

Competency-based Language Education: A Conversation with Peter Sayer

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New educational reforms being implemented in Mexico have as their fundamental objective the goal of increasing the quality of education so that students can improve their own lives and contribute to national development (SEP, 2011). Underlying this goal is the realization that today's students are going to live in an increasingly global environment where they will have to work and communicate with people from all around the world. The purpose of English education in Mexico is to provide students with the knowledge necessary to engage in social practices to interact with both native and non-native English speakers in a variety of circumstances to achieve a variety of tasks (SEP, 2011).

The new curriculum is competency-based. The approach has been criticized by many who claim, among other things, that the approach is too conformist and narrow (Auerbach, 1986; Chappell, Gonczi & Hager, 1995; Mulcahy & James, 2000; Toohey et al., 1995). Others defend the approach by claiming it offers a number of advantages over traditional approach including a personalized curriculum and focused educational goals (Mendenhall, 2012; Priest, Rudenstein & Weisstein, 2012). No matter which side of the debate one favors, the fact is that competency-based language education has arrived in Mexico.

I had a chance to talk with Professor Peter Sayer from the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas at San Antonio about competencies and their implementation in Mexico. In the discussion we explored a number of aspects regarding the introduction of competencies and its potential implications for education in Mexico.

I asked Dr. Sayer how he thought that this current competency-based language curriculum compared to earlier competency-based language models. According to him, historically, the competency-based language programs were developed for adult learners as a way to integrate them quickly into a new society. The idea was to make sure that individuals had the necessary skills, particularly job related skills, to become productive members of society. This meant that the language taught tended to be reductionist in nature. Language focused primarily on providing learners with the skills to become competent at specific narrowly defined tasks.

In Dr. Sayer's mind, the current Mexican program has a broader view. It is organized around the core notion of social practices and learning environments. According to the SEP (2011), social practices can be understood as patterns or methods of interaction. Each practice has a specific communicative purpose and a history linked to that practice. Competencies were designed to go along with each practice. Furthermore, the Mexican

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curriculum recognizes specifically that communication takes place in a variety of environments and that the nature of language used in each of these settings, while similar, may have important variations. The inclusion of three specific environments—familiar and community, literary and ludic, and educational and academic—as well as the focus on social practices, addresses the reductionist criticism often levied at competency-based language education.

I asked Dr. Sayer how one chooses appropriate competencies within specific cultural contexts. He said that competencies within the *Programa Nacional de Inglés en Educación Básica* (PNIEB or National English Program in Basic Education - NEPBE) were rooted in a socio-cultural focus. This approach is operationalized within the current model as a way to make the curriculum more student-centered and more meaningful. The idea is to make the material more relevant for children by connecting to the idea of communities and families. This suggests that the selection of appropriate competencies begins with an analysis of the needs, goals, or purposes that makes sense for learners in the community or setting where they are at, both for their present purposes and for projecting into the future needs. This begins with a look at what children bring with them to the classroom from their homes, their communities, and their culture. Competencies become a reflection of the students and their communities as well as their needs and goals for learning English.

This notion is in line with the ideas of “funds of knowledge” which draws on students’ own life experiences as a starting point for building a curriculum. This approach assumes that all people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge (Gonzalez, et al., 2009). Kanno and Norton (2003) suggested that learners would be more interested in and engaged in language learning if they imagined themselves and what they would be doing with English in the future. In these “imagined communities” students become inspired to use a variety of social practices to participate to meet their own goals. This “situated learning” approach is gaining in popularity (Anderson, 1991; Anderson, Reder, & Simon, 1996, 1997; Anderson, et al., (2000); Cobb, & Bowers, 1999; Greeno, 1997). The idea of imagined communities allows students to project themselves into the future and to connect with communities of people beyond their immediate location. This strategy has been shown to create increased motivation in students (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

I next asked Dr. Sayer how specific competencies in a target language could be incorporated into a given setting. He responded by noting that part of language learning involves learning about culture and becoming aware of cultural differences. He mentioned an example of a two-story house as an activity designed to promote competency in describing where one lives, identifying rooms, furniture, and so on. While such a house may be regarded as the stereotypic house in the United States, it may be quite alien in an indigenous community in rural Mexico. While the picture and exercise may be useful in terms of providing language for U.S. homes, it may have little meaning or relevance to students’ daily lives. Teachers can use this as an opportunity to show, for example, that there are different kinds of wealth and to examine wealth in the student’s community which may include less material goods. Care must be taken to note that differences do not necessarily imply “better” or “worse” in terms of value. In these

kinds of situations, teachers and students have the opportunity for a critical look at both cultures and to gain a greater understanding.

We talked about how to identify appropriate competencies for each level in the PNIEB program. The competencies are related to the idea of “communicative functions”. Communicative functions relate to the specific language skills people use and describe the way in which people use language to do things in everyday life. In the earliest stages of language learning, for example, a person needs to be able to introduce him/herself, give some personal information, ask for and follow directions, and so on. Communicative functions can be thought of as a kind of competency. They do not focus on grammatical forms, *per se*, nor are they organized around specific lexical issues. In other words, we do not begin with simple present tense, proceed to simple past tense, go on to future with “will” and so on. Instead, the curriculum and the lessons are designed around functional skill sets. The language to be taught is determined by the language needed to complete a task. Therefore, if students need to understand and use information about social services, the vocabulary and grammatical structures should be directly related to those functional skills. The knowledge gained should allow the students to perform a specific task such as, for example, giving information to others about social services.

To close out our conversation, we spoke about specific challenges that might arise with the full implementation of a competencies-based language curriculum in Mexico. The biggest challenge, which may also be the greatest advantage, is that it places an emphasis on the teacher and on the teacher’s expertise. This new curriculum actually provides the teacher with a great deal of freedom because, beyond the competencies specified, the curriculum is not specified. The curriculum is open and flexible and gives the teacher a lot of flexibility to determine the materials and topics that will be covered. While teachers have more autonomy and freedom in this situation, this approach also raises problems. A specific challenge for Mexico will be finding qualified teachers in terms of English level, proper credentials, and with training and degrees in English language teaching. The number of available teachers with at least a B2 English level and a bachelor’s degree is far smaller than the demand.

Teachers who are inexperienced, those with a weak background in education or a low level of English who are placed in a situation where they have to follow a fairly sophisticated English teaching curriculum are likely to stumble. They may feel uncomfortable with the flexibility offered by the program. They may feel lost about what to do and what to teach. In such cases, it is not uncommon for people to simply teach as they were taught—the idea of the “apprenticeship of observation” (Belcher, 1994). To really make the new language program work, in addition to hiring well prepared teachers, teacher training is also a very important part of the process. Teachers need to understand the differences between social practices and competencies. They need to understand how to build their own teaching and planning around a general purpose to achieve a more specific aim. The program has great promise but it requires cooperation, training, a willingness to get out of one’s comfort zone, and patience. If it all comes together, it has the chance to elevate the quality of education, motivate students, and provide better global citizens.

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