

Sociocultural Approach: Adaptations For Teaching English At Middle School

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Abstract – English learning has changed its role in Mexican Education throughout the years. Recently, in 2011, but with initial proof programs since 2009, the Federal Office of Public Education in Mexico proposed the National English Program in Basic Education, which included K-9.

National English Program was new for some states, while others had to migrate and adjust the ones they had. Recently in 2017 some adaptations were made, the most important was the name of the program, but maintained its essence. In Zacatecas state, there was not a background regarding English learning, at least for K-6 students. In middle school (7-9 grades) most of the schools have teachers. Currently there are still some struggles in Zacatecas, English teachers for K-6 have not been hired to cover all schools, although its number has been increasing since 2011.

This situation has broadened the proficiency levels of English commonly obtained by students. The study was carried out in Middle School #48 in the city of Zacatecas considering three 7th grade groups. The research is a mixed study, which considered different information gathered during the 2017-2018 school year, the intervention was based on Vygotsky's theory, and planning according to the National English Program, at the end of the school year, results were collected, demonstrating the importance of effective planning based on context and students' abilities.

Keywords – Planning, Intervention, EFL, Contextual Factors, Crosslinguistic Influence.

I. BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction

Throughout time, teaching English at middle school has been underestimated for the fact that it is not Mexico's first language. There are actually many teachers who do not have the clear idea about what teaching English involves. It is necessary to be competent to face challenges that arise when teaching a second or foreign language, but the first step is to have an optimum profile; which means enough training in didactics and pedagogical themes. Another important factor to demonstrate an adequate profile is to show mastery on second or foreign language use, according to different skill levels based on *Certificación Nacional de Nivel de Idioma (CENNI)*. This is required to ensure that the teacher in charge of a group has the tools to establish learning environments, this certification has equivalents with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages [1].

In addition to teacher's expertise, reference [2] expresses that principals in schools are in charge of checking teachers' planning, which are going to be implemented in classes. Another problem arises, many principals do not have a clear knowledge for approval or in other situations, experience is not enough.

Research in this area, has shown that teaching English and specially the National English Program for Basic Education (NEPBE) is inefficient, state office does not have enough resources to hire professionals and in schools, English teachers are evaluated by principals with insufficient knowledge [3].

As mentioned before, the process of teaching English has been considered an extra-curricular activity and reality is different because it is something which complements professional training and developing language skills is important to face globalized world. Nowadays, English is the lingua franca, thus the language with political, social and influential power which is spoken around the globe, it is almost an obligation for all people to have basic knowledge in order to perform everyday tasks efficiently [4].

As stated, there are many problems, but the most important one is that there is not enough money to pay the teachers properly, nor for temporal training and extra-academic courses as a way of upgrade to improve their teaching skills. The investment and management of the financial sector have an influential role within education in all levels. In the same way there are not proper conditions to hire teachers because of the financial, political and social situations in which education has been involved [5].

1.2. Contextual Factors

The middle high school chosen to take part within the investigation was number 48 at Zacatecas city, it opened 36 years ago, there are 18 groups, six per grade and every group is made up of approximately 45 students. There are some important social factors surrounding the school such as; low income, vandalism, drug addiction problems and violence in general; for up to half of the student population this is a reality, there are clear differences between students' conditions, the same as elementary schools where they come from.

According to *Planea* exam 2017¹, the final results obtained by students before entering middle school are described in the nationwide exam, this showed that Francisco Villa primary got 54.5% a non-satisfactory knowledge level, one of the lowest results, the same as Flores Magón primary. In the same situations elementary schools Maria M. Murillo and Lazaro Cardenas appeared with non-sufficient level, results between 62% and 67%, these schools provide more than 95% of middles schools population.

The diagnostic exam is a regular practice at the beginning of the school year; students took it during the last week of August, 2017. The test contained the following topics; basic expressions to obtain and give information in which students develop current questions and phrases used in daily life. The second sections included simple vocabulary, such as days of week, months, numbers, nationalities and school supplies. The third one was about reading comprehension skills in which students answered true/false exercises and finally the last part was about grammatical knowledge, in other words verb conjugation (especially past tense).

Results were irregular, per group, just one or two students who represent 4% of the total, showed a basic knowledge overall, 48% demonstrated a moderate level and the 47% revealed a low level in the English language. In the same way English was evaluated, Spanish diagnostic exam was applied, the results were the following; 72% had problems with reading comprehension and 78% did not use grammar correctly.

1.3. Theoretical Background

Whenever talking about education it is important to highlight that for Mexico from some time up to now the competency model has been included in all education levels, in this case, *doing*, which means, communicative actions carried out in concrete interactive situations; *knowing* involves the contents as well as the characteristics, functions and elements of language, finally, *being* presumes the importance of intercultural-social diversity in education, the oral and written interaction and the attitudes and values related to language [6].

The approach taken in the research was Constructivism which involves giving students the required tools to make them participants on their own learning, being able to select and transform information. As a result, mental structures need to be modified after its learning process and the role of socio-cultural aspects impacting on students learning [7].

Within constructivism theory, the social cultural approach states the influence that context has on people, this means that there is a connection between social interaction and learning. Teachers then have the responsibility to enable students to develop certain skills [8]. Planning classes should be a result of the present conditions, teacher should take into account individual characteristics

¹ http://planea.sep.gob.mx/ba/informe_de_resultados_2017/ , webpage were nationwide results can be consulted.

and decide what would be suitable for students to develop with help, teacher becomes an active participant of students learning process.

The Crosslinguistic influence is the impact and the effect of a native language when learning a second or foreign language. According to [9] the metaphorical use of the terms crosslinguistic influence and transfer both imply physical movement, despite the psychological nature of the phenomenon.

1.4. Objective

Taking into consideration contextual factors and theory related to teaching and learning a second or foreign language, the following objective was set in order to develop intervention during the school year:

Improve English proficiency level at junior high school 48 based on the National English Program in basic Education.

II. METHODOLOGY

An investigation is a gathering and analysis of data focused on a specific topic and objective. It takes present information and aims to expand it by providing “an original contribution to the existing stock of knowledge making for its advancement, so the goal is the pursuit of truth with the help of study, observation, comparison and experiment” [10]. It contains *un conjunto de procesos sistemáticos, críticos y empíricos que se aplican al estudio de un fenómeno* [11] and it requires to be supported by *teorías, métodos, técnicas e instrumentos adecuados y precisos para poder alcanzar un conocimiento objetivo* [12]. This means that to perform an investigation there must be order and discipline, it should be based on experience and include an analysis of the information at play.

In this research the selected approach was mixed method [13] in order to have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The method selected was the action research, based on the adaptation of activities considering background and data collected during class time in a binnacle. The quantitative part was taken from exams designed to measure the linguistic competencies developed by students during specific periods.

The participants selected for the study were seventh graders at Junior High School #48 located in the city of Zacatecas. The students were not notified about the study, because this would not affect in any way the progress of the class, because the themes that should be covered and the competencies that should be developed during class time are based on NEPBE. Moreover, it was a study that had the proposal to enhance their English communication skills.

Data was collected during the school year in different stages. First, the background data helped to identify the problems students had towards learning, then at the beginning of the school year, the diagnostic exam was another tool to make decisions towards intervention. During the school year two types of data were collected, first in a journal important information of students’ reactions towards activities, but also related to needs or lack of knowledge. The other data was a result of the previous information, because of the adaptations, the follow up process and test results. Finally, at the end of the school year data was collected considering the same areas than on the beginning but considering the required level after finishing first grade but with an open questionnaire, this was revised and authorized by expert’s technique.

It is important to mention that the intervention was held according to the aspects described by [14], these refer to activity diversification, learning through participation and collaboration. The principle is that learning should be significant and functional and it should be adapted to the different learning environments for the development of self-conception and self-esteem.

III. RESULTS

Research process contributes to finding new data and to explain reality in an organized and truthful manner. Regarding the results obtained during the proposed research they were collected in different stages considering the mixed approach, but finally all of them were gathered and converted into numbers to show students’ development during the school year.

3.1. Qualitative data

Data obtained during classes was necessary to plan lessons in a different way, considering the social context of the participants. An important factor in order to develop these units was to explain whenever required, parts of the speech and relate them with Spanish language functions in order to develop language ability in general. Due to these adaptations some of the projects proposed are described.

The first unit the project was about identifying different services in the community or city, in order to make it more significant the strategy was to use a general map of the city of Zacatecas, students then had to gather according to their neighborhood and design a map that included the services that were offered. This activity was carried well by students, because it was related to what they observe in their daily life, and there was a chance to do it in groups, helping each other when required.

Another project that students had to work on was on a Radio Program, as an example for them, they listened to a radio program related to “love at first sight” something that is familiar to adolescents, due to their age and biological development. After analyzing the radio program, they had to develop a questionnaire with doubts they had about love at first sight, and then in small groups they asked for further information on this topic provided by the social workers at school.

During this time the information collected was about their likes, interests, their thoughts, their needs, academic issues in order to integrate them in the following projects. There was another activity related to reading about different stories that are important in English speaking countries and analyzing them. The project consisted of working on a design of a *big book*, the adaptations were different because they were asked to look for local stories, at least Mexican ones that involved moral or values.

Projects’ construction was varied but the main purposes were still present and fulfilled. There was a project about English songs. There are some classical songs, but old versions are not appealing for students, this is why, the best way to do it was to find classical songs in a recent version and songs related to important topics that are current as well. It is important to mention that some of the songs were proposed by the students, because they listened to English music although they did not understand it. They had to look for the lyrics and describe the emotions or feelings expressed and decide if it was positive or not.

Finally, the only way to measure qualitatively students’ performance in English was by doing an exam where they had to write and by means of this measure their general competence in English. This is mainly because in order to write, first they have to understand the question, then they have to write an answer using adequate vocabulary and grammar. Writings were checked considering rubrics related to the abilities evaluated at the beginning of the school year and after deciding if they had developed those skills were turned into numbers to compare them with the exams results that were given during the school year.

3.2. Quantitative data

Numerical data was collected during the school year and then summed up, here it was easy to do the follow up because of the numbers. Grade scales in Mexico function from 0-10, but in basic education, if the grade is less than 5, then it is a 5; for example, if a student sums up a 3 during a period it does not matter, he will have a 5 as a final grade.

In order to collect the quantitative data, numbers had different meanings according to what was evaluated in the diagnostic exam. 8 or more meaning that the student had developed language skills, 6-8 meaning that their skills were moderately developed and finally less than 6 meaning that their skills were not developed. At the end of the school year the results were summed up for each student and categorized according to the final score they obtained.

3.3. Qualitative and quantitative data correspondence

As mentioned, qualitative data, based on rubrics was classified in categories like the quantitative data and the following results were obtained considering the initial results and categories, but according to their performance in what they were supposed to develop when finishing first grade, in table 1 results can be observed.

Table 1. School year beginning and ending results.

Language ability	School year	School year Ending	
	Beginning	Quantitative	Qualitative
Developed	4%	15%	19%
Moderately developed	45%	57%	48%
Not Developed	51%	28%	33%

Table 1 shows the difference between the abilities developed at the beginning of the school year, taking into consideration 6th grade goals in the NEPBE program, at the end of the school year data shows abilities developed in relation with 7th grade. Qualitative data is shown in percentages, these were taken from the rubrics, it is observable that they correspond with the quantitative data.

Moreover, there is a growth on the percentage of students that have developed or moderately developed their English proficiency level.

IV. DISCUSSION

This research gave light to the fact that the national English program has deficiencies, although it began almost ten years ago, the program does not present results on students' skills development. As observed in the research, being capable as a teacher to conduct a class and organize it properly will benefit students [3],[4],[5].

In addition to qualified professionals, understanding the teaching and learning process is fundamental to establish a link between previous knowledge on students and the required one. The qualitative section, demonstrated that by means of understanding students' context and proficiency level, it is possible to develop suitable planning in order to cope with variable conditions and develop effective learning [2].

Quantitative results contrasted with the *Planea* exam ones, show that there were advances in students, resulting in better results. More than half of students had lack of basic knowledge, while having worked in the intervention process resulted in 28% of students that did not develop basic skills or abilities.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the obtained data in the mixed research process, it can be established that there was an advancement considering how students started, this can be shown with both quantitative and qualitative results. The intervention was positive because the percentage of participants that had not developed English skills decreased. On the other hand, the number of students that developed English skills increased.

These results also demonstrate that integrating social-cultural information and proposing it within classes and give certain freedom for students on selecting what and how to learn. This validates that if teachers look for as much information as possible in order to have better knowledge of their students and use this information to adapt teaching activities, this will result could be useful to increase students proficiency levels.

It is observable that NEPBE program is more demanding than previous programs, this means that the gap is wider between students that develop abilities and those who do not. Higher levels are expected so most of the students will not develop the required skills, but there is a notable difference if there is an adequate intervention.

Although results were positive, there some issues that must be tackled in order to make NEPBE work. There should be a deep analysis on Cycles 1-3 regarding teachers' profile and based on results, work on the development of training courses. In addition, teachers should apply intervention strategies that impact positively the proficiency level of their students. As a final proposal, a complete intervention during Cycle 4 should be done to ensure the efficiency, having as a base the sociocultural background.

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