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Colombia national bilingual project

INTRODUCTION
The Colombian educational authorities value the mastery of a second language as an indispensable tool to succeed in today’s world. The Government’s educational policy regards learning foreign languages as a way of opening, internationalising and creating a positive foreign investment climate. The ‘Plan Colombia Bilingüe’ and the National Standards for English constitute outstanding efforts in this regard. Bilingualism is acknowledged as key for academic and labour mobility and for setting the basis for capacity building and competitiveness. While traditionally, Colombia’s bilingual education has been the privilege of the higher social classes, the Government of Colombia has sought to change this situation by implementing an ambitious education and language policy. The issuance of the General Education Law (Law 115 of 1994) and the launching of a National Bilingual Program, provided the grounds for Colombia’s aspiration for a bilingual education for all of the population. The following article contains a description of the collaboration between the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN – the Ministry of Education), the Instituto Colombiano para la Evaluación de la Educación (ICFES – the national awarding body), Cambridge ESOL and British Council, Colombia. This was a 4-year project covering the following areas:

- initial benchmarking of student and teacher levels
- new test development and deployment
- transfer of knowledge
- developing local capabilities and quality assurance.

The project successfully delivered new English language examinations in Colombia; specifically for 11th graders at the end of the State secondary education (the State exam, ‘Examen de Estado’) and for last-year university students (ECAES). Cambridge ESOL designed and produced the first version of the new English component of the Colombian State exams. Thereafter, the project has involved transfer of skills and localisation to improve the country’s capacity to produce its own English tests through ICFES. As a result of important efforts from the Colombian educational authorities, currently hundreds of thousands of students in Colombia are taking these mandatory English tests annually. Training provided by Cambridge ESOL allowed ICFES to form a team of new item writers who have already produced English test items used in the latest 2008 and 2009 versions of the State exams and ECAES. The success of this initiative has allowed Colombia to both raise its standards for English as a second language, and accurately measure progress attained against international standards.

BACKGROUND
Up until 2000, the examination of foreign languages had been optional in state exams. However after that year, with less than 2% of the population opting for the language tests, ICFES implemented a mandatory language component for State exams. In general, schools did not have much experience in teaching and testing foreign languages, consequently, a 2-year adjustment period was granted. ICFES began publishing the general results of language exams in 2003. But after a couple of years, unsatisfactory results provoked a strong response from the Colombian educational authorities. With only 1% of the country’s population estimated to perform in English as a second language at an adequate level, the educational authorities started promoting bilingualism as an important component of the broader educational reform project.

The broader educational reform context
Colombia has established four strategies to improve the quality of education:

1. Strengthening the education quality assurance system at all levels.
2. Providing professional development for teachers and school directors.
3. Implementing programs to develop competencies.
4. Fostering policy and programme evaluation (see World Bank 2004).

Around the same time, in 2006, the Colombian Government proposed long-term goals on educational policy in the document Vision 2019 Educación. This policy document called for the improvement of English language skills for the whole population as a means to improve the country’s competitiveness in the global market.

Furthermore, Colombia has engaged its people in the development of a 10-year plan to address these and other...
issues critical to education, through its Plan Nacional Decenal de Educación or National Decennial Education Plan. To galvanise support for its reforms, the Ministry of Education has used the decennial plan as a means of engaging the public in setting the nation’s education priorities for the 10-year periods of 1996–2005 and 2006–2016.1

As a result of its educational policy, Colombia has been strengthening its quality assurance system by developing basic competency standards; monitoring, analysing and using evaluation data for student and teacher performance; fostering school quality through the use of self-evaluation, improvement plans and a certification process; and strengthening sub-national agencies to support schools’ improvement efforts, especially schools that are low-achieving. Furthermore, Colombia has been working to increase the relevance of its education system from pre-primary to higher education and to increase access at the higher levels, so as to build the human capital required to increase general productivity and competitiveness.

The National Bilingual Program
As a result of the need to improve foreign language teaching skills and student competencies, educational institutions started including English language courses in their syllabus. Bilingualism became one criterion for accreditation of higher education programmes, while the Ministry of Education made important efforts to examine last-year high-school students. In 2004, the Ministry of Education presented the National Bilingual Program 2004–2019, an ambitious and unprecedented language policy. The programme was very influential, not only amongst schools and universities, but also outside the formal education system, and completely changed the way the education community perceives foreign language teaching and learning in the country.

The programme consists of five targeted areas for implementation, which include:
2. Continuously evaluating communicative competence in students, as well as in-service and pre-service teachers, within and outside the formal school system.
3. Providing professional development programmes for teachers in order to develop their pedagogical knowledge as well as communicative competence in English.
4. Supporting the use of new information and communication technologies for the teaching of English.
5. Consolidating bilingual and trilingual models in ethnic communities around the country.

Goals and objectives
The project’s objectives of providing a range of English language assessment services included the definition of student performance levels linked to international benchmarks. While the main objective was to improve the level of English of students and teachers, it required that ICFES provided a good delivery infrastructure and improved English language assessment.

Colombia’s educational authorities sought to evaluate and certify competencies by initiating periodic English language evaluations, to determine the level of competence of students and teachers. Such a certification process for in-service and pre-service teachers provided for accreditation of teachers’ competence at the various levels of language and language-teaching skills. This certification was to be issued by fully accredited teaching institutions, and to be closely aligned with international standards. The main goal was to attain a minimum CEFR B2 level for all teachers which required outstanding teacher training efforts at basic and intermediate levels.

The ultimate goals behind adopting new international standards for foreign-language learning was targeted at achieving English language skills at CEFR level B1 for school leavers, level B2 for university graduates, and at least C1 for all English language teachers. These levels correspond to the standards of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Initial objectives were programmed to be completed by 2010, aiming at full achievement (100% of the goal) by 2019. By then, the country’s educational authorities expect to have achieved a level of at least B2 for 100% of the English teachers in the country and all last-year university students; and at least B1 for 100% of final year high-school students. The targeted improvement over time is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: English language competence development goals for Colombia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of 11th grade students, state school sector in basic level</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of public and private school last-year high-school students attaining level B1 of competence in ICFES State exam</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>70.40%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of English teachers in basic and intermediate levels, up to level B2 of competence</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>35% (50%)</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of last-year university students attaining level B2 of competence (ECAES general) at B1</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>70% at B1</td>
<td>100% at B1</td>
<td>100% at B2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of last-year English teacher trainees in basic and intermediate levels attaining level C1 of competence</td>
<td>58% at B2</td>
<td>75% at B2</td>
<td>100% at B2</td>
<td>100% at C1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of programmes accredited by English language institutes</td>
<td>0% at C1</td>
<td>25% at C1</td>
<td>50% at C1</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages

The levels for language skills defined for Colombia correspond to internationally accepted standards defined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages. The CEFR consists of a series of descriptions of abilities which can be applied to any language and can be used to set clear targets for achievements within

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1 The National Decennial Education Plan is a social pact around a democratic planning exercise, in which the general public determines the main features and guidelines of educational policy for the next decade. It consists of a set of proposals, actions, and goals expressing the will of the people regarding education in the country.
language learning, and has been invaluable to the project. The new international standards of testing English skills in the Colombian State exam were based on the Cambridge ESOL Preliminary English Test, which stands at level B1 of the CEFR. Colombia’s efforts to obtain training and support from Cambridge ESOL were aimed at improving Colombia’s capacity to produce its own tests linked to the CEFR.

Language educational policy actions
ICFES has designed and implemented certain strategies to meet the objectives of a bilingual education policy. The main one was the adoption of standards in English language as the common basis for fixing goals, designing curricula and evaluating competences, as well as certifying a person’s level of competence. English language standards adopted by the Ministry of Education, based on the CEFR, determined the competences that students are expected to develop, in order to attain a level of English that allows them to understand and be understood in that language.

After launching the National Bilingual Program, the Government issued legislation to regulate the new policy. With Decree 3870 of 28 October 2005, the Colombian Government formally adopted the CEFR for languages; regulated the organisation and functioning of foreign language programmes; provided for accreditation of language programmes in universities; and eliminated the certification requirement for programmes offered by international co-operation organisations.

The adoption of Cambridge ESOL exams was fundamental for policy advancement. Between 2005 and 2009, the National Bilingual Program made important progress with a large-scale collaboration between ICFES, Cambridge ESOL, British Council and the Colombian academic community. The partnership with Cambridge ESOL was aimed at developing an internationally benchmarked English language assessment in the State school-leaving exams and university ECAES exams in Colombia, and made up part of the Ministry’s efforts to equip the population of Colombia with English skills for work and higher study. It consisted of a comprehensive programme designed by Cambridge ESOL, which involved benchmarking specific student populations to establish existing levels of language ability, subsequent design of new tests for two test populations, building local capacity by training a Colombian team to write tests in line with international standards, and collaborating on statistical analysis techniques and the development of a measurement scale in order to tie student performance to CEFR levels. This was a 4-phase project implemented in the following phases:

1. Benchmarking of student and teacher levels (Nov 05–Feb 06).
2. Test development and deployment (Mar 06–Dec 06).
3. Transfer of knowledge (May 07–Dec 09).
4. Localisation and quality assurance (Jan 08–Dec 09).

Phase 1: Benchmarking of student and teacher levels with Cambridge tests
In November 2005, the first pilot for the new language tests was carried out in various territorial entities around the country. To provide a benchmark by which to plot progress of the National Bilingual Program, a sample population of 3,759 students in 8th and 10th grades in public schools in 11 departments, and 3,422 teachers, was selected to take part in a benchmarking activity designed by Cambridge ESOL. This exercise showed that only 6.4% of the students in the year prior to leaving school were at B1 level in English, while only 10.5% of the teachers had the necessary level of English to teach at this standard. A second study tested pedagogical and content knowledge of 243 teachers by using the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) administered by Cambridge ESOL; while a third study tested 2,467 students in public schools and 1,293 in private schools, not including bilingual schools.

The TKT study showed satisfactory results regarding teachers’ pedagogical knowledge. However, only 1.8% of the teachers were at an advanced level in English language ability, 32.8% at intermediate level, and 65.4% attained only a basic level.

Additionally, the First Certificate in English exam was applied to a sample of 300 final-year trainee English language teachers, fully sponsored by the Ministry of Education. This survey showed that over 50% of trainee English teachers were below B2 level.

In total, this illustrates that Colombia’s ambitious policy for bilingualism has a lack of qualified English teachers, with an estimated 40,000 extra at the appropriate language level still needed. This is one of the largest challenges faced today by the country’s educational system.

Phase 2: Strategic alliances for Cambridge ESOL test development and deployment
Cambridge ESOL presented new test designs for the English component of the State school-leaving exam and for the English test for final year university students. These designs were accepted by ICFES and MEN. The first of these tests was administered between July and September 2006. Cambridge ESOL also processed and delivered the results in this period. These tests contained items from Pre-A1 level up to B2 level in order to measure performance up to B2 on the CEFR.

Cambridge ESOL Colombia Test Structure
The new foreign language tests designed to replace the old elective tests focused on evaluating students’ communicative competences. The exam relied on a distinction between different levels of competence, where the knowledge of grammatical rules and semantic aspects of the language are only meaningful when used in specific contexts.

In terms of overall general ability, the English exam developed by Cambridge ESOL and implemented by ICFES evaluates skills in the following areas:

- can understand straightforward instructions or public messages
- can understand dictionary-style definitions for common objects
- can understand routine information
- can follow routine interactions covering a wide range of functional language
- can understand factual articles in newspapers, books and letters

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• can understand the general meaning of non-routine articles, including writer purpose, overall intention and writer opinion
• can appreciate cohesion in a written passage and select appropriate vocabulary from options.

The English language exams implemented in the annual tests for last-year high-school and university students, consist of 45 multiple-choice items (the previous language exams used to have 24 items). The test has been developed to assess across several levels of proficiency (from Pre-A1 to 'B1 or Above' on the CEFR). All 45 items are distributed amongst seven parts or sections of increasing difficulty. The basic and independent user levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages define the assessment levels.

A simultaneous alliance between ICFES and British Council worked to promote the basic standards for English competences. As a result in 2006, the Government introduced the Estándares Básicos de Competencias en Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés, a set of basic standards that English teachers should follow to guarantee the levels of proficiency the CEFR presents for Europe. The Minister of Education, Cecilia Maria Velez White, in an open letter introducing the standards (2006) made the following statement:

"The National Government has the fundamental commitment to create the conditions for Colombians to develop communicative competences in another language. Having a good proficiency level in English facilitates the access to job and education opportunities that help ensure quality of life. To be competent in another language is essential in a globalized world, which demands better communication, to open frontiers, to understand other contexts, to make knowledge your own and make it circulate, to understand and make yourself understood, to enrich your being and play a decisive role in the development of the country. Being bilingual broadens the opportunities to be more competent and competitive."

Phase 3: Local capacity-building

The new English language tests that were developed under the ICFES–Cambridge ESOL alliance made possible the application of national English exams to more than 800,000 students a year, in line with new international standards.

The first step in enabling test production to take place locally was for Cambridge ESOL and ICFES to recruit and train a team of locally based item writers to produce their own materials for the English components of the State exam and ECAES test. The British Council played an important role by facilitating and mediating this process, which commenced with the appointment of two Team Leaders, responsible for training and managing teams of locally based item writers, as well as other duties including the production of item writer guidelines.

Having agreed upon a detailed schedule for local capacity building covering a period of two years, the first activity in May 2007 was for the Team Leaders to attend an intensive 5-day training course specifically designed by Cambridge ESOL and held at its offices. The training was delivered by staff from Assessment and Operations, Research and Validation, and one of its leading external consultants. The purpose of the training was to provide the Team Leaders with all the necessary knowledge and skills they would require to perform their role, and covered the following aspects: familiarisation with the levels of the newly designed Examen de Estado (State exam) and ECAES tests and how they are related to the CEFR; a detailed consideration of the test parts and issues involved in producing successful test materials; the aims of editing and pretest review meetings; and how to effectively train and support item writers.

Immediately after returning to Colombia, the Team Leaders drafted a set of item writer guidelines for the Examen de Estado and ECAES tests detailing the test specifications and providing advice on producing the test items. Once the guidelines had been drafted with support from Cambridge ESOL, the Team Leaders went on to devise a training session for the newly recruited team of 15 item writers (eight from Bogotá and seven from other cities). The content of the session largely mirrored the content of the Team Leader training, except there was less focus on the Team Leader's role. The training was delivered at the British Council in Bogotá, and attended by the Cambridge ESOL consultant who had previously trained the Team Leaders.

The alliance with Cambridge ESOL was a key factor in enabling test production to take place locally. Furthermore, to support these efforts, British Council, the Ministry of Education, ICFES, Cambridge ESOL and other educational authorities were involved in devising teacher training programmes for in-service teachers, to strengthen the provision of English language teaching for students.

Phase 4: Localisation and quality assurance

This stage focused on quality assurance, with the aim of ensuring that ICFES and the new Colombian item writing team were supported by Cambridge ESOL so that the locally produced tests continued to measure candidates’ English language ability according to the new Colombian Standards and the CEFR.

Cambridge ESOL supported ICFES in achieving this aim by enabling them to calibrate tasks and by providing anchor items for inclusion in pretests and live tests. The development of a successful pretesting system was crucial to ensure that test items were at the right level for the live tests, and this was another area in which Cambridge ESOL gave significant support and advice to ICFES, besides providing feedback and editing comments on locally produced test materials via videoconference, teleconference and email. In addition to this, analysis of live results was undertaken by Cambridge ESOL Research and Validation Group to help ICFES with grading and to help refine the mapping of test items to the CEFR.

Via this means and by developing a network of item writers, ICFES has continued to build up its bank of test materials and was able to anchor test items to previous tests, and this was seen as the turning point for the Ministry of Education in guaranteeing the country’s own capacity to implement locally produced English language tests. The first tests produced locally were piloted in November 2007. Currently the State exam is a pre-requisite for the admission of 11th grade students to enter into higher education.
Test anchoring and comparison

Anchor items are a set of common items that a certain test shares with another in order to enable comparison of test results on a common scale of measurement. Anchor items are also used in the creation and expansion of an item bank; the known properties of anchor items inform the analysis of new items and enable their calibration to a common scale. Both of these types of anchoring have been employed to ensure that the ICFFES tests are aligned to an international standard – in this case the CEFR – and to build a psychometrically sound item bank.

Cambridge ESOL provided ICFFES with a set of anchor tasks which had been calibrated to the CEFR. These anchor tasks were incorporated in pretesting and live administrations of the new ICFFES tests and were used (i) to calibrate new ICFFES test items during pretesting and thus build an item bank, and (ii) to analyse results from the live tests in order to provide grading information based on the CEFR levels.

In 2009, ICFFES decided to analyse together the results of its 2007, 2008 and 2009 English tests. In order to achieve this, ICFFES, with the support of Cambridge ESOL, identified suitable anchoring items among the tests that linked the 2007–2009 tests to the English Benchmarking Test administered in 2005. Working together Cambridge ESOL and ICFFES also established a set of guidelines for the selection of anchor items and/or tasks for future ICFFES tests that will ensure the successful linking of new test versions to the existing ones.

Findings from the new ICFFES tests administered from 2007 to 2009

Figures 1 and 2 below display CEFR performance in ECAES and Examen de Estado examinations from 2007 to 2008. In the ECAES exam, the percentage of candidates at A1 level is higher than at pre-A1 level in ECAES 2008–1 in comparison to the ECAES 2007–1 or 2007–2. The same is true at B1 and B2 or above CEFR levels – on average the percentage of candidates falling at these two levels increases in the later administrations of the test (with the exception of 2007–2 and 2008–1 at B1). These first results indicate a tentative improvement of proficiency for the ECAES cohort in the lower (pre-A1, A1) and higher (B1, B2 or above) CEFR spectrum of the exam. The Examen de Estado results present a steady picture across all three administrations of the exam in 2007 and 2008. It should be noted here that these results are preliminary and more longitudinal data is needed in order to better monitor progress.

Measuring teachers’ English skills

Throughout the 4-phase project, over 13,000 state English teachers were tested and 6,500 teachers at different levels participated in development programmes. The same English test used for ECAES was implemented for measuring teachers’ language ability. Four different forms of the test for teachers were produced based on the ECAES test for 2008 (EK2008–1 and EK2008–2). The following are the results obtained for each of the forms applied:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Number of teachers</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>3,288</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>3,911</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>4,069</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2+</td>
<td>1,966</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13,234</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Conclusion

The first pilot tests of English as foreign language in Colombia, aligned to the CEFR, were taken in November 2005 and February 2006 involving more than 5,000 students. Cambridge ESOL conducted the analysis of performance and the results have been used by MEN and ICFES to inform on standards, to benchmark the performance of foreign language education against international standards and to adapt policy so as to progress towards the achievement of those standards. In 2007, new national English examinations were introduced in Colombia in line with the new CEFR standard. Cambridge ESOL designed the English component of the Colombian state sector exams and developed the early test versions. These are now produced locally following capacity-building in Colombia. Today, Colombia has its own capacity and know-how with a team of Colombian item writers to build its own tests, under the Cambridge ESOL format, totally linked to the CEFR standards. These tests are delivered to approaching a million students annually.

This case study illustrates a highly successful collaboration with mutual benefits for ICFES and Cambridge ESOL. Both organisations view the 4-year project as a major learning and development opportunity that has spanned a wide area of activity, enabling ICFES to produce tests with results linked to the CEFR, and Cambridge ESOL to further develop expertise that can be utilised for other state projects into the future.

References and further reading


