

Teacher and Student Perceptions of the Learning Activities in the NEPBE: A Case Study from Nayarit¹

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Abstract

The Mexican Secretary of Public Education (SEP by its initials in Spanish) put into operation the National English Program for Basic Education (NEPBE) as part of the Integral Basic Education reform. The program is centered around the adoption of an educational model based on competencies, with a socio cultural approach founded in Vygotsky (1995). The NEPBE divides three levels of English into 4 cycles with basic contents, which are defined by two main models: social practices of language and specific competencies. The concern of the present study is to detect the implementation problems of the activities proposed by NEPBE in cycle II. Two data collection instruments were used; an open questionnaire applied to 21% of the total of English teachers in cycle II in Nayarit and a closed questionnaire applied to 74% of the teachers in cycle II in Nayarit. The results show that the practices that students like the best are the "children's songs" and the "crossword puzzles" while the practices students did not like at all were the "guide of curious questions" and "the diagrams".

Resumen

La Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) puso en marcha el Programa Nacional de Inglés para Educación Básica como parte de la reforma integral de Educación Básica. El programa está centrado en la adopción de un modelo educativo basado en competencias, con un enfoque socio cultural fundamentado en Vygotsky(1995). El PNIEB divide tres niveles de Inglés en 4 ciclos con contenidos básicos que son definidos por dos modelos: Las prácticas sociales del lenguaje y las competencias específicas. El interés del presente estudio es detectar los problemas de implementación de las actividades propuestas por el PNIEB para el ciclo II. Para esto se utilizaron dos instrumentos para recolectar datos; un cuestionario abierto que fue aplicado al 21% del total de maestros de Inglés en el ciclo II en Nayarit y un cuestionario cerrado que fue aplicado al 74% de los maestros del ciclo II en Nayarit. Los resultados muestran que las prácticas que más gustan a los estudiantes son "canciones para niños" y los "crucigramas" mientras que las practicas que menos gustan a los estudiantes son la "guía de preguntas curiosas" y los "diagramas".

Introduction

The United Nations statement reflects International trends towards the transformation of educational systems in order to bring them more in line with economic and social needs. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2011) has expressed the need to consider multilingual and multicultural competencies in educational design policy in order to facilitate contact between multiple languages and cultures (Delors et al., 1996, p.31). In the same vein, the Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económico (OCDE, 2001) has stated that citizens should have an education based on life competencies that permit them to adapt to a complex and changing world. In accordance to this, the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) in 2008 "started the National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE) from which syllabuses for the three levels of Basic Education are derived. Such syllabuses are devised based on the alignment and standardization of national and international standards" (SEP, 2010, p.85).

Program Characteristics

The trial and implementation phases of NEPBE for 2009-2012 have been completed and now the NEPBE is in the expansion phase. Every school in the country must be incorporated into the

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program by 2018. During the first expansion phase the program is structured in 4 cycles that correspond to the three levels of basic education. The program of study for English as a second language in Basic Education has two distinctive features: they are distributed in cycles and not academic years in order to "ensure continuity and articulation in different academic years and levels of education" (SEP, 2010, p.11). In addition, the programs of study are flexible because they present a guide of sequences and contents that teachers can adapt according to the context. The program contents are essential and are defined by the social language practices and specific competences (SEP, 2010).

The social practices of language represent the approach for the language teaching adopted by the Secretariat of Public Education and the core referent in the definition of NEPBE's contents... They are patterns or ways of interaction, which, in addition to the production and interpretation of spoken and written texts, include several activities linked to them. Each practice has a specific communicative purpose and a history linked to a particular cultural situation. (SEP, 2006, p. 9)

Competence is the capability to perform a task or deal with different situations resourcefully; in order to do this the individual should combine attitude, ability and knowledge (SEP, 2012). Derived from the general competences the specific competencies students have to develop "are conceived as complex and articulated configurations of the doing with, knowing about, and being through the language, whose purpose is to preserve the formal aspects and functions of language within social life" (SEP, 2011, p. 25).

The foundations of the NEPBE curriculum are mainly based on the socio cultural theory (also called social constructivism) proposed by Vygotsky (1995), which highlights learning that is generated in everyday communication (social life) such as in those activities directed towards the acquisition of language through three types of "knowledge": doing with the language, knowing about the language, and being through the language (Vargas Ortega & Ban, 2011). Similar to Vygotsky (1995) Bandura (1978) sustains that learning takes place in a social environment in interaction with people, as a consequence of our own actions or through the observation of models (Bandura, 1987). Likewise, Piaget (1979) sustains that cognitive development follows an invariable sequence of stages that develop throughout one's life and that vary in length and social environment. In sum, the socio cultural theory of Vygotsky (1995) is an extension of the work of contemporary psychologists and is the basis of the social practices proposed by the NEPBE.

We are particularly interested in the social practices contained in the syllabus of cycle II of the NEPBE, which has as a general purpose that "students acquire in a progressive fashion the basic communicative competence in order to be able to participate successfully in specific competencies appropriate to the social practices which involve interaction with oral texts and written texts in known situations" (SEP, 2010, p.15). Table 1 shows 10 of the 20 social practices of language for cycle II that promote the development of all four skills (listening and reading comprehension, speaking and writing production) in an interactive way.

ACCESS AND APROXIMATION “A1”: 3rd AND 4th GRADES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		
Familiar and Community Environment	Literary and Ludic Environment	Academic and Educational Environment
Talk and write to participate in everyday dialogues.	Read and sing songs.	Give and receive instructions to make objects and record information.
Offer and receive information about oneself and acquaintances.	Play with words, and read and write for expressive and aesthetic purposes.	Formulate and answer questions in order to find information about a specific topic.
Listen to and express immediate practical needs.	Read narrative texts and recognize cultural expressions from English-speaking countries.	Record and interpret information in a graph.
Interpret messages in advertisements.		

Source: curricula foundation (SEP, 2011, p. 36)

Table 1. Cycle 2 Distribution of social practices of the language by environment

Literature review

There are two studies that are closely related to the present work. The first, Múnera Elorza’s (2007) study carried out over a three year period, had as its main objective to identify the type of teaching strategies used by teachers in the first and second year of elementary school and their effectiveness in students’ learning of English in the Education Center of “Rural la Hermosa” in Toruro, Enterrios Colombia. Múnera Elorza (2007) based her study on the competencies approach to propose educational strategies for teaching English. She collected data using three instruments; a semi-structured interview applied to teachers, class observations, and a diary. After five months of observations she proposed several teaching strategies based in both her research and Vygostky’s concept of zone of proximal development; she designed school workshops and follow up activities in which parents had to support their children at home. She proposed transverse teaching of natural science, technology, social science, physical education, and artistic education with English class. The workshop results showed that the project contributed to the practice and learning of teaching strategies on the part of the teachers and also the improvement of children’s interest and motivation. Parents’ participation allowed children to practice English at home.

The second study that is related to ours is Villasana Usry’s (2011) study. The objective of her study was to design teaching strategies for a group of fifth-graders in an elementary school in “Primaria Rafael Nieto” in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. Villasana Usry based her didactic proposal in the socio cultural approach and social practices of the NEPBE. Her research method was a qualitative one and has an empirical phase implementing a didactic proposal. The instruments she used to collect the data that was later used to design the English teaching strategies were a diary to take notes in class, and a survey she applied to teachers and students.

The strategies were designed based on the data she had collected and the reflexive cycle of Smyth (1991); describe, explain, confront and reconstruct. Villasana Usry applied a pre-test to students before using the strategies she designed. After using the strategies for teaching English to the same students she applied an achievement test. The conflict areas she found were in syntax, semantics and speaking. Munera and Villasana’s studies are similar to our study because we are also interested in exploring the use of didactic material to implement the social practices

of language in elementary schools, however we used different instruments to collect the data in our study. Our concern was to detect the existing problems in Nayarit, in relation to the implementation of the teaching practices proposed by the NEPBE for cycle II.

Methodology for the study

The methodology used for this research is mixed; qualitative and quantitative data was collected. We designed an open questionnaire to obtain information without limits about the teachers' experiences and the problems they face implementing the NEPBE as well as a closed questionnaire that aimed to collect more quantitative data from a larger number of teachers about the social practices of the language, didactic material and infrastructure matters.

Instruments

In order to design the instruments for this study we took into account several aspects that allowed us to understand the particular conditions in which the English language is taught in cycle II in Nayarit. In addition to inquiring about the social practices and the teachers' perception of the students' acceptance of the same, we included some aspects stated in the NEPBE curricula foundation; such as the use of didactic resources, access to printed material and multimedia in English, as well as the use of oral and written texts of different nature (SEP, 2011, pp. 19, 21).

Open questionnaire: The open questionnaire has two parts. The first part collects personal information in order to find out more about the characteristics of the teachers, the schools where they work, their English training, command and certification, as well as their experience as English teachers. The second part has 10 questions (appendix 1) question one to four are about the social practices of language that students like best or do not like at all and the alternatives teachers used instead of the activities students did not like. Question 5 is in relation to the students learning style, question 6 is about didactic material, question 7 enquires about the problems teachers have when planning a lesson and the activities for that lesson, question 8 is about the problems they have with the material provided by the NEPBE and questions 9 and 10 are about the teachers' needs for teacher training. In order to apply this questionnaire we gave teachers a handout with charts showing a summary of the 20 Social practices of language that correspond to cycle II of the NEPBE (SEP, 2010); this handout was useful for the teacher because they could answer by just using the number of the social practice.

Closed questionnaire: The closed questionnaire has 7 questions. Question 1 and 2 asks teachers of 3rd and 4th grade their opinion about their students' acceptance of the 20 Social practices of language; which ones they liked the best and which ones they did not like at all. Question 3 used a likert scale to find out the frequency with which teachers used different education material. In questions 4 to 7 teachers had to answer questions about the problems they face in relation to the didactic material that they are provided with, the facilities and technology equipment in the schools where they were teaching, as well as the support they have from the principal of the school where they worked (appendix 2)

SPSS and Excel: Software used for the quantitative data analysis and graphic design.

Subjects

The closed questionnaire was applied to 58 teachers, 32 women and 26 men; their average age is around 32 years old. Most of them have an acceptable command of English, however they do not have a degree in English teaching and many of them do not have previous experience teaching English. It is important to mention that only 43 of them returned the questionnaire answered.

The open questionnaire was applied to 12 teachers of English currently teaching in cycle II who were willing to dedicate more time to answer the questionnaire; 67% of them are women and 33% of them are men with an average age of around 32 years old. 75% of the teachers belong to urban schools while 25% of them belong to rural schools. Not all the basic education English teachers have a certification as English teachers; they are sometimes hired to do the job based on their command of the English language or because of administrative issues. After applying the open questionnaire, we were able to obtain more information about them due to the fact that the first part is dedicated to collecting personal information about the teachers (see results section).

Procedure

The questionnaires were applied in September 2012 to teachers currently teaching in cycle II of the NEPBE program, but also to teachers currently teaching cycle I and III who have also taught in cycle II. Questionnaires were given to teachers attending a teacher training conference with permission having been received in advance from the authorities. We asked the 58 teachers attending the conference to answer the closed questionnaire but only 43 of them were willing to do so. The open questionnaires were applied to 12 teachers who were willing to spend some more time answering the questions

Results

Open questionnaire

75% of the teachers in cycle II have a bachelor degree, 17% of them have knowledge about the methodology of English teaching and 67% of them have some sort of English language certification, which does not mean that they are foreign language teachers. According to their answers 42% of the teachers have an advanced level of English 50% of them have an intermediate level and 8% have an initial level of English. Concerning their experience with EFL teaching 8% of the subjects have been teaching English for more than 10 years, 25% for more than 5 years, 17% for more than 4 years, 17% for more than 3 years, 8% for more than 2 years and 8% for more than one year.

The data collected from the second section of the questionnaire was grouped under 7 headings in which we report the perception of the majority of the teachers for each heading:

- 1) Social practices the students like best: Most of the teachers reported children like the following activities best: The children liked children's song and booklets with song lyrics because most like to sing and dance, cross words because the students are familiar with the vocabulary they practice when performing the activity, comic strips because the students transmit positive messages and develop their creativity. Teachers also noticed the children like tongue twisters because they are competitive.
- 2) Social practices the students don't like: The children do not enjoy the audio story and radio reading because they think the readings are complicated and they don't understand them. They do not like making diagrams and are not very interested in the guide of curious questions.
- 3) Students learning styles: Most teachers state that their students are kinesthetic and visual students.
- 4) Didactic material: Teachers obtain the material to adapt the practices from the Internet, in magazines, or they buy new material.
- 5) Problems teachers have when planning a lesson: They state that they have problems designing the material and activities according to the NEPBE and that time management in class is also a problem for them.

6) Problems they have with the material provided by the NEPBE: They have problems with the articulation of the stages in order to obtain a product. In addition, teachers think that the problem they face with the material is that the English level of the textbook provided by the program administration is too high for the students they teach.

7) Teachers' needs for teacher training: The teachers would like to be trained in student discipline and management, as well as design of teaching-learning strategies.

Closed Questionnaire

We can see in Figure 1 that students accept most of the social practices of language for third-graders in elementary school, which shows that students are happy with the social language activities proposed by the NEPBE. In Figure 2 we can observe the same situation with the students in the 4th year of study; it shows that most of them like the social practices of language.

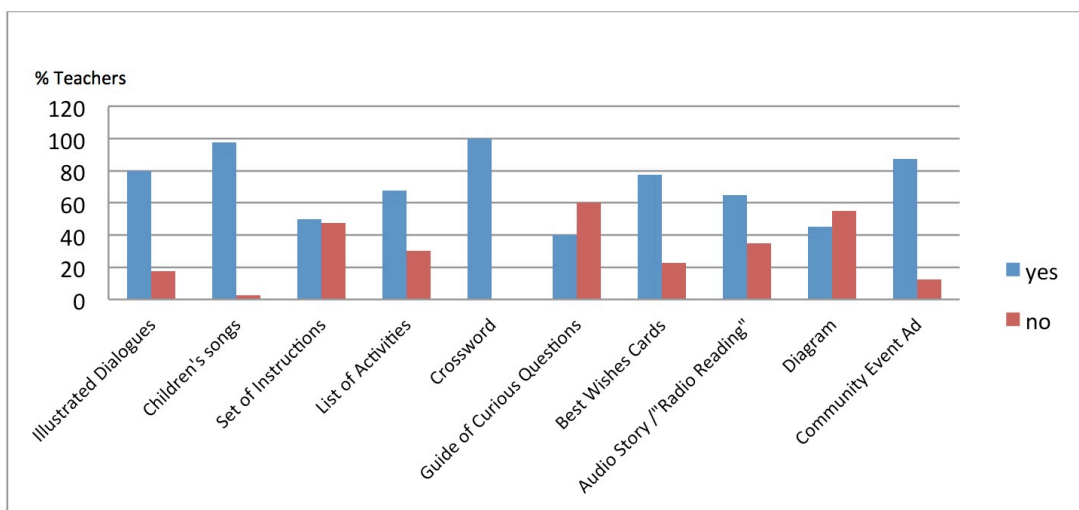


Figure 1: Acceptance of products 3rd grade

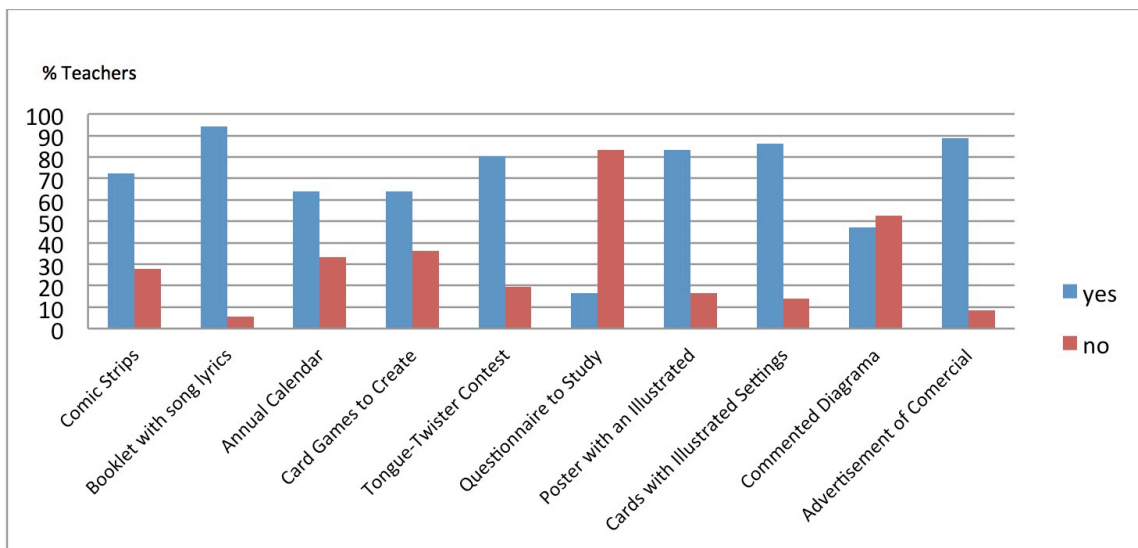


Figure 2: Acceptance of products 4th grade

In Figure 3 we can see that over 50% of teachers who answered the questionnaire did not use technology for teaching their classes or performing the social practices of language. The bottom

line in Figure 3 represents those teachers who answered that they do use technology a little, more or less, almost always and always. The line above that shows the teachers who answered that they do not use technology at all.

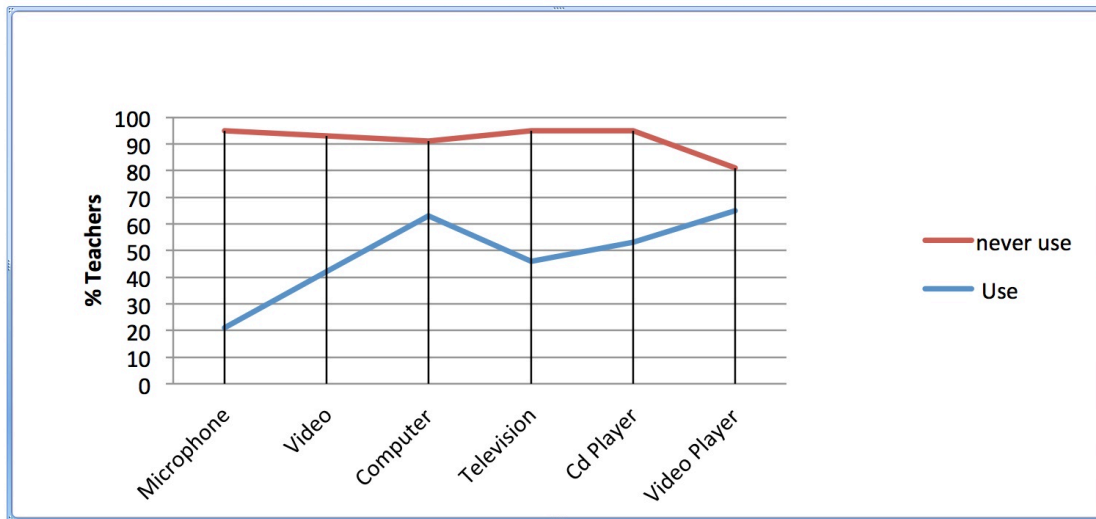


Figure 3: Use of technology in the classroom

Music and song practice are some of the resources the teacher uses the most to plan their lesson (Figure 4 and 5).

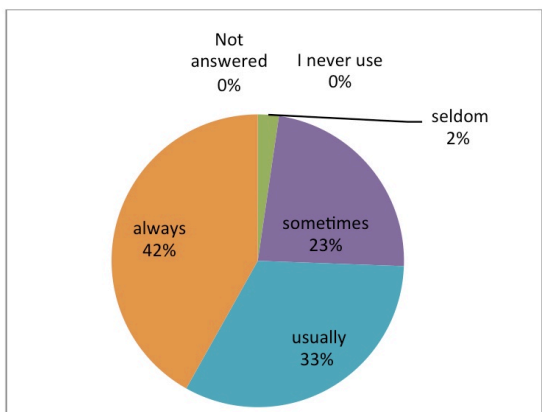


Figure 4: Use of Lyric

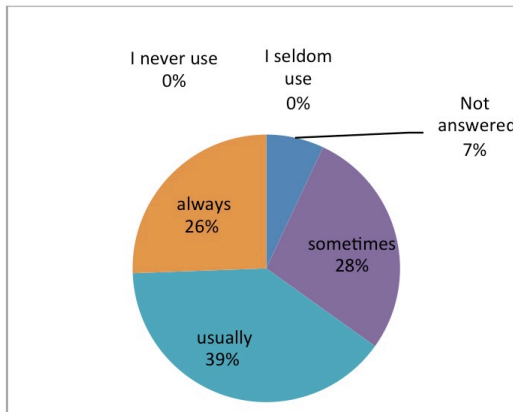


Figure 5: Use of Music

According to the data provided by the teachers of the NEPBE cycle II, we can see in figure 6 that the most popular texts used by teachers in their lesson plan are the short readings texts, however we can also see that most of the texts are not used as often as they should be.

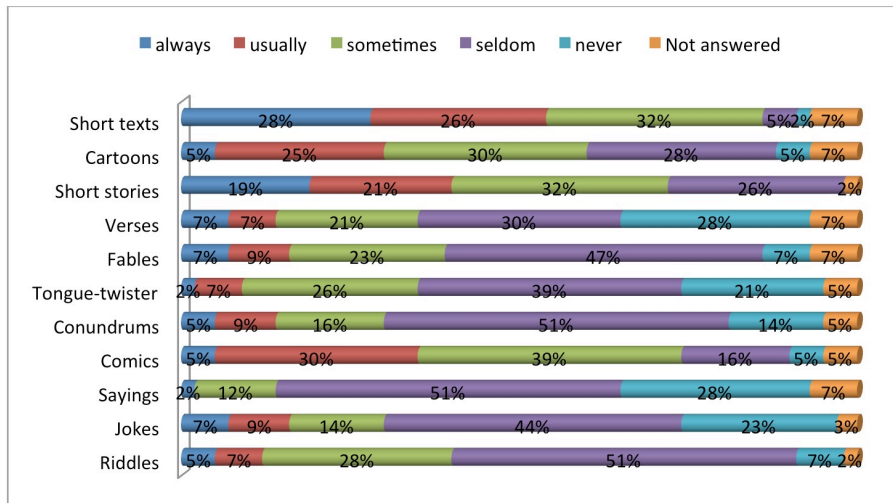


Figure 6: Use of Popular Texts

Information texts are regularly used by the teachers when planning their activities for the lesson. (Figure 7)

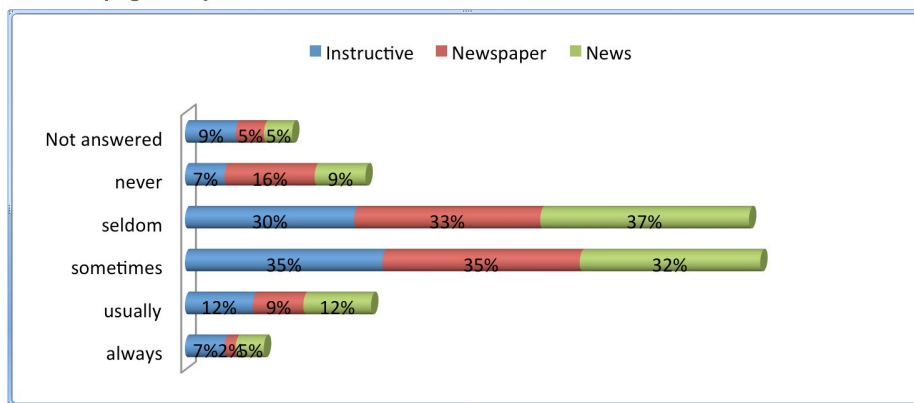


Figure 7: Use of Information Texts

Figure 8 below shows that most of the teachers use recreational resources to plan their lessons for cycle II. Most of the teachers reported that movies, use of the library and use of photographs are not considered in their lesson plan for cycle II or seldom used (Figure 9).

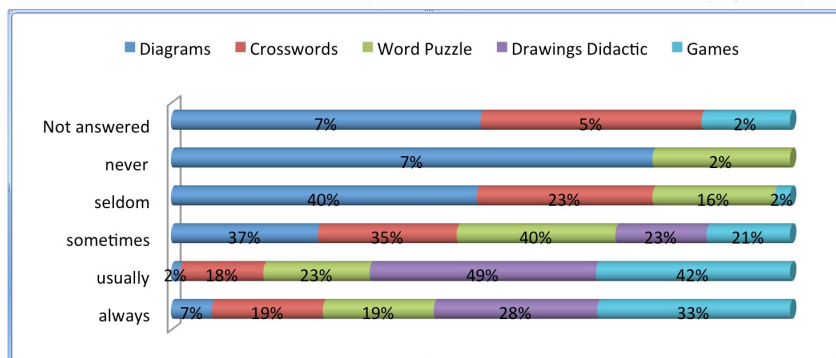


Figure 8: Recreational Materials

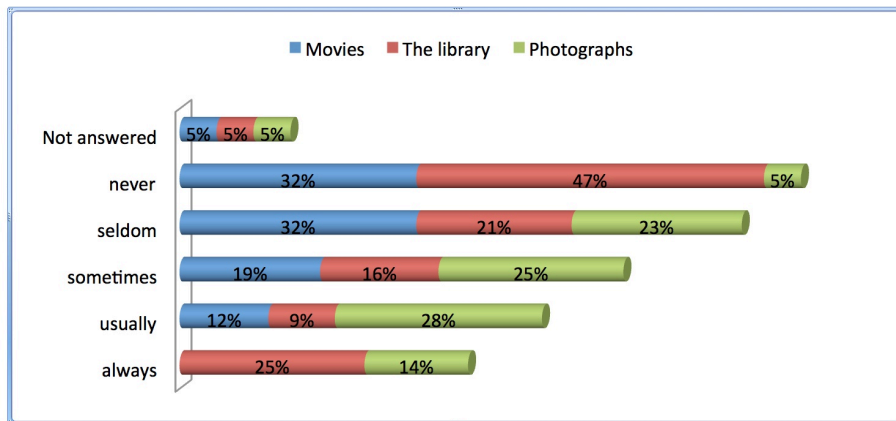


Figure 9: Other Resources

We can see in Figure 10 that in respect to the difficulties teachers face in the NEPBE cycle II of putting into practice the activities suggested by the program, the teacher’s access to technology obtained the highest percentage followed by school facilities, which indicates teachers’ degree of disapproval. We can also observe that teachers expressed that teaching material is good and support of teachers by the authorities is relatively good.

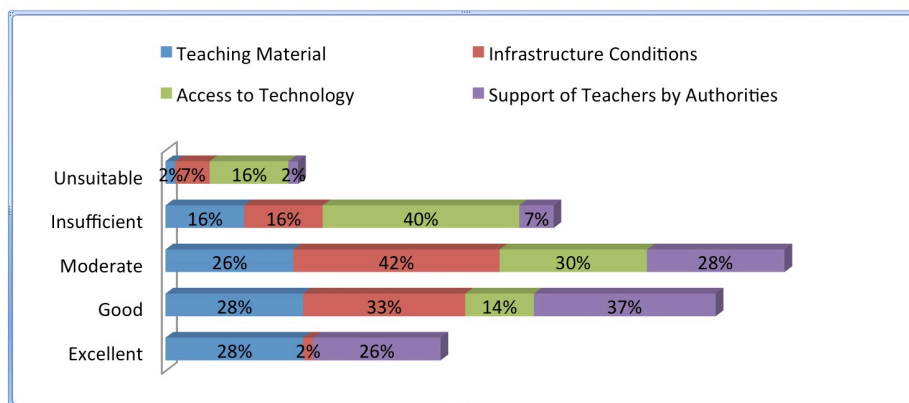


Figure 10: Teacher difficulties

Analysis of findings

In the analysis of the data collected from both instruments, although applied to different teachers and in a different fashion (open and closed questionnaires), several similarities were observed about the teachers’ and students’ perception of the social practices such as: students enjoy physical activities like dancing and singing to music since most at that age are kinesthetic and visual learners and therefore most of the teachers use recreational resources such as crossword puzzles and other games. However teachers do not report using movies or the use of the library, which in turn means students do not read much. Teachers obtain information for planning their lessons from texts, magazines or use of the Internet. However, they do not use technology for applying activities due to the lack of equipment at schools (teachers reported that the school authorities do not provide them with a classroom with everything that is needed for the English class, like: a CD player, stationery, didactic material, data projector, or computer). Teachers state that their main problem when they have to plan their lessons and the activities for the English class is time management, reporting that class time is not enough for the implementation of the activities. They also report problems with designing material for the different stages in order to obtain a product. The teachers expressed their desire to be trained in student discipline and management, as well as the design of teaching-learning strategies,

however according to their characteristics (command of English, teaching experience, etc.) and the problems they reported, it is also evident that they need to be trained in material design for teaching English, lesson planning and teaching-learning methods that can be used to implement social practices.

Conclusions

In this study we were able to appreciate that most of the Social practices of language are accepted by both teachers and students, however it has not been an easy task to face the difficulties that interfere with the teachers' performance, from problems with school facilities to lack of contextualized activities and problems with the articulation of contents.

The information collected in this study shed light on the situation of the NEPBE teachers and students in Nayarit; this information will be useful for helping teachers to implement the social practices according to the type of students they have and the facilities they use. The data collected also provided us with a diagnosis of the teachers involved in the program and their needs for training.

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Appendix 1: Open Questionnaire

We appreciate your participation to help us, please answer as honestly as you can this quiz. All information contained in this questionnaire will be used for our research anonymously.

Age: _____

Genre: M F

School's name: _____

School Category: Rural Urban

Professional degree: _____

Teaching experience (years) in teaching English language: 1 2 3 4 5+ 10+

Which of the following levels of English consider you have? Initial Intermediate Advanced

Do you have any certification, which ones? _____

To answer the following questions please write the number of practice according to the attached sheet (located at the end of the questionnaire) that was provided and the suggested product:

1. Describe the main activities you designed in the three social practices of language and your students liked the best (in each example records the number assigned to each practice):
2. Explain some of the reasons for the three social practices your students liked the least (in each example records the number assigned to each practice):
3. Give examples of three products you had to change to get better results in your students' attitudes? In each example mentions the number assigned to each practice and the product you suggest changing:
4. What other social practice should be included in the English program?
5. What learning styles have you detected in your groups?
6. Explain briefly how you get the teaching material used in your classes?
7. What are the main problems you had to plan your activities or your classes?
8. What problems have you had (or have your students had) with training materials provided by the program?
9. Which material you think is needed to make a good design in your class?
10. What training do you suggest PNIEB coordination should organize to improve your teaching practice?

Appendix 2: Closed Questionnaire

Thank you for your participation, please answer as honestly as you can this quiz. All confidential information contained in this questionnaire, may be used for our research anonymously.

1. Choose "Y" for yes or "N" for no If the Language practices of third grade summarized in the following table have been accepted or not accepted by your students.

LANGUAGE PRACTICE OF SECOND CYCLE: THIRD GRADE

3 Grade	Social Practices of the Language	Environment	Specific Competencies	Product	Y	N
Unit 1	A.1.1 Talk and write to participate in everyday dialogues.	Familiar and community	Recognize expressions related to personal expectations for the school year in a dialogue.	Illustrated Dialogues		
	A.1.2 Read and sing songs.	Literary and Ludic	Read and sing a traditional children's song.	Children's songs		
Unit 2	A.2.1 Give and receive instructions to make objects and record information.	Academic and educational	Follow the steps of a set of instructions to make an object.	Set of Instructions		
	A.2.2 Offer and receive information about oneself and acquaintances.	Familiar and community	Understand information about one's own and others' gaily routines.	List of activities		
Unit 3	A.3.1 Play with words, and read and write for expressive and aesthetic purposes.	Literary and Ludic	Make language games to find words through crossword puzzles.	Crossword		
	A.3.2 Formulate and answer questions in order to find information about a specific topic.	Academic and educational	Identify and ask questions to look for information about a specific topic.	Guide of curious questions		
Unit 4	A.4.1 Listen to and express immediate practical needs.	Familiar and community	Identify and understand expressions to get what one wants or needs from others.	Best wishes cards		
	A.4.2 Read narrative texts and recognize cultural expressions from English-speaking countries.	Literary and Ludic	Read children's stories and appreciate cultural expressions from English-speaking countries.	Audio story / "Radio Reading"		
Unit 5	A5.1 Record and interpret information in a graphic resource.	Academic and educational	Find and interpret information in a graphic resource.	Diagram		
	A.5.2 Interpret messages in advertisements.	Familiar and community	Identify and understand messages in community advertisements.	Community event ad		

2. Choose "Y" for yes or "N" for no If the Language practices of fourth grade summarized in the following table have been accepted or not accepted by your students.

LANGUAGE PRACTICE OF SECOND CYCLE: FOURTH GRADE

4 Grade	Social Practices of the Language	Environment	Specific Competencies	Product	Y	N
Unit 1	B.1.1 Talk and write to participate in everyday dialogues.	Familiar and community	Interpret a dialogue about school-related concerns.	Comic strips		
	B.1.2 Read and sing songs.	Literary and Ludic	Interpret and sing songs of interest to the class.	Booklet with song lyrics		
Unit 2	B.2.1 Give and receive instructions to make objects and record information.	Academic and educational	Give and receive instructions to interpret and record information on a calendar.	Annual calendar		
	B.2.2 Offer and receive information about oneself and acquaintances.	Familiar and community	Offer and interpret information about personal experiences.	Card game to create dialogues		
Unit 3	B.3.1 Play with words, and read and write for expressive and aesthetic purposes.	Literary and Ludic	Recreate language games to recite and write tongue-twisters.	Tongue-twister contest		
	B.3.2 Formulate and answer questions in order to find information about a specific topic.	Academic and educational	Formulate and answer questions to obtain information about a specific topic.	Questionnaire to study		
Unit 4	B.4.1 Listen to and express immediate practical needs.	Familiar and community	Interpret and produce expressions to offer help.	Poster with an illustrated dialogue		
	B.4.2 Read narrative texts and recognize cultural expressions from English-speaking countries.	Literary and Ludic	Read children's legends and appreciate cultural expressions from English speaking countries.	Cards with illustrated settings of a legend		
Unit 5	B.5.1 Record and interpret information in a graphic resource.	Academic and educational	Record and interpret information in a graphic.	Commented Diagram		
	B.5.2 Interpret messages in advertisements.	Familiar and community	Interpret messages in advertisements of commercial products.	Advertisement of commercial products		

3. Choose from the five options the frequency with which you use the following education material

Educational Materials	I never use	I seldom use	I sometimes use	I usually use	I always use
Drawings didactic					
Riddles					
Games					
Word puzzles					
Crosswords					
Short stories					
Jokes					
Diagrams					
Sayings					
Verses					
Short readings					
Instructive					
Comics					
News					
Cartoons					
Fables					
Conundrums					
Newspaper					
Lyrics					
Cd player					
Television					
Movies					
The library					
Video player					
Music					
Computer					
Video projector					
Photographs					
Tongue-twister					
Microphone					

4. You consider that the teaching materials (workbooks, Reading and teacher’s book) provided by the program is good to support class design?

Excellent Good Moderate Insufficient Unsuitable

5. How are the conditions of school facilities?

Excellent Good Moderate Insufficient Unsuitable

6. How is access to the technology in your school?

Excellent Good Moderate Insufficient Unsuitable

7. How is the support you receive from the primary school authorities and holding teachers of the group?

Excellent Good Moderate Insufficient Unsuitable