Linguistic Competence and Performance Standards in Students when Finishing Basic Education

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the students´ English linguistic competence, when they finish basic education, by comparison with the official curricular standards, in this way it contributes with information for designing teaching situations to promote the social practice of the language. The sample was: 629 students in 23 groups of third grade from 19 secondary schools in Nezahualcóyotl City. The Key English Test was administered and no meaningful relationship was found between the curricular standards and the real competence. The general average was 3.6; only 2.7% got pass and the standard deviation is 11.69 it means that there is a heterogeneous English level of English. Consequently, it is necessary to introduce a system for laying the foundations of coherent evaluation policies in the English language learning.

Key words: Linguistic Competence, Performance Standards, Basic Education, Evaluation

1 Introduction

The Integral Reform in Basic Education (RIEB) and the National English Program in Basic Education (NEPBE) prescribe a curricular design of plans and programs according to national and international standards with their respective achievement indicators. The English subject in preschool and primary increase the curriculum in the area, hence the basic education assigned 1060 hours for its teaching with the purpose that students participate in social practices of the language, interpret and produce oral and written texts, and satisfy their communication necessities, to develop learning strategies and know other cultures.

So, the main purpose of the English teaching in Basic Education is that students participate in social practices of the language, by means of the production and comprehension of oral and written texts. In the third grade of secondary school this purpose must be consolidated through social interaction in which students realize basic exchanges for expressing compulsoriness, sharing information about memories of the past; expressing plans and predictions about the future, or manifesting certainty or doubt.

Hence, the distinctive feature to define the production of texts for the students be able to satisfy basic necessities of communication is the social practice. It supposes as a necessary condition the interaction with their classmates and the teacher. Nevertheless, a recurrent problem in the classrooms of the secondary schools, where the teachers in training of the Escuela Normal No. 4 de Nezahualcóyotl do their English teaching practicum in real work conditions, is the lack of interaction and as a consequence an insufficient social practice of the language to improve the development of competencies for understanding frequent used expressions and be able to communicate among themselves at school. The effect of this situation is negative because the pupils do not get the specific competencies that allow them to reach the established standards for the Certificación Nacional de Idioma (CENNI), the B1 level of the Common European Framework (CEF), or its equivalent of the associated exams of the Cambridge System in this case the Preliminary English Test (PET).

No doubt, the mentioned problem depends on several causes, like: the students´ English level when they start to study secondary school; their cultural capital; interest and necessities that they have for learning; the context where they live in; the time for studying English; lack of teachers trained for the specialty; the teachers´ English knowledge and their didactic competence, among others.

This research is part of a project which looks for a possible relationship between the teacher´s professional competence and the students´ linguistic competence. In this work are expounded the results of the third grade students´ English level by comparison with the curricular standards established in the National English

Program. The skills included are reading, writing, listening and speaking, and aims to identify if there is relationship between the real learning level and the ideal standards. The research looks for answering to the questions: ¿What is the students´ English level knowledge when they finish studying the basic education? ¿What relationship is observed between the linguistic competence and the curricular standards? ¿Which linguistic competence is their main weakness and which is the strength? ¿What is the feasibility of getting the English level proposed in the English National Program?

In this way, the research seeks to contribute with knowledge for designing training programs for teachers who are working in secondary schools, in both: knowledge of the English language as much as in didactic techniques for their teaching. Likewise, to feedback the programs of the Licenciatura en Educación Secundaria con Especialidad en Lengua Extranjera (Inglés) which offers the Escuela Normal No. 4 de Nezahualcóyotl. In consequence, its goal is to improve the pupils´ English learning in basic education.

With respect to the teachers´ training, some programs have been developed for the English teaching, in different modalities, for giving answer to the teachers´ needs which are not trained, are not working according to their professional profile or they are not trained teachers, hence do not have disciplinary-didactic knowledge for the teaching. Nevertheless, these programs have been too shorts and have not answered to teachers´ necessities and expectations; so, its impact has not gotten the proposed results.

About the matter, the Programa Sectorial de Educación 2013-2018 mentions that:

En la formación y actualización de maestros en servicio, a pesar de los esfuerzos a la fecha realizados, se reconoce que la oferta brindada no ha demostrado ser pertinente a las necesidades de los profesores y directivos. No existe evidencia de su impacto en las prácticas de enseñanza" (SEP, 2013, p. 5) [1].

On the other hand, the secondary is the educational level where failure persists. Where the English subject holds on the second place in failure, only after Mathematics.

The research objectives are:

- Identify the English language level of the students when they finish studying basic education.
- Distinguish the English level that the students have gotten, in comparison to the standards established by the NEPBE.
- Describe strengthens and weaknesses of the students´ linguistic competence.
- Evaluate the feasibility that students get, when finishing basic education, the linguistic competence that the NEPBE establishes.

2. Linguistic competences and curricular standards

Since the beginning of the XXI century the training model in competences has occupied the educational programs in most parts of the world. In the case of México the interest for competences has been concentrated in the educational preschool reform (SEP, 2004), in secondary education (SEP, 2012) and in teachers´ training (2012). This obsession has not been unnoticed for the educational investigation environment, as Cortes (2011) [2] says:

El concepto de competencias ha sido retomado y definido de múltiples formas por acuciosos y multicitados estudiosos del tema y por organizaciones internacionales ocupadas en los aspectos educativos y de formación profesional, y desde luego ha recibido el embate de agudos críticos. Con todo, aunque no exento de polémica, el modelo de competencias ha logrado imponerse como paradigma en la redefinición de los objetivos de la educación.

Perrenoud (2010) [3] considers a competence as the ability for acting in an effective way in a situation. Ability that is supported in knowledge, but it is not reduced to it. However, to deal with a situation, in the best possible way, we generally have to use and associate different cognitive resources in which knowledge is included. In this sense Perrenoud mentions: Do we go to school for getting knowledge or for developing competences? And he answers that the question hides a misunderstood and a true dilemma. The misunderstood consists in believing

that when we develop competencies we must renounce to acquire knowledge. The dilemma is just that for creating competencies we need time which is taken of the time needed for acquiring wide knowledge. Hence, on the issue of what is the priority in the English learning: whether wide knowledge for getting national and international standards, or competencies for the social practice of the language; the answer is that both are very important.

The dilemma is just that the emphasis by the social practice of the language could tend to neglect the knowledge; in other words, that when improving the communicative competence the linguistic competence might be less important. In this sense, the communication is produced in the social practice of the foreign language; as Perrenoud says, in a diversity of interaction situations to unify the expression, repetition, and variation with the wish to understand and make oneself to be understood.

Therefore, the communicative competence is not divorced from the linguistic competence; that is to say, the grammar, the functions and the language structure, because this knowledge is also essential to produce texts and communicate in a correct way; if not, it might be possible the language fossilization or use it in a wrong form. So, at researching the students´ linguistic competence, this project looks for knowing their English level and its practical use and usage.

In the context of this dispute and faced with the low results obtained by the Mexican students in several national and international evaluations, Frade (2016) [4] proposes:

> Diseñar los planes y programas desde la perspectiva del paradigma de la complejidad, como respuesta al paradigma de la simplicidad. Esto trae como consecuencia identificar las competencias como un constructo complejo que no sólo incluye la construcción del conocimiento, como meta principal de la educación, o bien el desarrollo cognitivo e intelectual, sino el desempeño del sujeto en el contexto que enfrenta al articular todos los recursos que posee (conocimientos de varias disciplinas, habilidades, destrezas, actitudes, valores, percepciones, emociones, sentimientos, valores y creencias). Para lograr lo anterior, es necesario contar con un marco teórico claro en el que se construyan las condiciones de posibilidad que permitirá la reconstrucción de una práctica pedagógica distinta.
> Lo anterior supone la superación de la fragmentación que se genera cuando se observa el objeto de conocimiento desde disciplinas separadas que no lo identifican en conjunto con partes que se relacionan y que por lo tanto no terminan de explicarlo (p. 32).

So, to take into consideration the English learning into the complexity paradigm means to stop looking at it as an isolated subject, to consider it as a study object in itself and without linking it with the content of other subjects, furthermore, without linking it with the environmental culture.

Seen that way, the English subject can´t carry out the purpose of being a valuable tool for the communication through which the student can acquire new knowledge, express and understand ideas, feelings and experiences. Meanwhile, with regard to the relationship between competence and performance standards, Cortés (2011) [5] mentions:

> Decir que un individuo es competente significa afirmar que sus acciones alcanzan un cierto estándar. Dichos estándares pueden ser muy exigentes. Decir que alguien se maneja en un nivel 5 de competencia significa que esa persona ha alcanzado estándares más exigentes que los que demanda el nivel 1. (p. 3)

The problem is just that at establishing standards upon the reality, the teachers and students are situated in a critical situation, because it would seem that if they do not obtain those standards it means they are "incompetent". Then, they are called "fail teachers", or "A0 pupils".

3. Background

There are assessment studies whose aim is to analyze what the NEPBE has achieved, as well as the challenges that the achievements themselves have. Into these regards Mejía, Briseño and Cardoso (2013) [6] study the teachers' perceptions of 35 teachers who participated in the pilot program of the NEPBE in General Secondary

Schools of México State. The results of this work show that the program has its problems in the implementation, since there is difficulty in the creation of appropriate learning environments for the teaching and learning of the English language, besides there is a lack of materials for its implementation. The research concludes that fixed standards for secondary teachers and students still are unavailable, in this respect Mejía mentions that the challenges that the NEPBE faces lie mainly in the feasibility and the functionality and not in the curricular development in itself, since, from the teachers' perspective its implementation is a good decision in the area of curricular field, however, the purposes and its curricular teaching standards, in this moment are particularly difficult to reach.

In a research with students of first grade in 9 institutions of Higher Education in the Metropolitan Area of México City, González, et al. (s/f) [7] found that most of the first grade students at the university level got an average grade point in a linguistic test, students with more than 15 hours of English instruction a week showed better level of competence than the ones with less hours of instruction. In spite of having passed the subject in high school and having graduated from that educational level with a good average point, when they were assessed with standardized international parameters, they got mostly lower level of performance. The study concludes that the problem should be faced starting in middle school and going in high school; it is there where the institutions are supposed to be accountable of assessing the English Instruction that is offered.

These results coincide with a research conducted by Aquino, Becerra, and Hernández (2015) [8] with a sample of 492 students from 6 institutions of Higher Education, whose English level is still beginner, since the majority of students are at the basic level 66.6 % and they are placed at the level A1 (beginner) and A2 (elementary); 17.8% are at level B2 and only 1.8% are in C1 and C2. Therefore, a high percentage of students are at the basic level and this represents a serious challenge for the institutions and the instructors that teach teachers of English language. It is worth mentioning that these students are taking majors related with the teaching of the language.

A Székely´s et. al investigation (2015) [9] strives to value the measurement of the students that have the necessary learning to communicate in English with the national and international standards base, posed in the official curriculum of basic education by the SEP. This study measures the level use and comprehension of the English language of English teachers in this subject from public secondary schools, by using the same instruments and criteria administered to students. This research found that only 3% of the students achieved B1; that is to say, practically all participants in this study (97%) are in lower levels established by the SEP to get the credentials to teach at secondary schools. Besides, there is no relationship between the grade point average achieved in secondary and the level achieved in the research test. Regarding the teachers, more than half of the teachers got a lower level to the expected grade for the students and one in seven does not know the language at all. The study concludes that there is an English assessment system in Mexico that shows evidence of a simulation for giving grades but it does not guarantee the real learning.

Literature that has been consulted is a valuable contribution for the knowledge about English learning in secondary, high schools, and higher education, also about the feasibility to reach the proposed standards, through the opinion of teachers. The conclusions show that the curricular standards are above the level of the Mexican reality. In this way, the present research seeks to contribute with information about the situation of English learning at the end of basic public education, in a city with a great amount of population density Nezahualcóyotl City, which economic activity is based in providing labor to Mexico City; but in recent years the economic development is based in small businesses, above all in family businesses that manufacture different products, contexts in which the English will probably be a necessity for the population in the coming years.

4. Methodology

This is a descriptive investigation, it researches the competence achieved in a sample of students when they finish their basic education after the development and study of determined programs, in this case English. With this, we pretend to measure their linguistic and communicative competence to identify in each of them if the real level of knowledge achieved is related to the established standards.
The universe of the research were 5091 students of 28 secondary schools placed in the municipality of Nezahualcóyotl, where was collected a sample of 23 groups of 3rd grade with a total of 629 students.

There was a previous exploration about the knowledge of the English language, with the Preliminary English Test, equivalent to B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), considered by this organization as the Threshold to achieve the use autonomously of the English Language. This pilot test showed that students practically did not answer the instrument, for this reason, it was decided to administer the Key English Test, that constitutes an equivalent of A2, a bit lower than B1, according to the suite of Cambridge. For the statistical analysis was used the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

5. Results

More than 5 years ago, after having been implemented and counting with the agreement 592 for the teaching of English in Mexico, it is required to evaluate the progress of the established aims. According to NEPBE (today National Program of English), curricular standards for secondary were put together starting from certain common criteria of national and international reference; therefore, besides manifesting the identified competences in the grades corresponding to elementary school, they also reflect the levels of competence and English mastery that are demanded at the level 8 of the National Certification of the language (CENNI) and B1 of the CEFR for secondary. These standards are grouped in four aspects that include a series of aptitudes that are equally important in the four school periods that constitute the Basic Education:

1. Auditory Comprehension and Reading
2. Oral and written expression
3. Multimodal
4. Attitudes towards language and communication.

According to these standards, in the program is expected that students to produce texts with creative proposals, personal, social and academic that express some opinions about issues related to the ordinary life that allows them to intervene in communicative exchanges.

However, the investigation shows that, when finishing the third grade of secondary school, students reach an average grade point of 30.5 from a 105 total of the KET items, which is equivalent to a percentage of 31% of the total of the test given; they only answered a third of the whole test. It is worth to clarify that KET is a level below PET in the Cambridge suite. This means that if the PET had been used as a proposal for assessing middle school the results would have been lower. The average grade point was 3.5 from a scale of 10.
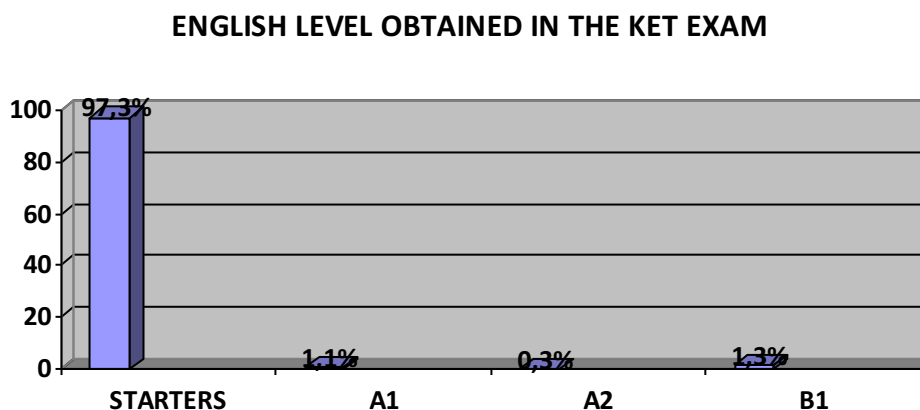
ENGLISH LEVEL OBTAINED IN THE KET EXAM

Fig. 1. English level of third grade secondary school students in Nezahualcóyotl city.

Regarding the four skills evaluated, the weakest is the written expression, with an average point of 3.6 from a total of 25 items, a seventh part of the total of items, it shows an insufficient competence to produce texts in written form even it was found that some students had null text productions. In auditory comprehension there

was an average point of 5.7 from a total of 25 items equivalent to 22%. Reading comprehension shows a grade point average of 11.7 from a total of 35 items, an approximate of a third of the corresponding reading test. Finally, the oral performance showed the most positive results, since the average grade point was 9.5. (See chart No. 1, graph. 1)

Table. 1. Linguistic competence in four skills

	Reading (35)	%	writing (25)	%	Listening (25)	%	Speaking (20)	%	**Total (105)**	%
Media	11,76	33	3,58	14	5,74	22	9,48	47	30,59	
Moda	11		0		5		6		26	31
Mediana	11		2		5		9		28	
Desviación	4,33		4,50		3,09		4,00		11,69	

Source: own from the database of the results of the Key English Test administered.

Among the 629 students who took part in the test, 17 passed with 61 points or more. The maximum value is 102, it represents 97% in relation to the total of the items and the minimum is 6 that represents 5.7%; this means that the range of learning between students is pretty big and reflect a standard deviation of 11.69; this is to say; in spite of a sample whose socioeconomic and cultural conditions are similar, differences in the learning of the English language are very clear.

5.1 Relation among linguistic skills

Table No. 2 allows to determinate how much the linguistic skills from the students are related. As it can be seen, there is a moderate correlation between Reading and writing, despite the fact that these two skills resulted in the extreme average highest grade in Reading as well as the lower grade point average in writing. Below there is a correlation of 0.443 between Reading and listening. Hence, the following hypothesis could be established: If a good reader then a good writer and; if a good listener, then a good reader and vice-versa.

Table. 2.

	Reading	Writing
Reading	1	
Writing	0,540	1
	Listening	Speaking
Listening	1	
Speaking	0,256	1
	Writing	Speaking
Writing	1	
Speaking	0,254	1
	Reading	Listening
Reading	1	
Listening	0,443	1

Only 2.7% of students passed the exam and 97.3 did not do it. According to the table 3, there is not relation among the curricular standards and the real standards when the pupils finish basic education. Most of them are in the beginners´ level.

Table. 3. Cambridge Suite, European Common Framework and the Students´ linguistic competence

Cambridge Suite Levels	EXAMS	Common European Framework	Students´ level
Proficiency	CPE	C2	-----
Advanced	CAE *BEC Higher*	C1	-----
Upper intermediate	FCE *BEC Vantage*	B2	-----
Intermediate	PET *BEC Preliminary*	B1	
Lower Intermediate		B1	**1.3%**
Elementary	KET Flyers	A2	**0.3%**
Beginner	Movers	A1	**1.1%**
	Starters		**97.3%**

At identifying the academic students´ performance, it is possible to know the real possibilities that they have for getting the standards currently established. So, it will be necessary to make changes in the plan of the Licenciatura en Educación Secundaria con Especialidad en Lengua Extranjera (Inglés), in the Licenciatura en Enseñanza y Aprendizqje del Inglés en Educación Secundaria, Plan 2018, and also during the pedagogic practices, because not all the students of secondary have studied English in primary school.

With regard to the English language, the curricular time for its study is too short, that is the reason because some students have to learn English in private schools or in language centers of universities where they study with adult people whose English learning is done in 5 or 6 years, this fall behind is more meaningful if we take into account the current standards.

Therefore, it is likely that students get the curricular standards at an average age of 27 and 28 years old, depending on the English language level they are studying currently and on the time they study English per week.

In this regard Cummins (2000) [10] mentions 4 years of a continuous study for the knowledge of social language, and from 4 to 7 years for acquiring the academic language, it means for the students to get higher standards than possible because of the institutional and curricular practices do not enhance them.

6. Conclusions

English language knowledge of secondary school graduates is down below curricular standards determined by the official programs of the SEP. Therefore, knowledge of the subject starts lagging behind an average of 6 to 7 years, in relation to the parameters established.

The main strength is in Reading comprehension and the main weakness is in written expression. Despite this difference, we have a moderate correlation between oral comprehension and written expression; as well as; between auditory comprehension and reading comprehension.

Starting from reported data in this investigation and other that have been reviewed, the feasibility that students in secondary school reach proposed goals are almost null, above all if the current operational policies of the Program are not modified.

While the problem is multi-causal systematic actions are required in the short, medium and long term to guide the training and updating of the English teachers in such a way that the expected impact is achieved in the professional performance of the teachers. As De la Cruz points out, (2011) [11] "El maestro de inglés desempeña un papel trascendental en lograr aprendizajes efectivos del idioma, convirtiéndose en pieza fundamental, para ello requiere amplio conocimiento del idioma que aunado a estrategias de enseñanza, lleve a sus alumnos al logro de competencias comunicativas". (págs. 7-8)

The Normal School must re-design its development teaching programs of their staff as well as the in service teachers among which can be found its own graduates. Regarding initial training of Normal students who are studying English BA and Elementary Education two graduate profile features should be strengthen: mastery of language and didactic competence. In this sense, the impact should be emphasized on the formation of mediator teachers who, from the socio-cultural paradigm, promote the social practice of the language in the normal classrooms and in the secondary school. Of course, the main beneficiaries should be the secondary school students who will have better trained teachers. The future research should be about relationship between students´ linguistic competence and teachers´ professional competence; on the other hand, about how to improve the social practices of the language in the schools, even in Spanish and in a foreign language.

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