Research in English Language Teaching and Learning in México: Findings related to Students, Teachers, and Teaching Methods[1]

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Mapping the Research Territory in México

From an English language learning and teaching standpoint, México is located within what is called the 'expansion circle' (Krachru, 1992). Historically, countries within the expansion circle have based their English language teaching methods and standards on those created in the United States and the United Kingdom, the 'inner circle' countries (Canagarajah, 1999; Freidrich y Berns, 2003; Seargeant, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2009). Despite the fact that the expansion circle is the largest in the world in relation to language learners, very little is known about EFL teaching in these contexts because of the lack of research that has been reported (Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2009).

In our country, the language teaching and researching situation has grown and developed in the past decades along with international trends. Up until the mid nineties, language centers had been the main source of courses and teacher training programs. However, as the field evolved, a greater demand for language courses and teachers emerged. Universities began to offer different teacher preparation programs at the undergraduate and graduate

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level, and professional associations and forums were created (Encinas, Busseniers, & Ramirez Romero, 2007). As a result of all this, research was started in the field of language teaching through individual dissertations and by groups of academics that shared common interests. Unfortunately, much of the work was not published or readily available and new researchers could not benefit from past experiences and findings. There was a need for an overall view of the different topics, research methods, and results that these studies were telling us about Mexican language learners and programs. In other words, there was a need to map the territory to see where we stood, how far we had travelled, and how we could help new travelers in their teaching and researching journey.

With this frame of thought in mind, from 2005 to 2008 a group of academics from several Mexican universities collaborated in an initiative to collect and review research on foreign language teaching and learning developed in Mexico from 2000 to 2007. The aim was to establish the state of knowledge of this field in our country. The results of the study, as well as the research methodology and analysis of the data at a national and state level were published in two volumes which were coordinated by one of the authors of this paper (Ramírez-Romero, 2007, 2010).

For the purpose of this chapter however, we will focus primarily on describing fifty of the studies that give us some understanding of English language learners in Mexico, their teachers, and the methods and resources that are used in their teaching. The aim is to present an overview of research in Mexico during this period of time which may be useful to those interested in this field. By providing specific information about the Mexican context, this review will allow teachers to make better informed decisions about crucial aspects of their professional practice. They can use the studies as a point of reference with which to compare and contrast their own practices and situations. This work is also a useful resource for beginning researchers and research methods students who can locate different references to support their literature review. By looking further into the studies that are mentioned throughout the chapter, students can see other methodological perspectives that have been used when researching topics that are similar to their own. It is

relevant to point out that the studies which were reviewed all used different research methodologies and sample sizes and they were carried out in different institutions and contexts. For this reason, the results cannot be applied to particular cases and must only be seen as references or hypothesis that must be compared in other contexts. Nevertheless, their significance lies in the fact that that they were carried out by Mexican students in their contexts and they offer us, teachers and researchers alike, a first glance into the research history and situation in our country.

The information covered in the chapter will be presented in four sections that include studies about (a) students; (b) teachers; (c) learning activities and strategies and teaching methods, and (d) educational resources and materials. In each of these sections we will mention the studies and discuss the main findings that were reported. However before this, in the following section we will briefly describe the research approach that was used for the state of knowledge review and some reflections on the process.

Methodology: Systematic Review of Research

The approach that was followed was a **systematic review of research**, a frequently used method in educational research that aims to obtain a comprehensive view or understanding of a field of study at a particular point or moment of its development. This understanding is called a 'state of knowledge' and is defined by Lopez & Mota (2003) as "the systematic analysis and review generated around a field of research during a determined period of time" (p. 25). For this work, recommendations from *Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa* for this type of research were taken into account. Further information regarding research methodology and procedures can be consulted in Ramírez-Romero (2007, 2009, and 2010).

The first step in the project involved identifying researchers that would be interested in participating, and forming the work groups in each state. To do so, the project coordinator invited academics from around the country that held recognition in the field of foreign language teaching, with an additional intent of covering the greatest number of states and

institutions. As a result, seventy researchers from twenty one higher education institutions participated in the state of knowledge review. During 2005 to 2008 they collected and analyzed research produced in 26 of the 32 states in the country.

For the process, each group of participants defined the geographic areas to be covered in each state. Their decision was based on the size of the state, the location of the institutions with foreign language programs, and the number of teachers and students in each area, both current and graduated. Following this, information on research reports, articles, books, thesis and dissertations (undergraduate and graduate) was requested from each institution.

During this stage, a total of 1375 products were reviewed, but only 548 were selected for the final state of knowledge report because the rest did not meet the general criteria that was previously established by the main researchers. The first requirement was that the work had to be a research study or a proposal for implementation carried out in Mexico from 2000 to 2007 on any topic related to foreign language teaching and learning processes. In addition to this, the work had to be a finished product or have a considerable degree of advance. It also had to have been published or presented at a conference or as thesis work. The work that was accepted represented 40% of that which was reviewed. Of the selected products, 472 (86%) were from the different states and 76 (14%) from Mexico Distrito Federal and the metropolitan area.

The concentration and analysis of the data was carried out in two levels. For the first level, each group of participating researchers organized and analyzed the data at an institutional or state level. At a second point, the data and products from all the states and institutions in the sample were compared and analyzed at a national level. For the analysis of the data, basic descriptive statistics and content analysis techniques were used. In addition to this, the results were compared to those obtained in similar studies and state of knowledge reviews developed by the *Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa*.

It is important to highlight that the state of knowledge reviews carried out in 2007 and 2010 represent the first collective achievements of this kind in the field of foreign language teaching and learning in Mexico. The thought, planning, and effort involved in coordinating the views of the participating researchers, and in organizing and following the different stages in the process was a great challenge for all those involved in the project. One of the key elements in this academic endeavor was for all those involved to have clear objectives and instructions every step of the way. In addition to this, each group of participating researchers had to work collaboratively within their own state searching, selecting and reviewing the many products. In retrospect, we can say that the work and effort that was placed into the project was worthwhile because of the contribution that was made to the field. Even more so, the participation and involvement of colleagues from different institutions strengthened the relations that existed in the field, and new networks of collaboration developed from one book to the next.

Review of Findings on Students, Teachers, and Teaching Methods and Resources

In this section, selected research studies are presented according to the following main categories: (a) students, (b) teachers, (c) learning activities, strategies and teaching methods, and (d) educational resources and materials. For each category, the study and main findings are described and in some cases, the research method that was used.

Students

In this area we include findings associated with Mexican students, specifically those that mention factors that influence their level linguistic competence and language learning.

In relation to students' level linguistic competence, several studies (Espinoza, 2007; Langford, 2007; Mota, 2007) were identified that used research instruments such as English language and socio-cultural background surveys to collect data. These studies found that students who achieved higher linguistic competence in English had received more hours of instruction in elementary, secondary, and high school; the study relates these findings to

factors such as consistency and continuity that make a difference in language instruction (Espinoza, 2007).   Other studies reported a relation between the level of linguistic competence in English, and the students' level of linguistic competence in Spanish, to their education, to their exposure to the language in and outside the school in their socio-family setting, as to the type of school they previously attended (public or private) and to their parents educational background (Langford, 2007; Mota, 2007).

Other significant factors that influence language learning in different contexts are the students' cultural identities and the way in which the target language is contextualized within their own cultural framework (Barbier, 2002; González, 2001; Gutierrez, 2005). These studies were of a descriptive nature and some used research instruments like interviews, questionnaires and observations (Gonzalez, 2001), while others also analyzed documents (Barbier, 2005) and used reflective instruments such as journals (Gutierrez, 2005). Another significant factor identified in an ethnographic study is the socio-cultural status of the students and their social positioning in terms of gender, age, social class and sexuality (Clemente y Higgins, 2008). A related study confirms a hypothesis about the relation that exists between students' learning styles and their age, gender, level of schooling, and area of study (Hernández, R.L. 2003).

The results from these studies on language students in our country are similar to others developed with students in other countries (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Lightbrown & Spada, 2006; Stern, 1983) which indicate that linguistic competence and learning in a foreign language are complex processes which are influenced by multiple factors. These authors recommend teachers to diagnose the students' needs and to understand the individual learners' characteristics. This will allow them to design strategies that can address problems areas that are within their teaching reach.

Teachers

In relation to the teachers, the most important findings can be placed within two main categories: the teacher's working conditions, and the level of preparation and educational background of teachers.

In an institution that they reviewed, Ayala and Rodriguez (2000) mention that an absence of institutional policy has limited the development of the language area. They reflect on the poor professionalization of academic personnel, the frequent rotation of foreign language personnel, and the lack of academic criteria for the hiring of teachers. This situation seems to repeat itself with varying characteristics in other higher education institutions and in other educational levels as well (Ramírez, Pamplón & Cota, in review). These last results are part of a qualitative study where English teachers and administrators were interviewed about the problems they faced in the field.

In addition to this, studies (Cota, 2000; González, 2001) that collected data through questionnaires mention a need to prepare and revitalize teachers. They also point out that more studies that characterize foreign language teachers are required to serve as a basis for the design of subsequent instructional policies.

In relation to the second category, several studies report problems related to the teachers' linguistic and pedagogic knowledge and the need for preparation and development (Álvarez, 2003; Ayala & Rodríguez, 2000; Cota, 2000; González, 2001; Puga, 2004; Zhizhko, 2005). Moreover, they found that administrators and teachers hold different perspectives about the aims and benefits of teacher training programs (Murillo Ruiz, 2004). The previous studies are of a qualitative design and questionnaires, interviews and observations were the most frequently used data collecting instruments.

These finding seem to indicate that as with the rest of the Mexican academics (Gil Antón, 1994) there is much to be known about foreign language teachers. Moreover, the limited knowledge that exists seems to indicate that the language teachers' working conditions, as with the rest of the Mexican teachers are not very adequate (Grediaga, 2000; Heras, 2005; Rodríguez, Oramas & Rodríguez 2007; Sandoval, 2001). Other studies indicate that English teachers need, as do Mexican teachers from other educational levels, greater

training and professional development (Ramírez Romero, 1999; Sandoval, 2001; Rodríguez *et al*., 2007), and teachers' perspectives are very different from those of the administrators (Murillo, 2004).

Learning Activities, Strategies and Teaching Methods

In general, the studies about learning activities, strategies and teaching methods that were identified report that the use of a variety of cognitive learning strategies and teaching techniques enhances learning in an integral way (Hernández, 2001; Moreno, 2007; Quijano, 2003). These studies suggest that students' learning of specific linguistic forms is achieved with their use, and not only through memorization ones (García, 2005), while others indicate that the use of collaborative methods improved learning in a course (Ortega, 2002) and cooperative learning increased students' communicative performance (Martinez Cantu, 2004).

In relation to linguistic skills, the following subcategories were identified:

Reading Comprehension

Several authors report that the use of reading comprehension strategies in English positively affects students' achievement. Bencomo y Moncivaez (2003) report that the use of reading comprehension strategies allows students to better assimilate information in the foreign language, and the students in the study expressed that these activities were helpful in improving their performance. Another study (Guillen, 2002) that used a case study approach and collected data through questionnaires, journals and reading reports found that explicit teaching of reading strategies positively affected students' language learning. Moreover, students reflected in their journals about becoming more aware of their L1 grammar through their FL learning.

Hernandez (2001) and Quijano (2003) developed pre-experimental studies with data collection techniques such as questionnaires, structured interviews and standardized tests. They found that the use of reading comprehension strategies has a positive influence on

students' attitude, satisfaction and learning (Hernandez, 2001) and students' achievement increased with their use (Quijano, 2003). Moreover, Moreno Gloggner, Bories Maury y Domínguez Aguilar (2005) share their experience using a variety of cognitive strategies during a school year as part of their study. They found positive results when using different strategies and when these were taught as part of the course content. Rodríguez (2005) also reported positive results from an ethnographic study that included observations, student and teacher interviews, and pre and post reading comprehension evaluations to see the effect of this type of strategies.

In addition, researchers found that the use of learning strategies with games improved reading comprehension in English and students enjoyed studying more and were more motivated (Martínez, 2005; Martínez Cantú, 2004, 2005). Additional studies relating to reading comprehension (Pérez Chavez, 2003; Treviño Miranda, 2004) mention different factors that influence the development of reading comprehension skills in our students. On one hand, there are individual factors such as the learners' construction of mental representations; on the other, the students' experiences prior to coming to school.

Listening Comprehension

Under a more linguistic focus, the following studies address phonological factors that affect students' listening comprehension.

Akerberg (2005) highlights the importance of considering factors of reconstruction, addition, and guessing in listening comprehension, as well as helping students to establish relations between gramemes and phonemes in the foreign language to make these processes automatic, as in their L1 learning. The study also found that practicing sound discrimination activities for sounds that are most problematic for students improves their listening perception. The author recommends the inclusion of this type of exercises in the second language classroom.

Along this line, Shea (2003) found that native speakers of Mexican Spanish identified lexical units better when assimilation was not present. The study showed that in a statistically significant manner, subjects identified words that condition assimilation when the primary accentuation was on the first syllabus, in comparison to sentences that did not have it.

Writing and L1 and L2 Strategies

Results from a study (Ramirez, 2003) on students' academic writing suggest that a majority of students that were interviewed expressed that their lack of vocabulary was an important limitation and one of the main reason for plagiarism in academic text writing. The use of incorrect grammar was also mentioned in the study. Most students preferred to plagiarize than to present a text with serious written discourse problems.

Dominguez Aguilar (2002) found that the use of L1 strategies was not only determined by the level of competence of the students and by their perception of the proximity of Spanish to English, but also by the students' previous experience with English outside the classroom, their age, and knowledge of other languages. In another study, Corona (2001) focused on the lexical influence of Spanish as a L1 and of English as L2 on university students' learning of French as a third language.

Results from a study (Pamplon, 2005) that used think-aloud protocols, questionnaires, and text analysis and codification as instruments mention that students apply some of the process writing strategies they have learned as part of their English language instruction to their writing in Spanish. The study found no indication of interference or transfer of L1 writing strategies to L2 writing. This may be a result of the lack of writing instruction and practice in L1 prior to reaching university level.

Speaking

Moctezuma (2005) reports improvement in students' oral production fluency when teachers explained the different types of speech acts and the benefits of exploratory speaking to the students. The study recommends the development of pragmatic competence in language teaching. Another study (Da Silva, Alfaro, Colin & Herrera, 2002) also states that discourse resources used by the teacher, such as reformulations, context clues, conversational style markers, interactive scaffolding and courtesy strategies also seem to help students in their oral production.

A further study on oral production in the classroom (Sumaran, 2006) reported that students found the classroom as appropriate for speaking practice. However, they considered the time designated for this skill as not sufficient, and the teachers' inadequate application of strategies as making speaking more difficult for them. In this study, both students and teachers agreed that the use of creative techniques such as conversation clubs could be a possible solution to this situation.

Another study on the use of strategies (Dominguez Aguilar, 2002) explains that students use repetitions more than fillers to gain time to think on the words they need use to convey the message. Some beginner level students said they preferred to shorten the message instead of paraphrasing the word or phrase because they thought the listener would get confused if they took a long time answering. This study showed that students do not always use the strategies they use in their L1, so there is a need to explicitly teach them to use these strategies to improve their speaking in the FL.

The previous findings confirm the important role that language learning strategies of different kinds have in Mexican students' foreign language learning. For this reason, the effort that is invested in designing varied, creative, dynamic, collaborative and fun activities and strategies is very valuable and worthwhile. Unfortunately, some authors (Cánovas, 2004; Iturbe Ruiz, 2005) have found that some teachers do not place importance on results as these and continue to use a limited variety of teaching strategies. Other studies suggest that teachers only follow the textbook (García, 2005) and use a rigid teaching

scheme, investing a great amount of time in maintaining discipline in class, and basically focusing on grammar and correction correction (Basurto, Busseniers y Scholes (2001a, 2001b, 2002).

Educational Resources and Materials

In relation to educational resources and materials, García García (2002) reports results from a semi-experimental study which showed that the use of technology in English language teaching seems to increase student participation in class and the development of the four language skills.

In relation to specific resources and materials, Dominguez (2002) found that multimedia programs provided students with interesting interactive activities which helped them to develop different skills and sub-skills such as pronunciation, listening comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary development to mention some. Hernandez, Hernandez, Valdez & Valenzuela (2000) mention that the use of multimedia and video helps students to perceive language as a system and not as a list of words or grammatical items to be memorized. The study also suggests that media helps language to be perceived as a means of communication and interaction, and in general it helps to lower learner's anxiety in their different learning stages. In addition, Flores (2001) demonstrated that the use of video favored learning. Finally, Dzay & Medina (2002) and Ramírez M.M. (2006) report that the use of authentic listening materials in English class improves listening comprehension skills and reduces the difficulties that students have when using authentic materials.

Despite previous findings, Bories (2002) mentions that the use of text books with beginner learners favored memory type of learning, and that the most commonly used resources in the class were the board and the textbook. Additional studies (García, 2005; Mejía y Álvarez, 2002; Nacud, 2005; y Ramírez-Romero, 2000a; 2000b; 2003) indicate that resources and materials are viewed by teachers and principals as tools, resources or

materials to teach or to expand what is included in the textbooks. These studies also reported that the resources and materials are insufficient and in bad condition, and there is insufficient budget to acquire new resources and materials or to repair those that exist. Finally there is a lack of teacher training on the use of information and communication technologies (TICS); and a limited and poor use of available materials by some teachers.

Conclusions

As it was previously noted, the results presented in this chapter represent research that was developed in very different Mexican contexts with the use of diverse methods. They allow us to understand important segments of foreign language teaching in Mexico during this period of time, especially about English since it is the most studied language. This chapter is an effort to present a brief summary of studies, authors and results which to our judgment are most relevant to foreign language teachers and researchers.

In sum, from the work reported here we can say that we have learned that:

- Linguistic competence and learning of a foreign language by Mexican students are complex processes that are influenced by multiple factors. We must therefore avoid searching for simple and definite solutions.
- We do not have sufficient knowledge about the characteristics of language teachers, but from what we do know, their working conditions and academic preparation is far from advantageous.
- Despite findings on how the use of different cognitive learning strategies and teaching techniques increases student performance, teachers use a very limited variety of these with their students.
- Several studies suggest that the use of technology in English language teaching positively affects student participation in the class and the development of the four language skills. Nevertheless, studies also indicate that resources and materials are limited and in poor condition. Results also indicate that the most commonly used are the board and the textbook, and teachers seldom and inadequately use materials that are available.

All the studies that have been reviewed throughout the chapter recommend further research on a wide range of topics and issues. They mention a need to further study students' learning styles and strategies, their characteristics, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, level of knowledge, and on their most frequent errors. In relation to teachers, they indicate a need to know their statistics, educational background, problems, work conditions, beliefs, expectations, teaching styles and forms of evaluation, to mention some. More research is also needed on the teaching methods, strategies, activities and resources that are most suitable for each topic, competence or objective. We need to find ways in which the use of all these may help to create better instructional programs and policies in our country.

In addition to this, future research should include a wider range of research methods and instruments that assure stronger designs and new epistemological perspectives. A fundamental aspect to take into account is that to be able to understand and address many of the issues in foreign language teaching, we need to reflect more deeply and extensively on the socio-cultural characteristics and needs of our Mexican students and contexts and their connection to language learning processes, objectives, and results.

We hope that this summarized view of what we have learned about foreign languages in Mexico, based on the efforts of hundreds of researchers throughout the country, contributes towards the improvement of teaching. We hope that by mapping the territory and marking some thematic paths and landmarks, future research may create and connect new paths to those traveled in the past. Finally, we hope that this work serves as a reminder to all of us involved in this field of our commitment to strive for greater quality in education in Mexico.

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