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“More & Earlier”: Neoliberalism and Primary English Education in Mexican Public Schools

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As global English expands, developing countries feel the pressure that, in order to remain globally competitive, they must increase the number of people with English proficiency. In response, many countries have significantly expanded English instruction in public schools by implementing primary English language teaching (PELT) programs. This is particularly true in countries in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where national Ministries of Education have taken a “more & earlier” approach, integrating English into the public primary curriculum. Children start learning English younger and study the language more during their basic education. The author argues that this language education policy shift toward expanding English in the public education curricula in developing countries is best understood as a shift from past models of elite English bilingualism to policies intended to support the macroacquisition, or general proficiency in English. The rationale for this policy change is framed in terms of the “modernization” and “internationalization” of a country’s public education system, and hence should be understood as part of the response to align education curricula and programs with neoliberal policies. The author examines Mexico’s recent national English program for public primary schools as a case study in the implementation of neoliberal language policy.

THE GLOBAL EXPANSION OF ENGLISH IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Participation in global markets increasingly happens in and through English. As global English expands, developing countries feel the pressure that, in order to become globally competitive, they must increase the number of their citizens who are proficient in English. At the individual level, families equate their children learning English with better job prospects in the future. In response, many countries have significantly expanded English instruction in public schools (Enever & Moon, 2010). This is particularly true in countries in Southeast Asia and Latin America, where national Ministries of Education have taken a “more & earlier” approach (Hamid, 2010), integrating English into the primary school curriculum. The simple logic of these programs is that the earlier children start learning English and the more years they study English, the greater their L2 gains will be. These educational programs, then, are directly connected to expanding economic opportunities: for example, in Chilean elementary schools, it is called the “English Opens Doors Programme.” This paper explores to what extent the surge in “more & earlier” English programs in public schools represents the implementation of educational reforms that enact neoliberal policies and ideologies. I take Mexico’s recent national English program as a case in point.

I begin by describing Mexico’s recent expansion of English in the public school curriculum. I compare the Mexican program to similar ones in neighboring Latin American

countries and argue that the status and role of English in Mexico is both enhanced and complicated by the geographical proximity and historical and current cultural ties with the United States, as well as the importance of Spanish as a regional and global language. I make the case that the Mexican program represents a policy shift from past models of elite English bilingualism to policies intended to support macroacquisition, or general proficiency in English. Next, I locate Mexico’s adoption of its new public school program as part of a global move towards primary English language teaching (PELT). The PELT phenomenon is clearly reflected in the language education policies of developing countries—seen as “emerging markets”—particularly in Latin America and East and Southeast Asia. The rationale for PELT policies changes are framed in terms of the “modernization” and “internationalization” of a country’s public education system, and hence should be understood as part of the response to align education curricula and programs with neoliberal policies.

METHODOLOGY

This paper attempts to connect specific language education policy actions—the implementation of the Mexican program—to macro discourses, namely how public PELT policies in developing countries are expanding rapidly in response to neoliberal pressures for education reform. I have adopted a critical discourse analytic (CDA) approach (Blommaert, 2005; Gee 2011; Fairclough, 1995) to synthesize several studies of the Mexican program that I have been involved with. These included (1) a national evaluation of the pilot phase of the program during 2009-12 using a large-scale language proficiency assessment and 21 site visits I made to elementary and middle schools (65 total) and programs in 16 states, (2) a year-long ethnographic project in 2011-12 in several schools in the state of Puebla, (3) a three-year qualitative impact study in 2012-15 of the state program in the primary and secondary levels in Aguascalientes¹, as well as several teacher training projects and workshops I led in Puebla, Aguascalientes, Estado de México, Michoacán, and Chiapas. The analysis is also informed by collaborations with colleagues researching the program, particularly in Sonora, Jalisco, and Oaxaca.

The work, therefore, is based on long-term ethnographic engagement, foregrounding the perspectives of the participants. Johnson (2011) explains that “the combination of ethnography and CDA [critical discourse analysis] provides a foundation for understanding how particular policies are recontextualized in particular contexts, how such recontextualization is related to more widely circulating policy text and discourse, and what this means for language policy agents” (p. 267). This policy-in-practice approach enables researchers working in classrooms and schools to connect particular social actions at a micro level to larger macro-level discourses and power structures (Hornberger & Johnson, 2007; Hult, 2010), such as tracing the influence of neoliberalism on language education policy shifts.

So, for example, a finding coming out of the study in Aguascalientes that I wanted to explain was the differences we observed in classrooms in teaching methods and instructional

¹ These studies were, respectively, commissioned by the national Ministry of Education, sponsored by a Fulbright-COMEXUS grant, and commissioned by the Office of English Programs of the State Ministry of Education.

² Note that Colombia seems to be the only program in Latin America that refers to English in terms of “bilingualism,” although in curricular and instructional terms English is still taught treated as a foreign language (and not, for example, as a medium of instruction or using content-based approaches). In Mexico, “bilingual”

models used in middle and lower class schools, whereby often the “same” lesson on daily routines taught in a more affluent school consisted of student-generated role plays, projects, and presentations, while in a poorer school students learned the daily routines in English by copying grammar rules from the blackboard. This disparity of instructional quality along social class lines, especially given the main (neoliberal) rationale of the program as a means of producing greater socioeconomic equality, in turn led me to question to what extent the policy-in-practice really represented a substantive shift from elite bilingualism.

The concept of neoliberalism was a compelling one for re-examining these studies done over the last six years and trying to make sense of the larger issues and discourses framing how the national language education policy has been implemented. At the outset, I had not, quite honestly, thought about the “bigger” questions of what was motivating the policy; the initial questions focused very much on practical concerns of what teachers and students were doing at a classroom level and how effective it was. Very quickly, however, I realized that judgments about pedagogical efficacy and questions of how best to implement the national curriculum were influenced by other, political dimensions, such as the type of contracts and status given to the newly-created positions of the English teachers in the program within the powerful national teachers union. There has been a recent awareness within TESOL that the field has largely prospered because the English language teaching industry aligns with the creation of ideal neoliberal subjects (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012; Flores, 2013). Flores attributes the genesis of this awareness to work of Robert Phillipson and his and subsequent scholars’ critique of linguistic imperialism and explains: “The major argument made by these scholars is that TESOL in a neoliberal context has produced a new global market for English language teaching that has increased the profits of transnational corporations while reinforcing existing hierarchies between Anglo-American nations and the rest of the world’s population” (2013, p. 501). I have used CDA, therefore, to examine how one country is enacting a language education policy and to connect this policy to the broader discourses within the global market that are motivating it.

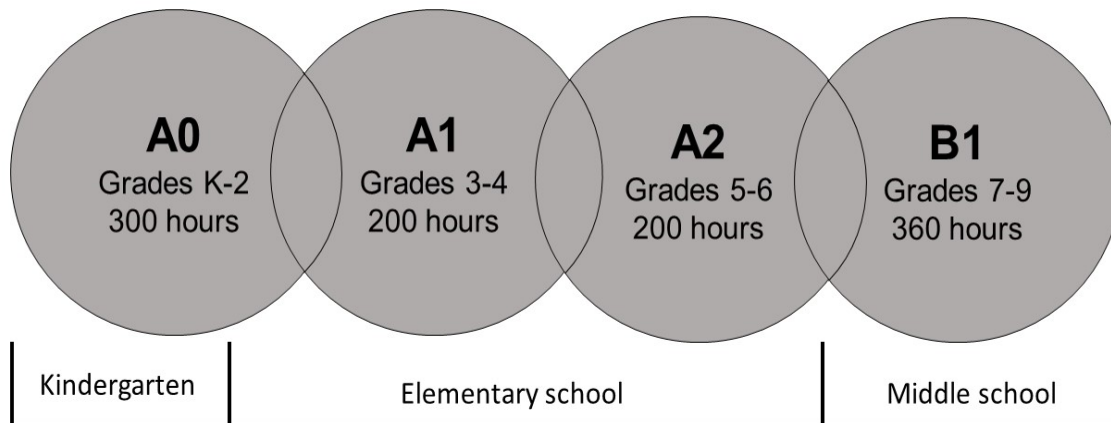
THE ENGLISH PROGRAM IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MEXICO

The teaching of English as a foreign language in the public school curriculum has a long history in Mexico, going back 60 years. However, instruction in English was limited to three years, during the lower secondary grades seven to nine, and generally led to only minimal competence. Adults reflecting on their English classes often report that after three years they had learned only “colors, numbers, and the verb *to be*,” and that teachers’ pedagogy consisted mainly of copying and translation (Davies, 2009; Sayer, 2012). This created a disparity between the public and private education systems. Many private primary schools market themselves as “bilingual,” and the chance for their children to develop fluency in English is seen as one of the main reasons parents choose a private school (López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014). The result has been a *de facto* policy of elite bilingualism: those who can afford private schooling had access to quality English instruction, could develop competence and, thereby, could get better-paying positions that required English. Matear (2008) explains that the same generally holds throughout Latin America; at present, knowledge of English in Latin American countries largely reflects existing political and economic power structures. It remains the preserve of the elite with access to private schooling, and, as such, it demarcates and divides social groups by reinforcing an unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and

knowledge within and between nations. In Mexico and throughout the region, having the means to acquire English, then, has historically served as one mechanism of social reproduction.

In 2009, the Mexican Ministry of Education initiated the implementation of a new program, called the *National English Program for Basic Education*, which incorporates 2½ hours of English instruction throughout the 13 years of K-12 public education (Ramírez Romero, Sayer, & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2014). This new program, which affects millions of Mexican children who previously did not study the language (or at least not until seventh grade), is a drastic expansion of English teaching: an over 400% increase in the number of hours of instruction in English a student in the Mexican public school system receives. The curriculum charts a trajectory whereby public school students will achieve a B1 level on the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 2001), defined as someone who is somewhat conversationally fluent. In total, students are to receive 1060 hours of classroom instruction, which would allow them to progress from level A0 (a “true beginner”) in kindergarten to level B1 (intermediate) by the end of ninth grade (*secundaria* in the Mexican system) on the Common European Framework of Reference scale, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Progression of English Proficiency According to the Curriculum in Mexico



Source: Adapted from Mexican English Curriculum (SEP, 2011)

On the surface, the program represents a significant shift away from elite bilingualism and can be seen as a broad attempt at acquisition planning (Wiley, 1996) that ostensibly “levels the playing field” by significantly expanding access to acquiring English among working class Mexicans and, so the common refrain goes, thereby opening new doors of economic opportunity. Such a major new program, of course, requires a massive investment of resources and energy. According to the Ministry, to fully implement it by 2018 will involve hiring and training 98,000 new English teachers to teach 17.2 million children age five to twelve (Ramírez Romero, Sayer, & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2014). The obvious question is: why did the government decide to invest in the program? What are the political, economic, and educational ramifications of the program?

The disparity between the quality and nominal English taught in public schools and the great emphasis placed on English in private schools has contributed to a division along socioeconomic lines in access to English acquisition. Starting in the 1990s, some state

governments had begun extra-curricular English programs in primary schools, though these were often limited in scope and offered only in the state capital. By 2008, there were 21 out of 32 states that had some kind of program. Additionally, afterschool English classes were often organized as a local initiative by school principals with support from the parent organization, who would hire a parent or older sibling who spoke some English and would teach ad hoc classes with whatever materials were available; each child usually paid a few *pesos* per lesson.

Since 2009, however, the landscape of English education in the country has shifted, and the Ministry of Education has adopted an “English for Everyone” approach (Wedell, 2008). The Ministry’s 2010 English curriculum document, the *National English Program for Basic Education*, states at the outset the purpose of the program:

The articulation of the teaching of English in all three levels of Basic Education [grades K-12] has the aim to guarantee that, by the time students complete their secondary education, they 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, 2010, p. 55)

Elsewhere, the curriculum makes reference to the “Equal Opportunities” section in Mexico’s 2006-12 National Development Plan, which defines the goal of having Mexico’s citizens develop abilities in additional languages. Additionally, the document explains that the English program addresses the following:

[1] Contemporary society, predominantly governed by information and communication technologies, requires citizens with competencies needed to insert themselves within a globalized changing world. (p. 58)

[2] [The English program was implemented] as a measure to reduce the disparity in quality between private and public schools. (p. 58)

The English program was hardly difficult to sell to the public. In fact, since at least 1994, presidential candidates had routinely campaigned on “computers and English” as part of their promise to improve education. The discourse of English and individual mobility described above—*English opens doors, English creates opportunities*—is widely evident in Mexico (Clemente, 2007) and is a prevalent view in most parts of Latin America, where English is often equated to the U.S. dollar (Niño-Murcia, 2003). In the public discourse, the value of English as linguistic capital is accepted as self-evident.

Notwithstanding, it should be noted that the acceptance of the utility and even necessity of English is not unproblematic. As in many countries, particularly in periphery and post-colonial contexts, Mexicans have a love-hate relationship with English. This is because English is first and foremost associated with the United States, and the two neighboring countries have a complicated and polemic history, culminating in the forced cession in the mid-19th century of more than 50% of Mexico’s territory (including present-day states of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas). Because the school day in Mexico is quite short (most schools have morning and afternoon shifts; students are in school for 5½ hours), in order to create room in the curriculum for English, one of the subjects that was

reduced was Mexican history. The irony of replacing Mexican history with language of the *gringos* [Americans] has not been lost on many educators.

Even with popular support for expanding the English teaching to primary schools, the federal program was slow in coming and, in fact, despite its geographic proximity to the U.S., Mexico lagged behind other large Latin American countries in initiating a public PELT program. Chile started the “English Opens Doors Programme” in 2004, with students beginning their English studies in fifth grade; Matear (2008) explains that the Chilean program was supported with funding by the United Nations Development Programme as means to address educational and socioeconomic inequality. Colombia also launched in 2004 the National Bilingualism Program,² which encompasses grades 1-12 (de Mejía, 2009). Argentina, despite the fact that the country’s largest trading partner is Portuguese-speaking Brazil, adopted a program in 2006 that includes English as a compulsory subject for two hours per week starting in fourth grade (Zappa-Hollman, 2007). By 2009, Mexican Ministry officials saw that they were behind their regional neighbors. However, once launched the Mexican program is the most ambitious in that English will now be integrated across K-12, starting at the youngest age (five years old) and with the greatest number of instructional hours (1060) of any country in Latin America.

Implementation of the program has involved a huge investment of resources: there are 17.2 million students in K-6 public schools, requiring the hiring of more than 98,000 new English teachers just for the primary levels, plus the hiring and re-training of teachers at the middle and high school grades. In fairly short order, within two years, the Ministry of Education was able to develop the national curriculum, delineate contents, define the pedagogical approach, and create textbooks and materials to be used throughout Mexico’s 32 states.

For an educational system that is chronically under-resourced, hampered by an inefficient bureaucratic structure, and has a well-organized and powerful national teachers union, the reallocation of resources from other areas of the curriculum to create the English program has been complicated. Likewise, the national program displaced the state programs that were already being used in 21 states and that had been developed by administrators and educators who were deeply invested in the programs they had created. Particularly in the northern border states, many administrators felt that the previous state programs better responded to the local needs of students and students than the top-down, “one-size-fits-all” approach imposed by the national program. Hence, the heavily top-down processes through which it has been enacted has also led to less buy-in and more resistance from some administrators, principals and teachers (Ramírez Romero, Sayer, & Pamplón Irigoyen, 2014). The litany of problems facing the implementation of the English program in Mexico is familiar to educators working in other recent PELT programs in developing countries. The difficulties experienced by educators in the Colombian English program described by de Mejía (2009) and Herazo Rivera, Jerez Rodríguez, and Lorduy Arellano (2012) echo findings by scholars studying problems in the early implementation of the national program in Mexico (Collins & Pérez, 2013; Mendoza & Puón, 2013; Ramírez Romero, Pamplón Irigoyen, & Cota Grijalva, 2012). Kaplan, Baldauf, & Kamwangamalu (2011) examine PELT

² Note that Colombia seems to be the only program in Latin America that refers to English in terms of “bilingualism,” although in curricular and instructional terms English is still taught treated as a foreign language (and not, for example, as a medium of instruction or using content-based approaches). In Mexico, “bilingual education” refers to a parallel indigenous education system, teaching the national language and one of Mexico’s 62 indigenous languages.

education policies in developing countries and conclude that there at least 12 different problems associated with their implementation, ranging from the practical difficulties of hiring enough qualified teachers who speak English and training them in effective second language teaching methodologies to the development of appropriate materials. They also identified challenges arising from the lack of continuity of funding and resources as governments change and the effects of large-scale English language instruction on maintenance and vitality of vernacular/indigenous languages.

In Mexico, for example, in many states, recently-hired primary school English teachers are on a different, non-union contract and pay scale than the “regular” unionized classroom teachers. Their salaries are much lower (typically 33-50% or less) than what unionized teachers make and do not include the same benefits or job security through tenure. Furthermore, there have been persistent problems in the distribution of payroll monies from the federal to state level, and, as a consequence, in some states, primary English teachers have gone for months without being paid. In several cases there were mass lay-offs as state programs were shut down over financial and political disputes within the Ministry. As a consequence, many of the best teachers—those with a high level of English who were teaching in the private schools and who had been lured to the public program because of the benefits and stability of a public sector—job left the program. So although the national program was intended to provide a uniform curriculum and quality of instruction across the country, the results of the implementation have varied considerably from state to state.

Despite the formidable obstacles, given Mexico and the United States’ shared border, as well as the many economic and cultural ties the countries have, it may seem inevitable for Mexico to place greater emphasis on English learning. The program to expand English in public schools may seem long overdue, and indeed at least since the early 1990s presidential candidates have routinely included promises of “English and computer skills” in their education platforms. However, the 2009 PELT program in Mexico should be understood as part of a much wider phenomenon towards the inclusion of English in national primary school curricula in developing countries around the world.

THE PELT PHENOMENON AND NEOLIBERALISM

Especially since the 1980s, there have been two clear trends in language education policy across the globe. First, countries have been increasingly moving towards English, replacing other colonial languages. In Cambodia, for example, English has come to displace the French as the main second language (Clayton, 2006). Nguyen (2011) describes how in Vietnam, French was replaced initially by Chinese and Russian in the 1950-70s, but since 1986, the government has oriented towards English as the preferred second language in order to promote investment. Second, countries have tended towards introducing English earlier in the school curriculum. Johnstone (2009) describes the steady expansion of English into the primary curriculum, noting that the “Third Wave” of PELT policies started since the beginning of the 21st century has been centered particularly in Asia and, I would add, in Latin America. An analysis by Cha and Ham (2008) concludes that as of 2005, English was included in 70% of primary curricula throughout the world and, ten years on, this figure is undoubtedly much higher.

PELT as Second Language Acquisition

The language learning rationale of PELT programs is quite simple and based largely on folk theories of second language acquisition: the younger children start and the greater exposure to the target language, the greater ultimate attainment will be. On the one hand, there is a common perception (anecdotally from personal experience) that students who have studied a foreign language in high school or university for a year or two often come away with no practical ability to use the language. On the other hand, it is generally accepted, again usually from first-hand experience, that young children are “language sponges,” therefore it makes perfect good sense to take advantage of this natural propensity by introducing foreign language learning at as young an age as possible.

However, we should recognize that L1 learning or even young simultaneous bilinguals’ language learning differs from instructed foreign/second language contexts, where children have minimal exposure, usually two to three hours per week, and only part of that time would count as actual “input” or “exposure” to English. In fact, scholars generally acknowledge that the little evidence that exists from empirical research in the field of instructed second language acquisition has not produced clear results about the advantages and outcomes in terms of ultimate attainment for young L2 learners: “Instruction in English as a foreign language at an early age is becoming more common worldwide even though the effects of this early instruction are not yet known” (Knell et al., 2007). While the concept of the *critical period hypothesis* (CPH)—an age somewhere between five and puberty after which the nature of the cognitive processes of second language learning seem to change—has long been debated in SLA, and the variability of empirical evidence has confounded a consensus about the precise age or effects that can attributed to the CPH (Birdsong, 1999; DeKeyser & Larsen-Hall, 2005; Muñoz, 2006).

Likewise, some research has examined whether foreign language programs which provide “minimal input” can actually produce any long-term effects on linguistic measures (Larson-Hall, 2008). Our knowledge about the objective outcomes of most PELT programs, such as the Mexican program with 2½ hours of instruction starting at five years of age, is therefore best characterized as *equipoise*: the recognition that substantial scientific uncertainty still exists about whether an earlier start in a given educational and social context really does necessarily lead to greater competence. So while a “more & earlier” approach seems to make good sense intuitively—if we want children to learn English, we should start them younger and give them more exposure—it does little to inform policy decisions about how to implement programs and invest resources more effectively.

Educational sociolinguistics would also point out that, beyond the unanswered questions of instructed SLA, age, and amount of exposure, the contexts of PELT vary significantly. In post-colonial English contexts such as India (Mathew, 2012) or Tanzania (Vavrus, 2003), PELT policies are usually discussed as a *medium-of-instruction* (MOI, or language-of-instruction, LOI) issue heavily influenced by the political relationship with Britain as the former colonial power. In Europe, PELT is contextualized as part of the balance the EU is seeking to strike between the pragmatics of efficiently running a highly multilingual union and respecting national and regional identities and language diversity (Enever, 2012) and seems to be orienting towards content-language integrated learning (CLIL) approaches. In Mexico, as with most countries in Asia and Latin America, English in public schools is generally taught as a foreign language by local teachers, alongside different types of bilingual and English-medium private schools. Hence important practical questions about how to implement the PELT policy in public schools—such as the number hours of instruction per week or optimum grade level to introduce English and the effects of early L2 instruction on

L1 literacy development as well as issues of the cultural and linguistic normativity of English native speakers in PELT curricula—should not be generalized but need to be considered within the cultural context. Other factors shaping PELT policies in a given country include whether English has an official status, and societies where English functions as a lingua franca versus those where it does not.

PELT as Neoliberal Education Policy

Education policy, as educational researchers have long bemoaned, is rarely made based on an objective weighing of scientific evidence. Rather policies are often driven by what programs are going to be politically palatable and fiscally feasible. Thus, PELT policies, particularly in public school curricula, can be seen as responding to the popular discourse of the perceived “need” for English as the preeminent global language. While it is hard to argue with the evidence that globalization and the spread of international English are connected (Crystal, 2003), Pennycook (2007) argues that the perception that English is “essential” in most international contexts is based largely on a Barthesian myth that naturalizes and reifies international English as inherently good, useful, and even necessary for “full participation” in global society (see Bruthiaux, 2002), Grin (2008) and Ricento (2012) for further critical discussion about the economics of English proficiency and English education).

We can debate the merits of whether PELT as part of the public school curricula of developing countries is good educational policy. At a practical level, we can ask what works and doesn’t work with the policy and how to better implement it. Kaplan, Baldauf, and Kamwangamalu (2011) point out that for developing countries with weak educational infrastructures and a shortage of qualified English-speaking teachers, introducing PELT in public schooling requires a massive investment for what are often only minimal returns. The purpose of this paper is to use the Mexican case to explore to what extent the rapid recent emergence of PELT in public curricula should be understood as part of the phenomenon of adopting education programs that align with and support neoliberal policies.

Park and Wee (2012) cite political economist David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism as “a political and economic doctrine which ‘proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)” (p. 157). Block, Gray, and Holborow (2012) observe that neoliberalism has supplanted the previous economic theory of Keynesianism, which held that states did have a role in intervening in markets to balance and keep them in check. They further note that neoliberalism, and associated ideas of small government, anti-regulations, and free markets, create economic conditions favorable for large multinational corporations, which has led since the 1980s to substantial economic growth, world trade, and globalization.

What is the connection, then, between an economic doctrine favorable to corporate interests and the decision of a Ministry of Education to adopt a language education policy to teach English to children? Park and Wee (2012) argue that global English, related language policies, and the TESOL industry constitute a market, following Bourdieu’s (1977, 1991) notion of *linguistic marketplaces*. These markets, they explain, structure the value of a resource, *linguistic capital*, and the way that that resource can be used to gain other forms of symbolic and material goods. Various scholars have documented how in developing countries the value English is seen directly in monetary terms (e.g., Niño-Murcia, 2003; Park, 2011).

The clearest evidence of how language policies are framed in market terms comes from the way such language policies are discussed and the rationale that is provided to justify the cost of the policy, especially given lack of educational infrastructure in many developing countries that creates serious challenges for implementing the policy successfully (Kaplan, Baldauf, & Kamwangamalu, 2011). Consider the following examples excerpted from language policy articles in various countries where authors describe the justification for expanding English language instruction in public primary schools (emphasis added):

- China:** Concerning the language teaching situation in China, starting English courses in primary schools is important in terms of national development and modernization. (Wu, 2012, p. 17)
- Malaysia:** There is considerable consternation in Malaysia at the emergence of English as a global language because of its potential impact on the national language, which is heavily promoted for political reasons. In the 1960s and 1970s, English was abandoned as a medium of instruction, and it was only during the 1990s that the government realized that the loss of English would adversely affect economic development. Deterioration in the standards of English is seen as a major obstacle to the aspiration that Malaysia be declared a developed nation by 2020. (Nunan, 2003, p. 602)
- Taiwan:** The emergence of English as a global language has had a major influence on the government's thinking. Taiwan aims to be a major economic global player and sees the economic imperative as a major impetus for promoting the learning of English. (Nunan, 2003, p. 603)
- Chile:** The case for extending the provision of English in schools was made by the ministerial coordinator, who stated: 'English opens doors, not only because it is a means of enriching education generally, as has always been the case, but because it is essential in order to avail ourselves of the employment opportunities offered by the internationalization of the Chilean economy.' (Matear, 2008, p. 135)
- Bangladesh:** The English language is considered instrumental to nations' participation in the global economy. Particularly for developing countries, the international language is seen as essential for developing human capital, which is believed to contribute to their economic development. [In Bangladesh,] the official website of a £50 million English language project [stated]: 'English in Action will provide the communicative English to transform the lives of people in Bangladesh and make a major contribution to the economic development of the country.' (Hamid, 2010, p. 289)
- Vietnam:** The emergence of English as a global language has had a considerable impact on language planning policy in many non-English-speaking countries, including Vietnam, leading to more English teaching in primary schools. As English has become increasingly prominent, there has been an urgent need to keep proficiency in this foreign language high to enhance Vietnam's

competitive position in the international economic and political arena.
(Nguyen, 2011, p. 225)

Some of the authors cited above provide critique of the policy; others take the rationale they are articulating to be self-evident and unproblematic. What is consistent is how the discourse of PELT policies is clearly framed in neoliberal terms. Learning English is seen as “essential” and an “economic imperative” for a country’s *employment opportunities, economic development, modernization, internationalization, participation in the global economy* and to become an *economic global player*. Vavrus (2002), writing about dilemmas of language education policy in post-colonial Tanzania, explains that this discourse evokes Human Capital Theory; it is the discursive positioning of people as potentially competent English users who can thus contribute to their country’s development and global competitiveness. Vavrus explains how Human Capital Theory, neoliberal economic, and education policies are interconnected:

Formulated several decades ago by Schultz (1971), the theory contends that economic growth depends on the health and education of the labor force—human capital—in addition to improvements in a country’s physical capital, such as roads, dams, and factories. From this perspective, education not only increases productivity by teaching young people new skills but also promotes development through the inculcation of so-called modern attitudes about work, education, fertility, and health. The World Bank, one of the most important institutions shaping educational policy in the Third World, uses human capital theory to explain the rationale for promoting education within its overall program of economic development there. (p. 378)

Blommaert (2010), in his critique of Fairclough’s (2006) *Language and Globalization*, cautions us against an ahistorical view of neoliberalism as a recent phenomenon whose concomitant rise with globalization started during the Reagan/Thatcher era. In an analysis of neoliberalism (Blommaert’s work is in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis), he warns that “observable intertextuality [should not] become a substitute for history” (p. 15). Therefore, the statements above can be interpreted as reflecting the discursive shift in how we talk about the *raison d’être* for language education policies that support the “economic imperative” of having the general population of a given country be fluent in English. The upsurge of PELT programs in public schools is certainly a recent phenomenon and, as I am arguing here, an indicator of the fact that neoliberal policies are pushing English language education policies from a model of elite bilingualism to macroacquisition by making the jump from private to public primary schools. However, Blommaert suggests that we should take a historical view, and so these policies should be understood as the culmination of historical political and economic processes.

What does emerge from the texts cited above are two clear rationales for PELT programs, both couched strongly in a neoliberal discourse of economic development. First, at any individual level, “English opens doors,” providing improved job prospects and hence “transforming lives” and fostering socioeconomic mobility. Mathew (2012), describing the context of post-colonial India, writes: “The assumption is that if children from the lower middle classes can be enabled to learn English early [...] this would enable them to gain better proficiency in the language, ensure access to jobs in the global markets and have better opportunities in life” (p. 83). Second, at the nation-state level, English skills develop a

country’s human capital, which in turn allows that country to compete better in the global economy and as a consequence develop its economy.

Given the premise of this article, that neoliberalism is motivating changes in public early English programs, it is fair to ask: to what extent is the Mexican program really a case of neoliberal language education policy? On the one hand, the Ministry’s statement cited above that studying English as a foreign language serves to “to build a broader vision of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world, and thus, to respect their own and other cultures” (SEP, 2010, p. 55) seems to embody humanistic educational values that go beyond a purely economic view of languages. On the other hand, the general trend described in Latin America and elsewhere of incorporating PELT in national public education curricula creates a sense that, linguistically, one must keep up with other “emerging market” countries or risk becoming less competitive in the global marketplace. English then not only becomes the “inevitable” choice as the default foreign language but must be introduced as early as possible in the curriculum.

The PELT Program as Part of Neoliberal Education Reform in Mexico

The language education policy Mexican program should be contextualized as part of a larger 2007-12 education reform which seeks to align the educational system with projected needs of the labor market, called the *Reforma Integral de la Educación Básica* (or the Core Reform of Basic Education). These reforms included the extension of basic education from kindergarten through high school, moving compulsory schooling from grades 1-9 (9 years) to K-12 (13 years); the reorganization of the curriculum across subject areas in terms of “competencies,” which included an emphasis on digital literacy and technology; the restructuring of teacher tenure system (facilitated by the arrest on corruption charges of the president of the national teacher union, who had sponsored their own opposition candidate in the previous election); and a move towards more schools with a full-day schedule (from 5½ hours to seven).

This most recent reform, the third major education reform in 20 years, was precipitated by a particularly damning international education report in 2006 of the 30 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member countries. This 2006 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report compiled results of standardized tests given in each country and ranked Mexico at the very bottom in educational attainment out of the 30 countries, as measured in student achievement in reading, mathematics, and science. Mexico scored far below 29th-ranked Turkey and below non-OECD Serbia and Thailand. The report noted that “only 24% of 25-to-34-year-old Mexicans have completed a baseline qualification at the upper secondary level, by far the lowest among OECD countries” (Hopkins, Ahtaridou, Matthews, & Posner, 2007, p. 11). Hopkins and colleagues’ 2007 report, which analyzes the problems in Mexico’s educational system that contributed to the low PISA ranking, lauds the seriousness with which the Mexican government took the PISA results and commends (in not so many words) the government’s strong commitment to neo-liberal policies and its membership in the OECD. They observe that:

The [Mexican] educational system is highly inefficient, incentives for improvement are weak and the quantity and quality of educational provision is well below OECD standards. In general the Mexican education system needs to rapidly improve human

capital development and the reforms already in place, which although are moving in the right direction, need strengthening considerably. (p. 4)

The wording of this statement strongly echoes Vavrus’ (2002) point about Human Capital Theory, that in a neoliberal view the role of education is to support the development of human capital.

This commitment to education reform to support free market economics may be starting to pay off for Mexico. For instance, the 2011 A. T. Kearney Global Services Location Index report, an analysis of the benefits of potential outsourcing sites for U.S. businesses, states that: “Latin America continues to serve the U.S. market well and is expected to grow in importance. This year, Mexico, in 6th place worldwide, leads the region, due to a sharp drop in wages over the year, the increased attractiveness of ‘near-shoring,’ and a well-developed talent pool” (Peterson, Gott, & King, 2011, p. 6). Nonetheless, even though Mexico has become attractive as a Business Processing Outsourcing (BPO) destination because of falling wages (average Mexicans probably hadn’t realized how that sharp drop in their earnings was such a good thing), the detailed A.T. Kearney report still ranks Mexico’s workforce quite low—below Chile, Brazil, and Colombia—in terms of English language capabilities and general educational levels (Peterson, Gott, & King, 2011). Figure 2 includes data from the Global Services Location Index report, which shows how Mexico fairs against other countries in terms of the availability of English speakers in the labor pool (called “language capabilities”) and overall educational levels. Note that the metrics A.T. Kearney uses to calculate values are not clear, but range from 0.80 to 1.67.

Figure 2: A Comparison of Language Capabilities and Education in Selected Countries

Country	Language capabilities	Education	Total
Canada	1.67	1.47	3.14
India	1.25	1.39	2.64
Costa Rica	1.29	1.19	2.48
Argentina	1.31	1.06	2.37
Chile	1.15	1.20	2.35
Brazil	1.19	1.07	2.26
Colombia	1.13	1.00	2.14
Mexico	1.19	0.89	2.08
Panama	1.13	0.83	1.96

Data extrapolated from Peterson, Gott, & King (2011, p. 8).

The analysis of Mexico’s BPO potential is telling because, although it currently represents a small sector of the economy, it is an important weathervane market, representing the direction that Mexico would like to go to become a greater participant in the global market. The *maquiladora* factories that opened along the U.S-Mexico border and in industrial zones in Mexico after NAFTA went into effect in 1994 created a boon of manual labor-intensive jobs, but a relatively small number of new jobs requiring English skills, mostly in mid-level management. The former model of elite bilingualism through private bilingual schooling sufficed to meet the demand for qualified English speakers. However, as Figure 2 suggests, in order to fully leverage Mexico’s geographic proximity to the U.S., they will have to improve their public education and promote English proficiency more generally by moving to a model of macroacquisition. The RIEB reform makes this explicit, stating that

the reform constitutes “a proposal to renovate the public school and its role in the national education system in the next two decades, as well as the reclaiming of the central role of this system in the economic and social development [of Mexico] in the first half of the 21st century” (SEP, 2011, p. 10, author’s translation). This century will be characterized by the increased necessity of certain skills: “the general mastery of information technologies and communication, of the use of digital platforms as thinking tools [and] the mastery of English as a second language in an increasingly interconnected global world” (p. 10). The English curriculum document reinforces this, stating that the new English program is a central part of the effort “to carry out an integral reform in Basic Education, focused on the adoption of an educational model based on competencies that corresponds to the developmental needs of Mexico in the XXI century” (SEP, 2010, p. 54).

The wording of the policy document, besides striking one as somewhat cliché, clearly echoes the discourses of PELT identified above. The Mexican public primary English program helps strengthen the education system by fulfilling its role to support economic development through modernization and greater participation in the global economy. As explained by human capital theory, the development of linguistic capital, therefore, is emphasized as a key component of a country’s human capital (Park & Wee, 2012; Vavrus, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

The expansion of English instruction in public schools in developing countries worldwide and the tendency to introduce English earlier in national curricula represents a widespread trend towards the recognition of the importance of English as the international language (Enever & Moon, 2010). In this paper, I have argued that this “more & earlier” approach and the recent rapid expansion of primary English language teaching (PELT) programs in the public school curricula of developing countries can best be understood as part of trend to align language education policy with neoliberal economic policies. The rationale for the large investment of resources that it takes to implement PELT programs is framed at the national level through the discourse of the development of a country’s human capital in order to support global competitiveness and economic development. On the individual level, the discourse is similarly cast in terms of “opening doors” and “creating opportunities” for employment and social mobility.

Taking Mexico’s 2009 National English Program for Basic Education as a case in point, I have described how it was enacted as part of a larger education reform that responded to concerns that Mexico was falling behind regionally and globally in its ability to compete. Whereas traditionally English was only taught in the primary grades in private schools, the introduction of English in public school starting in kindergarten represents a massive expansion of English language education and a serious effort on the part of the government to increase English proficiency in the general population. This is due to a growing recognition that the model of having a few, well-educated persons with English will not serve Mexico during the 21st century and that the country needs to re-equip to respond to the linguistic demands of what Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) refer to as the *new work order* (Cameron, 2002). Within the discourse of the development of human capital and competition in global markets, however, the government was compelled to create educational policies and programs that would expand access to English learning beyond those who traditionally could afford it: through private bilingual schooling, trips to the U.S.,

television and Internet access to English-medium programming, and other means of using and learning English associated with higher social class.

I suggested that this is an explicit type of acquisition planning (Wiley, 1996) that represents a shift from a model of elite bilingualism to one of macroacquisition. In the former model, a relatively few number of bilinguals were suffice to serve the nation’s needs, since they would fill the mid- and upper-level management positions and those related to tourism that required competent English speakers. In the latter model, a country’s global competitiveness—with indicators like PISA rankings, the status of membership in OECD, and reports on business processing outsourcing (BPO) potential—requires that public education function to supply a workforce with linguistic skills to meet the demands of international labor markets. We should recognize that this model represents the new neoliberal direction of language education policy in developing countries.

In highlighting the Mexican program, and with my suggestion that it seems to represent a typical case of how (and more importantly, why) developing countries are implementing PELT programs, we should appreciate the powerful discursive tensions within which these language education policy decisions are being made. The English program as part of a broader set of educational reforms represents the first opportunity that most younger working-class public school children have to learn English. Even beyond the linguistic content of the courses, the program also aims to foment intercultural awareness as well as a wider global worldview; it also seems to incidentally allow for greater connections with transnational family members and to ways to access information on the internet (Sayer & Ban, 2014). On the surface then, this is evidence that the policy move from elite bilingualism to macroacquisition of English can be seen as a democratic one, by beginning to level access to a powerful form of linguistic capital. What the analysis in this paper has shown, however, is that the program should also be understood as part of the alignment of the educational curriculum to neoliberal policies and comes at the expense of other aspects of schooling.

Finally, clearly the implementation of the English program in Mexico will proceed whether or not stakeholders acknowledge the discourses of neoliberalism that are shaping it. The program and the shift towards English macroacquisition that I have described are not good or bad in and of itself. From the perspective of a critique of neoliberal language policy (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012; Park & Wee, 2012), a key issue for scholar and policy makers is how language education ought to engage with issues of access, equity, and social class. Indeed, to the extent that knowing English may give individual Mexican students greater agency, voice, and possibilities for participation in social and political processes, the program may also promote other important 21st century skills: the awareness and means to recognize and resist neoliberal policies that work against one’s interests.

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