

7. Competency based language teaching and teacher agency. A critical discourse study (CDS) of its implementation in a BA of ELT in Mexico



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Resumen

Este estudio de caso cualitativo tiene como objetivo analizar la agencia docente bajo el modelo de Enseñanza del Lenguaje Basado en Competencias (ELBC) implementado en una licenciatura de Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés en una universidad estatal en la región noroeste de México. El principal interés es saber cómo los docentes enfrentan este modelo en las aulas y las dinámicas que se desarrollan a partir de esta implementación de políticas de arriba hacia abajo. Los estudios críticos del discurso fueron la base teórica para observar la ruta ideológica que podía influir en los discursos académicos. Los resultados revelan que la agencia docente se ve obstaculizada por los sistemas externos impuestos en el aula ELBC y brindan información relevante sobre cómo la universidad lucha por adaptarse y cumplir con los indicadores educativos.

Palabras clave: *enseñanza del lenguaje basado en competencias, agencialidad docente, evaluación.*

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Abstract

This qualitative case study aims to analyse teacher agency under the Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) model implemented in a B.A. of English Language Teaching in a state university in the northwest region of Mexico. The main interest was to investigate how teachers deal with this model in classrooms and the dynamics that evolve from this top-down policy implementation. Critical Discourse Studies was the theoretical foundation to observe the ideological route that could influence academic discourses. Results reveal that teacher agency is hindered by imposed external systems in the CBLT classroom and provide relevant information about how the university struggles to adapt and comply with the educative indicators.

Keywords: *competency-based language teaching, teacher agency, assessment.*

Résumé

Cette étude de cas qualitative vise à analyser l'agence des enseignants dans le cadre du modèle d'enseignement des langues basé sur les compétences mis en œuvre dans un baccalauréat ès arts en enseignement de l'anglais dans une université d'État de la région du nord-ouest du Mexique. L'intérêt principal est de savoir comment les enseignants gèrent ce modèle dans les salles de classe et la dynamique qui découle de cette mise en œuvre politique descendante. Études Critiques du Discours a été le fondement théorique pour observer la voie idéologique qui pourrait influencer les discours académiques. Les résultats révèlent que l'agence des enseignants est entravée par des systèmes externes imposés dans la salle de classes et fournit des informations pertinentes sur la façon dont l'université lutte pour s'adapter et se conformer aux indicateurs éducatifs.

Mots-clés : *enseignement des langues basé sur les compétences, agence enseignante, évaluation.*

Introduction

Competency-Based Education (CBE) evolved with an interest in establishing a link between schools and the wider world, trying to relate theory and practice (Diaz and Rigo, 2000). According to its advocates, the premise undertaken by this model shows a transition in the education paradigm by modifying the focus of attention from teaching to learning (Bader Al Bataineh & Tasnimi, 2014). Furthermore, a reconceptualisation of teaching and learning is required to align with the criterion of the approach. Richards and Rodgers explained that Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) is the implementation of the Competency-Based Education Model in a Language teaching context. Since this study was developed within a CBLT context, the term CBLT will be used throughout the text. CBLT focuses on what students can do with language instead of what is known about it. In some way, it relates to aspects similar to the communicative approach in language teaching. Moreover, this model could be defined as what students know about language and what they do with language in real life situations (Griffith, 2014).

Competency is a learner's capacity to perform specific skills in complex and authentic contexts adequately. It is based on integrating and activating knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to have an integral formation (Andrade, 2008). The competency-based education model has been implemented at all instruction levels, especially in Mexico's higher education. The change has also landed to one of the B.A. of English language teaching in the northwest of Mexico, where future English teachers are being trained. Therefore, it was essential to organise an adequate follow-up of its implementation to know the impact of these policies on classroom practices.

Teachers are now recognised as agents in learning and teaching processes capable of operating within their environment (Kalaja et al., 2015). A comprehensive definition of *agency* is "a sociocultural capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112). Thus, "agency is not only concerned with what is observable, but it also involves not visible behaviours, beliefs, thoughts and feelings; all of which must be understood in relation to the various context and affordances from which they cannot be abstracted" (Mercer, 2012, p. 42).

The objective of the present study consists of analysing teacher agency in the implementation of the model to understand the impact on classroom practices. Hence, this study will investigate how competency-based language teaching impacts teacher agency. The present research attempts to understand how this international policy has permeated until reaching the main educative agents, teachers. From their perspective, teachers explain how they understand this policy and describe the characteristics of the CBLT model.

Furthermore, they explained how they implement the CBLT model and allowed me to access their classrooms and observe how this policy is implemented. In the end, teachers are the ones who decide what happens inside classrooms and have the power to determine what is learned. While thinking about this aspect, the following research questions have been formulated:

What impact does the CBLT model have on teacher agency, as observed in a Mexican BA in ELT programme?

Specific questions:

1. What elements of CBLT are carried out?
2. How has the CBLT model been understood and interpreted by teachers?
3. What underlying notions of the social model implicit within CBLT are found?
4. Do teachers resist CBLT? If so, why?
5. What features in my particular case study indicate a custom-made adaptation of the model?
6. What kind of students' learning outcomes are presented?

This qualitative study aims to analyse teacher agency under the Competency-Based Language Teaching (CBLT) model implemented in a BA of English Language Teaching in a state university in the Northwest region of Mexico. The main interest is to know how teachers deal with this model in classrooms and the dynamics surrounding assessment that evolve from this top-down policy implementation. The following section will draw the current literature trends concerning CBLT and teacher agency in classrooms.

Literature review

In this section, I offer a critical position concerning the latest literature trends about the central aspects that influenced the development of this research. I discuss CBE and CBLT theoretical foundations, teacher agency, assessment to have a complete glimpse of the subject. Moreover, in the next section, the methodology is presented to illustrate the procedures data collection and analysis.

Competency-Based Education

The competency-based education model defeats some conventional criteria where learners are viewed as recipients of the information. Assuming a competency posture intends to go far away from behaviourist beliefs and to go nearer to constructivist ideas where the pupil is the main character. Learning is concentrated on performance (Andrade, 2018).

Competencies

A competence represents a group of skills, attitudes and values manifested in an adequate performance. The concept of competence is “a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills, and ethical values” (Lokhoff, et al, 2010, p. 52). Argudin simplifies the term by summarising it as knowledge in execution and explains that being competent implies comprehending how to interpret and perform in different sceneries. However, Tobón develops the concept and integrates the fact of pertinent acting and moral engagement: “Competencies are more than knowledge in context because they go further of acting, and besides, they imply commitment and will to do things with clarity, and understanding” (p. 10).

As it can be noted, the definitions concentrate on facts and visual performance. Such inclinations reaffirm critiques of different scholars towards

the model where it is proclaimed that CBE holds a tenor to produce technically-oriented automatised students trained to solve simulated and predetermined situations in the classroom. Nevertheless, from my perspective, being a technician is not enough in the knowledge area, considering unique and complex challenges where critical analysis and mental processes cannot be dictated, traced and demonstrated through technical proof as expected.

Saadi et al. (2016) define CBLT as an interaction of realities of language means, the social context and the communication needs of students. In addition, Bader and Tasnimi (2014) express that CBLT addresses what the learners are expected to do rather than what they are expected to learn. Moreover, Auerbach (1986) mentions that CBLT “reflects the shift from viewing language learning as an end in itself to viewing it as a means for learners to achieve their own individual goals.” (p. 413) The following table present different authors’ definitions of the CBLT terminology (see table 1):

Table 1. *Definitions of CBLT*

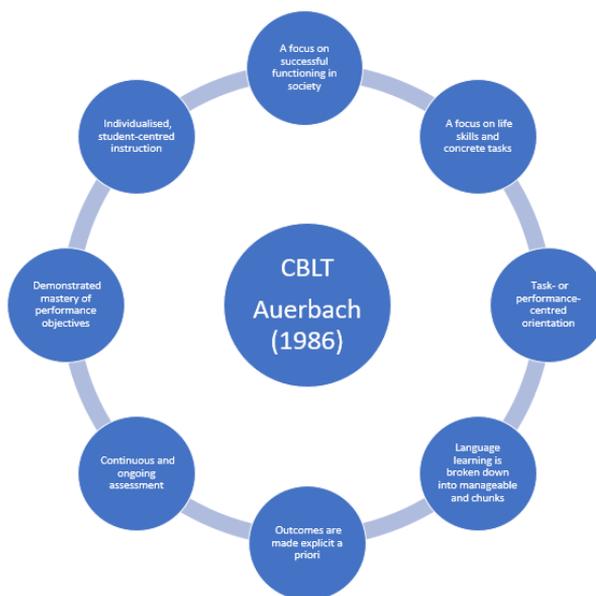
<p>CBLT is an interaction of realities of language means the social context and the communication needs of students (Saadi, Saedi and Karbalaeei, 2016).</p>	<p>CBLT addresses what the learners are expected to do rather than what they are expected to learn about (Bader Bataineh and Tasnimi, 2014).</p>
<p>CBLT classroom must be oriented towards the ability to complete a real-world task.(Bader Bataineh and Tasnimi, 2014)</p>	<p>“CBAE/ESL reflects the shift from viewing language learning as an end in itself to viewing it as a mean for learners to achieve their own individual goals”. (Auerbach, 1986 p. 413)</p>

Fuente: elaboración propia con base en Saadi et al. (2016), Bader & Tasnini (2014) y Auerbach (1986).

The above definitions focus on using language for communication purposes derived from the social context. All descriptions address “doing with the language” rather than “learning about the language” and focus on performance. This study will focus on the curriculum implementation in the

CBLT model, where students perfect their language while studying the BA. For that reason, this study is considered CBLT. Following this, Auerbach draws a framework about the state of the art of CBLT and illustrates eight key features to serve as a skeleton of the CBE model in ELT (p. 414). This framework concentrates on the underpinnings of CBE applied to an ELT context as observed in figure 1:

Figure 1. *Characteristics of the CBLT theory (Auerbach, 1986)*



Fuente: elaboración propia con base Auerbach (1986).

Auerbach (1986) summarises the main characteristics of the theory about how CBE is applied to an ELT context. She also emphasises the focus on performance and the demonstration of knowledge as proof of learning. In language learning, she states that language is separated into chunks to make it more manageable. Breaking content into manageable stages is a characteristic of CBLT. Also, the content should be based on the working market needs. The author carefully reviews the foundations of the model and its implementation. In addition, Auerbach (1986) offers a critical perspective on the CBLT model implementation and presents critics of the mod-

el in ESL. The author directly emphasises the CBLT model's implicit neoliberal system. She discusses the CBLT theoretical assumptions or social implications in the existing socio-economic order. The author stresses the need for further debate rather than what she considers uncritical acceptance of competency-based systems. She analyses the curriculum and relates it to the social implications that this takes. Here, the function of education is to transmit this knowledge and to socialise learners according to the values of the dominant socio-economic group (Auerbach, 1986).

I agree with her perspective since the author analyses the curriculum and its repercussions on society and how, at the same time, education is influenced by the neoliberal stance taken by a globalised civilisation. However, CBLT is focused on results and the process taken to reach the aims previously set. From my perspective, this kind of curriculum puts education in a predicament since the purposes are set by the employers' needs that require students for specific tasks, limiting learning to those skills. Therefore, I also agree when the author puts forth a discussion about the curriculum and its social implications. Furthermore, the author emphasises the need for engagement in an informed debate: "if critical thinking is to be a goal for our students, it must be a goal for us as educators in the same way" (p. 426). The more informed and alert educators are about the model and the social implications derived from this political implementation, the more influence educators can have on students to exercise their critical judgment. At the same time, teachers will encourage the development of thinking skills. Thus, there is a need for a critical thinking society that could be empowered by higher education. However, it would be best to start with critical education models to reach such purposes.

Agency

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) mention that agency is the interplay between the following dimensions: routine, which is the acquired pattern of action; purpose, which is the motivating force of the individuals; and judgment which shows engagement with the actual situations in the moment of action. Teachers' background experience reflects directly on their actions. At the

same time, they adjust their baggage of knowledge to the present context and continue adapting what they know to future scenarios. Furthermore, the authors describe agency as temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments —the temporal-relational context of action— which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms these structures' interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

Furthermore, *agency* is not a quality that individuals possess; it is an action that people take based on their context and their beliefs of what fits best to each situation. As Priestley et al. (2012) state, “agency is not something that people have, is something that people do” (p. 13). Moreover, agency is based “not on the objective reality but the subjective reality, their reality” (p. 14).

Quality recognition organisations invite higher education institutions to transform and meet their quality criteria. Such transformation relies on teachers' acceptance or rejection of a policy that has been required. Observing how this model has been addressed inside the classrooms is relevant. Therefore, teachers are recognised as agents in learning and teaching processes capable of operating within their environment (Kalaja et al., 2015, p. 17). A comprehensive definition of *agency* is “a sociocultural capacity to act” (Ahearn, 112). Thus, “agency is not only concerned with what is observable, but it also involves not visible behaviours, beliefs, thoughts and feelings; all of which must be understood in relation to the various context and affordances from which they cannot be abstracted” (Mercer, 2012, p. 42).

Since schools are continually required to respond to policies or educational reforms, this study intends to know how such ecology permeates the educational agents by alternating with their ideologies, identities, requirements, and concrete actions. Also, the present study intends to identify if professors accept, adapt or ignore the structural changes that come as a trickle-down effect. From this perspective, professors are not perceived as individuals relegated to follow instructions but as capable of managing policies and implementing them in their actual and local context. I selected the ecology perspective since it allows us to observe the unique relationship that individuals construct with their environment and the effect of this relationship on their actions.

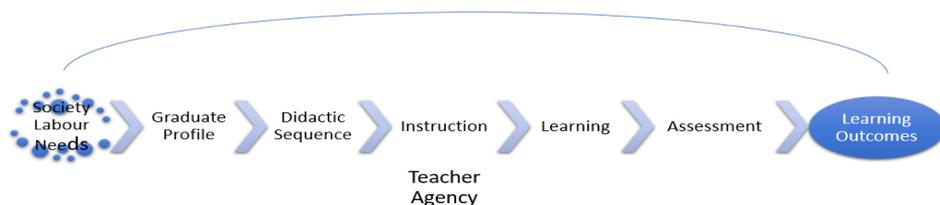
Assessment under CBLT

In broad terms, assessment is a valuation in any situation. In particular terms, the expression in education has evolved and the method of instruction. According to CBE, assessment is the spine of education, the highest motivation, and the focus point where teachers and students focus their attention. That is to say, assessment represents the core of the whole CBE project (Klein Collins, 2013). Therefore, assessment strongly influences how students learn, and teachers teach by focusing on what assessment requires (Alderson and Wall, 1993). The transition to the new curriculum paradigm urges us to reconsider the concept of assessment in order to be able to cover the different competency areas. For this reason, teachers and students need to assume new roles within CBE by making the required changes in their actions to find learning more effective and valuable (Bader Al Bataineh & Tasnimi, 2014).

The CBE approach has a clear correlation between instruction, learning and assessment. Therefore, assessment, learning and instruction should be aligned (Bartman et al., 2007). These three elements represent a symbiosis, and consequently, congruence among them needs to be preserved. According to CBE advocates, assessment is not simply the conclusion of the course, but it represents the fundamental steering component, and it is directly connected to learning outcomes (Lokhoff et al., 2010). Within the competency-based programmes, assessment represents an influential part that must be lined with the other elements of curriculum planning, like the graduate profile and the society's employment needs. The role of assessment is to confirm with substantial proof that the pupil accomplished the established competencies in the graduate profile. For this reason, it is said that assessment is a fundamental element of the CBLT approach.

Therefore, it is essential to state that within CBE/CBLT curriculum planning, there should be an alignment of the main elements of the model, which are instruction, learning and assessment. At the same time, these elements should be aligned with societal employment needs. In addition, congruence among these three elements should be preserved in a CBP. Figure 2 represents the alignment that should prevail within a CBE programme:

Figure 2. CBE curriculum planning



Fuente: elaboración propia.

Since this model is based on demonstrating competencies and the required employment skills, assessment represents the core of the CBE/CBLT curriculum. All these elements are already preestablished within curricular planning and the so-called didactic sequences where educational strategies and assessment processes are suggested to the facilitator to help students achieve their competencies. The facilitator counts on an established guide to attaining student competencies in this case. It is debatable if all the students should go through the same learning process to meet the target competencies or if all of them learn differently.

However, Ryohei (2017) points out another issue addressed using evidence-based approaches: the fabrication and falsification of data. The author states that “as the competition to avoid penalties, stipulated by incentives, grows ever fiercer, intrinsic motivation toward education fades, and as the professional ethic of self-regulation is lost, the fabrication and falsification of evidence take centre stage” (p. 106). Teachers might be encouraged to fabricate data that fits the requirements of the model, intending to receive incentives or avoid penalties. The elaboration of fake data would represent a significant failure of a model where evidence-based practices are the driving characteristics of the approach. According to Kaplan (2010), assessment should be as specific as possible for students to practice the actual uses of language within the perspective of language teaching and communicative methods. Therefore, the thematic covered in the curriculum should be based on the pragmatics of the word and should also be considered the base criteria to contrast students’ performance. The author also mentions that out-

come-based approaches represent essential advantages over standardised tests since a significant alignment between assessment and learning should be made. However, the author also pointed out that such outcome-based programmes could be problematic to operate “for a variety of political, technical and practical reasons” (Kaplan, 2010, p. 465).

Theoretical framework

This research was analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA represents a critical attitude when targeting different topics and searching for reflection about what is happening in the educational system from the so-called commercialisation of education. Also, this approach can provide significant answers to my research questions that cover aspects related to power reproduction or resistance of the educational actors. CDA can be employed in any discipline; therefore, it is not exclusive to linguistics or applied linguistics; still, it takes language elements to grasp conclusions. However, Van Dijk proposed to change the name of CDA to Critical Discourse Studies CDS because there is no similar analysis covering all the elements that CDS embrace. His motivation to suggest a change in the denomination of this analysis goes beyond since the CDS analyse discourse not only as an autonomous verbal object but as truly social, cultural, historical or political practice (Van Dijk, 2009).

CDS analyse in-depth the preestablished intentions not openly mentioned by the actors of power directed through different discursive processes to persuade or lead specific group(s) within the population. For this purpose, CDS utilise any method that is pertinent to the objectives of inquiry (Van Dijk, 2009) and holds the aim of contributing to the social strengthening of the dominated groups, especially in the domain of discourse and communication. In addition, CDS focuses on analysing those language structures that could trigger social consequences and influence the social beliefs and, thus, the receivers’ actions. Since CDS are positioned on the side of the oppressed, its focus is on the discourse properties associated with the expression, confirmation, reproduction or impugnation of social power as members of the dominant groups. Such analysis must “describe and (p. 24)

explain how the institutions of dominant groups promulgate, reproduce and legitimate the power abuse” (p. 121). Given this panorama, CDS is valuable for studying the connections linking the instruction, learning and curriculum, as well as ideologies and power and their consequences on the classroom process and teaching-learning activity (Bukhari and Xiaoyang, 2013).

Methodology

Research setting and participants

This study was conducted at a public state university located in the northwest of the country. The BA in ELT was created within a CBLT curriculum, and it has worked with the model for eleven years. Consequently, the selected university holds a consolidated program that could provide a mature panorama of the examined phenomenon. I designed a non-probability study since the sample selected was purposive. That is, “sampling is seen as a series of strategic choices about with whom, where, and how one does one’s research” (Palys, 2008, p. 697). Teachers and staff administrators from a BA in English Language Teaching in the North West Region of Mexico were chosen by identifying the programme’s major stakeholders and who could be affected by it. They were selected because they could contribute by providing relevant information about the proposed research topic and setting. The site was purposefully selected since CBLT has been their mainstream programme for about eight years, an aspect that will provide more enriching information about a well-established programme. For this study, five experienced teachers were selected since they were imparting classes in the BA. As part of the administrative interviews, I interviewed the chief of the BA and the Academic Administrator of the University. The researcher sought individuals who could articulate their views and opinions clearly, were familiar with the study’s circumstances and were open to exploring different panoramas in their practice.

Methods and procedure of data collection

This qualitative case study analyses how the educational policy of CBLT was implemented in a classroom setting. Case studies are well documented in the literature since they “portray, analyse and interpret the uniqueness of real individuals and situations through accessible accounts” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 129). A critical element in this research is the semi-structured interview, which employs questions to build upon the participants’ responses, the class’s observations, and the collection of learning outcomes that exemplified the processes developed in the classroom. While observing classes, the researcher was a non-participant observer with the aim of not interrupting the natural conditions of the class. In addition, students facilitated the students’ learning outcomes to be analysed in this study.

Methods and procedure of data analysis

This case study involved a detailed description of the setting and individuals, followed by an analysis of data. The interviews were in Spanish, the participants’ mother tongue, to obtain a deeper meaning of the phenomenon. Moreover, to protect participants’ identities, they were assigned an alias. When observing the classes, the researcher focused on how the CBLT ideology and assessment was reflected in the actions carried out by the teacher in the classroom. Furthermore, for analysing the students’ learning outcomes, the focus was on reviewing if they matched with the kind of learning outcomes suggested by the CBLT approach. The researcher interpreted and classified the information to analyse it. Results discussion was arranged through an interpretation of the interconnected themes. At the same time, data were triangulated with the different sources of information to make a coherent justification of the topics and add validity to the study.

Main results and discussion

Teachers' attitudes towards the model

This section aims to answer the research question: How has the CBLT model been understood and interpreted by teachers?. The findings of this project reveal that the teachers at the selected university hold a favourable attitude towards the competency model. All the participants can explain the academic model's guidelines and highlight the constructivist aspects that the model advises. Teachers at the selected university see the educative model based on competencies as an opportunity to offer the student a different approach from the teacher-centred ones, bringing them closer to the actual practice of the contents seen in class. According to Patricia, the following excerpt reflects how CBLT represents an opportunity to improve instruction.

Patricia: Oh, yes, it (CBLT) is a growing opportunity when used appropriately. With enough tools for the student to achieve...the student can self-regulate and manage his knowledge during the whole semester. Then, if there is no facilitator, it would be easy to enrich the knowledge. For that reason, I believe the model is an opportunity be used with all it has.

Patricia also mentions that she sees CBLT as an opportunity to grow. She explains that the model provides all the elements students need to learn. Patricia emphasises and puts a condition when she mentions the expressions "if the model is used appropriately;" and "when used with all it has". According to Patricia's perspective, these two expressions might suggest that not all students take advantage of the CBLT model that presents all the elements students need. She clearly expresses her approval of the constructivist ideas underlying CBLT. She believes the model offers a range of opportunities for students to learn, and she even mentions that students do not need the facilitator because all the knowledge is there for them. Moreover, teachers in this study manifest a favourable attitude towards the neoliberal tendencies implicit in the model. Data analysis suggests that participants have appropriat-

ed preparing students for the job market, which occurs naturally in their interviews.

Guadalupe: I see a lot of positive aspects because we need to know how we will function in the labour area. If they tell me about the development of skills, for example, if I am being trained as a teacher, and they train me to develop teaching and learning strategies, I will be able to transmit that and apply it in the classroom... Now, it is not only skills development in the immediate sense. Each thing taught has its' theoretical foundations, such as previous reading and previous discussion, and then you go to the practical stage. Then, yes, I think it gives you many tools for facing the labour area.

Guadalupe agrees with Patricia that CBLT offers a range of possibilities for students, and she adds that everything done in the classroom has its theoretical foundation. However, Guadalupe's notion about the purpose of higher education is to help students function in the labour area. She uses the expressions: "function", "labour area" (twice), "trained". It is clear evidence of the neoliberal ideologies inserted in higher education policies by taking these ideologies for granted and promoting them to students. Teachers seem to value the constructivist ideas of CBLT and accept the neoliberal ideologies that CBLT implies. CBLT comes as a whole package, including pedagogical tools that offer liberating resources for teachers and students. However, it also means a design directed to commercialise education.

Nonetheless, teachers seem unaware of this aspect, revealing a lack of a critical attitude towards their work and activities. According to Moreno and Mosquera, teachers' discourse is added to the power discourse to naturalise the reproduction processes present at schools. The last excerpt is an excellent example of the CBLT ideology's reproduction in teachers' discourse by accepting CBLT and their students' function in the labour area. It is also observable how, through her speech, Guadalupe shows her appropriation of the CBLT ideology. From the sociocultural perspective, she has internalised the ideology of the CBLT, which includes the neoliberal path to society. As postulated by Van Dijk, when the speaker can influence the receptors' mental model, knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, can indirectly control these people's future actions. As noted, it is natural in the teachers' discourse to

express approval towards the neoliberal ideas infiltrated in higher education. The participants replicate the ideologies generated by the elites of power, which are having higher education to the employers' service using constructivist pedagogy.

Assessment

This section answers the research questions: What kind of students' learning outcomes are presented? What underlying notions of the social model implicit within CBLT are found? Regarding assessment, some participants highlighted using rubrics to help them be aware of what is required in each activity. However, other teachers mentioned that it is impossible to follow the model due to time constraints and other administrative responsibilities that must be carried out. Both students and teachers referred positively to mental rubrics to evaluate the students and thus comply with the model. The teachers expressed their knowledge about the types of assessments carried out in the competency model. The students' learning outcomes that teachers ask for are according to those established by competency-based education and the formative assessment promoted. However, the feedback delivered to students is not as constant and detailed as expected. Nevertheless, feedback is an essential part of formative assessment and continuous learning, as can be observed in the following quote:

Students: "There is a teacher that does not give us a grade; he only grades as completed. Then, I did not know how I did my assignment or whether he had something to tell me or improve. Then the semester advances, and you have an incognita that the teacher will say: "you are basic". But you did not tell me anything during the semester: how I could improve or develop certain skills."

The materialisation of the ideology is manifested through the kind of learning outcome teachers require. The students' learning outcomes I collected match the criteria the university asks for, as can be seen in the following example (see figure 3):

exam for students to practise answering this type of test since it is one of the requirements for graduation:

Guadalupe: The standardised test limits me as a teacher; it limits me a lot. I no longer have the liberty of teaching. Even if I did have the liberty of teaching, I do not have the time.

The participants' vision in this study allowed me to observe the phenomenon from different angles. I could attend to the model's macro aspects and insertion into the Mexican educative system. According to the data collected, it is necessary to modify the Mexican educative system's structural aspects for the model by competencies to work as planned. According to the participants: The model exceeds Mexico's educative system derived from the lack of flexibility in the programmes and assessment:

Clara: The big problem is... we saw it when we were designing it, and I see it now that we are implementing it: we have a model that exceeds the Mexican model. That is to say; we are working with a model that we thought could be cutting-edge. Still, we are tied up, confined to a Mexican pedagogical model of assessment that does not allow flexibility.

Clara points out that Mexico is not prepared to have a model used in other countries since the assessment system "confines" teachers and students to follow the teacher-centred path. Clara starts with this statement and uses the words: "the big problem", stating that this is the central aspect of Clara's belief that the CBE implementation has been partial in the university and the different educational levels in Mexico. She also uses the phrase "exceeds the Mexican model", "we thought that could be cutting-edge", "Tied up," "confined" and "does not allow".

Another aspect that displays inconsistencies in the Mexican educative system is the type of evaluation. Within the competency method, evaluation is through categories derived from instruction and formative assessment, and in the educative system, only numbers and averages are accepted. In the end, the student's transcripts are based on numbers, and aspects such as student scholarships are conditional on a numerical average. For this reason,

students are interested in knowing their numerical grades and continue pondering averages since, in the end, averages are considered:

Students: It is not having a precise number in the moment of why I got an *intermediate*. And what kind of *intermediate* is it? Is it a 7? I don't know. Sometimes it depends on the teacher's perspective, maybe the teacher thought it was an 8, but I feel like a 7. But why? No number says to me: you have a seven; you have an 8. I believe this is essential for students who want to get their BA degree by average. We could do that here. Then, you go with an incognito all semester. Is my grade going to go or down?

These students are expressing their uncertainty about their grades. Students try to translate the categories to the numerical system they know because, in the end, the categories are converted to numbers and averaged in the university. I can imply that for this reason, students want to know their numerical average. I understand that they are trying to build a schema and adapt these categories to what they perceive to make sense of these new terms that define their assessment. Students can obtain their degree on the BA in ELT to have a certain average on their transcript. The average is taken after the conversion of categories to numbers.

The University's pressure to comply with the academic indicators was evidenced in this study. These pressures have been translated into practices carried out in educative design and connect with teachers' and students' agency. The teachers link the quality indicators and the university's funding for its operation:

Flor: Yes, and public universities have their indicators, which are the money universities receive. Yes, authorities have to take care of the quality of learning and know that those indicators will have the money for the university's operation. Isn't it? Then, they are very important to accomplish; they are, NI MODO...

Flor explains how the quality indicators in higher education work. Higher education institutions that want to develop must fulfil the requested quality indicators. The participant uses "indicators, money, quality of learning, operation, necessary to accomplish". In the end, the term "Ni Modo", which

in this context means, compliance: we must do it that way, even though we disagree. The terms used in the last excerpt reflect the language of commercialisation that higher education institutions use. Henceforth, this demonstrates how neoliberal ideologies have penetrated the official documents of higher education and how teachers express themselves. The participant directly links the accomplishment of the quality indicators with the university's money for its operation. This aspect seems to suggest that neoliberal ideas have permeated teachers' ideologies. Another example of the pressure that the rankings and the accomplishment of specific academic quality indicators can be observed in the following excerpt:

Flor: How do I do to elevate my graduation rates or my graduation degree rates? Well, offer them summer courses to the students that failed, NI MODO PUES... It is a job that would have to do from a different view, probably from the bottom, a different culture of more effort, that probably us (teachers) in four years we do not accomplish to do.

The participant comments that the system/model and the quality indicators favour "lazy" students. She states that intending to elevate the graduation rates, the University has become too generous with students to approve. The participant mentions that the system facilitates students "not failing". This way, the University would be able to increase the indicators and present "good" reports to the educational organisations to maintain a good record. She explained the situation, and again she used the word "Ni Modo", expressing compliance and indicating that she must conform because those are the rules. The participant offers a different idea of education since her concept helps students accomplish an effort culture. Again, this event is part of seeing the student, and she is making her best effort.

This aligns with Ryohei ideas (2012) while using evidence-based approaches: the fabrication and falsification of data. The author states that "as the competition to avoid penalties, stipulated by incentives grows ever fiercer, intrinsic motivation toward education fades, and as the professional ethic or self-regulation is lost, the fabrication and falsification of evidence take centre stage" (p. 106). According to the participant, the university offers

students what they need to pass and present better indicators' records. Having better records might allow University to receive the incentives offered. However, acting this way seems to have the opposite results that teachers and education seek.

While conducting the present research, some elements evolved during the interviews about teachers' economic stability. Teachers' economic stability is linked to teachers' agency in instruction and the assessment performed in class. The following excerpt explains the situation and how it evolves at the selected university:

Clara: Then the economic bonus teachers receive is another point against because you can only access that economic stimulation when you have a certain average on the students' evaluation of you as a teacher. But, besides, the average of your groups has to be equal to or more than 8.5. Then if you fail students, you will not have the economic bonus. Then, the logic is: Are you basic? If you are basic, well, you already passed. I'll give you a nine. This way, my average goes up, and I can access the bonus.

There are two aspects revealed in Clara's excerpt. First, students' evaluation of teachers' work determines if teachers receive an economic bonus. This aspect might influence teachers' agency since now the teacher's economic improvement depends on their students' opinions. However, there is a second condition to receiving this financial bonus. Students' grades average needs to be 8.5 or up (on a 1-10 scale). For Clara, it is evident that this bonus access influences professors when assessing their students. I could infer that the selected university intends to increase the students' average and graduation rates. This conclusion might reflect how a top-down external policy influences teachers' classroom agency and how the records presented are fabricated to access an economic resource conditioned to students' passing the courses.

Conclusion

Given the range of views around the issue of CBLT and teacher agency, the evidence from this research suggests that teacher agency is exercised in using competency-based language teaching and their criteria for accommodating activities to their students. However, teachers' agency is also limited by external factors that directly or indirectly pressure their teaching practice. Teachers are no longer fully in control of their classrooms, as external groups now influence what is taught. Neoliberal ideas have made their way into the education system and are shaping how it works, affecting students directly. As a result, higher education has moved away from promoting critical thinking, where different viewpoints are considered, and decisions are thoughtfully questioned.

My research suggests that educative policies should favour critical learning, understanding the various positions and not allowing manipulation of economic or ideological regimes of any kind. This freedom of teaching and learning would make a thoughtful contribution to the society where students live and would enrich their local communities through democratic instruction in higher education.

Limitations

Teachers allowed me to observe their classrooms and their work. However, it was not easy to get evidence of their online work and the type of virtual feedback they provide to their students. Nevertheless, I was able to get some of this data with the help of students. The methodological design I carried out provided me with enough data to reach the abovementioned conclusions.

The ideological perspectives of the participants were analysed through an adaptation of CDA. Such an interpretive approach intends to observe how the ideology is observed in the classroom. In addition, it tries to understand how the materialisation of the ideology takes place. Considering that each person interprets and constructs the social world differently, it is essential

to state that studying it depends on the researcher's understanding of these interpretations and constructions.

Implications for further work

Since competency-based education has not been widely explored in applied linguistics research, new research ideas emerged while working on this study. Further work needs to address the competency model's digital ethnography teaching experiences that could allow a more in depth understanding of educative interactions. We are faced with a changing context where more and more interactions occur online today. That is why a digital ethnography could enhance the results offered in this study. In turn, teachers' attitudes could be contrasted to other the attitude that teachers in different universities hold. This comparative study could explore and contrast the attitudes that the participants of this study presented.

Given the range of views around the issue of CBLT and teacher agency, the evidence from this research suggests that teacher agency is exercised in using competency-based education and their criteria for accommodating activities to their students. However, their agency is also limited by external factors that directly or indirectly pressure their teaching practice. Teachers have lost control of their classrooms. This control has been delegated to external factors with a say in classroom content. Neoliberal trends are being replicated by the educative system and the main academic actors, and they successfully reach students. As could be observed through the results presented, higher education is far from a critical education where time is spent observing different positions and questioning the decisions. More critical studies are needed to observe the ideologies that teachers hold since there is no doubt that they have an influence their students ideologies who will also become teachers in the future.

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