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Developing Competencies under the National English Program for Basic Education in Mexico: Is It Possible?

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Disclaimer: *The views and opinions presented in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the MEXTESOL Journal.*

Abstract

With the launch and adoption of the National English Program for Basic Education (NEPBE), the Mexican Educational System has substantially increased the time students must devote to the learning of English as a foreign language during their compulsory education of Basic Education. In the 2011-2012 school year English was introduced beginning at the last year of kindergarten and up to 9th grade, as opposed to the previous three-year program of 7th to 9th grades. Along with other actions (in-service teacher development courses, new methodologies, and assessment), this ambitious change in the curricular level aims at contributing to the improvement of the current quality of education. However, if a solid framework for success is not ensured, success is jeopardized. Success is to be measured in terms of the amount and quality students develop competencies for life, but since succeeding in this endeavor is not dependent on one isolated change: the increase of time devoted to learning English regardless of how powerful it can be, careful attention must be given to the areas of complete coverage across the country, and a proper funding must be ensured as well.

Resumen

Con el lanzamiento y adopción del Programa Nacional de Inglés para la Educación Básica (PNIEB), el sistema educativo mexicano ha incrementado sustancialmente el tiempo que los estudiantes deben dedicar al aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera durante su educación obligatoria de Educación Básica. En el ciclo escolar 2011-2012 la asignatura de Inglés fue introducida en el tercer grado de preescolar para ser cursada hasta el tercer grado de la educación secundaria, en oposición al programa anterior de tres grados (educación secundaria). Junto con otras acciones (cursos de actualización docente, la adopción de nuevas metodologías y la atención a la evaluación), este cambio ambicioso en el nivel curricular tiene como propósito contribuir a la mejora de la calidad de la educación actual; sin embargo, si no se construye un marco sólido para garantizar el éxito, éste estará en riesgo de no alcanzarse. El éxito ha de ser medido en términos de la cantidad y calidad con las que los estudiantes desarrollan sus competencias para la vida, pero en tanto que esto no depende de un solo cambio, el incremento en el tiempo dedicado al aprendizaje del inglés independientemente de qué tan poderoso pueda ser, debe garantizarse una adecuada atención a las áreas de acceso universal y al financiamiento adecuado del programa.

The Mexican Educational System has recently made a sudden and substantial modification in the teaching of English as a foreign language. From the three-year program at the secondary level that we traditionally had (7th to 9th grades), in a couple of swift movements an ambitious ten year program (K-9) was adopted that is expected to improve the linguistic and communicative competencies of our students in English. This unexpected change in the priorities and specific weight that has been imposed on this target language in the general curriculum for Basic Education has brought concerns and new challenges for many people.

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The purpose of this article is to offer an overview and opinion of the National Program of English for Basic Education (NEPBE) from the inside. Often the perception that “outsiders” have of the phenomena and situations of a given event is somewhat different from what the “insiders” perceive, but the opposite is also quite common. People within do not always get to see what is obvious to people outside. In contrasting both positions, we might be able to create a clearer picture of such an event, and in doing so, we have the possibility to intervene and improve on any weaknesses there may be.

To begin, my initial assumption is that in launching such an ambitious program of English all across mandatory education in a country so large and so diverse without having created the framework for success to be fully guaranteed, there are chances that the outcomes may be different from those intended by the policymakers. Moreover, if the NEPBE is not supported by the different state bureaus of education with a number of adequate decisions and actions, it might be doomed to failure.

I will first provide some general background information for the readers who are not familiar with the Mexican educational system, especially as refers to the 2011 Study Plan for Basic Education (K-9), and the Comprehensive Reform of Basic Education (Reforma Integral a la Educación Básica, RIEB).² I then define some basic concepts and continue with a brief outline on what the NEPBE is and how it has developed into what it is today. I will also give a general description of today’s state of the art of the teaching of English as a foreign language in Mexico, and the challenges that the new reality is imposing on us if we are to develop the expected linguistic and communicative competencies in all our students. I will close this brief analysis with some general reflections. This article is based upon my perspectives concerning the program.

Background

The educational policies in Mexico in the most recent years have been oriented to improving the quality of education so that all children learn the basic skills, knowledge and attitudes and values needed for a better life. These policies have been integrated in what is known as the Comprehensive Reform of Basic Education, which, according to our leaders in the field:

[It] is a public policy that fosters the comprehensive education of all the pre-school, elementary and secondary education students, aiming at favoring the development of life competencies and attaining the completion profile based on expected learning outcomes and on the establishment of curricular standards, teacher performance standards, and management standards. (SEP, 2011, p. 17) [author’s translation]

The general assumption that underlies this trend is that the more literate, skillful and sensitive the citizens are the better lifestyle they will have. Additionally, this reform revolves around a new scope for issues related to following four areas:

1. Curricular re-engineering. Curriculum renewal has been seen as an important action of this reform. It is believed that the adoption of a competencies-based model will help us respond to the necessities of the development of our country in the 21st century (Programa Sectorial de Educación 2007-2012, 2007, p.15).

² Basic Education (K-9) in Mexico comprises of three levels: pre-primary (K), primary (1-6) and secondary (7-9) instruction.

2. In-service teacher development programs. Since permanent and systematic in-service development programs predict an increase in the quality of education, a variety of courses and workshops offered, aiming at helping teachers increase their understanding in the theoretical basis of education, as well as enhancing their professional competencies, that is, integrating theory into practice. Every school system deserves world-class teachers and that is why it is now understood that professional development is a life-long endeavor.
3. Methodologies. This area includes two basic pedagogical principles as stated in the 2011 Study Plan and these refer to: Focus attention on the students and on their learning processes and work collaboratively to foster learning (SEP, 2011, pp. 26-28). Cooperative learning is also highly valued and encouraged, yet it is my opinion that it has not yet been fully adopted by many teachers
4. Assessment. Teacher and student assessment are seen here as an important road that leads to improvement and quality in education. In this regard, in February of 2013, a constitutional amendment was decreed to grant the National Institute of Educational Assessment (Instituto Nacional para la Evaluación de la Educación, INEE) the responsibility to assess the whole system using the most suitable methods (Diario Oficial, February 26, 2013, Decreto de Reforma a los Artículos Constitucionales 3o. y 73). As for students, they are periodically assessed by means of national and international standardized tests (Evaluación Nacional de Logro Académico en Centros Escolares, ENLACE, and the Program for International Student Assessment, PISA), and teachers are also assessed on a yearly basis. The results, in addition to examining the school system, constitute an opportunity to redefine the actions that are to be taken for hopefully life-long learning to take place.

These and other issues considered for this reform, among other sources, come from a series of recommendations made by Hopkins et al. (2007) to our educational system after he and his team conducted an analysis of the surprising results in the 2006 evaluation in PISA administered by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). However, there is an important consideration to highlight at this point: The quality of education will not improve automatically even if these twelve recommendations (see Appendix 1) or others to come are not attended to or are attended to in an isolated manner in my opinion.

Moreover, quality must not only meet our national social and economic requirements, it ought to follow current global trends as well. Today, globalization of today imposes certain demands upon people. Nowadays, for example, English has undoubtedly become the *lingua franca* through which exchanges in science, technology and entertainment take place on a daily basis around the world. English is the language for worldwide communication. In August 2009, English was introduced in a handful of schools in grades K-3 as a pilot program (<http://www.pnieb.net/inicio.html>)³.

³ The official school year in Mexico begins in August, usually during the third week of this month, and ends by the beginning of July.

By 2011-2012 the three levels of the Basic Education System were expected to be taught under the new syllabi or English programs for each cycle.⁴ The incorporation of English in the general curriculum for Basic Education beginning in the last stage of pre-primary aims at forming highly competent users of this foreign language upon completion of their compulsory schooling.

Competences for life in the 2011 Study Plan

Whereas constructs such as *competencies* and *standards* have been commonly used in educational settings in different countries for decades, these terms are relatively new in the teacher's jargon in Mexico. Some of them were newly introduced with this comprehensive reform, as stated in our redefined curriculum:

The 2011 Study Plan (curriculum) for Basic Education is the governing document that defines the competencies for life, the completion profile, curricular standards and the expected learning outcomes, which altogether make up the students' educational trajectory, and has the purpose of contributing to the formation of the democratic critical and creative citizens required by the 21st century Mexican society at the national and global levels which in turn consider both the human and universal beings. (SEP, 2011, p.25) [author's translation]

In this regard, both dimensions of the human being are to be fostered through key competencies for life. Being competent in the "human" or personal dimension ensures the individual's own and national identity, whereas being competent in the "universal" sense makes him or her competitive in the global village. Both dimensions are paramount in the world of today.

There are twelve principles that uphold the 2011 Study Plan or curriculum and they are based upon the aims of the Mexican Ministry of Education. These principles are thought to ensure better and life-long learning in our students and are found in Appendix 2. Because of the novelty both conceptually and practically, I will now devote some attention to principle number 5 (Focus on the development of competencies and on achieving curricular standards and expected learning outcomes) because this principle relates to competencies.

Many scholars have theorized about competencies in education for the last two decades, although the term has been around for more than half a century. Key competencies may differ in type or degree among different scholars as may the concepts. However, they also have commonalities. There seems to be a generalized agreement on the fact that a competency is the ability to respond to different situations in different contexts because it constitutes knowing, knowing how, and knowing how to be. In other words, it is a balance between knowledge, skills, and attitudes and values. Competencies are acknowledged as necessary for personal and social fulfillment and development. But a competency is much more than the simple coexistence of knowledge, skills and attitudes and they should be interrelated (Zabala & Arnau, 2007). Moreover, competencies for life

⁴ As it has already been pointed out, schools are supposed to be teaching English across the three levels of Basic Education in what has been divided into four "cycles". Cycle 1 includes the last year of pre-school, first and second grades of elementary education; Cycle 2 includes third and fourth grades only. Cycle 3 is fifth and sixth grades and Cycle 4 includes the three grades of secondary education. A total of ten years for developing both, linguistic and communicative competent low intermediate speakers of English.

should be acquired during schooling, that is, learners must be equipped with everything they need for active and engaged citizenship as well as for personal growth (ibid).

The following key competencies for life are to be developed throughout the Basic Education levels:

1. Competencies for permanent learning;
2. Competencies for the use of information;
3. Competencies for dealing with situations;
4. Competencies for interaction;
5. Competencies for life in society.

Together, they will certainly give people greater chances of succeeding in life. Another new term is *learning outcomes*. Tuning Educational Structures in Europe distinguishes learning outcomes from competencies. It is assured that the former are "statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of learning" whereas "competencies represent a dynamic combination of knowledge, understanding, skills and abilities". In short, learning outcomes are the result of a single course, unit or class. Competencies, on the other hand, are formed in various courses and over a longer period of time. In this regard, school must ensure solid learning outcomes because they will lead our students to develop competencies that they need for life (Project Tuning).

Finally, *standards* are statements that define what students ought to know and be able to do at the end of each level. They are achievement descriptors and they express the learning outcomes. They match international standards and are a referent for assessment. In understanding these basic concepts and teaching towards them, educators should be able to promote lifelong learning in their students, at least ideally because there seem to be many other intervening factors that also influence the outcomes. Despite their effect, aiming at a clear target increases the possibilities of reaching our goals.

The place of English in the Mexican educational system: Then and now

As stated above, English as a foreign language has been given a new status in the official Mexican curriculum. English (or French in only a handful of schools) has always been taught officially in Mexico and it has always been a school subject in secondary education despite the changes in the curricula throughout time. Of course, what has changed is the scope and sequence of the contents, which have been determined mainly from the results of research in linguistics and psychology. Now, regardless of the changes in the contents and in the teaching approaches throughout the years to adjust it to the new trends in foreign language teaching, there is concluding evidence that proves that all the efforts have been insufficient to make learners competent users of English. Although English is not assessed in the domestic and international standardized tests (ENLACE and PISA), the poor results in mathematics, language arts, and science, the three core areas, make us certain of the outcomes English (http://www.enlace.sep.gob.mx/content/gr/docs/2013/historico/00_EB_2013.pdf).

To exemplify, even though the gap between underachievers and achievers in these standardized tests is clearly being bridged, the distance is still catastrophic. As for secondary education in mathematics, 79.7% of the students who took ENLACE in 2012

scored insufficient or elemental; only 20.3% ranked good or excellent. In language arts the variation is only a matter of decimals (SEP, 2012), so what can we expect in content areas that are not top priority in our current curriculum? In the end, students are not able to communicate in English in any form. In general, a great number of adolescent learners can barely comprehend or produce conventional written or oral English, often not even at a very basic level. Regrettably this is not surprising due to the inefficiency of the whole educational system in my opinion, but since no government can stay inactive before such a catastrophe, one more attempt was needed to be carried out to straighten things up. This is the comprehensive reform we are going through.

The *status quo* had to be changed if we wanted to catch up with years of failure. The basic strategy has been done at the curricular level, but is this enough? Will the learning of English be assured by tripling teaching time? For better or worse, the first changes have been made. It is not that I am skeptical about what has been promised, rather, it is just that I believe that success is not dependent on one movement. Many other actions have to be done simultaneously, especially considering the great challenge it represents to introduce millions of young learners to English. Let us analyze three of those factors that need careful attention.

Teacher recruitment.

The Mexican educational system is enormous, given that only in Basic Education the government caters to almost 25 million students. Bringing quality education to any area, including English, is by no means an easy task. The problem would most surely not be too worrisome if teacher recruitment was done seriously and selectively, but it does not always happen in such a way. Again, Hopkins et al., (2007) acknowledge that the lack of quality is strongly dependent on the mechanisms in which teachers are hired for teaching positions and enrolled in colleges of education. It seems that the best individuals do not always choose to enter our teacher training schools. Eventually, many of those students who do enter education programs become teachers whose performance in the classroom is not up to *par*. This is a reality that our system has been trying to combat. What does this mean concerning the new urgency in recruiting teachers of English?

It is a general misconception that speakers of a given language can automatically teach it. Because Mexico neighbors the United States of America, many people “speak” that language at different levels of proficiency. In the near past, many “speakers” of English took teaching positions in secondary schools despite being poorly trained in that language and not trained at all in the methodology of the teaching of foreign languages. The results have led to obvious disappointments. Simply because a person knows an academic discipline does not mean he or she knows how to teach that material to students effectively. Teachers of any content area should have majored in teaching because of the complexity of this activity.

Today, when qualified teachers are needed to teach in the NEPBE, recruitment needs to be approached carefully. The program has not been launched adequately, reproducing once again one of our biggest flaws: failing to prepare the necessary human resources ahead of time. We have insufficient human capital to teach English at least for Cycles 1 and 2 of the Basic Education system. Would it not have been wiser to select and prepare the personnel before actually starting this ambitious program? Failure can be prevented,

especially if experience and research tell us what must be done and how. There is no form in which competencies will be developed in the English class if incompetent *educators* are in charge of *teaching*.

Another flaw in hiring teachers is that those who are qualified to teach often are certified for teaching adolescents rather than young learners whose ages range from five to eleven. Until recently, only secondary school students were taught English. Very few courses, if any, were offered in universities around the country. Being able to teach foreign languages to adolescents helps a lot, but training is not enough to teach younger learners due to their specific cognitive processes.

Coverage, an issue of equity

Megacities, such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey, have large population concentrations, making it easier to recruit teachers. However, thousands of rural communities also exist where it is harder to recruit and retain teachers. The salaries of newly hired English teachers for pre-primary and elementary schools are truly low, since according to the official yearly salary schedule approved by the National Office of Public Education (SEP), they have not yet accumulated years of teaching experience. Moreover, they do not qualify for the additional benefits that elementary and secondary school teachers have, such as the end of the year compensation or other funds because they have not been incorporated to the teacher's labor union. All this jeopardizes access and permanence, especially in remote rural areas because these teachers invest a major portion of their payment in transportation and lodging. Unfortunately, no follow-up has been done to the PNIEB so far, but job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and resignation are regrettably most surely to happen based on the research of Peiró and Prieto (1996). At the end, the gap between urban and rural schools is unlikely to close. On the contrary, it is likely to expand even more. Ten years of schooling in English is aimed at empowering our people, but not being able to cover all the population at the end will empower many, but disempower the least favored sector of our society even more, and the result will inevitably be more polarization of the society.

Equality is not a synonym for equity. The former exists when everybody is given the same opportunities regardless of their individual needs. On the other hand, in my opinion, equity exists when everyone has what they need to place them in the same conditions for attaining success in life. Socioeconomic and educational systems can be inequitable and, thus, the poor may be even poorer. The illiterate may be even more illiterate if quality education is not provided to them equitably. The learning of English must not be another factor of differentiation among the already different sectors of our society because this language is the key that opens other doors, the doors of science, art, technology, entertainment. In other words, it opens the door to the outer world.

Funding

For any program to be successful, money must be invested. In addition to teachers' salaries, other aspects need to be funded; books, technology, infrastructure, teaching materials, supervision, and teacher preparation and in-service development are the most obvious. Learners need hands-on materials, audio recordings, access to the internet, and a variety of other resources. Otherwise the learning of English will not be as powerful and meaningful as it should be.

Conclusions

Given the weaknesses of education in Mexico, every attempt at improving it is certainly valuable. The new curriculum states very clearly the profile that students must have by the end of their compulsory schooling, clarifying aspects like the expected learning outcomes, the learning standards and the competencies that they must have developed by then. Literacy in English now begins at a very early age and is present in kindergarten, primary and secondary levels contributing to the students' personal development for enabling them to play an important role in their personal, family and social life. That is why being competent is important nowadays. Competencies are understood as the mobilization of scientific and technical knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes to make a person a complete human being that will lead him or her to happiness. That is the essence of education: educating the whole human being. This includes a comprehensive approach addressing the moral, intellectual, and social needs of the student in order to achieve his/her wellbeing.

Undoubtedly, this is attainable if the correct decisions are made by government and education policymakers. But it is also necessary for teachers to do their share with commitment and passion. Similarly, parents must be truly involved in the common task of elevating the quality of the education system. This is not a one-sided endeavor. It is the responsibility of all forces directed at only one aim which is quality.

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Appendix 1 Recommendations for Mexico (Hopkins et al., 2007, pp. 4-5)

- Recommendation 1: Establish a compelling moral purpose for the reform of the Mexican educational system
- Recommendation 2: Establish absolute clarity about the standards expected in key areas (such as literacy, numeracy and information technology) required for students at various levels in the system.
- Recommendation 3: Align the curriculum to these key areas and produce high quality and practical materials to support the work of teachers.
- Recommendation 4: Develop assessment approaches around the standards that provide regular diagnostic information for formative assessment and monitoring.
- Recommendation 5: Invest heavily in enhancing teacher quality.
- Recommendation 6: Move quickly to improve the quality of leadership at school and system level.
- Recommendation 7: Increase autonomy at key levels within the system - state, regional and school- but maintain strong national frameworks.
- Recommendation 8: Intervene positively in those schools and areas that have the strongest challenges and support those students most at risk.
- Recommendation 9: Review the organization of schooling in Mexico in light of the principles being espoused for the reform of the Bachillerato.
- Recommendation 10: Take immediate steps to expand teachers supply in Mexico.
- Recommendation 11: Review the balance of funding of education.
- Recommendation 12: Build a 'guiding coalition' among the key stakeholders in education in Mexico.

Appendix 2 The Twelve Pedagogical Principles that Sustain the Study Plan (Curriculum) (http://telesecundaria.dgme.sep.gob.mx/plan_estudios.pdf, pp.26-37) [author's translation]

1. Focus attention on the students and on their learning processes.
2. Plan to promote learning.
3. Create environments for learning
4. Work collaboratively to foster learning.
5. Focus on the development of competencies and on achieving curricular standards and expected learning outcomes.
6. Use teaching materials to enhance learning.
7. Assess to ensure learning.
8. Promote inclusion to attend to diversity.
9. Incorporate socially relevant topics.
10. Renew the pact among students, teachers, family and school.
11. Reorient leadership.
12. Tutoring and academic counseling in school.