages (1999), the Basic Standards of Competencies in Foreign Languages (English) (2006), Law 1651, the Bilingualism Law (2013), and several national programs focused on bilingualism, including the National Bilingualism Program (PNB) 2004–2019 and its latest update for the 2018–2022 period. These policies emphasize Colombia as a “multilingual and multicultural country that recognizes its native and creole languages while opening the doors to

building global citizenship through foreign languages." Nevertheless, the main focus remains on the English language.

Research Methodology

We conducted a large diagnostic qualitative study to answer the question: *What are the needs in terms of multilingualism (multilingual content, teacher training and language training, translation and interpretation services) in the subregions of Antioquia?* As indicated earlier, in this paper we discuss the findings that pertain to one of these subregions, that of Medellín and the other nine municipalities that make up the metropolitan area of the department.

Data was collected from various sources, including the voices of participants from diverse societal sectors. This stage was developed through a three-phase process: document analysis, a survey, and individual interviews applied to relevant stakeholders. During the *document analysis*, relevant documents were identified to provide an account of multilingualism needs in the Aburrá Valley's 10 municipalities, including development plans (one per municipality, the one for the Antioquia department, and economic development plans). This document analysis, along with information from our university's databases of allies in the region, was key to determine the relevant stakeholders to whom we were going to contact in the following stages.

During the second stage, the *survey*, a Google Forms questionnaire was sent to representatives from education, government, production sectors, and the general community. A total of 35 responses were collected from representatives of the different sectors in the Aburrá Valley. This response rate was negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, since at the time of starting this process we were going through a lockdown that changed the dynamics within institutions. Lastly, we did *individual interviews* with some of the stakeholders previously identified. Due to the lockdown, these interviews were done virtually, using Google Meet. Four interviews were conducted for the Aburrá Valley. Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2002), meaning that participants were selected based on the information they could provide due to their role in different organizations with influence in the region.

Data were organized and analyzed using NVivo® software. This was done parallel to data collection, using both deductive and inductive approaches: while initial categories were established based on our research questions, to organize the data, the categories were refined throughout the research process. While qualitative data was analyzed in NVivo®, quantitative data was analyzed separately using Excel.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, we used triangulation of data coming from the various sources. In addition, we held several meetings at the end of the data collection process to validate the preliminary findings with participants.

Findings

Foreign Language Use and Purposes

When asked about the languages that needed to be used in their corresponding sectors, survey respondents indicated that English is the most widely used language,

accounting for 65% of all the participant's responses. French was the second most commonly used language, representing 11% of the responses, followed by Portuguese (8%), Italian (5%), German (5%), Chinese (4%), Japanese (2%), and Arabic (1%) (Fig. 1 and 2).

When analyzing languages used in the different sectors, we found that the need for English was consistent across all scenarios, reflecting its widespread use in various domains. However, other foreign languages showed different patterns of use depending on the context; that is, foreign language use depends on the particular characteristics of the region. In the case of the Aburrá's Valley, languages like French, Portuguese and German are reported to be largely used in education, tourism, and commerce. French and Italian are linked to cultural activities, while Chinese (Mandarin) is particularly important in customs exchange.

In conclusion, these results show that English continues to be the most dominant foreign language in the Aburrá Valley metropolitan area, due to its relevance as the main lingua franca and reinforced by its mandatory inclusion in the curricula of primary and secondary education in Colombia. However, the survey also revealed that other languages like French and Portuguese are frequently used in the region. The

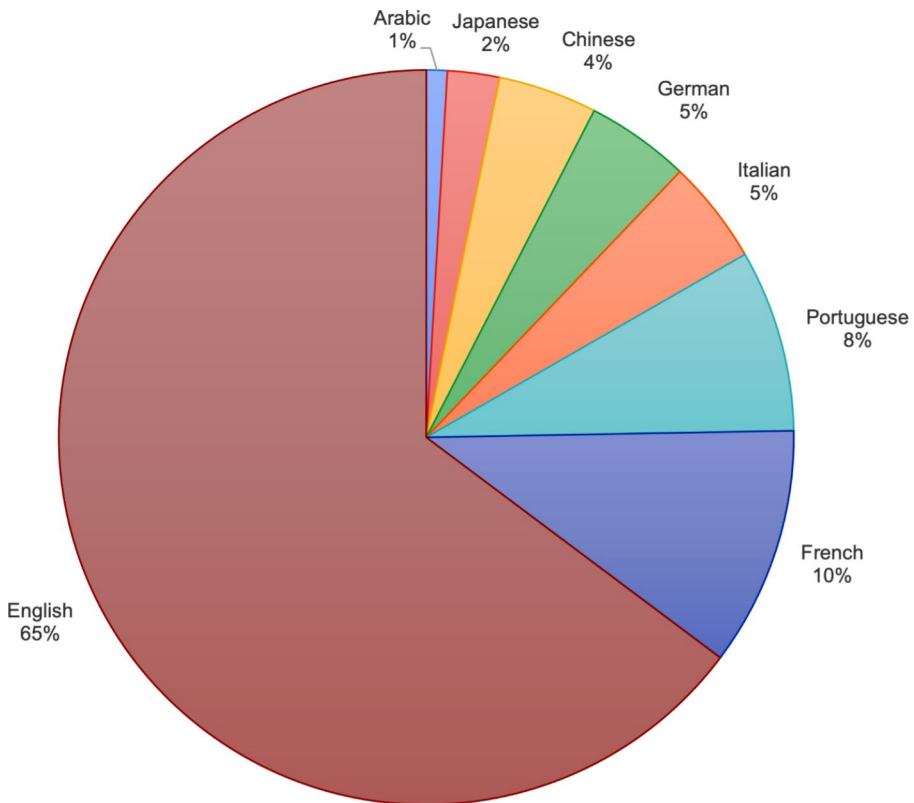


Fig. 1 Foreign languages most commonly used in the Aburrá Valley (N=35)

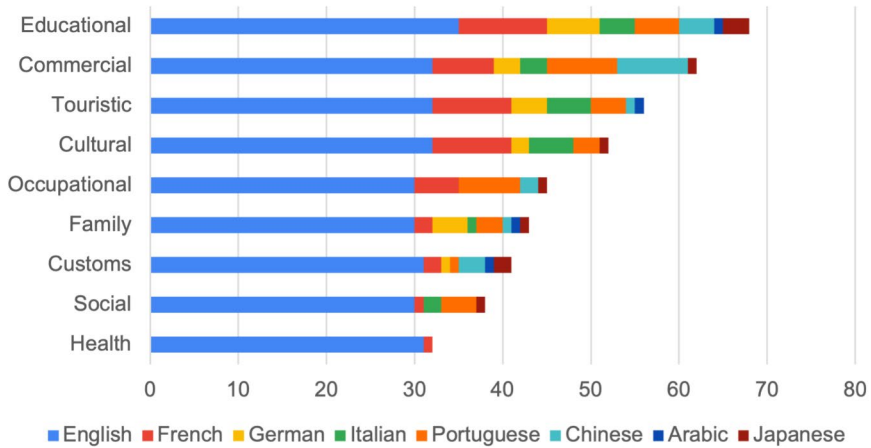


Fig. 2 Contexts in which foreign languages are Most Used in the Aburrá Valley (N=35)

Table 1 Municipalities of the Aburrá Valley with initiatives in their development plan 2020–2023 focused on english language education for students and community members

Municipality	Four-year term goal
Barbosa	400 students and teachers in training for bilingualism as a strategy for competitiveness and the development of local potential
Bello	Three schools with scores at or above the B1 level of the Common European Framework, according to standardized tests. One strategy created for the implementation of bilingualism in the municipality.
Envigado	30% of official educational institutions with improved scores in the national standardized test (<i>Saber 11</i>).
Girardota	Four strategies for the appropriation of a second language carried out.
Itagüí	One-hundred percent (100%) of public schools in the municipality with implemented strategies for strengthening bilingualism (Spanish-English).
La Estrella	54% average score in the Saber 11 English tests. One-hundred and sixty-six (166) students benefited from bilingualism strategies.
Medellín	Forty (40) public schools participating in curriculum strengthening programs and construction of English environments.

results also indicated that these languages are mostly used or required in education, commerce, and tourism.

Foreign Language Planning, Workforce Development and Expectations for Schools

The prevailing view of English as a key tool for economic and social development has led to an increasing number of municipal governments in the Aburrá Valle formulating English-Spanish bilingualism projects in recent years. This is evident in the municipal development plans outlined by elected officials for their four-year terms, where 8 out of the 10 municipalities in the Aburrá Valley include English-Spanish bilingualism plans and goals. Most of these plans focused on programs designed to foster the development of English language skills among secondary and high school students.

In general, the primary focus of these plans was on strengthening English education and improving results on standardized tests. In Colombia, national standardized tests called *Saber 11* assess students' knowledge of Mathematics, Spanish, Social studies, Science and English. The English section is designed in accordance with national bilingualism policies that adhere to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). For example, in Bello, scores are used to evaluate the achievement of proposed goals in English proficiency, and the language competence of teachers is also measured. In Medellín, the four-year term goal includes certifying 500 teachers at the B2 level.

However, despite efforts to improve standardized test results, significant disparities in English language proficiency persist, particularly based on socioeconomic status. In Colombia, the socioeconomic stratum system classifies residential properties into six strata based on their physical characteristics and surrounding environment. Stratum 1 is the lowest, often associated with low-income households, while stratum 6 is the highest, typically associated with high-income households. For instance, the average score on the English component of the *Saber 11* tests in 2019 for a student from the lowest socioeconomic stratum (stratum 1) in the Metropolitan Area was 44/100, while the average score for a student from the highest socioeconomic stratum (stratum 6) was 73.2/100, a difference of 29.2 points (see Fig. 3).

Furthermore, while 52.4% of stratum 5 students and 74.6% of stratum 6 students achieved or exceeded the B1 level of English proficiency expected by the Ministry of Education, only 2.3% of stratum 1 students and 5.6% of stratum 2 students achieved this goal (see Fig. 4).

The disparity in English language proficiency is also evident when comparing students from public and private schools. For example, while the average score on the English test for a private school student in the municipality of La Estrella was 67.3/100, the average score for a student from a public school was 49.6/100, a difference of 17.7 points (see Fig. 5).

These results not only highlight the low achievement of English proficiency in public schools across the Metropolitan Area, but also underscore the gap between public and private schools in the subregion. And while this situation is not atypical in

Fig. 3 English proficiency scores, Saber 11, 2019, Valle de Aburrá by socioeconomic level

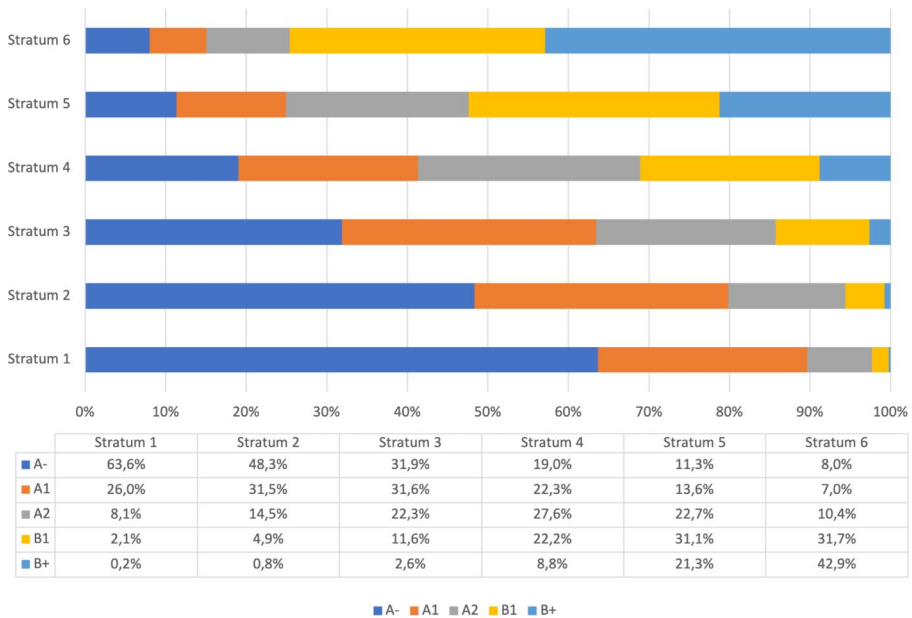
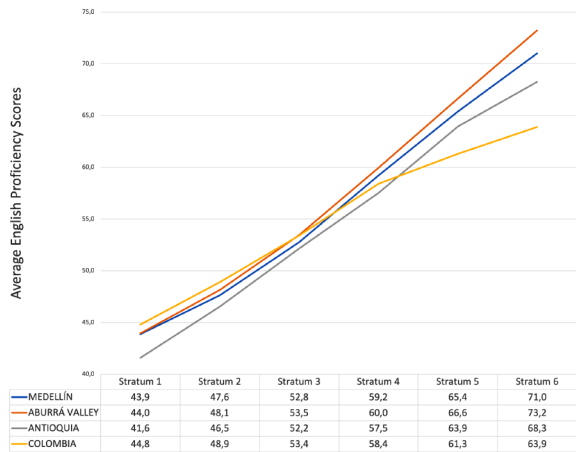


Fig. 4 Performance in english, Saber 11, Aburrá Valley, 2019 by socioeconomic stratum

the region, the new directions in city planning and development engender additional challenges in terms of workforce, employability, and foreign language education.

In recent years, the Aburrá Valley has witnessed the development of important initiatives aimed at positioning it as a leader in technological advancement, both nationally and globally. This is more evident in Medellín, which launched the program "Medellín, Software Valley" in 2020. This program aimed to develop the city into a hub for technological innovation. Moreover, the Colombian government designated Medellín as a Science, Technology, and Innovation District and the capital of

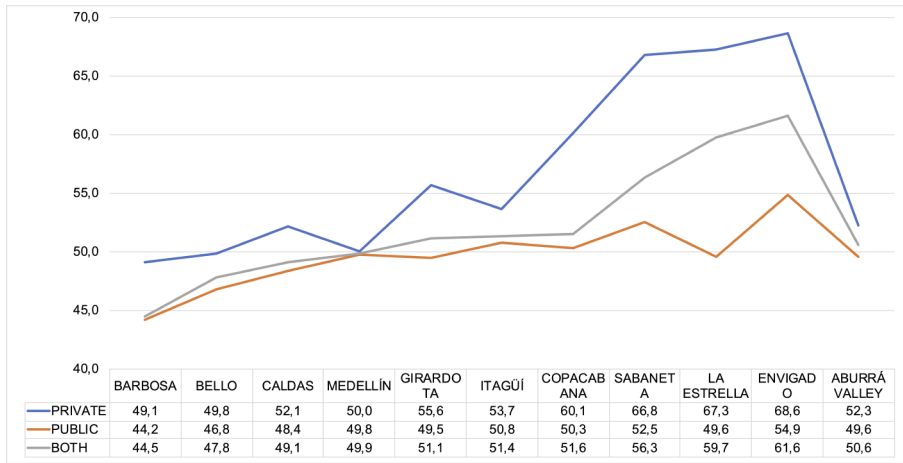


Fig. 5 Performance in english, Saber 11, Valle de Aburrá, 2019 by school type

the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Mayor Daniel Quintero's 2020–2024 development plan, "Medellín Future," further committed to transforming the city into a bilingual territory with a focus on the digital economy and citizens equipped with strong technological skills.

One interviewee from the Chamber of commerce noted that Medellín's commitment, which has generated strategies such as robotics and software programming seedbeds, necessitates "a much higher level of English than what we currently have." According to this commercial sector representative, children and young people with training in both technology and English have very good opportunities for international exchange. (D. O, personal communication, December 14, 2020).

Numerous stakeholders have been called upon to support the implementation of the bilingual policy in the city, in addition to public educational institutions. An example of this is an alliance of representatives of private and public sectors in the city named "Code: Medellín." One of the participants in this alliance highlighted the urgency of accelerating English language learning in order to improve competitiveness and promote development:

What we have done in Code: Medellín is [...] connecting so many institutions around this and educational institutions, the government, and business institutions. I think we have everything, everything we need so that hopefully in a few years, Medellín, Antioquia, and Colombia have a very important development in English. So, the first point I would make is to accelerate the process. I think we are all responsible for being able to accelerate the process of learning English, and that a large percentage of the population can interact with that language and use it for what we as a country need, in terms of competitiveness. (D.O., personal communication, December 14, 2020).

These efforts have had a significant impact on the other municipalities of the Aburrá Valley's as well, leading to an increased focus on internationalization and the need to

develop language skills for communicating with people worldwide and responding to the needs of digital industries. As a result, smaller municipalities in the region have also prioritized English language training as a strategy for enhancing competitiveness and local potential, particularly in the context of other initiatives related to software development, the orange economy, and communication technologies.

Caldas, another municipality, for instance, has set a four-year term goal of establishing four strategic alliances to offer training in bilingualism, logistics, tourism, entrepreneurship, the creative economy, innovation, and ICTs within the framework of the fourth industrial revolution. These alliances will be formed through strategic partnerships with national entities and/or international cooperation resources. Similarly, Medellín aims to train and certify 100,000 individuals in a second language for employment purposes during its four-year term.

While participants in this study recognized that competences in a foreign language are essential in preparing citizens to join the workforce, foreign language training is not accessible for everyone due to the high costs associated with it. This is shown in some of the participants' responses to the survey, where they indicated a desire for free or more affordable language courses.

Neoliberal discourses Around Foreign Language Education

Our findings illustrate the influence of neoliberal discourses in foreign language education, as evidenced in Medellín's development plan. The city's strategic initiative to become a 'Software Valley' and to advance in 'Industry 4.0' highlights a commodification of language skills, where English is not just an instrument for communication, but a commodity that can be capitalized on in the global market. The plan's emphasis on 'overcoming the deficit of human talent' and improving 'connectivity' reveals a competitive mindset characteristic of neoliberalism, which prioritizes market needs over educational equity. This focus on competitiveness and market readiness can be seen as part of a broader neoliberal agenda that values economic outcomes above cultural or linguistic diversity.

The strategic importance of bilingualism is further seen as one of the prerequisites for the city's economic growth:

In addition to the aforementioned issues, we can identify the following challenges as crucial aspects to make Medellín the Valley of Software and to develop both industry 4.0 and digital economy: overcoming the enormous deficit of human talent to cover the thousands of well-paid jobs that will be required, overcoming the low level of bilingualism of its citizens, and substantially improving the still limited connectivity. (Medellín, 2020, p. 105)

The same document further presents English as an advantage and a tool for achieving competitiveness. In the introduction to the document for the program "Bilingual seed for the Software Valley", it is mentioned how, through English, citizens will be prepared to compete in the global market and contribute to the development of industry 4.0 and the digital economy:

Program: Bilingual Seed for the Valley of Software

Description : Communicating in a foreign language is an essential skill in today's world, and it represents for individuals and for the city a comparative advantage, an attribute of their competence and competitiveness. The above not only makes the academic and work mobility of individuals possible; it is one of the bases on which the competitive capacity of a society is built and a tool for achieving new knowledge, opening up to new cultures and new experiences.

Based on the above, different strategies will be designed and implemented to benefit public educational institutions in Medellin, their students and teachers, in such a way that not only communication skills can be improved and strengthened, but also contribute to the curricular strengthening and the construction of environments that favor the teaching and learning of English for the future. (p. 238–239)

These excerpts are consistent with the responses by survey participants, who underlined the need of training young people in the region to work in centers for business process outsourcing services and the need for technical English courses for specific areas. This highlights the perceived importance of English language skills in various sectors, such as technology and commerce.

During the interviews, various participants also reinforced the connection between English proficiency as a means to enhance competitiveness, economic growth, and job opportunities. One representative of the commercial sector observed how individuals who are bilingual in Spanish and English possess a soft skill that can complement the technical skills acquired through formal education. Thus, by understanding what companies are looking for, it is suggested that bilingualism can facilitate job connections and better align training with the demands of the job market:

...the idea is to understand very well what companies are looking for, especially in order to achieve that job connection. There, bilingualism is seen as a soft skill, right? Because the technical skill, well, they pursue it and that's where universities or academies, the whole academic world, would come in. But, in that sense, in that search for that soft skill, that's where the idea is to be able to do it in a way that is relevant so that the person can connect more easily, more quickly, and match what companies are really looking for. Many times they say there are no jobs, but suddenly there are many jobs, but we are not training people in a relevant way, so the idea is to understand well what companies are looking for. (P. C, personal communication, December 16, 2020)"

A representative from the government sector also supported the notion that the importance of English is due to the economic development it represents. They explained that the prominence of English stems from its association with a world power, which in turn, is associated with access to knowledge, job opportunities, and personal and professional development. Although the choice to learn English depends on indi-

vidual aspirations, this participant acknowledged that it is essential for those seeking to work in technology:

...as it is the language of one of the world powers, it is given more relevance because you will be able to find both knowledge and job development, personal development... as well as information and better opportunities, both personal and professional. So, I think it's due to that, I don't really think it has any other purpose. And also, in the end, it depends a lot on what each person wants for their life. Well, because ultimately, if a person wants to get involved in the field in which we are at the moment, which is the field of technology, they will necessarily have to go for the English language. (J. T, personal communication, December 22, 2020).

Discussion

Findings from this research in a metropolitan area of a Latin American country show how the learning of foreign languages, especially the learning of English, is associated with ideas of progress, economic growth, and material success. Thus, it has been prioritized in schools' curricula and in training programs to prepare citizens to compete in the globalized market (Ricento, 2015). This happens more so in a city that is projected as a city where other companies land to develop their outsourcing initiatives.

It is evident that there is a clear link between service-based markets that flourish in the metropolitan area referred to in this report and competence in a second or foreign language. As argued by Clinginsmith (2014), the urban context provides better opportunities to engage in the use of the language; however, these uses are not available to everyone.

Even though there is a great number of initiatives to promote bilingualism to foster the social and economic development of the city, gaps continue prevailing due to the high costs of language education. Aware of this, governmental institutions have put forth initiatives focused on public schools whose population is mostly made up of students coming from low-income families; however, as expressed by one of our participants, these efforts are not sustained through time given the changes in the government every four years. Thus, in the pursuit of development to overcome poverty, discourses and actions around bilingualism continue reproducing inequalities, resulting in a false commodity as Park (2011) argues.

Results of this study show that while it is true that English is the language of most transactions taking place nowadays, the emphasis on this language contradicts the multilingual agenda stated in national policies; also, this shows neglect of other languages that are needed in the development of some sectors. In addition, the intention to preserve Colombian native and creole languages is not evidenced in the plans, much less in the municipalities that make up the metropolitan area.

The situation described in this article shows how the training required for the new workforce, which in addition to a foreign language-English demands computer

literacy and training in other technologies poses more complex challenges for public education in an urban context like this. During our study, we heard from various actors that education is called to keep up with societal demands, so setting higher expectations is the natural course of action. However, government four-year terms are not sufficient time to achieve the goals established.

Results also reveal that an emphasis on the competences required in technological innovation and bilingualism, necessary to be part of a global market, may engender to lose focus on the social issues still occurring in the city: in addition to poverty, gang violence in some neighborhoods, there is an increasing number of immigrants coming from Venezuela, with a large population of children and young people who are becoming part of our educational system. Neoliberal agendas reflected in development plans are shaping educational goals, and the investment in education by the government and the private sector. Bilingualism policies and plans that include bilingualism initiatives are presented as tools for empowerment; unfortunately, the conditions necessary for such empowerment are not sufficiently provided. Or, it seems, we need to come to agreements concerning the kind of empowerment that we are searching for.

We are not against discourses that celebrate the transformation of the city, but we argue that these discourses fall short in addressing social issues like inequity and poverty. There is more investment in English education by the national and local governments, which has certainly had a positive impact on those populations who would not otherwise have access to English learning opportunities. But many of the initiatives developed are missing all the possibilities language education offers like intercultural dialogue and the celebration of cultures, including one's own, etc.

There are issues present in this kind of programs and policies intended to foster social and economic development that have not been addressed; for instance, we need to look at the actual possibilities for our youth in the current job market. With the increase in foreign investment in this metropolitan area, the notion of cheap labor is not being contested. So, while there is an increase in job opportunities, we need to consider, on one hand, to what extent the conditions are fair for the new workforce. On the other hand, we might consider that there is systemic discrimination that affects hiring processes: during hiring not only matters technological training and competence in a foreign language, but also the applicants' connections-social capital and sometimes the institution where they graduated-public or private. Lastly, there is no evidence, at least in recent publications, that the branding of Medellín as the most innovative city brings better educational opportunities for all. We observe an increase in international tourists, but not necessarily more or better educational opportunities for all children and youth.

We believe that an intercultural approach could be an alternative in educational planning; greater attention should be paid to cultural exchange and intercultural dialogue, as this approach would leave far greater outcomes in terms of language and culture than just training for a standardized English test. Development plans are missing the fact that language education in our current context should be multidimensional, that is, involve multiple competences and knowledge to foster the use of languages (foreign and native) for diverse purposes and audiences.

Conclusions

The expanding global economy and the neoliberal agendas driving development in Medellín and the Aburrá Valley, Colombia, have placed foreign language education, particularly around English, at the heart of social transformation and economic empowerment. This research has unveiled a series of paradoxes and challenges within the current approaches used to foster language education:

Economic Growth vs Social Inequity

Despite efforts to strengthen English language education to fuel global competitiveness and create opportunities for growth, not everyone can access these opportunities. High costs associated with language education coupled with stark contrasts in proficiency levels between socioeconomic strata, constrain the realization of truly inclusive growth.

Intercultural Integration vs Instrumental Focus

The push for English proficiency tends to overlook the rich multilingual tapestry of Colombia. While foreign language education could be a platform for intercultural exchange and understanding, the current emphasis on English as merely an economic tool threatens to sideline other significant cultural and social aspects.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite numerous initiatives and policies, the effectiveness and sustainability of the push for English-Spanish bilingualism in the subregion are questionable. Short governmental terms, and lack of continuity in initiatives underline the complexity of implementing a cohesive strategy.

The Path Forward

Embracing an intercultural approach could remedy some of the mentioned contradictions. By viewing language education as a multi-dimensional endeavor that involves not just economic advancement but also cultural dialogue, social inclusion, and educational innovation, any region may find a more holistic pathway to development.

Future efforts could focus on investigating the long-term outcomes of bilingual education policies in Medellín and the Aburrá Valley, providing insights into the sustainability and actual efficacy of these initiatives. Another promising area for research would be the direct involvement of local communities in the design and implementation of language education policies. Future studies could focus on participatory action research methodologies to co-create educational programs with community members, ensuring that these initiatives are relevant and more readily embraced by those they aim to benefit.

Those who intend to engage in this line of research might consider the importance of having a larger number of participants or stakeholders from diverse social groups.

In our study, reaching to a larger and diverse audience was a challenge, given the constraints imposed by the pandemic. It was our expectation that we could contact participants in person, but this was not possible as all data had to be collected virtually. In future research endeavors similar in scope to this study, access to key participants is a must if one intends to collect a variety of voices and perspectives from diverse sectors.

The case of Medellín, and the broader Aburrá Valley subregion illustrates the intersection of language education, economic planning, and social challenges in an increasingly globalized world. While the city's strides towards technological and global competitiveness are commendable, this study reminds us of the need to balance these pursuits with social justice, cultural integrity, and sustainable educational practices.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank the members of our research team, Diana Quinchía, Marta Barrientos, Yasmira Barboza, Elsa Restrepo, Claudia Urrego, Natalia Carvajal, Sara Vanegas, Andrés Cardona and Santiago Aristizábal for their steady commitment to this research and to contributing to the generation of local knowledge.

Funding Open Access funding provided by Colombia Consortium. This research was supported by the Research Development Committee, CODI in Spanish, which is part of the Vice Chancellor for Research office, in Universidad de Antioquia.

Open Access funding provided by Colombia Consortium

Data Availability Data and materials are available upon request.

Code Availability New NVivo[®] software was used in the organization and analysis of data.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Our study followed the Code of ethics of the Vice Chancellor for Research office, in Universidad de Antioquia. We assure that this manuscript is the authors' own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere, and that we do not have any competing interests. Both authors have been personally and actively involved in substantial work leading to the paper, and will take public responsibility for its content.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

Barahona, M. (2016). Challenges and accomplishments of ELT at primary level in Chile: Towards the aspiration of becoming a bilingual country. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(82). <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.24.2448>.

- Cámara de Comercio de Medellín para Antioquia (2019). *Perfiles socioeconómicos de las subregiones de Antioquia*. <https://www.camarmedellin.com.co/DesktopModules/EasyDNNNews/DocumentDownload.ashx?portalid=0&moduleid=569&articleid=480&documentid=152>
- Clingingsmith (2006).
- Clingingsmith, D. (2014). Industrialization and Bilingualism in India. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 49(1), 73–109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23799077>.
- Corburn, J., Ruiz Asari, M., Pérez Jamarillo, J., & Gaviria, A. (2020). The transformation of Medellín into a ‘City for Life’: insights for healthy cities. *Cities & Health*, 4(1), 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2019.1592735>.
- Correa, D., & Usma Wilches, J. (2013). From a Bureaucratic to a Critical-Sociocultural Model of Policy-making in Colombia. *HOW*, 20(1), 226–242. Retrieved from <https://howjournalcolombia.org/index.php/how/article/view/32>.
- FOLU (2021). *Subregiones de Antioquia: diversidad y oportunidad*. Bogotá D.C.: FOLU. <https://folu-colombia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Subregiones-FOLU-Antioquia.pdf>.
- Franz, T. (2017). Urban Governance and Economic Development in Medellín: An Urban Miracle? Latin American Perspectives, 44(2), 52–70. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X16668313Guerrero-Nieto and Quintero-Polo \(2021\)](https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X16668313Guerrero-Nieto and Quintero-Polo (2021)).
- Guerrero-Nieto, C. H., & Quintero-Polo, Á. H. (2021). Emergence and Development of a Research Area in Language Education Policies: Our Contribution to Setting the Grounds for a Local Perspective on Policymaking. *HOW*, 28(3), 119–133. <https://doi.org/10.19183/how.28.3.677>.
- Katznelson, N., & Bernstein, K. A. (2017). Rebranding bilingualism: The shifting discourses of language education policy in California’s 2016 election, *Linguistics and Education*, 40, pp. 11–26, ISSN 0898–5898, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2017.05.002>.
- Matear, A. (2008). English language learning and education policy in Chile: can English really open doors for all? *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 28(2), 131–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790802036679>.
- Moll, I. (2022). The Fourth Industrial Revolution: A New Ideology. *tripleC: Communication Capitalism & Critique*, 20(1), 45–61. <https://doi.org/10.31269/tripleC.v20i1.1297>.
- Naef, P. (2018). Touring the ‘comuna’: memory and transformation in Medellín, Colombia. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 16(2), 173–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2016.1246555>.
- Park, J. S. Y. (2011). The promise of English: linguistic capital and the neoliberal worker in the South Korean job market. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(4), 443–455. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2011.573067>.
- Patton, M. (2015). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. 4th Edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks.
- Price, G. (2014). English for all? Neoliberalism, globalization, and language policy in Taiwan. *Language in Society*, 43(5), 567–589. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404514000566>.
- Puón Castro, Y., & Valladares, J. L. M., J. L. (2022). Neoliberalism and ELT Policy in México: Analysis and Implications from a. *Political Economy Stance Ñemityrä*, 4(2), 49–63. <https://doi.org/10.47133/NEMITYRA20222002A5>.
- Ricento, T. (2015). ‘Political Economy and English as a Global Language’, in Thomas Ricento (Ed.), *Language Policy and Political Economy: English in a Global Context* New York, NY. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199363391.003.0002>.
- Sayer, P. (2015). More & Earlier: Neoliberalism and Primary English Education in Mexican Public Schools. *L2 Journal*, 7(3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.5070/L27323602>.
- Shin, H. (2016). Language ‘skills’ and the neoliberal English education industry. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 37(5), 509–522. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2015.1071828>.
- Soto, C., & Pérez-Milans, M. (2018). Language, neoliberalism, and the commodification of pedagogy. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 18(5), 490–506. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2018.1501844>.
- Stroud, C. (2002). *Towards a policy for bilingual education in developing countries*. New Education Division Documents. Stockholm.
- Xu, M., David, J. M., & Kim, S. (2018). The Fourth Industrial Revolution: Opportunities and Challenges. *International Journal of Financial Research*, 9, 90–95.