

Voices and Echoes from the PNIEB experience in Puebla¹

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Abstract

Implementing educational reform requires decisions and actions, which usually become a challenge for the people involved. Teaching English as a compulsory subject in the curricula of elementary public education in Mexico was the 'implementation of an innovation', which created a number of challenges worth documenting (Markee, 1997). This paper presents the results of a longitudinal study where the voices of a group of teachers involved in this implementation was heard and recorded using narrative inquiry (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). These teachers, living this innovational project in public elementary schools in Puebla, were going through a path nobody had walked before. Importantly in this study the teachers themselves through narratives and focus groups raised the issues and made their voices heard. Overall, this is a reconstruction of those voices from the PNIEB implementing stage in Puebla.

Resumen

Implementar una reforma educativa implica la toma de decisiones y acciones que pueden llegar a ser un reto complejo para los involucrados en esta tarea. La enseñanza del Inglés como una materia obligatoria en el programa de educación básica pública en México a través del PNIEB (Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica) ha sido una "implementación de una innovación educativa" (Markee, 1997) que sin lugar a dudas ha implicado decisiones y acciones que necesitan ser documentadas para su difusión y análisis (Markee, 1997). El presente estudio muestra los resultados de una investigación longitudinal de las voces de un grupo de maestros de educación básica que participaron en esta implementación en el estado de Puebla. Estos educadores transitaron un camino sin antecedentes y experiencias previas al (PNIEB), lo que hace que este estudio sea valioso debido a que fueron los propios participantes, sus voces y ecos, a partir de narrativas y grupos focales (Johnson & Golombek, 2002), los que construyeron parte de la historia en la implementación del PNIEB en Puebla.

Introduction

English learning in all educational levels in Mexico has become a priority in education, given its geography and economical situation. However, learning or teaching English has mainly been a privilege of private education in Mexico. Private institutions have taken the teaching of English as an additional benefit making the inequity of education in this county more evident and creating the need for the teaching of English in public education. As a result, state local projects in thirteen states of our country implemented English instruction, with their own limitations and lacking homogeneity or a systematic evaluation program. These attempts to cover the need for a foreign language set the foundations for a more extended program in the long term: the *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica* (PNIEB) implemented nationally in 2008. However, it was until August 2010 that the PNIEB was set into action in limited elementary schools in Puebla.

This study aimed at recording and understanding the first impressions of a group of teachers implementing PNIEB while participating in the first stages of this program in Mexico and particularly, in Puebla. Giving a voice to the participants of this project raised a number of issues regarding their professionalization and adaptation process (Johnson & Golombek, 2002) in this implementation during initial stages. This study followed a group of teachers who participated in training sessions designed for those who were implementing the PNIEB in Puebla. In the specific case of Puebla and the context of the present study, the *Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de*

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Puebla (BUAP) and a government educational institution, *Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP)*, made an agreement to offer these kinds of courses for novice and in-service teachers implementing PNIEB.

Research Questions

In light of the previous discussion, the following questions were formulated to direct the study:

- What personal and professional experiences seem to characterize the teachers participating in this innovative teaching context in Puebla?
- What were these teachers' expectations and impressions during the initial stage of their participation in the PNIEB in Puebla, as well as during the continuing education preparation courses they were asked to do as part of the requirements of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP)*?
- What characterized the reflective process and the teachers' professional development during the initial stages of an innovation in education in Mexico?

Curriculum implementation and innovation

Teachers' attitude and involvement in change are key elements to the success of curriculum reform. Hargreaves (1994) stated that "change in the curriculum is not effected without some concomitant change in the teacher" (p. 54) because it is the teacher who is responsible for delivering the new curriculum at classroom level molded by his/her own beliefs and experiences. Hargreaves also mentions that what the teacher thinks, what the teacher believes, what the teacher assumes, all have powerful implications for the change process, for the ways in which curriculum policy is translated into curriculum practice" (ibid). Similarly, Fullan (1992) states that, the implementation of curriculum change is about translating an idea into practice in the classroom. It is only from the tension between classroom action and curriculum guidelines recorded in syllabuses that we can expect innovation. This tension is then, what can drive curricula forward (Candlin, 1983). The ultimate aim of all educational innovation is to bring about improvement in classroom practice and enhance student learning. Therefore, we can assume that combining knowledge, skills and actual practice could be the key for long-term lasting innovation in the foreign language-teaching field in Mexico with the implementation of PNIEB.

Innovation and teacher training

Innovation means changing features in a known and given situation. When we try new things (something we have never tried before) or try the opposite of what we usually do, "we can compare them with what we usually do, and based on this comparison we can see our teaching differently, including our beliefs about teaching and learning" (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999, p. 3). Innovation in language education may also involve several other aspects such as materials and methodological skills, which are called "primary innovations" that have an impact in the "core dimensions of teaching and learning" (Markee, 1997, p. 53). In this context, the inclusion of English in the Mexican public educational system through PNIEB aims for an improvement of education and a better scenario for future generations. However, a very important issue in this process is the preparation of teachers for the new scenarios demanded by the actual implementation of innovation. Teacher training and support are crucial issues in the preparation of teachers to implement a new curricular innovation. For instance, Vespoor (1991) states that there are four elements needed for successful teacher training to support innovation:

- Permanent and locally available in-service training,
- Establishment of effective systems for supervision and support of teachers,

- Adjustment of the content of teacher training to the teachers' own level of knowledge and experience and
- Encouragement of teacher motivation and commitment. (Hall and Hewigs, 2001).

Therefore, training needs to be ongoing and developmental as stated by Brindley and Hood (1990). Teachers, as the practical implementers of innovation, need the support and guidance of the principal promoters of the innovation before, during and after the implementation in order to review and sustain the original objectives. Importantly, it is necessary to hear what teachers say about their experiences, successes and limitations that make them go into the occurrence of professional development during implementation of a program or an innovation in language teaching. Certainly, reflection on such experiences becomes a key element for professional growth to occur and be effective; reflection in teaching has to be systematic and public such as in narratives (Boyer, 1990).

There has to be evidence that reflection is being used as a method of fostering professional development. Reflection leads to action and in the end to improvement. Teachers may use their own thoughts to lead their own professional development; these thoughts can be poured into narratives that can probably be the evidence of this professional development (Bailey, 1997; Fullan, 1992).

Context

The Facultad de Lenguas (FALE) in Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, (BUAP), provided training courses for the teachers implementing the PNIEB in Puebla. About 150 teachers registered and attended several courses in FALE in 2008; these courses addressed three main areas: 1) language, 2) teaching methodology and 3) professional development. The participants of this study took part in one of the language courses that started in July 2010 and finished in July 2011.

When the summer course for teachers of PNIEB started in 2010, the teachers were experiencing excitement and seemed to be very motivated, it was evident that something was happening during the course. Then, a narrative was required in which teachers could write about their expectations and feelings about the PNIEB in Puebla at that stage of the implementation. This research had not been considered at that moment, but their opinions and ideas during that time were seen as important and were registered. During the class previous to the beginning of the school year, the whole group was asked to write their expectations and fears regarding the new project.

Participants

The participants in this study were all English teachers with a variety teaching experiences. At the time of the study, some of them had already worked for several years in the EFL field either in the private or public system, and some had little or no experience in teaching as they had recently graduated from 'Normal School' (State Teachers' School) or from the English language pre-service program offered in FAL, BUAP. The ages of the participants ranged from twenty three to fifty years old. They were divided into two groups and accepted participating on a voluntary basis. One group titled **voices**, was followed for nine months and used as the main source of the data in the study. The **voices** group was made up of four females and one male. They were all informed of the project and agreed to participate by submitting narrative accounts and be part of the focus group when the author of the research considered it appropriate. The participants showed a natural willingness to be part of the project and were all PNIEB implementing teachers at the moment of the study. The other group, titled **echoes** were teachers who decided to participated at the end of this study as they felt the need to be heard and report on what they were experiencing while implementing the program. The **echoes** in this

study were used to triangulate the data in order to ensure that the data provided enough information for its further analysis.

The echoes participants were a group of implementers that voluntarily agreed to participate in an informal focus group alternative to the **voices** focus group. This second group was mainly used as supporting data to echo and reinforce the issues that emerged from the main group. This group of teachers was invited to express their ideas in a focus group derived from informal conversations, as they showed their interest to share their views and their opinions on the study being performed.

Methodology and data collection

This study is presented as an explorative, interpretative qualitative case study within the field of education and more specifically in the field of TESOL because of its nature, the strategy for data collection and data analysis used under the tradition of narrative inquiry and focus groups. According to Patton (2002), one of the main differences between the qualitative and quantitative methods is based on the focus of the sample; "qualitative research is generally carried out with small samples... chosen on purpose," (p. 230). Similarly, Cousin (2009) states that "Qualitative data analysis explores themes, patterns, stories, narrative structure and language within research texts" the instruments to perform the data collection and further data analysis for this research had the intention to reflect what participants had to say in order to allow the researcher to "interpret meanings and to generate theoretical insights" (p. 31).

Written narratives were used from participants and additionally, two focus groups were performed to give the study a more solid back up. As suggested by Johnson and Golombeck (2002), in qualitative research, data from narratives were systematically collected and analyzed to make the interpretation of the data as trustworthy as possible. Therefore, the narrative accounts were used as instruments 1 and 2, to help teachers understand and make sense of what happens in the classroom. The collection of the initial data (narratives) was carried out in two different moments, the first one being before they started the actual work with the children in the classroom. This first narrative was collected with the aim of recording what the first impressions and expectations of the participants were right before the beginning of the school year, when the PNIEB was going to be implemented as an official pilot program in some of the public elementary schools in Puebla.

The second set of narrative account was to be submitted at the end of the school year, once the teachers had a complete overview of the program and could give an opinion of it. According to Dewey (1933), we ground conceptualization of narrative inquiry in educational philosophy, which argues that we are all *knowers* who reflect on experience, face the unknown situations and make sense of it and then take action. (See a sample of the narratives in Appendix A).

As stated before, the development of the present study required the voices of participants to be merged in a collective account of what was taking place during the implementation stage of the PNIEB project. Teachers wanted to be heard, which is why focus groups were considered as the means for teachers to speak their minds. According to Cousin (2009) focus groups are based on "the principle that rich data can be elicited from group interactivity" (p. 51). Morgan (1997), says that the focus group method allows "sharing and participations, from the researcher's point of view, this process of sharing and comparing provides the rare opportunity to collect direct evidence on how the participants themselves understand their similarities and differences" (p. 21). (See the focus group agenda in Appendix B).

The agenda for the first group was made after reading the narratives and based on the issues that emerged from them. This focus group took place on Saturday, July 19th, 2011 and lasted for

30 minutes, all participants shared their points of view and all had a chance to answer the questions prompted. The questions used to elicit teachers' answers are in Appendix B.

The participants in this first focus group were the voices group and as they had been in the same group for almost a year, seemed to feel comfortable answering questions and expressing their opinions in a free and relaxed manner. The focus group was recorded and then typed and translated into English as it was originally planned to be in Spanish in order to facilitate teachers' participation and make it easier and more meaningful for them. The second focus group was organized with the "echoes" participants. These teachers voluntarily agreed to be part of the research and they expressed their opinions and points of view in a relaxed and friendly manner as well. This focus group was also recorded and then, the information was transcribed and translated into English for its subsequent analysis. The second focus group lasted for 45 minutes. The timeline for data collection is shown in Figure 1:

	Narrative 1 (N1)	Narrative 2 (N2)	Focus Group 1 (FG1)	Focus Group 2 (FG2)
Instrument	Expectations before starting the program Voices	My experience with PNIEB Voices	Common issues in the PNIEB experience Voices	Common issues in the PNIEB experience Echoes
Time	August 2010	June 2011	July 2011	September 2011
Participants	1,2,3,4,5	1,2,3,4,5	1,2,3,4,5	Five PNIEB teachers

Figure 1: Timeline of the instruments and data collection

Data analysis procedure

After the data was collected in its different moments, stages and modalities the analysis of the information began. In the beginning, the Narratives were read several times, trying to find meanings between the texts and the study. Cousin (2009) argues that in "much qualitative research, data gathering and analysis are dynamically linked" (p. 31), and it proved to be true as collecting, reading and designing the next data collection stage showed these aspects were mutually interacting and influencing each other. The same procedure continued with the rest of the instruments, using grounded theory strategies so as to find what the documents were telling us. To analyze the data collected, grounded theory strategies provided the guidelines and strategies to answer the research questions that shaped this study. Grounded theory strategies also helped to understand what emerged from the information collected.

Grounded theory strategies allows for the data to speak to the researcher. The researcher then looks for coincidences or differences emerging from data along the data collection process. Care was taken when collecting data so as to not influence the analysis with personal opinions or views altering participants' reality. The theory should provide clear enough categories and hypothesis so that crucial categories can be verified in present and future research. This theory approach gave us the freedom to use experience when categorizing and trying to explain what was happening with the implementation of PNIEB in Puebla.

Therefore, the actual words of the participants shaped this study, its outcomes and the discussion, with the purpose of gaining a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding these

teachers and the educational change happening at the actual moment and with the hope of highlighting the situation and the teachers' perspective towards change.

Outcomes of the study

The participants' answers in N1 (Narrative 1) mainly showed the emotions and feelings they were going through at that moment. It is evident that, this pre-initial stage was a very emotional one and giving them support and confidence by praising the work they were doing and encouraging them to feel proud of themselves to go ahead with the task they were going to undertake, seemed to be important. Regarding emotions, Goleman, (1997), said that "*emotions are not extras; they are the very center of human mental life*" (p. 34). Paying attention to their emotions and recognizing their feelings, teachers might be agents of their reflective processes (Stanley, 1988: cited in Arnold 1999). This stage was characterized by the feelings and the expectations participants were experiencing.

When the instrument for narrative two was applied, most of the school year had already passed. The participants had had the opportunity to experience what PNIEB meant for themselves, in their particular contexts and for their students. This instrument was more elaborated and the outcomes were based on teachers' experiences after a year PNIEB was implemented. Teachers' stories captured and described their experiences "in the midst" as Clandinin and Connelly argue (1991). By reading their second narratives, it was possible to see that participants were engaged with the project. They expressed some of their perceptions and by making statements in their narratives such as "*we need material and appropriate material*", "*there are some problems with the **titulares** of the groups*"; issues that will be discussed below came to light.

The voice of teachers had to be heard when they were interacting with each other, so the third instrument used was two focus groups. During these sessions, participants were encouraged to participate and give their opinions. During focus group 1, participants talked about their experiences and though they had worked and been in different contexts in general these experiences were similar. Each participant was trying to understand what was going on in his or her specific context, as Everard and Morris (1985) stated; "It is important to adapt innovations to the reality of the context in which they are introduced" (p. 15). Theory and the practice have to be balanced in the light of reality, especially in a brand new educational context. Participants seemed to have the most specific and pressing problems and concerns in the initial stages of implementations when attempts were being made to translate theoretical proposals into real practice. The echoes in FG2 (Focus Group 2) confirmed what had been read and heard from the main voices in the research. Echoes are, for this study, a representation of all novice teachers who were implementing PNIEB in the state of Puebla.

For purposes of organization, research questions have been answered with the actual words of the participants:

How have these language teachers have transformed personally and professionally by participating in this innovational teaching context in Puebla?

What the participants expressed in their narratives and oral accounts revealed they felt part of the new project by being the implementers of PNIEB in Puebla. This sense of ownership and belonging was calling for "respect" (N 2, FG1) and "for a space of their own" (N2, FG1, FG2) as they were transforming into PNIEB teachers, for these participants, pride was a common feeling among them. The experiences of these implementers made them see themselves as innovators. They knew that they were facing a new environment and they expressed it as an urgency to inform all people involved in the innovation to know about the project: "*Authorities, Parents and Titular teachers, need to know about PNIEB teachers*" (FG 1). The data from the focus group

showed enough evidence to say that participants were going through a transformation process that might lead them to professional development. To acknowledge and respect teachers' feelings was another aspect to understand under the data from this study, where innovation and change might trigger emotions in people going through these processes. The inter-relatedness of the learner's attitudes with thinking and language as an important issue; the participants of this study made their voices heard using a language common among themselves and adapting their personal and professional personalities to a new state of becoming PNIEB teachers.

What were these teachers' expectations and impressions during the initial stage of their participation in the PNIEB in Puebla as well as during the continuing education preparations courses they were asked to do as part of the requirements of the SEP?

Expectation and reality can be very different sides of the same coin, and the participants in the study could experience both. Through the instruments, it was possible to see what they were expecting before the implementation, their experience during the first stages of piloting PNIEB and how they felt after the school year finished. The participants expressed their feelings in a variety of emotions, such as "happiness" (N1, N2, FG1, FG2), "excitement", (N1, FG2) "nervousness" (N 1, N2, F G1) at the beginning and then, "pride" (N 2, FG1), "satisfaction" (N2, FG1, FG2) "surprise" (FG1) and even expressed "feeling overwhelmed" (N2, FG2). By their emotions they seemed to be grasping the extent of the innovations of the program. The PNIEB project was a huge challenge and they were trying to understand the different situations they were facing. In words of Mezirow, (1990): "Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our presuppositions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world" (p. 14). Reformulating our beliefs might allow us to develop a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable and integrative perspective that eventually leads to being able to make decisions depending on the new contexts.

The narratives exposed the need that participants had for support in terms of training, materials and collaboration. When support is available, teachers' experiences with innovations are more likely to be positive and initiatives stand a greater chance of success. However, when support is not available, or it fails to materialize, teachers' experiences and accounts are likely to be characterized by frustration and discouragement, and the implementation of initiatives can be limited. This was apparent from certain aspects of the implementation of PNIEB in Puebla from what participants commented at the time of this research.

How was a reflection process used as a means to promote teacher professional development during the initial stages of an innovation in education in Mexico?

One of the aspects that defined this research, its development and the final outcomes was the participants' reflections and my own during the PNIEB implementation stage in Puebla. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) state "what is missing in the classroom is a place for teachers to tell and retell their stories of teaching... but it can become a place of repetitive stories without a possibility for awakening and transformations" (p. 13). Therefore, trying to make the classroom a place where the participants could tell their stories and relate them to their experiences and emotions was supported and encouraged. The teachers' experiences along the school year made them aware of what PNIEB meant to them, "To have a job to grow personal and professionally" (FG2), "This makes me commit myself to learn more" (N1, FG1). This awareness of emotions was intentionally used to enhance reflection and use it in their own benefit. We found that these teachers were using reflection to adequate themselves to a new situation. "I like to be honest with myself, during the school year I had some problems with some activities which are not the best for the children" (N2, FG1).

From what participants and their tutor went through, experience proved that when teachers develop a critical attitude toward themselves and their environment, they can act in a transformative and intentional way, as they might be able to recognize problems and limitations. One teacher stated that she "needed to think and see what was right and what needed to be eliminated..." (N2) and, thus, could come up with appropriate solutions, which contribute to their professional development. Another stated, "I have grown in my professional development because in view of some situations I know how to react" (N2). This reflective process-oriented approach (Richards and Lockhart, 1994) was also very positive for the teachers, as it led to a collaborative process of discussion and reflection, which was very valuable.

Overall, the group interaction and environment also served to generate an enthusiasm and a consistency within the project as they implemented PNIEB in Puebla. The project offered teachers an opportunity to share their experiences regarding their teaching, beliefs, and their own opinion on the project as observed in the following quote: "[The] PNIEB is a program that will benefit many teachers and thousands of children, who will have the opportunity to learn what for many years, was a privilege of private schools" (N2).

Conclusions

As established in the research questions, the aim of this study was to know what teachers were experiencing at the moment of implementing the PNIEB in Puebla; therefore, it was important to hear teachers' voices as well as paying attention to the specific experiences and perspectives. After analyzing and discussing the findings, we could find coincidences and common issues among the voices and echoes. By attempting to answer the research questions, we also found our own interpretation of what was going on, in and outside the classroom. Overall, it was perceived that although PNIEB was considered an asset in the basic education in Mexico, at the time of this study a state of uncertainty and confusion was evident in this group of teachers. However, it was important to know the pros and cons about educational change and the implementation of innovation by listening to the voices of these teachers. We could sense that what was happening with PNIEB was important and relevant for the Public Elementary Education in Puebla.

The PNIEB project revealed a number of issues surrounding educational change that can be relevant to teachers during an initial implementation stage, among these: the amount and duration of support, the amount of ownership that teachers have over the initiative, the meaning the innovation holds for teachers, opportunities for collaboration, the problems and demands teachers are facing.

Something that we consider very important here, however, is that the teachers themselves raised issues. Though we had some assumptions on innovation, it was the participants who made their voices heard. Our hope is that those who read this study could be enlightened and interested by the narratives and accounts of these teachers, and that they too, might be impressed and moved by the emerging issues and insights these teachers have brought to the field of educational change in basic education in Mexico.

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Appendix 1

A Sample of the Narratives and Codification of Topics

~~more~~ **Participant**

- Para mi es una responsabilidad mi
marato de inglés
- Yo espero irradiar gusto y ganas po
- Quiero iniciar la primera hora con
terminar mi última hora con
- Siempre planear clases, pensando
alumnos
- I'm very happy
is a great experience for
- I need in ~~pro~~ Sorry!
- Doy Gracias a Dios por la oport
como maestra y eso me hace con
prepararme más

AMO LO QUE HAGO

I love my work, too.

1) **feelings / emotions**

2) **opportunity / novelty /**

3) **Doubts** about being prep

4) **Commitment** / res. pers. bet

5) **Expect**

6) **awareness of responsibility**

Appendix 2: Agenda for Focus Group

To take place on Saturday, July 9th, 2011; at the

English in Public Elementary Schools

The PNIEB experience for five teachers in Puebla

Greetings,

Explain the purpose of the focus group to participant

I. - Warm up: I will write the word PNIEB on the board, and then I will ask participants to write in a card what comes to their minds. Then I will place the cards on the table and I will ask to read what the other participants wrote and comment on that.

II. - Question: How have you grown as an English Teacher during this year?

I will ask participants to comment individually, and then as a group.

III. - Question: How do you plan to continue with your professional development in the short term?

I will ask participants to comment individually, and then as a group.

IV. - Question: What has been the biggest drawback or disadvantage you have encountered in the classroom and how have you dealt with it.

V. - Question: What would you like to change in the PNIEB in relation to a) The program, b) The support from parents and c) In the classroom?

I will ask participants to comment first individually and then as a group.

VI. - Final Comments,

I will ask participants to comment on any specific aspect of PNIEB they would like to discuss individually and then in group.

Thank participants for their attendance.