

RESEARCH ON FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING IN MEXICO: A DECADE OF WORK

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Abstract

In this presentation, the authors discuss the methodological design and main results of a national study, coordinated by the first author, aimed to generate a state of the art of research in the field of foreign language teaching and learning conducted in Mexico from 2012 to 2021. The study's objective was to collect, document, and analyze research reports generated on this topic. The study was carried out by 148 researchers from 34 universities who collected, concentrated, and analyzed data from 28 states, which represent 88% of the total number of states in the country. Data was collected through interviews with university authorities and academics, visits to institutions and libraries, and a review of institutional websites and documents of a sample of higher education Mexican institutions from the 28 states.

Some of the main issues to be discussed in the results section are the type of institutions where research projects were conducted; the language, subjects, and topics studied; the research objectives pursued in the studies; the methodology and instruments employed for the collection and analysis of data; and the main findings reported in the studies.

The presentation closes with an analysis of the main characteristics, contexts, agents, and conditions of the research projects conducted in the field of foreign language teaching in Mexico and with some recommendations for the improvement of the area.

Keywords: *State of the art, research, foreign languages teaching (FLT).*

1. Introduction

The production generated in terms of research on foreign languages teaching (FLT) in Mexico has been the subject of several studies. Among the main ones are those by McLean (1978); Da Silva and Gilbon (1993); Gilbon and Gomez (1996); Chasán, Rall, and Valdez (1997); Brambila Rojo et al., (2007); Ramírez Romero (2007, 2010, 2013); and Ignatieva et al., (2016). The present paper seeks to give continuity to these efforts through the documentation and analysis of the academic production of the second decade of the 21st century, seeking to generate a state of the art of research in the field of foreign language teaching conducted in Mexico from 2012 to 2021.

2. Method

The approach that we followed was a systematic review of research that aimed to obtain a comprehensive view or understanding of a field of study at a particular point or moment of its development, based on the recommendations from the Mexican Council of Education Research.

For that purpose, we invited academics from around the country that held recognition in the field of foreign language teaching to collect, concentrate, and analyze research production on FLT from their home states. As a result, 148 researchers, from 28 states (which represented 88% of the total number of states in the country), from 34 higher education institutions, accepted the invitation and conducted interviews with university authorities and academics of their home states, visited their institutions and libraries, and reviewed institutional websites and documents.

The main requirements to select a document or product were that the studies in which the products were based should have been conducted in Mexico from 2012 to 2021 on any topic related to foreign language teaching or learning. In addition, the products had to have been published or presented as thesis or dissertations.

Data concentration and analysis were carried out in two levels. For the first one, each group of participating researchers collected and analyzed data from their own home states. For the second one, data was compared and analyzed at a national level. In both levels, basic descriptive statistics and content analysis techniques were used.

3. Findings & discussion

This section will be organized in four subsections, namely: characteristics of the production, characteristics of the authors, characteristics of the context,

3.1. Characteristics of the production

A total of 869 research-related products were selected. Broadly speaking, the products addressed a wide variety of topics. Among the topics most studied were those related to beliefs, expectations and perceptions of teachers and students; skills and knowledge of teachers and students; teaching materials, including ICT; and, emotions, attitudes, motivations and identity of teachers and students. The vast majority of the documents (more than 80%) focused on studying the English language; most of them were interested primarily on higher education (67%) and the study of students (48%) and teachers (37%) from urban areas (92%). Although a high percentage of the papers (89%) included some type of theoretical foundation, theoretical frameworks presented different levels of complexity, depth, and rigor; 56% of the studies were qualitative and 22% used mixed approaches (22%); the most commonly used data collection instruments were questionnaires (40%), interviews (20%), or both (34%); and, a large number of studies showed insufficient knowledge of the characteristics, nature and traditions of research paradigms.

Compared with the production of the previous decade, even though the selection criteria were more demanding in the current one, the number of selected products was greater than before. The designs and theoretical approaches of some documents evidenced a higher level of maturity and quality. Several studies were conducted collaboratively by researchers from various institutions, states, or countries; involved individual or joint participation of undergraduate or graduate students; and used inter or multidisciplinary frameworks. The previous quantitative advances also suggest an improvement in the production quality. Some thematic lines considered emerging in the previous decade, advanced in their consolidation, new ones emerged, and it was found a slight increase in the percentage of studies focused on educational levels other than higher education.

However, some challenges and pending issues were also detected, among which stand out in the theoretical-conceptual field the need to stop depending from the epistemology of Eurocentric influence and start developing our own theoretical frameworks. In the methodological field, one of the challenges is to design more sophisticated and well-founded strategies independent of the hegemonic ones and capable of capturing the complexity and specificity of our subjects and contexts. Finally, in the social sphere, some challenges and pending issues are the implementation of projects that seek to study issues that are hardly or not at all attended to by the research agenda promoted or sponsored by dominant political, economic, or ideological pressure groups.

3.2. Characteristics of the authors

Regarding the traits or characteristics of the authors who publish in the field, it was found that most of them are attached to a Mexican higher education institution; work collaboratively with other colleagues, particularly in small teams; they have graduate degrees, especially in the area of languages, education or applied linguistics; they have obtained their degrees in national institutions, especially public ones. In addition, few have received any type of funding to do research or belong to an academic body or to a network of researchers in the field, and only a small percentage of them are in the National System of Researchers or are the authors or co-authors of ten or more papers. Finally, higher productivity seems to be associated with factors related to the institutional contexts where the authors work or study and to factors associated with the own researchers.

3.3. Characteristics of the context

When comparing the current state of the field with that of a decade ago, we find some positive changes related to the context, especially in relation to a greater plurality in the areas of the country where the institutions of those who carry out research in the field are located and with their size; a higher number of papers and research-oriented events; and a moderate growth in the field in terms of specialized publications related to FLT. Some problems persist, however, among which are the low growth of graduate programs, organizations and associations; the lack of support for teachers interested in doing research; and the little importance granted to research.

3.4. Pending agenda

As expected, there are still many pending issues in the field of FLT research, which can be clustered into three groups: what we still need to know, what we still need to do, and what we still need to overcome. Regarding the former, the agenda of unknown issues is quite extensive, however, some of the priority ones are the characteristics, ways of learning, problems and conditions of Mexican students, especially those who live in rural or marginalized areas. Knowing these issues would make possible to develop more consistent teaching-learning strategies instead of continuing to import methodologies and materials that are unsuitable for our schools from dominant countries. As for the second one, although some progress has been made, there is still a long way to go, and although we are aware that the list is quite long, we could summarize it in a single sentence: we need to conduct more and better research. Regarding the main problems and obstacles that would have to be overcome, the following stand out: the working conditions of those who do or intend to do research in the field and the weak institutional support they receive; the belief that research and theory are unimportant and irrelevant to practice; the existing misconception that privileges the foreigner or "native speaker" and their productions over what is done in the country or by Mexican authors; the deficient theoretical knowledge and research methodology training of language teachers; the favoring of research topics relevant to hegemonic countries; the lack of spaces to publish and present research papers; and insufficient knowledge and use of the results of studies carried out in Mexico.

4. Conclusions

By way of closing, we want to emphasize that in this paper we have tried to document, from a critical perspective, what has been done in the field of research on FLT in Mexico in order to contribute to overcome the pending issues detected and to collaborate to some extent to ensure that we do more and better research. However, it is necessary to recognize that there are still many unfinished issues, especially those related to what we still need to know, what we still need to do and what we still need to overcome. Let's hope we don't have to wait another decade for the necessary changes to take place.

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