

AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF BILINGUALISM ON  
MOBILITY, EMPLOYABILITY, AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE:  
THE COLOMBIAN CASE

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ABSTRACT

Research on bilingual education has looked mainly at the benefits bilingual programs offer learners with regard to cognition, education, and language. Fewer studies have explored the effect of bilingualism on mobility, employability, and intercultural competence, and even fewer have centered on these three dimensions at once. Considering the wide range of skills required to be a 21st-century global citizen, it is crucial to achieve a more balanced portrait of bilingualism. This study, part of a large-scale research project, seeks to contribute to expanding the body of research that examines mobility, employability, and intercultural competence together. A total of 417 participants living in Colombia filled out an online fourteen-item questionnaire and a background questionnaire designed by the members of the research project EDU2017-84800-R. Spearman correlations were computed between the three dimensions and a strong interrelation was revealed among the three of them. Data were analysed in terms of the differences between former bilingual education learners and mainstream learners as well as across gender. Statistical analyses revealed a strong interrelation among the three dimensions and higher scores for former bilinguals in all three dimensions. No differences across gender were identified. The findings support the crucial role of bilingual education in fostering the development of these three aspects in students' perception. The originality of the study lies in the fact that the study has former bilingual education learners as participants instead of students who were in receipt of bilingual education at the time of completing the questionnaire, which had usually been the case in previous studies.

Keywords: Bilingualism; mobility; employability; intercultural competence; Colombia.

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## 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of this century, bilingualism in Colombia has gradually become a priority at all levels of the education system, as has been thoroughly documented (de Mejía & Tejada 2002; de Mejía 2004, 2011; Jaramillo 2005; British Council 2015, 2018; Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez 2016; Martínez Rincón 2016; Gómez Sará 2017; Mora, Chiquito & Zapata 2019). As with bilingual education (hereafter BE) studies elsewhere (Bialystok 2010; Farrell 2010; Coyle 2013; Denman, Tanner & de Graaf 2013; Teubner-Rhodes et al. 2016; Fayyazi et al. 2017; Rad, Ahmadi & Gorbani 2020) in the Colombian context the debate has tended to be dominated by studies focused on cognitive, educational (Mariño 2014; Aguilar Cortés & Alzate B. 2015; Archilla & Truscott de Mejía 2020), and language issues (Herrán Barón 2015). In order to achieve a more balanced portrait of bilingualism, studies that focus on other issues bilingualism also affects significantly need to be carried out. This study was designed to examine the success of bilingual education in Colombia regarding mobility, employability, and intercultural competence from the viewpoint of those who had undergone bilingual education.

## 2. Bilingual education in Colombia

Colombia is a plurilingual and pluricultural country as a result of the interaction of peoples from the Mesoamerican, Caribbean, Amazonian, and Andean regions. Despite the absence of accurate, reliable data, however, Spanish, the official language, is incontrovertibly the first language for 99% of the population (Uribe-Jongbloed & Anderson 2014; Garzón-Díaz 2018). According to the British Council, about 4% of the population in Colombia speak English (British Council 2015). The perceived need to learn English made it the first option when choosing bilingual education, implying that several measures be adopted by the Ministry of Education.

Bilingualism was not new in Colombia, but had existed mostly in the private sector. Schools such as the International Baccalaureate schools, American-style schools, and British style schools have been teaching more than 50% of their academic subject matter in English for more than 40 years (de Mejía & Tejada 2003; McDougald 2015). The first attempt to implement bilingual programs in all schools across the country was the National Bilingualism Education Plan (2004–2019), which adopted the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) guidelines with the aim of establishing parameters tried and tested at an international level. The Ministry of Education (2006: 6) thus asserted that:

Colombian citizens will be able to communicate through English with internationally comparable standards. This will contribute to the insertion of the country in the processes of universal communication, the global economy and cultural openness.

The government went on to launch plans to regulate English language instruction in the country. The incorporation of bilingualism, however, was not homogeneous. Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) was first incorporated mostly in private schools and universities (Secretaría de Educación de Bogotá 2009; Garzón-Díaz 2018), and the gap between the private and the public sectors grew once more. According to data from the latest report by the OECD (2016), only 9% of Colombian university students come from weaker socio-economic backgrounds compared to 53% of those from affluent families.

As is acknowledged in the literature, this scenario is not exclusive to Colombia. Differences in social class also seem to have been part of the history of bilingualism elsewhere. In Spain and Germany, for example, in the first stages of the implementation of what we may call “bilingualism for all”, i.e., content and language integrated learning, parents may choose whether their children receive such an education. Parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds tended to opt for this for their children, whereas the rest of the students would remain in the mainstream track (Apsel 2012; Bruton 2013). This trend has, however, begun gradually to change over the last few years in Colombia and elsewhere. Garzón-Díaz (2018) contends that no child should be denied access to such teaching, referred to as “good teaching” by Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010) and Anderson, McDougald & Cuesta Medina (2015).

Although an analysis of the decisions taken by education authorities in Colombia falls outside the scope of this paper, it is imperative to note the concern of several researchers about the neglect of the other languages in Colombia (de Mejía 2004; Fandiño Parra, Bermúdez Jiménez & Bermúdez-Jiménez 2016; Mora, Chiquito & Zapata 2019). In this respect, Valencia (2005: 1) remarked:

This focus on Spanish/English bilingualism now predominates, and the other dimensions of multilingualism and cultural difference in Colombia are often ignored. The existence of other languages in different regions of the country is overlooked, particularly the languages of indigenous Colombian populations. The teaching of other modern languages (e.g. French...) has also been undermined by the spread of English,

The same view was echoed in Guerrero’s (2008: 38) detailed analysis of the *Basic Standards for Competences in Foreign Languages* document, issued by the Ministry of Education (MEN 2006) and the British Council to guide and promote the use of the English language in Colombia. Guerrero draws attention to the way

the preference of English over any other foreign languages is accounted for in one of the paragraphs (Guerrero 2008: 1):

Given its importance as a universal language, the Ministry of Education has established, as one of the core points of its educational policy, the improvement of the quality of English.

### 3. Mobility, employability, and intercultural competence

Coleman (2006: 4) affirms that “all education is influential”, and that influence may appear in many forms. The literature on bilingualism approaches the influence of bilingual programs on mobility, employability, and intercultural skills in different ways. This literature review will attempt to highlight a number of studies that are pertinent to the purposes of this paper.

We shall, however, specify what these three terms refer to in our work. Mobility refers to a person’s movement from one country to another in order to study or work (Yang 2017: 609). Consensus has not been easy to reach on the skills and personal attributes that make up employability. Yorke (2004: 410) provided a definition that includes the features present in most definitions of the term:

[...] a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.

In accordance with Byram, Gribkova & Starkey (2002: 10), we understand that being interculturally competent implies being able “to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and their ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality”.

Despite the long-standing interest in the relationship between bilingualism and mobility, employability, and intercultural competence, few studies have addressed them together. The only research, to our knowledge, to have done so is Gómez-Parra, Huertas-Abril & Espejo-Mohedano (2021). This work presents the results of the pilot study of the research undertaken within the framework of the project “Facing bilinguals: Study of the results of bilingual education programs through the massive collection and analysis of data extracted from social networks” (Ref. no. EDU-2017-84800R), which seeks to evaluate the impact of bilingual education by measuring mobility, employability, and intercultural competence across several countries. By means of a questionnaire, the study compared perceptions regarding these three aspects of 320 Spanish

undergraduate students who had participated in bilingual programs in primary, secondary, vocational, or higher education with those of 426 students from mainstream education. The results reveal higher scores for bilingual students in all three aspects.

Other scholars incorporating the three aspects in their work have dealt with theoretical conceptualizations. For example, Jäppinen (2005) referred to the potential of bilingualism to increase employability and mobility opportunities and to enhance intercultural competence skills in the theoretical framework for her study on the thinking and learning processes of the subjects of mathematics and science in a content and language integrated content (CLIL) context in Finland. Marsh (2002, 2012) also refers to the influence bilingualism has on the three aspects in his reports and analyses of the results of the incorporation of bilingual programs at all levels of education across Europe. In her review of bilingualism in Colombia and the difficulties encountered in its implementation, Martínez Rincón (2016: 105) wrote:

[...] learning a second language presents students with a wider range of opportunities to improve in different aspects of their lives. The possibility to travel, to experience other cultures, to communicate with different people, and to obtain better job opportunities.

The rest of the publications we reviewed either linked two of the aspects or focused exclusively on one of them. Mobility and employability, for instance, have often appeared together but, again, as part of theoretical discussions or reflections on their association with bilingualism (see Lasagabaster & Sierra 2010; Aguilar & Rodríguez 2012; Coyle 2013; Pérez Vidal 2015; Alonso-Díaz, Delicado & Ramos 2019). One of the two most relevant empirical studies was carried out by Yang (2017), who investigated the perception of these two aspects in 110 Taiwanese university students of the bilingual Tourism Management and Culinary Arts degrees. A 39-item Likert scale questionnaire and a follow-up interview were completed by students at different stages in their degree courses. All responses point in the same direction: students are aware of the key role of bilingualism in their future opportunities to move from one country to another and also to succeed in the job market. The study by Poveda (2019), which involved participants from South-Central Spain from a wider age range, i.e., from compulsory secondary education to university students, analyzed participants' discourse on bilingualism through workshops and group discussions. The data elicited show both sides of the coin. Some students associate bilingualism with professional mobility and equate that with socio-economic success, whereas others consider seeking work abroad purely as the result of the unstable labor market in Spain and therefore see it as a failure rather than a privilege.

A small number of studies have focused on mobility alone. Hunt (2011) and Ioannou Georgiou (2012) approached it from a theoretical perspective, and González-Rodrigo & Salto-Weis (2013) from a data-based perspective. González-Rodrigo & Salto-Weis conducted a pilot study with 29 engineering students at the Polytechnic University of Madrid who had received part of the content of the subject Steel Structure Constructions in English. Through a qualitative/quantitative questionnaire, González-Rodrigo & Salto-Weis aimed to obtain information about participants' satisfaction with the experience and possible improvements for the future. The results obtained after the analysis of the data and the positive comments reported by the majority of the students led the authors to emphasize the role of English as a medium of instruction in facilitating student mobility.

Studies on the relationship between employability and bilingualism are also scarce. The only one of relevance to our study was undertaken recently by Madrid & Julius (2020). They surveyed 216 Spanish students enrolled in a bilingual teaching degree at a university in the south of Spain with the purpose of learning about their profiles, the difficulties they encountered, and their opinion about the degree. The majority of the participants reported they had opted for English as a medium of instruction (EMI) because they believed it would help them increase their career opportunities.

While a preponderance of studies has focused on intercultural competence, the number of theoretical approaches (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey 2002; Sercu 2004; de Mejía 2004; Stier 2006; Lasagabaster 2008; Coyle, Holmes & King 2009; Hunt 2011; Yang 2017) far exceeds the number of empirical approaches. Some of the data-based studies have followed quite complex procedures to measure this aspect. This is the case with Arasaratnam-Smith's (2016) study, which used a scale for each of the variables identified as contributors to what they labeled *intercultural communication competence* and was carried out with 390 university students (245 from Australia and the rest from 36 different countries). Drawing on the responses in the scales to measure motivation, empathy, attitude towards other cultures, interaction involvement, ethnocentrism, sensation seeking, and intercultural communication competence, Arasaratnam-Smith corroborated the connection between intercultural communicative competence and bilingualism. Roiha & Sommier (2018) also investigated the potential of CLIL for encouraging positive intercultural attitudes. They focused on 24 former CLIL students who all attended CLIL primary and compulsory secondary education in Finland in the 1990s. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed that many of the participants considered themselves "tolerant and open to other cultures" (10). Another strand of this research looked at the perspective of those teaching in bilingual programs. Méndez García (2013) interviewed a group of 12 primary and secondary teachers and language assistants from two schools in Spain with the aim

of finding out their views on the benefits CLIL confers. Participants believe that CLIL programs may lead to “reflection on otherness from a non-ethnocentric perspective” (Méndez García 2013: 277) and may help learners to become empathetic and flexible citizens and deal with ambiguity more effectively. Likewise, in their interviews with eight Indonesian lecturers, Abduh & Rosmaladewi (2018) found evidence of their awareness of the impact bilingual programs has on increasing students’ open-mindedness and respect for their own and other cultures and for diversity in society.

Finally, a combination of the perspectives of those involved in bilingual programs in compulsory secondary education in Spain is to be found in the paper by Gómez-Parra (2020). The opinions of 76 students on the intercultural competence gained through the bilingual program in their schools were contrasted with the opinions of two coordinators and two school principals. They all concurred in placing special emphasis on the role of international exchange programs and language assistants in developing students’ intercultural competence.

As is evident from these findings, the three aspects have been studied, but further research is needed to empirically test the impact of bilingualism on them. Instruments that specifically measure mobility, employability, and intercultural competence together have yet to be employed. As part of a larger research project, this study attempts to contribute to filling this research lacuna. The questions at the centre of this study were:

- (1) To what extent do participants who have participated in a bilingual program agree that the foreign language/languages enhances/enhance their mobility skills? Are there significant differences between their answers and the answers of participants from mainstream education?
- (2) To what extent do participants who have participated in a bilingual program agree that the foreign language/languages enhances/enhance their employability skills? Are there significant differences between their answers and the answers of participants from mainstream education?
- (3) To what extent do participants who have participated in a bilingual program agree that the foreign language/languages gained enhances/ enhance their intercultural competence? Are there significant differences between their answers and the answers of participants from mainstream education?
- (4) To what extent do the results obtained in the previous comparisons differ in terms of gender?

#### 4. Method

##### 4.1. Participants

This study contains data from a total of 417 respondents from Colombia. As is often the case with this type of research (Dewaele 2018; Dewaele & Botes 2019), there was a remarkable gender disparity (283 female students and 159 male students). The mean age of participants was 37.2 (SD= 16.31) and 30.7% had been educated in a bilingual program at one or more educational levels (i.e.; primary, secondary, vocational, or higher education).

##### 4.2. Instrument

In order to measure the success of bilingual education, a close-ended questionnaire was especially designed by the researchers of the project “Facing Bilinguals: Study of the results of the bilingual education programs through the massive collection and analysis of data extracted from social networks” (BESOC) (EDU2017-84800-R) (see Gómez-Parra, Huertas-Abril & Espejo-Mohedano 2021). The 10-point Likert scale instrument initially had 24 items, ranging from 1 (very little) to 10 (very much), to measure aspects of mobility, employability, and intercultural competence. The remaining items were excluded because they adversely affected the statistical reliability of the scales. Respondents were additionally asked to fill out a socio-biographical questionnaire. Only data relevant to the purpose of this study have been considered.

A confirmatory factor analysis with Promax Rotation was carried out to determine the scale structure. The figures in Table 1 show that the three factors, explaining 78.136% of the variance, are clearly identifiable. Five items were loaded on the first factor (mobility), which explained 63.216 % of the variance, with loadings ranging from 0.745 to 0.902; on the second factor (employability), which explained 9.713% of the variance, four items presented loadings ranging from 0.570 to 0.983; on the third factor (intercultural competence), which explained 5.206% of the variance, five items presented loadings from 0.789 to 0.908.

Table I. Factor analysis with Promax Rotation

	Mobility	Employability	Intercultural competence
How much do you think your bilingualism/languages favors/favor your mobility abroad?	0.820		
How much do you use your second language abroad when you travel for pleasure?	0.804		

How much do you feel more international due to your second language?	0.801		
How much do you think your second language makes you more willing to travel abroad?	0.902		
How much do you think your bilingualism/languages makes/make you willing to follow training courses abroad?	0.745		
How much do you think your bilingualism/languages has/have favored your employability?		0.751	
How much do you think your second language has impacted the development of your job?		0.812	
How much do/would you use your second language to communicate with your colleagues at work?		0.983	
How much do/would you use your second language abroad when you travel for work?		0.570	
How much do you think your bilingualism/languages helps/help your understanding and acceptance of others?			0.843
How much do you think your bilingualism/languages helps/help your adaptation to other cultures abroad?			0.853
How much do you think your bilingualism/languages helps/help you evolve as an intercultural individual?			0.789
How much do you think your bilingualism/languages makes/make you competent in different cultural contexts?			0.876
How much do you consider that being bilingual/plurilingual helped you to understand/feel empathy with foreign citizens (even in your own country)?			0.908
Eigenvalue	8.850		0.729
% Variance	63.216		5.206

In terms of Cronbach's alpha, the 14-item scale transpired to be highly reliable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.954$ ). Separate analyses of the three subscales similarly showed that reliability was high for the mobility scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.886$ ), very high for the intercultural competence scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.954$ ), and high for the employability scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.880$ ). The results of the Spearman correlations also indicate that the three aspects were tightly interrelated, as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Spearman correlation between factors

Factors	Mobility	Employability	Intercultural competence
Mobility	1.000	0.642**	0.600**
Employability	0.642**	1.000	0.720**
Intercultural competence	0.600**	0.720**	1.000

\*\* $p < 0.001$

#### 4.3. Data collection

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which is a form of non-probability sampling (Ness Evans & Rooney 2013). Calls for recruits were posted on Facebook, where a link to Survey Monkey was provided.

Our open-access questionnaire remained online between December and March 2019 and attracted 624 responses. It was administered in Spanish and took 15 minutes on average to be completed.

The tool used for participant selection was Audience Insights, included in the Facebook Ads Manager, which allows the identification of the right target audience according to configurable parameters. Once the target audience had been identified, advertisements encouraging completion of the questionnaire were uploaded.

#### 4.4. Data analysis

The statistical analyses were performed with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 22.0). Once the data were collected, data cleansing began. Firstly, questionnaires in which more than 25% of the items were unanswered were removed, instead of using the multiple imputation procedure. This was done with the aim of guaranteeing that the data showed no inconsistencies. Following this stage, questionnaires with data anomalies were eliminated. In this cleansing process, the number of questionnaires decreased from 624 to 442 (stage 1), and finally to 417 (stage 2). A basic descriptive study was then carried out.

As a one-sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov test revealed no normal distribution ( $p < .05$ ), non-parametric tests were run. Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon W tests were used to ascertain whether there were significant differences between former bilingual and mainstream participants regarding their self-perceived mobility, employability, and intercultural competences. Scores were subsequently compared by gender, as well as within each gender group.

## 5. Results

Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon W tests for all aspects were performed. As observed in table 3, bilingual participants scored higher than mainstream participants in the three aspects.

Table 3. Differences between bilingual and mainstream participants

	Bilingual Program	N	Mean Rank	<i>p</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>W</i>	<i>z</i>
Mobility	Yes	134	270.46	0.000	14075.0	61661.0	-5.318
	No	308	200.20				
Employability	Yes	134	255.88	0.000	16029.0	63615.0	-3.734
	No	308	206.54				
Intercultural competence	Yes	134	244.99	0.011	17489.0	65075.0	-2.551
	No	308	211.28				

\*  $p < .05$

When participants were divided by gender, Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon W tests revealed that gender had no significant effect on any of the three aspects (sig. > 0.05).

## 6. Discussion

The results of this research show significant differences in the perception of the aspects of mobility and employability, and partially significant differences in the perception of the intercultural competence between former bilingual learners and mainstream learners. These findings mirror those in Gómez-Parra, Huertas-Abril & Espejo-Mohedano (2021). The results obtained in the Spearman correlation analysis also confirm the success of the decision to design an instrument that includes these three aspects. The analysis demonstrates the existence of a strong correlation among the three, the correlation between mobility and employability being the strongest, which explains the abundance of studies that, using different approaches, have addressed these two aspects together. The results presented above will now be discussed in relation to each of the research questions proposed.

Question 1 focused on the aspects of mobility (bilingual program participants' agreement/disagreement regarding the enhancement of their mobility skills and differences with mainstream education participants). The statistical analysis shows higher scores among bilinguals in this aspect than among mainstream respondents. Former bilingual learners tend to feel more willing to travel abroad,

either for pleasure or to take part in training courses, to use their second language when they travel for pleasure, and see themselves as more international. This tendency reflects findings from previous studies in other contexts in which participants also view mobility both as an opportunity for economic welfare and for the completion of a life project (González-Rodrigo & Salto-Weis 2013; Yang 2017; Póveda 2019). Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010) indicate the promotion of mobility is one of the ultimate goals of any bilingual program.

For a correct interpretation of the data in this study, especially those related to mobility, it is essential to consider that the questionnaires were completed by participants before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic has transformed the way we live and work, and has led to a marked increase in digital nomadism and remote work travel, it would be interesting to identify the way the perception of this factor may have been affected.

The answers to Question 2 offer data on the dimension of employability (bilingual program participants' agreement/disagreement regarding the enhancement of their employability skills and differences with mainstream education participants). Bilinguals are aware that their bilingual education has not only turned them into "more employable" citizens, but has also impacted the development of their careers. They also tend to use a foreign language in their job to a higher degree than mainstream students. As with the aspect of mobility, these results chime with those in previous studies (Yang 2017; Madrid & Julius 2020) and substantiate the assertion that students gradually adopt and reproduce the ideologies that lie behind the educational programs they were enrolled in (Alonso-Díaz, Delicado & Ramos 2019; Poveda 2019). The emphasis given to bilingualism in the National Plan for Bilingualism (MEN 2014) as a vehicle to enhance the economic development of the labor market has not, however, been welcomed by education experts. Some of them have criticized the fact that the document presents employability as the only purpose of education (Gómez Sará 2017). Others have remarked that the only purpose of the plan seems to be to meet the economic needs of an increasingly global world (Fandiño-Parra, Bermúdez-Jiménez & Lugo-Vásquez 2012) and the requirements of companies interested in recruiting low-cost staff proficient in English instead of supporting the integral development of individuals, which, in turn, may lead to the improvement of society (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez 2016; Gómez Sará 2017). In the same vein, intercultural competence has not been given the prominence it deserves in official Colombian education documents or in the bilingual initiatives taken by the education authorities (Álvarez Valencia 2014; Fandiño Parra 2014; Fandiño-Parra, Bermúdez-Jiménez & Lugo-Vásquez 2016; Pena-Dix 2018). Although reference to intercultural communication is made in official documents (MEN 2006: 7), some experts have indicated that one of the weaknesses of bilingual programs in Colombia is their excessive emphasis on

the communicative competence required by the labor market and a neglect of the work on competences oriented to understanding and respecting other ways of life and opening minds to educate culturally sensitive individuals (Fandiño Parra 2014; Fandiño-Parra, Bermúdez-Jiménez & Lugo-Vásquez 2016; Rojas-Barreto 2019).

In spite of intercultural competence's being relegated to a secondary position in Colombia, according to some academic experts, as mentioned above, the responses to the intercultural dimension in question 3 (bilingual program participants' agreement/disagreement regarding the enhancement of their intercultural competence skills and differences with mainstream education participants) indicate that former bilingual learners gave significantly higher scores than mainstream students to items related to the ability to adapt to other cultures and the understanding and acceptance of others. These perceived gains are consistent with the literature showing that all stakeholders in bilingual education programs (Méndez García 2013; Arasaratnam-Smith 2016; Abduh & Rosmaladewi 2018; Roiha & Sommier 2018; Gómez-Parra 2020) seem to be certain of the benefits of bilingual education for intercultural competence.

Question 4 looked at gender differences. The results show that one gender had no advantage over the other in any of the aspects. These results are in line with those obtained by Arasaratnam-Smith (2016) regarding intercultural competence, but differ from those in Yang (2017) related to the aspect of employability. In one of the groups of undergraduate students in Yang's research, women expressed higher agreement with the increase in future employability.

## 7. Limitations

Three limitations must be acknowledged in this study. Firstly, since detailed scrutiny of the characteristics of the bilingual programs followed by the participants was omitted as it was considered beyond the ambit of this research, our study considers none of the inevitable differences of such bilingual programs. We cannot deny the possible influence of those differences on the responses.

Secondly, the duration and period of the bilingual program may also be of significance when interpreting the results. We are aware that at the time our participants received their bilingual education, bilingualism was not quite "settled" in Colombia, at least in state schools. Nevertheless, as this study is part of a research project carried out at a global level, we considered it important to have data for this country, too. We believed that by including it, we would be able to offer the research area a wider perspective on the issue under study.

Finally, the results must be interpreted in light of the fact that they are based on participants' self-reports. As with any research of similar characteristics (see,

e.g., MacIntyre et al. 2002; Dewaele & Botes 2019; Mijatovic & Tytus 2019), the results very much depend on participants' views of their own environment. It should nevertheless be noted that, as the study relies on the comparison of the self-reports of two different groups, the validity of the data is influenced by similar factors in both cases.

## 8. Conclusions

The need to empirically test the extent to which bilingualism carries advantages for mobility, employability, and intercultural competence prompted us to conduct research in this area. This study, a part of a series of studies considered to be the first to approach these three aspects together, underscores the efficacy of bilingualism in enhancing mobility and employability in the eyes of former bilingual education learners. Since the success of bilingual programs in enhancing intercultural competence was only partial, it would be interesting to explore the perceptions of subjects according to their age or to the time of exposure to bilingual education, as previous studies with other purposes have done (see, e.g., Artieda, Roquet & Nicolás-Conessa 2020).

The originality of the series of studies to which this research belongs also lies in the fact that it has former bilingual education learners as participants instead of students who were in receipt of bilingual education at the time of completing the questionnaire, which tends to be the case in previous studies. Our aim is to continue to contribute to broadening our understanding of this already "robust area of investigation" (Fox, Corretjer & Webb 2019). At the same time, we believe our study may encourage and guide much needed further quantitative research on the three aspects outside the frame of our project.

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