Decolonizing the Curriculum through Participatory Action Research: The Case of the Bachelor's Degree in Language Teaching at the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO)

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ABSTRACT

This article documents preliminary findings from a participatory action research (PAR) project undertaken to reform the curriculum of the bachelor's degree in Language Teaching at the "Benito Juárez" Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO). This reform centers the experiential knowledge and leadership of its primary stakeholders, the faculty, while also incorporating the voices of students, alumni, and employers. The article describes the collaborative process of listening, analysis, discussion, and construction carried out over a 16-month timeframe. Although the resulting curriculum remains a work in progress, it represents significant advances in both relevance and alignment with the needs of its academic community. The findings underscore the complexity of collaborative processes and the contested nature of curriculum design itself, while also highlighting the transformative potential of a curriculum shaped by those who bring it to life.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum, language teaching, decolonization, glocal, participatory action research

Introduction

Higher education is undergoing a process of reinvention worldwide. Institutions face the challenge of meeting global, national, regional, and local expectations to deliver an education that is relevant, inclusive, and transformative. This process began at the School of Languages of the "Benito Juárez" Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UABJO) in August 2023, when we embarked on a radical reform of the curriculum of our most popular degree course: the bachelor's program in Language Teaching. Although it is dated, the existing curriculum, which was last updated in 2011, already incorporated decolonial theory (Quijano, 2024; Mignolo, 2017; Dussel, 2020) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1992). However, such approaches to knowledge production were only formally adopted by the whole university in 2019 with the launch of the 'Educational Model for Social Transformation' (UABJO, 2019). Furthermore, the national rollout of a policy for significant educational reform, known as the New Mexican School (NEM), was only approved in 2024 (SEP, 2024). However, the process of transforming policy into practice remains challenging, especially in a Global South context where resistance to top-down reform is prevalent.

The School of Languages undertook a comprehensive overhaul of its curriculum, conducted entirely by internal staff members. External consultants are typically tasked with curriculum development; such practices are often disconnected, however, from the granular realities of instruction and often lead to a flattening or even replication of curricula from other institutions. This curricular reform was mandated through a student referendum under the direction of an administration with an explicitly decolonial approach to language education (López-Gopar, 2016). Furthermore, it draws on a longstanding institutional ethos of critical, inclusive, and antiracist praxis that necessitated an anti-hierarchical and participatory methodology

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(López-Gopar, 2014). Participatory paradigms of research, as pioneered in Latin America (Fals-Borda, 1987), prioritize the voices of those most immediately impacted by research: in this case, full-time and adjunct faculty, as well as students, alumni, and employers—in pursuit of a more democratic, context-sensitive, and meaningful pedagogy. We aimed to achieve these goals through dialogue, active listening, and the validation of historically marginalized voices.

This piece of participatory action research was then undertaken as a transformative, collaborative learning process for all involved, rather than for any kind of accreditation or compliance. By documenting this process, we hope to preserve, reflect on, and share the experiences and insights it generated. The article seeks to recognize and validate collective knowledge production in a context where curriculum design has often been imposed in a top-down manner. The text presents preliminary findings, emphasizing the perspectives of those involved in the transformation of the program. It also proceeds from the premise that the curriculum is never a neutral space but rather a site of ideological struggle wherein power relations and worldviews are negotiated—either reproducing or challenging the coloniality of knowledge (Lander, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

Curriculum has been conceptualized in myriad forms within educational literature. It represents a complex social construct reflecting a specific worldview, an understanding of what constitutes knowledge, and a moral vision of the model learner. Díaz Barriga (2003) argues that "curricula must be understood as an abstract cultural tool that only becomes concrete on entry into the classroom" (p. 18). This view underscores how a curriculum is not merely about organizing content but rather about transmitting values, knowledge systems, and relationships of care. Casarini Ratto (1999) also discusses the codification of content within a formal curriculum, since the resulting document must translate directly into classroom practice. As such, curricular design will inevitably fail if it remains a technical document removed from the social realities of both teacher and student; De Alba (2007) recommends it rather be considered as "a process of negotiation that acknowledges the inherent tension between homogenization and inclusion" (p. 51). In our context—as in others—a curricular model needs to account for questions of interculturality, educational equity, and sociocultural relevance.

University curricula emerge, then, through a negotiation between hegemonic and local imperatives. This process is sometimes termed glocal—a blend of "global" and "local"—in acknowledgement of the dynamic interaction between global and local actors across multiple contexts, including the economy, culture, and broader education sector. Robertson (1995) defines the phenomenon as one in which "the global and the local intertwine, generating new realities through the negotiation of identities, practices, and knowledge" (p. 30). Torres (2009) further affirms that "a glocal curriculum must prepare students to be global citizens while remaining grounded in their own cultures, languages, and local challenges" (p. 142). A glocal approach to curriculum design consequently rejects the notion of universal truths and standardized systems of teaching and assessment; rather, it advocates for resistance to any hegemonic ideological and social reproduction through emancipatory, critical curricula that celebrate and incorporate cultural diversity and community knowledge. Glocal curricula provide holistic, contextualized education integrating students' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds.

A critical understanding of curriculum necessitates participatory paradigms when addressing the issue of curricular design. Rather than treating educators simply as instructors of prepackaged content, participatory approaches suggest faculty hold agency over content and delivery to the greatest degree possible. Faculty members, after all, are the individuals with the most detailed knowledge of the realities of their classrooms. Their role consequently extends not only to teaching but also, as Stenhouse (1987) emphasizes, to "curriculum developers, since only through their active engagement can the curriculum be meaningful and responsive to the realities of the educational context" (p. 142). In a post-colonial context, imperatives must furthermore adopt a decolonial approach, visibilising and contesting coloniality as an ideology "based on the racialization of bodies, products, and knowledge" (Quijano, 2024, p. 21). Díaz Barriga (2003) summarizes this sentiment well: "The teacher, as an epistemic subject, must participate in curricular decision-making so that curriculum

is not an external imposition, but a situated and shared construction" (p. 112). This situated dimension is particularly relevant for public universities like ours, where the curriculum must engage with complex, pluricultural realities. Finally, the question of praxis, or how theory may usefully be operationalized through practice, requires educators' involvement in policy-level decision-making in order for it to be effective. Grundy (1987) summarizes this point as follows: "Teachers must be part of curriculum design because they are the ones who translate curriculum into pedagogical practice. Their exclusion diminishes the curriculum's ability to respond to classroom realities" (p. 121). No curriculum can be effective if it is not lived, shaped, and adapted by those who teach it daily.

In conclusion, curriculum design should be neither vertical nor technocratic. Active participation from faculty is essential in crafting educational proposals that are contextualized, equitable, and critically engaged. Involving teachers in curriculum design is not only a pedagogical imperative but also a political and ethical one. The transition between a theoretical frame and one of praxis nonetheless entailed a degree of complexity in order to ensure meaningful and willing participation from stakeholders whose priorities at times proved divergent.

Methodology

The most appropriate methodology for a situated, decolonial process of curricular reform was naturally that of participatory action research (PAR). This approach emphasizes experiential knowledge and seeks to address systemic inequalities by fostering active participation and leadership from those most affected. Key elements of this approach include shared understanding, collaborative analysis, and strategic planning (Cornish et al., 2023). In this context, PAR entails involving participants in defining problems and developing actionable solutions for educational transformation (Roca, 2024).

The study sought to answer one central research question: How can a situated and critical curriculum reform process be developed through the leadership of participating faculty while integrating the collective perspectives of other stakeholders (students, alumni, and employers)? To better illustrate the curriculum design process, Figure 1 offers an overview of the stages involved in creating the proposed 2025 curriculum.

Figure 1
Participatory Curriculum Design Process
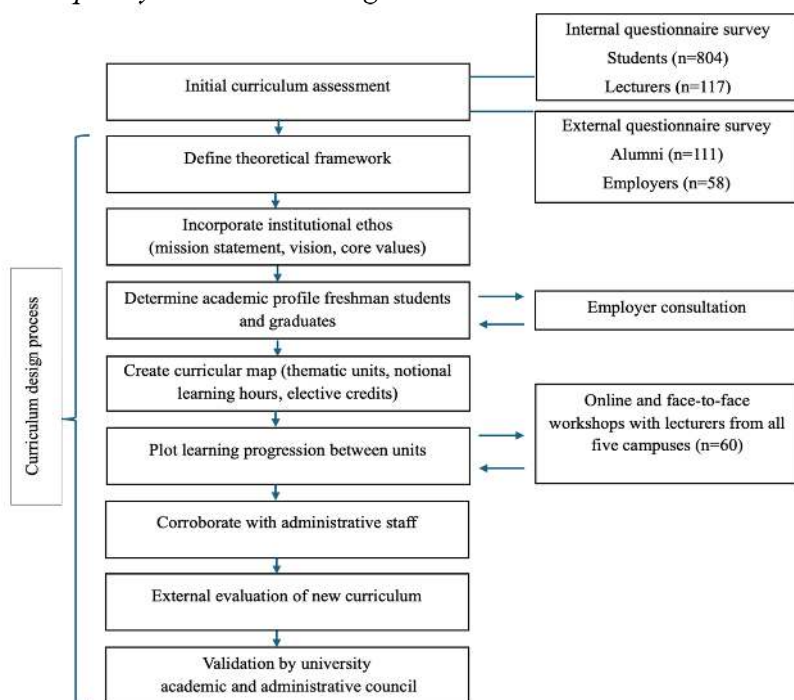
Initial Curriculum Assessment and Planning

Before embarking on the curriculum design process, a preliminary diagnostic survey was necessary. This first stage took place over a five-month period (August–December 2023) and applied Likert-scale questionnaires to identify strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in the previous 2011 curriculum. These surveys targeted students (n=804) and faculty (n=117) across three active campuses of the School of Languages (Main Oaxaca City Campus, Santo Domingo Tehuantepec, and Puerto Escondido) on both full-time and part-time courses. The newly established campuses of Huajuapan de León and Villa de Tututepec were excluded from this phase due to their recent inception.

The inclusion of students from additional campuses in the preliminary study guaranteed the inclusion of Indigenous and Afro-descendant voices. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is, for example, characterized by its deep roots in the Zapotec culture and language; the coastal region around Puerto Escondido is home to significant Afro-descendant communities. The main campus in Oaxaca City is itself exceptionally diverse, composed of students from all 570 municipalities, approximately 10% of whom speak one of the fifteen languages Indigenous to the state. Furthermore, the sample also included members of the LGBTIQ+ community and some students with motor and visual disabilities, as the inclusive policies of the Faculty of Languages promote the presence of members of diverse vulnerable groups in its classrooms.

Additionally, the preliminary study gathered perspectives from external stakeholders by surveying alumni (n=111, from 2006–2023 cohorts) and employers in both the public and private sectors, as well as various NGOs (n=58).

Employer Consultation

Employability was found to be a key concern for students and alumni. As such, dialogue with a range of employers was suggested as an important step early on in the curriculum design process. On July 12, 2024, an Employers' Forum was organized where employers were able to offer input on desirable graduate profiles. This event achieved a wide range of participants, including heads of schools, HR personnel, and teachers from basic, secondary, and higher education institutions from diverse educational contexts, including rural areas and various regions. We were thus able to promote and sustain meaningful community and intercultural dialogue. This input helped deepen ongoing discussions within the certificate program.

This triangulation enabled a comprehensive understanding of the curriculum's current impact.

The data gleaned from these stages of the study suggested initial points of inquiry for the curriculum design process. To ensure opinions and suggestions expressed by students, graduates, and employers were taken into consideration, relevant comments were read out at the start of working meetings with teachers. Many requests and suggestions resonated with academic staff and were incorporated as new subjects or curricular content, such as strengthening inclusive and intercultural education, incorporating emotional education, eliminating repetitive content, and supporting professional internships.

Teacher Collaboration

Teachers from all three campuses were invited to participate voluntarily in the new curriculum. The Oaxaca City campus hosted weekly meetings, to which teachers from the Tehuantepec and Puerto Escondido campuses also joined and participated virtually.

To offer a degree of reciprocity to subject lecturers involved in this process, who did not receive any financial compensation for their work, it was decided to recognize their fundamental role in developing the new curriculum by granting a certificate with academic value at the diploma level. The diploma program was scheduled to start on May 3, 2024, with weekly sessions spanning an 8-month period (excluding vacations).

The initial assessment, as well as all core planning, was conducted by full-time faculty from the School of Languages. Community knowledge was intended to be prioritized, as in the proposals of the Ecology of Knowledge and the Southern Epistemologies of Boaventura de Sousa.

Curricular Map and Learning Progression

The most significant undertaking involved the mapping and orientation of thematic units. An internal

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curricular expert was named to facilitate workshops for this stage, involving the contributions of approximately 60 adjunct faculty. As such, the core curriculum was built collaboratively, dialogically, and in a decentralized manner through the use of working groups, guided discussions, and collaborative questioning.

Faculty members were divided into subject area working groups for the sake of efficiency: Pedagogy, Research, English Language, Additional Languages, and Electives. Thus, a total of 52 programs were designed. In each area, collaborative work and contextualization of knowledge were prioritized; for example, for English modules, developing tailored materials was recommended as a strategy to counteract the Euro-American biases of textbooks.

The final stages of the consultation required input from administrators. Administrators helped incorporate a wide number of non-academic activities into the program that contribute to reaching objectives. For instance, the mandatory 200 extracurricular hours students must complete were expanded to integrate or consolidate content, including peace education, biopsychosocial healthcare, cultural and sports activities, amongst others. Similarly, requirements for professional internships, community service, and other degree requirements were updated.

Validation of the New Educational Program

A formal external evaluation of the curriculum was finally undertaken, culminating in the formal approval of the proposed curriculum by the School's Academic Council on February 12, 2025, and the University Administrative Council on March 26, 2025. Presenting the new program to faculty and university councils for approval marked an appropriate closure of the curriculum elaboration process, since these bodies are democratic entities constituted entirely of faculty and students.

Discussion

The faculty's successful delivery of a decolonial curricular reform elicited celebration from staff, students and stakeholders; the reform process nonetheless traversed several conflicts that merit further discussion. In a time of profound educational change and uncertainty, the prospect of 'restructuring' within the workplace is rarely welcomed with open arms. In this chapter, we address the more granular details of struggle regarding graduate employability, labor rights, and language equity. Each point is addressed briefly below with examples and provisional solutions.

Employability and decoloniality may seem an odd coupling as a point of departure for a piece of action research. In a context where racialization and social class remain widely conflated with linguistic competence and professionalism (Cushing & Snell, 2022; López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014; Ramjattan, 2025), these emerged nonetheless as a key consideration during our preliminary study. The development of graduate profiles proved particularly complex, aligning philosophical ideals with the express concrete needs of key stakeholders—primarily, alumni and employers. Somewhat surprisingly, employers repeatedly raised discipline-related competences: punctuality, presentation, and 'resilience'. Each of these professional competencies is aligned with an instrumentalist, rationalist and neoliberal logic that exists in tension with our stated intercultural and decolonial aims (Quijano, 2024, pp. 95–131); as such, incorporating them into the curricular map proved challenging. As a provisional measure, increased importance was afforded to employer-led courses, community service, internships, and compulsory extracurricular hours in mapping students' transition into the workforce. Similarly, two modules ('Reflective Practice in Professional Contexts' and 'Inclusion, Identity, and Professional Ethics') were included in the fifth semester, when students begin professional internships, with the aim of promoting group reflection on employability issues. However, we recognize this problematization of certain aspects of professionalism as an important area for further investigation through an intercultural lens in order to balance the prioritization of local culture, languages, and social norms with a responsiveness to global demands as our graduates continue to engage professionally both locally and globally.

The most controversial aspect of this curricular reform was, however, its perceived threat to job security for lecturers. Despite the democratic mandate behind reform, lecturers expressed concern that their modules would be eliminated and they would consequently lose teaching hours, or else, major changes might render their materials redundant. To ensure a smoother process, institutional leadership had to publicly

guarantee that no faculty members would lose teaching hours under the new curriculum. With this assurance, participation became significantly more constructive and creative. For example, one module on 'Comparative Linguistics' was criticized as increasingly outdated and problematic due to its focus on contrastive modes of analysis between European languages (Lado, 1957); rather than eliminating the module, it was instead rebranded as 'Comparative Linguistics and Translanguaging' to reconcile this approach with more critical and decolonial understandings of language contact (Wei & García, 2022). Similarly, other subjects were updated to privilege contextual and local epistemologies; these include, for example, 'Language Teaching in Oaxaca and Other Contexts' or 'Critical Teaching Strategies, Resources and New Technologies'. As such, the new curriculum presents Eurocentric knowledge systems alongside critical, situated and decolonial alternatives, preparing students for a world and workplace where such understandings inevitably coexist and an uncertain yet hopeful horizon.

It is important to mention that the principle of 'libre cátedra' or 'academic autonomy' at Mexican public universities further safeguards lecturers regarding their delivery of content. Ultimately, the precedent of an underlying decolonial current in the previous 2011 curriculum, the dialogical and participatory methodology, and a sensitivity to working conditions for both staff and students facilitated the reform process.

As with any research addressing language education and decoloniality, the most inexorably ingrained issue faced during this study was that of language hierarchies. English—and to a much lesser extent, other European and colonial languages, including French, Portuguese, and Japanese—hold significantly greater import within and without academia. Despite Oaxaca's rich linguistic heritage as a region where an indigenous language is spoken in 42% of households (INEGI, 2021), interest in learning and teaching Zapotec or Mixtec remains muted. In addition to students' lack of interest in indigenous languages, other logistical challenges included a limited number of indigenous language teachers, significant dialectal variation within those languages and a scarcity of authentic teaching materials.

Furthermore, English language proficiency remains a graduation requirement determining student priorities (López-Gopar, 2021). Calls were made in our sessions to strengthen instruction in other languages— through departmental collaboration, extracurricular hours, and more. For example, student-led workshops can be an ideal space to spark interest in and promote the teaching of indigenous languages. The possibility of replacing the English language certification requirement with proof of speaking an indigenous language was also suggested as a welcome alternative. Additionally, graduation requirements were quietly reduced from a B2 to a B1 level of proficiency. Nonetheless, promoting the teaching of indigenous languages in the region remains an issue that requires urgent attention from educators, administrators, and researchers.

Conclusions

Building a curriculum with the participation of all stakeholders presents an undeniably daunting challenge. The process described here addresses only a very limited selection of concerns and perspectives expressed by faculty, students, graduates, and employers during our surveys, forums, workshops, meetings, and reflections. Nonetheless, we hope this brief overview offers something of a prototype to institutions considering such an undertaking, as well as a flavor of the rich contributions provided by participants. While not all proposals were integrated into the formal reform, many were taken up within the program's more flexible components, such as elective courses, workshops, extracurricular activities, teaching observations, and internships. Walking this path together became a profoundly educational experience for all involved, and we hope that documentation of this process inspires others to brave similar initiatives. Our commitment to bringing future employers into the classroom and offering work placements to our students hopes to address issues of employability among our graduates, though further work may be required to problematize discriminatory practices in the workplace. Our participatory paradigm enabled us to navigate concerns regarding job security among lecturers and may offer useful insights for institutions outside of Mexico regarding resistance to ideological restructuring. Unfortunately, the question of how best to promote language instruction in languages indigenous to the region remains very much an issue to be addressed through future endeavors, present to all of those engaged with this process.

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