

Research on Foreign Language Teaching and Learning in Mexico: A New Path to Professionalization ¹

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Abstract

The article reports the methodological design and main results of a study conducted in 2005 on research in the area of foreign language teaching and learning in Mexico. The purpose was to generate updated information about what is being researched in the field, and from what perspective; what research designs and instruments are used; and who, why and under what conditions research is conducted, in order to document and analyze the status of this field of study.

Introduction

Research Projects in Language Teaching and Learning in Mexico began in the mid-eighties with the opening of English Language Teaching (ELT) undergraduate programs, and graduate courses in Language Teaching in a large number of Mexican Higher Education Institutions. Some of the factors that encouraged research projects were the requirements associated with the new national guidelines to certify those programs and to stimulate their faculty members, as well as the increasing hiring of full time professors with graduate studies. Moreover, the initiative to investigate also started to bloom slowly in various language centers and departments traditionally centered only in teaching foreign languages. Unfortunately, those efforts have not been sufficiently documented or systematized, as Gilbón and Gómez (1996) correctly highlighted a few years ago. Among the few studies that have tried to document the research thus far conducted on the field in Mexico are those of McLean (1978) on applied linguistics research in Mexico; Da Silva and Gilbón's (1993) state of the art of the field from 1982 to 1992; Gilbón and Gómez (1996) about the development of language centers in different higher education institutions; Chasán, Rall, and Valdez (1997) on the different applied linguistics masters dissertations; Encinas and Busseniers (2003) on the English teaching programs in Mexican higher education institutions; and, a catalogue on research and programs in linguistics, language teaching, modern arts and related areas in Mexico by Valdez (UNAM, CELE, 2005).

¹ This is a refereed article.

The purpose of our study was to build upon these previous studies and generate updated information about what is being researched on the area of foreign language teaching and learning in Mexico and from what perspective; what research designs and instruments are used; and who, why and under what conditions research is conducted, in order to document and analyze the status of this field of study.

Methodology

Sixteen researchers and twenty-one collaborators from eleven different Mexican Higher Education Institutions [1] participated in this study, collecting and analyzing data from fifteen different states [2].

Data was collected from different sources: directors, researchers, librarians, university web pages, conferences proceedings, and databases on educational research in language teaching through interviews and analysis of documents.

The scope of the investigation included only research reports on foreign language teaching and learning conducted between 2000 and 2005 that had been published or presented as papers or as dissertations.

The gathering and analysis of the data was conducted using basic descriptive statistics and content analysis at two levels: at an institutional or state level, and at the national level.

Results

Only 53% (n=264), of the total 494 projects that were initially reviewed, were selected for the study. As shown in Figure 1, from those selected, 79% were undergraduate dissertations; 11% were papers presented in regional or national conferences; 3% were articles and the remaining 7% were catalogued as "other".

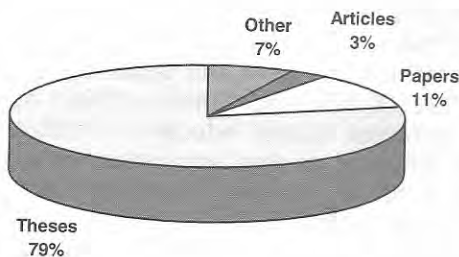


Figure 1. Research projects included in the study

The great majority of these research projects (97%) were conducted by faculty or undergraduate students from different Mexican higher education public institutions. Only 2% of the selected projects were conducted by faculty or students from private institutions, and 1% was conducted by personnel from other types of institutions.

The main research topics were related to the four basic skills (30%). The other research topics were: evaluation (9% of the studies), learning and teaching strategies (8%); language acquisition (7%) and didactic-related topics (7%). The remaining 39% dealt with diverse topics. (See Figure 2)

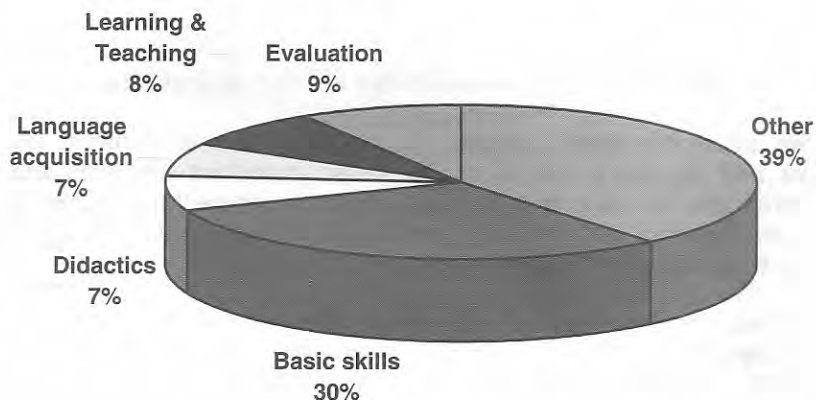


Figure 2. Main research topics

In regards to the language being investigated, English was definitely the most studied (91% of the cases) and French was second (7% of the cases).

As shown in Figure 3, the objectives of the research projects were mainly to describe phenomena, events or experiences (48% of them), followed by those with analytical or evaluative purposes (23%). Only 12% of them aimed to present proposals and 17% of the cases did not present a clear and straightforward objective.

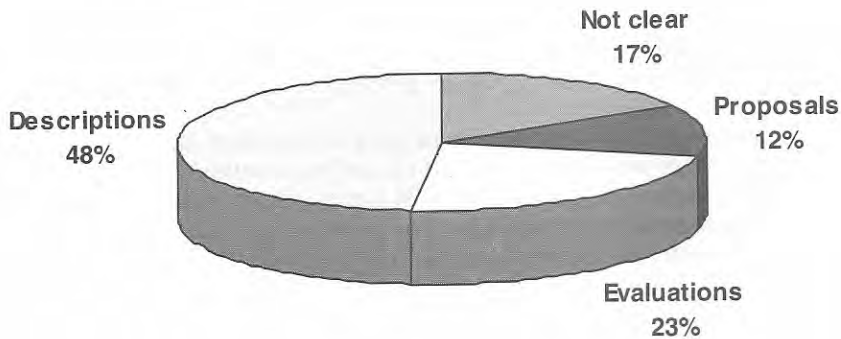


Figure 3. Objectives of the research projects

Some problems were detected in relation to the different theoretical frameworks and literature reviews. The most important one was the diverse levels of strictness or rigor found in the projects: some had highly structured theoretical frameworks while others presented unclear, not fully developed or inconsistent theoretical backgrounds [3].

In relation to the research methodologies employed in the projects, we found the following: 44% employed survey-type designs, followed by those that used qualitative designs (16%). A similar percentage (16%) used a combination of quantitative-qualitative methods; 4% used some other type of research design and an alarming 20% of the projects did not describe or had a clear description of the methodology employed [4]. See Figure 4.

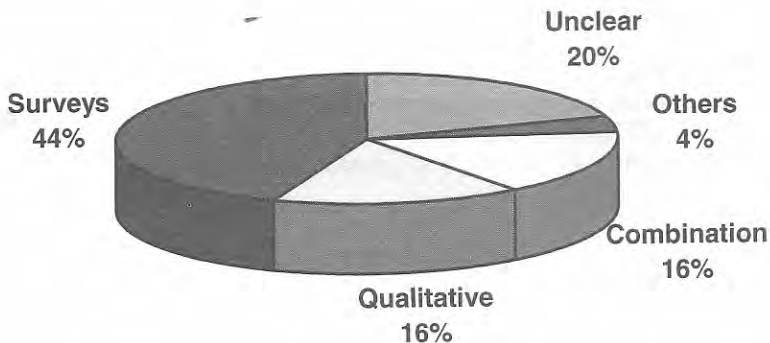


Figure 4. Research methodologies

As shown in Figure 5, the instruments most widely used for data collection were questionnaires (40% of the cases), interviews (23% of the cases) and observations (16% of the cases). Only 7% of the projects used tests and the other 13% employed other instruments such as diaries, written task analysis, think-aloud protocols and journal keeping.

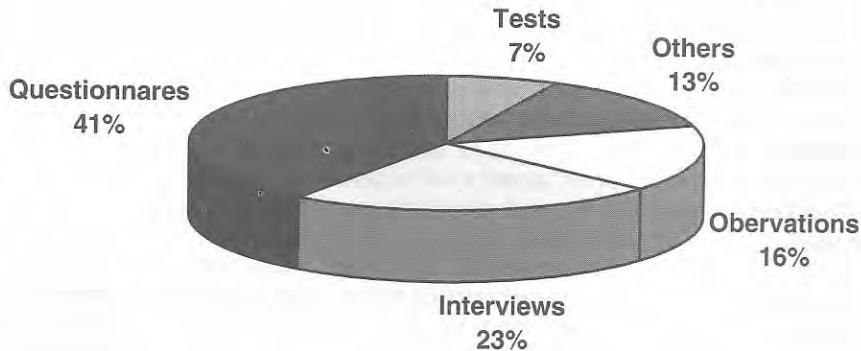


Figure 5. Instruments used for data collection

The subjects most studied were by far the students (79% of the cases) followed by the teachers (19%) and only 2% described or analyzed someone outside of those groups. See Figure 6.

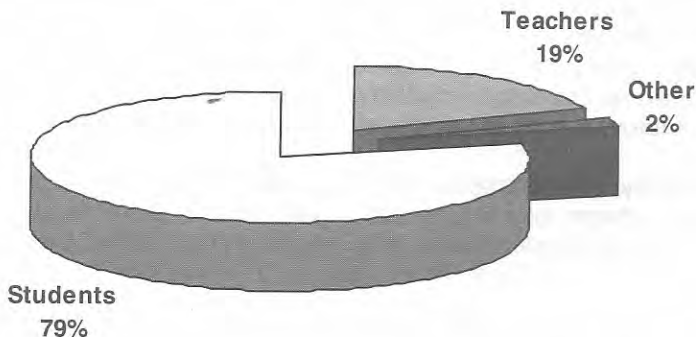


Figure 6. Subjects of the studies

Finally, most of the research that has been conducted in the last five years focuses on small-scale studies, with limited samples of the population.

Analysis and Evaluation

The collected data seem to suggest that research in this field could be classified as one with a very incipient level of development in quantity and in quality as well. With regards to quantity, the number of projects is really undersized in comparison to the growth the field has experienced in the last 20 years, as evidenced by the number of B.A and master programs in the field of foreign language teaching [5]; the number of foreign language professional associations (and their members) existent in Mexico [6]; the number of conferences on the topic organized in the last several years [7]; the number of periodical publications specialized in foreign languages [8]; and the networks that have lately emerged [9]. In relation to the quality of the work presented, results show that few of the projects could really pass a serious review. Although we found some high-quality projects, most of the ones we reviewed were of medium quality, and some were of poor quality with unclear research designs, fragile theoretical backgrounds and/ or were rife with weak data collection instruments and protocols.

In general, the following characteristics have been found in the area so far: research studies have been conducted by and about faculty or students from higher education public institutions. In most cases, research projects are completed as undergraduate dissertations to fulfill graduation requirements. For the most part, the projects aim to describe rather than to analyze the learning-teaching phenomena. They use survey-type design and, on a smaller scale, qualitative or combined designs. Questionnaires are usually the only instrument employed to collect information; while other data collection instruments, which might be more appropriate for the problems being investigated, are seldom used.

Most of the research has focused on topics related to English language teaching or learning, although other languages are being taught in Mexico. The majority of the studies are oriented to the study of classrooms and/or student learning but little attention is paid to other topics such as values, culture, or ethical issues. Furthermore, most of the studies present fragile theoretical frameworks; some do not explicitly state the rationale or methodological procedures employed; and many present very superficial data analysis.

Additionally, the samples are generally very small and do not allow generalizations, there is not enough experimental research, and there are no longitudinal or large-scale studies that could inform and/or endorse educational policies.

Even though the causes that explain the insufficiently developed current state of the field are multiple, there are two factors that seem to stand out: the people who conduct the research and the conditions under which research is being conducted in this field in Mexico.

In relation to the researchers we found the following: most of them are undergraduate students with little or no research training. Those who are faculty members have no training or experience in research in most cases; and very few have undergone graduate studies. Thus, both groups lack the skills and the training to conduct serious research projects.

Regarding the conditions, we found that in general the institutional conditions and contexts in which research is being conducted are usually inappropriate to foster and/or to encourage research efforts. On the whole, infrastructure is limited or not updated; there is little structural support and inadequate funding; and, faculty have heavy teaching loads and very little time left for research.

In spite of these limitations, the research thus far conducted has contributed to a better understanding of what happens in foreign language classrooms and to the factors and dimensions that affect learning. Additionally, the research efforts we were able to locate, represent, in spite of their limitations, a step forward in the slow process of consolidating research in foreign language teaching in our country.

Therefore, the trend seems to be positive. The growing number of academics who are presently taking graduate courses causes us to expect that there will be an increase in high-quality research projects in the field, especially as a result of the dissertations they will have to complete, as well as the internal and external sources of motivation to conduct research that they will develop once they have experienced the thrill associated with it. It is also expected that government policies towards higher education will stimulate and promote the development of groups of researchers and committees who will contribute to an increase in the number of high-quality state and regional research projects.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of the data collected in this study, we present the following recommendations:

- It is necessary to pay attention to the problems and limitations that have been mentioned in this study, especially to the ones related to the training in research methods for faculty and faculty working conditions. More specifically, we think it is urgent to promote and to stimulate the generation of policies and programs to train teachers in the area of language teaching research, especially by providing them scholarships or funding to take graduate courses at prestigious institutions, where research is an important part of the curriculum. Furthermore, the different educational organizations should create working conditions that encourage and support research, develop policies that reward research, help faculty obtain quality training, provide small amounts of money to faculty who are

just beginning to conduct research, and support the publication of faculty research projects.

- Institutions need to include a solid foundation in research methodology and epistemology in the curriculum of undergraduate and graduate language teaching programs. Additionally, we recommend that undergraduate students participate in research projects.
- Finally, we suggest the promotion of longitudinal studies, the use of larger samples, and the study of topics that thus far have received little or no attention, such as identities, cultural, and ethical issues. We also recommend research topics that focus on institutional, regional or national requirements and needs, as well as the promotion of collaborative research work among various teachers and students from diverse regions.

Conclusions

For the moment, we have detected a nascent field with unequal quality and levels of development. Nevertheless, a positive picture is developing as more and better quality work appears as a result of new generations of faculty members completing their graduate studies. It is hoped that better working conditions will also promote development in this field. We hope that our effort to document the state of the field will contribute to its consolidation and as a result, to the professionalization of its members.

Notes

1. The following institutions participated in the study: Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Universidad Autónoma de Chiapas, Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, Universidad de Colima, Universidad de Guadalajara, Universidad de Quintana Roo, Universidad de Sonora, Universidad de Tlaxcala, Universidad Veracruzana, and Universidad de Zacatecas.
2. The states were: Baja California (North and South), Campeche, Colima, Chiapas, Jalisco, Puebla, Quintana Roo, Sonora, Tabasco, Tamaulipas, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Yucatán, and Zacatecas.
3. The criteria for evaluating the quality of the research projects theoretical frameworks and literature reviews considered the following questions: was there an explicit section named "theoretical framework" or "literature review? Was the section well organized and contained all the relevant sections marked with subheadings? Were the main ideas clear, well organized and developed, and coherent? Did the section have a clear focus/sequence throughout? Did the section show evidence of sufficient background reading and state-of-the-art research on the topic? Was the bibliography updated and relevant? Were

- the references and quotations clear? Was the section consistent with the hypothesis or research assumptions; objectives; variables; methodology; and data analysis?
4. The criteria for evaluating the quality of the research methodologies employed in the projects considered the following questions: was there an explicit section named "research methodology? Was the section well organized and contained all the relevant sections marked with subheadings? Were the research paradigm or approach, the procedures, and the instruments clearly described and justified? Were the criteria and mechanisms employed for data analysis justified and clearly described? Did the section have a clear focus/sequence throughout? Did the section show evidence of sufficient background reading and state-of-the-art research on the topic? Was the section coherent with the theoretical framework and literature review; hypothesis or research assumptions; objectives; and variables?
 5. According to Encinas and others (in press) in 2005 there were in Mexico 20 B.A. programs and 9 M.A programs in the area of foreign language teaching.
 6. Encinas and others (in press) report that in 2006 there were in Mexico at least 9 foreign language teaching professional associations.
 7. For more specific data related to the conferences organized in the field in the last several years, see Encinas and others (in press).
 8. According to Encinas and others (in press) in 2006 there were in Mexico at least 8 periodical publications specializing in the area of foreign language teaching.
 9. For greater details related to such networks, see Encinas and others (in press).

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