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Neoliberalism and ELT Policy in México: Analysis and Implications from a Political Economy Stance

Neoliberalismo y políticas de enseñanza del inglés en México: Análisis e implicaciones desde la política económica

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ABSTRACT
The influence of Neoliberalism on domestic policies has been well documented in the literature. Broadly speaking, there is evidence that many countries have adapted their policies to neoliberal principles which, among other aspects, require governments to promote 'the privatization of public services, the capitalization and commodification of humanity' (Kumar and Hill, 2009p. 1). In terms of language learning and teaching, 'there is little doubt that language is now treated as a skill that, in effect, can be bought and sold in job markets' (Block, 2018 p. 14). Under this scope, Block, Gray and Holborow (2014 p.1) suggest "one blind spot in the interdisciplinarism of applied linguistics has been political economy and in particular a detailed critique of neoliberalism as the ideology driving the practice of economics by governments and international organizations today. This article derives from a broader study which aims at analyzing a) the orientations, enactment and social/institutional practices of the ELT policies in Mexico under the light of neoliberal ideologies. Here, the analysis -and results- focus on the identification of the relationship of neoliberal ideology and Mexico's ELT policy. For the purposes of this delivery, the analysis consisted on the identification of the role that macro international organizations have played in shaping Mexico's domestic education policy over the past three decades. Developing from this, an identification and description of the specific public policies which have emanated from the macro-organizations' suggestions is also part of the analysis. Results confirm that there is a direct relationship between international recommendations and local policies. These results are discussed under the light of the political economy strand of research in linguistics.

Keywords: political economy; English language teaching; neoliberalism; ELT policy.

RESUMEN
La influencia del Neoliberalismo sobre las políticas locales ha sido documentada en la literatura. De manera general, existe evidencia de que múltiples países han adaptado sus políticas a los principios neoliberales que, entre otras consideraciones, requieren que los gobiernos promuevan la privatización de los servicios públicos y la capitalización y mercantilización de la humanidad (Kumar and Hill, 2009p. 1). En relación a la enseñanza y aprendizaje de las lenguas no hay duda de que las lenguas se consideran una habilidad que puede comprarse y venderse en el Mercado (Block, 2018). Desde esta mirada, Block, Gray and Holborow (2014) sugieren que un punto ciego en la interdisciplinariedad de la lingüística aplicada ha sido la economía política. En particular desde una mirada crítica hacia la ideología neoliberal que dirige las prácticas económicas de los gobiernos y las organizaciones internacionales. Este artículo se desprende de un estudio más amplio que analiza la orientación de las políticas lingüistas en México así como la forma en la que se materializan y se manifiestan en prácticas sociales e institucionales. En este artículo, el análisis y resultados se centran en la identificación de la relación entre la ideología neoliberal y la política de la enseñanza del inglés en México. Para esta entrega, el análisis consistió en identificar el rol que las organizaciones internacionales han tenido en la conformación de la política educativa nacional en las tres últimas décadas. Los resultados confirman que existe una relación directa entre las recomendaciones internacionales y la política local. Los resultados se discuten a la luz de la vertiente de investigación en lingüística y economía política.

Palabras clave: economía política, enseñanza del inglés, neoliberalismo, políticas de enseñanza del inglés.

INTRODUCTION

In 1993, Mexico signed the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as the panacea which would drive the country into the first world elite. Through this, Mexico officially opened the doors to neoliberalism regarding the implementation of economic and social policies for the decades to come. One year later, Mexico became an OECD member which, in addition to the commitment to liberalize the economy, accelerated 'the alignment of public education funds with local or regional corporate needs, especially in technical education, providing justification for the growth of two-year technical colleges' (Hampton and Silva, 2008).

Broadly speaking, the implications of becoming a member of the 'global' economy has on national education systems are manifested at various levels. One of the first attempts towards the alignment of education with a global and neoliberal ideology can be found in NAFTA chapters 12 and 16 which implied the need to implement national regulations in matters of professional certification and in accreditation of degrees' in order to establish training-oriented model for labor (Barrow, Didou-Aupetit & Mallea 2003).

Despite the fact that some critics have pointed out that pushing forwards to neoliberalism might not be as appropriate for countries like Mexico, during the last three decades, neoliberal orientations have continued to be steadily promoted. As Hampton and Silva note (2008), 'motivated by the neoliberal impetus of the 1980s, the Mexican government initiated several reforms in its economic and social sectors, which in 1992 reached the education sector' (p. 37).

This article derives from a broader study which aims at analyzing a) the orientations, enactment and social/institutional practices of the ELT policies in Mexico under the light of neoliberal ideologies. Here, the analysis -and results- focus on the identification of the relationship of neoliberal ideology and Mexico's ELT policy. For the purposes of this delivery, the analysis consisted on the identification of the role that macro international organizations have played in shaping Mexico's domestic education policy over the past three decades. Developing from this, an identification and description of the specific public policies which have emanated from the macro-organizations' suggestions is also part of the analysis. Results confirm that there is a direct relationship between international recommendations and local

policies. These results are discussed under the light of the political economy strand of research in linguistics.

BACKGROUND: NEOLIBERALISM, EDUCATION AND LPP

The influence of Neoliberalism, understood as an economical model, on policies has been well documented in the literature. For example, Kumar and Hill (2009) have stated that the neoliberal agenda overtly requires governments to promote 'The privatization of public services, the capitalization and commodification of humanity' (p. 1). This view has been backed up by supranational financial agencies, which exercise pressure on governments for the liberalization and privatization of public services, like housing, education, and water, traditionally provided by governments (Rikowski, 2002). As a result, many countries including Mexico have now opened 'Public services such as health care, childcare, public assistance, education, and transportation … to the rules of the market' (p. 31).

The basic premise, according to the neoliberal stance, is that the participation of the private capital in public services is the necessary condition for a healthy economy. Following this perspective, the neoliberal model has been successful in subordinating education to international market goals (Mulderrig 2002; Levidow 2002). The central argument is that "problems of education are mainly due to poor management, dilapidation of resources, lack of freedom of choice, out-dated curricula, and ill-prepared teachers' (Domenech and Mora-Ninci, 2009, p.151). Under these adverse circumstances, governments have, frequently with no alternative, opted to instrument neoliberal strategies in education such as:

> privatization schemes, massive dismissals of teachers, lowering of real incomes, decentralizing of services, changes in the curriculum towards more accountability, and higher standards in the direction of unreachable student achievements, accompanied by the sordid involvement of banks and private enterprises in the public affairs of education. (ibid)

The role of the OECD and the World Bank (WB) has been decisive to implement the neoliberal agenda in education particularly in developing countries. In Zajda's words, (2015, p.121) "the policies of the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD), UNESCO, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) operate as powerful forces, which, as supranational organization, shape and influence education and policy around the world."

In the case of Latin America, the Washington Consensus (WC) represents one of the earliest applications of the neoliberal agenda after two decades (70's and 80's) of economic crisis in the region. As Castellani points out (2002), Latin American countries were required to implement "guidelines for the adjustment and stabilization of programs as the only solution for tackling the economic problems of the region, noting that its points of view should not be questioned because they were regarded as optimal" (p. 91).

The relevance of the education sector both to train a skilled workforce to satisfy the needs of the market and to open a new 'educational' market did not remain unnoticed. For example, the WC included a section, specifically dedicated to education, arguing that "in order to overcome the current educational crisis the markets must be strong while the state sector should weaken. Therefore, decentralization and privatization of services are promoted as fundamental policy measures for the education sector" (Domenech & Mora-Ninci, 2009, p. 153).

Under this viewpoint, Zajda, (2015, p. 120) has claimed that the major goal of education is to enhance the individual's social and economic prospects which can only be achieved by providing quality education for all. At the core of the 'quality education for all' model is the

ideological neoliberal principle which defines education as '…a good or commodity, and when all consumers can choose, the quality of the goods and services improves' (Holger, p. 41). This reconceptualization of education implies that the 'Marketisation of the field of education can, in this view, be partial – the ownership and delivery are private, but the owners or their customers receive public funds' (Ibid).

Following this logic, the private capital seeks to make a profit out of education, but the ideological and economic reproduction of neoliberalism seems to be a much more elaborated aim to achieve. Thus, education becomes not only a means to get profit out of but an indoctrinating system which pursues 'to make schooling and higher education subordinate to the personality, ideological, and economic requirements of capital, and to make sure schools produce compliant, ideologically indoctrinated, pro capitalist, effective workers' (Kumar & Hill, 2009, p. 21). In the light of this, supranational financial bodies have also urged governments for the instrumentation of education systems which a) respond to the need of a global market workforce and b) train those workers with the basic competences, or skills, necessary to adapt to the demands of the market.

The OECD overtly stressed the necessity for a competence-based model of education which addresses the demands of the 'working world', and it seems to lay the foundations for the neoliberal the concept of human capital. The privatization of education systems has been promoted since the early 90's, first by international economic organizations and accompanied by its member governments. Although this move towards a neoliberal education system started almost three decades ago, the macroeconomic agencies interest in education has not ceased. As Domenech and Mora-Ninci (2009) explained 'in the field of education, specifically, the World Bank (WB) shows a renewed willingness to continue with those reforms initiated during the 1990s, forcing the implementation of a new political agenda in the current decade' (p. 151). Since the 90's, Mexican governments, regardless of political ideology, have attempted to liberalize and privatize the energy, health, and labor sectors, but it was only during the Peña Nieto administration (2012-2018) that a major step forward toward their privatization of education has been taken: the education reform. In Becker's view, individuals are free agents who weigh the cost of the education and training as they seek to make themselves more competitive on the job market. The self is seen as a bundle of skills in which individuals invest in a rational and calculating way (cited in Block & Gray 2016, p. 483).

According to Ager (2001, p.5) language policy refers to 'official planning, carried out by those in political authority, and has clear similarities with any other form of public policy". Broadly speaking, there exist three main models for LPP: Status planning, Acquisition Planning and corpus planning. The first focuses on the uses of language; for example, nationalization and standardization. The second centers on the users of language and the language's formal role in society and the latter copes with processes of standardization of code (Hornberger, 2009).

The impact of neoliberalism on LPP is observable in status, corpus, and acquisition planning. Its effects range from language choice, language loss, to foreign language planning. In the latter case, Ricento (2015) points out that 'English is often promoted by its advocates as a social 'good' with unquestioned instrumental value' (p. 1). This widespread assumption is supported "in many non-English dominant countries that by using English as a medium of instruction, or as a core subject in the curriculum, individuals and societies will reap benefits, be they material, psychological, strategic, symbolic, or all of the above" (Ricento 2015, p. 3)

Overall, it is possible to state that there has been an increase in Primary English Language Teaching programs. Contemporary PELT programs of countries such as China, Malaysia, Taiwan, Chile, Bangladesh, and Vietnam illustrate that the '…discourse of PELT policies is clearly framed in neoliberal terms' (Sayer, 2015a, p. 49). This expansion represents a shift from elite bilingualism to macroacquisition which, from a neoliberal ideological perspective,

enhances the notion that English is a key skill for an individual's social mobility and economic development of a nation (ibid). One of the associated strategies of neoliberal education reforms is what Enever and Moon (cited in Johnstone, 2010) called the 'global revolution' of PELT in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa.

In the case of Latin American countries, several have adopted a neoliberal-driven political economy since the 1990's favoring tax, energy and, of course, education reforms (Walton, 2004; Gwynne, 1997). Thus, it is not surprising the increasing number of Latin American governments which have implemented massive PELT programs as a mechanism, at least ideally, to promote economic growth. For instance, Correa and Gonzalez (2016) explained that "the Colombian government has been promoting the teaching of English from primary school in the hope that this will ensure high levels of English by the end of secondary school, and make Colombian citizens more competitive in the global market" (p. 18).

In Chile, English language teaching also became compulsory in public schools in 1996, but it was until 2004 that the government issued a decree for the creation of a massive ELT program: English Opens Doors (EOD). The rationale which sustains the implementation of the EOD states that higher English levels will contribute to access to better jobs, scholarships, and mobility and, in the context of international commercial agreements, social and economic development (Education act 81, 2004). In 2012, the government expanded the EOD program by implementing the English language instruction from the 1st grade of elementary school instead of the prior 5th grade. The social acceptance for the expansion of ELT was backed up by the 'social aspirations of becoming a developed and bilingual country supported by the view of English as a commodity to access economic development' (Barahona, 2016, p.12).

One more example is the move towards the macro acquisition of English reached Argentina in 2007 as a result of the 2006 Education Act which promoted the expansion of compulsory foreign language learning at the elementary level in public schools (Porto, 2016). In the light of this, Porto (ibid) has pointed out the influence of the human capital education model and Progressive Education in Argentina. Additionally, she argues that the motivation embedded in language education 'particularly in English because of its significance as a language of international communication, is seen as empowering and instrumental to development' (p. 8).

Research about the instauration of ideological orientations of neoliberalism on Language Teaching has been carried out in different parts of the world. Babaii and Sheikhi (2018) selected a corpus of American and British textbooks and analyzed the content of ELT textbooks used by thirty private institutions in Iran. One of the arguments that underpins this study is that 'English teaching materials are regularly revised and developed to respond to the (new) needs and interests of the learners – the customers, in fact' (p. 251). This resonates with the market-oriented neoliberal ideology which encapsulates individuals not as people but as customers. Their findings indicate that 'The [ELT] materials are meant to legitimize and advertise neoliberal, market-led lifestyle' (p. 261).

Similarly, Copley (2018) analyzed the ideological position of ELT textbooks in order to understand '… the ELT industry, its strategic role in the political economy of neoliberal globalization, and the practices that it promotes' (p. 47). His conclusions lead to the claim that ELT has not only become an instrument of neoliberalism but '… in many respects is strategically positioned within it' (p. 59). Both studies conclude that neoliberalism not only has influenced ELT textbook production, due to the growing massification of ELT elsewhere, but also has become an efficient medium through which the individualist and market-oriented lifestyle, distinctive features of neoliberal ideology, becomes legitimized and reproduced.

Exploring how marketization, a characteristic feature of neoliberalism, has influenced teacher preparation programs in England, Block and Gray (2016) concluded that what initial teacher education programs, in the field of ELT, actually promote is 'a workforce capable of

delivering a standardized product into the educational marketplace, capable of using basic tools of the trade such as textbooks – but with little…the reasoning skills' (p. 491). They further explain that 'language teaching itself– …[has] become more routine, uniform and predictable. We thus see Taylorist tendencies in initial teacher preparation programs' (p. 485). A salient implication is that a strategically trained ELT workforce is what the market needs to a) implement massive English language teaching programs, b) consume ELT materials and resources, and c) carry out large-scale teacher and student accreditation strategies elsewhere.

West (2019) analyzed the influence of neoliberalism on white, male, native English speakers (NES) teachers' moral construction within a neoliberal context of education (Korean hagwons). His aim was to 'investigate teachers as they construct moral selves in the neoliberal context of private English language institutes' (p. 1). Drawing from narrative analysis, he discovered that 'Teachers…took moral stances focused largely on an individual, rather than social, sense of justice, while also failing to fully interrogate privilege and the way it influences their moral stances' (p. 39). Teachers' morals seem to be influenced by the commodification, resulting in high marketability, of white NES teachers in Korean private institutions, and other features of individualism inherent to neoliberal ideology.

The private school (eikaiwa) advertising in Japan has been studied by Simpson (2018) from a multimodal analysis approach. Using commodity fetishism as a framework of analysis, he argues that the English is not what advertising sells as a commodity but rather the lesson itself. Thus, it is by the commodification of the lesson that advertising positions the student as the homo oeconomicus. As he explains, 'within the recontextualization of eikaiwa in advertising, one sees neither labor, nor the lesson-commodity, but rather representations of entrepreneurial selves who have successfully produced their own satisfaction' (p. 516). Self-satisfaction and individualism are two common features promoted by neoliberal ideology and, as this study shows, are inherently present in the advertising of English language learning private schools in Japan.

Warriner (2016) analyzed the influence of neoliberal ideology on '… the policies and practices prevalent' in an ESL program for refugees in the United States. The feature which makes this study distinctive from the previously presented is that it explores the impact of neoliberal ideology on shaping refugees' mindset in a native English-speaking country. From a critical perspective, her analysis describes 'how ideologically laden policies and practices limit the identities and trajectories imagined for and ascribed to adult learners of English' (p. 496).

While Warriner's contribution highlights how the policies and practices of an ESL program could promote a misleading notion that learning English is the only way to a successful life, Lee's (2016) study on the English ideologies of Korean early study-abroad students' parents in Gangnam describes how English represents a symbolic characteristic inherent to status and prestige. Using CDA as a framework of analysis, he concluded that 'English was used … for maintaining the social position and vested interests represented by their address: Gangnam' (p. 44). A further interpretation of this study might be that English is used as the utmost needed commodity not to reach economic security but to maintain social status and prestige. He also draws attention to further '… problematising and undermining the neoliberal ideology that assumes English is equally accessible by all in a more fundamental way' (p. 47).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

A current topic in the study of language teaching is the role of political economy to account for the implications of the neoliberal ideology. In the light of this, Block (2018) has identified five areas of sociolinguistic inquiry (1) the English divide; (2) language in the workplace; (3) economics of language; (4) language and tourism; and (5) Critical Discourse Studies ([CDS]; Critical Discourse Analysis [CDA]) which adopt the political economy approach.

Broadly speaking, Block (2018) suggests that the English divide research strand accounts for the role of English as the language of the elite and how the learning of it, or, in other cases, the limited access to it, can lead to issues of inequality and social class stratification. The second strand, 'language in the workplace' examines the economic value of language in job markets. The expansion of the notion of language, formerly studied as a means of communication and marker of identity, to a valued job skill has been termed 'language commodification'.

The research strand focuses on the relationship between economics and language is known as Economics of Language (EL). Grin (2003) explains that EL as a research strand is 'located somewhere in a virtual territory bordered not only by economics, but also by policy analysis, the sociology of language, sociolinguistics, and the education

Furthermore, Block (2018) explains that 'EL researchers have explored links between economic variables such as salary, productivity, costs, sales, profit, and market share (and the more global concept of 'economic efficiency'), and language-related variables' (p. 18). An important aspect to consider is that EL research does not exclusively account for the economic value of English but also how linguistic diversity can have an impact on economic activity, language policy and planning and education policy around the world.

Block (2018), notes that language and tourism represent a focus of research which deals with '…how aspects of local and global economies are linked to language policies and practices in the tourism industry' (p. 20). In addition, he identifies two strands of language and tourism research: cultural commodification and mobile elite tourism. Finally, after explaining the all-encompassing outlook of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), Block (2018) notes that CDS '… has always sought not only to analyze discourse, but also to challenge dominant ideologies and propose changes in power relations in societies' (p. 24).

Another CDS research strand is grounded on Fairclough's 'market metaphor' discourses; in this sense, Park's (2013) and Gunarsson's (2010) studies deal with the 'neoliberal management discourses' in workplaces in Japanese and Sweden companies respectively. By examining the prominence of neoliberal terms in education and society arenas, Holborow (cited in Block 2018) 'shows how these and other constructs become agents of ideology as they help form and shape our ways of understanding the world around us and events in it' (p. 26).

Despite the emerging trend in studies which adopt the previously explained views, there is still a need to continue exploring the implications of the influence of neoliberal policies in language teaching. As Block, Gray and Holborow (2014) suggest "one blind spot in the interdisciplinarism of applied linguistics has been political economy and in particular a detailed critique of neoliberalism as the ideology driving the practice of economics by governments and international organizations today. (p.1)

Following this line of argumentation, the present study aligns with the political economy strand of research. In this particular case, the methodological approach was based on Lo Bianco's (2009) three-dimensional CDA approach to LPP. Briefly, this approach views LPP 'as an ensemble of activities' which include public texts, public discourses and performative action. Lo Bianco describes public texts as 'accommodations (language policies and plans) particular to given settings and times and reflect prevailing political and ideological forces'.

As stated before, this article derives from a broader study which aims at analyzing a) the orientations of the ELT policies in Mexico under the light of neoliberal ideologies; b) the

enactment of neoliberal ideologies in domestic policies; and c) the social/institutional practices that reproduce and legitimize those neoliberal ideologies in the field in México. Here, the analysis -and results- focus on the identification of the relationship of neoliberal ideology and Mexico's ELT policy.

In order to accomplish this, the analysis aimed at identifying evidence to explore how the implementation of contemporary domestic policies in Mexico aligns with the macro-organization guidelines. In this sense, the study explores how Mexico's education reform represents an extension of the neoliberal strategic reforms package, and the way in which contemporary ELT programs have been instrumented as complementary strategies to the neoliberal agenda in Mexico.

For the purposes of this delivery, the analysis consisted on the identification of the role that macro international organizations have played in shaping Mexico's domestic education policy over the past three decades. Developing from this, an identification and description of the specific public policies which have emanated from the macro-organizations' suggestions is also part of the analysis.

The specific international documents used for analysis included the following: Invitation to Mexico to accede to the convention on the organization for economic co-operation and development (1994); Improving schools' strategies for action in Mexico executive summary (2010); OECD Education policy outlook: Mexico (2013); Policy priorities to upgrade the skills and knowledge of Mexicans for greater productivity and innovation (2015); OECD skills strategy diagnostic report: Mexico (2017); Towards a stronger and more inclusive Mexico an assessment of recent policy reforms (2017); OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education: MEXICO (2012); and World Bank Country Partnership strategy for the United Mexican States (2013).

In regards to the local documents, the analysis included: the National development programs 2001-2006; 2007-2012; 2013-2018; the National Education Plans 2001-2006; 2007-2012; 2013-2018; the Modelo educativo para la educación obligatoria (2017); the document called, Hacia una Nueva Escuela Mexicana (2019); the ELT secondary program (2006); the ELT reform (2006); the National English Language Program (NEPBE) Curricular Foundations (2009); the NEPBE diagnosis (2015); the National English Program decree (2015); and the National English Strategy (2017).

Although the analysis included different levels and a broad range of documents, it is important to note that the present article is narrow in focus. Therefore, only the most salient instances that respond to the purposes are presented in the results section.

RESULTS

The analysis of the OECD influence on Mexico's education reform and accompanying strategies allows the identification of connection between education and labor market interests over the past years. As can be observed in the following excerpt, in 2010, the OECD addressed the urgent need to promote an education reform and ascribed it as an opportunity in economic and social terms:

> Education reform is too important to the future of Mexico to be left to educators alone. The OECD Steering Group therefore urges the creation of a broader "guiding coalition" of top political, corporate, university and civil society leaders that will step forward and take responsibility for championing these reforms in the public arena, advocating for adequate and equitable funding, and holding key education stakeholders accountable for results. Failure to invest in the comprehensive reforms proposed here in teacher policy and school leadership would, in the long run, be much more costly to Mexico's future than the investments recommended now. (OECD, 2010, p. 12)

The orientations of the OECD regarding education reform supported the idea that it was important to improve Mexicans' skills in order to increase productivity and access the labor market. As can be seen, in the following quote, it is noticeable that OECD (2015) conceived the education reform as the mechanism to create a labor market force which, in theory, would increase Mexico's productivity.

> Fully unleashing the country's potential and lifting productivity also in the sectors that are lagging behind requires a comprehensive program to improve the skills of all Mexicans, both at school and in the labor market. To this end, the objective of education reform to increase the quality and relevance of education is key, as is motivating students to pursue education.

Domestic policies in México made resonance with those recommendations. One of example of this can be found in the 2001-2006 NDP which explicitly announced an educational reform to foster teacher accountability:

> This educational reform strategy is based on the principle that with greater initiative and authority in decision making, and with greater participation of civil society in educational progress, accountability of schools, teachers and institutions will become a common practice and a mechanism to guarantee quality and educational impact, while at the same time constituting a further step in the overall emancipation of Mexico and Mexicans.

On the other hand, intentions to orient the education aims towards training individuals to be able to incorporate into the labor market was included in the 2001-2006 NDP. Similarly, the 2007-2012 NDP established the need to promote a link between middle and higher education goals and the productive system, a subtle way to refer to the labor market:

> Objective 5: To offer quality educational services to train people with a high sense of social responsibility and participate productively and competitively in the labor market (NDP, 2001-2006).

> There are still considerable lags in the national education system [one of them] is to overcome the disconnection between secondary and higher education and the productive system (NDP, 2007-2012).

The 2013-2018 NDP shows that the recommendations made by the OECD regarding teacher accountability were taken into consideration for the education reform, which had recently been passed:

> The education reform is a determined step in developing the human potential of Mexicans with quality education through three axes of fundamental action. First, it is expected that students will be educated by the best teachers. With the New Teaching Professional Service, merit is the only way to enter and ascend the education system of the country (NDP, 2013-2018).

In addition to that, a reaffirmation that this education reform was conceived as the instrument to achieve quality of education by connecting higher education with the labor market demands is evident in the following passage:

> This concern is contained in the spirit of the education reform and is an integral part of the action plan of a Mexico with Quality Education. This action plan also responds to the demand of this same group of participants, in relation to the need to link universities and industry, as well as the importance of achieving greater investment in Science, Technology and Innovation (NDP, 2013-2018).

Some of the concrete actions promoted by the government to articulate education and labor market were established in the Programa Sectorial de Educación 2013- 2018:

a) Strengthen education-enterprise cooperation to promote updating curriculums and programs, employability of young people and innovation.
b) Periodically carry out studies, diagnoses, and prospects of the labor market to guide the educational offer.

Along with the promulgation of the education reform, the National Institute for the Evaluation of Education (INEE) was created as a mechanism to guarantee quality of education; mainly by promoting teacher evaluation through accreditations. To this regard, the NDP 2013-2018 sated the following:

> To this end, INEE was given full autonomy and an evaluation system was created. This will result in greater management autonomy for schools. The evaluation will be an instrument of the utmost importance to guide the task of continuous improvement. It is undeniable that teaching is the most important piece for the educational process. Only with teachers can we carry out the task of improving public education.

It is worth mentioning that by 2017, once the reform package had already been passed and implemented in Mexico, the OECD overtly recognized its participation in the completion of such a task. Such participation included guidance and so-called recommendations but also concrete support for the changes to take place at the legislative and institutional levels. In addition to that, the OECD acknowledged that such reform fully responded to the OECD recommendations:

> The OECD has accompanied and supported the Mexican government in the design, development, and implementation of many of these reforms. Since 2013, more than 40 publications on Mexico have been launched, analyzing the country's challenges, and proposing policies to address them. In many cases, these analyses were complemented by hands-on support to implement legislative and institutional changes and make reform happen (OECD, 2017).
>
> Mexico's education reform is well-aligned with previous OECD policy recommendations. They include putting students and schools at the center of the education system, implementing a new curriculum and raising the quality of the teaching profession. (OECD, 2017)

The alignment of the domestic policies with the OECD orientations can be seen in the following extracts in which the OECD acknowledges that Mexican policies have considered teachers' accountability, school autonomy, and evaluation:

> Considerable efforts have been made recently to improve the quality of education and provide all students with stronger education foundations for further education in life. Key reforms are now being implemented to improve the equity and quality of the system in areas such as teacher quality and school leadership as well as to strengthen school autonomy, resources and evaluation. Mexico needs to continue its efforts to raise the quality of compulsory education and also make it more relevant to students' needs by strengthening the link with the labor market.

As presented before, human capital development is considered a key aspect from the neoliberal viewpoint. In terms of language as a human capital, the analysis of second language learning policies show second language proficiency is positioned as an activity that enhances productivity and economic growth. One key document that shows this economy-oriented

perspective is the OECD's *Languages in a global world: learning for better cultural understanding.* In this document, the OECD states that languages have become an added value of people's human capital.

> Since globalization is the free movement of people, products, money and ideas, the value of languages to individuals and to society has probably changed with such flows. Therefore, the language assets of a country as well as the language components of human capital of individuals could provide comparative advantage in a globalizing world.

Following the previous argumentation, the OECD explains that globalization of economy has caused that second language proficiency is valued as an economic asset or human capital given the economic benefits for those who master one or more foreign languages:

> If learning a language responds, among other things, to a rational decision defined by cost-benefit calculations, the returns from language acquisition would have to compensate for the costs, for this decision to be realized. Thus, from an economic perspective, language is a skill that must be treated as human capital due to the fact that: a) it is non-tangible, "embedded capital", non-transferrable b) it has to be created by sacrificing resources – time and financial resources, and c) its manifestation through labor market participation has measurable returns and can also make consumption itself more productive.

Following these ideas, governments are encouraged to consider the allocation of funds in the education system to promote second language learning as a human capital skill with direct benefits in labor market productivity and the economy in general. However, not all the languages are given the same value. To this respect the OECD emphasizes that the language to be learnt must be English:

> Labor market demands with regard to linguistic skills have changed appreciably in recent decades, and more especially over the last few years. Outside the English-speaking countries, anybody recruited at or above "a certain level" is now expected to be able to express himself/herself at least in English (assuming it is not his/her mother tongue) or in Globish, and even in one or more other languages – this is often what "makes the difference" between two candidates for the same post, whose respective qualifications are otherwise judged to be equivalent. In other words, the time (up until the 1970-80s) when mastering a non-native language (mainly English) was considered to be a "plus" belongs to the past and has given way to a situation in which not mastering English is seen as a "minus" – a real social and economic shortcoming, in fact – whether or not English is really needed for the job in question.

In alignment with the perspectives stated by the OECD, the gradual but steady construction of English as the privileged foreign language in Mexican public education can be found in the 2001-2006, and 2007-2012 NEPs. Although both NEPs timidly mention English once in each document, there is a direct inclination towards ELT as they both use the same expression "mainly English" when encouraging foreign language learning in higher education:

- Mastery of foreign languages, mainly English.
- Encourage the teaching of at least one second language (mainly English) as part of the curriculum and encourage its inclusion as a requirement for egress from higher education.

More specifically, in 2009 the Ministry of Public Education (SEP) launched the National English Program for Basic Education (NEPBE). The significance of NEPBE is that, for the first time, public preschool and primary students would receive English language instruction. Few years later, in December 2015, by presidential decree NEPBE was administratively

transformed into the National English Program (PRONI). In a broader perspective, NEP actions seem to be a confirmation of international organizations (i.e., OECD reviews of evaluation and assessment in education: Mexico 2012) recommendations regarding education: development of a skill-oriented curriculum and an increasing teacher and students' accreditation strategy. This program was also sheltered by the education reform approved a couple of years before:

> In the field of English, within education reform, the Mexican government is committed to raising the standards of English language teaching throughout the country, recognizing the benefits of learning English for its citizens and society. In the education system, this commitment is realized through the National English Program (PRONI), which has mobilized a large number of actions to improve the teaching of English, curriculum, educational materials, and evaluation.

Furthermore, the relationship between the ELT policy actions and the need to respond to the need to form human capital to respond to the global needs is overtly discussed in the PRONI. Similarly, this program made explicit reference to the relationship between English and the labor market as the following extract shows:

> PRONI addresses what is envisaged in the PND in its Cross-Cutting Approach (Mexico with Quality Education), Strategy I "Democratizing Productivity", which establishes as one of its lines of action to promote the acquisition of basic capacities, including the management of other languages, to enter a globally competitive labor market. (Rules of Operation of the National English Program for fiscal year 2017, p.5).

Another action taken to promote ELT in Mexico was the National English Strategy (NES) which was officially announced by SEP in 2017.The NES incorporated a strong ELT component for Escuelas Normales (teacher training schools for public education) and was planned to undertake three specific actions: 1) curriculum design and articulation across levels, 2) students' and teachers' language accreditation, and 3) teacher training in ELT. This strategy validates the idea that public investment in English is desirable if human capital development, which will consequently enhance productivity, is to be achieved:

> The mastery of a foreign language such as English represents an investment in human and social capital. The resources allocated by the State to finance public education in the inclusion of the teaching of a foreign language in the national plan and programs and their effective implementation in the classroom, add value for the training of students. Authors such as Jiménez point out that a language, in this case English, in addition to being a good or a resource, can be considered as a productive factor that can stimulate growth and therefore be a source of social capital.

CONCLUSIONS

As presented before, the evidence shows a clear connection between international neoliberal oriented policies and domestic policies in México. These results are concomitant with similar studies presented here. To this respect, as neoliberalism is a hegemonic model in the Western hemisphere which has influenced nations' economies, education systems, and structures of society in favor of its ideological-driven interests, studying language and neoliberal ideology is necessary (Block, Gray and Holborow 2014).

The fact that neoliberalism has its roots in economic consensus and interests, mostly supported by the United States and the United Kingdom, has resulted in the use of English as de facto language of this model. As a result, for the last three decades English language teaching and learning has become and consolidated as a very profitable business for many transnational companies (Phillipson, 1992).

Nevertheless, overemphasizing that an English as a foreign language policy is the door to social mobility, access to better education and, therefore, better jobs, and a vehicle for global communication, overshadows the economic and ideological orientations which underpin such policy. As Codó (2018) explains "little attention has traditionally been paid in the field of LPP to issues of political economy, thus often producing naïve accounts of the role of language in relation to the promotion of social justice" (p.468)

Following this premise, a comprehensive analysis of neoliberal ideology and language policy and planning under the light of political economy may shed light on how such policies might impact on labor market, teacher evaluation and accountability. As presented before, although the local policies align with the international orientations, there is not enough evidence that there is a straightforward relationship between English Language Learning and welfare.

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