

## **Learning from Young Researchers: English in Public Elementary Schools**

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English language teaching in public elementary schools in Mexico is on the rise. Following the world trend, often with neoliberal and "progressive" ideologies that sell English as the language that opens doors, that changes people's lives and that contributes to the development of countries (López-Gopar, 2016; Sayer, 2015), both educational systems and parents want girls and boys to start learning this language at an early age. In the case of Mexico, this language is reaching public elementary schools through the National English Program (PRONI). Although there are different studies on PRONI in Mexico (Ramírez, 2015; Ramírez et al., 2014), little is known about English classes in Oaxaca, much less from the perspective of children, not only as students within PRONI but also as researchers collaborating in virtual spaces.

Responding to the call of Pinter and Zandian (2014) about the importance and benefits of involving girls and boys as researchers, the purpose of this article is to briefly present the process and results of a survey designed and answered in virtual spaces by the girls and boys from a public primary school in the city of Oaxaca. The purpose of the survey was to learn about the characteristics of an ideal English class from the perspective of girls and boys. In this article, we will first talk about the process for designing the survey and its content. Then, we will present the results obtained from the survey. We will conclude this article with some implications for (future) English language teachers in primary schools based both on the results and on their analysis, carried out by girls and boys acting as researchers.

## Survey Design Development

In the development of the survey, six boys and five girls from a fifth grade elementary school participated, working voluntarily with Mario and Belem, as the “grown-up” researchers, and Darita, who is currently their English teacher. Through Zoom, 6 one-hour sessions were held, which were video recorded and transcribed. In the first 5 sessions the survey was designed and in the sixth session the results were analyzed. In the first session, the topic of “what research means and what it implies from the perspective of the boys and girls” was addressed, ending this session with the contribution of one of the girls who said, “For example, a question that would be good in the survey is, 'What would your ideal English class look like?’” Together with all the participants in the session, it was decided that this would be the main research question of the survey. In the second and third sessions, we worked on the activities "What if...?" and “Imagine that...” proposed by Dunne and Raby (2013). These authors allege that when children speculate about their realities and produce statements such as, "What if my English class had more games?" or “What if my teacher tested us through games?” and they describe or articulate what they imagine when they are playing in their English class in this case, they create possibilities of how they could adapt, change or improve their realities. As a result of these two activities, in the fourth session, the girls and boys wrote questions for the survey, learned about the format of questions used in surveys and decided to use Google Forms to create and carry out the survey. In the fifth session, the girls and boys took the draft survey, as a pilot, and defined the final survey (see survey in the appendix).

The survey includes questions about activities or strategies that they would like their teacher to use or to include in their English textbooks. It also focuses on the use of languages (“English only” or “bilingual: English and Spanish”) used by teachers or their textbooks, the length of their English class, and assessment issues. It was decided that the survey would be answered by all the children of their primary school, from first to sixth grade, asking the tutors to help the girls and boys in first grade by reading the questions and answer options. In the end, 278 girls and boys, almost 90% of the primary school student population, responded to the survey. In the next section we present the general results of the survey.

### **Results of the Survey**

The survey was taken more or less equally by all grades and girls and boys (56% girls and 44% boys). Regarding the activities and games that children would like their textbooks or teachers to include in their classes, the following answers were the most selected: “Coloring drawings” (62%), “Drawing Activities” (60%), “Puzzles” (56%), “Word Search” (60%), “Board Games” (51%) and “Memory Games” (50%). Other activities were also chosen, although to a lesser degree, which could mean that girls and boys prefer to have variety rather than just one type of class activities or games. Most girls and boys like songs (83%), virtual games (90%) and crafts (82%) to be included in their English class, which contrasts with “research homework on different topics” (40%). One of the most outstanding findings was came from the two questions about the use of languages, both in textbooks and in English classes. Only 10% of children want their textbook to be written only in English and similarly only 9% wants teachers to use only the English language in class. In fact, 74% and 80% respectively prefer that the book and the class to be in English and Spanish. If we added the percentages of “English, Spanish, and other language(s),” about 90% prefer their

textbooks and classes to be bilingual or multilingual. Regarding the number of textbooks that they would like to have for their English class, 50% would like to have more than one textbook and on average all the girls and boys are happy that their English class lasts one hour. Finally, in terms of having exams in their English class, girls and boys are more inclined not to have exams in class. If it is mandatory to have exams, 65% chose that the exams be through games or “virtual interactive exams” (34%).

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Having involved boys and girls both in the design and in answering the survey gives us the certainty that the results of this survey shed light on the perspective of Oaxacan boys and girls in an urban context about the ideal English class. In general, we could conclude that girls and boys prefer a (multi) bilingual English class with varied activities and games and bilingual textbooks that work both to learn this language and to assess their learning. In her own words, a young girl recommends the following to English textbook publishers,

That they include a little more of activities such as word searches, crossword puzzles and if it's possible. . . bingo and puzzles. Like in the math [textbook], they should bring the bingo [pieces] at the back of the book or bring cut-out material in order to have puzzles, bingo and memory games. . . And now the children can play in the class if their teacher allows them. Give them the cut-out material of the topic they are studying.

We can also conclude that girls and boys want to be in a classroom where communication makes sense to them, which leads to a bilingual or multilingual class, where girls and boys and teachers feel free, comfortable and happy to use all their languages (Spanish, English, indigenous languages and other languages) that they have as part of their linguistic

repertoire. In the words of one child, “they would get very tired of speaking only English and [it is better to use two languages] in order to learn better.” Nevertheless, one child also mentioned that the following might be the reason why the majority prefer that the teacher speaks English and Spanish: “The truth is that I think, because the teacher has always spoken like that. She has always spoken in Spanish and English and for sure, this is why everyone is already used to it.” The words of the last child remind us that the results of any survey must be questioned and analyzed and that the answers are based on the realities or experiences of the people surveyed. For this reason, we invite (future) teachers to adapt this survey, or better yet design a new one with their students, to learn about the perspective of the girls and boys, which are at the receiving end of the decision of governments and educational systems such as is the case of teaching/learning English in public elementary schools in Mexico.

### **References:**

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Appendix:

**Survey about the ideal English class in an elementary public school (It takes less than 5 minutes to answer it)**

*The purpose of this research is to know the characteristics of an ideal English class from the perspective of girls and boys from an elementary public school. This survey was designed by a group of children as researchers from an elementary public school in Oaxaca, México.*

**1. In what grade are you?**

- First grade
- Second grade
- Third grade
- Fourth grade
- Fifth grade
- Sixth grade

**2. Are you a girl or a boy?**

- Boy
- Girl

**3. What kind of activities would you like your English textbook to include? (You can choose as many choices as you want or add some others)**

- Drawings to color
- Short readings
- Audio activities
- Drawing activities
- Other (Add): \_\_\_\_\_

**4. What kind of games would you like your English textbook to include? (You can choose as many choices as you want or add some others)**

- Crosswords
- Puzzles
- Memory games
- Bingo
- Other (Add): \_\_\_\_\_

**5. In what languages would you like your English textbook to be?**

- English only
- Spanish only
- English and Spanish
- English, Spanish and other (s) languages

**6. What languages would you like your teacher to use in your English class?**

- English only
- Spanish only
- English and Spanish
- English, Spanish and other (s) languages

**7. What kind of games would you like your English teacher to use in class? (You can choose as many choices as you want or add some others)**

- Games outside the classroom
- Board games
- Movement games
- Competition games
- Memory games
- Other (Add): \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Do you think that it would be fun that your teacher includes more songs in your class?**

	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
No, it would not be fun	1	2	3	4	5	It would be a lot of fun

**9. Would you like your teacher to assign research homework about different topics?**

	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
No, I would not like it at all	1	2	3	4	5	I would love it

**10. Would you like your teacher to include online games in your English class?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

**11. Do you think that it would be fun that your teacher included arts and crafts in her class?**

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

**12. How many textbooks would you like to have?**

- 1 book
- 2 books
- 3 books
- More than 3 books

**13. Would you like that your English class last more than an hour?**

	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Less than an hour	1	2	3	4	5	More than an hour

**14. Do you like to have tests in your English class?**

	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
I don't like it at all	1	2	3	4	5	I love it

**15. What kind of tests would you like to have in your English class? (You can choose as many choices as you want or add some others)**

- Written tests
- Oral tests
- Tests through games
- Virtual interactive tests
- Presentations in class
- Creating audios or videos
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_