

Introduction to the Special Issue: Research on the PNIEB

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Guest editors

It is safe to say that the *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica* has transformed the landscape of English teaching in Mexico. This is because the new national program for teaching English launched by the Mexican Ministry of Education in 2009 represents the largest expansion of English language education in the country's history. Even in its pilot phase, it includes hundreds of thousands of students and tens of thousands of teachers from all 32 states. It involves materials designers, curriculum developers, administrators and supervisors, and researchers. The Ministry projects that by 2018 every student in public schools in Mexico will receive 2½ hours of instruction per week for all 13 years of their K-12 education. In short, it is a big deal.

It also represents an historic opportunity for us to "get it right." For many years in Mexico, the perception has been that if you want to learn English, you either have to go to a private school or take extra classes in a language center. The quality of English classes in the public *secundaria* schools, where most students study English for three years from grades seven to nine, has generally been regarded as quite poor. However, with the advent of the PNIEB (or NEPBE, the acronym in English), public school students suddenly have the possibility of developing real communicative competence in the language, an opportunity that was previously only available to those who could afford private studies. Now, learning English could function as a social equalizer, not linguistic mechanism for maintaining social divisions (Sayer, 2014). What a shame it would be, then, to waste this opportunity.

This is our motivation in developing this special issue of the *Mextesol Journal*. It is a compilation of some of the early research on the PNIEB, including on some of the preceding state programs, that stems from two panels that we organized for the 2012 national Mextesol convention in Puerto Vallarta. However, it is also meant to be a "call to arms" for others to contribute their time, energy, and creativity to helping make the PNIEB work. The noted scholar Paul Davies, who has many years working in ELT in Mexico, observed that some have approached the new program with a recognition of the merits of the program on paper, critique of the program in practice, and hope for the success of the program in the future (personal communication, Aug. 15, 2013). One of the general conclusions the reader of this volume should come away with is that many of the authors and studies in this volume document the positive aspects and potential of the program, as well as try to provide a critical examination of what things can be improved. And as with any new program, there is much that can be improved.

One problem with a national program is, for starters, that it is national. That is, a SEP (Ministry of Education) program by its nature takes a "one size fits all" approach. Mexico, as we know, is a large and diverse place. The approach we take to teach English to a bilingual Spanish-Maya child from rural Chiapas who has never travelled far from her village may (and should) be different than how we would teach to a street-wise kid in Tepito or a transnational student in Michoacán whose family has just returned from the U.S. That is, we know that good teaching must respond

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to the needs of particular *students* and be relevant to their particular *contexts*. Teachers, then, need help to figure out how to “localize” the PNIEB and make it work for their particular program.

Fortunately, the sociocultural approach that the SEP has adopted is inherently much more flexible than other curricula, and encourages teachers to be creative and adapt the program to their own situation. Unfortunately, due to the insufficient training provided to the teachers as well as their diverse formation (see Sayer, Mercau & Blanco, this volume) this same flexibility can become a problem for many of them. For instance, many want to know what exactly is a “social practice”? How are they related to communicative functions or competencies? Added to this, there have been problems within the SEP related to the design, developing and distribution of textbooks and educational materials (as Castro’s article addresses), the hiring, training, payment and working conditions of teachers, and the English teachers’ relationship with principals and regular teachers and their status within the schools, as we see in the articles López de Anda and also Poun and Mendoza, just to mention a few documented by the authors here that have adversely affected the operation and legitimacy of the program.

These and other problems, as well as the programs achievements and progress are explored throughout this special issue where the approaches of different scholars are presented. As the reader will be able to appreciate by reviewing the different texts, the authors here have analyzed the program from various perspectives, conceptual and cultural frameworks, methodological approaches, and educational backgrounds, but they all share a common interest in documenting and analyzing what is happening in Mexico in order to provide elements to improve the current efforts and programs. The articles here also include contributions and case studies from a range of states representing the diversity of PNIEB contexts in Mexico: Sonora, Puebla, Aguascalientes, Nayarit and Guanajuato. Despite their diversity, we have grouped the papers in three sections, depending upon their focus: participants, methodology, or educational materials.

In the first section, the authors analyze the perspectives, perceptions and problems of various subjects (students, teachers, principals, and administrators) who participate in the program. From the point of view of the students, Sayer and Ban present a study carried out in Aguascalientes. Their results point to the ways to the potential benefits that the PNIEB can have beyond just learning English words and skills, but also includes inter-curricular connections and children’s engagements with the community.

Teachers are central to the success of the PNIEB, and this issue includes three articles which focus on aspects of the teachers’ experiences with the PNIEB. Quezada’s *Transforming into a Multilingual Nation: A Qualitative Analysis of Mexico’s Initiative to Develop Language Teachers*, where the author documents the progress and impact of the PNIEB in Mexican schools based on participants personal and professional self-reflection accounts of their experience in the program. The study by Salas and Sánchez *Voices and Echoes from the PNIEB Experience in Puebla*, about the first impressions of a group of teachers that participated in the first stages of this program in Puebla. Sayer, Mercau and Blanco’s *PNIEB Teachers’ Profiles and Professional Development: A Needs Analysis* examines the question of teacher training and presents a needs analysis study which identifies key areas to focus training efforts.

López de Anda discusses the key role that the *directores*, or principals play in implementing a new program. She maps out for us the complexities of layers and administrative units involved in the PNIEB, and how the national and state ministries have evaluated the pilot phase. She presents data showing how the principals view the PNIEB, and what sort of priorities they bring to its implementation. Collins and Pérez take a very different approach to discuss the administrator’s role. They use narrative inquiry to tell the story from the administrator’s point of

view of how one state program was created and transformed, including the many obstacles faced.

The last two articles in this section consider how the perceptions of stakeholders may converge or diverge. Mendoza and Puón's article *The Challenge of Teaching English in Public Schools: Beyond Academic Factors* explores the non-academic aspects that might hinder the implementation of this program from the perspective of teachers, principals and coordinators. In the last article, Ramírez documents the problems encountered or related to the subjects (professors, directors, parents and students) who have participated in the PNIEB and in the state programs that preceded it.

The second section focuses on the teaching methodology employed in the programs. In the first article, Alcántar and Montes explore teacher and student perceptions of the learning activities in the PNIEB in a case study conducted in Nayarit. In the second one, Pamplón and Ramírez present the findings from a qualitative study on the implementation of the PNIEB in Sonora, in relation to the teaching methodology used in schools.

Finally, the last two articles deal with the important issue of textbooks and teaching materials. Lengeling and her co-authors report the results of a small-scale qualitative study concerning the teachers' perspectives of didactic material used in the PNIEB in Guanajuato, while Castro presents a framework for evaluating the pedagogical value of a textbook, and uses this framework to analyze two of the texts used in the PNIEB.

We hope that reading the articles included in this special issue provides readers with a better understanding of what is happening in Mexico related to EFL teaching in primary public schools, and from such understanding, new questions and future research projects emerge as well as a myriad of innovative ideas to improve the quality of the education provided to Mexican children who attend those type of schools.

Finally, we would like to thank the general editor of the *Mextesol Journal*, Martha Lengeling, and the editorial board of the journal for their support of this special issue. They recognize that the PNIEB is an important and timely topic, and that the journal as the main professional publication in our field in Mexico is the right venue to publish these studies. As always, thanks go to the indefatigable JoAnn Miller for doing all the time-consuming behind-the-scenes work that makes the journal issues magically appear on the website. We would also like to thank Octavio Castro, MA-TESL at the University of Texas at San Antonio, for his work in copy-editing the special issue. As well, we thank the reviewers who contributed their time and expertise to comment on and improve the articles.

References:

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