

# Voices from Mexico: How American Teachers can Meet the Needs of Mexican Immigrant Students

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**Abstract** In this study 18 Mexican teachers of English as a foreign language in Guanajuato, Mexico were asked for their professional opinion about the teaching of English to Mexican immigrant students in the U.S. Teachers responded to a questionnaire that asked about attitudes toward the U.S. educational system, ways to support Mexican immigrant students, advice for American teachers, and Mexican students' motivation for learning English. Respondents averaged 4 years of teaching English at various levels ranging from elementary to university. Half of the teachers had received some K-12 education in the U.S. Respondents held generally positive views regarding the U.S. educational system, but felt American teachers could do a better job in teaching Mexican immigrant students. They offered numerous linguistic and culturally responsive suggestions for improving upon the learning of English and the academic performance of immigrant students.

**Keywords** Immigrant students · Teacher education · English language learning

## Introduction

Every year thousands of families unable to cope with economic hardships in Mexico emigrate to the U.S. to seek a better future. Children of these economically disadvantaged migrants will often enter schools in the U.S. that are not prepared to meet their educational needs. Instructional programs designed to support the

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educational needs of immigrant students depend upon the effectiveness of the teachers who implement them. Teachers' effectiveness to a large extent depends upon how they view their students and how they see themselves as agents of change (Olsen 1997; Valdes 1998; Valenzuela 1999). In order to better serve this population, educators must learn about prior social, economic, and educational conditions that these children experienced in Mexico. Teachers need to learn what immigrant students know, what they want to learn, and how they best learn. Teachers who value what students know and tap into that background knowledge in order to enhance new learning enable their students to reach higher levels of academic achievement (Valdes 1998).

The schooling experiences of Mexican immigrant students are variously described from different disciplinary perspectives. Sociologists Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) view schools as systems that sort students into a prescribed social hierarchy in which individuals with existing social advantages continue to maintain those advantages, and conversely immigrant students entering school with limited social capital gain little social advantage as they leave schools in part because many will be forced out prior to graduation. Gonzalez (1997) focuses on a historical and binational perspective in which educational experiences of Mexicans in the U.S. are viewed as a by-product of a U.S. policy that views Mexican immigrants as resources that can be exploited for the benefit of the U.S. economic system. Gonzalez explains that the U.S. needs Mexican labor since it is inexpensive and Mexicans willingly do jobs usually rejected by American citizens. Gonzalez further notes that the transplantation of Mexican labor also produces some negative consequences for the U.S., particularly in "educating" the children of Mexican laborers. Since this group is viewed as inferior (i.e., deficit model), the education of Mexican children is a challenge that schools have to confront, but it is not clear how much pressure is exerted on schools to actually enable immigrant students to achieve academically. According to Ricento (2003) these differing perspectives are important to present since Americans still have a "deep value" that demands that all immigrants assimilate into the melting pot of White American culture and the English language.

In accordance with Ricento's hypothesis, Valenzuela (1999) argues that the American educational system views Mexican immigrant students' cultural norms as inferior and sees it as the responsibility of schools to replace these norms with more "acceptable" ones. Furthermore, Valenzuela notes that schools either overtly or covertly enforce policies directed at eliminating non English language use among language minority students. This subtractive schooling is further enabled when school personnel view immigrant students and their parents as not caring about education and social mobility and use this to justify their policies.

In turn many Latino students do not perceive their teachers as caring individuals or their schools as supportive institutions to which they feel a sense of belonging. In an examination of Houston's public schools, Valenzuela (1999) found that Latino students expressed beliefs that their teachers did not care about them. Students noted that teachers view them and their families as unmotivated and not valuing education. Students further emphasized that their schools did not have high expectations for them and what they studied in school was uninspiring. The curriculum offered to Latino students is described as highly aligned with high stake

testing and often emphasizing rote and below grade level English language instruction.

Padilla (2003) argues that race and ethnicity play a significant role in high school graduation rates. He argues that it is not being Mexican that leads to doing poorly in schools; rather, it is the educational system that provides less than adequate schooling experiences for Mexican students. He notes that this inequality is historically rooted in economic self-interest as well as racism. Importantly, Padilla also blames the Mexican educational system for creating an undereducated class which has limited opportunities to advance socially and economically in either Mexico or the United States. Thus, the Mexican undereducated class is therefore a commodity that serves the interests of elites in both countries.

Arce et al. (2005) argue that due to hegemonic structures of the U.S. society as well as xenophobia, Latinos are under constant and systematic attack in ways that hinder the advancement of many. As proof for their argument they show how bilingual programs designed to improve the educational achievement of immigrant children were dismantled by Proposition 227 in California and similar legislation in other states which enforced English only instruction for the majority of students who could be better served by bilingual instruction. Arce et al. also contend that teacher education programs now put less emphasis on coursework that promotes cultural and linguistic diversity among K-12 students; and new teachers receive less preparation in pedagogical strategies for teaching English language learners.

Fortunately, many educators reject the model as they gain clarity in their own philosophy as teachers committed to social justice and equity (Ladson-Billings 2004). These teachers work to create educational programs that value the cultures and languages of their students. These educators believe that making space for students' experiences and cultural and linguistic diversity allows for English language learning and instruction to gain legitimacy in both the classroom and in the lives of immigrant students.

## **Effective Teachers**

Trueba and Bartolome (2000) note that when teachers work with culturally and linguistically diverse students they must create an environment in which students feel fully accepted and welcomed. Trueba and Bartolome maintain that teachers must understand their personal beliefs and from where they stem. These authors discuss the notion of ideological clarity and note that often times teachers' childhood experiences are significantly different from their immigrant students' experiences. Hence, their beliefs regarding culturally as well as socio-economically diverse populations are significantly influenced by their own upbringing. Freire (1970) maintains that teachers' views are linked to what they teach and how they teach. Valdes' (1996) research shows that teachers' lack of understanding of immigrant students contributes to these students' limited educational success in U.S. schools.

Garcia (1997) describes successful White teachers of limited-English proficient students and explains that in addition to providing cultural and linguistic validation these teachers truly believe that learning Spanish and learning about Latino culture is

mutually beneficial to them as well as to their Latino students. These teachers believe that being bilingual and bicultural enriches the U.S. society. Most importantly, providing cultural and linguistic validation is an on-going process that takes place in these teachers' classrooms on a daily basis. Furthermore, they promote student engagement, monitor student progress and provide regular feedback on students' performance. As a result, such actions contributed to the establishment of trust among students for their teachers and increased student achievement.

## **This Study**

One way of creating positive opportunities for Mexican immigrant students is to understand their life experiences and their realities. Teachers who learn about how their students live, what their aspirations are, and how they are motivated to achieve in school are embracing sound pedagogical strategies that yield high outcomes, both academically and socially as a bond of caring and respect is forged. Establishing a dialogue with Mexican teachers is one avenue for enriching our view of the strengths and life experiences that Mexican students bring when they enter an American school.

Little research exists on how educators from other countries can be a resource for American teachers responsible for educating immigrant students with pedagogically sound teaching practices. This study sought to remedy this short-coming. Since the largest group of immigrant students in the United States is from Mexico, learning from Mexican teachers was viewed as an important first step. In addition, Mexican immigrant students sustain close and persistent links over time and into several generations with co-nationals on both sides of the border and may have had schooling experiences in Mexico as well. Thus, Mexican teachers' insights may be particularly useful as they are persons who can inform on these experiences and who may also be teaching children who have returned to Mexico.

Participants in this study were not only professional language educators (they teach English at various levels), but some had extensive experiences themselves as English language learners attending American schools. Hence, the goal of this study was to harness the insights of Mexican educators gleaned from their personal experiences as English learners and now as English language teachers in Mexico. Respondents reflected on their experiences as second language learners and where applicable as immigrant students in the U.S. The Mexican teachers were asked to use their expertise as language educators to describe what worked or did not work in their own English learning experience. This paper will present the voices of Mexican teachers, and it is hoped that it will be used as a catalyst to further incorporate the funds of knowledge of teachers from immigrant sending countries.

## **Methods**

Data collection was conducted at a public university in Guanajuato, Mexico. Guanajuato is a major exporter of workers to the United States and immigration has

had profound social and economic impact on many communities in this state. All of the respondents were completing their B.A. program in teaching English as a foreign language at a university known for providing quality language programs. The respondents were recommended for inclusion in this study by Mexican faculty members. Respondents were contacted individually and were informed of the study and their participation was requested. From those who agreed to participate a subgroup was selected based on the criteria that they were highly proficient in English as well as currently teaching English to Mexican students attending schools across the state of Guanajuato.

### Instruments

A questionnaire was designed based on the findings of a pilot study conducted by the first author (Borjian 2008, Cultural understanding and the teaching of English: Lessons learned from Mexican teachers, unpublished) who focused on Mexican teachers' recommendations for teachers in the United States who are working with Mexican immigrant students. The questionnaire consisted of five sections. In particular, respondents were asked to write about: attitudes toward the U.S. educational system, American teachers' effectiveness in supporting immigrant students, advice for U.S. teachers, and Mexican students' motivations for learning English. Furthermore, respondents were asked to rate their own oral English language proficiency in comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. The Stanford Foreign Language Oral Skills Evaluation Matrix (FLOSEM) was used for the self-ratings (Padilla et al. 1994). In addition to open-ended questions, a number of items required respondents to rate each item on a four point Likert-type scale that ranged from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". After completing the questionnaire six respondents were subsequently asked to participate in an interview in order to provide more in depth and rich context to issues related to the study.

### Respondents

Eighteen English language teachers in Mexico were invited to discuss their opinions on how American teachers can better support the educational development of Mexican immigrant students. Respondents had an average of 4 years of teaching experience and were teaching at various schools and universities in the state of Guanajuato. Thirteen out of 18 (72%) respondents were female and respondents' average age was 30 with a range from 19 to 50 years old. Respondents averaged 11 years of English language study and the overwhelming majority (89%) had begun their acquisition of English as children or adolescents (average age = 14). Ten out of 18 noted that they had visited or lived in the United States. However, the majority of respondents expressed that they had learned English in Mexico. Others noted that they had opportunities to learn English in other countries including the U.S., Germany, and Norway. Respondents in this study taught English in various settings from a bilingual kindergarten classroom to university level courses. Twenty eight percent taught at the elementary school level. One third of the respondents were high school teachers and one third taught at various universities. One

respondent was a junior high school English teacher. The majority of teachers taught in urban schools, and one teacher served the children of a rural community. Teachers in this study averaged 6 h per week of English language instruction yet some taught English as much as 15 h per week.

Ten respondents had personal experiences attending schools in the United States and some had spent their adolescence and young adult years attending schools in the United States. One teacher was born in the U.S. and had attended elementary school and junior high school in California. She moved to Mexico at the age of 15 to finish high school. Importantly, none of the teachers had received their college education in the United States. They had all permanently returned to Mexico and had been living there for a number of years. All of the respondents were highly proficient in English as they responded to the questionnaire in English and all of the subsequent interviews and discussions were conducted in English. Many of the respondents had worked in various professions, but had realized that their proficiency in English was a highly valuable asset and therefore had decided to pursue teaching English as a career.

Using the Stanford FLOSEM, respondents self-rated their oral skills in English. A rating of 1 indicates low proficiency and 6 is native-like proficiency. Teachers in this study averaged 5.0 on comprehension, indicating that they understand nearly everything spoken in English at a normal speed with the need for some occasional repetition. Respondents' average rating in fluency was 4.5 which indicates that they were able to express themselves well with only some difficulty with less common words and expressions. Teachers noted that they possess a broad knowledge of vocabulary so that they are able to understand and participate in conversations which include abstract ideas. Their average rating was 4.5 for vocabulary. Respondents gave the lowest average rating to pronunciation (4.2) suggesting that although their speech is always intelligible they have a distinct accent when using some words. Teachers in this study also expressed that they generally exhibit a good command of the English grammar (average rating was 4.6) with some occasional errors.

## Results

Teachers were asked why students in Mexico study English. All respondents provided one or more reasons, and these were categorized into five main groups: academic requirement, better jobs, intrinsic motivation, parents' desire, and free education. By far, the most frequent response was academic requirement. Ten teachers noted that English was required by their institution regardless of whether it was an elementary school or a university. Indeed 78% responded affirmatively when asked whether English language teaching was required at their school. The second most popular response given by six teachers was that students felt that their employment opportunities would be enhanced if they could speak English. These teachers and their students are expressing what has become a reality in Mexico; that is, in a global economy better job opportunities are tied to knowing English. In many respects this is related to the first reason, educational program at all levels in

Mexico are beginning to require English. The recognition of the importance of English is motivating many younger Mexicans to learn English. “Intrinsic motivation” and “parents” were the next most popular categories with each being reported by four teachers. Teachers explained that some of their students are interested in traveling to English-speaking countries or are motivated to learn about cultural issues. In the “parents” category it was explained that parents are encouraging their children to learn English. Two teachers noted that they are teaching at bilingual schools and parents are highly supportive of these programs.

An important component of this study was to learn Mexican teachers’ views on how teachers in the United States can help their Mexican immigrant students become proficient in English in order to succeed academically. Respondents were asked to provide written comments to this question. Their responses were then compiled and categorized. The main categories that arose from this question were: Multicultural understanding, good learning environment, and knowledge of languages.

### Multicultural Understanding

Cultural understanding was viewed as an important factor in helping students succeed. Seven teachers emphasized that American teachers should incorporate cultural differences when teaching Mexican immigrant students. For example, one teacher noted: “...Make students learn English through their culture so they do not resist the language [English]”. Another teacher wrote: “...Most of the Mexican immigrant families are very proud of their Mexican heritage, so making connections between English and Spanish might be meaningful to them”. One teacher expressed that teachers are important in reducing societal stress on students and further noted: “...Teachers can let students bring their own culture into classrooms and little by little adapting to the new context...” Other teachers expressed the importance of having a balance between language and culture and noted that students need to be connected to their cultural backgrounds. One teacher expressed the idea in this way “...Another point could be to involve the English learning in their Mexican, cultural context, it will help them [students] to be identified with the new language they are using and at the same time bring to class something they would like to share with their classmates about their country”. Lastly, one teacher expressed the importance of cultural heritage as it is confronted with issues of immigration and economic mobility by noting: “they [teachers] have to teach immigrants English as a tool in order to grow and survive in the U.S. without forgetting their origins”.

### Good Learning Environment

Almost equally important as “culture” was the category of “good learning environment” coined by the Mexican teachers to describe a relationship-based approach to teaching and learning. The Mexican teachers felt that U.S. teachers’ success with Mexican immigrant students depended upon the learning environment that they create for their students. Additionally, respondents emphasized that teachers need to maintain a good relationship with their students by reinforcing their competence as learners and creating a safe classroom learning environment. One

teacher represents this group of respondents by noting: "...I think when a teacher shows interest to his students, when there is a good relationship between the teacher and students the learning results will be effective as well..." Mexican educators also encouraged their American counterparts to create active language classrooms in which "real life" and "real context" is used to facilitate learning.

### Knowledge of Languages

Another group of teachers maintained that the best way to support Mexican immigrant students is for teachers to have a thorough linguistic knowledge of the structure and rules of both English and Spanish. One teacher summarized this point with: "...the grammar rules may interfere in their [students'] language learning and the teacher should be aware that the students may be applying their rules of [Spanish] grammar into English". Teachers of English language learners need to provide students with real life and multiple opportunities to practice the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. One teacher in this group expressed the opinion that U.S. teachers' ability to help immigrant students is limited because many do not speak Spanish and therefore are not well informed about the linguistic differences between English and Spanish that create particular types of difficulty as Spanish speakers acquire English.

Teachers focusing on issues of language teaching maintained that a comprehensive approach to teaching English was necessary in order for Mexican immigrant students to be successful in U.S. schools. Mexican teachers noted that a low stress learning environment is essential to positive language acquisition and that this should be coupled with the teaching of English skills that will be most useful to students' success in the classroom. In addition, respondents raised the issue of native versus non-native speakers as teachers and argued that native speakers of English are not necessarily the most qualified teachers because knowledge of the language alone is not sufficient to be a good teacher of English. Teachers who instruct non-English speaking immigrant students must be trained in language teaching pedagogy including some knowledge of contrastive linguistics. The Mexican teachers asserted that their competence as English teachers was due to their fluency in English. A comparable situation does not exist in the United States because teachers of English learners are generally not also proficient in Spanish.

### Experiences and Views About the U.S. Educational System

Respondents who had the opportunity to study in the United States were asked to what extent they were satisfied with their educational experiences in the U.S. On average, the respondents were somewhat satisfied with their schooling while living in the United States; however, they felt strongly that the teachers they had encountered in the United States were well-qualified to teach. Respondents agreed that their teachers were effective and enthusiastically noted that their American teachers were interested in students and in their learning.

All of the respondents were invited to express their opinions regarding the U.S. educational system as it concerns Mexican immigrant students. A majority of respondents (11 out of 18) declined to respond to this question and noted that they were not familiar enough to respond to this question. Others who responded to this question had positive views and noted that the U.S. educational system is generally effective. Their positive remarks mostly stemmed from their perception that Mexican immigrant students had the opportunity to be immersed in English and hence they would become proficient English speakers. Others expressed that although they didn't know enough about the U.S. educational system to speak authoritatively they assumed it was effective. One Mexican teacher noted that she has relatives living in the U.S. with children and although the children are able to speak English their lower school achievement is likely due more to their lack of interest to fully integrate in the U.S. culture. Another teacher maintained that although she viewed the U.S. educational system as somewhat effective she felt that teachers tend to focus more on teaching their own culture and neglect other cultural perspectives.

### Suggestions for American Teachers

This group of Mexican teachers was asked to provide suggestions or advice for American teachers who work with Mexican immigrant students. Seven teachers did not respond to this question; however, the eleven who did were quite adamant about their views and provided in-depth responses. Their comments were categorized along two main lines: cultural perspectives and language teaching issues. Respondents advised their U.S. colleagues to get to know their Mexican immigrant students and learn about their personal as well as academic needs. The teacher respondents maintained that their American counterparts needed to be aware of students' educational level, social status, and their living conditions in the United States. They added that teachers need to take into account students' cultural background and should not underestimate students' abilities. They further noted that teachers need to facilitate students' adaptation to their new environment. One teacher urged her American colleagues to be patient and "...take into account that they [students] are Mexicans and they have to feel proud of that."

### Discussion

This study sought to learn about Mexican teachers' views on how teachers in the United States can help Mexican immigrant students succeed. Mexican teachers noted that English language instruction is a requirement in Mexican public schools and that students are motivated to learn it. This motivation was described as mostly instrumental as students realize that English proficiency will provide them with more economic opportunities in the future either in Mexico or the United States. Mexican teachers understood that teaching English in the United States is different and that American teachers must convey cultural understanding and value biculturalism in order to motivate immigrant students. They added that American

teachers should not underestimate students' abilities and they needed to reinforce students' feelings as competent language learners. The Mexican respondents maintained that their American counterparts need to be aware of students' prior experiences and their current economic and social conditions in the United States.

Equally important was the learning environment that teachers create for their students. Mexican teachers emphasized that American teachers should provide greater opportunities for their immigrant students to use their developing English language skills. Overall, Mexican teachers had positive opinions regarding the U.S. educational system which stemmed from their perception that Mexican immigrant students generally have the opportunity to be immersed in English and hence become proficient in their second language.

The educational success of immigrant students in the United States is highly dependent upon how we as a society view newcomers and their languages and cultures. Immigrant students' opportunities for achieving high levels of educational success is dependent upon their motivation, the dedication of their teachers, involvement of their parents, and the extent to which their host society accepts and respects them. This promotes mutual reciprocity through which students' incorporation into American society becomes a promising enterprise and at the center of which is mastery of the English language (Igoa 1995; Valdes 1996).

As our Mexican respondents noted, teachers play a crucial role in supporting the educational development of immigrant students. This support should not only be focused on language development although this is certainly a key element of student progress and achievement. Without cultural understanding and respect, teachers will severely limit their capabilities in fostering growth and academic enhancement of their students. In addition, teachers not only have to be knowledgeable about their students' language, literacy, and academic needs, but also be well informed about second language learning and teaching (Padilla 2006).

Some informants were reluctant to provide rigorous analysis of race, culture, and class when discussing the U.S. education system. This could be due partly to the fact that some of the Mexican teachers have limited knowledge of the achievement gap experienced by Latino students in U.S. schools. Not being aware of the complex issues involved in schooling of English learners in the U.S. may lead to a false impression that Mexican students who emigrate will face better educational experiences.

Mexican teachers are also not aware of the current working conditions and pressures placed on teachers and schools by such policies as NCLB to raise scores on standardized tests. Such pressures have intensified the challenges that Mexican immigrant students face in the U.S. schools and have made it more difficult for teachers to use pedagogically sound curricula that meet the needs of Mexican immigrant students. In a study commissioned by California Senate Office of Research, Borjian (2006) reports that many American teachers feel that they are treated as unskilled and unqualified workers who are forced to teach programs that do not allow them to apply their training, let alone empower them to change students' lives, and this may contribute to missing the mark on responding to Mexican immigrant students pedagogical profile. Hence, the mere fact of being in

the U.S. and attending schools does not lead to English language proficiency and academic success for Mexican immigrant students.

Limited success of many immigrant students in acquiring academic proficiency in English is also due to a large extent to a school system that views language only as a skill. Freire and Macedo (1987) remind us that language acquisition is highly influenced by attitudes toward self, language, and culture. When students are valued for what they bring to the classroom and when their native languages and cultures are promoted in schools then they will feel a greater sense of belonging to the school community and this is known to augment academic achievement (Gonzalez and Padilla 1997).

We acknowledge that Mexican educators may not be fully aware of the realities of Mexican immigrant students in the U.S.; however, those teachers who had lived in the United States and who had attended school in this country had the distinct advantage of being able to comment about the educational system in this country as well as the difficulty of teaching a second language since they were language educators in Mexico. We feel that this study sheds light on how educators in our closest neighboring country and the major sending country of immigrants to the United States perceive the reception given to Mexican children when they arrive in our schools. It would be ideal if U.S. educators could collaborate with their Mexican colleagues in the challenges faced by American teachers who have large numbers of Mexican students in their midst.

As suggested by the Mexican teachers we also believe that teachers should be well aware of their students' personal circumstances and strengths. By focusing on students' strengths rather than their shortcomings, teachers are more likely to create long lasting positive effects. As our Mexican colleagues noted, and as further supported by the work of Valdes (1996) emphasis on cultural connections can greatly enhance student motivation. Learning a second language under the best circumstances is still a complex process and requires supportive teachers. Such teachers create supportive learning environments and value their students' experiences and cultures. By having knowledge of the home language of their students, teachers can more effectively advocate for supportive learning environments for their students. This knowledge must be shared with other members of the school community who are equally involved in supporting immigrant students.

Academic achievement requires highly dedicated and capable teachers who truly want to see their students' succeed. As Valenzuela (1999) and Valdes (1996) clearly point out, teachers must recognize the immense influence of affective factors on learning. English language learners must feel respected and valued. Students must feel that their teachers and classmates care about them and are willing to learn about and from them. Schools must provide rigorous academic curricula that not only prepare students to be highly literate and analytic, but are also meaningful and take into account students' cultural background and prior knowledge. By being keenly aware of Mexican immigrant students' needs, teachers in Mexico and the U.S. can be of substantial support in building strong foundations in Spanish (and other native languages) as students develop their academic English. Teachers also need to be reminded that conversational skills are merely a fraction of the language skills needed to be successful in school. Full proficiency in oral production of English is

not a prerequisite to reading and writing instruction. Learning is accelerated when all language skills are developed simultaneously. Hence, bilingual academic development of Mexican origin students should be a high priority for schools across the United States.

The educational journeys of Mexican immigrant children have many routes. By having thorough understanding of the maps teachers can guide students to successful destinations. Teachers must be well versed regarding every step of this journey and ample quality education must be present at every stop. This is possible when teachers on both sides of the border work together and support each other at every point on this journey.

The findings in this study point to the need to further investigate how Mexican and U.S. teachers can help each other in becoming more effective in supporting the needs of Mexican immigrant students in the United States. What we have learned are the first steps in a long series of projects that will lead to fruitful collaborations between the two countries. We have a common goal: to support the development of every student to achieve his/her potential.

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