

Narratives of Equity in English as a Foreign Language teaching

ABSTRACT: This article seeks to depict the experiences of young English learners in diverse public primary schools in Mexico. This narrative inquiry examines how students view their English learning process in the PNIEB (Programa Nacional de Inglés en Enseñanza Básica) program. This narrative inquiry was re-storied from data from qualitative impact studies conducted between November 2012 and June 2015 as part of impact studies (Sayer and Ban, 2013) in three different states in Mexico. This article reports the narratives of three young people who are students in public primary schools and how they portray the sociocultural differences in the way this educational initiative has been implemented through their stories. Reflections on the students' perspective point to a positive disposition to study English, connections to their real lives and a desire to have good teachers. Tensions and conflicts of equity across schools and students are highlighted as cited as challenges for the implementation of this program.

KEYWORDS: English as a foreign language; narrative inquiry; young learners; PNIEB.

RESUMEN: Este artículo pretende describir las experiencias de estudiantes de inglés jóvenes en diversas escuelas primarias públicas en México. Esta investigación narrativa examina cómo los estudiantes ven su proceso de aprendizaje de Inglés en el programa (Programa Nacional de Inglés en Enseñanza Básica) PNIEB. La narrativa fue recreado por la investigadora en base a los datos de estudios cualitativos de impacto realizados entre noviembre de 2012 y junio 2015, como parte de los estudios de impacto (Sayer y Ban, 2013) en tres estados diferentes en México. Este artículo presenta los relatos de tres jóvenes estudiantes de escuelas primarias públicas y retrata como las diferencias socioculturales de equidad en esta iniciativa educativa han impactado su proceso de aprendizaje en sus historias. Reflexiones sobre de las historias de los estudiantes indican una disposición positiva para estudiar Inglés, conexiones a sus vidas reales y un deseo de tener buenos maestros. Las tensiones y los conflictos de la equidad a través de las escuelas están citados como desafíos para la implementación de este programa.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Inglés como lengua extranjera; investigación narrativa; aprendices jóvenes; PNIEB.

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Introduction

In 1954, the secondary school federal curriculum mandated the inclusion of English in public secondary schools (grades 7-9). As a result, students who have been enrolled in public secondary schools throughout Mexico have studied English as part of the regular secondary school curriculum since that date. This means that a majority of Mexican citizens have studied English at some point in their educational career, most commonly in secondary or preparatory school. Although individual experiences of secondary students vary, it has been widely understood that English classes at the secondary school level have not actually taught students to read, write and converse in English at any appreciable level of fluency. Around the turn of the 21st century, some of the individual public schools in different states in the Mexican republic began to teach English at the primary school level without any support from the state or federal Ministry of Education. These efforts largely came about as the result of interest by individual educators, parents or administrators to provide equity in education to students who could not afford to attend private primary schools where English was taught. The underlying belief of these stakeholders was that English would be important for the student because it would be beneficial for them in their future endeavors, educational or otherwise. However, little attention has been given to how studying English would impact the students' lives during the time they are in primary school. Even less thought or attention was given to the possibility that the student would use English outside the educational context.

Aims

This narrative study seeks to illustrate the experiences of primary school students as English becomes part of the established curriculum at their public school.

A narrative approach to elucidating the data was chosen for two reasons: 1.) student view is rarely put forth as 'expert' enough to be considered serious in educational research; therefore this piece seeks to give voice to students' perspectives, and 2.) draw attention to sociocultural differences that impact equity in public primary schools in Mexico.

Research question

How do students in varying socioeconomic contexts describe the impact of English teaching and learning in public primary schools in Mexico?

Narrative & Narrative in Applied Linguistics

Narrative inquiry came to the fore in educational research with the works of Connelly and Clandinin (1990, 2000, 2006). As pioneers in this area, their early works describe narrative inquiry as both a means to examine the phenomenon and a methodological approach. Specifically, in their earliest work (1990) they explain,

It is equally correct to say "inquiry into narrative" as it is "narrative inquiry". By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the pattern of inquiry for its study.... Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of tho-

se lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (p. 416)

Their ideas quickly spread to the area of Applied Linguistics. In one of his seminal works, Canagarajah (1996) explains how narratives “function in opposition to elitist scholarly discourses and that their use in research offers an opportunity for marginalized groups to participate in knowledge construction in the academy” (Bell, 2002). In other words, Canagarajah anticipated the postpositivist criticism that views narrative as merely *telling a story*. In 2002, Bell was able to shed more light on the importance of narrative when she explained how narrative must go beyond the mere rhetorical structure to the analysis of underlying notions that the story illustrates. In addition, Bell explains how the narrative is not always found in the data, but is a product of how the researcher’s interpretation of the makes sense of the participants’ experience. Specifically, narrative offers the opportunity to a.) understand people’s experience; b.) allow researchers to discover assumptions that are not necessarily at the surface of participant’s thought; 3.) illustrate how experiences change over time, providing insight into other types of research that offers an understanding of an event at a particular time.

Nowadays, the ongoing question continues about what researchers and practitioners mean when they use the term narrative inquiry. In their 2006 work, Connelly and Clandinin further explained,

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of

a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 477)

When examining the importance of narrative in research in Applied Linguistics, Nelson (2011) observed that between 1997 and 2006, nearly 500 articles using narrative or narrative inquiry as a methodology were published in leading international language learning and teaching journals, representing almost one quarter of the articles published.

Narrative inquiry, stated concretely, is the process of making a transition between the field texts and the research texts (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000: 120). The research begins with data collection focused on the stories the participants tell the researcher about the phenomenon they are experiencing. These field texts are a collection of storied accounts, even if the participant does not realize that he or she is telling

a story. It is the task of the researcher to re-story the field texts into research texts upon which the participants' narratives are built.

A final important aspect of any narrative inquiry is that it is focused on the context in which the participants make meaning of their reality. Phillion and Connelly (2004: 460) make this point when they say, 'context is crucial to meaning making'. This concept is also included in Connelly and Clandinin's (2000) work when they recommend that the narrative include three aspects: interaction, continuity or time and space or context. As a result, this study is particularly interested in exploring the context in which teaching and learning English as a foreign language takes place in public primary schools in Mexico.

Context

Globalization of Mexico

Historically, the integration of English as part of the K-12 curriculum has been a long time coming. As far back as November 1985, when Mexico announced that it would negotiate entry into the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) the first seeds were sowed. Subsequently, Mexico signed the GATT agreement on August 24, 1986. When GATT later became the World Trade Organization (WTO) this agreement eventually led to other trade agreements such as NAFTA. The WTO is the international entity that deals with the rules of trade between nations and has grown exponentially as the world becomes more globalized. In its mission statement, the WTO defines itself as the entity that breaks down trade barriers

between people and nations. Its goal is to improve the welfare of the peoples of the member countries.

Ironically, due to the communicative nature of language learning, applied linguists also frequently cite language learning as the tool that breaks down barriers between people and nations. It is also seen as a means to improve the welfare of the peoples in nations that can communicate through a common language.

As Mexico became more globalized and foreign investment in local industry grew, Mexican parents and educators began to realize that English speaking citizens have more access to jobs than non-English speaking people. As a result, Mexican society in general became more concerned with their young people learning English in public schools than it had ever been.

PNIEB history

As a result, the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) realized a need to incorporate English as a foreign language in public pre- and primary schools in Mexico. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, each state in the Mexican republic began to address the need for their citizens to learn English in different ways. Some states implemented after school programs that taught English in some schools, whereas others integrated the teaching of English into the regular school day. In 2006, the federal government made the first attempt to mandate the curricular inclusion of English in the federal program. In 2009 the Mexican Ministry of Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública) announced another curricular reform through which teaching English at the primary and pre-school level in public

schools would become part of the regular curriculum, its goal was the articulation of this curriculum to the teaching of English at the secondary level. This curriculum has a long-term goal of producing more Mexicans who have communicative competence in English. However, the PNIEB goals are not only framed in terms of linguistic gains. According to the *Fundamentos Curriculares del Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica* (SEP, 2011: 54):

UNESCO has indicated that educational systems are to prepare students in order to face the new challenges of a globalized world, in which the contact among multiple languages and cultures becomes more and more common every day. In this context, the [Mexican] educational system is compelled to help students understand the diverse cultural expressions in Mexico and the world.

As a result, the program articulates the general goal of the program, that students completing their basic education "... will have developed the necessary multilingual and multicultural competencies to face the communicative challenges of a globalized world successfully, to build a broader vision of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world, and thus, to respect their own and other cultures" (SEP, 2011: 54). The *Fundamentos Curriculares* document also lists a range of non-language learning objectives for the program. For example, the curriculum states the general goals for the first four years of the program (grades K-3) as (SEP, 2010: 22, emphasis in original):

1. Acknowledge the existence of other cultures and languages.
2. Acquire motivation and a positive attitude towards the English language.
3. Developing basic communication skills, especially the receptive ones.
4. Reflect on how the writing system works.
5. Get acquainted with different types of texts.
6. Start exploring children's literature.
7. Use some linguistic and non-linguistic resources to give information about themselves and their surroundings.

The reader will note that besides the third and seventh points, most of the objectives do not refer to language skills, but rather competencies that can be achieved *through* studying a foreign language, but are not themselves linguistic competencies. The objectives also reflect the argument (Woodgate-Jones, 2009) that a key aim of early L2 instruction in foreign language contexts like Mexico should be intercultural understanding.

Each state, then, was encouraged to implement the PNIEB to their state context as part of this curricular reform. However, some states had already been providing resources to implement a statewide project that served the majority of the young learners in that state, whereas other states were now faced with the challenge of implementing a program from the ground up. Part of the agreement between federal and state governments upon which federal funding was based was the implementation of some type of evaluation of the above-stated program goals.

Data collection and analysis

Because the program goals were not based solely on linguistic competencies, the data (Sayer and Ban, 2013) upon which this narrative inquiry was based was framed as a *qualitative impact study*: it is focused on documenting how well the PNIEB in three states has been able to promote non-linguistic learning objectives. In order to examine the impact this state's early foreign language program is having on students' learning and development more broadly, the researchers, including the author of this article, used a framework called the "Five Cs" developed by the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1996).

These impact studies were commissioned individually by three states in the Mexican Republic between November 2013 and June 2015. Although data were collected from three sources: 1.) semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders: teachers, students; parents and administrators; 2.) classroom observations of English lessons, and 3.) texts including student work, lesson plans and other documents involved in the teaching and learning process for the original studies, this narrative inquiry focused primarily on data related to the stories of the student participants. The student comments regarding their parents' thoughts is re-storied from the data from the parent interviews.

Patton (2002) suggests there is no absolute correct number of participants in any given qualitative study. More appropriately, the participants should be purposefully selected as representative of the groups under study. The selection of sites in the present study is purposive in that they are

carefully chosen to include all of the criteria in the following table, such that the overall sample includes schools that reflect the diversity of educational contexts within the different states. Therefore, the strategy for selecting schools will be to include the greatest *diversity* possible.

Table 1. Criteria and plan for selection of school sites

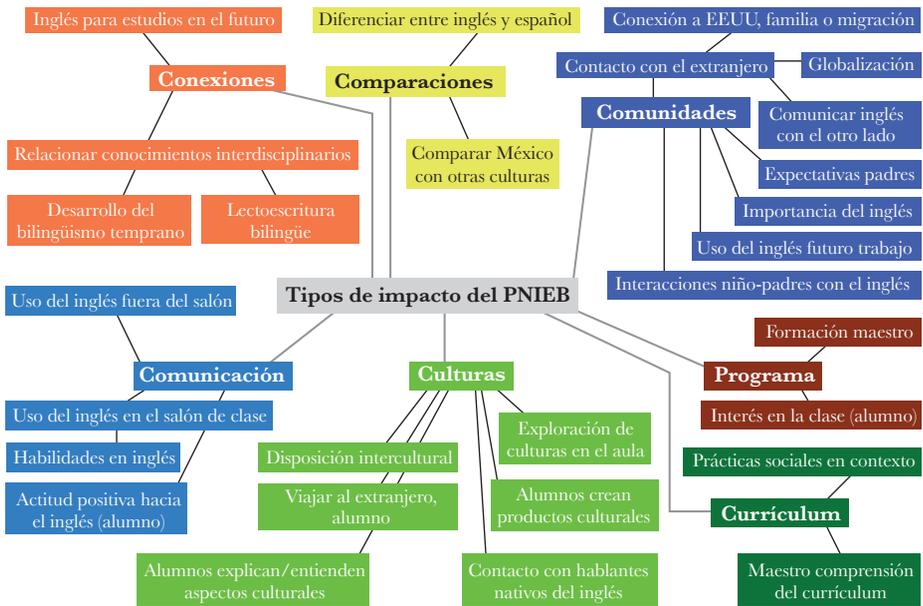
Category	Diversity
Context	Urban, suburban, rural
SES	3 socioeconomic levels
Schedule	Morning/afternoon/full time
School size	Small <12 groups/ medium 12-18 groups/large 18+ groups
Other	Other factors: High migration, multigrade school, etc.

Data Analysis

After the field texts were collected and the individual interviews were transcribed they were then coded and analyzed by the researchers utilizing NVivo 10 qualitative research software to do qualitative content and emergent analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The competencies specified in the PNIEB and the ACTFL framework served as a starting point in the study, for designing interview and observation protocol and as a lens for data analysis. However, since the researchers did not presume to be able to conjecture the possible impacts the program may have, we took a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in that the data were analyzed inductively and recursively until

saturation was reached in the recognition of patterns amongst emerging themes.

As we coded using the manual, we continued to refine the categories as more themes emerged through the analysis. The following conceptual map represents our categories:



The resulting themes from the student interviews served as the basis for the stories of how students describe the impact of the PNIEB program on their use of English both in and outside of their school environment.

Stories

The following stories have been re-storied from the field texts gathered as part of the data collection process from the impact studies conducted in three states in Mexican public primary schools. As a group,

they are representative of how the students describe the impact of the PNIEB program in their English learning process. The question that guides this narrative inquiry is as follows:

How do students in varying socio-economic contexts describe the impact of English teaching and learning in public primary schools in Mexico?

This narrative inquiry seeks to answer the research question through the re-storied data from a composite of learners in the three states.

Jose Luis

My name is Jose Luis; I live in a large city in a state that is located in the central part of Mexico. I am in the 5th grade in a public primary school; I will be 12 years old in December. I go to school in the morning session or *turno matutino*. There are other students that come to study in my school in the afternoon. I am glad that I study in the morning.

Recently, some American people came to my school to ask questions about my English class. They explained that they were part of the team that gave us a test last week. Some parts of that test were really hard. But, I really don't know what the fuss about studying English is all about.

My parents wanted me to attend a public primary school where English is taught. They are worried that if I do not study English in primary school, I will be behind in my English studies when I reach secondary school. They frequently mention how they struggled with English when they were in secondary school and how they didn't like their classes. Of course, my parents want me to go to university and to have all of the tools I need to be successful when I do go to university. They say English is one of the most important things for university; I will need it when I read books in English.

I know English will be important for me in the future, but I see it as important for me now. I am lucky because I have my own laptop and we have good Internet at home. I just love to play videogames when I get a chance. Minecraft is my favorite. Not too long ago I hooked up with a guy in Viet Nam and we play Minecraft and Gears of War together. We need to talk to win the game, so, of course, I need English to talk

to him. It is the language we use when we are gaming.

My little sister and brother also study at my school so they also study English too. My sister just loves Dora – she is always watching her on TV. The cool thing about Dora is that she speaks English and Spanish. My sister prefers to watch her in English. My brother mostly watches movies; sometimes he has the captions on and sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes I hear him repeating after the conversations on the TV or singing along with songs.

That's one of the things about using English outside the classroom, if you don't understand; you can always use something like the Internet to figure out what the song says or what you are trying to read. Google translate is a great tool but there are also other ways to understand. For example you can go to the singer's webpage and find the lyrics, then read and translate them. Or you can take them to your teacher and she can help.

Again, I guess I got lucky because I think I have a good teacher. My teacher tells us about her when she was in the university studying to be an English teacher. She says it was hard and took a long time. She had to travel to many different locations to do her student teaching in different schools and take lots of English classes. Last year my teacher went to study in the US on her summer break. She got a scholarship through the embassy to study in Austin, TX at a special program. That is probably why she is a good teacher and knows lots of English. When those people came to ask us about our English class they asked me to grade my teacher. I gave her a 9.5 because sometimes she makes me work

too hard and gives us too much homework. Otherwise, she is a great teacher.

My teacher brings interesting activities and sometimes we learn the same things in English as we do in Spanish. The other day we were learning about the circulatory system in English and we remembered that we had studied the same thing a couple of weeks previously in Spanish. We found the leftover *laminas* and cut them up for the illustrations and pasted them in our English notebooks. Then we used our English vocabulary to name the parts of the circulatory system. When my *maestra titular* saw that we were studying the circulatory system, she was also very happy.

On some days, another teacher comes to watch my English teacher work. I am not sure who that person is, but she always meets with my teacher after class and tells her to do something different. But mostly, she is happy with the way my teacher teaches. Like I said before, I think my teacher is good.

Sometimes I feel sad when my English teacher leaves our school before the end of the day. She explained to us that she goes to teach at another school. I think it would be better if she stayed at our school all day.

One thing that I like about our English class is when we learn about other countries or things people do in other countries. Every year our English teachers talk about Halloween. We had already heard about Halloween from television, but our English teacher explained it better to us. The other event that our teacher plans is a class for our parents. Of course, we practice the class before the parent come so we don't make any mistakes, but our parents really like it when they come to observe our class.

Another person who is very proud when we perform in English is the school director. At Christmas we sing traditional Christmas Carols in English at the festival for the whole school. The director always congratulates our teacher and says she is "the best". That makes her very happy. Sometimes he talks about how happy we will be when we get to secondary school because he didn't have these opportunities when he was our age.

Maria Guadalupe

My name is Maria Guadalupe; I live in a medium size city in a state that is located in the central part of Mexico. I am in the 6th grade in a public primary school; I am 13 years old, I had a birthday in January. I go to school in the morning session or *turno matutino*. There are other students that come to study in my school in the afternoon. Most of the students that study in the afternoon work in the morning. I think it would be hard to work in the morning and go to school in the afternoon. Next year I will go to secondary school where I will really study English. I will receive a grade on the report card for English.

The other day we had some visitors from the US at our school. They wanted to ask us questions about how we learn English and about our class and our teacher. I was chosen by the teacher to participate in the interview.

My parents tell me that they never liked to study English when they were in secondary school. They say they only copied phrases and words from the board and then translated them into Spanish. Neither my mama nor my papa speaks or understands English, so they make sure that I get

English class in school. They keep saying I will need it in the future when I go to work in one of those big industries where the managers speak English and the manuals for the line are in English.

I see how I can use English in my life right now. For example, our family has a lot of connections to the US, two of my uncles, one aunt and my grandpa live in there. Last summer, my aunt and uncle who live in the US brought my cousins to visit us in Mexico. I thought it was very strange because they do not speak Spanish, they communicate with each other only in English. Therefore, I had to try to use my English to talk to them. It was kinda fun, trying to make sense of what they were saying. But it still felt strange to know that my relatives speak only English.

I guess I see English as way to find out things on the Internet so I can do better on my homework. One bad thing is that we don't have Internet at home, I have to go to someplace like the *cyber* [café] where there are computers and I can access Internet. But I do like to watch movies in English; sometimes I watch with my brother and sisters but they like the ones for kids like cartoons.

My brother and sisters also study English at the school we go to; I help them to do their homework when they cannot do it alone. My mama doesn't know any English and she gets very frustrated when she doesn't know what the words mean in the book they use. It makes me happy to help my siblings, but sad to know my mama does not understand. She says that we have another chip in our brains, and that we can learn things her generation cannot because of the way we think.

The researchers asked us to grade our teacher. I gave my regular English teacher a 9 because she uses the book we have and we cover a page in the book every time she teaches us. Also, she worked with us to give our parents a demonstration of what we have learned at the end of the school year. My parents were very happy to see we could do something with our English.

But, I did not give my regular teacher – *Maestra Titular* – a 9 when she teaches us English. She is a good or even great teacher in Spanish, but I feel kinda sad for her because she tries to follow our regular English teacher and complete the lessons for the week, but she really does not know English. The teacher explained to us that there are not enough English teachers to teach us in every class, so the coordinators and the school decide how the *Maestros Titulares* can work with the English teachers and help us to learn.

Last year, my parents were very unhappy with our English teacher because he missed class a lot. We didn't care, because he was a mean teacher and did not follow a book or organize his classes. But then, the maestra titular could not teach us because she did not have anyone to follow. Last year we didn't learn very much English.

My parents have come to the school many times to talk to our school principal about the English class; this year their concern is that we do the work and get grades from our teacher but the grade is not on the official report card.

Jhonaton

My name is Jhonaton and I live in a small size city that is located outside of a bigger city in the central part of Mexico. I am in the 5th grade. I am 11 years old; I just had

a birthday in November. I attend school in the afternoon; we begin at 1 pm. In Mexico we call that *turno vespertino*. I go to school in the afternoon because sometimes I help my mom in her business in the morning. Also, I don't like going to school very much.

We had some visitors to my school the other day; they explained that they were a part of the same group that came to the school last week to test us in English. The teacher made me and a small group of students go to talk to them with and asked us a lot of questions about what we think about English and how we use it.

I explained to them that I have a lot of relatives in the US. Sometimes they come to visit at Christmas and that's how I found out that I have cousins that do not speak Spanish. That was so surprising for me. But, good for me, because I have been studying English at school, so I could talk to my cousins. Some other times we use other programs on the computer to talk to the whole family at the same time and I can help my mom to understand what her relatives are saying. My grandpa lives in the US; I have never met him, I only Facebook with him in English.

That is the only time I am allowed to use the computer to Facebook. My mom does not like me to make friends that way and our computer is old. She is afraid I will break it. I have heard of lots of cool games on the computer, but we would need a newer, faster computer and stronger Internet connection to be able to run them.

The people that came asked us to grade our English teacher. I gave her an 8 because most of the time I don't understand what she is explaining to us. She likes to talk about nouns and verbs and gives us lots

of vocabulary to copy from the board. We have to write it in English and in Spanish. Then she wants us to memorize the words. It is hard to memorize things that don't make any sense.

The good thing about her is that she doesn't ever leave us any homework.

Our teacher has talked to us about when she used to live in the US. She went to live there because her parents took her when she was about my age. She says that in the future she will go to the university to study how to be a teacher; a *maestro titular*. Now, she plans her class from the information provided to her from the English supervisor. But I don't think my teacher takes her job very seriously. She misses her classes a lot and complains about not getting paid on time. She says she will be a *maestra titular*, not an English teacher because the teachers that teach us in Spanish have more benefits and get paid on time. I really don't understand why one teacher is different from another one; I think that all teachers should be paid in the same way.

Reflections

Because the data set in the original three studies was almost unwieldy, the researcher constructed the narratives from the stories the students and their parents provided during the data collection. In order to answer the research question posed at the beginning of this article, the researcher has chosen to highlight three aspects depicted in the students' stories. The research question is as follows:

How do students in varying socioeconomic contexts describe the impact of English teaching and learning in public primary schools in Mexico?

Through the narrative depiction of the students' experiences, the researcher re-storied the data to provide the student narratives. Each narrative exemplifies a student in a different sociocultural and educational setting. The researcher chose to address three aspects of the students' experiences in the telling of their stories:

- 1. There is a positive disposition toward learning English.** Most Mexican students have relatives or friends who live in the US. In general, parents in most schools have an expectation that through the PNIEB program their children will achieve a communicative competence that will permit them to understand and speak English in a normal fashion. Parents distinguish the PNIEB and its goals and achievements from the historical teaching of English at the secondary level.
- 2. Students do not find English learning as “foreign”.** Although most students see that learning English can be and is used in their daily lives; there is a distinction between how students at different kinds of schools (*matutino*, *vespertino*, large city, small city) have different possibilities to access technology that is part of student access to the use of English in their daily lives.
- 3. Students want good teachers.** Although students do not have a view of how the PNIEB program is implemented in different states, the students in smaller cities or in *turno vespertino* have a feeling that there must be a better way to address the problem of an insufficient number of qualified teachers to cover the demand for English teachers in the schools.

As underscored by the student narratives, there is a wide range of teacher quality between and within the states. Some states hire only university prepared teachers, others use anyone who speaks English and some use the *Maestras titulares de Español* to work with the students on the English lessons prepared by the *Maestra Titular de Ingles*.

These three reflections extracted from the students' stories by the researcher are only a small piece of the stories that could be constructed from the data collected in the impact studies and from other research on the PNIEB.

Conclusion

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the Mexican education system regarding the implementation of the PNIEB program in all states in the republic is how to provide equitable access to learning English to all students and all schools. Although this problem is not uncommon to other initiatives in the Mexican school system or even in educational systems across the globe, it remains a serious problem. One aspect of important aspect of providing an equitable solution may include an investment into English as a foreign language teacher education and training to meet the need of meeting the demand for teachers in schools throughout Mexico.

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