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In search of one's own evaluation criteria: The case of Mexican higher education

ABSTRACT: In Mexico, the evaluation and assessment of teaching and learning of English as a foreign language is all too often undertaken by international examination boards. This paper examines the administration of language testing in the local context of Guadalajara, Mexico, and explores how testing could be developed to respond to local needs. By revisiting the concept of linguistic imperialism, I attempt to establish a framework for a mode of evaluation could be structured more closely to students' needs and wants.

KEY WORDS: evaluation, English as a foreign language, linguistic imperialism,

Introduction

The need for external evaluation of the foreign-language learning process in Mexico is seen as integral to validating teaching practice and student achievement, especially in higher education where knowledge of a foreign-language has increasingly become a requirement for graduating at B.A. level. Furthermore external evaluation is more often than not carried out by non-Mexican certification boards who independently determine the format, procedure and content which may or may not respond to the needs and objectives of Mexican foreign-language programmes. The reliance on such language boards raises questions regarding the need to resort to outside agencies and why Mexico cannot develop and administer home-grown evaluation processes. In this paper, I examine the current evaluation practices of English-language teaching and learning in the Mexican university context, in particular in Guadalajara, whilst arguing that these findings can be applied to other foreign-language situations and contexts. I contend that not only is there a need for the establishment of domestic evaluation processes but that non-Mexican certification boards, which

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have laudable goals and objectives, often fail to respond to the requirements, wants and goals of Mexican foreign-language students.

To forward this argument, I briefly survey practices and patterns regarding the evaluation of English as a foreign language programmes at undergraduate level in Guadalajara, Mexico and critique the increasingly prevalent requisite that foreign-language knowledge is a requirement and condition for graduation. For instance, university students may have to sit the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and achieve a previously determined number of points. However, one may question the requirement that all university graduates should be proficient in a foreign language – a requirement that is often not necessary in other countries such as the United Kingdom.

I then analyse the dependence on non-Mexican certification boards which can be seen to represent the interests and objectives of teaching methodologies promoted by what Holliday (1994: 2005) has identified as the BANA culture 'located in the private sector or in commercially-run language centres in universities and colleges in *B*ritain, *A*ustralasia and *N*orth *A*merica' (Holliday, 2005: 3; the author's italics) and what Widin (2010) discusses in terms of 'NABA (North American, British and Australian) language teaching methodologies' (2010: 20). Critiquing the over-reliance on foreign agencies to evaluate Mexico's English-language programmes, I argue that teaching English as a foreign language in Mexico needs to respond to local needs and reflect the use of English as local practice (Pennycook: 2010).

University students' language needs

In order to understand how English-language learning and teaching can be evaluated at university level in Guadalajara, research needs to be conducted into understanding the students' needs and objectives. There appears to be little published research at the local level which has focused on the teaching and learning of English in Mexican universities. However, one investigation was carried by the *Universidad de Guadalajara's Centro de Estudios de Mercadotecnia y Opinión* in 2007 regarding the possible uses of knowing English as a foreign language. The results were as follows:

Table 1
What is/could be the purpose behind a knowledge of English

For work or business	34%
To enrich my CV	15%
To travel abroad	14%
To communicate with friends or family	11%
Other	7%
No use	19%

(*La Gaceta*, Guadalajara, Jal. October, 2007)

The results suggest these interviewees were not primarily interested in learning and/or in using English for academic purposes and therefore the usefulness of international examinations as an evaluative instrument, which is widely used in Guadalajara's private universities, must be questionable. For instance, the TOEFL examination is an extremely useful exam in predicting future academic success at university level in an English-speaking

environment. However, the examination may not be so helpful in evaluating a student's communicative knowledge of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) in a non-academic setting. Four-skills courses are often a feature of English-language learning and study in university settings. The findings of Universidad de Guadalajara's small-scale study indicate that language evaluation should be based on identifying business, academic and communicative language competence and helping students employ English knowledge and ability in specific areas. Rather than just focusing on language as a structure i.e. in terms of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary, which is a common feature of ELT programmes in Guadalajara, language learners also need to develop pragmatic, discoursal and sociolinguistic competence in the target language.

Such competences were first identified by Hymes (1971) who formulated the umbrella term "communicative competence" which reflects the ability to participate in suitable ways that are "possible", "feasible", "appropriate" and "in fact done or actually performed" (1971: 281). Canale and Swain further developed this perspective and identified the "sociocultural, interpersonal interaction" (1980: 2) dimension. Additional work was carried out by Bachman who uses the term "communicative language ability" which he describes 'as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use' (1990: 84). At the same time, Leung (2005) is wary of Hymes' categories: "*possible*", "*feasible*", "*appropriate*" and "actually *performed*". He argues that such labels may reveal too much adherence to language as a system rather than the need to also reflect socio-cultural practices. Foreign-language learners need to be evaluated on their ability to come across in their own individual (and even creative) ways rather than solely on their adherence to language norms and target-language patterns and practices. Comprehensibility, joint co-construction and negotiation of communicative meaning may provide more meaningful parameters for evaluating language competence and ability.

A similar inquiry to the *Universidad de Guadalajara* study was carried out by Sierra and Padilla (2003) at la *Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana* (in Coyoacán, México City). They investigated the purposes for, and attitudes towards, learning English by university students. Sierra and Padilla were particularly interested in 'the extent to which university students in Mexico wanted to learn English because they considered it an international neutral language or because they associated this language with the United States' (2003: 216). Sierra and Padilla report that students appear to learn English for 'pragmatic purposes' (2003: 227) because they need an academic knowledge of language. Furthermore, they state that

> This study demonstrates that the purposes Mexican university students may have for learning English may conflict with the educational goals of public universities. The educational philosophy of Mexican public univer-

> sities emphasizes the need to educate citizens capable of identifying the elements that may reinforce subservience and the acceptance of dominant interests and worldviews. (Sierra and Padilla 2003: 228)

Research needs to further investigate and identify the potential mismatch between students' perceived needs and objectives and those of the universities in teaching English. Sierra and Padilla go on to say that

> To this end, English language teachers and undergraduate faculty in Mexico need to work more closely in order to identify English linguistic skills and syllabi that correspond to the objectives and approaches to knowledge of undergraduate programs. In addition, syllabi for English language courses need to include not only the mastery of specific language features, but ways to analyze the extent to which learning of English contributes to empower individuals. (2003: 228)

These two studies, while limited given the broad range of foreign-language issues in the Mexican context, suggest that evaluation procedures and practices should reflect and respond to the immediate local perspective and language as 'local practice' (Pennycook, 2010). If students' interactions in English as a foreign language manifest individuality, solidarity, creativity and socialisation, these fluid dimensions to communicative behaviour need to be evaluated along with their ability to use the target-language in grammatically, lexically and phonetically appropriate ways .

Besides often failing to respond to local needs, evaluation practices in Mexico at university level are also heavily influenced by teaching and evaluation practices promoted by BANA and NABA countries.

BANA / NABA cultures

The use and learning of English has often been explained in terms of inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle countries (Kachru: 1992 and 1995). This division has had important implications for the teaching, learning and evaluation of English as a foreign language since certain countries may attempt to take advantage of their self-perceived but unfounded dominant linguistic position to develop and administer testing and assessments and to try to establish international standards regarding English-language use and profoundly influence the nature and format of evaluating foreign-language students.

Inner circle countries, which include Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, are those countries where English is considered to be a native language. English-language native users may try to promote and establish prescriptive rules and norms regarding language use which are often encompassed in grammar books and dictionaries and EFL textbooks and other teaching/learning materials. Speakers of these varieties consider themselves to have considerable linguistic capital (Bourdieu: 1972). These countries promote a wide range of international examinations such as the TOEFL, the Test of English for In-

ternational Communication (TOEIC), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the University of Cambridge's suite of examinations: Key English Test (KET), Preliminary English Test (PET), First Certificate in English (FCE), and Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE). The setting and supervision of these examinations represent a colossal organizational undertaking. For instance, on their website, the Cambridge English Language Assessment report that they work in over 130 countries with:

- Around 400 permanent Cambridge English Language Assessment staff
- Staff in over 2,700 examination centres
- More than 36,000 registered preparation centres
- Tens of thousands of examiners, teachers and publishers.
  (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2014)

Meanwhile, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administers the TOEFL examination, claim on their website that "ETS develops, administers and scores more than 50 million tests annually in more than 180 countries, at 9,000+ locations worldwide". (Educational Testing Service, 2014).

And with respect to the TOEFL exam, the ETS claims that:

> The *TOEFL*® test is the most widely respected English-language test in the world, recognized by more than 9,000 colleges, universities and agencies in more than 130 countries, including Australia, Canada, the U.K. and the United States. (Educational Testing Service, 2014).

Without a doubt, these examination boards are huge educational and commercial enterprises. For example, according to Kinnock,

> The English language teaching sector directly earns nearly £1.3 billion for the UK in invisible exports and our other education related exports earn up to £10 billion a year more. (Kinnock, 2006).

With specific reference to the United Kingdom economy, the administration of examinations represents substantial export revenues as revealed in the following 2011 report from the British Council to the British parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee:

> In the past year, our English and exams activities brought us into direct contact with two million people. We supported individuals to fulfil their aspirations while consolidating the reputation of the UK as a source of educational opportunities and supporting UK businesses in their pursuit of exports and investment. Around the world we administered 2.5 million exams in the last year—worth £50 million in export earnings for UK exam boards. (Foreign Affairs Committee Written evidence from the British Council, 2012).

Outer circle countries include India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nigeria and Eng-

lish is normally used as a second language especially in the areas of education, government and commerce. Although outer circle varieties are gaining prestige, such speakers are often not seen to have the same linguistic capital (Bourdieu: 1972) as members of the inner circle. However, such varieties are increasingly being recognised as valid modes of communication in their own right. Nevertheless, outer circle countries are not known for having international examination boards as their variety of English is often not accepted internationally. Quirk and Kachru have famously debated between inner circle and outer circle Englishes, which McKay summarised as follows:

> Quirk argued for the need to uphold standards in the use of English in both Inner Circle countries and those outside the Inner Circle. He maintained that tolerance for variation in language use was educationally damaging in Inner Circle countries and that 'the relatively narrow range of purposes for which the non-native needs to use English (...) is arguably well catered for by a single monochrome standard form that looks as good on paper as it sounds in speech' (Quirk 1985: 6). In other words, for Quirk, a common standard of use is warranted in all contexts of English language use. (2002: 50).

By contrast,

> Kachru argued for a recognition of norms based on the manner in which English is used within particular speech communities, both native-speaking communities and those in the Outer Circle. He maintained that allowing for a variety of norms would not lead to a lack of intelligibility among varieties of English; rather, what would emerge from this situation would be an educated variety that would be intelligible across the others. (2002: 50-51).

Quirk, therefore, is in favour of upholding existing norms whilst Kachru focuses on the reality of individual speech communities and language in use. (Their papers can be found in Seidlhofer, 2003.). The debate is relevant to the Mexican EFL context: Should Mexican evaluation norms reflect Inner Circle standards or should EFL users be examined on the use of localised practices and patterns? Whilst such a question may seem absurd and ridiculous at the present moment, the day may not be far off when Mexico has its own variety of English which sits along with Singlish (Singapore English), Malaysian English or Nigerian English as an acceptable English-language variety. The evolution of local varieties in English has been termed 'New Englishes' which Ferguson argues:

> is usually understood to denote those varieties of English from post-colonial societies (e.g. English, Pakistan, Malaysia, Ghana) whose formal properties – phonological, lexical, grammatical, discoursal – show a measure of divergence from British or American standard English. (2006: 152).

Currently Mexican English is considered to be a 'performance' variety which, along with others, reflects

> those varieties which are used as foreign languages. Identificational modifiers, such as *Japanese* English or *Iranian* English, are indicative of geographical or national performance characteristics. These do not indicate an institutionalized status. The performance varieties of English have a highly restricted functional range in specific contexts; for example, those of tourism, commerce, and other international transactions' (Kachru, 1992: 55).

In order to achieve a local variety status, Mexican English would need to satisfy the following criteria set out by Kachru:

> The main characteristics of an institutionalized variety seem to be (a) the length of time in use; (b) the extension of use; (c) the emotional attachment of L2 users with the variety; (d) functional importance; and (e) sociolinguistic status. (1992: 55).

Expanding circle countries include Mexico, Japan, China and Brazil and where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. Even though these countries now make up the vast bulk of EFL users, as previously mentioned, these speakers are not seen to have the same degree of Bourdieu's (1972) linguistic capital as members of the inner circle or indeed as those of the outer circle. Consequently, expanding circle countries more often than not refer to inner circle language users to validate their teaching and learning processes and this is especially reinforced through taking international examinations. This relationship has been highlighted by Shohamy:

> Tests are capable of dictating what will be studied, learned and taught by students and teachers. In return, test-takers and teachers comply with the demands of the tests and change their behavior accordingly, in order to maximize their scores, given the detrimental effects of the tests. (2006: 103).

Such practices aim to ensure that teaching and learning standards in expanding circle countries match those in inner circle countries. However, the danger is that teachers and school administrators may not be fully cognisant of the aims and objectives of specific examinations and students may be entered for examinations without due regard and consideration concerning specific examination aims and objectives. Consequently, the purposes of the examinations are often misunderstood. For instance, the TOEFL examination evaluates whether students have the academic ability and knowledge to study in an English-language university environment at undergraduate or postgraduate level. In Mexico, the TOEFL exam is often applied indiscriminately to assess students' language level in terms of communicative ability. For instance, in private universities in Guadalajara, it is often used to evaluate the foreign-language ability of graduating B.A. students.

The relationship between inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle countries, identified by Kachru, has been succinctly summarised by McKay in the following way:

> He [Kachru] argued that whereas Inner Circle countries are usually

> considered to be *norm-providing speech communities*, Outer Circle countries are *norm-developing communities* since innovations in these countries get conventionally established by regular use and are subsequently codified. He also suggested that in the Expanding Circle, where English does not have an official role, its use should be *norm-dependent* since there is no regular internal use of the language. In this respect, Kachru and Quirk are in agreement. (2002: 54).

The continuing dominance of inner circle countries in determining language standards and practices may be due to historical and economic reasons but it is certainly not due to the number of language users since expanding circle countries contain the vast majority of target-language users. Whilst figures vary, Crystal (2003: 61) estimates the following number of English-language speakers: inner circle countries: 320 - 380 million; outer circle countries: 300 - 500 million; and expanding circle countries 500 - 1,000 million. With the continuing growth of English as an international language, the number of expanding circle countries can only be expected to grow more and, just as importantly, their influence on the way English is spoken and the norms of use and usage.

The influence of inner circle countries regarding the setting and maintenance of English-language norms has strongly influenced the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Holliday (2005) argues that EFL teaching (and by implication evaluation systems and practices) needs to be seen in political terms. The inner circle countries may have very specific aims, as expressed through BANA interests are which may be at odds with English language teaching in countries such as Mexico:

> Another way of describing the political division within TESOL is in terms not of location but of professional culture. Such is the BANA-TESEP distinction (Holiday 1994a).... BANA comprises an innovative, often predatory culture of integrated skills, which is located in the private sector or in commercially-run language centres in universities and colleges in *B*ritain, *A*ustralasia and *N*orth *A*merica. TESEP comprises a more traditional culture of collections of academic subjects, which is located in state *te*rtiary, *se*condary, or *p*rimary schools through the world. (Holliday, 2005: 2-3, author's italics).

Therefore, the teaching of English in Mexico in tertiary, secondary, primary state education (TESEP) terms may be more academic in its objectives and evaluation and assessment activities should reflect this as opposed to the communicative focus that often lies behind testing and evaluation in BANA countries. Examining the teaching of English from an international perspective, Widin uses a similar dichotomy:

> The goal of the international education projects is to teach English and conduct teacher education programmes based on current NABA (North American, British and Australian) language teaching methodologies. (Widin, 2010: 20).

Given the concept of Inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle countries, along with BANA / NABA teaching cultures and methodologies, I question whether external evaluation schemes consistently and effectively respond to the language learning needs of Mexican EFL users and, in particular, university students who require English to graduate, engage in business activities in the target language and pursue postgraduate studies in Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Whilst international examinations such as TOEFL and IELTS go some way to satisfying students' needs, there is still a need to evaluate local language practices.

Linguistic imperialism

An evaluation scheme that responds to Mexican EFL needs and objectives would be enhanced by taking into consideration the educational effects of linguistic imperialism. Linguistic imperialism provides a way of understanding how English is used to promote one language over and above other possible contenders. In the case of English, linguistic imperialism focuses on making sure that inner circle English provides and maintains the norm through which all other language users are encouraged to adhere to as argued by Canagarajah (1999) and Phillipson (1992). Phillipson provides a 'working definition of *English linguistic imperialism*' in that:

> The dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages. (1992: 47).

Therefore, Phillipson would argue that linguistic imperialism involves using English teaching to subject language users to external norms and beliefs which benefit the inner circle countries at the expense of the interests of expanding circle countries. He presents five tenets behind English-language teaching which can also be presented as fallacies:

- the monolingual fallacy
- the native speaker fallacy
- the early start fallacy
- the maximum exposure fallacy
- the subtractive fallacy
  (1992: 185)

Although these tenets and fallacies were presented by Phillipson well over twenty years ago, they are still more than relevant in the current Mexican EFL context. I will briefly summarise the tenets and discuss their bearing on Mexican language teaching and evaluation practices.

The monolingual tenet maintains that 'English is best taught monolingually' (Phillipson, 1992: 185) and this involves 'the rejection of the experience of other languages' along with 'attempts to impose a single lens on the world' (1992: 189). This perception of always using English in the classroom is especially prevalent in private sector EFL teaching in Mexico even though there is no evidence that English is best taught monolingually.

The native speaker tenet claims that 'the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker' (1992: 193) which Phillipson seriously mistrusts since it is an questionable assertion: 'The untrained or unqualified native speaker is potentially a menace –

apparently many of the products of the British education system recruited currently into ELT do not know much about their own language' (1992: 195). However, it is still the case in Mexico that English-language native teachers are often hired because of their nationality rather than because of their teaching skills or ability. This may be to the determinant of Mexican EFL teachers who have invested considerable amounts of time and money in preparing themselves to qualify as ELT professionals.

The early start tenet holds that 'the earlier English is taught the better the results (Phillipson, 1992: 199). In Mexico, the plethora of 'bilingual' kindergartens and primary schools attests to this prevalent attitude that young children should be exposed to English as early as possible. However, little testing and evaluation has been carried out to see whether earlier is indeed better. The maximum exposure tenet claims that 'the more English is taught, the better the results' (1992: 199). School programmes in Mexico will often try to offer up to half of their subjects in English. Phillipson also notes that there is the parallel tenet that 'for students who are weak in English, the more exposure to the teaching of the language, the better the results. This is intuitively commonsensical' (1992: 210). However, he goes on to say: 'The tenet ignores the fact that the quantity of the input is less important than its appropriacy and comprehensibility (Krashen, 1981)' (1992: 210). Finally, the subtractive tenet holds that 'if other languages are used, standards of English will drop' (1992: 212). The idea that English-language standards are dropping has long been held and many educational institutions, along with teachers, try to limit the use of Spanish in the classroom or, in the school programme as a whole.

Phillipson's five tenets appear to reflect the aim of using the English language for imperialistic purposes:

> English linguistic imperialism is one example of **linguicism**, which is defined as 'ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and produce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language... (1992: 47).

These tenets, fallacies and linguicism have produced a strong influence on evaluation practices and assessment techniques in Mexico. For instance, the monolingual tenet not only means that the language of the classroom, including classroom management, should only be in English but that examinations must only be in English. Whilst this may be commonsensical, it ignores the fact that students are often being tested on their ability to understand examination instructions and requirements rather than on their knowledge of English and how they can put that knowledge to use.

The native speaker tenet is reproduced in evaluations and assessments by looking for external evaluation criteria, especially in terms of those designed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). According to the (ACTFL) website, 'The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are a description of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context' (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012). ACTFL is interested in measuring the use of four skills in unpredictable situations at advanced, intermediate, and novice levels which are further divided into high, mid, and low sublevels. The ACTFL website further states that their guidelines 'are an instrument for the evaluation of functional language ability' (ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, 2012). When assessing the appropriateness of the ACTFL framework, Mexican test administrators need to consider its value and relevancy for the local context.

On their website the Council of Europe states that The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) 'was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency' (CEFR, 2014). The guidelines categorises six levels of language proficiency: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2, along with three additional levels: A2+, B1+ and B2+). Furthermore, they provide a list of 'descriptors' regarding what language users 'can do' with their target language. Again the key question is whether the guidelines are relevant to the Mexican context.

Whilst the ACTFL and CEFR prove detailed analysis regarding language user proficiency, they may still represent an overdependence on external evaluation criteria and fail to take into consideration local needs. In terms of linguistic imperialism, they may reflect the tenet that native English speakers know best.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that Mexico needs to have its own systems of evaluation. This does not mean, however, throwing the baby out with the bath water and rejecting foreign-language examinations per se. It does mean, however, reviewing who is in the best position to evaluate language proficiency and student progress and whether this has to be carried out by international examination bodies.

There is a serious need for research into Mexican foreign-language requirements and desired proficiency levels and how they can best be evaluated and assessed. A key starting point is by reviewing the objectives and purposes of international examinations which are obviously useful for specific contexts, but perhaps not in all Mexican academic situations. Another area for further research concerns Phillipson's (1992) tenets – English is best taught monolingually, the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker, the earlier English is taught the better the results, the more English is taught, the better the results and if other languages are used, standards of English will drop – which appear to still be determining attitudes towards the teaching, learning and evaluation of EFL in Mexico. The ELT profession in Mexico

needs to develop a working partnership with international examination boards which all too often determine the nature of exams and have an inordinate influence on teaching and learning practices. As Shohamy argues, 'Tests are capable of dictating what will be studied, learned and taught by students and teachers. In return, test-takers and teachers comply with the demands of the tests and change their behavior accordingly, in order to maximize their scores, given the detrimental effects of the tests' (2006: 103). The relationship should be the other way around: Test-takers and teachers should decide what should be evaluated in the Mexican context and examination bodies should provides the means of achieving this objective.

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