



MEXICAN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POLICY ON SECOND LANGUAGES (PRINCIPALLY ENGLISH).

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta un panorama del estado actual de las políticas nacionales e internacionales en materia de segundas lenguas con énfasis sobre la situación de la lengua inglesa en el contexto mexicano. Pretende formar un marco para la toma de decisiones en relación al diseño curricular de licenciaturas en lenguas en universidades mexicanas, por lo que en primer lugar se presentan algunos modelos teóricos que ayudan a conceptualizar la política lingüística. Con respecto a las políticas internacionales, se comentan políticas explícitas de la UNESCO sobre la educación en general, el estatus de las lenguas y el aprendizaje de las lenguas extranjeras, así como políticas de la OCDE como se plantean en el informe Hopkins. En el ámbito nacional, se comenta la falta de directrices explícitas en la planeación de la educación (Ley General y Plan Sectorial de Educación) en relación a la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, lo cual se yuxtapone con la actual presencia de la lengua inglesa en todos los niveles educativos como resultado de la Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica lo que refleja una demanda social real. El artículo llega a algunas conclusiones sobre el impacto de estas políticas en el proceso de diseño curricular y sugiere algunas áreas de oportunidad para los egresados de programas en Lenguas.

Key words: Política lingüística, lengua extranjera, lengua inglesa, diseño curricular

Abstract

This article presents an overview of the current state of national and international language policy with regard to second languages with emphasis on the situation of the English language in the context of Mexico. The primary aim is to provide a framework for decision making in curricular design for undergraduate studies in languages within Mexican Universities. In the first place, to provide a background for this undertaking, several theoretical frameworks which aid in the conceptualization of language policy and politics are presented. In the area of international



policy, we comment on UNESCO's explicit policies with regard to education in general, the status of languages and the learning of foreign languages. A look is also taken at OECD policies as set forth in the Hopkins Report. On a national level, attention is directed to the lack of explicit policy statements in key documents for educational planning (the *Ley General* and the *Plan Sectorial de Educación*) in relation to the teaching of foreign languages. This reticence on the highest levels of planning and policy making is in contrast to the current predominance of English language teaching and learning throughout all levels of the educational system as a direct result of educational reform (*Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica*). This reform has come about as a direct result of a very real societal demand for the English language. The article reaches preliminary conclusions about the impact of the policies discussed on the process of curricular design and suggests some areas of opportunity which may be exploited by undergraduate programs.

Key words: Language policy, foreign languages, English language, Curriculum design

Introduction

The late 20th century was a time of much speculation as to the potential effects of globalization. In 2012, we no longer need to speculate; the global village is here along with its counterweight, glocalization, to name but one of the powerful juxtapositions at work. It holds much of what we expected, in particular, a whole new way of looking at questions of national identity and the languages which transport them. Life in globalized Mexico, as in many other countries, carries on essentially as before but with a heightened sense of connectedness of those who live here with others in the international sphere and, at the same time, disconnectedness with large groups of co-nationals whose lives are hard to understand from behind the safe façade of *Facebook*. Globalization has changed the human potential for allegiance; ironically, both expanding and contracting it at the same time.

This paper is an attempt to analyze recent developments in national and international policies which affect the teaching and learning of foreign languages and to serve as a guide to future



developments in the curricular design of undergraduate degree programs in languages. For curricular design, the impact of globalization is noteworthy. Where previously one could limit a search for tendencies and policies to a national level, our interconnectedness means that the range considered must extend to cover international tendencies, some of which may not even be externalized as policies. First, language and educational policy is briefly defined and a theoretical framework established in terms of Calvet's ecology of world languages (2006). Then a short explanation of international policies and tendencies will be provided to set the scene for a description of current policies and tendencies at a national level, with particular attention to second languages in higher education. Throughout the discussion, labor demands which emerge from these policies will be identified.

Policy, politics and planning

This paper will deal with language and educational policies with regard to second languages (principally English) and their impact on contemporary Mexico. Language policy is always a slippery subject; difficult to define clearly, difficult to identify in practice and the potential impact of a given policy is hard to predict. By policy, in this paper we shall consider the construal of a standpoint towards action in the sphere of languages. Of necessity we cannot restrict our view to language policies which openly declare themselves as such, but will have to expand our perspective to include governmental and institutional declarations regarding the question of languages, even the lack of a declared stance on languages will have to be accepted as a language policy of sorts. To facilitate this approach we will follow Kaplan & Baldauf (1997) in identifying three levels at which policy can be expressed and/or put into action: the macro, meso and micro levels. Depending on the context, even individual beliefs and prejudices can strongly affect the course of policy. We shall also look at the wider notion of language ecology to pinpoint the main fears which drive many of these policies.

As mentioned previously, the study of policy is somewhat problematic. Firstly, policy is often implicit in the actions of the individuals and institutions concerned. There is little direct mention of the English language and its use in the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo* (PND, 2007) or in the *Plan Sectorial de Educación* (PSE, 2007), notwithstanding its pervasive presence in Mexico's

school system. Secondly, even when a policy can be clearly identified, it is difficult to measure all the impacts of a policy, since one small change in one part of a system can have far-reaching ramifications or, indeed, the impact may fall close to the original area but affect an area which was previously believed to be unrelated. Many of the most important impacts are long term and outside the scope of the original policy. Thirdly, the relationship between statements of policy and individual action is complex. The mere fact that the authorities recommend a particular course of action will not stimulate the population to take this course unless they perceive it as beneficial on a personal level. Likewise, the absence of a government directive to do something will not prevent the population carrying out the action if the perceived benefits of that action are sufficiently positive.

In the context of Mexico, language policy is frequently symbolic rather than substantive (Terborg et al., 2007). According to Kaplan and Baldauf (1997: xi) “the first articulates good feelings toward change... and the latter articulates specific steps to be taken”. Symbolic policies are frequently more statements of political orientation than actual policies; they are intended to attract voters rather than generate benefits for the population as a whole. While vague goodwill may be sufficient to consider a policy as operative, those policies require planning efforts if their goals are to be achieved. For example, if it is determined to be a good thing that a large sector of the population should attain high levels of linguistic and cultural competence in various languages then a correspondingly large number of human resources will be required to help them to achieve that goal. Teachers will have to be trained, supported in professional development both in Mexico and abroad and offered acceptable working conditions.

Language planning can be divided into status planning, corpus planning, and acquisition planning (Cooper, 1989). In this paper we will be mainly concerned with acquisition planning which deals with the questions of which languages will be learnt, who will learn them and what standard should be achieved in those languages. The observance of international benchmarks became a curricular buzzword in the late 90’s, as a result, much of what is written in Mexico about language planning revolves around the issue of standards, and their centrality is undeniable. However, it is also interesting to note the absence of comments regarding which language should

be learnt and by whom. Language Acquisition policy, currently limited to the articulation of can-do statements describing different levels of performance without assigning these values to any sector of the population, is articulated in non-controversial terms.

In order to explain the rationale behind the controversies implicit in language policy, it is helpful to think in terms of a language ecology. Under this view, languages are seen as social practices which are chosen by speakers within the constraints of their environment depending on their relative strengths of different practices as perceived by members of a language community and the affinities of those speakers. Calvet's (2006) model of language as an ecology uses the metaphor of a galaxy of languages and the force of gravitational pull to explain the complex interaction between languages in contact. All of the languages present in particular language ecologies will interact and affect each other in terms of use. The "larger" or more vital a language is – in terms of number of speakers, prestige, standardization, and so on – the greater its gravitational pull on the satellite languages which co-exist in the system. As in the universe, once a language achieves a certain critical mass all other languages will find it difficult to resist its gravitational pull, becoming inexorably attracted to that language and eventually becoming absorbed by it. The model is homeostatic in that it can be expected to self-regulate. While the model can be criticized as fatalistic, Calvet, himself, believes it merely realistic.

Spanish is a powerful, vital language. According to many indicators, such as number and geographic dispersion of native speakers and its use as a language of scientific communication, the vitality of Spanish is undergoing a growth spurt. Within the Mexican language ecology, the increasing vitality of Spanish has unfortunate consequences for indigenous languages which are becoming increasingly fragmented into isolated communities, pulled into the gravitational field of Spanish, as satellites are inevitably attracted to the greater mass of the body they orbit. If we consider the entire universe of world language ecologies however, Spanish can be seen as in grave danger as being absorbed by the gravitational pull of English.

Calvet's theory of the current global linguistic system postulates four levels of languages. At the first level, there is one hyper-central language, currently English. Given this status speakers of English tend towards monolingualism, for them the role of native language, language of wider

regional communication and language of international communication are conflated within one language and, therefore, there is little motivation to learn other languages. On the second level there are approximately 10 super-central languages, including Russian, Chinese, Spanish, French. While some of these languages have a greater number of native speakers than English this statistic alone is not enough to confer hyper-central status, which in the case of English is supported by additional measures such as the predominance of English as a language for scientific communication and internet use. Speakers of languages of this group will tend towards monolingualism or bilingualism with the hyper-central language or another super-central representative. The third level consists of 100-200 central languages. Wolof (Africa) and Swedish fall into this category. They are standardized languages with an associated literature. Speakers will tend towards bilingualism with a language from a higher level. Finally, level four covers 4000-5000 peripheral languages, whose speakers will tend towards plurilingualism.

This description of the current linguistic situation begs the question of whether there could be more than one hyper central language. The question is particularly relevant for speakers of super-central languages who are interested to see if their language will grow to the point where it might topple English from its fortunate position. However, the mere existence of more than one hyper-central language would nullify the category. If more than one language could be considered a candidate for this position, neither would be regarded as hyper-central.

International policy on second languages

In this section, UNESCO and OECD policies which affect planning for second languages will be discussed. Many of these policies are not directly intended to affect the teaching and learning of second languages but nonetheless form the educational backdrop against which we practice our profession.

Specifically in the field of foreign language learning, the UNESCO (2009) has declared that knowledge of three languages is the norm in terms of language proficiency which will be expected from school leavers in the 21st century. These 3 languages are expected to include the native language (which is afforded central status), a regional language of wider communication



and a language of international communication. They specifically promote those language policies which aim to maintain and strengthen language diversity; an important consideration for languages with lower levels of vitality. Language diversity is to be protected because languages are recognized as the principal vehicles of identity of the self, playing a central role as a carrier of culture. The loss of a language as a vehicle for communication is accompanied by a loss of a particular world view and constitutes an impoverishment of global culture. For this reason, the UNESCO actively promotes policies of translation of documents into a wide variety of languages to facilitate access and, hence, the development of the knowledge society. In terms of educational policy, the UNESCO has argued convincingly for the need to implement learning for life as a pillar of curricular design. The dynamics of the knowledge society require constant updating of knowledge bases to keep up with scientific and technological developments. Learning for life requires the development of self-direction in learning, which allows the learner to identify her learning needs, select the best means of fulfilling those needs and evaluating the end result.

The OECD identifies the twin concerns of professionalized teaching and personalized learning as key policy drivers which should guide educational efforts in general. Hopkins *et al.* describe personalized learning as “putting students at the heart of the educational process, tailoring teaching to individual need, interest and aptitude in order to fulfill individual potential” (2007: 46). From this perspective, student success is the only reliable indicator of the success of the system as a whole. In order to achieve this goal teaching must become professionalized, that is to say that teachers must feel pride in their profession and feel that they are on a par with other professionals in terms of competence and respect. A professional teacher is one who evaluates students in terms of learning and works continually to incorporate innovative pedagogical strategies in the classroom. This would be made possible by the implementation of coherent and systematic policies of teacher selection and promotion and the provision of access to opportunities for professional development.

National policy on second languages

Given the previous description of the international linguistic situation it is surprising that Mexican Education Authorities at the macro-level of planning are relatively silent on the issue of

second languages and apparently reluctant to speak directly about the English language. There is no direct mention of the English language in the PND and only one late mention of English in the PSE. This is in contrast to the provision on a chapter in the PSE treating the learning and use of indigenous languages. Chilean government have no such qualms, in Chile a nationwide campaign called 'English Opens Doors' (Gutiérrez Ramírez & Landeros Falcón, 2010) promotes the acquisition of English to enhance economic development.

One exception to the avoidance of the word English in policy statements was the notorious presidential campaign of Francisco Labastida in 2000. A keystone of the campaign was the insistence that all schoolchildren should become proficient in English and information technology. Labastida lost that campaign to Fox, in an election that was arguably lost before it began, given the political context at the turn of the century. Even though it was certainly not the decisive factor in the electoral results, it does seem that, in Mexico, using the word *English* in a policy statement can be considered political suicide. Labastida's motto was stolen by Fox to great effect. He added the corollary that if Mexicans are to learn English then Americans should have to learn Spanish (which they are in fact doing in ever increasing numbers). The proximity of Mexico's northern neighbor should never be underestimated.

In terms of educational policy, some recent changes have had a profound effect on second languages in Mexico. The poor results obtained in PISA 2006 goaded the authorities into a plethora of planning and policy making. The Mexican response was to commission an OECD report diagnosing the problem and providing suggestions for improvement (Hopkins *et al.*, 2007). A special committee was formed with international experts who characterized Mexican school authorities as being aware of major strengths and weaknesses and open in their communication of them. The authorities were said to have good ideas for reform and though expenditure was considered low by OECD standards it was increasing. On the downside, they also defined the educational system as highly inefficient, pointing out that incentives for improvement are weak and that both the quantity and quality of educational provision is low by OECD standards.

The team of internationally renowned policy makers made 12 recommendations, some of which were long term and others immediate requirements. These recommendations have guided policy

development since that time. For example, the interest in standards discussed in the introduction to this paper can be seen as a reaction to the second recommendation “Establish absolute clarity about the standards expected in key areas (such as literacy, math and informational technology)” (Hopkins *et al.*, 2007: 4). Their study of the Mexican system was thorough and robust, despite the urgency with which it was requisitioned. They also recommended aligning the curriculum to the key areas of literacy, math and information technology and investing heavily investment in teacher quality, taking immediate steps to increase teacher supply, both suggestions are directly in line with the OECD policy drivers presented above.

Returning to the issue of standards, they urged authorities to provide clear guidelines as to what success looks like in terms of student performance at different levels within the system. This allows students to identify their own level in relation to expected values and to set acceptable and realistic objectives to take them to the next level. It also allows for greater control of the learning process and the reorientation of assessment to learning. The report emphasized the use of formative assessment to improve learning, encouraging Mexican teachers and authorities to take their concept of assessment beyond measurement.

While recommending far-reaching changes to the Mexican education system, many of which are in place today, they recognized a number of barriers to that change, including complacency, opposition from teacher unions, over-bureaucratization and incoherent policies. They could hardly be accused of painting an unrealistic picture of the situation at the time. The following sections comment some of the changes incorporated to the Mexican system in response to this report.

As a major policy document and referent for curricular design at all levels in the education system, the PSE (2007) includes amongst its objectives: "Fortalecer la convivencia democrática e intercultural¹" and prioritizes the education of responsible citizens who are respectful of cultural diversity. Given the multicultural and multilingual character of Mexico, however, these largely symbolic statements could be considered as inward or outwardly looking. It is unclear whether the cultures to be respected are the indigenous cultures existent within Mexico borders or those at

¹ To strengthen democratic and intercultural interaction in society. (my own translation)



play in the international arena. There is no mention made of second language in the PSE, even in generic terms, until section 4.9 on higher education. Objective 4.9 proposes to encourage the learning of at least one second language (“principally English”) as part of the curriculum and the inclusion of knowledge of a foreign language as an exit requirement. The selection of words is reflected in the title of this paper, since it seems symptomatic of the treatment of English as a politically sensitive term.

In 2008, the General Education Law (*Ley General de Educación*) was modified by the addition of a subsection to article 7, point XVI which says that education in Mexico must promote knowledge of universal culture and international solidarity through the teaching of foreign languages. The choice of wording in this article clarifies that, in this case, the orientation is outwards. It is also noteworthy as the first time that foreign languages are specifically mentioned in an Education Law, in spite of the fact that English has been taught as an obligatory subject since 1926 (Reyes Cruz *et al.*, 2012). This modification has heralded a number of important educational reforms under the auspices of the integral reform (RIEB, *Reforma Integral a la Educación Básica*) to the programs related to English in the curriculum, the most substantial of which are:

- Articulation of program contents in the levels which make up basic education to ensure greater continuity.
- Emphasis on topics, activities and curricular content relevant to participation in contemporary society and learning for life.

January 2012 saw the phasing in of some particularly relevant aspects of the reform in Mexican secondary schools. Previously English was included in the secondary school curriculum under the generic name “Lengua extranjera” (Foreign language) (RES, 2006), this was consistent with the previously mentioned discursive practices of avoiding direct mention and allowed for the possibility of teaching other languages in the same curricular space if conditions were in place. The subject name is, at the time of writing, registered as “Segunda lengua: Inglés” (English as a second language) (PE, 2011) and it has been moved up to second place on the official report sheet after Spanish language and before Math. While these may seem to represent mainly



cosmetic changes, their status acquires greater relevance given previous resistance to naming the language.

Foreign language study is seen as a means for achieving comprehension, international collaboration and economic welfare. The second language program, which had remained unmodified since 1992, is now couched in constructivist rather than communicative terms. Other modifications include a shift in the balance of attention from productive to receptive skills, and from oral to written language. These reorientations are more in line with the linguistic demands on school leavers. To achieve these aims, teachers are encouraged to include project work among their repertoire of classroom activities, which promotes collaboration and the development of individual skills as components of teamwork. As far as teacher training in the universities is concerned, it is clear that we must prepare our students to use a variety of teaching methodologies and to develop the skills required to critically evaluate and adopt new methodologies as required.

At the time of writing, the Mexican authorities were advancing (albeit against much resistance) in the process of defining minimum professional requirements for English teachers in terms of international standards and certifying those professionals who fulfilled these standards. There has also been some progress in the accreditation of schools and educational programs, especially in higher education. Perhaps the most interesting development is the introduction of CENNI (*Certificación Nacional de Nivel de Idioma*) a 20-level scale which facilitates comparison of evaluations of student competence in a second language with European and Canadian standards and offers for the first time a coherent benchmark for curricular development in languages. The scale is not language specific, but it is stated in terms of can-do statements, similar to those produced by ALTE (Association of Language Testers in Europe: www.alte.org). An important function of this scale, considering greater population mobility in globalization and the emergent internationalization of our graduate and postgraduate programs, is that it allows equivalences to be determined from the number of hours of study and is equally appropriate for use in the evaluation of Spanish as a Foreign Language.

The Hopkins report (2007) also pointed out that the Mexican education system showed a particularly high dropout rate after secondary level. Many over 15's chose not to continue their

education to *Bachillerato* and *Licenciatura* level. They suggest that this reflects a perception that the aims of high school and university level education are irrelevant to societal needs and only weakly related to improvements in earning potential. The SEP addressed this by making high school level education obligatory. It is worth mentioning that the reform to the *Bachillerato* predates the report itself, and is mentioned by the Hopkins team as illustrating best practice. These results should be borne in mind during the curricular design process to ensure maximal relevance of the program to its environment.

Also relevant to our discussion of policies in second languages at the meso level of national policy making, is the SEP drive to introduce English in early levels of public education. English has been taught in Secondary schools since 1926 and efforts to introduce English in Primary and Kindergarten officially in some states since 1992, but activity in this respect increased in 2008 when the PNIEB (*Programa Nacional para Ingles en la Educación Básica*; SEB, 2008) was set up. Reyes Cruz *et al.* (2012) report 23 state programs of this kind and the PNIEB website reports that currently there are operative programs in all 32 states although it is true that the number of schools involved and their level of involvement decreases as one moves south. After a detailed study of public documents, Reyes Cruz *et al.* (2012) found no evidence to suggest a coherent national language macro-policy which would indicate a need for English at the Primary level. For students of languages in the universities this constitutes an area of emerging work opportunities. Since the present population of Primary School teachers on the whole lack the level of linguistic competence required to teach English as a Second Language, at state level a number of different strategies are being implemented to cover this deficit. In the long term, a successful implementation of the PNIEB will change the level of linguistic competence in the students we receive at entrance level, freeing curricular time for greater specialization.

As mentioned in the international policy section, UNESCO identifies learning for life as a key strategy for all educational levels. Self-directed learning is becoming more important for students to achieve the standards demanded by university education and is critically important to success in flexible curricula and curricula with shorter durations. The SINED (*Sistema Nacional de Educación a Distancia*) was created in September 2010 with the intention of providing a national



framework for distance and further education. It is too early to estimate the impact of this program; however, the demand for pedagogically sound, linguistically self-contained learning materials will become an area of growth.

Increased participation in student exchange programs as a result of internationalization policies obligates the participants to achieve relatively high levels of language competence; most Anglophone universities require above 550 on TOEFL. In order to take advantage of the opportunities a greater number of undergraduate students in other disciplines will have to achieve this level, again creating valuable jobs for our graduates. CIEES (*Comites Interinstitucionales para la Evaluación de la Educación Superior*), a government program providing diagnostic information to educational programs which seek accreditation, recommends that degree level programs in all disciplines include second language. Most of the accreditation bodies for graduate programs recommend second language as an entrance and an exit requirement. Echoing the terms of the PSE, the PIFI 2010-2011 (a federal program for the financing of higher education) agenda recommended promoting the teaching of a second language – principally English.

Conclusions

This brief paper describes some of the main policy developments on the international and national arena. Some major policy areas necessarily fall outside its scope, for example, the SEP move to revalidate life skills with high school and graduate diplomas can be construed as both a threat and an opportunity for the universities. English is becoming the predominant language of scientific publication, particularly in the hard sciences, like Physics and Chemistry, where students are normally less proficient in foreign languages. Our language faculties have two different ways to respond to this, on the one hand, we can aim to educate educators who can enable the publication of scientific studies by the original authors which would involve teaching the scientists to enable them to use written academic language to the degree of competence required by such an endeavor or we can train them as translators who can transform the original texts of the Mexican authors into acceptable English text. The two options are not necessarily mutually exclusive and either scenario affords ample work opportunities to our graduates.

The tendency observed in Mexican macro-level policy making to avoid naming the English language and concentrating formal policy on indigenous languages will not avoid the consequences of affording the English language the position it has attained, but only displace the assumption of blame for the decision. Since the potential decisions are of a delicate nature it is not surprising that authorities are loath to rush into anything, but the interaction will happen anyway; English has either already reached critical mass or is about to do so and the consequences will be far-reaching and impossible to avoid.

The reason why Calvet's model of the language ecology is convincing is because it describes our experience of language learning; the acquisition of a second language to high levels does affect the native language ability. The ability to use collocations and select appropriate structures and vocabulary, intuitions as to grammatical correctness and some domain specific competence is lost due to lack of exposure to and communicative use of native models of language. When we focus on the situation from the perspective of the individual who has become immersed in the second language to such an extent that her competence in the native language is compromised or of a language community whose social practices in one or more of their languages are restricted to fewer and fewer domains of use, language shift does occur. As policy makers, we should ensure that sufficient support is provided to guarantee the continued use of individual languages in a variety of domains.

If planning and policy intends to reorient, stem or reverse such shift, it should be borne in mind that outcomes are most easily appreciated and frequently determined on the micro level – in terms of what institutions and individuals do. Many of those who have been involved in processes of curricular design know well that curricular time is at a premium. Time afforded to English language classes must be taken away from some other area; it is important to consider the potential impact carefully. Terborg et al. (2007) characterized language policies in Mexico as symbolic; I would like to revise that claim in the light of the revision of policies in second languages covered in this paper. While macro-level policies remain symbolic, at the meso and micro levels policy is becoming more substantive in nature. One can only hope that this



contributes towards the achievement of positive change which will be beneficial for the country and its language ecology.

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