The Impact of the Colombian Framework for English (COFE) Project: An Insiders’ Perspective

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Bajo la influencia del Proyecto COFE, cuyo fin consistía en mejorar la enseñanza del inglés en Colombia, los programas de formación de profesores de inglés sufrieron profundos cambios, los cuales prepararon el terreno a los ajustes curriculares requeridos por el Comité Nacional de Acreditación. Se presentan aquí los resultados de una evaluación del proyecto llevada a cabo por un equipo de profesoras de nueve universidades, en cinco áreas de interés: el desarrollo de la lengua, la formación profesional, la investigación, los recursos y la evaluación.

Palabras clave: proyecto COFE, colaboración interuniversitaria, reforma curricular, formación de profesores, enseñanza del inglés.

En Colombie, grâce au Projet COFE, qui visait à améliorer l’enseignement de l’anglais, les programmes formant les professeurs d’anglais ont été grandement réformés. Cela a permis d’apporter des certaines réformes dans les programmes, réformes requises par le “Comité Nacional de Acreditación”. L’article présente les résultats de l’évaluation de un projet mené par une équipe de professeurs de neuf universités, et selon cinq critères: le développement de la langue, le développement professionnel, la recherche, les ressources et l’évaluation.

Mots-clés: Projet COFE, collaboration interuniversitaire, réforme des programmes, formation de professeurs, enseignement de l’anglais.

Under the Influence of the COFE Project, the ultimate goal of which was to improve the teaching of English in secondary schools in Colombia, English teacher training courses underwent profound changes, which prepared the ground for curricular adjustments required by the Comité Nacional de Acreditación. The article presents the results of the evaluation of the COFE project conducted by a team of teachers from nine universities from five areas: language development, professional development, research, resources and evaluation.

Key words: COFE Project, university research collaboration, curricular adjustments, professional development, English teaching.
INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing expectation that change in the field of education will be an evolutionary process which will adapt programs to their context and strengthen the principles which underlie them. However, this process requires that people involved in the programs participate in a continuous revision of the curriculum which should be illuminated by evaluation. This article reports one such effort carried out by the group of evaluation and research, one of the subprojects which comprised the COFE Project network, with the aim of assessing the nature and extent of the innovations promoted by the project and laying the ground for future curricular adjustments.

The report includes five sections. In the first section we provide a brief background of the COFE Project. In the second one we present the rationale behind this evaluation. Section three explains the procedures used to undertake the study and section four the results of the study. In section five we provide parameters to guide future curricular developments. To conclude, we mention areas in the curriculum which deserve special attention and reflect on the benefits of a participatory approach to evaluation.

1. THE COFE PROJECT

The COFE Project was the result of a complementary arrangement between the government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the government of the Republic of Colombia concerning technical cooperation for the improvement in the teaching of English. The project had originally been planned for four years but was extended to conclude in June 1997.

1.1. Objectives

The objectives of the arrangement, signed in Bogotá on 16 February 1991, were as follow:

- To make a qualitative change in the initial training of teachers of English as a foreign language.
- To design and implement a permanent training program for the teachers of the entities linked to the project, which would include both practical and theoretical components, and to establish appropriate evaluating procedures.
- To design and implement a permanent training project for active teachers of grades 6-11 in the government sector, to include practical and theoretical components and to establish appropriate evaluating procedures.
- To set common standards for the teaching practice component in the initial training.
- To expand the scope of the project to the regions, involving regional universities.
- To develop existing regional resource centers, and to encourage the creation of others.

A Plan of Operations was formulated by mutual agreement between the executing entities, the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) designated by the United Kingdom and the Ministry of Education (MEN) designated by the Colombian government. The Plan presented details about the contribution of each party to the project, stated the goals and objectives of the project and determined the activities to be implemented in a four-year period.

1.2. Strategies of implementation to produce and support change

Since 1991, the COFE Project began its mission promoting change in language programs in Colombian universities. The project grew through several phases within a cyclic process of implementation and development.

In each phase, several strategies were carried out to produce change. The first strategy, the baseline survey, was concerned mainly with gathering information about the training of English teachers in Colombia and with establishing contact with the universities that ran licenciatura programs. The second strategy intended to expand the scope of the project involving regional universities, promoting and producing changes in the curricula, involving the whole staff in the implementation of the changes and organizing national conferences and regional meetings. For this strategy, teachers from different participating universities attended courses at Thames Valley University, London, and produced Working Documents on different areas, which were disseminated in the national conferences, to contribute ideas and proposals to the changes needed. The third one consisted in the establishment of resource centers and signing agreements with national entities and local educational authorities (Secretarías de Educación) to guarantee the training of high school and elementary school teachers and the financial sustainability of the centers. Within these strategies, bibliographic resources and equipment were donated to participating universities. Finally, special interest groups—"sub-
projects"—were created to complement the mission of the COFE Project and to guarantee its sustainability. Table 1 summarizes the main actions developed to implement the change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies to implement change</th>
<th>Actions</th>
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| 1. Baseline survey            | • To gather information about licenciatura programs  
                                 • To establish contact with universities which run licenciatura programs |
| 2. Expanding the scope of the COFE Project in the regions | • To involve universities throughout the country  
                                                                • To promote and produce changes in the curricula  
                                                                • To involve staff in the implementation of change  
                                                                • To organize and participate in regional meetings and national conferences |
| 3. Establishing and opening of RCs | • To sign agreements with national entities to guarantee financial sustainability |
| 4. Updating university teachers | • To train leaders able to promote change  
                                         • To produce Working Documents  
                                         • To discuss and disseminate Working Documents in each university |
| 5. Formation of sub-teams | • To develop guidelines for in-service and pre-service professional development  
                                           • To produce guidelines for the management of RCs  
                                           • To produce tests to measure communicative and linguistic competence in English  
                                           • To establish monitoring and evaluating systems for English programs in the COFE network |

2. Evaluations of the COFE Project

Due to the importance of the COFE Project, evaluation processes were conducted to measure the influence that the project was having throughout Colombia. Executing entities as well as university teachers were interested in looking for verifiable indicators to evaluate strategies of implementation and proposed actions to fulfill the objectives of the project. However, the purpose of each of those processes differed depending on the goals, the audience of the evaluation and the evaluators' proximity to the program under study (Lynch, 1996). Therefore, executing entities conducted evaluation processes using verifiable indicators based on expected outcomes; university teachers, on the other hand, conducted an evaluation to inform and report on the implementations and innovations in language programs in Colombian universities.

2.1. External evaluation

The Overseas Development Administration (ODA) programmed three visits of an expert in order to evaluate the project: one in 1994, another at the end of 1995 and the last one at the end of 1996. The expert familiarized herself with the project, its aims and objectives, its history, personnel, achievements, problems and hopes, and after the visit she submitted a report with recommendations in order to accomplish what had been specified in the Plan of Operations.

Among the verifiable indicators used by external evaluations were the number of universities involved in the project, the existence of proposals to set up resource centers, the existence of proposals and/or programs of postgraduate studies, the participation of universities in subprojects, including their actions, activities and achievements. But perhaps the most important indicators were the proposals for curricular change and/or changes in the curriculum. These changes included improvements in the syllabus, such as an increase in the number of hours allocated to teaching English, an increase in the number of semesters for the teaching practice and implementation of a research component. Changes in the teaching approach were also included, such as methodology courses given in English, teaching practice tutoring given by experts, integration of theory and practice and the inclusion of extracurricular activities. From the outsider's perspective, the impact of
the COFE Project seems to have been more summative in focus (see Appendix).

2.2. Internal evaluation

Internal evaluation was conducted by the Colombian Ministry of Education and by university teachers. The purposes to develop the evaluation of the COFE Project reflected the interest of those involved in carrying out the evaluation. On the one hand, the Ministry of Education—as executing entity—conducted two evaluations for accountability, in 1994 and in 1996. Both of them aimed at examining the results of the execution of the budget provided to develop the Plan of Operations. Besides, since the project was coming to its end, there was a growing interest to evaluate the achievements of sub-projects and the proposed actions for the sustainability of the COFE Project taking into account the objectives, indicators of achievement and activities proposed by the sub-projects.

On the other hand, university teachers, who had been directly involved in the project and constituted the primary evaluation audience (Lynch, 1996) also carried out an evaluation. They wanted to use a collaborative approach to evaluation and to examine qualitative and quantitative changes and innovations in language programs which may not have been included in the initial objectives of the project but which they felt were relevant. This is how a group of university teachers, to which we belong, formed a new COFE Sub-project—Grupo Interinstitucional de Evaluación e Investigación (GIEI)—with the initial aim to conduct the evaluation of the COFE Project. We think that how we perceive the impact of a project depends upon the evaluation processes carried out to highlight expected results or to emphasize new strategies or actions for sustainability. The concepts of evaluation for accountability and evaluation for development (Weir and Roberts, 1994) are important for the impact of a project, in this case the COFE Project.

2.3. The insiders’ perspective

The GIEI, directed by Clara Inés Rubiano, adopted a participatory model (Alderson and Scott, 1992) to develop the evaluation and benefited from the advice of an external consultant who had been involved with the project since its beginning in the updating of university teachers.

The purpose of the evaluation was to inform rather than simply to sum up the value of the effort expended.

According to Alderson and Scott (1992) there are three aspects that characterize participatory evaluation. The first aspect is to include managers and workers, in other words, planners and executors should participate in the process, the second aspect is for participants to get involved, and the third aspect is for them to obtain benefit from the work carried out.

Accordingly, the team established the following objectives for the evaluation:

- To show the insiders’ viewpoint of the impact of the project.
- To offer suggestions to develop those areas which do not exhibit significant change.
- To present universities with criteria to compare their curricula and identify strengths and weaknesses.
- To establish quality criteria to measure the effectiveness of language programs and thus to contribute to the process of accreditation.
- To provide information that could generate evaluation and/or research projects in more specific areas of interest.

These changes included improvements in the syllabus, such as an increase in the number of hours allocated to teaching English, an increase in the number of semesters for the teaching practice and implementation of a research component. Changes in the teaching approach were also included, such as methodology courses given in English, teaching practice tutoring given by experts, integration of theory and practice and the inclusion of extracurricular activities.
3. PROCEDURES

The evaluation of the impact of the project was conducted in a two-year period and involved 22 of the participating universities. An action plan was executed from April 1996 to December 1998 and included different stages that went from the consolidation of the team in April 1996 to the writing up of a report to stakeholders in December 1998. During this period, the group benefited from two consultant visits.

The following are the activities that were planned and developed in order to assess the impact of the project:

- In a national workshop, the team selected five essential aspects of curricular development in the language programs: English language development, professional preparation, research, resources and evaluation.

- In that same workshop the team designed a questionnaire to collect information related to the five aspects of curricular development.

- The questionnaire was piloted by the members of the team in their universities, then restructured and reformulated. The questionnaire consisted of seventy items distributed among the five aspects under study.

- A timetable of visits to the universities participating in the COFE Project was designed for team members to administer the questionnaire in universities where they did not work. The visits were carried out in a period of three weeks.

- The questionnaire was administered, in the form of a structured interview to a group of 232 people (30 administrators, 122 teachers and 80 students), belonging to 22 universities.

- Three national workshops were held in order to describe and analyze the information that was obtained. In the first workshop, a database was created, and a preliminary description of the information was completed. These data were presented in the Sixth National COFE Conference held in Neiva in 1996. In the second workshop, the team defined the criteria to analyze the information gathered in order to determine the achievements and tendencies of change that have been driven by the COFE Project. In the third workshop, the team interpreted the data collected in accordance with the established criteria and wrote a preliminary draft of the evaluation report, which included a series of recommendations.

- Previous to the preparation of the final report, the team and the external consultant evaluated the procedures followed to conduct the study.

Bearing in mind standard procedures in program evaluation, the following table summarizes the stages followed in this evaluative research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>UT</th>
<th>UC</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>EC</th>
<th>SP</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sounding</td>
<td>April, 1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>Designing the evaluation</td>
<td>May, 1996</td>
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<td>Constructing the instruments</td>
<td>July, 1996</td>
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<td>Testing them out</td>
<td>July 1996**</td>
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<td>Collecting data</td>
<td>Aug.-Nov. 1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>November, 1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drafting the report</td>
<td>February, 1997</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading and learning from it</td>
<td>1997-1998</td>
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*Degree of involvement

UT: University Teachers
UC: University Coordinators
CA: COFE Advisor
EC: External Consultant
SP: Sponsors

4. RESULTS

In order to determine the impact of the COFE Project in Colombian universities we identified three criteria. Only those aspects which met the three criteria listed below were identified as achievements of the COFE Project. Developments which did not meet the three criteria, but which we, nevertheless, considered important towards the implementation of COFE proposals in the various areas of the curriculum are listed as tendencies.

- Substantial changes in the different components of the curriculum as compared to baseline studies carried out in 1991, 1994 and 1995.
• Changes resulting from the implementation of proposals contained in the Working Documents of the COFE Project written by university teachers who benefited from updating at Thames Valley University.

• Changes and innovations in different aspects of the curriculum in more than half of the universities involved in the study.

4.1. Achievements

4.1.1. Language Development Component

In 1991, when the COFE Project began, language programs allocated between 300 and 800 hours to the development of English proficiency. In 1996, 77% of the universities had increased these figures ranging between 976 and 1616 hours, in accordance with the project’s recommendation of a minimum of 1000.

With respect to activities carried out in the classroom, traditional practices such as translation, repetition and substitution exercises, which were still used in 40% of the universities, had been replaced by activities that promote communicative competence such as simulations, discussions, dramatizations and problem-solving activities, among others.

4.1.2. Professional Preparation Component

In the baseline study of 1991, it was found that in most universities the professional preparation component was introduced in the fifth semester of the program. In 1994, only 40% of the universities had introduced this component in the first semesters. In contrast, in 1996, 90% of the universities had included methodology courses in the initial semesters.

One of the recommendations of the COFE Project for the professional preparation component had been the inclusion of two semesters of practice teaching. While in 1994 only 45% of the universities programmed two semesters of practice teaching, this study found that 63% of the universities had increased to two the number of semesters of practice teaching.

In 1994 it was found that in 63% of the universities the language of instruction of the methodology classes was English. In 1995 this percentage rose to 68% and in 1996, 72% of the universities taught their methodology courses in English.

4.1.3. Research

At the start of the project the emphasis on research as an integral part of the curriculum was very low. This study showed the increased importance of research. 55% of the universities include special courses for developing research and 45% integrate research to other components of the curriculum.

4.1.4. Resources

In 1991 there were only two resource centers set up by the British Government. In 1996, 82% of the universities which participated in this study had set up resource centers. Of these centers, 50% were established through donations and 32% by the universities themselves.

Before the creation of the COFE Project there was little contact between lecturers of the various universities offering language programs. In 1991 four universities started a joint scheme. In 1996, 88% of the universities—91 lecturers—were actively participating in the various sub-projects and in the development of academic and educational projects at regional and national levels.

At the beginning of the COFE Project the possibilities for professional training, updating and development were rather limited. After five years 100% of the participants in the study stated that the project had provided possibilities for training and updating as well as for sharing experiences. 91% of the teachers reported that they had advanced in their knowledge through access to up-dated books and materials, 82% mentioned opportunities to take part in research activities, and 68% mentioned opportunities of accessing new areas of knowledge.

4.2. Tendencies

4.2.1. Language Development Component

With respect to the approach used in teaching the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—it was found that in 68% of the universities the integration of these skills was the main feature.

It was also found that there exists a tendency to use a guidebook with a communicative approach complemented with authentic materials—magazines, newspapers, videos—with the aim of optimizing the students' opportunities to access the English language and culture.
4.2.2. Professional Preparation Component

An increasing tendency was observed towards the qualification of professional training by specialists in foreign language teaching. In 1994, 22% of the participant universities had foreign language specialists in charge of this area. In 1995, there were 27%, and in 1996 there were 31% universities in which this component was taught by foreign language specialists.

Following the ultimate goal of the COFE Project, which was to improve the teaching of English in secondary schools, 68% of the participant universities claim to prepare their students to become secondary school teachers. However, 13.5% of the universities have undergone curriculum reforms in order to adapt their syllabuses and make them more flexible in order to respond to the educational requirements set out by the General Educational Law (Ley General de Educación), namely, to teach a foreign language in primary schools.

4.2.3. Research

The impact of the COFE Project in this area has been significant. There were approximately 20 research projects being carried out and about another 10 projects had been completed from 1990 to 1996. As a result of these developments, ten graduate programs had been opened—six leading to a Diploma, and four leading to a Master’s degree.

4.2.4. Evaluation

The interest shown by universities in the implementation of exams to allow for the assessment of the language performance of future English teachers could be observed in the fact that 36% of the universities had used proficiency exams such as the TOEFL, Michigan or Cambridge First Certificate. It is worth mentioning, however, that in order to meet the profile of Colombian English teachers, the universities participated in the Testing Sub-project whose aim was to design a specific proficiency test for Colombia which should be validated against international standards. Unfortunately, the Testing Sub-project had to leave their work unfinished when the COFE Project came to an end.

5. Parameters for Future Curricular Development

Although this study showed that significant changes had taken place in almost all the components investigated, there are still some aspects which should be reflected and acted upon. The following sections present the criteria of excellence proposed to evaluate the quality of language programs and make recommendations which may be followed by the universities concerned.

5.1. Language Development Component

5.1.1. Criteria

80% of the student population which takes the proficiency exam should achieve the basic pass grade or above in order to be awarded the Licenciatura degree.

5.1.2. Suggested Actions

- To develop strategies promoting self-access learning in order to support graduates in their future language development.
- To create or acquire self-access learning materials.
- To promote language performance and progress assessment.
- To continue with the implementation of learner-centered active methodologies.
- To organize activities to develop students' communicative and linguistic competence inside and outside the classroom, e.g. English clubs, workshops, etc.

5.2. Professional Preparation Component

5.2.1. Criteria

- The languages program includes a minimum of two semesters for methodology courses in foreign language teaching taught in English and two semesters for the teaching practice.
- Teachers giving methodology courses and supervising the teaching practice are expert trainers.
in the teaching of a foreign language.

- The selection of institutions for the teaching practice is done taking into account the aims of the program, for example, training teachers for primary, or for secondary school.

5.2.2. Suggested Actions

- To train foreign language teachers as teacher educators in order to prepare language teachers for different levels of education.
- To use flexible procedures to supervise the teaching practice, emphasizing cooperation with the trainee rather than prescription.
- To carry out observation of foreign language classes in different institutions.
- To include reflective activities and practices in the teaching and learning processes of the foreign language since the beginning of the program.
- To develop experiential knowledge progressively through peer- and micro-teaching practices.
- To allow students to assume the role of teacher from the beginning of the program in their own classes at the university.

5.3. Research

5.3.1. Criteria

- The Licenciatura program includes at least one course on research in the teaching of foreign languages, which is in charge of a foreign language professional.
- Trainees develop a research project during their teaching practice.
- Students develop research skills through the different courses of the program.
- Licenciatura teachers do research in their fields.

5.3.2. Suggested Actions

- To include, from the beginning and along the curriculum, activities to facilitate the development of research skills in the students, for example, observation and reflection on the teaching-learning process and analysis of documents and problems about education.
- To support university teachers in the development of research projects with updating courses, expert advisors, visiting professors, bibliography, equipment, etc.
- To facilitate the work of inter-institutional groups by providing financial support for trips and lodging.
- To organize interest groups and research teams with experienced and novice researchers.
- To involve students in the research teams led by teachers.

5.4. Resources

5.4.1. Criteria

- The institution has a development plan for the teaching staff.
- The teaching staff has the opportunity to participate at least in one academic event per year for their professional development.
- There are agreements with national and/or foreign institutions to sponsor research projects and events for professional growth.
- There is a resource center for the language department.
- The resource center has an adequate budget for its maintenance and for updating equipment and materials.
- The resource center has trained personnel to guide students in the self-learning process.

5.4.2. Suggested Actions

- To establish links with national and foreign institutions to promote agreements and joint research and professional development activities.
- To train the resource center personnel so that they can provide help for more efficient use of materials and equipment.
- To plan activities to motivate in-service teachers to use the resource center so that it contributes to the good quality of primary and secondary education.
- To unify the classification system of materials to facilitate inter-institutional cooperation.
- To establish basic regulations for the resource center users so that materials and equipment are well kept and efficiently used.
- To provide time and courses to university teachers in order to design materials for self-access learning, which could be used by in-service teachers who are in remote places.
5.5. Evaluation

5.5.1. Criteria

- The languages program includes a systematic process for evaluation.
- Evaluation includes the following aspects: curriculum, courses, teachers, materials, students' performance, administration, tracer study.
- The evaluation process gears changes to enhance the languages program.
- The data and results of the evaluation process are used to make decisions, plan and establish developmental strategies.

5.5.2. Suggested actions

- To train university teachers in evaluative processes such as designing instruments, analyzing data, using statistical procedures.
- To develop an evaluation scheme to be used periodically.
- To link evaluative processes to the development of research projects.
- To use the results of evaluative practices to design strategies in order to solve problems found.
- To implement tracer studies of graduates to measure the quality of existing programs, to design and to implement new proposals for professional development and to introduce changes in the curriculum.
- To include at least one course on Evaluation in the curriculum.
- To implement a test to measure students' proficiency in the foreign language.

6. Conclusions

The results of the study show that the COFE Project's main objective, namely, to promote the implementation of curricular reforms in order to qualify teachers, was achieved. There are, however, various areas which deserve special attention if the goal is to meet the criteria set by the COFE Project itself and by the CNA:

- Systematic evaluation schemes should be established in order to nourish curriculum changes aiming at meeting society's demands and CNA requirements.
- Departments should make provisions for the development of its teaching staff in order to qualify them as teacher educators and researchers.
- Resource centers should be strengthened so that they support both language students and inservice teachers' autonomous learning endeavors.

Regarding the evaluation process itself, we think that the participatory approach to evaluation we adopted enabled us to look at the impact of the COFE project from different perspectives and in areas that were relevant to the participants. It also informed us not only on achievements but also on tendencies towards change for future development, which will influence the sustainability of the project's aims. We also learned about the importance of working collaboratively and sharing not only expertise but also frustrations and limitations. We became aware of the areas which needed to be addressed in future research projects. This led the team to undertake research on autonomous learning by examining students and teachers' profiles and practices. It is in the original spirit of the COFE Project that we have continued working together.
REFERENCES


NOTAS SOBRE LAS AUTORAS

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NOTES

The evaluation team was made up of the authors and six other professors: Rosalia Cardenas from Universidad del Valle, Gilma Zúñiga from Universidad Surcolombiana de Neiva, Myriam Luna from Universidad de Pamplona, Clara Villanizar from Universidad del Magdalena, Myriam de Otalora from Universidad Pedagógica Nacional and Yolanda Rodriguez from Universidad de los Andes. Other people collaborated with the team in different stages: Osiel Mitchell from Universidad Surcolombiana de Neiva, Oscar Zuluaga from Universidad del Cauca, Yolanda Salamanca and Mauricio Vergara from Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Miguel García from Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica, Sonia Jiménez from Universidad de Los Andes, Ray Brown, COFE Project Advisor, and Dermot Murphy, external consultant from Thames Valley University, London.

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Figura recostada. Bronce.
Plaza de Esculturas
Fernando Botero, 1964