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**The Teaching of English in Public Primary Schools in  
Mexico: More Heat than Light?**

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**Abstract:** The national English program in Mexico was formally launched in 2009. The new program supplanted various state programs, and aimed to create a coherent, uniform curriculum that extended English instruction to all public school students across the country. The article describes the development, evolution, and changes as the program was piloted and implemented. The authors synthesize various sources to identify the accomplishments of the program and the challenges that remain. They argue that a main

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concern, from a policy perspective, is that the program has not been conceptualized as part of a broader coherent language education policy, and that the program has been implemented not as an education policy, but as a series administrative and fiscal actions. Hence, while the program has succeeded in expanding access to English in public schools, it has not had continuity and has been characterized by inconsistency and change.

**Keywords:** National English program, Mexico, PRONI, PNIEB, primary English language teaching

### **La enseñanza del inglés en las primarias públicas de México: ¿Más ruido que nueces?**

**Resumen:** El Programa Nacional de Inglés inició formalmente en México en 2009. El nuevo programa reemplazó varios programas estatales y tenía como objetivo la creación de un currículum coherente y uniforme que permitiese extender la enseñanza del inglés a todos los estudiantes de las primarias públicas del país. El artículo describe el desarrollo, la evolución y los cambios del programa, así como los logros que ha tenido y los retos que, de acuerdo a diversos autores, aún debe enfrentar. Los autores sostienen que el problema principal del programa, desde la perspectiva política, es que no ha sido conceptualizado ni implementado como parte de una política lingüístico-educativa más amplia y coherente, sino que ha limitado a una serie de acciones administrativas y fiscales. Por lo tanto, si bien el programa ha ampliado el acceso al inglés en las primarias públicas, ha carecido de continuidad y se ha caracterizado por su inconsistencia y falta de solidez en los cambios.

**Palabras-clave:** Programa Nacional de Inglés; México; PRONI; PNIEB; enseñanza del inglés; primarias públicas

### **O ensino de Inglês em escolas primárias públicas no México: Mais calor do que luz?**

**Resumo:** O programa nacional de Inglês no México foi lançado formalmente em 2009. O novo programa suplantou vários programas estaduais, que teve como objetivo criar um currículo coherente, uniforme, que estendia instruções de Inglês para todos os estudantes de escolas públicas ao redor do país. O artigo descreve o desenvolvimento, evolução, e mudanças em como o programa era implementado e direcionado. O autor sintetiza várias fontes para identificar as realizações do programa e os desafios que permanecem. Eles argumentam que a principal preocupação, de uma perspectiva política, é que o programa não tem sido conceituado como parte de uma ampla e coerente política de ensino da língua, e que o programa não foi implementado como uma política educacional, mas como uma série administrativa e ações fiscais. Assim, enquanto o programa tem sucedido em expandir o acesso ao Inglês em escolas públicas, não teve continuidade e foi caracterizado por inconsistência e mudança.

**Palavras-chave:** Programa nacional de Inglês; México; PRONI; PNIEB; ensino de língua Inglesa primária

## Introduction

During its relatively short history, the teaching of English in public primary schools in Mexico has had successes, undergone various changes, and experienced setbacks and problems. In this sense, the issues confronting the implementation of the national English program in basic education mirrors those confronting the entire Mexican education system, as well as those faced in other countries in Latin America (see other articles in this special issue). In this article, we will describe and analyze the evolution and current situation of the Mexican *Programa Nacional de Inglés* (PRONI). The analysis is based on the results of two national studies on the teaching of English in primary public schools in Mexico coordinated by both authors (Ramírez, 2015a, 2015b; Sayer, 2015), as well as secondary sources and additional information we have gathered.

We begin by presenting a brief description of the Mexican context, followed by a schematic analysis of the structure and situation of the Mexican educational system, that will help readers contextualize the information and have a better understanding of the role that EFL plays in the overall system. Next, we review the official Mexican policy on EFL, followed by a description of the historical development of public primary ELT programs in the country, an analysis of the expansion and coverage of the program, a description of the current program, and a portrait of EFL primary education teachers and their working conditions. The article closes with a discussion of the main problems and accomplishments of Mexican EFL programs for public primary education, as well as some conclusions.

### A Brief Description of the Mexican Context

Demographically speaking, Mexico is a relatively young country. According to the projections of the National Council of Population (CONAPO), by 2016 the country will have a population of 122 million people with an annual growth rate of 1.03%. In 2013, 29% of the population was between the ages of 3 and 17, with projections that by 2020, the population of greater importance will be the working age population (ages 15 to 65), which will reach roughly 82.6 million persons (CONAPO, 2015).

With regard to the present socio-economical context, Mexico is experiencing a crisis characterized by a high degree of public mistrust of their political leaders and institutions; rising crime rates and high levels of violence; the slide of the peso against the US dollar<sup>1</sup> and the fall of oil prices, that in turn could generate a rise in the price of imports and consumer products. Moreover, according to a report by the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Information (INEGI, 2015a), almost eight out of every 10 Mexican citizen (79.5%) could be classified as poor and vulnerable, 72% of the total Mexican population has at least one social deficiency or requirement, and at least 4% of Mexicans live on an income per capita below 1.25 USD per day.

### Organization of the National Education System

The Mexican educational system is divided into public or private schools, according to the source of funding, and encompasses three types of educational subsystems: basic education, upper-middle education, and higher education, of which the first two constitute compulsory education

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<sup>1</sup> According to Jiménez (2016), in the last two years, the Mexican peso has experienced a 33.82 % devaluation against the USD.

(grades K-12). Additionally, the system includes programs for early childhood education, special education, adult education, and job training (SEP, 2015).

Basic education consists of pre-school, primary, and secondary levels. The typical or ideal ages to study each level are: 3-5 years old for preschool, ages 6-11 for primary school, and 12-14 for secondary, although most students enrolled in the secondary level are aged 15 to 17. Higher education is divided into undergraduate education, graduate education, and job training, and encompasses the following types of institutions: universities, technology institutes, normal (teacher training) schools, and job or occupational training.

### **The Current State of the Mexican Education System**

The current state of the Mexican education system, although slightly better than what existed in the last century, is far from desirable. According to the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP), the average educational level of the Mexican population is 9.1, which is equivalent to the last grade of secondary education. For children aged 3 to 14 during 2014-2015, the net enrollment rate was 94.8%, the completion rate 98.2%, the coverage of children 96.6%, and the illiteracy rate 5.7% (SEP, 2015).

Furthermore, students' absorption and coverage decrease as they move higher in the education system. Of Mexicans 15 years and older, 5.4 million cannot read or write, and nearly 3.4 million people were enrolled only in the first two years of primary education. Thus, Narro-Robles and Moctezuma-Navarro (2012) argue that the number of Mexicans who could be considered functionally illiterate is actually about 8.8 million. Finally, the quality of education still leaves much to be desired, judging by the results achieved by Mexican students on international tests (cf. recent PISA results; Hopkins, Ahtaridou, Matthews & Posner, 2007), among other indicators.

### **Primary Schools in Mexico**

According to the results of 2015 government report called the *Evaluation of Basic Conditions for Teaching and Learning* (INEE, 2015), serious problems of inequality exist within primary schools in Mexico. For instance, during the 2013-2014 school year, 26% of students received their books almost three months or more after the first day of school and 37% never received them at all. The infrastructure of the school buildings themselves varies significantly: 17% of students took classes in schools that did not have restrooms for students; 26% of schools had five or more infrastructure problems that put children's security at risk, such as broken windows and non-working electrical and plumbing, as well as low quality infrastructure in stairs, guardrails, roofs, walls, and ground floors. 84% of all primary schools in Mexico have at least one of these problems. Likewise, more than 20% of the students, and a similar number of teachers, did not have desks or chairs in good condition. The report found that class time is also more likely to be disrupted in poorer schools: 23% of schools experienced some sort of teachers' rotation, 23% of schools suspended classes for non-official reasons, and only 75% of class time was devoted to teaching and learning activities. In the case of rural schools, the situation is even worse in almost all of the aspects the report measured.

In addition, the Mexican educational system is currently experiencing major turmoil. Since 2008, the Mexican government has been attempting to launch a major educational reform in basic education. In 2013, the Mexican Congress approved an education reform bill, a series of secondary laws known as the *Ley del Servicio Profesional Docente* (LSPD), based on the president's justification that it would improve the quality of Mexican education (British Council, 2015). However, this reform has faced strong opposition from one of the main teacher union groups. Their chief criticism is that the educational reform has become a mere administrative reform whose principle aim is to evaluate the

teachers. In addition, many academics have questioned the evaluation criteria, mechanisms, and practices for being punitive, deficient, and unreliable. The proposed reform has also been severely criticized by academic experts, such as Gil-Anton (2015), Díaz-Barriga (2015), and more than 68% of the members of the Mexican Education Research Association (COMIE) for imposing changes without teachers' participation, for paying greater attention to trying to control and discipline the teachers, and for forcing them to take the evaluations to the extreme. The evaluation of teachers then, and the so-called educational reform by extension, has been, as Hernández-Navarro (2016) argued, more a punitive act than a pedagogical one. In the summer of 2016 protests by teachers in several states led to the arrest of union leaders and some violent clashes between teachers, citizens who supported them, and the police. Thus, despite government officials' optimism, Mexican education in general and basic education in particular are facing hard times and heated pressure, and it is difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

## **Historical Development of Public Primary ELT Programs in Mexico<sup>2</sup>**

For many years, the official teaching of English in public institutions in Mexico was limited to middle and high school levels. However, since the early 1990s, as part of a worldwide movement supported by the idea that earlier incorporation would result in better and more permanent learning. In response to pressure from international organizations of the same school of thought, several attempts to incorporate the teaching of English in public primary schools have occurred.

In this section, we will describe and analyze the main characteristics and features of the most important programs for teaching EFL that have been implemented in Mexico in public primary education. Since the 1990s, there have been at least five types of EFL programs for Mexican public primary schools, namely: the state programs, *English Enciclopedia*, the National English Program in Basic Education (PNIEB), the Program for Strengthening the Quality of Basic Education (PFCEB), and the National English Program (PRONI).

### **The State Programs**

Starting in the 1990s, five states launched the first programs to teach English in public elementary schools. From 2000-03, an additional 13 states also began programs, and in the subsequent few years four more states had enacted programs, so that by 2010 there were 22 out of 31 states with some kind of local English program in basic education (SEP, 2010). It is important to note that even though all state programs sought to promote the learning of English in their public primary schools, there were significant differences among them regarding the years each program was put into operation, the programs' names, the actual numbers of students participating in the programs, the curriculum guidelines, the approaches and methodologies for teaching, the educational materials and the number of hours for EFL classes, as well as the preparation for and recruitment of teachers (Castañedo & Davies, 2004; Davies, 2009; SEP, 2010). However, such heterogeneity was expected since each state regulated, distributed, organized and financed their own programs without having a common axis or at least guidelines to follow.

Among the main achievements of the state programs, three in particular are noteworthy. First, they intended to provide access to students from Mexican public schools, usually the most disadvantaged students, with knowledge and skills in English previously only available to students of

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<sup>2</sup> Parts of this section were taken from Ramírez-Romero, Pamplón-Irigoyen, Chuc, Dzul-Escamilla, & Paredes (2015).

private institutions, usually the most privileged. Another major achievement was that these programs facilitated discussion about the need to incorporate English as a subject in the school curriculum and to demonstrate that learning English was possible and feasible for any student, and thus they set a precedent which facilitated the subsequent approval of the national program. A third major achievement of some of the state programs was that they established an organizational structure which expedited the implementation of the subsequent national program.

Unfortunately, most state programs had a relatively short lifespan, with the great majority initiated in 2000 and replaced by a national program in 2009. In addition, the programs were never systematically evaluated. Some of the main problems that most state programs faced included:

- Recruitment and employment status of teachers: in almost all cases, English teachers were hired on temporary contracts and were granted few or no benefits and rights, which in turn caused high teacher turnover.
- Teacher education and training: a significant percentage of those who were hired had no teaching experience and/or training to teach English, and very few states developed a training plan for their teachers. In most cases, the training of teachers was left to publishers, embassies, and international organizations associated with embassies.
- The lack of an official curriculum: the vast majority of states did not have a curriculum that provided guidelines for EFL teachers; therefore, most teachers planned their classes based almost entirely on the textbooks.
- Unavailability of textbooks: unlike the textbooks for other subjects, EFL textbooks were not free and often were only available several months after the beginning of the school year.
- A “peripheral” subject: EFL courses were marginalized and lacked connections with the regular curriculum.
- Frequent changes in the schools or grades served: several states experimented with various schemes of attention, sometimes leaving groups or intermediate generations unattended or disrupting the education of those who had already received a course.
- Incomplete coverage: in most states, the program reached less than 10% of the school population, and tended to favor students in the state capitals or major cities, leaving virtually neglected small towns and marginalized areas.

### ***Inglés Enciclomedia***

A second type of program was *Inglés Enciclomedia*, part of a broader program called *Enciclomedia*. The *Enciclomedia* program was designed in 2001, formally presented in 2003, piloted in the 2005-2006 school year in 13 states (SEP, 2006a), and ended in 2011. The program had two major components: specially designed software that included the digitalization of fifth and sixth grade textbooks for all subjects, with links to various multimedia resources that complemented textbook contents; and the necessary hardware to run the software, which included a computer, an electronic whiteboard and a projector, for each classroom participating in the program.

At first, the program included only the contents for Spanish, mathematics, history, geography, and civic education courses, but in the 2005-2006 school year *Inglés Enciclomedia* was piloted with sixth grade students in 13 states. The main goals were, according to SEP (2006a), “to determine the feasibility of the program and to help students to have an initial contact with English”

(p. 23). The materials were designed for sixth grade students and could be reviewed in two 50 minute sessions per week, covering one unit per month. The implicit assumption was that by using these materials, regular teachers could teach English to their students even if they themselves did not know English. Accordingly, it was designed to be semi-autodidactic, and the manual claimed that the *Enciclomedia* materials were prepared so that teachers and students could learn English together (SEP, 2006b).

Even though students liked the general *Enciclomedia* program and the materials were attractive, *Inglés Enciclomedia* presented problems. One was the naiveté of believing that by using technology teachers and students could learn English at the same time, without any guidance and support other than the materials. Most regular teachers, since they did not know English, could not help students with language questions as they arose, nor were they able to detect the particular needs of students or provide them with constructive and personal feedback (SEP, 2011b). Researchers who analyzed the linguistic content and pedagogical approach of *Enciclomedia* noted that the program suffered problems related to the sociocultural relevance of the content (López-Gopar, 2009), and although the use of interactive programs and projectors in the classroom was innovative, according to López-Gopar and colleagues (2009), the program extolled the concept of the native speaker, reinforced the hegemony of Spanish over indigenous languages, and largely ignored the country's multiculturalism.

### **The National English Program in Basic Education**

With the previous programs as background and seeking to achieve greater uniformity among them and coordinate the programs that existed at the different educational levels, several attempts were made to create a national program for teaching English in primary public schools. These efforts culminated in the creation of the National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE in English, or PNIEB in Spanish), which was first piloted during the 2009-2010 school year. The PNIEB was framed in the 2009 Curriculum for Basic Education Primary Level, as part of the *Language and Communication* block of the national curriculum, seeking by this measure to align English with Spanish and at the same time to articulate the progression of the contents of English across preschool, primary and secondary levels (SEP, 2010). According to official documents, the implementation of the program would follow several stages, and during each, the government would collect information to examine the progression of the four cycles in which the program was structured.

The program was intended to be piloted and rolled out in phases, so that by 2012 it would be expanded across all grades K-12. However, the implementation was disrupted by several factors, and by 2013 the PNIEB was replaced by a new program, the *S246* Program (described in the next section). Some of the factors that undermined the PNIEB and slowed the rate at which the program was expanded was that it was implemented in a time of uncertainty and turmoil and included as part of the wider educational reform referred to above. Another factor complicating the rollout of the PNIEB was that it supplanted local programs that were already up and running in 22 states. In many states, these were token English programs that reached only a small percentage of students in public schools. Yet in a handful of states the programs were quite large and well-organized, and administrators and teachers were heavily invested in the programs they had created. Hence there was some pushback against the national program, since they saw it as a step backward from what they had developed locally. A third reason may well be that, historically, English had been taught for only three years during middle school and the quality of teaching and results have generally been seen as poor.



Although the expansion of the program was inconsistent and plagued by administrative difficulties, Sayer (2015a) argues that the PNIEB still represents the largest expansion of English teaching in the country's history. Whereas previously only students whose families had the means to send them to private primary schools (about 10% of the country's school enrollment) received English classes, the PNIEB increased children's access to English instruction. Hence, he claims that in language education policy terms, the PNIEB represented the start of a move from a model of elite bilingualism, based on a select few who could acquire English, to a model of macroacquisition, or general societal bilingualism.

### The S246 Program to Strengthen the Quality of Basic Education

In 2013, the federal government launched the *Programa S246 Fortalecimiento de la Calidad en Educación Básica* (PFCEB). The PFCEB was not a specific program for English teaching itself, but *de facto* eliminated PNIEB replacing it with one of the three initiatives or strategies of the new program meant to provide support to existing programs, entitled *Apoyo para los procesos de estudio de una segunda lengua (inglés)*<sup>3</sup> (SEP, 2014). The motive for replacing PNIEB is not entirely clear, but the move coincided with the change of political parties at the national level. Unfortunately, the switch to PFCEB was undertaken administratively, with no explanation and apparently without taking into account the evaluations of pilot phase of the PNIEB carried out by the previous administration. Amongst classroom-level teachers, this generated significant confusion and anxiety about what would happen with the English program.

By the end of that same year, on December 3, 2013, the federal government published the annual 2014 budget, which included the PFCEB allocation (SEP, 2014). Days later, on December 28, 2013, the *Official Gazette* published the *Acuerdo número 706 por el que se emiten las Reglas de Operación del Programa de Fortalecimiento de la Calidad en Educación Básica*<sup>4</sup>, which would come into effect on 1 January 2014 (SEGOB, 2013). Under this agreement,

The program integrates components that are intended to support the states, schools and teachers in building the necessary conditions to improve the educational achievement of students in basic education, with emphasis on reading, writing and mathematics. The components include four types of support: 1) Supplementary educational materials, resources and strategies, 2) support for curriculum development; 3) the implementation of a second language (English) in public elementary schools, and 4) the implementation of a funding scheme to finance local projects that are consistent with the objective of this program. (p. 5)

The program had national coverage and it was open to those schools which “expressed their willingness to participate in the program by signing an agreement” (p. 5). In addition, according to the same document, the Sub-Secretary of Basic Education would offer “the content and the basic materials to study a second language (English). Moreover, the Sub-Secretary would provide financial support to the local authorities to pay external consultants” (SEP, 2014, p. 18). Here, an “external consultant” is the ministry's euphemism for “teacher”, but because English teachers are seldom given permanent contracts they cannot be referred to as *maestros* or *docentes* so they are usually referred to as *asesores* or simply “teachers” in English.

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<sup>3</sup> Support for the study of a second language (English).

<sup>4</sup> Agreement number 706 that contains the Rules of Operation for the Program for Strengthening Quality in Basic Education.



For states who participated in the program, resources in *Item 3. Stimulus to the study of a second language (English)* could also be used for the following areas: training of academic, technical, and management and administrative staff, as well as external consultants, and monitoring and support. In other words, the federal government would provide the framework, the books, and the teachers' salaries, while the states that "voluntarily" decide to participate, would be responsible for managing the resources and the local implementation, such as selecting the schools, hiring teachers, and so forth. Thus, the responsibility of teaching English to students from primary public schools returned to the states, but with the support of the federation, "according to budget availability" (p. 18). At the classroom level, there was little change for teachers, who continued to work from the same PNIEB curriculum and books. The practical effect was to cause administrative problems at the state level, and overall, generate instability and distrust of the ministry since the perception was that it was opening and closing programs without having a clear plan. In several states, the switch did cause severe administrative problems which caused the local program to be suspended or reduced, and teachers to be laid off.

### **The National English Program (PRONI)**

The program was changed yet again on December 22, 2015. The Federal Government issued the *Acuerdo Número 20/12/15 por el que se emiten las Reglas de Operación del Programa Nacional de Inglés para el Ejercicio Fiscal 2016* in the *Official Journal of the Federation (DOF, 2015)*, which took effect on January 1, 2016, and a new program was mentioned: the National English Program (PRONI). Under the Agreement, "the SEP through the PRONI, aims to support the states in order to strengthen and give continuity to the actions that have been implemented since the pilot began in the 2009-2010 school year in K-6 public schools, so that students get the skills to participate in more realistic English language social practices" (p. 39). The agreement specified that by 2016 the PRONI would be implemented in 33,093 public elementary schools and will continue with the expansion phase from third grade of preschool through sixth grade.

The objectives of PRONI are as follows:

- a) To support the states in the public elementary schools students' and teachers' development of competencies, through the production and distribution of educational materials for teaching and learning English.
- b) To strengthen the academic knowledge as well as the teaching skills and/or the international academic certification of teachers and external consultants specialized in English teaching from the schools participating in the PRONI.
- c) To promote international certification of students in English language proficiency, on the basis of equality between male and female students.
- d) To support the states in the implementation of second language (English) courses in public elementary schools from preschool to sixth grade.

As is apparent from the previous information, on the one hand, the federal government, even before completing the six years of the current presidential term, seems to have revived the old PNIEB, but with a new name (PRONI), and without a clear reason that explains the change. On the other hand, the objectives of the new program are very similar to those stipulated in the Program for Strengthening Quality in Basic Education (PFCEB). Therefore, it seems that the new program is a hybrid arising from crossing two previous programs: the PNIEB and PFCEB, but without making explicit the relationship with either of them or the reason for the creation of a new program. This

suggests that in the best scenario, the current government is unsure of what to do with the issue of teaching English in public primary schools.

To sum up, there are several key points here. First, excepting a few of the earlier state programs, no program has been implemented with at least one complete generation of students. Rather than continuity and development, the implementation of the national program has been characterized by inconsistency and change. Second, the program has not been consistently evaluated. With the exception of the pilot phase (where the results were not widely disseminated to language education scholars), the rest of the programs have not been subjected to serious systematic evaluation. Therefore, changes in programs or strategies have not been supported by data from evaluations of previous programs. In addition, none of the programs has been agreed upon by the social or academic communities, nor open to their participation. Thus, changes in programs or strategies seem to have been the product of political interests or partisan concerns and/or interests neither related nor linked to social needs or long-term educational projects. Finally, the establishment of the PRONI, like the previous PFCEB, was carried out by its inclusion in documents related to management or budgeting issues or in agreements. Rather than launch this an educational program focused on academic goals, it was relegated to monetary issues. By the same token, this speaks to the need to formulate state policies that allow education-related matters to go beyond presidential periods, thus opening the issue of teaching English in public primary schools to the mercy of the interests, tastes or whims of the next group in power, as we further discuss in the next section.

## Language Education Policy in Mexico

Mexican English programs can be seen as part of a larger trend towards introducing the language earlier in the school curriculum, a trend Enever (2012) refers to as primary English language teaching (PELT). This trend largely benefited from or was impacted by pressures exerted by neoliberal economic policies on developing countries to modernize their education systems in order to become more globally competitive (cf. Perales Escudero, Reyes Cruz, & Murrieta Loyo, 2012). The inclusion of subjects like English and technology can be interpreted as emblematic of those modernization efforts. In the case of Mexico, Sayer (2015b) explains that after many years of trying to get the English program off the ground, it was an especially critical report in 2006 by Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) that may have finally provided enough impetus to speed things up:

[The PISA report] ranked Mexico last in education attainment out of 30 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member countries. The report noted ‘only 24% of 25-to-34-year-old Mexicans have completed a baseline qualification at the upper secondary level, by far the lowest among OECD countries’ (Hopkins et al., 2007, p. 11). This report served as a wake-up call for the government, and a series of ambitious reforms of the public education system were undertaken (Reyes Cruz, Murrieta Loyo, & Hernández Méndez, 2011). (p. 259)

These reforms, called the *Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica* (RIEB), were approved by the Mexican congress under a law referred to as Acuerdo 592 (SEP, 2011). The RIEB included reorienting the pedagogical approach in all subject areas to a Vygotskian-inspired sociocultural approach and strengthening the areas of technology and literacy. In fact, Acuerdo 592 stated

explicitly that the goal was to modernize schooling at the primary level, and to bring fundamental changes to the Mexican education system. These goals undoubtedly eased the approval in 2008 of the PNIEB, and its launch as a pilot program during the 2009-10 school year.

However, the PNIEB was never accompanied by a specific national or state language policy. Latapí (2004) clarifies that a state policy is not the same that a government policy: “State policies often refer to policies that are more irreversible, because they imply greater state commitment to them, while a government policy is defined and applied by a particular government or by the government in office” (as cited in Hernández-Alarcón, 2015, p. 95). For Hernández-Alarcón (2015),

PNIEB was born with the aim of becoming a state policy so it took into account the regulatory principles established by the third article of the Constitution, the educational transformation that guided the National Development Plan 2007-2012 and the objectives outlined in the Education Program 2007-2012. (p. 101)

Unfortunately, according to the same author, while it could have become a state policy, it remained a government policy because the involvement of the federal government was limited to methodological and formal issues; its operation was left to each state government, without setting general or binding commitments or creating a linguistic legislation or policy that sheltered the program (for a more extensive argument, see Hernández-Alarcón, 2015, p. 101).

Calderón (2015), a member of a group of businessmen called *Mexicanos Primero* that has been a vocal critic strongly of government public education programs, makes the point that the larger problem in Mexico is that *política educativa*, or educational policy, cannot succeed when it is subsumed by *política política*, or political policy. Likewise, Sayer (2015c) in a response to their criticisms, argued that it would hold true that a language policy, however well conceptualized, cannot be effectively implemented when it becomes politicized. The current PRONI, without a clear language policy to frame it, and by extension, of a legal framework that guaranteed its continuity independently of the groups or parties in power, will likely face a similar outcome as the previous incarnations of the national English program. Therefore, the feasibility of the implementation of English across Mexico is still unclear and the country still lacks a state policy to frame its language education programs.

### **Expansion and Current Coverage of the Programs**

Following the implementation of the national programs, greater coverage was achieved in terms of the percentage of students served in almost every state. However, this growth has been uneven across states, as demonstrated in a recent study by Ramírez-Romero (2015) which found that some states had experienced a high level of growth, while in others the growth had been very slight or nonexistent (see Table 1). As for the rate of growth, in some states, it was very strong at the beginning, but came to a standstill after one or two years; in other cases, growth slightly decreased.

Table 1:  
*Percentage of students and grades served by some state and program types*

State	State Programs		PNIEB	
	% of students served	Grades	% of students served	Grades
<b>Baja California</b>	5%	3° p-6°P	5%	3°p-6°P
<b>Colima</b>	No data	No data	24%	1-6° P
<b>Durango</b>	15%	1°-6° P	41%	1-6° P
<b>Guanajuato</b>	0.63%	3° p y 1° P	3%	3°p -6° P
<b>Hidalgo</b>	No data	5° y 6° P	9%	1-6° P
<b>Jalisco</b>	0.79%	1° a 5° P	2%	1-6° P
<b>Quinta Roo</b>	4%	1° a 4° P	No data	No data
<b>Sonora</b>	40%	3° a 6° P	45%	3°p-6° P

Source: Ramírez-Romero, 2015.

Note: P=primary school, p=preschool.

Nationally, in the 2012-2013 school year, the last year for which official information was available, according to the National Council of Development Policy Assessment (CONEVAL, 2013, p. 2), the English program (then called PNIEB) was functioning in the 32 states and covered 20,905 preschool and primary schools and 4,156 secondary (in the pilot phase), serving a total of 6,544,914 students nationally. By these counts, the program covered only 12.57% of public schools and 25% of students in basic education in the country, despite the Ministry of Education's stated goal that the program would be implemented across the board by 2018.

Finally, the data we had access to seemed to suggest that the current program coverage is not only insufficient, but it is also unequal in geographical and demographic terms. As for the former, coverage continues to focus on state capitals or major cities, neglecting smaller populations and marginalized areas. Demographically, the situation is no better, as in many cases, the programs have been serving only students enrolled in the morning shift<sup>5</sup>. If we juxtapose both sets of data, we could conclude that the students who have been covered less are the most socially vulnerable, namely indigenous peoples, peasants, and migrants, because it is precisely they who live in small towns and in marginalized areas.

### Description of the Current English Curricular Framework

Even though the PNIEB is not mentioned in the new program (PRONI), the curricular framework designed for the PNIEB is still the official English curricular framework. According to this framework, all students from third grade of kindergarten through sixth grade of elementary school, should receive 2-2½ hours of instruction per week, or roughly 100 hours yearly. In 2012, this was extended to incorporate the existing three-year middle/lower secondary school program that also receives 2½ hours weekly. This means that students should receive a total of 700 hours of instruction over ten years, grades K-9. The progression of students' level is shown in the figure below. In the Mexican system, the CENNI levels are based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale (Council of Europe, 2001), and students should progress from an A0 level to A2-B1 (called B1-) by the end of ninth grade (called *3o de secundaria*).

<sup>5</sup> Because of overcrowding and lack of classroom space, most schools in Mexico has a *matutino* (morning) and *vespertino* (afternoon) shifts.

MARCO COMÚN EUROPEO DE REFERENCIA (MCER). ESTÁNDARES INTERNACIONALES		CERTIFICACIÓN NACIONAL DE NIVEL DE IDIOMA (CENNI). ESTÁNDARES NACIONALES Y NÚMERO APROXIMADO DE HORAS PARA ALCANZARLOS			
NIVELES		-		+	HORAS
C2	➔	17	18	19	1251-1300
C1	➔	14	15	16	851-900
B2	➔	11	12	13	651-700
B1	➔	8	9	10	451-500
A2	➔	5	6	7	321-350
A1	➔	2	3	4	161-200
					} Educación Básica

Figure 1: Progression of levels and hours (Source: SEP, 2010).

As noted in the section on language policy, the English program was initiated as part of a broader educational reform. This reform reoriented the curriculum and pedagogy of all subject areas to a Vygotskyan sociocultural approach. In the case of English, the newer sociocultural approach incorporated elements of the previous communicative approach, which was based on the development of competencies. However, rather than define contents and learning objectives in terms of competencies, the sociocultural approach defines them in terms of social practices. These social practices – which extend the notion of communicative functions as linguistic categories – prioritize the activity or task being accomplished. Consistent with Vygotskyan theory, language is seen as a powerful mediational tool. The contents of the curriculum are organized according to these social practices, which are located within one of three contexts or environments: the community/family, literary/ludic, and academic.

Hence, the curriculum represents a theoretically sophisticated approach to early second/foreign language teaching. This sophistication entails both advantages and challenges. On the plus side, it gives the teacher a great deal of autonomy for developing lessons that are relevant to the local context, since social practices should be defined in terms of the lived experiences of the students. Also, it de-emphasizes linguistic, and particularly grammatical elements, and instead asks teachers to get students to develop *products* for each unit of study, which lends itself to a more project-based approach. Finally, the contents of English class tend to overlap with other areas of the curriculum that students are studying in Spanish, which could potentially reinforce learning in other content areas.

Amongst the drawbacks, it requires the teacher to have a fairly deep theoretical understanding of the program in order to know how to apply it properly. Many Vygotskyan concepts can be abstract and difficult to see how to immediately put into practice, and many novice teachers do not have a sound understanding of what “sociocultural” means. Furthermore, teaching in Mexico traditionally relies on a teacher-fronted classroom, with extensive use of the textbooks published by international publishers. Unfortunately, most textbooks do not have the expected

quality, are not adequately congruent with the official framework, and standardize the contents and emphasize the linguistic elements, all of which create inconsistencies with the goals of the curriculum and the actual classroom practices, among other problems (Castro, 2013, 2015). In a well-documented analysis, Villarreal & Olave (2015), also evidence that many of the activities proposed in the framework are out of context, of little or no significance for students, contain gender stereotypes, promote artificial and limited interactions, and insufficiently help students to develop the social functions of language. In addition, the authors point out that the learning activities included in the framework are insufficiently linked to the content of other subjects and do not support the development of the competencies established in the basic education curriculum.

## Profiles of English Teachers

One of the main challenges of the widespread implementation of the English programs in Mexico has been the teachers: their qualifications, types, and working conditions.

### Teacher Qualifications

Considering that most primary school teachers do not speak English and that in most states (perhaps all but 3 of 32) there is a chronic shortage of qualified English teachers, the Ministry of Education estimated that expanding the program to every school and classroom in primary grades K-6 in the country would require hiring more than 99,000 teachers. Moreover, the ministry established guidelines for state coordinators for the qualifications of new teachers: they must meet the *perfil mínimo* (minimum profile), and give preference to individuals with the *perfil ideal* (ideal profile). An ideal profile includes a B2 or better level of English, particularly with oral skills, and a BA in the area of language teaching, or a BA in another area with a certificate in ELT. The minimum profile is a B1 level with certification, or no certification but a higher level.

### Types of Teachers

In two studies of teachers working in the English program (Ramírez-Romero, 2015; Sayer, Mercau, & Blanco López, 2013), researchers identified four basic categories of teachers working in the program. The first category, teachers with BA-TEFL degrees from universities, tended to have higher levels of English – often the B2 level of the ideal profile – but sometimes lacked pedagogical skills to work with children in challenging contexts within public schools, such as classroom management skills. The second, *normalista* (teacher training school graduates), usually have a degree to teach English to secondary students. They had done an extensive practicum in the public schools and often have better classroom management skills and more rounded training, for example for working with children with disabilities, but often had much lower English proficiency. The third group included those who generally had been hired for their English level, but did not have a background in education, included degrees in tourism, business administration, as well as former migrants who had lived and worked in the U.S. The last group are current students in BA-TEFL or similar programs (who hope to graduate to become teachers like those in the first group).

### Teacher Training

Given the shortage of qualified English teachers and the features of the sociocultural curriculum, state administrators have recognized that one of the solutions is to implement teacher

training programs. As with any L2 English program, there are three main areas where they have focused: (1) English proficiency, especially in oral language skills, (2) methodology for language teaching, especially with the new sociocultural approach, and (3) general pedagogical skills, especially for classroom management, working with children with special needs, and other concerns of public schools.

Rather than take a one-size-fits-all approach to training, some state coordinators have tried to tailor training to the particular needs of the teachers. Others have emphasized teacher certification, which usually means having teachers do a language proficiency exam (such as TOEFL or IELTS) or the Test of Knowledge of Teaching (TKT) exam. Some states have signed contracts with the British Council, the American Embassy, the Center of Applied Linguistics (CAL), or in a few cases with American or Mexican universities. While the variety of training options may be seen as a strength, it may also be interpreted as a lack of a clear national strategy (see Ramírez-Romero, 2015). By the same token, while the collaboration of higher education institutions from foreign countries, particularly from the United Kingdom and the United States may be seen as an asset for some, several Mexican scholars strongly criticize such collaboration because of the risks historically associated to the intervention of agencies from other countries on a such a sensitive area as education (see Clemente et al., 2006; Ramírez-Romero, 2015). In a similar vein, some researchers have critiqued the role of publishers (Castro, 2015), especially foreign, who even though their participation in training or upgrading teachers has been reduced, have expanded their involvement in the development and publishing of official textbooks. This participation has allowed them to maintain a leading role in the Mexican education scenario considering that textbooks, along with blackboards, remain the most used resources by Mexican English teachers in public primary schools (Ramírez-Romero, 2015). Therefore, in practice, publishers continue acting as teacher trainers as long as teachers keep guiding or framing their teaching practices mainly or solely by the textbooks.

Finally, it should be noted that language teacher preparation programs, especially in public universities, have seen tremendous development since the mid-1990s. Many universities have *licenciatura* (BA) and *maestría* (MA) programs in ELT, and some even have concentrations or include coursework on working with children, educational psychology, and other aspects of early L2 teaching and learning. However, historically almost all teachers in the public primary schools have come from the normal schools, a national system of teacher training schools with close ties to the teachers unions. At present, the only degree that the normal schools offer in English teaching is for middle school.

### **Working Conditions**

About two-thirds of teachers working in the English program earn between 50-80 Mexican pesos (about \$3-5 USD) per class hour, and the majority (92%) work with a non-union temporary contract that does not guarantee them permanence and employment stability nor provide them the same benefits as regular teachers, such as health insurance, annual Christmas bonus, paid vacations, and housing benefits. Moreover, in many states, teachers report that they are not paid in a timely manner, and despite signing a contract, often have to wait months to receive their paycheck. In fact, in most states, English teachers are not referred to as “teachers” but “external specialized advisors”. The situation is even worse for female teachers (overall, teachers working in the program tend to be young females) who, in many states, are not entitled to health insurance or maternity leave, do not get paid, and lose their jobs if they become pregnant (Funderburk, Hidalgo & Dzul, 2015).



## Main Accomplishments and Remaining Challenges

Table 2 summarizes the previous discussion and identifies the main accomplishments of the national English program in six areas, as well as the challenges that remain. Additionally, we have discussed how the continuity of the program has been hindered by the lack of an official national language policy for English, and that it has been conceptualized and implemented as part of an education policy, but rather through a series of administrative and fiscal actions. Likewise, it is important to note that although English as school status now has official status in the basic education curriculum, there has not been a concomitant improvement in the labor conditions and professional status of English teachers. Paychecks are routinely delayed by months, and most

Table 2:

*Summary of accomplishments and challenges of the English program*

<b>Area: Coverage</b>	
Accomplishment: Numbers of students receiving English instruction in public schools has been greatly increased.	Challenge: Expansion has been slow, coverage has been uneven across and within states, and marginalized students still do not have English (Ramírez-Romero et al., 2015).
<b>Area: Curriculum</b>	
Solid design of new curriculum gives fairly clear framework.	Challenge: The framework is still relatively unknown and seldom used by a large number of teachers, who would rather base their lesson plans on the textbooks. Additionally, the framework itself faces a number of challenges that need to be properly addressed (Villarreal & Olave, 2015).
<b>Area: Status of English program</b>	
English now appears on official <i>Plan de Estudios</i> for basic education.	Challenge: English grades still do not appear on the official school report cards because English is not taught in all schools (Ramírez-Romero, 2015).
<b>Area: Textbooks</b>	
Accomplishment: Free books are widely available.	Challenge: The quality and distribution are still experiencing severe problems (Castro, 2013, 2015).
<b>Area: Teacher training</b>	
Accomplishment: Diversity of teacher training activities are available in many states.	Challenge: The number of qualified teachers is still insufficient as well as the quantity, relevance, and quality of training.
<b>Area: Attitudes towards English in Mexico</b>	
Accomplishment: A more positive attitude towards learning English by many students and a recognition of its importance by a high percentage of parents and teachers.	Challenge: There is still some opposition from important sectors of the population due to ideological, as well as historical and academic, reasons (Ramírez-Romero, 2013).

English teachers do not have the same benefits and make only a fraction of what their colleagues do, contributing growing manifestations of discontent in many states (Ramírez-Romero, 2013). In most states, changes to the contract structure to create stable, decent-paying positions are needed. Within the schools, teachers have limited access to educational resources: most of them do not have their own classroom and receive little or no support from schools for the acquisition of educational materials (Ramírez Romero Sayer, & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2014). Difficulties managing large classes sizes – routinely between 30-45 students – and having to rotate between 8-12 groups per week, also makes the English teacher’s job more challenging.

Another, often overlooked issue that we have alluded to here is the need of a more multilingual and intercultural approach in ELT in Mexico. Several researchers have argued that the teaching of English in Mexico should promote multilingualism, but instead but has instead imposed what Lara (2006) calls “Anglophone monolingualism” (p. 429). The effect is a type of “bilingual diglossia” that privileges English over Spanish, and by implication, places indigenous languages further down the hierarchy. Imposition that has been driven, enhanced, or promoted by the major English speaking world powers through various mechanisms such as the aforementioned training programs, the design of official textbooks by American or British publishers, their participation as consultants or designers in the creation of new programs or frameworks, and the participation of foreign “experts” in the evaluation of the programs. Similar criticisms have been leveled by Clemente et al. (2006) and López-Gopar (2013, 2014) who advocate for a greater appreciation of Mexican linguistic and cultural diversity where multilingualism and interculturalism are seen as positive and valuable.

Nearly a quarter-century after the implementation of the first English programs in a handful of states and just over half a decade of its launching nationwide, the teaching of English in Mexican public primary schools, although it has experienced some important advances, holds promises whose fulfillment are still far from being accomplished and there are many unattended challenges and issues.

The teaching of English in public elementary schools burst into the Mexican educational scenario, like its “road companion” the information and communication technology (ICT) area, accompanied by large and spectacular promises and speeches issued by politicians eager for quick fixes or solutions for complicated problems. In both scenarios (the ICT and English) omissions were similar: they focused on the forms and props (purchase of equipment in the case of the first and creation of an administrative and organizational apparatus called PNIEB in the second case) without addressing, designing and implementing the long-term and more complex structures and measures that would enable the consolidation and permanence of the proposals, such as state policies and teacher training.

Additionally, in both cases, politicians and administrators have left out of their proposals one of the cornerstones of any educational innovation: the teachers, who have never been seen as important agents in the design and implementation of the “innovative programs” (ICT and English) launched by the federal government. In the case of English the situation is even worse: English teachers are not even called “teachers” but “advisors”, a euphemism with which states have tried to avoid giving them the same rights and benefits of their colleagues, the regular teachers.

The current political, social, educational and economic crisis impacting the country, as well as the attempts to implement by force and/or coercion an erroneously called “educational reform,” coupled with the changing and hesitantly official position regarding the teaching of English in this administration have hampered its consolidation and strengthening in Mexican public primary schools. In fact, it appears that the teaching of English in this type of school is experiencing a setback in this presidential period, not only because the much needed state policy has not been yet

formulated nor the problems that teachers face have been properly addressed (especially their working conditions and their training), but the responsibility of the program administration and operation has returned to the state governments. In addition, the doors have opened up (even more) to commercial publishers and institutions, agencies and embassies of the two linguistic English speaking superpowers (United States and United Kingdom), allowing them to influence the spinal cord of the Mexican education system: the textbooks and the training of teachers.

It can therefore be concluded that, in response to the question posed in the title of this article, that the teaching of English in Mexican public elementary schools thus far is more heat than light. Achievements are largely a product of the hope and work of many of those English teachers, who despite their working conditions, are still struggling to give to the most needy children in the country access to a knowledge previously only deserved for a few privileged ones. By doing so, they maintain the possibility that one day, we will be able to write a happy ending to this story still under construction.

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