

Decolonizing English Language Teaching (ELT) in Mexico through the New Mexican School

José Joaquín Enrique Erguera-Guerrero, Dept. of Humanities and Sciences, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Quintana Roo

Abstract

The teaching of English in the New Mexican School (NEM) is closely linked to the idea of linguistic and cultural decolonization. This is particularly important in Mexico where Indigenous languages and cultures have been subordinated and marginalized. Decolonization in English teaching involves questioning and challenging the linguistic hierarchies that have perpetuated the dominance of English over other languages in Mexico and the world (López-Gopar, 2016; López-Gopar et al., 2022). To achieve this, a “grammar of decoloniality” approach should be adopted. This involves creating opportunities for dialogue among all members of the school community and incorporating diverse cultures and knowledge systems into the curriculum. In short, this article examines the New Mexican School as a means of educational renewal in Mexico, the importance of teaching English in a globalized world, and the need for decolonizing approaches in English education.

Keywords

Decolonizing ELT
New Mexican School
Linguistic decolonization
Indigenous languages
Mexico
Linguistic hierarchies
Intercultural education
Contextualized ELT
Decolonial pedagogy

Introduction

In the current Mexican education context, the New Mexican School (NEM for its Spanish acronym) emerges as a comprehensive initiative aimed at transforming the national educational system. This project, promoted by the Mexican Secretariat of Public Education (SEP), seeks to revitalize and strengthen the country's pedagogical and curricular foundations, with the aim of promoting a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally relevant education for all Mexican students (SEP, 2022).

In this context of growing globalization, mastery of the English language is presented as a crucial skill for effective participation in academic, work, and social spheres at an international level. Teaching English not only facilitates intercultural communication and access to global resources but also promotes the country's competitiveness and economic development in an interconnected world (Rao, 2019).

However, the way English is taught in non-English-speaking contexts has been the subject of significant criticism due to its potential to reinforce dominant colonial and linguistic structures (Branschat, 2019; Le Gal, 2019; Meighan, 2019). It is imperative, therefore, to decolonize the methods and approaches used in teaching English, questioning the linguistic hierarchies that perpetuate the primacy of English over other local languages and cultures. According to Fandiño-Parra (2021), this decolonization not only seeks to promote more equitable linguistic diversity but also to foster a genuine and respectful appreciation of the diverse cultural identities, particularly in countries like Mexico which have a wide variety of Indigenous communities and a rich linguistic culture.

This article explores the intersection of these key themes: the New Mexican School as a platform for educational renewal in Mexico, the strategic importance of teaching English in a globalized context, and the urgent need to adopt decolonizing

approaches in the teaching of this language. Through a critical and reflective analysis, this article seeks to contribute to the academic and educational debate on how these initiatives can positively impact the formation of future generations in Mexico and beyond.

Historical and Cultural Influence on Mexican Education

Education in Mexico has been shaped by a rich and complex interplay of historical and cultural influences dating from pre-Columbian times to the contemporary era (Andrade de Herrera, 1996). The arrival of the Spanish conquistadors in the 16th century marked a crucial turning point in the country's educational history, introducing not only Christianity and the European educational system but also imposing a colonial structure that perpetuated social and cultural inequalities for centuries. Hamel (2008) emphasizes that Spanish colonization imposed an educational system prioritizing the cultural and religious assimilation of Indigenous peoples into the dominant European paradigm. Educational institutions mainly administrated by the Catholic Church were used as tools of social and cultural control, promoting the superiority of European culture and relegating Indigenous languages and traditions to the background (de León, 2017). According to Decorme (1926) during the Colonial Epoch [1526-1810] the educational curriculum focused on the teaching of the Spanish language, the history of Spain, and evangelization, ignoring the rich pre-Hispanic traditions and contributing to the marginalization of native cultures. Historical events like the auto de fe in Maní, Yucatán on July 12, 1562, in which a considerable number of cult images, sacred objects, and codices of the Mayan culture were incinerated marked the initiation of a process of intellectual and linguistic colonization, establishing a supremacy of European knowledge whose impact lasted for centuries, continuing even after the Mexican independence from the Spanish monarchy (Saucedo, 2013).

In the contemporary context, the teaching of English in Mexico has been influenced by colonial paradigms that privilege the English language as an exclusive vehicle for access to educational and economic opportunities. Unsurprisingly, English is often regarded as the language of the elites as noted by Aprianti (2023). There is even a documented correlation between the mastery of the English language and economic growth in Mexico (Heredia & Rubio, 2015). This approach has contributed to the reproduction of linguistic hierarchies that marginalize local languages. Additionally, traditional English teaching methods have often replicated Eurocentric models (Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Quintero, 2023), minimizing or even belittling the linguistic and cultural expressions typical of Mexico and other non-English speaking regions. In line with this, Branschat (2019) makes the point that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers may contribute to linguistic imperialism and the perpetuation of language colonialism. In other words, EFL teachers and the broader educational system may promote beliefs and attitudes that elevate English while marginalizing other languages, particularly Indigenous ones.

The New Mexican School (NEM)

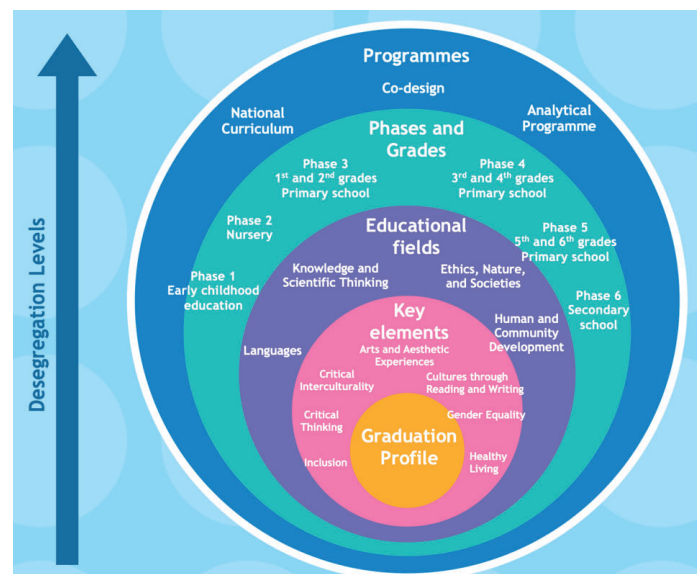
The NEM is presented as a comprehensive educational framework that seeks to transform and update the educational system in Mexico. The SEP (2019) defines the NEM as an educational project with a critical, humanistic, and community-based approach to educating students with a comprehensive vision. Its main objectives include the promotion of inclusive, equitable, and quality education, as well as the strengthening of the cultural and linguistic identity of Mexican students. Hernández-Moreno (2024) highlights that the NEM focuses on promoting critical thinking, creativity, and the integration of relevant knowledge for the comprehensive development of students putting them at the centre of public action. Introduced in 2022 as a public policy within the pre-school, primary, and secondary education curriculum, the NEM is underpinned constitutionally by principles that advocate for a democratic, national, and excellence-driven educational process, contributing to harmonious human coexistence, equity, inclusivity, interculturality, and comprehensiveness. It upholds the secular and free nature of education as outlined in Article 3 of the Mexican Constitution.

The NEM Study Plan is structured around four core elements that form the backbone of its curriculum: Firstly, curricular integration facilitates interdisciplinary work, problematisation of real-world issues, and project development. This responds to longstanding calls for a holistic educational approach that contextualises content with students' realities. Unlike traditional subject-based organisation, the curriculum is structured around Educational Fields: Languages; Knowledge and Scientific Thinking; Ethics, Nature, and Societies; and Human and Community Development. These fields are designed to interact transversally with key elements such as Inclusion, Critical Interculturality, Critical Thinking, Gender Equality, Arts and Aesthetic Experiences, Cultures through Reading and Writing, and Healthy Living, as illustrated in the figure below outlining the disaggregation levels of the NEM programme.

FIGURE 1. ORGANIZACIÓN CURRICULAR. TAKEN FROM SEP, 2022, P.3.

Secondly, professional autonomy in the teaching profession gives educators the power to modify curriculum content according to the social, territorial, cultural, and educational contexts of their students. It is important to note that teachers have the freedom to tailor the national programme content to their spe-

cific educational environment by participating in the co-design and design of the analytical program, to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to education.



Thirdly, the community serves as the focal point for integrating teaching and learning processes, promoting the school as a centre for community learning. Here, knowledge is co-created and shared, while values, norms, cultures, and modes of coexistence are exchanged within the community and nation. The NEM highlights the importance of working on community projects as they respond to the environmental, social, cultural, political, and economic needs of the community, in connection with the elements of the plan and the study programs: corresponding phase, key element, educational field, and contents (SEP, 2022).

The fourth element aims to guarantee the human right to education to all Mexican students making them the central priority of the National Educational System. By and large, the NEM ensures the social right to free and compulsory education, as well as the cultural right to respect diversity, especially for minorities.

It is important to mention that the NEM emphasizes the promotion of cultural and linguistic diversity. Through the inclusion of educational content that values and respects the diverse cultural and linguistic expressions of Mexico, and in this way strengthen the self-esteem and identity of students. This is reflected in the incorporation of Indigenous languages and the recognition of the plurality of cultural traditions present in the Mexican territory. This inclusion view of education is aligned with the UNESCO principles against discrimination in education as well as Sustainable Development Goal 4 in which ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education as well as promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all are vital for the development of the nations. Additionally, UNESCO (2024) highlights the importance of multilingual education as a key to fostering respect for diversity and a sense of interconnectedness between countries and populations.

In contrast to previous educational approaches, characterized by their Eurocentrism and the imposition of homogenizing educational models (Hamel, 2008; Ornelas, 2018), the NEM aligns itself with principles of decolonization. Historically, educational systems in Mexico have marginalized Indigenous languages and cultures, thus perpetuating a colonial legacy (De León, 2017; Hamel, 2008). On the other hand, as stated by Marcial-Cer-

queda (2024), the NEM promotes knowledge of Indigenous and Afro-Mexican languages and cultures in all basic education schools, intending to establish school practices whose priority is the presence of linguistic and cultural diversity in the classrooms.

Decolonization in English Language Teaching

Undoubtedly, the English language carries a colonial and assimilationist heritage (Higgins, 2009; Danladi, 2013). Throughout history, English has often been imposed on non-dominant cultures and languages deemed “vernacular/inferior,” justified under the ideologies of civilization and “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson, 1992). This perception of English as a superior language can be linked back to the British Empire, where Great Britain played a pivotal role in the colonization of many countries in the global south. Fandiño-Parra (2021) points out that linguistic imperialism entails discriminating against other groups based on language, granting ideological and structural advantages to the powerful concerning language, and gaining economic benefits through biased language policies.

Nevertheless, one should consider that English in the contemporary world is seen as a “Lingua Franca”. In other words, English is no longer exclusively associated with core English-speaking countries but rather as a global medium of communication and a marker of local, multilingual identities (Zeng et al., 2023). For instance, consider the study by Grigoryeva and Zakirova (2022), which examined the role of English in intercultural communication. This research analyzed and synthesized contemporary findings in cultural studies, linguistics, and history, while also comparing recent statistical data. Using a predictive approach, they analyzed the spread of English and its usage among non-native speakers, proposing hypotheses about its future as a global language. Their findings suggest that English facilitates intercultural understanding, fostering clarity, productivity, and efficiency in intercultural relations.

Before delving into the definition of decolonization, it is crucial to contemplate the significance of colonization in today’s world. According to Borocz and Sarkar (2012), colonialism encompasses both a practice and a worldview. As a practice, it entails the dominance exerted by settlers from one society over another. As a worldview, colonialism represents a comprehensive geopolitical, economic, and cultural doctrine that originated from the global expansion of Western European capitalism and persisted long after the dissolution of most colonial empires. Pennycook (1998, as cited by Fandiño-Parra, 2021, p.170) claims that English Language Teaching (ELT) is:

“a product of colonialism not just because it is colonialism that produced the initial conditions for the global spread of English, but because it was colonialism that produced many of the ways of thinking and behaving that are still part of Western cultures... ELT not only rode on the back of colonialism to the distant corners of the Empire but was also in turn produced by that voyage.”

As we can see there is a strong tie between colonialism and ELT. To put it in another way, English can be considered as the most significant heritage from the past colonial times. Pennycook (2007) argued that colonialism and ELT are intertwined in three significant ways: historical, political-economic, and cultural. The historical relationship suggests that ELT has promoted English as an imperial language, disseminated English culture globally, and facilitated the production of compliant workers. The

political-economic relationship highlights ELT’s role in perpetuating global inequalities, where proficiency in English acts as a barrier to accessing education, employment, and scientific advancements. The cultural relationship implies that ELT shapes idealized perceptions of English, its learners, and its speakers.

One might argue that elements of colonialism are embedded in school curricula, as these frameworks often reflect the interest of dominant groups and contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities (Masta, 2016). Similarly, Palermo (2014) argues that education is the primary tool of colonial dominance, essential for perpetuating the colonial framework in shaping cultural perceptions and understandings of the world, which are inherently contentious and paradoxical. On the other hand, Charles (2019) argues that decolonizing the curriculum involves establishing opportunities and resources for inclusive dialogue within a school community. This dialogue aims to reimagine and incorporate diverse cultures and knowledge systems into the curriculum, ensuring that what is taught and how it shapes perspectives on the world are approached with respect and inclusivity. Walsh (2009) emphasizes the importance of decolonizing the curriculum. She argues that a decolonial pedagogy challenges concepts like racialization, subalternization, and inferiorization. This approach highlights diverse ways of being, living, and knowing, integrating them into pedagogical practices. It aligns with non-Eurocentric perspectives, positioning the experiences and knowledge of various peoples as central to developing critical thinking.

Proposals and Strategies to Decolonize English Teaching

To decolonize English teaching in Mexico, it is essential to adopt approaches that empower and validate students’ cultural and linguistic identities. Meighan (2020) states that to decolonize English, schools should implement alternative ways of knowing and being. He suggests that schools firstly can begin the decolonization process by learning from earth-centred perspectives and not only human-centred ones; one way to achieve this is by adopting Indigenous worldviews in essence as Indigenous languages convey wisdom, including Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). One advantage is that Mexico is rich in Indigenous cultures which are present in all the country, and it is possible to learn from them thanks to their music, dancing, legends, stories, and art in all its representations.

Secondly, it is also necessary to decolonize our thought processes and mental model in English, putting away the “Eurocentric logic” and adopting an earth-centred view of language. In other words, reflect on how we describe, experience and treat the environment. For instance, consider the English grammatical framework that classifies water (like air or oil) as an uncountable noun, portraying it as an “inexhaustible” resource that can be endlessly utilized. Furthermore, the current negative and impersonal (colonial) characterization of water as “tasteless” or “odorless” contrasts sharply with the relational and experiential worldview found in many Indigenous languages. For example, the Mayan worldview consider water as a sacred element with a life of its own and not as a resource. Similarly, for the Yaquis water is much more than a natural resource as there is a close relationship with their identity, worldview, rituality and way of life. Even today, the Yaqui people are still fighting to protect the water from the “El Novillo” dam, which is being extracted and exploited for the supply of multinational companies and Hermosillo, the capital city of Sonora in the North of Mexico.

Finally, Meighan (2020) suggests embracing and validating more sustainable and holistic worldviews in educational instruction. This means reflecting on our worldview, our experiences and our language choices.

Now, turning to what Mignolo (2010) refers to as “the grammar of decoloniality” – this concept emphasizes the use of language and frameworks to challenge, critique, and reframe traditional understandings shaped by colonialism. It seeks to promote more inclusive and equitable ways of knowing and being, thereby dismantling colonial legacies and fostering diverse perspectives. This grammar of decoloniality inspired many ELT professionals to formulate and question the way we teach and learn. Take for example Kumaravadivelu (2016) who makes the point that a grammar of decoloniality can be useful and useable, just if it is implemented by local players or subalterns, in other words, by non-native English teachers who are experts, knowledgeable, and sensitive to local conditions. The NEM is aligned with this vision as teachers are required to contextualize the content based on the realities and needs of their communities. Kumaravadivelu (2016, pp.81-82) developed a framework to adopt a grammar of decoloniality approach in the ELT community and involves the following aspects:

- The abandonment of experimental studies aimed at proving whether non-native English teachers can teach well, as well as comparative studies aiming to show who teaches a language aspect better, such as pronunciation (Native vs. Non-native teacher). Instead, redirect research to result-oriented strategic actions and adopt a more World Englishes perspective, focusing more on intelligibility rather than on accent.
- The design of context-specific instructional strategies to the local historical, political, social, cultural, and educational needs.
- The creation of contextual teaching materials developed by local teachers.
- The redesign of the current teacher education programs to enable pre-service teachers not only to consume pedagogical knowledge and materials but also to create their own pedagogical resources. In-service teachers can also develop those skills through continuous professional development courses.
- The development of proactive research focusing on the specific learning and teaching needs in the local area.

My vision for the grammar of decoloniality involves empowering EFL teachers to control the curriculum and adopt approaches that validate students’ cultural and linguistic identities. Strategies could include:

1. Multilingualism focus: Mexican EFL teachers can create spaces in their lessons to value and preserve Indigenous languages. For example, they can use contrastive analysis to compare vocabulary, phonology, grammar, and pragmatics with Indigenous languages. Additionally, they can use English for intercultural communication among people from all over the world, not just from English-speaking cultures.
2. Integration of local knowledge: Mexican EFL teachers can incorporate topics and texts that reflect students’ local realities and the experiences, enabling the learning of Eng-

lish to connect meaningfully with their cultural context.

3. Critical and reflective approach: EFL teachers can encourage critical thinking about the historical and contemporary influence of English and other foreign languages, as well as their social, economic, and cultural implications.
4. Sensitized teacher training: Universities and Normal Schools (Teachers’ Colleges) should provide prospective teachers with tools for inclusive and equitable teaching to recognize and address the power dynamics and coloniality present in English teaching. This will equip them with tools for inclusive and equitable teaching.
5. Develop decolonized materials: According to Kumaravadivelu (2016), teachers should be trained to create teaching materials based on their local realities and context.
6. Adopt a World Englishes perspective: Research should be oriented towards actionable strategies rather than comparisons between native or non-native teachers. Emphasizing action research may be useful to contextualize the teaching of English within local settings.

All these strategies can be achieved using the principles of the New Mexican School (NEM). As stated in the NEM curriculum, all content must relate to the community, adopting a humanistic approach. Teachers have the freedom to exercise their professional autonomy, contextualize learning, and focus on developing educational paths based on the individual needs and interests of the learners. In short, decolonizing the teaching of English within the framework of the New Mexican School involves a transformative approach that recognizes and celebrates the cultural and linguistic diversity of Mexico. This approach aims to build a more inclusive, equitable, and sensitive educational system that is responsive to both local and global realities.

Conclusion

The NEM plays a pivotal role as a catalyst for the decolonization of English language teaching. It offers a framework that challenges conventional educational practices and advocates for alternatives that honour local cultural identities. Within the NEM, EFL teachers are encouraged to adapt content and methodologies to align with the local cultural context, moving away from hegemonic and exclusionary paradigms. To facilitate this shift, the adoption of a grammar of decoloniality framework is essential, aligning with the principles of intercultural education.

However, the NEM encounters both facilitators and obstacles in its mission to promote decolonization within the Mexican educational system. Among the facilitators are a strong focus on cultural identity, a flexible curriculum that allows for contextualization, enhanced teacher training in critical and intercultural methodologies, community participation, and the development of contextualized EFL materials and textbooks by the Secretariat of Public Education these were created and evaluated by EFL teachers from different parts of Mexico.

Conversely, obstacles include entrenched traditional teaching methods centred on Anglo-Saxon or Eurocentric models, limited availability of appropriate resources that reflect an intercultural perspective, resistance to change among some educators and administrators, and a lack of adequate training for EFL teachers to effectively implement a decoloniality approach.

For the NEM to successfully catalyse decolonization in English

language teaching, it is crucial to address these obstacles while leveraging the available facilitators. This effort must emphasize a teaching approach that values both the English language and Mexico's rich cultural diversity. By dismantling power structures that perpetuate the cultural superiority of foreign languages, the NEM can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable educational vision. This commitment is vital for developing an educational system that not only prepares students for a globalized world but also respects and celebrates their cultural heritage.

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