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Expanding global language education in public primary schools: the national English programme in Mexico

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The paper examines the recent national programme of English language instruction in the Mexican public primary schools, called the *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica* (PNIEB). The programme, initiated in 2009 by the Ministry of Education as part of the national curriculum, represents the largest expansion of English teaching in Mexico's history, entailing the hiring of 98,000 new English teachers. It is the result of an explicit educational policy intended to prepare Mexicans for the twenty-first century by emphasising linguistic and digital abilities: meaning a massive increase of English and computer skills in public schools. The launch of the programme also coincides with a major reform of basic education, as well as the extension of compulsory education from 9 to 13 years. Nevertheless, implementing the English programme, nationally and simultaneously throughout Mexico's 32 states, presents considerable challenges for a public education system that is already under-resourced. The author describes the complexity of the programme in several local contexts. The Mexican programme is analysed as part of a growing trend to expand public primary English language teaching (PELT) in Latin America and developing countries as part of an educational policy to make them more economically competitive.

Keywords: public primaries; early foreign language programmes; Mexico; PNIEB

Introduction

The articulation of the teaching of English in all three levels of Basic Education has the aim to guarantee that, by the time students complete their secondary education, they will have developed the necessary multilingual and multicultural competencies to face the communicative challenges of a globalized world successfully, to build a broader vision of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world, and thus, to respect their own and other cultures. (Mexican Ministry of Education, 2010, National English Program for Basic Education)

Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States ... (Attributed to Porfirio Díaz, Mexican President from 1876 to 1911)

This paper examines the recent national programme of English language instruction in the Mexican public primary schools. The programme, initiated in 2009 by the Ministry of Education as part of the national curriculum, represents the largest expansion of English

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teaching in Mexico's history and entails hiring 98,000 new English teachers. It is the result of an explicit educational policy to prepare Mexicans for the twenty-first century by emphasising linguistic and digital abilities: meaning a massive increase of English and computer skills in public schools. The initiation of the programme also coincides with a major reform of basic education, as well as the extension of compulsory education from 9 to 13 years (through K-12, as of 2011–2012). Nevertheless, implementing this ambitious new programme, properly called the *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica* (hereafter, PNIEB), nationally and simultaneously throughout Mexico's 32 states, presents considerable challenges for a public education system that is already under-resourced.

I begin by briefly contextualising the programme within the current trends in English language teaching (ELT) in Latin America. Then I give some background about the language and education policy in public schools in Mexico, and the antecedents of the current English programme. In order to highlight the differences in how the national ELT policy has been implemented across the country, I profile three states, describing key features and challenges of introducing the programme. Finally, I consider the policy implications. While the implications are particular to the Mexican context, the broader struggles and discourses that frame the challenges faced in Mexico are parallel to what has played out in education language policy in many post-colonial or so-called expanding circle contexts. I argue that the PNIEB in Mexico is a prototypical case of the global trend towards primary English language teaching (PELT). In particular, I discuss the extent to which the Mexican case typifies how developing countries feel compelled to include PELT as an integral part of public primary education, despite the obvious challenges and lack of resources.

Methods

The information reported here has been compiled from several projects I collaborated on with the national and state Ministries of Education. The implementation of the programme from 2009 to 2012 was considered the pilot phase, and the Ministry of Education commissioned a series of internal reports at the national level to evaluate the early implementation and results of the programme across the 31 states and Mexico City in order to help develop the curriculum. Since then, I have worked with three state English programmes on other evaluation projects related to teacher training and programme management. As the principle investigator of these projects,¹ I benefited from direct access to data from the Ministry of Education (including the figures and projections cited below of the numbers students, teachers, and schools in the programme). Data included results of standardised achievement tests of English proficiency administered to students in the programme, as well as extensive qualitative data from school visits with classroom observations, and documents including the curriculum, teaching materials, and student work.

The cases profiled here are drawn from site visits made to the respective state programmes, and their successes and difficulties are representative of some of the 18 states we worked in during the pilot projects. With the research team, we interviewed hundreds of teachers, students, parents, teacher trainers, and administrators; the information presented of the participants' experiences in the programme comes from those interviews. As well, they shared their experiences, insights, and insider knowledge about how the programme was organised, for example problems such as the difficulty in developing textbooks whose contents aligned to the new curriculum. This article is a synthesis of the analysis done over five years for the internal reports.

Trends in English teaching in Latin America

There is an unequivocal sense in Latin America that English is important. Niño-Murcia (2003), writing of the Peruvian context, describes the ‘hard currency ideology’ that likens English to the US dollar. In Mexico, Clemente (2007) explains how English functions as cultural capital, and Sayer (2010) illustrates the uses of English in the linguistic landscape to index a variety of social meanings. However, despite the consensus about the importance of English for Latin America’s present and future, in general there are relatively few people in the region who are conversationally fluent in English. A 2012 study comparing rates of English proficiency of adults in 54 countries found that as a region, Latin America has weak English language skills (Education First [EF], 2012), especially compared to Europe and Asia. Amongst Latin American countries, only adults in Argentina were deemed to have ‘moderate English proficiency’ (EF, 2012); the rest were rated as ‘low’ or ‘very low’.²

The 2012 study presented two explanations for this. First, Latin America already has a powerful language of wider communication, Spanish, which serves well for regional interactions and lessens the need for another lingua franca. Second, the report noted the poor quality of public education systems in Latin America and the unequal access to education across socioeconomic levels. According to the 2009 results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 48% of 15-year-olds in Latin America do not have sufficient literacy skills to ‘perform rudimentary tasks in reading and comprehension necessary to participate in society’ (EF, 2012, p. 30). Amongst lower income teens, the number rises to 62%.

A third reason, and one that runs counter to the common narrative that equates English proficiency with greater employment opportunities, could be a lack of economic incentive. While there is widespread belief that English opens doors to jobs and opportunities,³ Herazo Rivera, Jerez Rodríguez, and Lorduy Arellano (2012) present an analysis of online job postings in Colombia which show that from 2007 to 2011 only 0.5% of positions specifically listed English as a requirement. Hence, the perceived need for average citizens to know English may be ideological rather than reflective of the labour market. An alternative interpretation the authors do not consider, the neo-liberal side of the argument, could be that the lack of jobs requiring English in Colombia shows how poorly integrated the country is into the world economy, and in fact supports the case for increasing the English instruction because, again, the main argument for early public school English foreign language teaching is that it will enable emerging economies to become more globally competitive.

Despite these challenges, Latin American governments have followed the general global trend towards increasing the amount of English instruction in public schools and have clearly framed this move as part of the adoption of neo-liberal educational and economic policies aimed at allowing their countries to compete in the global marketplace. Cha and Ham (2008) note that from 1920 to 1944 only 12.3% of countries surveyed ($n = 65$) included English as a second language in the primary curriculum, whereas by 1990–2005 this number had risen to 67.5%, and has undoubtedly continued to rise, especially in developing nations. In Chile, for example, the English programme was expanded in public schools in 2004 and begins in fifth grade (Matear, 2008). Matear (2008) explains that the rationale for extending English into the primary grades was clearly framed as means to address educational and socioeconomic inequality and was supported by the United Nations Development Programme. However, it is worth noting that Latin America, perhaps for the reasons outlined above about the strength of Spanish and the problems with the public education systems, has been slower to adopt English in the primary

curriculum than other regions with developing economies. Cha and Ham (2008) report that by 2005, 69.0% of countries globally ($N=129$) included English in the curriculum at primary levels, but only 44.4% in Latin America ($N=18$). They note that English is firmly established in secondary education: 100% of Latin American countries include English in the secondary curriculum.

English language education has expanded in two ways: by introducing English earlier in the curriculum and by teaching English to more students beyond select schools in larger urban areas. We can call this a policy of a ‘more and earlier’ approach to ELT (Hamid, 2010). In Colombia, the government created the ambitious *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo* (PNB) in 2004. The Colombian PNB effort shares several commonalities with the Mexican PNIEB: (a) they have been directed top-down from the Ministry of Education by including English as part of the national curriculum (Herazo Rivera et al., 2012); (b) the programme is justified in terms of the discourse of global communication and competitiveness as necessary for national development (Fandiño-Parra, Bermúdez-Jiménez, & Lugo-Vásquez, 2012); (c) the English curriculum itself is organised along Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) of Languages (Council of Europe, 2001); (d) the English programmes were rapidly expanded without consideration to how they would affect or articulate with indigenous bilingual education and other foreign language programmes (Mejía, 2006); and (e) both programmes have faced serious difficulties with funding and finding qualified teachers (Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014).

Likewise, Argentina has also recently accelerated its move towards English, even though the country’s largest trading partner is Portuguese-speaking Brazil. The 2006 curriculum reform includes English as a compulsory subject for two hours per week starting in fourth grade. Zappa-Hollman (2007) describes several challenges that the programme has faced that parallel the Mexican experiences, including the difficulty in finding enough qualified teachers to expand the programme beyond urban areas, and the disconnect between the theoretical and practical elements of the curriculum. The same set of challenges has been observed in Chile by Matear (2008).

Language policy and English language education in Mexico

Mexico’s geographical proximity and strong cultural and economic ties to the USA would suggest that English ought to have a prominent role in the country. The 2011 A.T. Kearney *Global Services Location Index* report, an analysis of the benefits of potential outsourcing sites for US businesses, states that:

Latin America continues to serve the U.S. market well and is expected to grow in importance. This year, Mexico, in 6th place worldwide, leads the region, due to a sharp drop in wages over the year, the increased attractiveness of ‘near-shoring,’ and a well-developed talent pool. (n/p)

The report states that the increasing numbers of Spanish speakers in the USA, as well as the increasing numbers of proficient English speakers in Mexico, will make Mexico more attractive for locating service call centres and other business processing outsourcing (BPO):

Mexico is becoming a more prominent BPO location, as it supports the United States with both Spanish and English [...] Its average wages decreased 18% in dollar terms last year [2010], as it was buffeted by economic headwinds from the United States. The country now stands to benefit from increasing nearshoring sentiment, even with the difficult times related to escalating drug violence. (Peterson, Gott, & King, 2011, p. 9)

Country	Language capabilities	Education	Total
Canada	1.67	1.47	3.14
India	1.25	1.39	2.64
Costa Rica	1.29	1.19	2.48
Argentina	1.31	1.06	2.37
Chile	1.15	1.20	2.35
Brazil	1.19	1.07	2.26
Colombia	1.13	1.00	2.14
Mexico	1.19	0.89	2.08
Panama	1.13	0.83	1.96

Figure 1. A comparison of language capabilities and education in selected countries.
Source: Peterson et al. (2011, p. 8)

Figure 1 shows how Mexico is rated relative to selected other countries in the report's economic analysis in terms of its workforce's language capabilities (meaning the number of proficient English speakers) and the effectiveness of its education system to give its citizens skills that would serve the US market.

One concern noted in the economic report is the general weakness of the Mexican public education system. The 2006 PISA report was particularly damning: it ranked Mexico last in education attainment out of 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. The report noted 'only 24% of 25-to-34-year-old Mexicans have completed a baseline qualification at the upper secondary level, by far the lowest among OECD countries' (Hopkins, Ahtaridou, Matthews, & Posner, 2007, p. 11). This report served as a wake-up call for the government, and a series of ambitious reforms of the public education system were undertaken (Reyes Cruz, Murrieta Loyo, & Hernández Méndez, 2011). In fact, despite its low ranking, the Hopkins et al. (2007) report, which analyses the problems in Mexico's educational system that contributed to the low PISA ranking, lauds the seriousness with which the Mexican government took the PISA results, and commends (in not so many words) the government's strong commitment to neo-liberal policies and its membership in the OECD. Soon afterwards, a comprehensive education reform, the 2007–2012 *Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica* (Core Reforms of Basic Education) was initiated and included the new national English programme launched in 2009.

In fact, the teaching of English as a foreign language in Mexican public schools has a long history. Since 1954, all Mexican public school students who have completed their basic education⁴ have received three years of English instruction at the *secundaria* level (lower secondary or middle school, Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP], 2010, and perhaps since 1927, see Reyes et al., 2011). Figure 2 gives a timeline of language education policy in Mexico. Nevertheless, the level of teaching and the overall results in terms of students' acquisition of English is generally regarded as poor (Pamplon Irigoyen, 2012). Despite Mexico's proximity to the USA and close economic and social connections to English-speaking countries, relatively few Mexicans are conversationally proficient in English. The lack of English proficiency at the national level is, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, recognised by the Mexican government as a challenge to the country's regional and global competitiveness.

One proposal to increase the overall linguistic and communicative competence in English of Mexicans is to adopt an explicit policy of language acquisition (Wiley, 1996).

1810-1960s: Policy of <i>castellanización</i> for all Mexicans in national language, Spanish, and eradication of indigenous languages
1955: Three years of English included as a foreign language in middle school (<i>secundaria</i> , grades 7-9)
1970s: Indigenous Intercultural-Bilingual Education system established
1980s-2000s: Significant expansion of private “bilingual” primary schools
1990s: Many universities establish BA TEFL majors
2000s: Some states establish programs for teaching English in primary schools
2009: National Ministry of Education includes English as part of the public K-6 curriculum; compulsory education extended to K-12
2009-2018: National English Program expanded to all public schools
2031: All high school graduates to be proficient in English

Figure 2. A general timeline of language policy in Mexico.

This policy is premised on a ‘more and earlier’ approach to foreign language instruction (Hamid, 2010) and aims to begin teaching English in public schools from kindergarten (Nunan, 2003; see also Sierra & Padilla, 2003 and Terborg, Garcia, & Moore, 2006 for an overview of the historical context of the USA and English in Mexico). In a sense, the policy marks a shift for Mexico from a model of *elite bilingualism* to *macroacquisition*. Historically, only private schools offered bilingual instruction in primary school, and only about 10% of Mexican parents can afford to enrol their children in private education.⁵ As a result, access to learning English became another means for Mexico’s elites to control the reproduction of linguistic and cultural capital. However, there has been a growing recognition that having a few, well-educated persons with English will not serve Mexico during the twenty-first century and that the country needs to re-equip to respond to the linguistic demands of what Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996) refer to as the *new work order* (Cameron, 2002).

Within the last few years the Mexican government has taken two major steps towards significantly increasing the amount of English instruction that public school students receive. First, in 2009 the Ministry of Education (SEP) began the implementation of a new programme to provide 2½ hours per week of English instruction in all years of primary schooling (100 hours per year, totalling 700 hours), from kindergarten to sixth grade. This programme is called the PNIEB. The second initiative was to expand compulsory education through high school (called *preparatoria* or *bachillerato* in Mexico). The results of these two measures are that, when fully implemented, students will study English as a foreign language during all 13 years of K-12 education.⁶ As it is conceptualised, the articulated curricula from pre-primary to secondary defines student progress in terms of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) and will allow students to progress from the true beginner or A0 level in primary up to a B2 or ‘independent user’ level.⁷ Such an achievement would represent a major improvement in the general level of Mexicans’ English proficiency, generating and more equitably distributing significant linguistic capital. It would also put the country well ahead of other Latin American nations in terms of English language skills. By the 2011–2012 school year, the programme had been implemented in almost 20,000 schools in all 32 states, with the ultimate goal of having full coverage of English in primary schools by 2018.

Whether these goals are realistic, however, is open to debate. The expansion of ELT in Mexico faces some considerable challenges. The programme involves the development of new curricula, textbooks, and materials, and creating the organisation and infrastructure in each state to run the programme, as well as the hiring and training of tens of thousands of teachers.

The national English programme in Mexico

The total population of public primary schools in Mexico is 14.7 million students in approximately 100,000 schools (National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information [INEGI], 2010). There are several different types of primary schools: because of lack of infrastructure and space constraints in urban areas, many schools are divided into separate morning and afternoon shifts; students in each shift study about 5½ hours a day. There are also a growing number of extended day or ‘full-time’ schools. In some villages, there are also schools belonging to the indigenous education system (called *Educación Bilingüe Intercultural*) where students are already instructed bilingually in the national language and one of Mexico’s 62 autochthonous languages.

Prior to the start of the PNIEB in 2009, 21 of 32 state governments had already initiated English programmes. Of the earlier state programmes, most of these were modest in terms of their resources and coverage; they were generally limited to the state capital and less than 10% of students received English instruction. A few regions – notably Tamaulipas, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Sonora along the US border, and Morelos and Aguascalientes in the central region – had developed strong state programmes. In other regions, the local parents’ committee would sometimes take a voluntary collection and ask the principal to hire an extracurricular teacher. Most often, however, children did not receive any English instruction until seventh grade. For their part parents generally feel that English is valuable and are very supportive of their children learning English as young as possible.

The establishment of the national English programme was approved by the legislature and the teachers’ union in 2008 under the *Alliance for Educational Quality*, and codified by the Ministry of Education as part of ‘Acuerdo 592’, a broad set of educational reforms meant to strengthen and modernise the Mexican public education system (SEP, 2011). The PNIEB programme was launched in 2009–2010, although the curriculum was not finalised until 2011. The programme was to be funded 30% by the national ministry and 70% by each state (although Perales Escudero, Reyes Cruz, & Murrieta Loyo (2012) note that in one state they studied, which hardly seems the exception, there was no state money allocated, and almost all the federal funding was designated for salaries, leaving the state coordinator only US\$3600 to operate the programme for the whole fiscal year). By the 2011–2012 school year, it had been implemented in about 20,000 preschools and primary schools. This represents less than 11% of the total number of K-6 schools, although in some states the percentage of schools was far higher or lower, and in most cases the programme was introduced in the state capital or other larger urban areas. The ministry’s plan was to increase the number of schools in 2012–2013 overall to 45,000, although in several cases stand-offs over funding actually caused the programme to contract in some states, and in three states the programme was suspended with several hundred teachers laid off.

During 2011–2012 the ministry also brought the existing English programme in secondary schools into the PNIEB, where it is to be gradually articulated with the primary programme as students finishing in the primary school programme move to secondary

school. One concern is that students who do obtain an equivalent of A1+ or A2 level (CEFR scale) by sixth grade would arrive at secondary school and be placed in an English class alongside peers who did not study English in primary. The result would be, as one teacher said, ‘starting with colors, numbers and the verb *to be* all over again’.

Curriculum and textbooks

The curriculum is set by the national Ministry of Education. At the middle school level, the ministry abandoned the previous audiolingual model in 1994 and adopted a model based on *communicative language teaching*. The teaching methodology and contents were re-organised in terms of language functions and skills. The curriculum implemented in 2009 with the PNIEB is framed as a sociocultural approach (Vargas & Ban, 2011), and extends the communicative approach. Relying on Vygotskian learning theory, it emphasises competencies and what it terms three ‘learning environments’: the academic, literary, and familial/communitarian. Language functions⁸ are called ‘social practices’ and ‘competencies’, and emphasise contextualised engagement with the target language. For example, the curriculum states the general goals for the first four years of the programme (grades K-3) as (SEP, 2010, p. 22, emphasis in original):

The purpose of English Language Teaching for Cycle 1 in Basic Education is to raise students’ awareness about the existence of a language different from their own and to get them acquainted with English by developing *specific competencies* particular to routine and familiar *social practices of the language*, through the interaction among students and spoken and written texts belonging to various social environments[...] Therefore, at the end of this cycle, students are expected to:

- Acknowledge the existence of other cultures and languages.
- Acquire motivation and a positive attitude towards the English language.
- Begin developing basic communication skills, especially the receptive ones.
- Reflect on how the writing system works.
- Get acquainted with different types of texts.
- Start exploring children’s literature.
- Use some linguistic and non-linguistic resources to give information about themselves and their surroundings.

Whereas the ministry develops its own textbooks for other subject areas, which are distributed for free for students to keep, for the new English programme they asked publishers to develop a set of books. Because the curriculum had yet to be finalised, and the publishers who produced materials for the private market did not understand the new pedagogical model underlying the reform, they had a difficult time developing the contents and methodology. Furthermore, rather than choose one book, the ministry accepted all proposals that had been submitted, and ended up publishing 12 different sets of books. This has created significant logistical problems in distributing a complete set of the same book to each classroom, and in most cases publication delays meant that the books did not arrive until several months after the school year began. The books are of uneven quality, and some do not line up with the curriculum very well (Castro, 2013).

Teachers

The Ministry of Education estimates that in order to reach its goal of 100% implementation of the programme in all schools across the country by 2018, it will need approximately

98,000 English teachers. One concern at the outset was that the coordinators charged with hiring new teachers would give in to pressures to give preference to applicants with family or political connections but who did not have the language or educational requirements. Additionally, one of the recognised weaknesses of English teaching in the secondary grades is the teachers' lack of English proficiency. To this end, the national ministry specified an 'ideal profile' and 'basic profile' for new PNIEB teachers, stipulating the minimum requirements for candidates: the preferred qualifications are a B2 level of English on the CEFR scale and some kind of prior teacher training or certificate. However, they did not have the means of enforcing or even checking if these guidelines were being followed, and the national teachers union had for several years been actively resisting any external certification process for teachers.

Nonetheless, an external evaluation of the pilot phase of the programme (2009–2012) indicated that most state coordinators had followed hiring guidelines, and where there were not enough applicants matching the profiles, preference had usually been given to candidates who speak English over those with a lower level and teaching credentials (Sayer, 2012). Often, these were individuals who had come from other fields, especially tourism and business, or in some cases were children of migrant returnee families who had gone to school and learned English in the USA. The evaluation found that nationally 33.4% ($n=425$) had a level B2 or better ('independent user' on CEFR scale); by comparison Cárdenas and Miranda (2014) report that in one region in Colombia, only 17.1% of teachers surveyed ($n=136$) were at the designated minimum level for teachers' English proficiency – the B2 band or above – and only 1.2% had advanced-level proficiency (C1 band). In 2012 near the end of the pilot phase in Mexico, the programme had only been implemented nationally in less than 10% of schools, and most state coordinators reported that they were already having difficulty finding teachers who met the minimum profile. Hence without extensive capacity building of teacher preparation programmes it is unclear where the rest of the teachers will come from.

Despite the realignment of the curriculum and the introduction of new terminology (social practices, zone of proximal development, and learning environments), teachers who had been trained in communicative language teaching approaches generally felt quite comfortable with the sociocultural approach, since it also placed an emphasis on interaction and the development of language skills and communicative competence. Ramírez Romero, Sayer, and Pamplón Irigoyen (2014) document the implementation of the programme from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders: students, parents, English teachers, regular classroom teachers,⁹ principals, and coordinators. They note:

we also found evidence that the more communicative and student-oriented lessons brought by many of the English teachers may have some positive effect with [regular classroom] teachers, who often stay in the classroom to mark papers during English lessons and are thus exposed to alternate teaching models. (Ramírez Romero et al., 2014, p. 1034)

The actual form the programme has taken has varied greatly from state to state. Obviously, implementing a national educational policy in a large and diverse country will spawn uneven results. So in spite of the top-down approach taken by the ministry in setting the curriculum (including contents and hours of instruction), textbooks, pedagogical model, profiles of teachers, and so forth, the following descriptions of the programme's implementation in three states will give the reader a sense of how the same policy has been enacted differently according to the context and resources available.

Tamaulipas

Tamaulipas is in the northeast corner of Mexico and shares a long border with the US state of Texas. The state English programme began as an initiative of the governor in 2002 and was well funded. Importantly, a semi-autonomous Department of English was created within the state Ministry of Education, and the director was given control of hiring, textbook adoption, and teacher development. They hired a large cadre of teachers with good English proficiency and partnered with a commercial ELT publishing company to train them in communicative teaching methods. Under the state programme, approximately 75% of public K-6 students received English instruction. When the state programme was folded into the national programme in 2009, they used the additional federal funds to expand the programme and became the first of Mexico's 32 states to offer English classes to 100% of public primary school children.

The programme administrators have consciously worked to connect the prestige associated with learning English to their programme. The teachers are easily recognisable by their white collared shirts embroidered with the distinctive programme logo. The programme has its own website, which features innovative content such as a podcast radio show produced by students. Students also participate in statewide spelling bees and writing competitions; for the latter, their publishing partner produces a booklet of the winning stories to include in school libraries across the state.

Each teacher teaches between four and eight groups per day, and working full-time earns about US\$800 per month. Because there are not enough schools, most schools in Mexico are divided into two 5½-hour shifts; that is, the same physical buildings have a morning *matutino* shift and an afternoon *vespertino* shift. Full-time teachers often cover 5–6 groups in the morning in one school and 2–3 groups in the afternoons. Although all regular classroom teachers and most administrative positions in schools in Mexico are unionised (and the teachers union is one of the most powerful in Mexico), the English teachers are hired with a special non-union contract, though they do have some benefits and relatively high job stability. Teachers prepare their lessons according to the general national syllabus and submit their lesson plans online to their regional supervisor, who is responsible for about 50–75 teachers. The supervisors observe each of their teachers about three times per semester and also work on programme development and training workshops.

Mexico City

Mexico City, properly known as México Distrito Federal, is a sprawling urban area of 21 million people in the middle of the country, home to both the world's richest man (Carlos Slim, owner of Mexico's telephone monopoly) and some of the poorest. The city has many private schools, including elite English-medium-of-instruction academies; others adopt a bilingual CLIL (content and language integrated learning) approach, often using mainstream textbooks from the USA to teach the content areas (Sayer & López Gopar, 2015). However, 90% of children who attend public schools received no English instruction in the primary grades until the PNIEB was implemented in 2010. Unlike Tamaulipas, there was no previous English programme to build off of, so the new programme had to be built from scratch. Without an antecedent, the administrators decided to begin the programme modestly. Rather than create a special category of non-unionised English teachers, they recruited from within the existing ranks of teachers, offering incentives to current teachers with good English skills to convert their appointment from regular classroom teacher to English teacher, and reassigning appointments of retiring teachers to create positions for

English teachers within the union. The result has been a stable group of teachers with very low turnover, allowing administrators to train a core group of teachers.

Another characteristic of the programme in the national capital is that it was begun in 'extended schedule' or full-time schools. In order to improve educational achievement, the Ministry of Education is encouraging extending the school day from 5½ to 7 hours. Often, this is done in schools where the neighbourhood's demographics have shifted, and enrolments have dropped, allowing them to close the afternoon school and convert it to a full-time school. Moreover, in most of these schools, there are extra classroom spaces, which can be used as dedicated English classrooms. Rather than 'teaching off the cart', English teachers in these schools can decorate and equip their own classrooms. Whereas many urban schools typically have 40–50 students per group, these classes are often smaller than 25. However, because they are focused on building the programme in full-time schools with unionised teachers, the programme in Mexico City has grown very slowly: as of 2013 only about 2% of the K-6 public school population is receiving English instruction. By going after the 'low-hanging fruit', or schools with optimal conditions for implementing the programme and with a small cadre of unionised teachers, the programme has been very successful, but only on a small and perhaps symbolic scale; it is difficult to see how the current programme can be expanded quickly enough to come anywhere close to the target of 100% coverage by 2018 set by the national ministry.

Michoacán

Michoacán is a large, mostly agrarian state in western Mexico. It is the home to the migratory monarch butterflies; it also has the highest rate of out-migration to the USA. However, since the recession hit in the USA in 2008, many families have returned to rural communities in Michoacán and the rest of Mexico, and the country's educational system is experiencing the phenomenon of trying to incorporate transnational children schooled in the USA – and in some cases dominant in English with limited literacy skills in Spanish – into the Mexican school system.¹⁰ Overall, Michoacán has amongst the lowest educational attainment (29th of 32 states, average 7.4 years) and literacy rates (INEGI, 2010).

The national English programme began in Michoacán in 2010, and like Mexico City there was no prior state programme. There was pressure on administrators to expand the programme relatively quickly, and within the first two years more than 300 teachers were hired and trained. The teachers were given a non-union contract, and make US \$5.40 per class taught (no pay for planning or marking); a full-time teacher has about 30 contact hours per week, and earns an average of less than US\$500 monthly for 10 months, with no benefits. Financial disputes within the state ministry also caused the suspension of teachers' pay for over four months in 2011–2012. Because of the low and irregular pay, there is high turnover, and most teachers have to work a second job, often teaching English in high school, weekend language centres, or private schools. This instability makes it difficult to train teachers and develop the programme.¹¹ Furthermore, Michoacán is one of the epicentres of narcoviolence in Mexico, where approximately 70,000 have been killed in drug-related violence between 2006 and 2012. Hence many of the positions in rural areas go unfilled because English teachers in the cities do not want to risk the commute, given the low wages. The English programme has yet to be implemented in indigenous P'urhépecha-speaking communities, which are farther from the cities and belong to the Bilingual-Intercultural Education System.¹²

Taken together, these cases illustrate the variety of challenges and responses to those challenges that are faced in trying to implement an ambitious national language education policy in a large and diverse country. As in the Tamaulipas case, the northern border states have several advantages, in that their proximity to the USA provides a larger pool of English speakers to hire from. The largely successful implementation of the programme there highlights the disparities in the Mexican education system between the north and south. Using adequate state funding, they have created the administrative infrastructure and hired and trained a strong group of non-union faculty, allowing them to expand the programme fairly quickly to the majority of schools.

Like the Mexico City case, in other areas the expansion has been more modest. The teachers' union has pushed back against non-union positions, and the transition to designate union positions for qualified English teachers has been slow. As in Michoacán, in most of the country the programme has been introduced largely in state capital and urban areas, but the percentage of schools where the programme is operating is still less than 50% in many states. The allocation of federal and state monies to the programme has caused chronic problems and disruptions of the programme in some states. In rural areas, the programme has yet to have a major impact, and its effective implementation has been complicated by the lack of teachers, poor integration with the indigenous-bilingual education system, and by the insecurity caused by the on-going narcoviolence in some areas.

PELT: policy and practice in Mexico

Whereas historically in Mexico only a small number of elites attending private schools could acquire a functioning level of English proficiency, the current policy of PELT adopts a curriculum that, on paper, would allow everyone who finishes secondary education to become proficient in English. This would give average Mexicans access to a significant source of linguistic capital. Clemente and Higgins (2008) and Sayer (2012) provide ethnographic accounts of Mexicans learning English and its impact on their personal and professional trajectories. Individually, the policy would give people attending public schools opportunities for better jobs and concomitant economic mobility they did not previously have, and on a national level it improves Mexico's global competitiveness and attractiveness as a destination for BPO. Due to the prestige of English, the policy also makes good politics; the PNIEB has been almost universally well received by parents because the government is providing something for free that they either could not afford previously or used to have to pay extra for.

A fundamental set of questions we should be asking about PELT policies is: does PELT lead to real social and economic advantages (Grin, 2008)? If so, for whom? Does it foment socioeconomic equality, or actually exacerbate existing inequalities? The political economy of PELT in Mexico, as elsewhere, can be read in at least two ways.

Van Parijs (2011) argues that English lingua franca is a force for global equality. The move towards the adoption of PELT seems to be a key policy towards the macroacquisition of the language, especially in developing economies in the so-called expanding circle countries where English has traditionally been widely used. However, given the problems with the education systems in many of these countries, it is difficult to see how the policy can be successfully adopted in short order. In particular, in Mexico as in other Latin American countries, problems in finding, training, and retaining qualified teachers are compounded by weaknesses of the public education system. To address this, the other part of Van Parijs' (2011) argument is that developed countries also benefit from the increased

economic activity and standards of living that a lingua franca enables, and should be subsidising emerging countries development of English.

Ricento (2013) takes a more critical stance, arguing, on the one hand, that the current role of English as the preeminent global language does not exactly fit the traditional role of lingua franca as a transient, fairly neutral vehicle of intercultural communication, but rather is becoming entrenched as part of the means by which inner circle countries are able to maintain advantageous economic and political positions. On the other hand, the term ‘acquiring English’ in developing countries remains fraught with polemic issues of access to quality English instruction, and questions of which varieties or Englishes one has access to. While the effects of PELT to provide opportunities and ameliorate poverty is taken as self-evident, Mufwene (2010) points to work by Tollefson (2000), Bruthiaux (2002), and Grin (2001) and argues that the perceived need for English in developing countries is based largely on the construction of the myth of global English, the ideology that equates the language with positive notions of development, mobility, competitiveness, and opportunity.

Cha and Ham (2008) analyse the relation between policies, curricula, and economic conditions in countries that have moved towards including and increasing English instruction in public education. They argue that the inclusion of English often does not follow a ‘functional’ approach that responds to local conditions and needs for the language, but rather an ‘isomorphic’ approach that responds instead to the institutional dynamics of the world-culture system:

In the modern world system, which consists of not merely economic networks, but also transnational cultural rules and values, national educational system are by and large built on the basis of highly rationalized world education models. The school curriculum, and integral component of the modern educational system, is expected to share the same quality: the legitimacy of a body of school knowledge that is ‘isomorphic’ with the world curriculum model is mostly taken for granted, regardless of its immediate utility. (Cha & Ham, 2008, p. 321)

It is clear that the PNIEB in Mexico is part of a trend towards the proliferation of public PELT and is intricately linked to a neo-liberal discourse of English lingua franca, globalisation, and economic opportunity (Sayer, 2015). However, many critical language policy scholars have questioned the assumptions and ideology upon which this discourse is constructed, and interrogated the policies and their purported goals of promoting social and economic equality (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012; Mufwene, 2010; Phillipson, 2000; Ricento, 2012).

This is not to say, however, that the stakeholders within the PNIEB are naïve or unaware of the contradictions of English education (cf. Perales Escudero et al. (2012) and Ramírez Romero et al. (2014) for a fuller presentation of stakeholders’ perspectives). Parents will proudly recount that their child can understand Hollywood movies without reading the subtitles, but explain that they cannot help their children with their English homework and bemoan the fact that unlike when they were in school, nowadays you have to know English to be considered an educated person. Teachers will agree that English is important, but point out the irony that the number of hours of Mexican history in the curriculum was reduced to make room for the gringos’ language. One coordinator took a longer view, seeing the need for Mexico to learn English as a linguistic arms race against the Chinese, to keep them from stealing Mexican jobs from international companies. One school principal I spoke to used the interview as an opportunity to rail against US imperialism and globalisation, but then went on to explain that his teachers were the best because

they had travelled to the USA and spoke English very well, and consequently he was proud that his school was recognised for having the best English classes. He concluded: 'What choice do we have [but to teach English]? We either learn it or we learn it, so we might as well get to it and learn it right.' His statement captures nicely the ambivalence many Mexican educators feel between the begrudging pragmatic acceptance of the value of English as linguistic capital for students' future socioeconomic opportunities, wariness about the neo-liberal implication of this language education policy implies for the direction of the Mexican education system, and their desire as educators to implement at the school and classroom level a programme that actually has an impact on the lives of students.

Finally, given the variability in success of the implementation of the programme in different parts of the country, it is fair to ask whether the national English programme is actually evening out the disparity of socioeconomic opportunities, or simply reinforcing them? Do the greater opportunities to learn English in public schools in Tamaulipas than in Michoacán actually exacerbate the inequalities between the two states? In the long run and once the programme is fully functioning, it may have a levelling effect across regions or social classes, but in the short term it may be having the opposite effect. On the other hand, it can be argued that the national programme's one-size-fits-all approach ignores the sociolinguistic reality that English is in fact more relevant and important for students in the northern border states than it is for students from other areas. Hopefully, language education policy and curriculum decisions made as the programme moves forward will be informed by debates about the role of English in Mexican schools, and what models best support social and educational equity.

Expanding English in public primary schools: implications

The expansion of English in the public primary curriculum in Mexico is best understood as a language education policy that reflects a perceived need to have a larger percentage of the general population proficient in the language. At the national level, this is based on the assumption that more English speakers are needed to support the country's aspirations to become more globally competitive. At the individual level, English is said to 'open doors', leading to greater job prospects and social and economic mobility. Here, I have argued that the introduction of this policy has several dimensions that make it relevant to broaden the language policy and planning (LPP) discussion about the role of English language instruction in the public school curriculum.

First, I suggested that the policy represents a shift away from a model of elite bilingualism, towards a model of macroacquisition. Whereas historically the ability to develop English skills was largely a function of who had access to private education and bilingual schooling, under recent education reforms the new paradigm extends English instruction to all 13 years of K-12 education, with a projected result that all high school graduates should be conversationally fluent. The programme is to be fully implemented by 2018, meaning that kindergarteners entering the school system then would be graduating by 2031. The analysis I presented poses several challenges to reach this goal. The fact that Spanish is a strong regional and global language somewhat ameliorates the urgency to acquire English. Most pressingly, results from the PISA evaluations and market analyses conclude that the Mexican education system is weak and inefficient, and that the current overall English proficiency of the general population is quite low. The cases included from three states illustrate the complexity of issues faced across Mexico's 32 states in implementing the programme, ranging from serious problems of instability in funding teacher salaries,

the status of English teachers within the teachers union, the difficulties finding qualified English speakers to fill teaching positions, and the lack of articulation of the English programme with the indigenous-bilingual education system.

Second, the Mexican programme reflects the larger trend in PELT. This trend is decidedly towards a ‘more and earlier’ approach (Hamid, 2010), expanding English instruction by pushing it increasingly into younger grades. Nowhere has the trend been more pronounced than in the public education curricula of developing countries, what Johnstone (2009) calls the ‘Third Wave’ of PELT policies. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, he explains the growth has been centred particularly in Asia and, I would add, in Latin America. The Mexican Ministry of Education’s programme parallels, but is even more ambitious than, similar initiatives begun during the 2000s in other Latin American countries, notably Colombia, Chile, and Argentina. In post-colonial English contexts such as India (Mathew, 2012) or Tanzania (Vavrus, 2002), PELT policies are typically debated as a *medium-of-instruction* issue. In Malaysia, Ali, Hamid, and Moni (2011) and Hardman and A-Rahman (2014) document how the question of best to craft an English in primary education policy has gone back and forth as policy-makers try to balance very real concerns over strengthening the national language Bahasa Malaysia, offering education in vernaculars, and maintaining high levels of English acquisition. In other countries, the expansion of English in the lower grades poses problems for how to achieve ‘communicative’ pedagogies, such as Bangladesh (Hamid & Honan, 2012), Turkey (Elgün-Gündüz, Akcan, & Bayyurt, 2012), and China (Rui & Chew, 2013). In countries like Cambodia (Clayton, 2006) and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011), English has largely displaced French, Chinese, and Russian as their governments have oriented towards English as the preferred second language in order to promote investment.

An analysis by Cha and Ham (2008) concludes that as of 2005 English was included in 70% of primary curricula throughout the world, and 10 years on this figure is undoubtedly much higher. The complexity found in the Mexican programme has also been documented in other contexts. Kaplan, Baldauf, and Kamwangamalu (2011) examine PELT education policies in developing countries, and conclude that there at least 12 different associated problems. These range from the practical issues of training teachers in effective second language teaching methodologies and developing appropriate materials, to maintaining the continuity of money and resources when governments change and the effects of large-scale English language instruction on maintenance and vitality of vernacular/indigenous languages. They point out that implementing primary English programmes in public schools in developing countries with weak educational infrastructures and shortages of qualified teachers requires tremendous amounts of investment for what often end up being only minimal returns.

In Mexico, the policy implications are far from clear. We can say however that it is incumbent on educators and educational policy-makers to find an appropriate balance for investing in the expansion of the programme, recognising that state programmes need to be built locally. At the broader level, stakeholders should also engage with the ambivalence expressed by the principal who said ‘What choice do we have? Either we learn it, or we learn it.’ This calls for reflexivity and further debate about how the main policy goal – having all high school students graduate with English – can actually support an effort to reduce the widening social and economic disparities that the country faces.

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Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge gratefully my research collaborators, especially co-principle investigators on several projects: Ruth Ban (Barry University, Florida) and Magdalena López (ITESO, Guadalajara).
2. According to this analysis, Mexico was rated 'low' on the cusp of 'very low' in English proficiency (EF, 2012).
3. In fact, the national programme in Chile is called 'English Opens Doors Programme' (Matear, 2008).
4. Starting in 2011, compulsory basic education was expanded from grades 1–9 to K-12. However, the average level of educational attainment is only 8.4 years, and varies widely according to geographical region (three years higher in the north than the south) and gender (0.3 difference, INEGI, 2010).
5. This figure was cited to me by the director of a regional association on private schools. Hopkins et al. (2007) put private school attendance at 10–12% of the total population, a figure they report is much higher (compared to an average of 3%) than most other OECD countries, which they attribute to the lack of confidence of the Mexican middle classes in the public education system.
6. The previous curriculum at lower secondary included a block generically called 'Foreign Language'; in the new curriculum it is now labelled 'Second Language: English'.
7. The Mexican scale is called *Certificación Nacional de Nivel de Idioma (CENNI)*, and breaks down the CEFR bands into smaller ranges that fit the Mexican curriculum. It also worth noting that although the CEFR is a European model, the PNIEB curriculum was developed by Mexican educational experts as part of broader reform of the education system (see Wedell (2003) for a history of Western-led teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) educational reform in post-colonial contexts).
8. Language functions (doing things with language, e.g. introducing yourself, asking for directions, etc.) and notions (expressed through language, e.g. time, distance, etc.) are the organising principles of communicatively oriented L2 syllabi.
9. The regular teacher, called the *titular*, teaches the rest of the subjects in Spanish and may have been unaccustomed to 'giving up' their classroom to the English teachers, who have to teach largely 'off the cart' by bringing their materials from classroom to classroom.
10. The Binational Migrant Education Program (PROBEM) was formed in 1982 to help migrant families enrol children in US schools. Since 2005, the programme has been successful in addressing issues of academic mobility for returnee families by allowing transnational students to enrol in the correct grade level by getting Mexican school administrators to accept records from American schools; the programme has not explicitly addressed language- and pedagogy-related issues of transnational students (see Zúñiga, Hamann, & Sánchez García, 2008).
11. Despite the serious difficulties I describe here in getting the programme running in the state, I should add that I was invited to observe classes in several towns in Michoacán and do a series of workshops with the teachers, and was personally extremely impressed by the dedication and professionalism of the teachers and administrators in working with limited resources (even while their pay was suspended) in a challenging context.
12. Like Michoacán, in most states it is unclear how the PNIEB will be integrated into the indigenous education system. Additionally, because of the economic conditions that foment migration and diaspora, many indigenous communities are now on the receiving end of transnational (and often English-speaking) children arriving from the USA and having attended American schools.

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