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Learning English in Mexico: Perspectives From Mexican Teachers of English

ESL and Language Arts teachers have noted a growing population of transnational students who—because of family migration patterns—have complex educational histories that straddle both Mexico and the US. Yet US teachers know little about the English-language training that such students receive in Mexico. This study attempts to bridge that gap, reporting on a survey-based study conducted in Mexico of 76 Mexican teachers of English. Included are recommendations about English instruction in both Mexican and US contexts, as well as recommendations for greater collaboration between US and Mexican English teachers.

Many Mexican-origin students in ESL and Language Arts classes have complex educational histories that straddle the geographic boundaries of Mexico and the US. This occurs as families migrate back and forth between Mexico and the US in search of economic opportunities. It also occurs as individual students move between US-based and Mexico-based branches of the family, for example staying alternately with relatives in Mexico and parents in the US or vice versa. Even though such students bring with them a history of English-language instruction in Mexico, US teachers know little about students' prior English-language training. This makes it difficult for US teachers to understand the complex long-term language acquisition process that such students experience and to develop appropriate pedagogical responses. This study attempts to address this knowledge gap by presenting data about the teaching of English in Mexico.

Acquisition of English proficiency is clearly a goal for most transnational students, regardless of whether they intend to eventually

settle in the US or Mexico. In the US nearly 10% of adults are limited English-proficient and many are unable to secure jobs that provide the income necessary to sustain a family (Batalova & Fix, 2010). Lacking adequate education and literacy skills, millions of individuals in the US are struggling economically (Kirsch, Braun, Yamamoto, & Sum, 2007).

Similarly, in Mexico, English proficiency can be seen as a route to upward economic mobility. The economies of the US and Mexico are intertwined and social, cultural, and historical influences of the two countries are enormous. The extraordinary economic partnership between the US and Mexico has motivated (and at times forced) many Mexicans to learn English in order to advance economically. Yet after decades of efforts by the Mexican government, relatively few Mexican adolescents and adults have sufficient linguistic skills to be employed in jobs that require high levels of proficiency in English (Petrón, 2009).

English in Mexico

English has long been highly regarded among the middle and upper classes of Mexican society, and parents with economic means have the opportunity to send children to private bilingual and immersion schools with teachers who are highly proficient in English. When such students migrate to the US, they typically bring with them a strong foundation in both academic and communicative aspects of English.

As for public schooling, the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) established the "English in Primary School Program" with the clear understanding that in a global market, knowledge of English benefits the Mexican economy. English, which had been taught in secondary schools for decades, began in 1993 to appear in elementary school curricula as well (Petrón, 2009). Thus even middle school–aged immigrants to the US will have some prior English-language training before coming to US schools.

However, such public school instruction may be very limited. English instruction typically begins at the early stages of children's education in Mexico, yet it focuses primarily on vocabulary and simple phrases (Borjian, 2008). The narrowness of the English curriculum is due in part to the shortage of teachers who have sufficient proficiency in English to teach more complex communicative aspects of English.

The lack of *communicatively proficient* English teachers in Mexico is due to a number of factors, including the type of English training given at the university level. Sierra and Padilla (2003) focused on the reasons university students study English in Mexico and the relationship that exists between students' attitudes toward the US and desire to learn English. The authors noted that educational objectives of

institutions of higher education are not necessarily compatible with students' purposes for learning English. Sierra and Padilla called for research that can shed more light on the impact of English in Mexico and the power that the US exerts to influence Mexicans to learn English. Nevertheless, few researchers have investigated the teaching of English in Mexico and in spite of the Mexican government's mandates to promote the teaching of English to students across grade levels, little has been published on this topic. For instance, a small number of studies have focused on the challenges that students face as they are introduced to English in schools and what teachers of English view as important factors to support students' development in English. Researchers in Mexico are now coordinating a nationwide project to study the state of foreign language teaching in the country's elementary schools (Muñoz de Cote, personal communication, January 28, 2013).

In their research on Mexican teachers of English, Borjian and Padilla (2010) noted that Mexican students take English classes for various reasons and that their motivation for learning this language is complex. The researchers found that some students pursue learning English because they are intrinsically motivated and had cultural connections with English-speaking people. They further noted that the global economy is pressuring Mexicans to learn English as better job opportunities are tied to knowing English. Borjian and Padilla also reported that parents' encouragement was an important factor influencing the learning of English in Mexico.

The Current Study

This research study attempts to address two questions, both of which will help US-based teachers understand their transnational Mexican American students' educational trajectories:

1. What major obstacles do Mexican teachers see for students learning English in Mexico?
2. What are teachers' recommendations for improving English instruction in Mexico?

Data collection was conducted at a public university in central Mexico. This institution has a major emphasis on the teaching of English and trains a significant number of teachers of English. The university has a large English teacher–education program, including several satellite programs at various cities and communities across the state. In addition, it is important to note that this Mexican state has had a major and historical role in the transnational migration of

Mexican workers to the US. Faculty members in the Department of Languages recommended the respondents for inclusion in this study. The researcher presented the study to prospective participants and requested their participation. From 94 who agreed to participate a subgroup was selected based on the criteria that they were Mexican nationals and were teaching English to Mexican students at the time.

A written questionnaire was designed to measure English teachers' views on the role of English in Mexico. This article centers on respondents' views on major obstacles to learning English in Mexico and suggestions for improving the teaching of English in Mexico. and it does not explore the economic and social impact of English in the lives of teachers. Participants also provided demographic information such as age, gender, and highest level of education for self as well as for their parents (see the Appendix for an overview of respondents' most relevant demographic information.) In addition to open-ended questions, several questions required respondents to rate each item on a 10-point Likert-type scale that ranged from *disagree a lot* to *agree a lot* and *not important* to *very important*.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to rate their own English language proficiency in listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing using the European Language Passport, an instrument designed by the Council of Europe (2011).

Analysis of written responses involved reading each written comment to get a general sense of the respondents' presentation of obstacles they viewed as significant for learning English in Mexico and the recommendations they provided to overcome them. We then indexed key words and phrases from written responses and organized the material into themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our data reduction involved thematic analysis and coding. Codes were aggregated and organized to form major themes or ideas based on simple frequency counts, calculated by the number of times respondents reported certain obstacles and provided specific recommendations (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the constant-comparison approach was used throughout to compare new elements of data with previously coded data, which refined emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Backgrounds of the Participants

Seventy-six Mexican teachers of English were invited to discuss how they became interested in learning English, how English has affected their lives, and to provide recommendations for others who are interested in learning English. The overwhelming majority of teachers in this study were educated in Mexico; however, five expressed that

much of their formal schooling took place in the US. They had an average of 12 years of teaching experience and were teaching at various schools and universities.

The majority of respondents (63%) learned English in Mexico. However, 26 individuals (34%) noted that their bilingual development was due to living in both Mexico and the US. In addition, one person noted that she learned English in Canada and another said that living in England helped to develop her English proficiency. Of the respondents, 53 (70%) noted that they have had opportunities to visit an English-speaking country. The US was the most popular destination.

Using the European Language Passport (Council of Europe, 2011), respondents self-rated their listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing skills in English. A rating of 1 indicates basic user and 6 is proficient user. Teachers in this study averaged 4.9 on listening and 5.0 on reading, indicating that they can understand extended speech without too much effort and can understand long and complex factual and literary texts even when they do not relate to their own field of study. An average score of 5.0 on spoken interaction indicates that this group of teachers can express themselves fluently and spontaneously and can formulate ideas and opinions with precision and relate their contributions skillfully to those of other speakers. These English teachers gave an average score of 4.9 on spoken production, indicating that they can present clear, detailed descriptions of complex subjects, integrating subthemes, developing particular points, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion. Finally, they noted that they were able to express themselves in clear, well-structured text, expressing points of view at some length. These teachers indicated that they are able to write about complex subjects in a letter, an essay, or report focusing on salient issues. Their average self-assessment on writing was 4.8. For further information about the participants see the Appendix.

Results Part 1: Obstacles to Learning English

Participants in this study reported that students' attitude and motivation played the most important role in English language acquisition. Thirty-five teachers (46%) expressed that their students' lack of interest as well as their views on the difficulty of English limited their progress in acquiring this language. The following statement from one teacher expresses this group's perspective: "I think motivation is a major obstacle because some [of my] students say it's too hard or complicated." Another teacher remarked: "Most of my students think that they are not able to learn the language [English] and that it is useless."

Similarly, teachers discussed the views of their students regarding the utility of English and said that some younger students who are not interested in learning English are not aware of the potential benefits of learning this language. One teacher noted: "Some people don't see the importance of this language [English] until they are in college … ." Another teacher stated: "They are not really interested because there isn't a tangible, short-term use they see for it." Her colleague added: "Motivation and lack of a wider view about how English will be helpful for them in further situations." This teacher's comment echoed many others who expressed that Mexican students are not aware of the economic impact of English in their lives.

Respondents viewed the Mexican educational system as a similarly important obstacle to the learning of English. Sixteen respondents (21%) noted that the teaching of grammar skills rather than emphasis on communicative competence continues to be the focus of the Mexican educational system. They expressed that this policy was detrimental to students' long-term acquisition of English. One teacher complained about this methodology as noted: "… the language is taught in terms of grammar almost exclusively. Repetition of the same [material] year after year in the school system … ." Six teachers in this group expressed that a limited number of adequately trained English teachers with sufficient proficiency in English impedes the educational progress of Mexican students. It is also important to note that respondents did not equate native speakers of English with effective teachers of English, as the overwhelming majority of respondents were of the opinion that Mexican teachers can be highly effective teachers of English if they have high levels of proficiency and are provided with adequate professional-development support.

Respondents also reported other factors as having an effect on students' language development. Seven respondents (9%) viewed limited access to English outside of the classroom as the biggest obstacle for Mexican students' English-language development. One teacher explained: "Their low self-confidence and the fact that they haven't faced situations in which to use it [English]." Seven teachers (9%) maintained that linguistic differences between Spanish and English prevent most Mexicans from becoming proficient in English. These language educators said that structural and grammatical differences between English and Spanish causes confusion for Mexican students. They noted that literal translation, issues with pronunciation, spelling, use of slang, and writing are the most prominent obstacles for their students learning English. Six teachers (8%) believed that students with limited economic resources are particularly disadvantaged

and have less access to English classes in Mexico. Three (4%) respondents noted that limited educational preparation for their students was the biggest obstacle to their advancement in English proficiency. Last, negative views toward the US were presented as another obstacle to learning English in Mexico. Two (3%) teachers expressed that US policies in Mexico have negatively affected how some students view English. They noted that US actions in Mexico have diminished students' enthusiasm for learning English. One teacher wrote: "Political and emotional barriers against the U.S. [are obstacles] for some students. The affective filter plays a big role here in Mexico because the U.S. is so close." Another educator wrote: "The feelings they [students] have towards USA and their consequent lack of motivation."

Results Part 2: Teachers' Recommendations for Improving Instruction

By far the most common suggestions provided by this group of teachers focused on student-initiated learning strategies. Forty respondents (60%) emphasized the need for students to be in charge of their own learning and noted the need for students to find various opportunities to enhance their proficiency in English. This group of respondents was of the opinion that students need to practice and be immersed in English to advance. They reminded students to spend time in addition to the required class time to learn English. These teachers suggested that students should listen to music in English and English-language programming on TV. Others noted that being in contact with native speakers of English and creating real situations for using English enhances language proficiency.

Motivation and attitude toward learning English was emphasized by another group of respondents. Twenty-four (31%) teachers expressed that language learners need to have a positive view about English. They underscored that learners need to be enthusiastic about learning English but teachers also must take responsibility in providing students with encouragement and support in the path for learning another language.

A group of nine teachers (12%) expressed that the context in which learning takes place affects students' learning outcomes. Some suggested that students need to know the importance of learning English as a tool for upward mobility, and others in this group noted the importance of starting to learn English as early as possible. In addition, some emphasized the role that teachers play in language learning and discussed the need for the Mexican educational system to select the most qualified teachers to teach English.

Recommendations

Globalization increasingly requires developing countries to train their workforces to successfully respond to the demands of businesses that use English to communicate. Yet Mexican teachers of English noted that many Mexican students do not see themselves as capable of achieving a high level of proficiency in English. The lack of confidence is certainly compounded when students migrate or immigrate to the US and encounter schools that place little value on students' home cultures, native-language literacy practices, and prior schooling. Clearly much work is needed on both sides of the border if we are to help transnational students effectively acquire a level of English that will help them succeed regardless of whether they choose to live permanently in the US or seek economic opportunities in Mexico.

A number of recommendations can be made. First, researchers need to explore in much greater detail the educational trajectories of transnational students and the intellectual, social, and linguistic development fostered by these trajectories. Questions such as the following need to be addressed:

1. What are the characteristics of the English instruction that students receive in Mexico before they migrate to the US?
2. How does instruction correspond with the English instruction that they receive once they arrive in the US?
3. Conversely, what happens when students experience a period of schooling in the US and then return to Mexican schools? How does the in-class and out-of-class English acquisition converge with the subsequent English instruction that they will receive in Mexico?

Second, researchers need to explore both preparation of English teachers in Mexico and the methods and curriculum that are used to teach English in Mexican schools:

1. Given that a number of Mexican students will follow a transitional educational path that will dovetail with English instruction in the US, how well do the teachers and curriculum prepare students for such a path?
2. Conversely, how well do teachers and the curriculum prepare students for educational and career paths in Mexico that involve English?

Third, how can we better prepare US ESL and Language Arts teachers to build upon the prior educational experiences of transna-

tional students rather than simply viewing such students as "linguistically deficient"? What do they need to know in order to help Mexican-origin immigrant students make the transition from learning English in Mexico to learning English in the US?

Finally, and perhaps most important, how can we establish collaboration between teachers in the US and Mexico—as well as teacher trainers in the US and Mexico—so that we can both *learn more about the experiences* of transnational students and *develop better pedagogy* for transnational students? Such collaboration could provide US teachers with a window into the cultural and educational experiences that children bring along when they migrate from Mexico to the US. Such collaboration could also provide Mexican teachers with a window into the cultural and educational experiences that lie ahead for their students who eventually migrate to the US. Such collaboration would also help those students who are perhaps most at risk: those students with complex patterns of back-and-forth migration that involve alternating periods of schooling in the US and periods of schooling in Mexico.

Author

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Appendix
Profiles of Participating Teachers

Number of respondents	76
Nationality	Mexican (all)
Age and gender	59% female with average age of 34
Travel experiences	70% had traveled to English-speaking country

Highest level of education

	Self	Father	Mother
Less than high school	0	30	37
High school	10	9	16
Some college	26	8	5
College degree	24	18	12
Graduate degree	15	8	5

English language proficiency (self-assessed)

Listening	4.9
Reading	5.0
Spoken interaction	5.0
Spoken production	4.9
Writing	4.8

Level of teaching English

Elementary school	13
Middle school	8
Secondary school	16
College	18
Language centers	9
Multiple levels	12

Note: A few respondents did not answer all questions.