Young EFL students' engagements with English outside the classroom

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Following the global trend in primary English language instruction, the Ministry of Education in Mexico has recently included English as an additional language as part of the national curriculum for primary grades. Some have questioned whether early EFL programmes can work, given the few instructional hours per week and limited exposure to the target language in non-English speaking environments. However, this article reveals that children in EFL settings often use English more than is commonly thought, and in surprising ways. It examines the types of engagements that primary school students in Mexico have with English when the teacher is not around. These engagements, especially through music, movies, and video games, illustrate the creative ways children draw on their emerging linguistic resources and employ a variety of tools to accomplish a range of communicative functions in English. The results of the study outlined in this article suggest that they can be sources from which teachers can draw pedagogical inspiration.

The National English Programme in Mexico

In 2009, the Mexican Ministry of Education made instruction of English as an additional language a compulsory part of the national public primary school curriculum from Grades kindergarten (K) to 6. This new early start policy is called the National English Programme for Basic Education (or PNIEB, for its Spanish acronym), and reflects the global trend towards a greater emphasis on teaching English earlier in the school curriculum (Enever, Moon, and Raman 2009). Elsewhere in Latin America, English is also seen as important; in Peru, for example, English is seen as 'hard currency' and equated to the US dollar (Niño-Murcia 2003). Chile has recently implemented the national English Opens Doors Programme for public primary, which is explicitly linked to the discourse of learning English from a young age to promote greater socio-economic opportunities (Matear 2008). Likewise, in Mexico, English is seen as an important form of cultural capital (Clemente 2007). The Mexican Programme represents the largest expansion of English language instruction in the country's history. Whereas previously learning English in early grades was only available to children who could afford to attend private bilingual schools, this policy of 'elite bilingualism' is being replaced by a policy of 'macroacquisition' (Sayer 2014). Just to implement the Programme

in Grades K–6 (ages 5 to 12) will require the hiring of 99,500 new EFL teachers. By the time the Programme is fully implemented in 2018, all students will receive 13 years of English instruction, and should reach a B1 or B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference.

Another interesting aspect of the PNIEB is its adoption of a sociocultural curriculum. Since the 1990s, the EFL curriculum in public lower secondary schools (Grades 7–9) has been based on a communicative language teaching approach, imported from the BANA (English-speaking) countries without much tailoring for the local context (cf. Holliday 2005). The new approach is meant to respond, and in fact incorporate into the lesson, the realities and everyday lived experiences of the students. Thus, for example, instead of 'communicative functions', the curriculum is organized in terms of 'social practices' (Vargas and Ban 2011). That is, the pedagogy of most contemporary EFL lessons is based on some iteration of a communicative language teaching approach and emphasizes communicative functions such as 'making a request' or 'inviting someone to a party'. The sociocultural curriculum of the PNIEB takes this a step further by asking teachers to design activities and outcomes that are based on Mexican social practices and are therefore directly relevant to their students and the local context, such as having the students invite their parents' *compadres* and *comadres* (formalized social relations in Mexico) to their sister's *quiceñera* party (a girl's 15th birthday). Likewise, children may compare and contrast the cultural practices associated with the traditional Mexican holiday of Day of the Dead with the American custom of Halloween. Furthermore, the organization of the activities is designed around activities that mediate the development of cooperative work, a hallmark of the sociocultural approach.

The new Programme, however, is not without its critics. Some question the cost of the Programme; since most regular classroom teachers do not speak English, extra teachers will have to be hired. Secondly, to make room for two-and-a-half hours of English classes per week, time for other subjects has to be reduced, including Mexican history. Trading Mexican history for English is, understandably, a controversial move and has political implications, especially given the polemic history between Mexico and the United States. Finally, some question the efficacy of the Programme and its sociocultural curriculum, especially in an EFL setting (as opposed to an ESL setting) since students have limited or no exposure to the target language outside the classroom. With less than ten hours per month of English in the classroom and, according to critics, no chances to practise English outside of school, they argue that the Programme's proficiency objectives are simply not realistic.

As part of the effort to document the results of the new Programme, we were invited by the Ministry to undertake an impact study. Rather than only look at the results of tests to measure the students' levels and improvement, we decided to take an ethnographic approach. In keeping

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with the sociocultural emphasis of the curriculum, we wanted to look for ways to attune the contents of the new Programme to the actual lives of Mexican students. Therefore, instead of framing the study in terms of L2 skills—for example by measuring the results of the Programme in terms of receptive or productive skills—we conceptualized the impact of the Programme in terms of the children's 'engagements' with English. Our interest was to find out how children actually engaged with English beyond the classroom by asking the question: What do children do with English when the teacher is not around?

Design

We talked to 61 fifth and sixth grade students in 15 different schools who had begun the Programme in first or second grade. The schools were geographically spread across a state in central Mexico, and represented urban, suburban, and rural areas, as well as a range of socio-economic levels. We undertook 16 focus-group interviews with groups of four children, and asked them to talk about their English class and teacher, as well as their views about learning and using English. We gave them some scenarios and asked them how they would react, such as: 'The principal has asked you to volunteer at an information booth for the state festival. A girl from the United States who speaks English comes to your booth to ask some questions. What do you think she would ask? What would you want to tell her about your town?' We also interviewed the children's parents, and asked them to share their perceptions about the Programme. This was part of a broader study that also included classroom observations and interviews with teachers and administrators, as well as some quantitative measures of students' L2 gains. (Note that names used throughout are pseudonyms, and excerpts have been translated.)

What children do with English when the teacher is not around

Teachers consistently told us that one of the main obstacles the Programme faces is limited instruction time, especially, they said, because the students do not have opportunities to practise once they leave the classroom. As one teacher explained:

> It's not like the kids who go to the United States; they have it all around them. Here, the student leaves my room and doesn't think about English again until next class, because there's no chance to practice.

However, the children's and parents' comments did not support this view. In fact, one of the striking results was that the students use English for many functions and modalities outside the school context that their teachers did not seem to be aware of. The participants reported using English for a variety of communicative functions in their daily lives. In Extract 1, for example, one mother recalled that her children often chose to watch their favourite DVDs with the English soundtrack:

Extract 1

Mother: My son [watches] the spider movie, *Spiderman*. Sometimes they put it on and they start picking things up: 'Look Mom it's saying this'. And sometimes I'm

thinking 'why do they put it on like that [in English]?' But it seems like they're understanding. Me no, I'm just watching the characters jumping around; they're the ones who are understanding.

Interviewer: And are they translating it?

Mother: Sometimes translating it amongst themselves but sometimes just mimicking the sounds as they hear them.

Many others told similar stories. One father said: 'the music is what helps [my daughter] a lot. I mean *all* the music she listens to is in English'. Eleven-year-old Mateo explained that

the instructions [on my Xbox] are in English and like sometimes they tell you ... or like they say to push a button like the X button and move the stick to do this or that move, and so you try it out to see what happens and if you understand.[1]

Moreover, students reported using different tools to solve linguistic problems with English. In Extract 2, two children discuss how they received video games from relatives living in the United States or bought pirate versions at the local market that are in English. In order to advance through the levels, they had to develop strategies to figure out what was happening.

Extract 2

Damien: I have this video game it's like a little cube and all the instructions are in English [...]. It's called *Super Mario Sunshine*.

Interviewer: So to beat the level you have to figure out what they're saying in English ...?

Teresa: They talk ... and I have to open two tabs [windows on the computer]. One is the Google translator, and so I write it [what they say in the video game], and I see what it means. And then I go back to the game and back and forth like that until I get it.

A fair amount of English is needed to navigate the levels of video games. In the *Super Mario Sunshine* game, players have to interact with many characters who present them with problems and quests; as the characters talk, what they say appears as text 'close captioned' style at the bottom of the screen. For example, one of the characters suggests: 'The area around the Shine Gate is still quite bright. Perhaps you should check it out Master Mario'. Another says 'Bowser escaped into the graffiti! Mario, try spraying it with water'. Choosing the correct action for one's character in the game depends on being able to understand what other characters are saying. In other games, like *Spiderman,* there is no printed text, but the protagonist's allies and villains talk throughout. Gee (2007) has argued that many contemporary video games—he gives *Pokémon* as one example— promote the development of academic literacy and higher order

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thinking skills; he lists 36 learning principles that video games use that he argues should be incorporated in learning in school settings as well. Furthermore, he explains that children actually like difficult games: it is the challenge of having to figure out something that is hard that motivates learning, or what he calls 'pleasantly frustrating' (ibid.: 3). This study suggests that video games can have similar positive effects on English foreign language learning. It also provides instant feedback about whether or not they are understanding, what Gee calls 'situated meaning': as Mateo explained above, players read the directions, push the buttons, and move the joystick and according to what results they produce in the game, they can tell right away if they are getting it.

Therefore, one comical but perhaps not surprising result of the study is that the Xbox, Lady Gaga, and Spiderman turn out to be excellent English teachers. Amongst the uses of English outside the classroom, the children and parents identified 16 distinct functions, including:

1 Listening to **songs/music** in English (18, from pop to thrash and reggaeton).[2]

2 Watching **movies** in English (15, especially without subtitles).

3 **Video games** (15, many popular Xbox games come with English instructions).

4 **Internet** (8, to access English sites).

5 **Google Translate** (5, as a tool to translate words or texts in English).

6 **Television and cartoons** (5, using the options to put the soundtrack in English).

7 **Books** (4, in English, some sent by family members in the United States).

8 **Clothing tags** (3, reading tags on clothes from the United States).

9 Communicating with **family members in the United States** (2).

10 Reading **instruction manuals** of products that are in English (2).

11 Watching videos on **YouTube** in English (2).

12 Writing messages on **Facebook** (2).

13 Watching **iPod TV** (1).

14 Singing **karaoke** songs in English (1).

15 Taking a **Disney English course** on television (1).

16 **Writing emails** in English with Mexican and foreign friends (1).

The 'tag cloud' analysis in Figure 1 represents visually the students' answers about their uses of English. Note that the size of the word represents its relative importance in the dataset.

FIGURE 1
Uses of English in
daily life

Google translator
music karaoke movies
internet Facebook
email family in the U.S instruction manuals TV cartoons
video games tags on clothing
shows
Disney English courseipod TV
YouTube books

The relationship between the children studying English in primary school and using English in their daily lives seemed to form a kind of positive feedback loop. On the one hand, their classes seemed to help them resolve linguistic challenges they encountered with English outside the classroom, either by becoming more proficient (for example better able to understand the *Spiderman* movie and Lady Gaga songs) or by becoming more resourceful (for example problem-solving by using tools like Google Translate). On the other hand, the fact that they could use English more to get access to things they liked—movies, songs, and video games especially—also made them more motivated to study it in the classroom. English became less of an academic subject that you have to study because the grown-ups tell you so, and more of something that is associated with things that are cool, because they have nothing to do with school. This finding parallels similar attitudes documented amongst younger L2 English learners in Iceland (Lefever 2009).

Hence, we identified at least three positive effects that extend beyond the classroom and are likely the results of beginning to study English from a younger age.

1 A positive disposition towards English and willingness to look for opportunities outside of class to practise it.

2 Ability to use emerging linguistic resources and technological tools to understand English in authentic communicative contexts.

3 Access to a greater range of sociocultural possibilities through English, for example on the internet.

The following observations from parents exemplify each of these impacts:

Disposition
A mother described how today's children have a 'different chip' that allows them to use English without worrying about whether or not they will be able to understand:

> Well, I don't know what the instructions [in English] say. But them, for them it's like they have a different chip [in their brains], their chip is different than mine. For example, I look at it, and I haven't a clue, and I don't know how they do it but they seem to work it out, even though it's not like their English is perfect, but I'm telling you they just seem to get enough that they can figure it out ... with a few

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words here and there that they recognize, and they can stick them together to get the sentence. I don't know how they do it, but they just keep at it and keep going in the game, and they make even that look easy!

Ability

The following anecdote (Extract 3) shows how, from one mother's point of view, there is a clear and tangible result of her son studying English. She sees that he is able to understand native English speakers in a movie and proclaims 'look, there's the proof'.

Extract 3

Interviewer: Have you seen that [your children] having English classes has had any effects in that they can learn new things … with English?

Mother: Well simply that when we're watching a movie they're not sitting there translating it. They know, like all of sudden they're understanding some of the words, and that's great because I was so surprised. That's the proof it's working.

Access

We found ample evidence that children were able to use their English to access information, and actively looked for opportunities to use their English. As Extract 4 shows, this went beyond even doing their homework or projects assigned by their teacher.

Extract 4

Interviewer: And so you mean you have some family in the United States? Do you have much contact with them?

Mother: Yeah it's my mum and my two brothers.

Interviewer: In the United States?

Mother: And cousins, nieces and nephews.

Interviewer: And do they speak English?

Mother: [nods yes] In fact two of my children are in contact with them all the time because they use Facebook and so it's like a whole different way [to communicate], right? Um, for example my nephews [in the USA] they just speak English, only English, and so Emiliano [son] what he does if he doesn't get it he pastes it into Google translator or something like that … so well nowadays there's a million different tools.

The examples also illustrate that the various ways the children use English are interconnected. They are able to draw on their limited linguistic repertoire and access to tools to be creative problem solvers. For example, they communicate with family in the United States by using Facebook, and paste things they do not understand into Google

Translate to figure them out. Similarly, they described looking up tutorials on YouTube to discover how to get passed difficult parts of their video games. They described going on to internet sites to look up lyrics to the songs they were listening to in English.

Connecting learning English in and out of the classroom

The PNIEB in public elementary schools in Mexico, as in many countries rushing to include EFL in their curricula, is premised on a 'more and earlier' approach (Hamid 2010) to teaching English. That is, in order to compensate for the fact that EFL learners have limited exposure to the target language, they ought to take more English classes and start taking them younger. However, critics have pointed out that this approach can be expensive and difficult to implement, especially for underfunded education systems in developing countries where few teachers speak English. They also argue that the 'more and earlier' argument is largely based on popular conceptions of how second languages are acquired, that is, although many say that young children are like 'language sponges' and so it is better to start them earlier, empirical research to date is inconclusive about whether starting earlier with small amounts of formal language instruction (in this case, less than three hours per week) in non-English environments actually leads to greater acquisition than starting later (Pinter 2006: 29).

In this article, however, we are less focused on children learning English as a cognitive achievement, and instead approach it as a social and cultural achievement (following Gee op.cit.). We have suggested that one way of looking at the success of an early EFL programme is to examine what sorts of engagements children have with English outside the school setting. Whilst many teachers think that the exposure that children in EFL contexts have to the target language is negligible, the students and parents we talked to showed that this is a misconception. In fact, they described the multiple and creative ways that the children interacted in English. Although these were not the prototypical face-to-face interactions with English native speakers portrayed in ESOL textbooks, their uses of English were none the less authentic, meaningful, and most importantly, autonomously managed by the children themselves.

One clear implication is that teachers would benefit from taking a more ethnographic perspective towards their students, and find out what they like to do with English when she or he is not around. This is similar to what González, Moll, and Amati (2005) have termed a 'household funds of knowledge' approach. They argue that we should develop pedagogies that build from the lived experiences and know-how of our students and their families and communities. The children indicated that they were more enthusiastic about their English class because it gave them more access to doing things they liked, which we called a positive feedback loop. The teacher can nurture this loop by aligning and connecting in-school and out-of-school learning and use of English. It could take the form of activities or projects that are flexible and allow the students to bring in topics that are intrinsically motivating, such as making a Mario Brothers comic book based on the video game or producing a music video of a favourite song. Since many of the

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children's engagements reported here were more on the 'receptive' side of L2 skills development (for example listening to songs or watching movies), teachers could link and balance these with in-class activities geared towards more 'productive' language use (for example speaking and writing practice). In any event, as Pinter (op.cit.: 110) explains, the incorporation of students' out-of-school L2 practices entails the teacher giving up some control in order for young language learners to have 'choices' and 'voices' in the lessons, to opening up spaces that foster children's 'different sort of chip'.

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Notes

1 One reviewer raised an interesting question: Is Mateo actually comprehending the instructions in English, or just using trial-and-error until he gets the game to do what he wants? Based on the interview data, it is impossible to make a claim about comprehension; our purpose here is to document what the children reported to be their engagements with English: at least Mateo *thought* he was using his English to get through the game. However, it is not unreasonable to conclude that in this situation, the self-directed process of trial-and-error allows Mateo to build comprehension in real time by associating the instructions in English ('push the space bar to jump') with the corresponding actions in the game.

2 (X) refers to the number of tokens coded in the dataset.

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