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## English Language Learning at Tertiary Level in a Central Mexican Public University: A Case Study


**Irasema Mora-Pablo, PhD**

*University of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, México*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8532-5522>

**Edgar Emmanuell Garcia-Ponce, PhD**

*University of Guanajuato, Guanajuato, México*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5414-3862>

**Contact:** [imora@ugto.mx](mailto:imora@ugto.mx)

### Abstract

**Objective:** Our objective was to examine the perceptions regarding the teaching and learning of English of students in 16 undergraduate programs at a state public university in Mexico.

**Method:** In our qualitative case study, participating students responded to queries about their experiences learning English at the university, as well as their educational aspirations upon completion of their university studies.

**Results:** Despite their relevance to language immersion and competency, students struggle to combine prior experiences with current learning. Given Mexico's English education system and past national initiatives, most participants say they still speak basic English. It is also clear that the institution does not have a unified curriculum that permits students to take English lessons in their subject of study.

**Implication for Theory and/or Practice:** It is necessary to articulate English initiatives from elementary to higher education and to monitor national initiatives to ensure continuity in the development of language learning. Global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have affected education, and universities and their teachers must remain on the cutting edge of educational technologies and instructional methodologies and redouble efforts to enhance English teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** *English language learning, public universities, globalization, labor market, Mexico*

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## Introduction

English is an international and global language; governments use the teaching of the English language within their educational systems to equip citizens with the skills necessary to advance in the global economy, thereby accomplishing multiple benefits for their region. The majority of developed and developing nations now incorporate the teaching of English into their curricula. In Mexico, English predominates in both public and private institutions as the main foreign language (Despaigne, 2019).

Most public university students have had language learning experiences at the elementary and secondary school levels (Millán Librado & Basurto Santos, 2020). These experiences can affect student perceptions of their university professors as well as the university's efforts to equip them with the tools necessary to perform globally in their professional fields and to be competitive when they graduate (Bremner, 2019). The increase in teaching and learning the English language is an example of the current globalization trend. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which was enacted in 1994 and established a free trade zone for the United States, Mexico, and Canada, is the most significant aspect of the United States's and Mexico's bilateral economic relationship (Villareal & Fergusson, 2017). Given the commercial and economic competition among the three countries (United States, Mexico, and Canada), the signing of this agreement prompted a reconsideration of new policies and strategies for the development of higher education in Mexico in a context of globalization (Bleynat & Monroy-Gómez-Franco, 2023).

In our study, students from 16 diverse undergraduate programs shared their perspectives on the teaching and learning of the English language at the university level. We asked them to disclose their expectations and how they balanced the advantages of learning a second language and obtaining a better job. Numerous studies have focused primarily on the elementary and secondary levels of English instruction in Mexico (Borjian, 2015; Davies, 2021; Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016); however, little research has been conducted on university students (Davies, 2020). Our study represents an opportunity to examine the views of several students at a public university and the impact of their prior experiences on their development as university students.

## Literature Review

### English Language Teaching and Learning in Latin America

Under global demands and the driving force of English as a global language, public educational policies in Latin America have included English as a compulsory subject at all educational levels; students are expected to master basic skills not only in reading comprehension but also in oral communication prior to entering a university (Guerrero Rodríguez et al., 2022). Several Latin American nations have proposed national English programs, but only a small number of these programs have received continuous policy support for English language learning activities (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Public educational initiatives in Chile (*Programa Inglés Abre Puertas* [English Opens Doors]) and Uruguay (*Plan Ceibal* [Ceibal Plan]) are two examples of this support. These two initiatives have been supported for more than a decade and have been successful in promoting the language. Chile, for instance, integrates English into the curriculum beginning in the 5th grade to promote the four language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) (Yilorm, 2016). In 2016, based on teaching methodologies such as communicative language teaching and content-integrated learning for foreign languages, the Ministry of Education in Ecuador developed a curriculum for English as a foreign language beginning in the 2nd year of elementary school (Cadena et al., 2018). In 2004, Colombia initiated the National Program of Bilingualism, whose objective is to train students in English as a foreign language at all levels of education from primary school to university (Hurie, 2018; Parra et al., 2012).

However, in Costa Rica, the program *Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera* (English as a Foreign Language) encountered many issues related to the lack of institutional support. Two of the main problems

were the cost of technology and the lack of teachers. “The program had limited ability to respond since it did not have a plan in place, and thus had to assign outside entities to manage the issues” (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017, p. 7). Chile and Colombia addressed this concern by using volunteers (usually native speakers of English residing in the country with no teaching credentials) to teach classes and cope with the demand for English classes at a national level (Abrahams & Silva Ríos, 2017).

## English Language Teaching and Learning in Mexico

English has been taught in Mexico’s public secondary and higher education institutions since 1926 as a required course in secondary school (Calderón, 2015). However, while English has been mandatory for many years, students do not demonstrate a high level of English proficiency, particularly when it comes to communicating their ideas, despite the many hours spent studying the language when they start high school (Millán Librado & Basurto Santos, 2020). The primary concern is the strict adherence to reading and translation practices, with minimal emphasis on oral language practice. This is the prevailing method of English instruction in Mexico, and it remains quite common in today’s classrooms (Davies, 2020). Moreover, the results of programs involving the instruction of English in Mexico have yielded unfavorable results. In 2005–2006, for instance, the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP; Mexican Ministry of Education) acknowledged the pervasive failure of the Mexican public English Language Teaching (ELT) programs in lower secondary institutions. According to Davies (2009), reading aloud, translating, constructing vocabulary lists, and reciting in chorus were the most common practices among teachers who followed grammar translation practices. Consequently, many high school graduates lacked essential English language production skills.

In 2009, the Mexican Ministry of Education began implementing the National English Program for Basic Education (PNIEB, in Spanish), which incorporated 212 hours of English instruction across the 13 years of K–12 public education (Ramírez Romero et al., 2014). The newly developed program represented a significant departure from the standard English curriculum in lower secondary institutions. According to Sayer (2015b), this resulted in an increase of more than 400% in the number of hours a student in the Mexican public education system receives English instruction. According to the PNIEB, students were expected to achieve a B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2020), which would allow them to acquire conversational proficiency. The stated goal was:

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).

The ultimate objective was to assist students to progress from level A0 in kindergarten to level B1 by the end of secondary school. That goal was never achieved.

However, in 2015, the group *Mexicanos Primero* [Mexicans First] released a report called Sorry: *El Aprendizaje del Inglés en México* [Sorry: Learning English in Mexico] (O’Donoghue & Calderón Martín del Campo, 2015), which heavily criticized the PNIEB and the results obtained by the program up to that point. The report had more political than educational weight and presented data on the dismal results of the PNIEB program (Sayer, 2015a) without assessing the generations that were initially exposed to the PNIEB program. However, other studies have also indicated that the quality of English education in Mexico must be improved (Bremner, 2015; Castillo-Nava & Mora-Pablo, 2022; Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016; Sayer, 2018).

In 2018, a new national program called *Programa Nacional de Inglés* [National English Program] (PRONI) was implemented. This new program is based on a curriculum proposal endorsed by the University of Cambridge and was incorporated into the current study plans and programs pertaining to the subject of

English in basic education (preschool, primary, and secondary). Its goal is to ensure that students complete these courses with an optimal level of English that enables them to express themselves and understand the basic language. In other words, the objective of PRONI is to make the entire student population in Mexico bilingual in 20 years (SEP, 2017) with an A2 level per the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages at the conclusion of primary education.

One of the primary criticisms of the numerous English program implementations in Mexico has been the lack of evaluation of the current program when a new program is launched. Continuous program evaluation is an essential component of curriculum development (Nation & Macalister, 2010), yet governments have not conducted such evaluations for decades. The government's reluctance to conduct these evaluations may be influenced by the inadequate funding allocated to public universities (Mendoza Rojas, 2019). As Davies (2009) stated, "The English level of students in higher education may indicate better than anything else whether ELT in an educational system is a success or an expensive failure" (p. 3).

### **English in Mexican Higher Education**

English language proficiency is becoming increasingly important in the education of students. Most scientific and technological research is published in English, and this information is accessible to students via specialized platforms whose primary language is English (Aguayo Vergara et al., 2019). According to the National Association of Universities and Institutions of Higher Education (ANUIES; 2015), 48% of the institutions consider the English language to be a compulsory subject and only 41% consider it a requirement to graduate. According to the English proficiency index, Mexico ranks 92 of 112 countries, with students considered to have a low level of English language proficiency (Education First, 2021).

Cruz-Ramos et al. (2019) reported that, at present, a significant number of Mexican students enter university without English language proficiency. Even more alarming is the fact that English instruction at the university level in Mexico is of poor quality; 85% of students achieve very poor results in their learning because of structural defects in teaching and learning strategies (Davies, 2020). Students must be proficient in English to participate in many activities, including 6-month academic exchange programs and academic research at universities in other countries. According to ANUIES (2015), mastery of English is a transversal competence for all professions. However, in practice, this simply means that very few students participate in exchange programs. With the aim of securing cost-effective resources and catering to a broad audience beyond university students and faculty, university language centers generally function as nearly autonomous language institutions. This means that English courses are offered to the public and to university students. As a result, there are no courses designed for the needs of undergraduate students in the state public university system (García-Ponce et al., 2021).

Each Mexican state's public university is autonomous and tailors its curriculum to the local environment and requirements; however, all state institutions are limited, because as much as 80% of funding comes from the federal government. The funding comes with restrictions on how and where it can be used (Mendoza Rojas, 2019). For instance, state public universities are unable to integrate formal content English courses into their degree programs due to the lack of federal funding resulting from the employment of full-time English instructors overseeing those subjects. By requiring students to demonstrate a specific level of English proficiency by means of standardized tests like the TOEFL, universities absolve themselves of the obligation to incorporate English courses into their curricula (García-Ponce & Mora-Pablo, 2023). Rather, they solely demand that students attain a particular level of proficiency. These practices have resulted in further complications for students, including delaying degree completion or academic setbacks caused by being unable to pass the TOEFL exam and certify the necessary English proficiency for their BA programs (García-Ponce & Mora-Pablo, 2023).

As a result of the high demand for tertiary education and the insufficient number of public state universities, new public educational institutions were created such as technological and polytechnic universities. As part of a strategy to incorporate young people into the country's workforce, technological universities were created in Mexico in 1991. The intention was to diversify public higher education by offering 2-year courses to graduates of upper secondary education. These universities grant the degree of higher academic technician (SEP-CGUT, 2000). These universities provide professional training closely linked to the requirements of local companies to facilitate the rapid incorporation of graduates into the local economy (Sapien-Aguilar et al., 2019), such as nearby automotive factories. Polytechnic Universities emerged in 2001, and their objective is to respond to the need for educating professionals holistically and equipping them with the skills necessary for effective labor market integration (Castillo-Nava & Mora-Pablo, 2022). Students are expected to acquire the general skills required to learn and remain current; to identify, pose, and solve problems; to formulate and manage projects; and to communicate effectively in Spanish and English (Herrera-Rivas et al., 2023). They promote learning through real-world situations reflected in the content and pedagogical development of the programs (Martínez-Padilla, 2011). It is in this context that these public universities (technological and polytechnic universities) have surpassed the state public universities and have implemented formal bilingual programs. Here, content classes are taught in English and programs have been developed that include English as a medium of instruction to sustain the international bilingual model. The goal of the sustainable international bilingual model is to assist low-income students in gaining access to English and English-language content to enhance their profiles and position themselves on the international market (Sibaja, 2020). Even though these programs require additional work and evaluation to determine their efficacy, they represent an enhancement over what public universities have achieved.

## Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Our research is part of a larger investigation into the implementation of the TOEFL ITP exam at a public university. We examined the development of English proficiency using TOEFL ITP and considered student-related variables such as gender, age, language exposure, perspectives and experiences regarding English learning, and disciplinary areas. Our investigation fully adhered to the Universidad de Guanajuato's ethical considerations and was approved by the Institutional Committee of Research Bioethics of the same university (CEPIUG-A01-2022). For this article, we concentrated on the experiences and expectations of students enrolled in various undergraduate programs regarding the learning of the English language at a Mexican public university. We aimed to answer two research questions:

1. RQ1: What are the students' reasons for studying English at the university and their expectations from its English language learning system?
2. RQ2: What can the university do to improve the teaching and learning of English from the students' perspectives?

## Methods

### Context and Participants

Our study was conducted at the main campus of a university in central Mexico, a sizable public institution with more than 34,000 students enrolled at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. The university offers more than 150 programs in a variety of disciplines. Most courses are taught in Spanish, and only two programs (BA in English Language Teaching and MA in Applied Linguistics in English Language Teaching) have curricula in which at least 90% of their content subjects are taught in English. The university's English courses comprise eight proficiency levels ranging from A1 to B2. There is no university-wide policy regarding

English instruction and learning; each division and campus determines how English teaching and learning processes are implemented.

Invitations to participate in our study were sent to students who were already part of the larger investigation. These students were or had previously studied English at the university and were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program. The invitations were posted on social media or sent directly to program coordinators and sent to these students. Those who expressed their desire to participate in the study were emailed a link to the survey (see the Appendix) that was available for 2 months. Students from a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs provided their responses. They responded to an online survey with demographic information and queries about their experiences learning English at university as well as their educational aspirations upon completion of their university studies. In total, we obtained responses from 46 participants representing 16 different undergraduate degrees and 5 different divisions; 22 students were from the social sciences and humanities, 17 from the natural sciences, 3 from economics and administration, 2 from engineering, and 2 from health sciences.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

After collecting the data with the use of the online survey, the participants' responses were transferred to an Excel file and organized for analysis. We conducted a thematic analysis which, according to Lochmiller (2021), "summarizes what the participants see as valuable and is principally concerned with producing a descriptive account of the participants' understanding. A thematic analysis might focus on similarities or differences in repeated patterns found within the dataset" (p. 2030). In this sense, Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish two levels of themes: semantic and latent. Given our institutional understanding and the students' knowledge, we decided to proceed with a latent analysis. This analysis goes beyond a literal interpretation and enhances the importance of the participants' words. Six steps were followed: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining the themes, and (6) drafting the initial analysis. To maintain reliability, both researchers analyzed the data individually and then compared their analyses and an agreement was reached in those instances in which there were notable differences. Validity refers to whether the findings of a study are true and certain (Golafshani, 2003). To ensure validity, we asked two experts to assess whether the items in the online survey were formulated to follow the aims of our study.

### **Results**

Two main themes emerged: (1) the reasons for studying English at the university level, and (2) improving actions toward learning English by the institution. Specifically, the themes, subthemes, and codes are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Themes, Subthemes, and Codes Related to the Experiences and Expectations of Students Regarding the Learning of the English Language at a Mexican Public University

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Reasons for learning English	Academic reasons	More information available in English than in Spanish English is necessary to broaden experiences and knowledge
	Access to current knowledge	Having access to more sources beyond Spanish
	Employment	Having hiring advantages when applying for a job
		Being able to work abroad Perspectives of a better job in the future
Social and professional development	Aspiring to position themselves in the international professional field	
	Communication with English speakers	
Improving actions toward learning English by the institution	What has the university done for students?	Mixed opinions about the university's support
	English in the classes offered by the university	Classes at basic levels
		Focus on academic texts
		Traditional teaching approaches
	Administrative challenges	Insufficient support from the university
		Recommendations to address the challenges
Teachers' English level	Preference for native speakers	
Students' English learning experiences	Content-based teaching in natural sciences	
	Only general English instruction in social sciences and humanities	

### Reasons for Studying English at the University Level

The students identified four primary motivations for engaging in English language study: (1) academic, (2) access to current knowledge, (3) employment, and (4) social and professional development.

#### Academic Reasons

Concerning academic motivations, the students emphasized the significance of acquiring proficiency in English to enhance their professional development and gain a more comprehensive understanding of their jobs in diverse settings. "More than anything when doing research or taking a course since most of the reliable information is in English" (BA in Education, Student 24). Another student said, "English has many words that Spanish doesn't, and vice versa, so learning English helps me see more perspectives on the same subject and to some extent understand it better" (BA in Philosophy, Student 7). Student 15 mentioned that "There may be

various situations that warrant the use of a second language and follow studies and certificates of courses where the use of English is necessary and it improves the experience and skills of any professional, especially [in] health” (BA in Physiotherapy, Student 15).

### **Access to Current Knowledge**

In relation to accessing current knowledge, the students highlighted the significance of English proficiency as it enables them to read English-language articles or materials that would be inaccessible otherwise. One student said,

In my undergraduate degree it is necessary when carrying out or searching for articles for different projects, my subjects are related to curriculum design, therefore, it is necessary for me to know the contexts of many sources that influence educational programs or systems (BA in Education, Student 42).

The students also noted that having English proficiency grants access to resources in the English language that would be highly restricted if only available in Spanish: “It allows us to access texts in English that we would not have access to if we do not know the language” (BA in Spanish Language and Literature, Student 13). Also, the students referred to the advantages they may possess over other applicants when applying for jobs. For example, Student 35 commented: “When I need to find very limited information, searching in English yields more results and allows a better understanding of the topic” (BA in Pharmaceutical and Biological Chemistry, Student 35). In general, the students appeared to be aware that the most recent information in their fields of study is produced in English, so they must be proficient in the language. For some students, knowing how to access information in English is a means of expanding their knowledge.

### **Employment**

In terms of employability, proficiency in the English language confers a competitive edge over individuals lacking such proficiency. “English is currently necessary for the world of work since most jobs require the language. English allows my hiring in [sic] a job or at least an advantage over other candidates” (BA in Experimental Biology, Student 16). Another student said it was important “to improve communication and be able to work abroad” (BA in Chemical Engineering, Student 28). Moreover, as part of their employability vision, students asserted that English proficiency could afford them the chance to secure employment overseas. Additionally, they highlighted the advantages of bilingualism, emphasizing the potential for career advancements that result from the ability to function proficiently in the target language within their field of expertise:

It will give me the opportunity and sufficient capacity to be a functional element in a job, although they may have a lot of staff, but bilingual is very scarce, that would give me the opportunity to aspire to positions that allow me to learn more and not get stuck in a single routine (BA in Nursing, Student 40)

Undoubtedly, the pursuit of their bachelor’s degrees has made English an imperative for some students. Nevertheless, they also anticipated their future in the job market and recognized the significance that English language proficiency has in their professional aspirations.

### **Social and Professional Development**

When asked about their motivations for using English in their undergraduate programs, the students appeared to have a clear understanding of the necessity of English in their academic pursuits. Finally, the students concluded that proficiency in English would afford them the opportunity to engage in professional and social interactions with other international counterparts. Their professional development would also benefit from their ability to operate effectively in an international setting, both during their studies and subsequently in the workplace. For example, one student mentioned that: “It [English] will allow me to communicate my ideas in another language and thus be able to communicate with English speakers who may come along during my academic or professional career” (BA in Chemical Engineering, Student 38). Another



student said it was beneficial to “develop myself in the international professional field” (BA in Economics, Student 31).

Thus, participants are aware of the significance of English in enhancing employment prospects at their desired workplaces. The students in the natural sciences can see themselves working abroad in the future and English proficiency affords them the chance to find greater employment opportunities outside Mexico. Based upon their responses, it is evident that they are conscious of the benefits of bilingualism in a field such as nursing, where the university affords them the opportunity to complete academic visits at other foreign universities and enhance their knowledge skills. This causes them to consider a much more competitive presence in which the acquisition and mastery of English is not optional, but integral to their careers, not only for their professional but also for their social development.

### **Improving Actions Toward Learning English by the Institution**

There were discrepancies in the student perspectives regarding the English classes they receive from the university. For instance, some students appeared to have a favorable view of the classes, the instructors, and the material, but the majority had negative perceptions. We discovered five subthemes: (1) what has the university done for students, (2) English in the classes offered by the university, (3) administrative challenges, (4) teachers' English level, and (5) students' English learning experiences.

#### **What Has the University Done for Students?**

It is evident that those studying natural sciences benefitted from the institution's provision of curricular classes and activities on its digital platform. Similarly, they remarked that certain teachers in the field of natural sciences motivate students to use English in their written reports or other tasks. “With the classes that are given at the university, because they are aimed at science topics, as well as the extracurricular opportunities that it gives to continue studying and evaluating our level” (BA in Experimental Biology, Student 17). Another said, “Through these practice exams and some *SUME*<sup>1</sup> modules in addition to the fact that some teachers encourage the use of English in reports or other works” (BA in Chemical Engineering, Student 3). Student 29 said, “I have four content classes in English in my program” (BA in Biology).

#### **English in the Classes Offered by the University**

The opinions of the students in the Natural Sciences division regarding the English proficiency level in the university classes were unanimous. They held the notion that the classes provided are significantly basic. For example, they mentioned: “I consider that the level of English is somewhat low at times and that, for many English speakers, re-studying language subjects can be heavy or highly boring” (BA in Chemical Engineering, Student 5). Student 23 said, “The level is very basic” (BA in Experimental Biology, Student 23). Also, a student in chemical engineering suggested: “They teach languages in a very limited way, very strict and very academic language, with no opportunity to learn everyday language” (BA in Chemical Engineering, Student 1). The students in general observed that the classes provided tend to concentrate on academic contexts, neglecting the development of everyday communication skills necessary for functioning in less formal situations.

#### **Administrative Challenges**

The students in the Social Sciences and Humanities division expressed concerns about the university's insufficient efforts to foster English language acquisition, citing it as an administrative problem. For example, Student 12 mentioned that “[the University] does not make it easier, it seems to complicate it and it does not support language learning” (BA in Spanish Language and Literature, Student 12). Another student said, “The university does not support the learning of English” (BA in Education, Student 34). Student 19 said, “The university doesn't offer classes for free” (BA in History, Student 19). This is where one of the most significant

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<sup>1</sup> SUME stands for *Sistema Universitario de Multimodalidad Educativa* [Educational Multimodality University System].

distinctions is observed. The students in the Natural Sciences division acknowledged the presence of English components in their curricular sessions, whereas the students in the Social Sciences and Humanities division highlighted the insufficient support they received from the institution to acquire the language. A prevalent criticism is the absence of assistance in offering curricular classes (at no charge) to further their English language education, coupled with the perception of administrative hindrance from the institution.

### **Teachers' English Level**

Students in the Social Sciences and Humanities division reported a dominant ideology and preference for native speakers as the ideal speakers of the language, wherein they believed that learning English is more beneficial when taught by a native speaker of the language. One student mentioned, "They don't have the normal levels to learn English (A1, A2, B1, etc.) and they don't have a practice group with native English speakers" (BA in Spanish Language and Literature, Student 39). Moreover, students asserted that teachers conform to a traditional pedagogical approach, which, for them, is seen as a drawback in language acquisition. They advocated for more dynamic classrooms that break away from the monotony of traditional instruction. For example, Student 42 (BA in Education) said,

Breaking the routine, as I said, being students, our life is just studying, and that's not bad. But there are days when one feels tired, and we want to break or change the routine so as not to feel overwhelmed during teaching.

Another student said,

The process is relatively easy, but I feel that the general opinion of the student body is that the classes are not very useful, since the teachers are not that good at their job and people feel that they are not learning (BA in Spanish Language Teaching as a Second Language, Student 13).

### **Students' English Learning Experiences**

Two students from the Social Sciences and Humanities division (Students 24 and 7) argued that it is imperative to intensify efforts to raise student awareness of the significance of studying English. One proposal entailed launching a campaign that highlights the advantages of language acquisition while simultaneously promoting the university's language-learning services. Student 24 said, "[the university should] generate a campaign where students become aware of all the advantages that the foreign language brings us. The opportunities are there, it's just that we, students, tend not to take them completely" (BA in Education, Student 4). Furthermore, considering the lessons learned from emergency remote learning during the pandemic, they considered it important that English classes be made available in both in-person and online formats, thereby accommodating a larger population of students who may benefit from these instructional sessions. Student 7 highlighted the importance of this: "That there be two modalities, face-to-face class and online for those who find it difficult to move from their homeplace to the school" (BA in Philosophy, Student 7).

The data revealed that the students' English experiences varied based on the knowledge areas or divisions in which their degrees were located. For example, while there are English-taught content courses in the natural sciences, this is not the case for the remaining divisions except for degrees related to the teaching of English (i.e., bachelor's degree in English Teaching and master's degree in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English). Students discussed two distinct programs (content-based teaching and general English instruction) when referring to the English programs offered at the university. In the field of natural sciences, there are content-based courses that are taught in English. In contrast, a history student expressed the need for access to free English language instruction. In addition, there is a concern regarding the difficulties associated with taking their regular content classes on one campus and moving to another campus to access English language instruction, an expense that not all students can afford. This identifies the main issue within the university itself for not offering both content and language classes on the same campus for students' convenience.

## Discussion

At the level of higher education, few studies have reported on the experiences of students while learning English. However, our findings coincide with results from Carranza Alcántar et al. (2018) who also reported a lack of motivation or encouragement from the teachers in their research to continue in their language learning endeavors. In their study, participants from a Mexican public university mentioned that teachers do not use teaching methodologies that motivate them to learn. This reinforces the need to place greater emphasis on aspects of pedagogy to help the student learn English. In our study, most participants believe they still have only a basic level of English, which is concerning given the landscape of English instruction in Mexico and the various national programs implemented in previous years. Other studies have reported similar results (e.g., Romo López et al., 2005). González Robles et al. (2004) contacted 4,960 students who entered nine Mexico City higher education institutions. Participants were given an English placement test, and they found that 95.9% of students who had attended public schools failed the linguistic competence test upon entering higher education. Similarly, Székely et al. (2015) found that most students finished basic education with low English proficiency. More recently, Velázquez and García-Ponce (2018) found that reasons for deficiency were related to limited practice of the language, low motivation, lack of autonomy, and shortcomings in the decisions and strategies concerning teaching and learning in the institution. In general, the results obtained from our study are consistent with these studies. Additionally, students also reported a preference for having native English-speaking teachers. This is critical, considering the extensive scholarly discourse surrounding the fallacy of native speakers (Yuwita & Ambarwati, 2023). Educators, regardless of their native English proficiency, possess invaluable language teaching resources. Ellis (2016) and Copland et al. (2020) have advocated in recent years for the recognition of the plurilingual proficiencies held by English language instructors, regardless of their native status.

## Limitations

There are some limitations that should be acknowledged. The sample size was small; therefore, the generalizability of the findings is limited. Moreover, our study was conducted in one Mexican state university; however, since similar English teaching and learning practices are conducted in Mexican public universities, it is possible that our results may reflect the situation that other higher education contexts are experiencing. Another limitation is that the perspectives of other stakeholders, including teachers, university authorities, policy makers, and employers were not included. Despite the limitations, our study provides a starting point to encourage further research in this field in Mexico.

## Implications

Our study has implications on multiple levels. On a theoretical level, our study shows that, despite recent innovative approaches that are promoted in higher education, practices are adapted or changed to suit the local needs of students, teachers, and administrators. Therefore, it is essential that Mexican universities direct more efforts to educate teachers and students on the most recent and innovative English teaching methodologies. From a practical perspective, it is necessary to monitor the national English language initiatives so that there is continuity in the development of language learning. There has not been a formal evaluation of the continuity of national English programs. At the institutional level, the results demonstrate that the university has a long way to go before it can formalize a common program, as other universities in the country, particularly technological and polytechnic, have done.

State public universities have requested a restructuring of the higher education funding model (Mendoza Rojas, 2019). This would provide all public institutions a long-term perspective with appropriate budget and

funding certainty. To implement a transversal English program at the university, it is necessary to have financial resources from the federal government. The third constitutional article's mandate is for higher education to be universal, free, and obligatory (Const., 1993), and it will necessitate a new financing strategy. In addition, a new agreement between the federal and state administrations is required to ensure the financial viability of all public institutions of higher education (Mendoza Rojas, 2019). Having a well-developed policy framework within the university for English language teaching and learning is half the answer. Sustainable implementation of that framework is the other half. As with education policies more broadly, a key challenge is the translation of high-level policies and regulations into practices that directly influence what happens at the classroom level.

There is not one way to achieve the purpose of enhancing English language education and learning in Mexico, particularly inside state public universities. We assert that there is a need for proactive interventions to address shortcomings across multiple levels. To effectively address the ongoing issues presented by the structural shortcomings of national programs such as PNIEB and PRONI, it is crucial to undertake a comprehensive examination of these programs. Subsequently, the university should align its initiatives and decisions regarding the teaching of English accordingly. It is crucial to prioritize the development of two distinct programs that contribute to a common goal, such as equipping students with English proficiency and ensuring their competitiveness upon graduation: one that emphasizes the pedagogy of acquiring the English language and another that is specifically designed for utilizing English as a medium of instruction. As suggested by Ortega-Auquilla et al. (2020), the second language learning process involves a collaborative relationship among the administration, the teacher, and the student within an innovative environment that attempts to replicate the language demands of contemporary society.

## Conclusion

The results of our study reflect part of a complex situation in Mexico where efforts and resources have been invested in the implementation of a variety of English programs. However, the lack of continuity of English programs and the lack of alignment to the programs by state public universities result in students continuing to have a basic level of English; those who believe they can achieve a higher level have difficulty attaining this in the university because they do not feel challenged. The increasing enthusiasm for the development of English language skills extends beyond the K–12 educational system, which has been the focus of the PNIEB and PRONI initiatives in Mexico. More and more, students entering higher education express the need to access education that not only helps them develop disciplinary knowledge but also English language skills that are directly associated with their professional field. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a seamless language learning connection between K–12 tertiary education experiences. University students, administrators, and professors must meet the demands of the globalized world, and graduates need to remain competitive in the labor market.

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## Appendix

### Items in the Online Survey

1. Name of your educational program.
2. What do you think is the main reason why you are required to have a level of English to enter or graduate from your program?
3. In what way do you think English allows you to develop academic activities?
4. In what way do you think English allows you to develop work activities?
5. How does the university facilitate the teaching and learning of English?
6. What would be the successes of the university in terms of teaching and learning English?
7. What would be the advantages of learning English at the university?
8. Describe the disadvantages of learning English at the university.
9. How could the teaching and learning of English be improved?

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