Early Language Learning

Complexity and Mixed Methods

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Janet Enever and Eva Lindgren

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Peter Sayer, Ruth Ban and Magdalena López de Anda

The Need to Evaluate Primary English Language Programmes

This chapter describes the design of a large-scale evaluation of the pilot phase of an early English language programme in public elementary schools in Mexico. The researchers, at the behest of the Ministry of Education, were asked to document a range of outcomes to address the question of the broader effects of the programme on the students' learning and educational experiences. Therefore, they conceptualised the project as an *impact study* using a mixed methods approach (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). The development and implementation of the impact study of an early foreign language (FL) programme is described, including how the quantitative and qualitative components of the project were tailored to explore both the linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. The design allowed the researchers to look quantitatively at the second language (L2) gains students made across a range of contexts and socioeconomic levels. The qualitative component examined the types of connections between studying English and students' learning across other content areas in the curriculum, and the relation between the ways students used English inside and outside the classroom. The synergetic

result of utilising quantitative and qualitative data helped to inform the larger question of the value of early FL programmes on the educational and social experiences of Mexican children.

Across the globe, there has been a steady trend towards more children studying English for longer periods of time during their schooling and starting from a younger age (Enever & Moon, 2010). This 'English for everyone' (Hamid, 2010) or 'more and earlier' approach (Sayer, 2015) has been largely compelled by ministries of education who have included English as part of their public primary curricula. In developing countries, the decision to initiate primary English language teaching (PELT) programmes is based largely on two premises. First, the notion that for individuals, English skills equate with greater economic opportunity and hence social mobility. Likewise, at the national level, it is commonly accepted that a country surely needs to have a large number of its citizens to be competent in English in order for the nation to be economically competitive in the global marketplace. Second, PELT programmes are based on a folk theory of second language acquisition (SLA), whereby children are considered 'language sponges', who can soak up a foreign language with ease and hence it makes sense to start them as early as possible.

Although both of these premises for early English programmes are commonly accepted (Matear, 2008; Park & Wee, 2012), in fact there is a lack of empirical evidence about what types of programmes, pedagogies and materials are effective. Writing about the PELT programme in China, Knell and colleagues (2007) begin their paper by acknowledging: 'Instruction in English as a foreign language at an early age is becoming more common world-wide *even though the effects of this early instruction are not yet known*' (Knell *et al.*, 2007: 395, emphasis added). Most work in SLA has traditionally focused on adult learners and the true nature of the 'critical period hypothesis' has long been debated (Birdsong, 1999). Much of the work in SLA with younger learners has focused either on bilingual immigrant children (e.g. Cummins, 2000; Curtain & Dahlberg, 2010) or on instructed contexts in private schools and in Europe (Muñoz, 2006). Most of the recently implemented PELT programmes in developing countries, however, are English as a foreign language (EFL) programmes in public schools. They typically provide students with minimal exposure, generally only two to three hours per week of instruction.

Given the massive global investment in PELT, especially in resource-strapped developing countries, researchers need to respond to the question: what are the effects of minimal exposure English programmes as part of the public primary school curriculum? In this chapter, we describe the design of an *impact study* of the PELT programme in Mexico. The impact study methodology was developed to document the many linguistic, educational and social learning outcomes that a PELT programme could have, to account for how the social context shapes the programme and to include the voices of all the stakeholders involved. We describe the characteristics of the programme,

the design of the research using mixed methods and briefly highlight some of the main findings from the project in Mexico.

The English Programme in Mexico

The national programme in Mexico was launched in 2009 to introduce English as an additional language in public primary schools for all grades kindergarten through six (K-6). Historically, English instruction in the early grades had been limited to private schools and students in public schools did not study English until lower secondary (seventh grade, about age 12 years old). By the mid-2000s, several of the 32 states had launched state programmes for English and many others had small, local initiatives. In other schools, the principal worked with the parent associations to hire someone who knew English to teach extracurricular classes. Hence some students had access to English, but most did not and there were a wide variety of approaches and materials used of varying quality.

The national programme aims to provide classes to all students, and unifies instruction under a single curriculum. This ambitious plan represents the largest expansion of English instruction in Mexico's history, and the Ministry of Education estimates that when fully implemented it will require 98,300 teachers to instruct 14.7 million K-6 students across the country. Beginning in kindergarten, students are to receive 2½ hours of instruction per week, or about 100 hours each year. The curriculum projects the students' progression in terms of the levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale. With 700 hours of instruction, students should reach an A2 level by the end of elementary school, as shown in Figure 15.1.

The programme was introduced as part of a wider curriculum reform, which reoriented all subjects taught at the elementary and middle school

Q1

A0	A1	A2	B1
Grades K-2	Grades 3-4	Grades 5-6	Grades 7-9
300 hours	200 hours	200 hours	360 hours

Kindergarten | Elementary school | Middle school
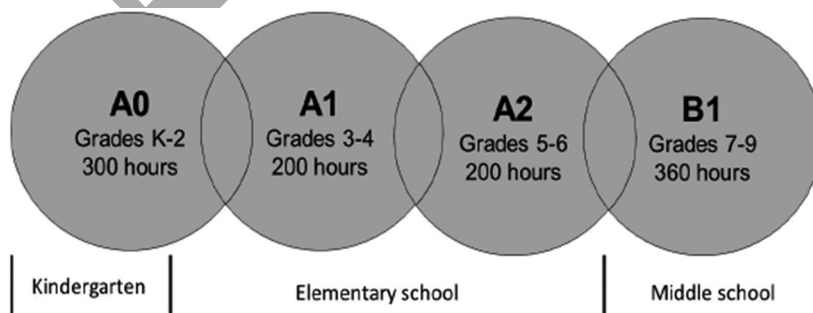
Source: Adapted from Mexican English Curriculum (SEP, 2011)

Figure 15.1 Progression in the Mexican programme
Source: Adapted from Mexican English Curriculum (SEP, 2010).

levels towards a sociocultural approach. This means that contents are organised around 'learning environments' (the home/community, ludic/play and academic/literary) and for English, that the language is situated within social practices of language (Vargas & Ban, 2011). The overall vision of the English programme is expressed by the Ministry as:

> The articulation of the teaching of English in all three levels of Basic Education [pre-school, elementary, and middle] 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. (Secretaria de Educación Pública, 2010: 21)

While the programme aims to significantly expand access to English for all Mexican children, its implementation has not been without challenges. Although it has been 90–100% implemented in several states, in other areas it is only operating in a small percentage of schools and in some cases been suspended because of administrative problems. On average, as of 2016, perhaps 25% of Mexican elementary students receive some English instruction, mostly in the urban areas.

Amongst the challenges are problems with production and distribution of textbooks and materials, the difficulty in expanding the programme to rural areas, particularly in indigenous communities, the creation of the administrative infrastructure to ensure that teachers receive timely payments and benefits, and perhaps most importantly, the availability of qualified teachers who have sufficient English proficiency (Ramírez Romero *et al.*, 2014). The hurdles the Mexican programme is experiencing are shared by other countries, where similar programmes have been launched. Other authors have noted that implementing PELT programmes in developing countries require large investments of resources and the shortage of qualified teachers is recognised as the main obstacle to building effective programmes (Davies, 2009; Kaplan *et al.*, 2011; Wu, 2012).

A Mixed-Methods Impact Study

This chapter describes the design of a large-scale evaluation of the pilot phase of an early English language programme in public elementary schools in the central state of Aguascalientes in Mexico. The impact study methodology was developed to document the many linguistic, educational and social learning outcomes that a PELT programme could have, to account for how the social context shapes the programme and to include the voices of all the

stakeholders involved. In fact, the methodology was developed organically over several years, as we the researchers worked with the Ministry administrators and programme coordinators to define what a comprehensive evaluation of the programme should consist of.[1] On the one hand, there was a stated need to assess the students' progress in terms of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards, both to provide an objective measurement of the overall linguistic gains, as well as to be able to identify and certify students who surpassed the required levels. On the other hand, the goal was to evaluate the programme in order to be able to carry out curriculum development and build teacher training courses, so we recognised that there were many other elements of the programme that ought to be evaluated in order to inform these activities. Richards (2001) explains that in language programme or curriculum evaluation there are three types of approaches: formative, illuminative and summative evaluations. He lists 13 aspects that can be evaluated, ranging from student learning outcomes to classroom processes, to materials and teacher training (Richards, 2001: 286–287). The aim of the impact study was to balance the formative, illuminative and summative goals. Rather than presume a priori which aspects were most important, we included various stakeholders so that they could tell us which aspects to prioritise.

We started the project by looking carefully at the curriculum document itself and talking to leaders in the Ministry. In the general objective cited above, the goals are stated in terms of 'multilingual and multicultural competencies', 'communicative challenges', 'a broader vision of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world' and 'respect [of] their own and other cultures'. Our overarching orienting question then became: how well is the programme fulfilling this vision? We realised that the answer to this question was going to have many and to capture the complexity we would need to include both quantitative and qualitative components, and include as many different types of participants as possible: students, English teachers, classroom teachers, parents, principals, programme coordinators and administrators.

We also studied other models and standards in language education. In particular, we found that the sociocultural approach as defined by the Mexican English programme fitted well with the standards of foreign language programmes defined by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The ACTFL's standards are called the 'Five Cs', for communication, communities, connections, comparisons and cultures (ACTFL, 1996). We added a sixth 'C', curriculum/programme, to include elements that related directly to the Mexican curriculum. Within this framework, we generated a more detailed set of research questions and aligned each question to the type of data we would collect. An example of one area is given in Table 15.1; note how the areas (*cultures*) and the ACTFL standards (2.1 and 2.2) align with its corresponding standard from the Mexican curricula, to the

Table 15.1 Alignment of framework, competencies and research questions

Framework and standards	Competencies defined by the Mexican curriculum	Research questions	Data sources
2. Cultures 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.	Students will recognise and respect differences between their own and other culture where English is spoken.	Q 2.1: How has the English programme contributed to students' development of global vision?	Interviews with focal groups of students Interviews with English teachers Interviews with classroom teachers
2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied.			

research question(s) we posed for that standard, and to the sources of data that we collected to address the question.

We then developed the instruments and protocols for each data source. For each project, we spent an intensive two weeks in the schools collecting data, followed by several months of transcribing, coding the qualitative data using NVivo and compiling the results of the quantitative measures. The main unit of analysis for the project was the school site. Therefore, a key aspect of the project was the selection of the schools that would constitute the sample. For each state, we chose 10 to 15 schools and the research team spent a full day at each site. The schools were selected to encompass as much diversity as possible, so as to allow us to compare across sites on the basis of urban/suburban/rural, socioeconomic level and other characteristics of Mexican schools (whether it was morning or afternoon shift and in a community identified as having 'high migration' to the United States).

The research team generally consisted of five to six members. We were all outsiders; that is, we were not teachers or administrators in the programme we were studying, though we had worked in English language teaching in Mexico for many years. The first two authors served as the principal investigators (PIs), directed the research team in the field, and conducted most of the observations and some of the interviews. They were also responsible for the analysis of the qualitative data. The third author was the project manager. She was the direct contact with the administrators in the Ministry and worked with the PIs to conceptualise the research questions

and design the methodology, supervised the administration of the quantitative instrument and did the analysis of the quantitative elements. The other members of the research team conducted the interviews with the children and administered the assessments. There were additional support members, especially for transcribing interviews and organising the logistics of school visits (getting permission forms, transportation between sites and organisation of digital files). Due to the scope of the project, the difficulty in arranging dates to fit the public school schedule and the relatively short intensive nature of the data collection, it was necessary to coordinate carefully beforehand all the pieces of the project. Admittedly, this became easier as we did several projects, making many mistakes along the way, but refining our methodology and becoming better able to anticipate the problems we were likely to encounter in the field.

Quantitative measures

The nature of the different types of data called for a mixed methods approach. Data about students' proficiency levels were obtained by applying standardised language proficiency tests[2] to a representative sample of sixth and eighth grade students, a quantitative measure. We also applied a survey to students; we wanted to find out how many of them studied English in private classes outside of school, whether they had ever lived in or travelled to the United States or other English-speaking countries, their level of satisfaction with their English classes and how much exposure they had to English outside the classroom in order to correlate their responses to the results on the test.

Based on earlier phases of the project we had found that for a given school, the success of the programme depended largely on how much support the principal gave to the English teachers. Since primary English teachers in Mexico are usually itinerant (they may be assigned to two or more schools and usually 'teach off the cart' and do not have their own classrooms), they depend heavily on the principal and regular classroom teachers to provide the physical and temporal spaces they need to work effectively. The principals' survey allowed us to gauge how much support the teachers and programme were receiving at the school level.

Finally, a question had arisen from parents and teachers about the extent to which the kindergarten and first grade contents of the English class emphasised reading and writing. There was a concern expressed by some that because children did not yet know how to read in their native language, Spanish, that early exposure to English – where the letters represented a different set of sounds – might cause confusion. Others felt that early exposure to another writing system could actually help young readers learn phonemic awareness faster (the association of graphemes to phonemes, or sound-symbol correspondence). Again, we decided to test this quantitatively, by designing an instrument in Spanish.[3] We gave the test to 60 first grade students from

four matched schools: two with the English programme and two where the students had not studied English. The results indicated that generally a student's participation in the English programme (after one and a half years or about 300 hours of instruction from ages 5–6 years old) had a negligible or slightly positive affect on their development of literacy skills in their L1.

Qualitative components

The main sources of qualitative data came from interviews, classroom observations and primary source documents. The qualitative aspects of the impact study responded to the need to document the processes. These helped explain the results of the quantitative measures, for example, why some schools or students had scored better on the proficiency test and it also allowed us to capture many of the social dimensions of the programmes that could not be measured quantitatively. The students talked about what they liked to do with English outside of school and how they saw it as part of their everyday lives. The English teachers described how they understood and tried to implement the new programme and what their relationship was like within the school with the principal and other classroom teachers. We felt that, particularly at the younger grades, it was important to include the views of parents, who are often not taken into account in research projects. The parents discussed what their aspirations were for their children and often the difficulties they had trying to help their children learn a language that they themselves did not know.

We considered the interviews our primary source of data for the impact study, since most of the research questions were addressed by speaking directly with key stakeholders. In retrospect, placing interview data at the centre of our study probably reflected what Johnson *et al.* (2007: 123) call our 'home' as researchers; that is, we identify ourselves as qualitative researchers using a mixed methods design because it fitted how the impact study project evolved. Hesse-Biber (2010) refers to this approach as qualitative mixed methods. She asserts that as mixed methods approaches have emerged and the advantages of combining data types has been accepted, there is nevertheless a quantitative and positivist bent to most mixed methods work, with the qualitative data serving as the second fiddle that 'often takes the form of sprinkling in some vignettes to provide narrative examples of the conclusions reached by means of quantitative methods' (Hesse-Biber, 2010: 457). She addresses eight areas where qualitative research can benefit from incorporating mixed methods. In our study, while the test scores and survey results – the quantitative information – provided important baseline information to help us choose our sites and develop our interview protocols, we considered the qualitative components as the primary sources of data, since they more directly helped us answer the 'how' and 'why'-type research questions the impact study was designed around (see research questions in Table 15.1).

At each school, we individually interviewed the English teachers, the principal, at least one classroom teacher and carried out focal group interviews with students and parents. The interviews were semi-structured, in order to strike a balance between asking a uniform set of questions tailored to the research objectives, and included an element of exploratory research by allowing for open-ended responses (King & Horrocks, 2010). One of the most important sources of data was the interview with parents and students. Kvale (2007: 68) states that 'Interviews with children allow them to give voice to their own experiences and understanding of their world'. We interviewed at three points in the programme: kindergarten, second and sixth grades. We decided to interview the children in focal groups of three or four, to give each student as much time as possible to talk, while at the same time trying to create a comfortable atmosphere with their peers so they did not feel 'put on the spot' in having to answer. We chose a quiet area in the library or study area so they knew teachers or school administrators would not overhear.

The oldest children we interviewed were sixth graders (about 11–12 years old) finishing primary school, many of whom were the first generation to have studied English in public schools since kindergarten. We asked them what they liked and did not like about their English classes, to grade their teachers and what type of activities helped them learn best. We also asked their connections with English in their everyday lives and many reported they had family living in the United States. In interviewing children, it can often be effective to embed questions within the context of some more concrete task, as Piaget suggested in the 1930s in his work on children's developmental stages (Kvale, 2007; cf. Pinter, 2006). For the older students, we asked them to imagine that they had been asked to work as volunteers in an information booth at the regional festival and that some foreigners approached them speaking English. The scenario allowed them to conjecture about what the foreigners would ask, what they would do to try to communicate with them and what sort of cultural differences they would encounter when visiting Mexico. For the younger children, we used a set of puppets depicting people from various cultures. We asked young ones to pick out which puppet they thought could speak English, to name the puppet and explain where she was from. In Figure 15.2, Regina, an 8-year-old girl in second grade who lives in town in central Mexico, choose the blonde doll in a pink dress:

Interviewer: Regina, which doll do you think speaks English?
Regina: [Chooses the blond puppet]. This one.
Interviewer: That one? Take it. Okay, why do you think that one
                    speaks English?
Regina: [Thinks for a moment]. Well, you can tell from her face
                    that she's speaking English.
Interviewer: Yeah? And where do you think she's from?
Regina: From the United States.

Figure 15.2 The puppet study

These tasks allowed us evaluate to what extent the students' study of English was enabling them to make broader cultural connections and understanding as envisioned in the curriculum (see again above the Ministry's objective statement and Table 15.1).

We also compared the students' responses to what we were observing in the classroom observations. Like our interview protocols, our observation sheets were semi-structured, including elements that the programme administrators focused on, but allowing us to pick up on whatever proved salient. For example, the kindergarteners we talked to were forming clear ideas about cultural differences between Mexicans and others, and had ideas about who spoke English. By eight years old, the second graders had even stronger notions about why people spoke English and how they were different. However, we observed very few instances where the English teacher served to help mediate children's understandings of cultural elements and the cultural content of the classes was usually limited to superficial aspects prescribed by the book, such as a comparison of the American holiday Halloween with the Mexican celebration of Day of the Dead. The children's notions therefore seemed to draw from popular culture – especially cartoons and movies for young children – and often conflated English with a general notion of 'foreign-ness.' For instance, many children said that their puppet spoke English because they were from China or Japan, although this did not necessarily correspond to their choice of a doll with Asian features.

The primary source documents consisted of the textbooks and teacher-generated materials, the teachers' lesson plans and examples of student work. We also took photographs to document if and how English had a presence on the walls of the classrooms and hallways. Brown (2012) refers to visual display of texts in schools as the *schoolscape*. We found that one feature of schools with a strong English programme was that the principal supported

the English teacher and promoted the programme with parents by allocating spaces in the school for English to be prominently displayed, such as student-created murals or signage in English visible from the entrance where parents dropped off their children.

Relation between quantitative and qualitative elements

An impact study should integrate all the components of the project to build the 'big picture'. Similarly, a mixed methods study is not simply a quantitative study plus a separate qualitative study, but rather the elements of mixed methods research should be articulated so that together they conform and respond to the particular questions to be asked. The mixed or blended design we settled on reflected what we considered the best method for addressing each research question, or what Creswell and Tashakkori (2007: 307) calls a 'bottom-up' approach to mixed methods. Patton (2015: 319–320) refers to this approach as a 'mixed design strategy' and explains that although there are many ways of combining qualitative and quantitative elements, the end result should be a design that reflects a 'coherent strategy'. The elements of our project were articulated in several ways. Since we began by applying the language proficiency test prior to the site visits, when we began the qualitative phase, we had a clear map of what the scores were for students and schools. We could therefore know when we arrived if a school was 'special' in some way, for example, a school in a working-class neighbourhood with very high English scores, and ask, how had they achieved that? Was it something special the teacher was doing in her classroom? Was it because the principal had worked with the parents to create an extracurricular after-school programme?

At each school, we also knew which students had scored the highest on the test, as well as additional information about them from the survey, such as whether they had ever lived in or travelled to an English-speaking country. We used this information when selecting students for the focal group interviews and organised at least one group of the high achieving students and one group who had about average scores. We chose at least one group of students at each school who had scored high on the test, but indicated they had never travelled outside of Mexico. We asked them what strategies they had used and found that at 10–12 years old they were invested substantially in their learning by routinely looking for authentic uses of English outside of school, such as studying song lyrics, saving money to buy books in English and engaging in online gaming communities (Sayer & Ban, 2014).

Some Findings of the Impact Study in Mexico

Each project had somewhat different results and many of the findings were quite specific to issues related to the Mexican curriculum and structural components of the programme in the particular context we were studying. The purpose of the impact study was to provide administrators with a view

of the educational processes of the programme to inform curriculum development and teacher training. However, a secondary purpose for us as researchers was to try to understand how our findings might be generalised or transferred to other contexts; that is, how the projects in the Mexican programme might inform our understanding of how to more effectively organise PELT programmes.

Our findings were of seven types: linguistic outcomes, learning/educational outcomes, social outcomes, implementation of the curriculum, level of satisfaction, organisational aspects and broader impacts. We briefly explain these findings below with some examples of each.

Linguistic outcomes

The most common metric for measuring a language programme's success is in terms of students' L2 learning of vocabulary, grammar and language skills. Even though curricular objectives are often stated more broadly, as in the Mexican case which speaks of a 'broader vision of a globalised world', the students' proficiency level seems to remain the main criterion of success. In the impact study, we used the results on the standardised assessments, scaled to the CEFR levels, as a referent for the qualitative elements of the programme. This allowed us to focus on, for example, how some students who had never travelled outside of Mexico or studied private English classes were able to achieve much higher than their classmates. For the sixth graders taking the proficiency, our premise was that very high-achieving students (level B1 or better) had probably lived in the United States, studied in private schools or language academies. However, we found that over half (54%) of these 'top performers' had only studied in the public school programme, a result which indicates the potential of even limited instruction EFL programmes (see Figure 15.3). By asking these students in the interviews what they did to learn, we identified the context-specific strategies that the
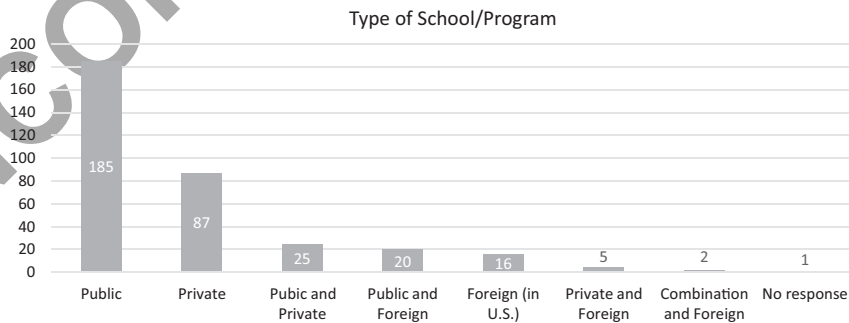
Figure 15.3 Where did the highest achieving students learn English?
Note: Results based on sixth-grade students (*n* = 341) who scored B1 or higher on proficiency test.

successful English learners in Mexican public schools use. Likewise, from the quantitative data we were able to identify which low socioeconomic status (SES) schools had more students scoring well on the test, and the site visits allowed us to examine which aspects of how the school organised their programme made them more successful.

For the younger children, we measured linguistic outcomes using the puppets and a colourful poster in groups of three. This made the assessment more relaxed and interactive. We found that children often had a hard time transferring what they had seen in class to a slightly different, more communicatively-oriented task. For example, although we had observed children in many classrooms singing *'Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes… Eyes and ears and mouth and nose…'* as a warm-up song while doing the corresponding body movements, they often could not identity these body parts on themselves or their puppets. Likewise, although they could recite most of the numbers and colours, only a few students aged 7–8 years old who had been in the programme for over two years could respond to questions such as *'How old are you?'* or *'What's your favourite colour?'*

This suggests that, although the curriculum calls for a communicative approach, the PELT programme in Mexico still tends to present linguistic elements in isolation. For younger children, this is not presented as explicit grammar instruction, but usually takes the form of thematic vocabulary such *clothing, animals* or *transportation.* Whereas songs, chants and rhymes are also common classroom warm-up and transition activities, they are rarely integrated to reinforce L2 learning, such as the 'Head and Shoulders' song example.

Learning/educational outcomes

One encouraging finding was that English lessons often help students build connections to content learning in other subject areas. The main idea behind content-based instruction (CBI) or content-language integrated learning (CLIL) approaches, is that English can be effectively acquired through the learning of other content areas.[4] Although the CLIL approach is not used in Mexican public schools, we found that in the EFL programme the reverse is often true: that students learn content through their English class. Most often, this took the form of reinforcing things learned first in Spanish. In the kindergarten, the children learned numbers, colours, shapes and the days of the week, which consolidated the knowledge of the concepts from Spanish. The results from the early literacy instrument reported above were another key area where learning in English helped the development of parallel abilities and knowledge in the students' first language. For older children, we found intercurricular connections in language arts (e.g. narrative story elements), science (e.g. the steps of the scientific method), and social studies and geography (e.g. maps and flags of countries).
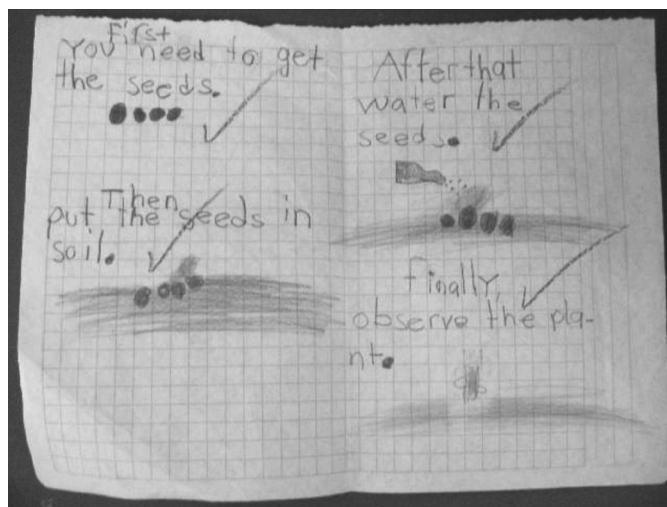
Figure 15.4 A students' notebook describing a science experiment

However, whereas regular classroom teachers teach all the subjects and can be more aware of where intercurricular connections exist, English teachers are usually more narrowly focused on their subject and may miss opportunities to help students make connections between learning across areas (Sayer & Ban, 2013). Figure 15.4 shows a student's notebook from an experiment the children had conducted to describe the growth of plants. The teacher explained that it was to teach the children the sequence words: *first, next, then, after, finally.* However, when we asked her if the children had studied life cycles in their science class, she admitted she had taught the same lesson several times, but had never really thought of it as a science lesson or of asking students to connect it to what they knew about life cycles. Rather, she had only approached it as a language lesson in terms of its linguistic goals.

Social outcomes

The interviews with parents and students illuminated the many social connections that exist in Mexico through English. In particular, almost all students reported to have family members, in some cases siblings or parents, but most often aunts, uncles and cousins, living in the United States. By 10–12 years old, many students were connected to their family members through social media; for example, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, Skype and What's App. As with the intercurricular connects, we found that the social connections that students had with English were largely unrecognised or unexploited by teachers in the programme. Specifically, student responses were analysed quantitatively (see list below) to provide insight into their use of English outside the classroom;

conversely, qualitative teacher responses uniformly expressed that the only English input the students had was in the classroom. Clearly, this example of the how the application of both qualitative and quantitative data allowed for the researchers to appreciate this lack of understanding by the teachers.

- Listening to *songs/music* in English (n = 18, from pop to thrash and reggaeton).
- Watching *movies* in English (n = 15, especially without subtitles).
- *Video games* (n = 15, many popular Xbox games come with English instructions).
- *Internet* (n = 8, to access English sites).
- *Google Translate* (n = 5, as a tool to translate words or texts in English).
- *Television and cartoons* (n = 5, using the options to put the soundtrack in English).
- *Books* (n = 4, in English, some sent by family members in the USA).
- *Clothing tags* (n = 3, reading tags on clothes from the USA).
- Communicating with *family members in the USA* (n = 2).
- Reading *instruction manuals* of products that are in English (n = 2).
- Watching videos on *YouTube* in English (n = 2).
- Writing messages on *Facebook* (n = 2).
- Watching *iPod TV* (n = 1).
- Singing *karaoke* songs in English (n = 1).
- Taking a *Disney English course* on television (n = 1).
- *Writing emails* in English with Mexican and foreign friends (n = 1).

This was somewhat surprising, since the curriculum itself called for a sociocultural approach based on social practices of language. However, the social practices came mostly from the textbook and not from the lived experiences of the students. So 'writing an invitation to a party' was an academic exercise for a fictional audience, rather than say an actual invitation students could write and send to cousins living in California.

Implementation of the curriculum

The launch of the English programme in Mexico coincided with a major educational reform which reoriented teaching of all subjects within a 'sociocultural approach'. The new English curriculum adopted the Ministry's approach. The sociocultural approach, defined in the programme in terms of competencies, social practices and learning environments, was fairly open-ended and allowed a good degree of teacher autonomy in lesson planning. Therefore, the concern of the project was not to determine the degree of teacher fidelity to the model, which would have been impossible given the lack of specifics about the teaching methods teachers were supposed to use, but rather to look at what teachers understood by 'sociocultural approach', how they related that to students' learning of English and how they were trying to put that into practice in the classroom.

We found that many teachers had not received any training about the programme and so they brought their own approach from their previous job – many had worked in private schools – or pre-service training. Those who had been trained in communicative language teaching had a good (around B2) level of English and had previous teaching experience often liked the curriculum, precisely because it was not prescriptive. Less experienced teachers reported that the programme was too vague and usually ended up relying almost exclusively on the textbook. For many teachers, one of the main challenges was not with the curriculum itself, but rather with classroom management. They had often been trained to work in secondary schools or with adults, since programmes to prepare English teachers to work specifically with children still do not exist. Hence, they felt ill-prepared to address behaviour issues, children with special needs and other challenges common to public primary schools in Mexico.

We also found that the curriculum's objectives for each grade level were not always consistent with the contents of the programme and less so with the textbooks. In particular, they tended to focus on the language skills and linguistic elements of the programme and mostly neglect the cultural and social aspects. Overall, this may reflect a conceptual problem with the programme. Early foreign language programmes can be organised as foreign language exploratory or experience (FLEX) or foreign language in elementary school (FLES) (Shin & Crandall, 2014). In a minimal exposure setting, supposedly two and half hours ,but sometimes less than two hours per week in the Mexican programme, it may make more sense to begin in K-3 as a FLEX programme and then adopt a FLES model for the higher grades.

Level of satisfaction

The impact study also allows evaluators to gauge the vitality of a programme by documenting the various stakeholders' level of satisfaction. In the Mexican programme, this was important because the programme was just finishing the pilot stage and administrators wanted to know how much support there was for continuing or expanding the programme. In particular, in order to have the programme run well at the school level, they depended on the 'buy in' from parents and principals. In our project, this was done qualitatively through the interviews. Although there was overall support for the programme, because English is seen as a necessary 21st century skill, participants were critical of many of the particulars of how the programme had been implemented.

Organisational aspects

Although initially we had, as language teacher trainers ourselves, conceptualised the project more in terms of the academic and pedagogical aspects; we soon realised that the effectiveness of the programme in the classroom

depended on a range of organisational factors that had not yet been worked out. The distribution of textbooks, the allocation of physical spaces in the schools, very large class sizes and class scheduling all impacted how well the teachers could deliver their lessons. For example, in a school where there was little support for the programme from the principal, the regular teachers often felt it was okay to use the time allocated for English lessons to organise students for other extracurricular events, such as the president's birthday. If there were no lines of communication between English teachers and their homeroom colleagues, the English teacher – rotating between eight or more classrooms each day and transporting her materials in wheeled crate – would often arrive breathless to her next class to find that the regular teacher had cancelled the English lesson. By contrast, in other schools the English teacher was integrated into the faculty and the school Christmas festival for parents would showcase children singing carols in English. Finally, since the programme was still in its pilot phase, most importantly among the organisational aspects was the fact that most of the teachers did not have regular contracts, which generated uncertainty and stress about whether they would receive a paycheck, job security, teaching assignments and ability to address problems with working conditions.

Broader impacts

Many parents stated that they were pleased that their children had a chance to take English classes because they could not afford to send them to private lessons. This seemed to speak to the broadest impact of the programme; that is, greater equity in access to learning English. There are still issues with the quality of the programme in the public school and the programme certainly does not address problems in socioeconomic disparities between the public and private education systems in Mexico. Also, we should not immediately assume that a 'more and earlier' or 'English for everyone' is automatically the right approach for English education (Sayer, 2015). An impact study therefore can document the benefits and challenges of a programme that can serve as a referent to weigh against the costs and resources that need to be invested.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have described a language programme evaluation project conceptualised as an impact study. An impact study design can effectively incorporate quantitative and qualitative elements to provide a holistic picture of a primary English language teaching programme. It combines formative, illuminative and summative approaches (Richards, 2001) to language programme evaluation. The project we described in Mexico was

a larger-scale study sponsored by the Ministry of Education and involved a research team working across multiple school sites. The sites had been selected to represent the diversity of contexts across a whole state; however, there is no reason that an impact study cannot be done on a smaller scale. It could be organised as a case study of one school and could involve the participation of teachers-as-results. One key element of the impact study in elementary schools that should be consistent is the inclusion of the voices of multiple stakeholders, especially of students and parents.

Our project used a mixed methods design, with quantitative and qualitative data sources addressing different research questions, although interviews were the primary source. The elements were integrated in several ways as well, such as the use of test results to select participants for interviews. We summarised our results in seven different areas, including language, learning and social outcomes, as well as aspects of the curriculum and programme itself. An impact study in a different context, with distinct research questions, could therefore integrate the mixed methods differently depending on what the researchers judged would produce a coherent design (Patton, 2015).

One point of constructive feedback that we received was the question of whether the project was really looking just at impacts. For example, in documenting how children used English in their everyday lives (Sayer & Ban, 2014), was that actually an *impact* or result of the programme, or something they would do anyway, regardless of whether they had English classes? This is a fair critique, since the naturalistic design of the project does not have a way of isolating what are strictly outcomes of the instruction children received in the English classroom. What the study can do is document these types of engagements that students have with the language outside of school and ask: if this is the children's authentic use of English, how can the programme support these practices? How can we align our teaching to these practices? What other practices or opportunities can we open up for students?

Notes

(1) The impact study methodology described here was developed as part of a national study of the pilot program in 2009–2012, and refined during projects carried out in the states of Aguascalientes (2013–2015), Durango (2014–2015) and Estado de México (2015).

(2) Since language proficiency tests are difficult and expensive to design and validate, we contracted with the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate of Mexico to design tests for Mexican public schools based on their *Starters* and *Movers* tests for young learners and normed to the CEFR scale.

(3) The instrument combined Woodcock and Muñoz-Sandoval (1995) and following Páez and Rinaldi (2006).

(4) Content-based instruction, such as the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model (Echevarría *et al.*, 2013) is commonly used in classrooms with ESL students in the United States. CLIL is a similar approach more widely used in Europe. In Mexico, the approach is used somewhat in bilingual private schools, but not at all in public schools, where methods are based a communicatively-oriented EFL model.

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