



## Is English the key to access the wonders of the modern world? A Critical Discourse Analysis

The spread of English in the world today is not only the result of colonizing campaigns (Canagarajah, 1999, 2005; Pennycook, 1994a, 1998a, 2000; Phillipson, 1992, 2000) but also of the compliance of the governments associated with the “expanding circle” (Kachru, 1986). Colombia is a good example of this phenomenon, because its national government is implementing a National Bilingualism Project (PNB) where there is an explicit interest in the promotion of English over all other languages spoken in the country. This article is a critical discourse analysis of the handbook that sets the standards for competences in English. The analysis of data follows Fairclough’s textual analysis and shows that the authors of the handbook perpetuate mainstream concepts about the symbolic power of English as the one and only necessary tool for academic and economic success.

**Key words:** Access, imagined communities, symbolic capital, linguistic capital, CDA.

**Search Tags:** Critical discourse analysis. English language. Intellectual capital.

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### Origen del artículo

Este artículo es parte de un trabajo investigativo más amplio que desarrolló la autora usando la metodología propuesta por Norman Fairclough para un Análisis Crítico del Discurso del documento *Estándares Básicos de Lenguas Extranjeras: Inglés. El reto*, publicado por el Ministerio de Educación Nacional en el 2006, como parte del Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo. El resultado completo del análisis está publicado en la Universidad de Arizona como disertación doctoral; el título es *National Standards for the Teaching of English in Colombia: A Critical Discourse Analysis*. Esta investigación surge de la necesidad de contribuir a la discusión iniciada por un gran número de académicos colombianos que cuestionan algunos puntos del Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo del Ministerio de Educación Nacional.

## ¿Es el inglés la clave para acceder a las maravillas del mundo moderno? Un análisis crítico del discurso

La difusión del inglés en el mundo de hoy es el resultado no solo de las campañas de colonización (Canagarajah, 1999, 2005; Pennycook, 1994a, 1998a, 2000; Phillipson, 1992, 2000) sino también del cumplimiento de la tarea de los gobiernos involucrados en el “círculo de expansión” (Kachru, 1986). Colombia es un buen ejemplo de este fenómeno puesto que el gobierno nacional está desarrollando un Proyecto Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB) cuyo interés explícito es la promoción del inglés por encima de todas las demás lenguas que se hablan en el país. El presente artículo es un análisis crítico del discurso expuesto en el documento en el que se establecen los estándares de competencia en lengua inglesa. Para el análisis de los datos se siguió el modelo de análisis textual de Fairclough; el ejercicio muestra que los autores del documento perpetúan conceptos dominantes sobre el poder simbólico del inglés como herramienta única y necesaria para el éxito académico y económico.

**Palabras claves:** acceso, comunidades imaginadas, capital simbólico, capital lingüístico, CDA

**Descriptores:** Análisis del discurso crítico. Inglés. Capital intelectual.

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# Is English the key to access the wonders of the modern world?

## A Critical Discourse Analysis

### Introduction

One of the prevalent discourses in the spread of English is that it gives unlimited access to the wonders of the modern world as science, technology, money, power, international communication, intercultural understanding, entertainment, and so on and so forth (Crystal, 2000; Nunan, 2001). This is only one side of the coin, because not everybody enjoys these benefits of speaking English and not everybody has access to acquire it. Nevertheless, the discourses that present English as bringing only benefits has been distributed and continues circulating thanks to those who hold power (Foucault, 2005).

This article intends to challenge those discourses by a presenting a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the document *Basic standards for competences in foreign languages: English. Teach in foreign languages: the challenge*<sup>1</sup> herein “Estándares” a publication made by the Minis-

try of Education (MEN) within its *Plan Nacional de Bilingüismo (PNB)* (National Bilingualism Project). The addressees of this document are school teachers, from elementary school to high school; and it describes some theoretical aspects of the policy, why teaching English is important, what the standards to be attained are, and how to do it.

The Ministry of Education through its “Estándares,” as an official institution that holds power, contributes to the construction of English as a key to access unlimited benefits, all of which can be eventually converted into economic profits (Bourdieu, 1986). Access to economic power is then an overarching framework in which the other forms of access feed into: Access to an imagined community of English speakers, access to equity in the distribution of social goods, and access to knowledge. In what follows, I will discuss each one of these forms of access and illustrate them with textual examples from the handbook.

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<sup>1</sup> *Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés. Formar en lenguas extranjeras, el reto.* Free translation by the author.

## Methodology

The analysis of data was illuminated by CDA, specifically the methodology of textual analysis proposed by Fairclough (1995, 2001, and 2003). This approach aims at bridging a gap between discourse analysis inspired by social theory on the one hand, and pure linguistic analysis on the other. Fairclough (2003) draws from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) proposed by Halliday (1974; 1994) but introduces a more explicit social element and proposes three functions of language: *identity*, *relational* and *ideational*. To unpack how these functions are enacted in discourse, Fairclough (2001) designed a methodology that consists of three stages: *Description*, *interpretation*, and *explanation*. *Description* deals with the linguistic analysis divided in three broad categories (vocabulary, grammar and text structures) accompanied by questions that aim at finding fine-grained explanations of how the language choices presented in the text resemble or contest particular ideology/ies. For the present study, in this first stage I examined the language, after an intensive reading of the document, I selected pieces of the text to conduct a fine grained analysis of the choices made by the authors of the “Estándares”. The second stage presented by Fairclough is *interpretation*, and it has to do with an analysis of the text in its relationship with other texts, other discourses, and the background in which it is produced and will be interpreted. This stage of the analysis brings together the formal features of the text and combines it with the analyst’s own set of beliefs, assumptions, experiences and background to unveil the meaning of the texts. It is in this stage of the analysis where I used other texts produced within the frame of the National Bilingualism Plan to inform and strengthen my interpretation of data. *Explanation* is the third stage proposed by Fairclough, and it is concerned with the analysis of the relationship between texts and the social context to explain how a text can reproduce or contest social structures, especially with regard to struggles over power. For this study, this third

stage was informed by official documents about economic, social, cultural and political issues that were taken place at the moment of the publication of the “Estándares”. These three levels of analysis complement each other and allow the researcher to unpack ideologies that are not apparent to the consumers of these texts.

The primary data source is the handbook aforementioned *Basic standards for competences in foreign languages: English. Teach in foreign languages: the challenge*<sup>2</sup>. This document is intended as a guideline for teachers of English in elementary and secondary schools of the public sector (from first grade to eleventh), and it is available both in print and online in the Ministry of Education web site: [www.mineduacion.gov.co](http://www.mineduacion.gov.co).

Given the high interpretative nature of CDA, intertextually becomes a very useful way of strengthen the analysis of data; for this reason, a great number of printed texts were used as secondary data sources. It is important to say that all texts are of public access; among them there are open letters, power point presentations posted on line by the Ministry of Education, nationally recognized newspaper articles, widely used EFL/ESL textbooks, decrees produced by Bogota City Hall, and other documents published by reliable sources.

## Results

This article is part of a larger study in which aspects such as the concept of bilingualism and the images of EFL Colombian teachers presented in the “Estándares” were explored. Here, only one part of the study will be presented and it has to do with the portrayal of English as the language that gives access to the wonders of the modern world. While this might be true for some, it is also a distant and unreachable goal

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2. *Estándares básicos de competencias en lenguas extranjeras: Inglés. Formar en lenguas extranjeras, el reto.* Free translation by the author.

for many. What the analysis of data shows is that English is presented as given automatic and unlimited access to economic profits, which in turns grants access to an imagined community, to equality, and to knowledge.

### Access to economic profits

Being bilingual is essential in the globalized world (Estandares, p. 5)<sup>3</sup>.

This quote, which opens the body of the “Estándares,” leaves many questions unanswered: for whom?, what for?, why? In the circulating discourse about why it is important to speak English, the economic benefits it brings along prevails to the point of equating not to being able to speak English with being illiterate in the global world (Vélez-Rendón, 2003). The economic interest of the institutions, agencies, and nations that provide the service of spreading English over the world is hidden, though. English is a multimillion dollar business for the inner circle countries (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1998), but that fact is never made evident in the campaigns to spread English around the world, rather the discourses on the importance of the spread of English are related to globalization, international communication, publications, competitiveness, and others of the like (Francis & Ryan, 1998; McKay, 2003; Romaine, 2000; Shohamy, 2006; Vargas Tejada *et al*, Warschauer, 2000)

Hiding their own economic interest grants international agencies like the British Council the symbolic capital they need to exert symbolic power. For example, in Colombia, the whole PNB is coordinated by the BC and all the services (such as teachers’ training programs, English courses for teachers, proficiency tests, textbooks, audio and videos, and other materials) are supplied by them. In an invitation letter sent to certain Colombian scholars, the MEN explicitly stated the relevant role of the British Council in the project and their interest to strengthen the master of English as a second language in Colombia (See table 1, pag. 309).

In an opposite fashion, the economic benefits of learning English are overtly expressed in various documents whose arguments are social mobility, job promotions, job opportunities, and in general a better economic future; these documents antecede, proceed and surround the “Estándares” and the implementation of the PNB (See table 2, pag. 310).

The only explicit claim about the economic relevance of learning English is in the following quote:

[English] offers greater working opportunities. (“Estándares”, p. 9) <sup>4</sup>.

From an oversimplified perspective, the Ministry of Education (MEN) perpetuates the belief that speaking English is enough to have better jobs and therefore better economic provisions in the globalized world; it is promoted as the “credit card to success” (London, 2001, 403). They imply that speaking English is the only form of (cultural/linguistic) capital needed to succeed while at the same time obscure the fact that other qualifications are needed (plus social and economic capital) to compete for jobs, especially within the globalized world where the competence is under unequal conditions.

Guided by the promise of a better future, students demand education in English (Francis & Ryan, 1998; Niño-Murcia, 2003; Ramanathan, 1999), but in fact, most of them will be kept away from these opportunities because of multiple factors. In Latin America, one of the strongest motivations people have to learn English is to migrate to the United States (Francis & Ryan, 1998; Niño-Murcia, 2003; Vélez-Rendón, 2003) to search for job opportunities in order to improve their economic situation and send money back to their families in their home countries. In Colombia, the reason to migrate is strongly attached to high indices of unemployment and to low salaries; in the new century, the profile

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3. *Ser bilingüe es esencial en el mundo globalizado*. Free translation by the author.
4. *[El inglés] Ofrece mayores oportunidades laborales*. Free translation by the author.

of migrants has extended to include middle and upper class Colombians whose reason to migrate responds to the political and economic instability of the country (Díaz, 2006).

The former group, which is a low income population, is at a disadvantage to apply for and obtain a visa because they lack the social capital (of the right sort) and the economic capital; speaking English, rather than incorporating them to the world of money and power, keeps them excluded and marginalized.

For people who stay in the country, the economic profit associated with English is an illusion too, and it can be particularly reflected in the current situation of local English teachers. The example mentioned by Pennycook (1998) in relation to house privileges for Britain born English teachers in Hong Kong is not extraneous to what happens in Colombia, where certain high profile bilingual schools in Bogota pay for the housing of their English teachers who are native speakers of English, in addition to their salaries. De Mejía (2005) found that in Colombia, English teachers can be categorized in three groups: A privileged group of teachers who are contracted in the United States or Great Britain, another group of teachers who are native of these countries but live in Colombia, and a third group of local teachers.

This categorization responds not only to the origin and place of living, but mainly to the working and salary conditions among these three groups, where the lower salaries are assigned to national teachers. It seems that the prevailing ideology shared by administrators and parents alike, is that it is more important to speak English native-like than having the qualifications to teach it. The evidence is that in many institutions, native speakers of English, who do not have any further qualifications, are hired as English teachers or as coordinators of language programs (De Mejía, 2005; Vélez-Rendón, 2003). As a consequence, lower working conditions and salaries for local teachers is as an indication of the construct of superiority-inferiority NS-NNS (Pennycook, 1998) and perpetuates the “mentality of underdevelop-

ment, in that foreign staff are considered the principal purveyors of new ideas and methodologies” (De Mejía, 2005: 32).

This example of the current situation of local English teachers helps to foresee the economic and employment future of a wide sector of the Colombian population who, for whatever reason, will not be able to attain the standards, considering that speaking English is set to become a criteria in selecting employees and giving them promotions and salary raises. The already disadvantaged population will be kept at disadvantage so English will be their “fool’s gold”.

### Access an **imagined** community

To explain this category, I draw from Anderson’s (2006) imagined communities and Gee’s (2005) notion that one important function of language is to support human affiliation. Anderson coined the term *imagined community* to offer a definition of *nation*, and explains it in the following way: “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6, italics in original), and further he explains why community: “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 7). Putting these two ideas together gives, as a result, that the inhabitants of the world who share an affiliation by speaking English are members of an imagined community that resides in the global village. The comradeship characteristic is enhanced by all the advantages ascribed to English, so by default, all members are afforded such advantages.

The main goal of the MEN through its PNB is to foster the learning of English in Colombia so that the country can become part of (belong to) the global village:

The National Bilingual Program aims to “ensure that citizens are able to communicate

in English, so they can insert the country into the universal communication processes in the global economy and cultural opening with comparable international standards. (“Estándares” p. 6)<sup>5</sup>.

Two main assumptions can be drawn from this excerpt. First, if Colombians are able to speak English automatically, they “belong” to the imagined community of English speakers that enjoy the benefits attached to that language. These benefits translate mainly into economic profits; interpreted in the light of Bourdieu’s concept of convertibility of capital (1986), this means that by acquiring the linguistic capital of a highly valued language in the linguistic market (English), Colombians will have better jobs and opportunities for social mobility.

The second assumption stems from the first, and this is that as the result of adding up the individual profit, Colombia will belong to the international community with the same status as that of the first world countries. The authors of the standards overrate the role of English in the development of the country and point to it as the sole element that will bring progress to our nation; the statement above is a cause effect construction that presents the insertion of the country in the global economy as a natural consequence of the ability of its citizens to communicate in English, when clearly other elements are necessary to do so (Bourdieu, 1986; Cárdenas, 2008; Niño Murcia, 2003). In order to belong to the elite nations of the world and to be recognized as one, multiple and complex elements need to be in play, not only promoting the learning of English among the citizens.

This type of discourse has an impact on people’s perceptions about the importance and reasons to learn English in Colombia. After the project “Bogotá bilingüe en diez años” was sanctioned, one of the members of the City Council stated that speaking English would be an advantage for anybody once the free trade agreement, TLC (*Tratado de Libre Comercio*),

was signed with the United States (ElTiempo.com, 2006), implying that the TLC would bring progress and job opportunities to Colombians. Unfortunately, advocates of free trade agreements fail to realize that Colombia does not have the infrastructure, policies, logistics, and resources to compete in an open market. According to Romero (2006), free trade agreements are sophisms aimed at distracting the attention over the fact of the unequal exchange of goods between powerful countries and third world countries like Colombia. In this sense, it would be utopian to consider that adopting English as a foreign language in Colombia will “insert” us in the global economy.

The aspiration of the Ministry of Education (MEN) for Colombia to belong to this imagined community finds a fertile ground in the same hope of some Colombian students. Within the English classroom, students are constructed as “the other” through the content of textbooks and teaching methodologies because they do not see themselves represented in any way (Canagarajah, 1999; Ducar, 2006; Pennycook, 1994a; Valencia-Giraldo, 2006); this fact might motivate students to long to belong to the imagined community of speakers of English. The same desire is fostered by the “Estándares” as seen in the following excerpt, but very likely, it is deceiving:

I seek opportunities to use what I know in English. (“Estándares”, Monólogos, p. 21)<sup>6</sup>.

What is a mandate for every schooled individual in Colombia can be actualized by only

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5. *El Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo se orienta a “lograr ciudadanos y ciudadanas capaces de comunicarse en inglés, de tal forma que puedan insertar al país en los procesos de comunicación universal, en la economía global y en la apertura cultural con estándares internacionalmente comparables”.* Free translation by the author.
6. *Busco oportunidades para usar lo que sé en inglés.* Free translation by the author.

a small percentage of people who belong to a privileged socio-economic status (Velez-Rendón, 2003) and have the cultural, social and economic capital to look for those opportunities outside the school and enjoy, by internet access, exchange programs with the United States or Great Britain. This group constitutes the exception, while the norm is that in the Colombian context, the majority of students do not have the occasion to practice English outside the school; in fact, within the school, these opportunities are limited because the surroundings are highly monolingual in Spanish. The MEN is aware of this situation, as seen in the next excerpt, but undermines it and does not state whose responsibility it is to overcome the problem:

We know that in many institutions in the country, the classroom and school environment are the only spaces available for the use of English and that students' exposure to the language is limited. These conditions pose a great challenge to maximize all the opportunities that are available. ("Estándares", p. 31) <sup>7</sup>.

This excerpt has two main sentences which differ greatly in terms of accountability. The first one is stated using first person plural *Sabemos* (we know), indicating the authors' awareness of a limitation (who represent the official voice of the MEN), though not assuming any responsibility in the fact; this type of structure masks a reality by presenting it as a natural event and not as something motivated by previous actions. The classroom is the only available setting to practice English because Colombia is mainly a Spanish monolingual country. This state of being did not happen by accident but by the language policies implemented since colonization and it has prevailed over the years and has been motivated by a monolingual/nationalist ideology (Mar-Molinero, 2000). There is not enough time to practice because the Ministry of Education has not made any provisions to implement a project like the PNB, as it did not made any provisions for its previous project, Law 115 in 1994<sup>8</sup>, where the teaching of at

least one foreign language in elementary school was mandatory, despite the fact that elementary school teachers did not know English nor how to teach it.

In the second part of the excerpt, there is an abrupt change because the first person plural is no longer included; instead, the sentence starts with *Estas condiciones* (these conditions). In doing so, the authors distance themselves from being the sources of the challenge, and they stick to their assumption that the current state of schools in Colombia is a natural happening and that nobody, not even the official institutions, are to be blame. Additionally, the sentence does not have an agent who would carry out the action; it is not explicitly stated whose responsibility it is to take advantage of the limited opportunities afforded to the students, but it could be assumed that it is a shared task between teachers and students, since the authors of the "Estándares" are not including themselves in the solution to the problem.

As a result, belonging to the imagined community of English is feasible for a few but an illusion for most students; it can create a local inner-outer dichotomy between those who might have access and those who do not (Ramanathan, 1999). It is necessary to consider, though, that even for those who can have the forms of capital to become members of this desired community, the experience of "belonging" is not automatically granted. It might be influenced by factors such as the nativeness/non-

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7. *Sabemos que en muchas instituciones del país, el aula y el entorno escolar son los únicos espacios disponibles para el uso del inglés y que el tiempo de contacto de los estudiantes con el idioma es limitado. Estas condiciones plantean el gran desafío de aprovechar al máximo todas las oportunidades que se tengan al alcance.* Free translation by the author.

8. Law 115, 1994 states the mandatory teaching of a foreign language in public elementary schools. Although this Law does not explicitly state that the foreign language is English, that is a common assumption (Valencia-Giraldo, n/d) and all public Colombian schools have adopted English. Unfortunately this still is a problem for elementary school teachers because they have not had the preparation to teach English and it is a constant struggle for them to comply with the requirements of the Ministry of Education.

nativeness ideology. It should not be generalized that by not being native speakers students will be automatically excluded as it should not be generalized that they will be automatically included. It all varies and depends on multilayered factors, too. More research is needed to document this aspect, but Cárdenas (1994) reports some cases of people feeling excluded or discriminated in Great Britain due to the variety of English they speak.

### Access to equality

The ways in which British colonization took place in India (Canagarajah, 1999) and Hong Kong (Pennycook, 1998) in relation to the status of English present some similarities with the PNB in Colombia. For one, English is associated with power, learning, science and civilization; at the same time English is promoted as the language of equity, but in fact, it contributes to the delivery and perpetuation of privilege and inequality because it favors the advantaged groups who have access to the right sort of linguistic capital.

As seen in the following excerpt, the authors of the “Estándares” state that one of the assets of speaking English is that it allows students to compete for scholarships offered abroad:

[English] gives access to scholarships and internships abroad. It is very important that young Colombians take advantage of the equal educational opportunities being offered abroad, and which require specific performance levels in English. (“Estándares” p. 9)<sup>10</sup>.

The subject/doer of the action in the first sentence of this example is English; it acquires the characteristics of an animated being capable of performing actions, in this case, giving access to scholarships and internships. The sentence suggests that the only necessary qualification is English (Niño-Murcia, 2003), but any person who have gone through the process of applying for a scholarship in Colombia knows that this is far from truth. Being intellectually and profession-

ally competent is also necessary; additionally, in order to obtain all the documentation required, including preparing for and taking international language tests and other exams, people need a social network and money.

On the other hand, this first statement is categorical in the sense that it excludes the possibility that any other foreign language can give access to scholarships and internships as well. English speaking countries are not the only ones that offer these opportunities; there are programs all around the world, even within South America and Spain, so Colombians would not need to learn a foreign language. To this date (July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2008), according to the information found in the ICETEX (Instituto Colombiano de Crédito y Estudios Técnicos en el Exterior) there are sixty-one scholarship offers (see table 3, pag. 311), and although English can be a plus, it is not necessarily the language in which students will be tested and taught.

In the second sentence of the example above it is assumed that English will give students the opportunity to compete under the same conditions (*en igualdad de condiciones*). This is another problematic statement because given that standardized tests are used to select students for scholarship programs, these are, in most cases, unfairly constructed in the sense that only a certain type of knowledge is valued and therefore included and tested. For this reason, it is not possible to talk about “equal” conditions, because they do not exist.

The discourse of equality has influenced language policy decisions under the premise that speaking English gives equal opportunities particularly in the economic field, but this ideology blurs the recognition of the inequality to the access of ways to learn English. There is a big

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10. [El Inglés] Permite el acceso a becas y pasantías fuera del país. Es muy importante que los jóvenes colombianos puedan aprovechar, en igualdad de condiciones, las oportunidades educativas que se ofrecen en el exterior y que requieren niveles de desempeño específico en inglés. Free translation by the author.



difference between attending public under-funded and overcrowded schools and attending elite private schools (Tollefson, 2000), and Colombia is not an exception. Some elite private bilingual schools offer intensive English classes (between eight to twenty hours per week) and others offer content instruction in both English and Spanish (De Mejía, 2005). On the contrary, adding to the lack of qualified teachers, there is little or no time assigned to teach English (Cárdenas, 2006), as acknowledged by the MEN in its “Estándares”:

In primary education, some institutions have one hour per week to teach English, and there are others which have not yet assigned time. (“Estándares”, p. 31) <sup>11</sup>.

In High School, the teaching of English has an average of two to four hours per week. (“Estándares”, p. 31) <sup>12</sup>.

Nevertheless the authors of the “Estándares” claim:

The time allotted is enough to reach the standards, and therefore it is crucial to maximize class time by proposing appropriate educational activities and using multiple resources that meet students’ needs and the objectives proposed by the teachers. Likewise, we recommend exploring all the possibilities offered by the world today, using media, music and internet, among others, that are close to the younger population.<sup>13</sup> (“Estándares”, p. 31).

The first statement in the first example above shows the lack of knowledge the MEN has about the L2 teaching-learning process as well as the Colombian public education context. In relation to the former one, it is impossible to learn an L2 without having any sort of contact with it. So, if children in elementary school are to attain a Basic I proficiency level (A 2.1 in the European Framework terminology), as shown in table 4 (pag. 311), the MEN needs to make provisions to make that happen in terms of allotting time, educating

teachers, and equipping schools, among others. Otherwise, the very same MEN is promoting and perpetuating inequality by restricting the access to the linguistic capital of English. The same is true in secondary education; while public schools have two to three hours per week, private schools have double or triple that time.

Given the strategic alliances of the education sector with the economic sector in Colombia to pursue this bilingual project, in which one of their objectives is to use proficiency in English as a criteria for job selection and promotion in table 5 (pag. 313), for these children, English will not be a key to equality but rather to inequality because it will become a gatekeeper that determines who can have access to certain types of employment and economic future and who will not.

As such, the structure of the PNB, particularly in the establishment of the standards to be attained by Colombian students and the misconceptions in which it is founded, is set to make an unequal distribution of English language to the nationals.

The second part of the excerpt shows again the lack of knowledge of the authors of the “Estándares” regarding availability of resources in public schools. To mention just two that directly influence the unattainability of the goals of the PNB, Colombian public schools have overcrowded classrooms where there are fifty or more students

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11. *En la Educación Básica Primaria, algunas instituciones cuentan con una hora semanal para la enseñanza del inglés y también hay otras en las cuales todavía no se le asigna tiempo.* Free translation by the author.
12. *En la Escuela Secundaria y en la Media, la enseñanza del inglés cuenta con un promedio de dos a cuatro horas semanales.* Free translation by the author.
13. *Esta intensidad horaria permite alcanzar los estándares y, por ello, es crucial aprovechar al máximo el tiempo de clase proponiendo actividades pedagógicas adecuadas y valiéndose de múltiples recursos que respondan a las necesidades de los estudiantes y a los objetivos propuestos por los docentes. Así mismo, recomendamos explorar todas las posibilidades que ofrece el mundo de hoy, utilizando los medios de comunicación, la música y la internet, entre otros, que resultan tan cercanos a la población más joven.* Free translation by the author.

per classroom (Ayala & Alvarez, 2005; Cárdenas, 2005; Castaño, 2008). This situation makes it very difficult for teachers to maximize the time in order to produce the results expected by the MEN. Furthermore, claiming that the internet is accessible to all Colombian students is a fallacy because the internet coverage in Colombia is very limited, and public schools are not an exception.

In 1996-1997, the MEN run their *Programa nacional de bilingüismo y nuevas tecnologías* (National New Technology and bilingual program) (De Mejía, 2005) and set up 1500 computer classrooms in the country connected to the internet. The reality is that some of these classrooms were never used because teachers were afraid that students could break the computers; others had limited use due to the overpopulation of students or because there was not internet access at all (Cárdenas & Nieto, 2003).

### Access to knowledge

There has been a mismatched ideology between people who want to acquire knowledge (pursue a professional career) and the institutions that offer and certify it. The latter are, generally, motivated by the convertibility of their cultural capital into economic capital. Parents insist that their children study a career that will provide for them a good monetary situation; in this case, the economic interest is overt. Educational institutions, on the other hand, give relevance to knowledge for the sake of knowledge and not for the possibility to convert it into money, so education is seen as a non-lucrative service (Zapata, 2007). When educational institutions exhibit any type of link with economic or monetary activities, they are strongly judged because they are failing their philosophy and are serving the interest of the capitalist world (Fairclough, 1995; McLaren, 1995).

Since the MEN represents and rules the education system in Colombia, it has to comply with the expectations and beliefs of Colombians in relation to the nature and purpose of schools and universities in the country. Traditionally education

has been seen mainly as a service, not as a business and it is not appropriate for the MEN to overtly present it as such. This explains the obscurity in presenting the economic advantages of English and hiding it through other benefits associated to the language like access to knowledge. In the following excerpt, the categorical syllogism logic of the authors of the “Estándares” to fulfill their purpose can be analyzed in the light of Toulmin’s model of Grounds, Backing, Warrants, and Claims (van Eemeren *et al.*, 1997):

The world is characterized by intercultural communication, by the increasing pace of scientific and technological advances and internationalization process. These circumstances raise the need for a common language that allows the international society access to this new globalized world.

Education enables human development and provides answers to the people that make up the society at various points in history. Particularly in Colombia, the General Education Law establishes as one of its purposes “the study and critical understanding of national culture and ethnic and cultural diversity of the country as the basis for national unity and identity.” The same law sets targets for Basic Education and the Media “The acquisition of elements of conversation and reading at least one foreign language” and “Understanding and ability to speak in a foreign language.”

Taking into account these rules and making use of their autonomy, the Colombian educational institutions have chosen to offer their students the opportunity to learn English as a foreign language, thus providing a useful tool intended to enable children and young people greater access to the world today. This is confirmed by data provided by ICFES regarding the evidence of 2004, in which ninety-nine percent of the students selected English in the state examination. (“Estándares”, p. 7)<sup>14</sup>.

.....  
14. *El mundo actual se caracteriza por la comunicación intercultural, por el creciente ritmo de los avances científicos y tecnológicos y por los procesos de internacio-*

The grounds are the premises that support a claim. In the example above, the authors weave their arguments to justify the choice of English as the language to be adopted in Colombia. The grounds of the text are as follows: 1) The modern world is characterized by intercultural communication, scientific and technological advancement; 2) Education allows people to perform according to the needs of their time. The Warrants are 1) Colombian Educational Law establishes the importance of education; 2) One paramount aspect of education is the ability to use a foreign language. The Backing of the Warrants in this case is the following: 1) the characteristics of the modern world demand the use of a common language. The claim is that the foreign and common language has to be English; finally, there is an additional backing to the claim, stating that institutions, in behalf of their autonomy, selected English, as motivated by students' foreign language choice in the national test, ICFES.

The deconstruction of the text using Toulmin's model unveils how the arguments are put together to unfold the connection between the production and consumption of knowledge, science, technology and culture, and English. From there, three sets of syllogisms can be identified as the origins of the content of example above and can be as follows: Syllogism 1) The modern world is characterized by culture, science and technology--> Culture, science and knowledge are spread through a common language--> The world needs a common language. Syllogism 2) The modern world needs a common language-->The common language is English--> The modern world needs English. And Syllogism 3) The modern world speaks English--> Colombia wants to belong to the modern world--> Colombia has to speak English. Building on that unfolding argument, the authors of the "Estándares" present as one of the advantages of speaking English the following:

[English] is a tool that allows access to knowledge to keep up with the ideas and the latest research at the international level. Speaking

English brings the student near to several areas of science and culture, management of new technologies and social and cultural interaction. ("Estándares", p. 9) <sup>15</sup>.

As seen in this excerpt, there is no mention of economic advantages attached to learning English. The justification for choosing English as the foreign language Colombians have to speak is related to a kind of enrichment bilingualism (Fishman, 1976a) whose purpose deals with cultural understanding, and in this particular case, access to knowledge, science, research, and technology. What seems as a legitimate and innocent incentive to promote the learning of a foreign language (English) is, in fact, a strategy to build on assumptions already constructed in other contexts. As seen in table 2 (pag. 310), the decision to impose English

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*nalización. Estas circunstancias plantean la necesidad de un idioma común que le permita a la sociedad internacional acceder a este nuevo mundo globalizado. La educación permite el desarrollo humano y ofrece respuestas a los ciudadanos que conforman la sociedad, en los diversos momentos de la historia. Particularmente en Colombia, la Ley General de Educación establece como uno de sus fines "El estudio y la comprensión crítica de la cultura nacional y e la diversidad étnica y cultural del país, como fundamento de la unidad nacional y de su identidad". En la misma ley se fijan como objetivos de la Educación Básica y Media "La adquisición de elementos de conversación y de lectura, al menos en una lengua extranjera" y "La comprensión y capacidad de expresarse en una lengua extranjera". Teniendo en cuenta esta reglamentación y haciendo uso de su autonomía, las instituciones educativas colombianas han optado por ofrecer a sus estudiantes la oportunidad de aprender el inglés como lengua extranjera. Con ello pretenden brindar una herramienta útil que permita a niños, niñas, y jóvenes mayor acceso al mundo de hoy. Este hecho se ve confirmado por los datos suministrados por el icfes respecto a las pruebas del 2004, según los cuales el noventa y nueve por ciento de los estudiantes seleccionaron el inglés en el examen de estado. Free translation by the author.*

15. *[El inglés] [e]s una herramienta que permite el acceso al conocimiento para estar al día con las ideas y con las investigaciones más recientes a nivel internacional. Saber inglés acerca al estudiante a diversas áreas de la ciencia y la cultura, al manejo de nuevas tecnologías y a la interacción social y cultural. Free translation by the author.*

in Colombia stems from mere economic interests led by the logic that if Colombia wants to have better economy, it needs to participate actively in the consumption of knowledge and that English is the currency that makes it possible.

The statements in the example above are categorical: English is the language that gives access to knowledge. In a very ethnocentric fashion (discussed below), the only valued knowledge is the one produced (and spread) in English. The implication that all the great philosophers, scientists, writers, and scholars have to be read in English denies students the possibility of approaching the great thinkers of humanity in their native languages. A vicious circle is being created: everything needs to be translated into English because that is the language people speak, and people learn English because everything is produced in English.

Along with the categorical high status of English, Spanish is undervalued because despite the fact that it is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, it is not enough for Colombians to access knowledge. This attitude is reflected in the unequal allocation of resources and efforts to promote the improvement of the teaching of the two languages; while English is the object of international agreements, investment in textbooks, proficiency tests, teacher preparation courses, national campaigns, and so on, Spanish does not receive the same attention (Cárdenas, 2003; Valencia-Giraldo, n/d), despite the high figures of illiteracy in the country. As a result, the access to knowledge is a farther possibility for a great number of Colombians.

On the other hand, the assumption that speaking English functions as a democratic instrument that makes knowledge, technology, science and culture available to anyone is not completely the truth, at least not for everyone. In India, during the colonization, English was imposed as the official language under the premise that it would open to Indians the world of British literature and the universities in Europe; the result was that for some it never became a reality because poverty and customs prevented them

from profiting from this opportunity (Pennycook, 1998). In Colombia, the economic, political, social, and cultural situations suffer profound inequalities that cannot be solved by demanding that everybody speaks English to have access to development. A project like “Colombia bilingüe en diez años” will contribute to increase the already unfair distribution of goods in our society.

## Conclusions

In the document analyzed here “Estandares”, English is presented as a key that gives access to wonderland, meaning economic profits. In a rather naïve perspective, the MEN places English as the magic formula that will solve our economic, social, cultural, and political problems; speaking English grants us “access” to the wide range of advantages associated to this language. Within my analysis, I found that the forms of access that could be inferred from the “Estándares” were strongly related to the convertibility of cultural and social capital into economic capital as described by Bourdieu (1986).

Despite the fact that, at least in theory, the objective of the MEN is to legislate for everyone in Colombia, and part of the justification to launch the PNB was to give equal opportunities to less privileged (or underprivileged) groups, as I have shown throughout the analysis of data, the result is quite the opposite. While there is a pretended equality in the discourse where standards are the same for everybody, and based on them the evaluation criteria will be the established the truth is that “equality” is a mirage.

One of the strategies used to perpetuate views of the world is to rely on previous discourses and on assumptions. One such common assumption is that of fairness defined as giving everybody the same, and if everybody is equal then there is no question that in order to maintain equality there must not be a differentiated distribution of goods. From a critical perspective, the definition of fairness is quite different; it means to give each one what they need. This simple definition unfolds

a many situations in which it is easy to spot the working of marginalization disguised in the discourse of equality.

Spreading the idea that all Colombians have access to a good quality of education along with a good environment to learn English is a big fallacy, as discussed above. Taking that for granted, and from there constructing the rest of the discourses that exalt the virtues of English, generates different expectations that might become true for a few but impossible for most.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to counter these discourses because they circulate in different fields of the society, so the more it circulates, the stronger it becomes and then becomes true (like the short story written by Garcia Marquez titled "Algo terrible va a suceder en este pueblo). The discourse of access given by English has become so true that a lot of people, from academics to the security guards of an apartment complex, utter it with absolute certainty; there is no interrogation about the validity of that statement, and whoever questions it might be out of their minds.

Those who propitiate the circulation of this discourse forget (voluntarily?) that if it is true that English is indeed a good asset to obtain certain benefits and to be able to participate of certain profits, it is not the only and necessary condition to do so. Simply speaking English is not enough; other forms of cultural capital are necessary (other qualifications certified by an institution like diplomas or degrees): social capital (belong to the right sort of social network) and economic capital. So although access seems available to all, there are a lot of constraints that make access unequal.

Summing up, in such a complex, competitive, rich, plurilingual, pluricultural world like the one we live in, it is very narcissist and egocentric to think that speaking an important language like English is the key to solve all our problems. But what is even worse, is that this narcissistic and egocentric thought is not of one individual but the thought of a governmental office, and it is imposed to a whole nation regardless of the potential consequences.

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See **tables** in next page

See **references** in page 314

## Tables

**Table 1:** Excerpt of the invitation letter sent by the MEN to validate the standards.

Para el cumplimiento de lo anterior, y atendiendo a lo establecido en el Plan Nacional de Desarrollo, el Ministerio de Educación Nacional iniciará en el año 2005 la generación de estándares básicos en inglés, su divulgación y promoción en las entidades territoriales y en las instituciones educativas. Para este proceso el Ministerio de Educación ha decidido celebrar un Convenio Especial de Cooperación con el Consejo Británico, previa las siguientes consideraciones: **1.** En el año de 1979 se firmó un Convenio Cultural -que sigue vigente- entre el Gobierno del Reino Unido de la Gran Bretaña e Irlanda del Norte y el Gobierno de la República de Colombia, el primero estará representado por la Misión Diplomática en Bogotá y por el British Council (Consejo Británico), entidad oficial encargada de llevar a cabo sus relaciones culturales y educativas. **2.** En el marco del Convenio, tanto EL MINISTERIO como el Consejo Británico han manifestado sus deseos de emprender acciones conjuntas a favor de la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés en la educación oficial del País, especialmente en el fortalecimiento de estrategias de mejoramiento en el manejo del idioma inglés de los alumnos, docentes y población en general. **3.** Se hace necesario implementar un programa Nacional que formule estándares de competencia para el área de inglés, que desarrolle evaluaciones de competencia en inglés en alumnos de primaria y secundaria y que adelante programas de formación para maestros encaminados a: **3.1.** Mejorar los resultados en cuanto al dominio del idioma en alumnos y docentes con referencia a los estándares que se formulen.... En esta línea, el convenio con el Consejo Británico busca fortalecer el dominio del idioma inglés como segunda lengua de los docentes y alumnos, a partir del diseño de estándares, evaluación sistemática del inglés en alumnos de primaria y secundaria y de programas de formación que se desarrollarán con referencia a los estándares definidos y a los resultados que arrojen la evaluaciones aplicadas.

### Translation for table 1

To accomplish this, and according to that established in the National Development Plan, the Ministry of Education in 2005 will initiate the creation of basic standards in English, its dissemination and promotion at local authorities and educational institutions. For this process, the Ministry of Education has decided to hold a Special Agreement of Cooperation with the British Council, upon the following considerations: **1.** In the year 1979, a Cultural Agreement which remains in force between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of Colombia was signed; the first is represented by the diplomatic mission in Bogota and the British Council (British Council), an official entity responsible for carrying out its educational and cultural relations. **2.** Under the Convention, both the Ministry and the British Council have expressed their desire to undertake joint action to promote the teaching and learning of English in formal education in the country, especially in strengthening strategies for improving the management of English of the students, teachers and general population. **3.** It becomes necessary to implement a national program to develop standards of competence for the area of English, to develop assessments of competence in English in elementary and secondary students and to bring forward teacher training programs aimed at 3.1. "Improved results in terms of language learners and teachers with reference to the standards that are formulated ...". In this vein, the agreement with the British Council aims to strengthen English as a Second Language for teachers and students as the result of standards, systematic evaluation of English in elementary and secondary students, and training programs that develop with reference to the standards defined and the results of the assessments used.

**Table 2:** Documents referring to the economic benefits of learning English in Colombia.

Document	Statement
ASCOPI Newsletter (October, 2003)	Objetivo: "Ante el mundo, Bogotá y Cundinamarca se destacaran por contar con personas más productivas. El dominio de un idioma diferente al Español, inicialmente el inglés, permitirá aumentar la competitividad de la región".
British Council Web Page (n/d)	De igual manera puede pensarse en implementar un Programa de certificación de Competencias Bilingües, mediante el cual los ciudadanos y ciudadanas bogotanos que llenen los requisitos establecidos en los estándares de la ciudad, adquieran una Certificación que les reconoce estos dominios y les sirve de garantía para efectos de su vinculación y movilidad laboral, complementando así los programas que adelanten las empresas.
Invitation letter sent by the MEN to validate the standards (April, 2005)	Dentro de la política de Mejoramiento de la Calidad de la Educación, El Ministerio de Educación Nacional ha impulsado estratégicamente la definición de estándares, la evaluación en las distintas áreas del conocimiento y la formulación de planes de mejoramiento institucional. Esta estrategia está orientada a lograr que los educandos obtengan mejores resultados en competencias básicas, laborales y valores ciudadanos.
Proyecto de acuerdo Bogotá bilingüe. Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá (Noviembre, 2006)	Se promoverán procesos colectivos que estimulen a personas productivas, a empresas de valor agregado e instituciones generadoras de confianza, mediante el fortalecimiento de los mercados, así como la democratización del acceso a las principales fuentes de ventajas como el conocimiento, la educación bilingüe, las tecnologías de información... Todo esto con el propósito de hacer posible la integración económica y social, la generación de empleo e ingresos y el logro progresivo de una sociedad más justa y equitativa.

**Translation for table 2.**

Document	Statement
ASOCOPI Newsletter (October, 2003)	Objective: "To the world, Bogota and Cundinamarca will be characterized as having more productive people. Mastery of a language other than Spanish, English being the first one, will enhance the competitiveness of the region ".
British Council Web Page (n/d)	Similarly we could implement a certification program for bilingual competence, through which citizens of Bogota who meet the requirements of the standards of the city, acquire a certification that recognizes these domains and use them to guarantee job mobility, as a complement to the recruiting programs of companies.
Invitation letter sent by the MEN to validate the standards (April, 2005)	Within the politics of Quality Improvement of Education, the MEN has strategically managed the definition of standards, the evaluation of many fields of knowledge and the creation of Institutional Improvement Plans. This strategy is design to ensure that students get better results on basic and work skills and civic values. (Free translation by the editor)
Project of the agreement "Bilingual Bogota". (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, November, 2006)	Collective processes that encourage productive people, value added business and institutions that create trust through the strengthening of markets or the democratization of the access to the main sources of knowledge, bilingual education and information technologies, are going to be promoted. All this with the purpose of making possible a social and economic integration, the creation of jobs and incomes and the progressive goal of a fair and equitative society. (Free translation by the editor)

**Table 3:** List of countries offering scholarships for Colombians

Country	Number of Scholarships	Country	Number of Scholarships
Colombia	1	Trinidad y Tobago	1
Mexico	6	Korea	1
Espana	7	Switzerland	1
Argentina	8	Panama	1
Honduras	1	India	9
Peru	3	Brazil	1
Guatemala	1	Costa Rica	1
Japan	11	Scotland	1
France	1	Iran	1
United States	1	Egypt	1

Taken from: ICETEX web page

See **Table 4** on next page.

**Table 5:** Project of the agreement "Bilingual Bogota in ten years", pag. 6

METAS A LARGO PLAZO
<p>Sector Empresarial</p> <p>El 80% de los trabajadores vinculados a los sectores promisorios de la Region estaran certificados en la competencia bilingue definida dentro del sistema de Certificacion de Competencias Laborales</p>

### Translation for table 5

LONG-TERM GOALS
<p>Business Sector</p> <p>80% of workers linked to the promising sectors of the region will be certified in the bilingual competence defined within the Certification of working competences.</p>



Table 4: Standards for elementary school



## Translation for table 4.

Chart 1:

1. I rely on my mother tongue to show understanding of what I read or hear
2. I speak English, using short words and short phrases to express my ideas and feelings about topics related to school or family.
3. I participate in conversations using a clear pronunciation and good intonation
4. I have started to structure my writings; I'm learning to read and write in my mother tongue. For this reason, my proficiency in English is lower.

Chart 2:

1. In this level
2. I understand short stories narrated in a simple language
3. I develop strategies that help me understand some words, expressions and sentences I read.
4. I understand basic language about family, friends, games and known places, if people speak slow and with a clear pronunciation

Chart 3:

1. In addition to what I learned in the previous level
2. I understand short texts, simple and with pictures about topics of the daily life, personal things and literature
3. I understand short stories or what my teacher says in class
4. I participate in short conversations using sentences with predictable structures

Chart 4:

1. I speak about myself, my classmates and our daily activities using simple sentences, logically chained and sometimes by memory. Still, it is difficult to talk about topics different from my family or school routine.
2. My pronunciation is understandable and I speak slowly
3. I write short simple texts about topics of my environment
4. My vocabulary is limited to known topics

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