Implementation of the CEFR in the Mexican Context

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Résumé: Cet article présente une étude de cas menée à l'Université Populaire Autonome de l'Etat de Puebla (UPAEP)[1] au Mexique, visant à mettre en œuvre le Cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues (CECRL) dans le Département des études linguistiques et culturelles (DELC). Le but de cet article est d'expliquer comment un enseignement basé sur les stratégies d'apprentissage[2] a été adapté afin d'initier la mise en œuvre du CECR dans le contexte universitaire mexicain. Après une brève description du contexte nous présentons le cadre théorique de cette recherche qui met l'accent sur les variables des apprenants et l'impact du contexte sociolinguistique mexicain sur ces variables. Nous décrivons ensuite les différentes initiatives d'enseignement des langues mises en œuvre à l'université pour développer les variables des apprenants dans ce contexte sociolinguistique. Nous discutons ensuite des résultats de l'approche basée sur les stratégies et les facteurs qui influent sur ces résultats. Pour conclure, nous soulignons l'importance du contexte socioculturel pour une mise en œuvre efficace du CECR et discutons des pistes de recherches futures au sein du DELC.

Mots-clés: cadre européen commun de référence pour les langues, enseignement basé sur les stratégies d'apprentissage, anglais langue étrangère, plurilinguisme, autonomie d'apprentissage

Abstract: The present paper outlines case study research conducted at the Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla[3] (UPAEP), in Puebla, Mexico. It explains an ongoing initiative to implement the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the Departamento de Estudios de Lengua y Cultura[4] (DELC). The purpose of this paper is to explain how Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI) was adapted in order to initiate the implementation of the CEFR in the Mexican university context; specifically at the UPAEP. It first describes the Mexican university context. Next, it presents the theoretical framework with a focus on learner variables, and how the Mexican sociolinguistic context influences these variables. Then, different language initiatives created at the university to develop the learner variables in the sociolinguistic context are described. This section is followed by a discussion of the results of implementing SBI and factors that influence these results. To conclude, the authors emphasize the importance of the sociocultural context when effectively adapting the CEFR and discuss issues for future research in the DELC regarding the implementation of the CEFR.

Keywords: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, strategy-based instruction, English as foreign languages, plurilingualism, learner autonomy

1. The Mexican university context

The UPAEP is a private university with nearly 8,800 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students in its main campus. It offers 45 undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as several different professional development courses. The DELC teaches English as a Foreign Language (EFL), French, German, Italian, Spanish as a Foreign Language, and Mandarin to an average of 4,000 students per semester, 80% of whom study EFL. This paper focuses on the EFL program because implementation of the CEFR began with this program to prepare students for the requirement of obtaining an advanced level of the CEFR and/or 550 points on the paper – based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam.

In 2000, the European Council published the CEFR in order *"to achieve greater unity among its members"* by facilitating *"communication and interaction among Europeans of different mother tongues in order to promote European mobility, mutual understanding and co-operation, and overcome prejudice and discrimination"* (Council of Europe, 2000 : 2).

This framework was to guide language professionals in language curriculum planning and language users in handling language exposure in a globalized society. When the DELC proposed the CEFR as the reference for a language learning policy at the UPAEP, the university's interest in establishing an international language certification program based on concrete proficiency levels that would facilitate the internationalization initiative of mobility began to grow. As the cornerstone of any successful internationalization initiative in Mexico is a strong EFL program, the DELC received full support from the university's authorities for restructuring a foreign language curriculum based on the CEFR.

2. Learner variables in the Mexican university context

The learner variables of plurilingualism and language learner autonomy were the focus of CEFR implementation in the DELC.

2.1 Plurilingualism

The DELC interpreted the concept of plurilingualism at two different levels, namely on *macro* and *micro* levels. On the *macro* level, all languages and cultures ideally have the same sociocultural power, i.e. they should all be perceived as equal. The Mexican sociolinguistic context does not promote a healthy relationship between all languages used, thus causing low macro levels of plurilingualism. As a result, Mexico's educational reality requires pedagogies that seek social transformation towards the acceptance of both mainstream and native languages. As discussed later, some languages like Spanish and English are perceived as being more valuable for obtaining social goods than others.

At the *micro* level, communicative competence is constructed at the level of the individual and involves a transformation in which language users extend their linguistic knowledge and experiences (Council of Europe, 2000 : 4). This notion of individual plurilingualism aligns with Cummins (1979)'s *Iceberg Model of Language Interdependence*, which holds that the different languages an individual may speak are not isolated from one another; they share common cognitive and academic underpinnings that influence the learning of all languages. These processes are referred to as the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and consist of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information.

CALP can be transferred from a first language to any other language being learned. This suggests that bilingual or multilingual proficiency requires a continued cognitive and linguistic development in the first language.

2.2 Language learner autonomy

The role of language learner autonomy in developing plurilingualism seeks individual transformation that fosters the ability to learn (Council of Europe, 2000 : 85). Fostering students' ability to learn is important because language learning is a lifelong process that happens in and out of the classroom in a globalized society. Henri Holec, the "father" of language learner autonomy, defines it as *"the ability to take charge of one's learning"* (Holec, 1981 : 3). Little (1995) updates this definition by stating that being an autonomous language learner has several implications:

- Learners must accept the responsibility of their own learning;
- Autonomy is not inborn; it must be acquired through reflection, analysis, and evaluation;
- Learners must learn how to learn;
- Learners must use the target language.

Rubin (1975) discusses these implications as characteristics of *good language learners*. A good language learner is an autonomous learner who understands the goal of his learning, participates in the elaboration of the learning goal, and puts his learning into practice and regularly evaluates it (Little, 2004). The DELC perceives the development of language learner autonomy as a dialogue between teachers and students. Since learners do not always accept the responsibility of their own learning, *"teachers must help them to do so"*, and therefore must acquire and understand what language learner autonomy means and how to develop it with students (Little, 1995 : 176). As a result, training teachers for language learner autonomy is a key element to effective CEFR implementation.

3. The Mexican sociolinguistic context

This section discusses the sociocultural variables of perception of languages, levels of Spanish proficiency, and foreign language teaching policy.

3.1 Perceptions of languages in Mexico

Linguistic assimilation of Spanish has been the main linguistic policy since Mexico's independence from Spain in 1821 (Hamel, 2001; Cuevas, 2004). A 2003 amendment to the Mexican Constitution presented plurilingualism as an asset, yet indigenous cultures are currently not perceived as equal to the mainstream *mestizo* culture and attitudes towards languages vary (Riley, 1989; Barbot & Camatarri, 1999; Baker, 2001; Lasagabaster, 2006). It is common in Mexico for indigenous languages, such as Nahuatl and Totonac, to be referred to as *dialects*. The term *dialect* is derogatory and bears negative connotations of inferiority of indigenous languages when compared to Spanish or international languages such as English, French, or German. English is the most prestigious international language because it is perceived as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1982), representing money, power, and the hope of a better life (Kachru, 1990; Phillipson, 1992; Calvet 2002). English is the language that the world is learning, including Mexicans who experience a love – hate relationship with English due to the

effects of the social, cultural, and economic imperialism it promotes (Kachru, 1996; Phillipson, 1992, 2009).

3.2 Spanish proficiency

According to Cummins (1979)'s *Iceberg Model of Language Interdependence*, if the threshold of cognitive proficiency is not reached in the first language, students may have problems to achieve bilingual proficiency. *PISA* (Program for International Student Assessment) results in 2003 showed that Mexico placed 34 out of 41 countries regarding L1 literacy levels which involve higher thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. An important percentage of UPAEP students come from the center and the south of Mexico where the educational levels are the lowest in the country (OCDE, 2007). Additionally, the *Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes* (National Council of Culture and Arts) conducted a survey in 2005 that showed that Mexicans only read an average of 2.9 books a year (Conaculta, 2006 : 15). As a result, university freshmen generally have low L1 literacy levels which translate into lower cognitive proficiencies when seen in international perspective. Educational implications therefore involve fomenting L1 CALP so students will not only improve performance in L1, but also will be able to learn other languages effectively (Cummins, 1979). As an example, the DELC created the *Language and Critical Thinking Program* (LPC). This program develops CALP in Spanish through two mandatory courses that foster language learner autonomy for UPAEP students. These courses serve as a solid foundation on which to build L2 learning (Gueorguíeva, Rubín & Villagrán, 2010). As reported by the LPC coordination, results after each level show an average 45% increase in writing, critical thinking, and learner autonomy.

3.3 Foreign language teaching policy

Mexico's Department of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*, SEP) has just launched the CENNI[5], a national certification of languages based on the CEFR and the Canadian Language Benchmark. The SEP has also mandated that instruction in English is obligatory in the public sector starting at the secondary level. In the private sector, English instruction usually begins at the primary level. English instruction must be planned using the CEFR guidelines (SEP, 2006), but no research has been done on a national level in order to evaluate if the framework can be adapted to the Mexican context appropriately. In both public and private sectors, English teachers generally have no formal preparation in foreign language teaching. They are often native speakers of English who travel and live for an extended time in Mexico or Mexicans who learned English in a formal school setting. The lack of teaching preparation often leads to unclear interpretations of grammar – based methods and Communicative Language Teaching. Additionally, this sociocultural context provides a variety of challenges for educators. One major challenge is that teachers have low levels of metacognitive knowledge about their own learning processes and about learning strategies. Another major challenge is the negative perceptions towards Mexican native languages as these languages are absent in language programs and mainstream society in Mexico. Teachers of any sociocultural context are essentially products of the same sociocultural system as the students. Therefore, many of the same difficulties related to developing plurilingualism and language learner autonomy in students are akin to those related to developing the same variables in language teachers.

4. Initiatives that promote plurilingualism and learner autonomy
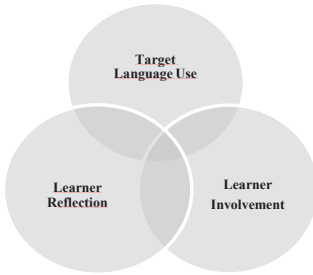
The *Three Pedagogical Principles* (Little, 1995) were used as a reference when creating initiatives in the DELC that promote plurilingualism and language learner autonomy.

Fig.1 Three Pedagogical Principles

4.1 Target language use in language immersion programs

In order to expose students to new languages and to support the university's internationalization initiative, the DELC and the Department of International Programs created two language immersion programs. The *International Cultural and Linguistic Program* was designed to offer students opportunities to immerse themselves in a foreign language and culture through international study, work, and travel opportunities. The *Programa de Inmersión Total en Español para Extranjeros* (Total Immersion Program for Spanish as a Foreign Language) was designed to immerse foreign students in Spanish language study and Mexican culture. In both programs, whether abroad or at the UPAEP, Mexican students were offered the opportunity to develop their communicative competence through interaction with native speakers of the target language.

4.2 Learner involv3ement, learner reflection, and teaching methodology

The principles of learner involvement and learner reflection imply a shift in methodology from a teacher – centered approach to a student – centered approach. This represents a shift from a positivist approach where "learning simply consists of the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another" (Benson, 1997 : 20), to a constructivist approach where knowledge *"is represented as the construction of meaning"* (Benson, 1997 : 21) through monitoring and self – regulation. In a student – centered approach, teachers guide students' in learning strategy application which allows them to develop language learner autonomy. Chamot discusses SBI models that emphasize *"the importance of developing students' metacognitive understanding of the value of learning strategies"* (Chamot, 2008 : 217). The models emphasize the importance of modeling learning strategy use and providing practice and evaluation opportunities with the strategies so that students can use them autonomously. One SBI model, the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), *"emphasizes that students who are mentally active and who analyze and reflect on their learning activities will learn, retain, and be able to use new information more effectively"* (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994 : 11). CALLA was chosen as the SBI model to be implemented in the DELC.

CALLA consists of five instructional phases that scaffold learning strategy instruction through a gradual shift from teacher direction to student independence. These phases represent the dialogue of language learner autonomy previously mentioned in the

paper. The *preparation phase* includes establishing the thematic context, activating students' prior knowledge, and presenting content, language, and strategy objectives to the students. The *presentation phase* includes explicitly presenting, explaining, and modeling learning strategies by the teacher. Students practice learning strategies in the *practice phase* and then evaluate the effectiveness of the learning strategy in the *evaluation phase*. L1 is permitted for metacognitive reflection if students are cognitively or affectively hesitant to discuss learning strategy effectiveness in L2. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) mention that metacognition is developed when using the first language because the development of productive metacognitive habits positively influences language learning. Finally, the *expansion phase* provides an opportunity for students to independently apply the learning strategy to consolidate learning strategy use and transfer learning strategy use to new tasks.

4.3 Professional development in learning strategy instruction

In order to develop metacognitively aware students, language teachers need to be metacognitively aware of their own learning processes and develop a theoretical background of language learner autonomy. In order to ensure successful CALLA implementation, teachers´ prior knowledge about teaching was taken into consideration by comparing a prior teaching approach to CALLA. The majority of EFL teachers in the DELC uses what has been coined as an eclectic approach to language teaching which mixes grammar form and function instruction with contemporary trends of Communicative Language Teaching. This approach promotes the idea that the conscious controlled efforts of learning a language can be skipped as long as students are using L2 in sufficiently communicative environments (Macaro, 2001). The influence of this adopted eclectic approach caused initial efforts of CALLA implementation to be difficult because the concept of focusing on the controlled stage of language learning was novel.

Thanks to collaborative efforts with the Human Resources department at the UPAEP, the DELC opened the *Strategy – Based Instruction Mentorship*. This mentorship is a two year professional development program that focuses on the implementation of SBI so teachers can *"provide students with a menu from which they can select strategies that have found to be appropriate for specific types of learning activities and tasks"* (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994 : 11). In order for teachers to obtain their official certification diploma, documental and performance evidence must be approved by the evaluation committee.

The program contains two phases. The first phase consists of three 14 – week semesters in which a two – hour session is conducted once a week to study CALLA through theoretical presentations and discussions, CALLA lesson planning and critique, and class observation debriefings. The second phase is an additional 14 – week long semester in which the documental evidence is developed. This consists of developing a thematic unit composed of a series of intertwined CALLA lessons. Upon approval by the evaluation committee, the participant creates the performance evidence by first teaching the thematic unit and being observed by the mentor. The purpose of this activity is to refine contradictory sections of the unit regarding its implementation from theory to practice. Once refined, the participant then films the unit being taught for 10 classroom hours for the performance evidence. Upon approval by the evaluation committee, the participant can be certified by the Mexican Department of Labor and the UPAEP in the *Strategy – Based Instruction Mentorship*.

5. Results in learner variable development

5.1 Language learner autonomy discussion

The DELC measured the effectiveness of SBI implementation to develop language learner autonomy by tracking the TOEFL score averages of the B2 level EFL students. Roughly 10% of the whole English department, translating into 150 students each semester, takes the TOEFL exam in this last level of English study. Also, the DELC used teacher evaluation averages to explore and draw conclusions about student reactions to language learner autonomy. Appendix 1 shows an increase of approximately 65 points in TOEFL score averages since 2006 indicating that students are gradually becoming strategic when they approach language tasks in the TOEFL exam because they are able to effectively match learning strategies with language tasks. An increase in TOEFL score averages shows how learners recognize the active role they play in obtaining an acceptable score in the TOEFL exam. Appendix 2 shows that language students evaluated their teachers higher since 2005 as the averages have risen from 8.56 to 9.21, indicating that students reacted positively to the teacher's role of creating a learning environment that promotes success. The consistent score of 9.0 or above beginning in 2009 could possibly correlate to the shift to SBI as teacher training in the *Strategy – Based Instruction Mentorship* began in 2009. These results suggest that students are beginning to exemplify characteristics of autonomous learners described by Little (1995) at the beginning of the paper. Therefore, the authors suggest a positive correlation between language teaching initiatives that promote language learner autonomy through learning strategy instruction.

5.2 Plurilingualism discussion

The DELC was unable to effectively measure the development of plurilingualism. Since plurilingualism involves the sociolinguistic relationship between various languages on both the *macro* and *micro* levels, the DELC will need to implement SBI in languages other than English that are taught in the department such as Spanish, French, or German. On a national level as well, plurilingualism will only be exemplified when schools develop language programs that teach languages other than English. Even though plurilingualism is mentioned in national language teaching policy of Mexico, English is still the main foreign language taught in Mexico. Mexico's sociolinguistic context is complex, making it easy for language programs to fall into the hegemony of English and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992, 2009). If Mexican language programs truly want to promote plurilingualism, they will have to integrate not only different international languages, but also Mexican native languages. Many UPAEP students are in fact surrounded by native languages. These languages need to be included in language teaching programs in order to develop background knowledge that favors the equal treatment and attitudes towards all languages.

6. Conclusion

The task of CEFR implementation continues into the future as the DELC will have to make adjustments to its language teaching policy. The development of plurilingualism and language learner autonomy is an ongoing process that requires time and effort. Language learner autonomy can lead to plurilingualism in an environment that foments an interdependent relationship between the learning of all languages. In the Mexican

university context, development of language learner autonomy shows that students are capable of learning languages, however the development of plurilingualism can only occur when more than one language is present in a context. The increase in TOEFL score averages and teacher evaluation averages suggests that the DELC is on the right track as far as individual language learner autonomy is concerned. Nevertheless, the variable of plurilingualism needs to be considered by conducting research in teaching of languages other than English in the DELC. Considering these factors, effective development of plurilingualism and language learner autonomy is possible when the sociocultural context is considered. The task of developing plurilingualism in the specific sociocultural context of this paper hints the need of developing of a Mexican framework for language learning that promotes not only the individual transformation of autonomous language learners, but also the sociocultural transformation of plurilinguistic language users. Future research should explore the pertinence of creating an alternative framework for Mexico as the CEFR is intended for the European context. Mexican universities are often attracted to the CEFR, yet focus on the learner variable of plurilingualism through the presence of English and on occasion, other international languages, but ignoring Mexican native languages completely. The CENNI, as mentioned earlier, does not mention any of the 62 Mexican native languages, thus language teaching policies lacking Mexican native languages are common in many schools like the UPAEP or large public universities such as the UNAM[6]. However, university projects, such as *Una Apuesta de Futuro* in the UPAEP, which grants scholarships to students from marginalized indigenous sectors of the state of Puebla, Mexico, can be the focus of developing plurilingualism by fomenting the interrelation between native languages, like Nahuatl, and modern languages, like English. Also, exploring the correlation between the development of CALP in Spanish in the LPC program and its influences on the development of plurilingualism is possible because according to the *Interdependence Theory* (Cummins, 1979), high levels of CALP in Spanish would have a positive impact on foreign language learning. The influence of Spanish in foreign language is another important part of the DELC's language learning policy.

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Notes

[1] Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP)
[2] Strategy-Based Instruction (SBI)
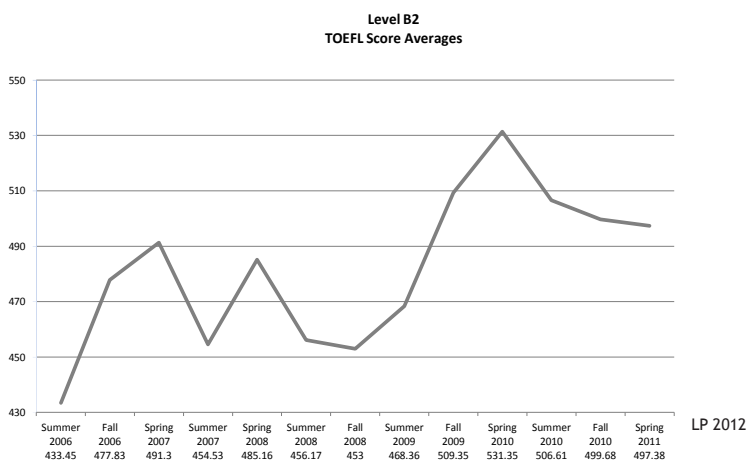[3] Popular Autonomous University of the State of Puebla
[4] Department of Language and Cultural Studies
[5] CENNI: Certificación Nacional de Nivel de Idioma (National Language Certification), http://www.cenni.sep.gob.mx/index.php
[6] UNAM: *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*, Mexico's largest public university in Mexico City. UNAM's language department teaches eleven foreign languages, but no Mexican native languages. Native languages are studied in other academic departments, such as the Philology department, but they are not taught as a foreign or second language. See http://www.cele.unam.mx.

Appendix 1
Appendix 1 shows the TOEFL score averages of English classes in the B2 level of the DELC. Approximately 150 students took the TOEFL exam in each term shown in the graph.

Level B2
TOEFL Score Averages

	Summer 2006	Fall 2006	Spring 2007	Summer 2007	Spring 2008	Summer 2008	Fall 2008	Summer 2009	Fall 2009	Spring 2010	Summer 2010	Fall 2010	Spring 2011
	433.45	477.83	491.3	454.53	485.16	456.17	453	468.36	509.35	531.35	506.61	499.68	497.38

LP 2012

Appendix 2

Appendix 2 shows the teacher evaluation averages by students of all English levels in the DELC.

Teacher Evaluation Averages
DELC

	Summer 2008	Fall 2008	Spring 2009	Summer 2009	Fall 2009	Spring 2010	Summer 2010	Fall 2010
	8.7	8.83	8.99	9.12	8.91	9.08	9.11	9.19

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