



The TOEFL as Exit Criteria in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Programs in Mexico: A Discourse Historical Analysis (DHA) Approach

Isaac Frausto Hernandez

University of Texas at El Paso, Department of Education, UNITED STATES

Received: 3 March 2021 ▪ Accepted: 4 June 2021 ▪ Published Online: 11 July 2021

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) assessment under its Institutional Testing Program (ITP) modality as it acts as a curriculum artifact along Mexican undergraduate degree programs considered within the exit criteria. A discourse historical approach (DHA) (Wodak, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) is taken in analyzing the TOEFL ITP assessment to further understand its implementation. The analysis helps reveal the many linguistic and metalinguistic skills and elements that extend beyond what may be traditionally taught in English courses or programs. The analysis also calls for further questioning of how suitable the TOEFL ITP may be in aiming to assess the proficiency level or development of English learners along undergraduate degrees in Mexico. Alternative types of assessment may better aid in providing a different perspective on the knowledge or progress of these students.

Keywords: TOEFL, assessment, curriculum artifact, discourse historical approach, English as a Foreign Language.

1. Introduction

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a means of assessment that is widely used throughout the world to evaluate the English proficiency of English Language Learners (ELLs) and users of English as a second or additional language. This assessment is used mainly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Kachru, 1982, 1985). The TOEFL under its Institutional Testing Program (ITP) modality is the most commonly used due to the ease of its application. This test consists of three sections: listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension, with a total of 140 multiple choice questions to be administered within a time frame of 115 minutes. This time is allocated to assessing grammar and vocabulary knowledge in the English language, along with the receptive skills (listening and reading).

As many English instructors may be faced with engaging in teaching TOEFL ITP preparation courses, the content may create many conflicts for the instructors and for the students as well. The weight is on the shoulders of the instructors, as students are expected to comply with a proficiency score according to content that may be limited throughout their curriculum, amongst other elements that may be present within the TOEFL ITP evaluation. It becomes critical, then, to

question whether or not, and to what degree the TOEFL is a suitable assessment to consider as exit criteria in undergraduate programs throughout the Mexican EFL context.

- The TOEFL ITP assessment acts as a curriculum artifact considered within exit criteria along the Mexican EFL context in undergraduate degree programs.
- The TOEFL ITP assessment encompasses many linguistic and metalinguistic skills and elements that extend beyond traditional EFL instruction.
- Alternative assessments to the TOEFL ITP may provide unique insights on the English proficiency of EFL students in Mexico.

An array of educational undergraduate degrees throughout Mexico considers a certain score on the TOEFL ITP assessment as exit criteria. This is done so with the attempt to demonstrate that there has been improvement in the proficiency of the English language from the learners along a given English course or program. This artifact within the larger curriculum is important due to the weight it has as a high stakes test, and also due to the widespread use it has gained throughout the world, mainly along EFL settings. The purpose of this article centers on exploring the TOEFL ITP assessment in terms of how it acts as a curriculum artifact along the larger curriculum of Mexican undergraduate school programs which consider it as a crucial element within their established exit criteria.

2. Literature review

The following section depicts the theoretical framework and the approach to curriculum.

2.1 *The curriculum*

The curriculum is believed to be the core of education. The curriculum refers to what should be taught, and incorporates thought, action, and purpose (Null, 2011). Moreover, the curriculum refers to the overall plan or design for a course and how the content of a course is transformed into a plan for teaching and learning which allows for the desired learning outcomes to be achieved (Richards, 2013). The curriculum takes content and shapes it into a plan for how to carry out effective teaching and learning; it functions as a map of how to achieve desired outputs of student performance, in which suitable learning activities and assessments are suggested to make it more likely that the students achieve the desired expectations (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). This leads to the development of curriculum traditions. The systematic curriculum tradition is worthy to highlight due to its relevance with the TOEFL and its application.

2.2 *The systematic curriculum and social efficiency*

The systematic curriculum views schools as places that produce students or student learning; teachers and workers mold students into a finished product with the hope of increasing efficiency (Null, 2011). This system of learning places emphasis on preparing students to be productive citizens. The school curriculum views how the students deal with standards in order to adjust instruction for maximum capacity. Thus, the creation of standards is understood as a way to establish what students should know and what students should be able to do. An initial challenge lies in identifying who should determine what these curricular aims ought to be, what they should include, and how they should be implemented.

The goal of the creation of curriculum standards was initially to increase educational opportunity for the goal of providing all students with access to a curriculum of high quality (Ravitch, 1995). The idea of curriculum standards may be traced back to the essentialist movement in education which began in the late 1930s. The father of essentialism is considered to be William C. Bagley, who led the movement of a group of people, referred to as essentialists, as they believed that the teaching of certain core content is essential for any curriculum to be considered solid (Null, 2011). Thus, essentialism refers to a traditional approach to education that strives to impart students with the essentials of academic knowledge and character development (Cohen, 1999; Shaw, 1995). This in turn aligns with a social efficiency curriculum ideology, which refers to the idea that that “a good curriculum should result in harmonious, well-functioning, and balanced society” (Kridel, 2010: 789). The social efficiency curriculum ideology believes that an initial purpose of schooling is to take advantage of its power with the purpose of meeting the needs of the society by training pupils as future adults who will contribute to a given society (Schiro, 1978).

The work of John Franklin Bobbitt (1918) is considered a central view amongst systematic curriculumists. The core of his work envisions that curriculum developers look into the social activities of adults when deciding what should be taught. The aim was to better understand the abilities and qualities that were considered necessary for the proper performance or efficiency of a person within society. The work of Werrett Wallace Charters (1923, 1927, 1928) follows up on that of Bobbit. The work of Charters (1923, 1927, 1928) was believed to bring status to teachers and to the teaching profession as a whole. He aimed to bring modern content into the teacher training curriculum in what would be seen as standards that were demanded and seen as useful. This was sought to help prepare the student to be an efficient citizen.

2.3 Curriculum research in Mexico

Both Angel Diaz Barriga (2003) and Frida Diaz Barriga (2003) discuss curriculum research within Mexico. Frida Diaz Barriga (2003) admits how research on curriculum in Mexico has derived from its link to an array of social problems and demands that pertain to the country. In this sense, it appears that the development of university curricula in recent years has aimed to respond to the idea of satisfying the social needs (Frida Diaz Barriga, 2003). Angel Diaz Barriga (2003) reminds us to keep in mind how the study plans of the Mexican educative system are characterized by their centralization, except at the level of public universities and in the private system of higher education in which each university or institution establishes the curricular proposal for the different specializations that it offers. He further acknowledges how the demands of better qualification in the work area are one of the elements in the conceptualization of competencies as an instrument that helps to articulate academic preparation with practical knowledge to facilitate the acquisition of certain skills. When referring to the flexible curriculum (Diaz Barriga, 1999), one of its many understandings emphasizes the adaptation of the curriculum to the changes that arise and are generated within the labor world, leaning for modifications to suit the socially efficient and productive citizen.

3.1 Methodology

Language is a core element within communication. When making use of language in a communicative setting, one is relying on discourse. Discourse analysis examines how language in its full, textual, social, and psychological context become meaningful and unified for its users (Cook, 1989). As Lemke (1995) further notes, discourse usually refers to the social activity of meaning-making with language and other symbolic systems in a given setting. Discursive practices may have major ideological effects in the sense that they can produce and/or reproduce unequal relations of power amongst people (Wodak & Fairclough, 1997). Moreover, power becomes a

fundamental factor in society, as society is defined around values and institutions; power enables a social actor to influence in the decisions of other social actors to favor the will of the more empowered (Castells, 2009).

The discourse historical approach (DHA) is characterized by plurality as the overarching goal in the tradition of critical theory is to highlight the discursive aspects of social differences and inequalities (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The core to address within the DHA is the relationship between conceptual tools and the social problem and its context (Wodak, 2008). Wodak (2008) further views the historical, political, sociological, and/or psychological dimensions of context as important as the linguistic dimension when analyzing a specific discursive event. The importance of the context arises within the following levels: (a) the immediate language or text; (b) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres, and discourses; (c) the extralinguistic social and/or sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific context of situation; and (d) the broader sociopolitical and historical contexts that the discursive context is embedded in and to which it may be related (Wodak, 2004).

The next section discusses the analysis of the TOEFL ITP as a curriculum artifact.

3.2 The analysis of the TOEFL ITP as a curriculum artifact

The TOEFL began its implementation in 1964, and has developed since then from the original paper-based test (pBT), to the computer-based test (cBT), to the internet-based test (iBT) (ETS, 2011). The pBT was initially based on the early structural view of language which views language as a set of discrete elements that aimed to analyze accuracy over fluency. The structure consists of listening comprehension, grammar and written expression, and reading comprehension under a traditional four option multiple-choice question format with a possible score ranging from 310 to 677. This test is now commonly known as the TOEFL Institutional Testing Program (ITP), and is the most widely used due to the ease of its applicability that does not require internet connectivity, but rather a device able to play CDs and for the test takers to be able to listen to the audio.

The TOEFL cBT is the computer version of the TOEFL which was used from 1998 to 2005 (ETS, 2011). The structure adheres to the TOEFL pBT as it consists of listening comprehension, grammar and written expression, and reading comprehension under a traditional four option multiple-choice question format with a possible score ranging from 0 to 300. The TOEFL cBT became to be known not as an alternative modality of the traditional TOEFL pBT, but as an innovative adaptive test in which the following test items were adapted in difficulty based on the ability of each student in selecting the correct or incorrect answer (ETS, 2011).

The TOEFL iBT is the latest version of this test, and was introduced in 2005 (ETS, 2011). This new version adopts the premise of looking at language from a more communicative stance, and aims to explore what the test takers can do with the language. Unlike previous TOEFL tests, this test focus on the productive skills by implementing speaking and writing alongside listening and reading comprehension with a possible score ranging from 0 to 120. In this sense, the TOEFL became a more integrated approach to test language reception and production.

As a proficiency test aiming to measure the general ability in the target language (Brown, 2005), the TOEFL assessment is a norm-referenced test designed to determine the test taker's ability in relation to that of other test takers (Brown & Hudson, 2002).

3.2.1 The TOEFL incorporating “academic content” and “standard English”

An initial focus of attention is how this language assessment presents itself using “100 percent academic content to evaluate the English language proficiency of non-native English speakers” (ETS, 2017: 3). The question arises as to whether or not academic content is taught in the English language in places where English is considered as a foreign language, and where the TOEFL ITP assessment may be applied. Furthermore, as this English assessment openly admits to relying on the use of academic English, doubts arise in terms of whether or not this assessment can be seen as the most suitable for ELLs, and/or English as a second/ additional language users.

This language assessment also presents itself as relying on the understanding of English as used in colleges and universities as follows: “Listening comprehension measures the ability to understand spoken English as it is used in colleges and universities” (ETS, 2017: 3). A further question arises as the English used in colleges and universities varies from one major or discipline to another. Furthermore, there is a jargon that pertains to each field that may not be generalizable as it aims to be. This is further expanded as the assessment also pertains to academic content as it states: “Reading Comprehension measures the ability to read and understand academic reading material written in English” (ETS, 2017: 3). As mentioned previously, the academic content of each discipline varies, which questions how to establish a common basis for all the test takers.

Similarly, “standard” English aims to be presented as: “Structure and Written Expression measures recognition of selected structural and grammatical points in standard written English” (ETS, 2017: 3). Further doubts arise concerning the foundation for relying on standard English, as the test argues, and what “standard” English means for those who design this assessment. As an implicit aim of the TOEFL may be to lead to the standardization of English (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015), this denies the change that the English language may go through as a result of its spread in which new Englishes may appear (Cook, 2003).

3.2.2 The TOEFL listening comprehension section and what it entails

Within the TOEFL listening comprehension section, three modalities are presented: (a) short conversations between two people, (b) longer conversations, and (c) monologic talks.

It is important to highlight how this section presents an array of idiomatic sentences, or idioms. These elements are continuously found along this section. This seems to be closely tied to aspects of pragmatic knowledge, one of the components of language competence and proficiency. Pragmatic knowledge, previously neglected in the scope of language learning and teaching, has gained more attention in recent years (Bachman, 1990; Garcia, 2004). This calls for the need of a language learner or user to not only have grammatical, lexical, and phonological awareness, but also to possess pragmatic knowledge (Corsetti, 2010). Pragmatics involves using language use to show the linguistic roles increased by the functions of language in social settings (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Tan, 1994). Crystal (2008) presents a recent view on pragmatics as the study of language from the point of view of the users upon the choices they make and the constraints they encounter when using language in social interaction. Thus, pragmatics refers to the use of language and meaning making in given social domains.

According to Jung (2001), for a person to be considered pragmatically competent in using a language, he or she should hold the following aspects: (1) the ability to perform speech acts (see Austin, 1962; Yule, 2000); (2) the ability to express and interpret non-literal meanings; (3) the ability to carry out politeness strategies (see Holmes, 2008; Lakoff, 1973); (4) the ability to carry out discourse functions (see Fraser, 1999; Yule & Brown, 1989); and (5) cultural knowledge (see Quinn & Holland, 1987; Wardhaugh, 2008). In addition, the schemata, frames, and scripts become crucial when constructing interpretations of past events or experiences being exposed to

(Yule, 2000). Karbalei and Rahmzade (2015) carried out an analysis of various English proficiency tests with special emphasis on pragmatic knowledge. They arrived to the conclusion that, to some extent, the TOEFL test is designed to assess the test takers' pragmatic knowledge. Apart from the many pragmatic aspects to consider, an early analysis of factors that played a role in determining the difficulty for listening comprehension within the TOEFL listening comprehension section revealed seventeen possible elements that may interfere in making a given construct more challenging on the test taker (Nissan et al., 1996).

It becomes noticeable how an array of elements pertaining to pragmatic competence are embedded into the TOEFL assessment. Much of pragmatic awareness and competence may result from being directly exposed to social settings in which certain linguistic and meaning making elements are used. Although the classroom may lend itself to superficially touch on these aspects, it is still an artificial environment that arises due to the content to be presented.

3.2.3 The TOEFL structure and written expression section, prescriptivism and complexity

In the structure and written expression section, the aim is to measure the ability to recognize the more appropriate language concerning standard written English (ETS, 2017). The structure section provides sentences with a missing element (or set of elements). The missing element pertains to what can complete the sentence and make it grammatically correct. For the written expression section, sentences are presented and four elements are highlighted. The aim is for the test taker to identify the element that is grammatically incorrect.

It is pertinent to highlight how this section adopts a prescriptive approach to grammar. A prescriptive view on grammar aims to specify how a language should be used aligned with grammar rules to be followed (Greenbaum, 1996). Thus, this view on grammar implies a distinction between “good/correct grammar”, and “bad/incorrect grammar”. As Odlin (1994) notes, many times, decisions about what is good and bad grammar are arbitrary. The aim for the TOEFL to adopt a prescriptive approach is perhaps linked to the idea of standardizing the English language (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015), denying again the power of the English speakers throughout the world in adopting the English language to a local variation, referred to as new Englishes (Cook, 2003). Nonetheless, as Hung (2003) sustains, the grammar of a given language resides not in grammar books or dictionaries, but in the minds of its speakers and how they use it to suit their needs. Thus, this may call for the TOEFL to consider adopting varieties of the English language as well as linguistic elements that can be used from a non-prescriptivist view on language.

The task of answering the TOEFL increases as an array of elements pertain to the structure of a sentence. It becomes crucial, then, for the test taker to initially recognize the function and category of each element within the sentence, along with identifying the way the elements are organized, and how each element within the sentence may have its own structure. Within the sentence, the first task is for the test taker to identify and analyze the noun phrase, the verb phrase, and the adjective phrase along with other elements that pertain to each phrase such as: auxiliaries, adverbs, prepositions, and any comparative and superlative modifications made to adjectives. As it is known, most sentences in the English language vary in structure, and usually combine various phrases within a sentence, or mix sentences to form compound and complex sentences. Apart from the previous tasks, the test taker should also be alert for the combination of more than one phrase or more than one sentence through the use of cohesive devices, conjunctions, clauses, and phrases. This is all linked to overall understanding of vocabulary in line with the content that is presented within the test. Ananda (2016) recently analyzed the many complexities that students face in answering the section on structure and written expression. He found that the students encountered problems in answering questions related to inversion of a sentence (or phrases within

a sentence), subject-verb agreement, adverb clause connectors, the use of the passive voice, reduced instances of adjective clause, parallelism structures, and the use of verbs in the different grammatical tenses. These challenges add up to the ones previously mentioned.

The task complexity increases as time is initially limited within the TOEFL test. Additionally, multiple challenges may arise within a single construct. A construct may require the test taker to analyze the sentence from the many different linguistic angles at his/her knowledge. Moreover, the TOEFL may not always respect the boundaries of a sentence, phrase, or clause within a construct. This ties with the complexity of the TOEFL presenting a possible answer to a given construct that may present grammar as it is used, challenging the prescriptive approach (Greenbaum, 1996). While it may be considered language that may be used or has the possibility of being used in common language practices, it is considered incorrect as it deviates from “standard” English (Wardhaugh & Fuller, 2015).

3.2.4 The TOEFL reading comprehension section, contextual issues, topic familiarity, and critical thinking

The last section is the reading comprehension section. In this section, the ability to read and understand short passages that are similar in topic and style to those found in undergraduate and graduate education is measured (ETS, 2017). The test takers read a number of passages on academic content, and answer a number of questions about the text. The passages provide the line numbering to the left for quicker access for the test taker when needed to recall specific information or retrieve a word as indicated by the constructs. An inquiry carried out by Enright et al. (2000) organized the reading tasks around four academic reading purposes as established within the TOEFL as: (1) Reading to find information, (2) Reading for basic comprehension, (3) Reading to learn new information, and (4) Reading to integrate information across multiple texts.

As discussed previously concerning the listening comprehension section within its three modalities, the reading comprehension section also includes some elements related to pragmatics such as cultural knowledge (Jung, 2001; Quinn & Holland, 1987; Wardhaugh, 2008). The schematic knowledge and script knowledge (Yule, 2000), in particular, become crucial when interpreting the passages that the test taker is being exposed to.

The TOEFL argues that it provides sufficient context so that no familiarity on a given subject matter is required; this is done so to avoid creating an advantage of some test-takers over others in terms of content familiarity (ETS, 2017). An initial doubt questions who selects the content and with what criteria. An early analysis by Norton Pierce (1992) challenged how the TOEFL test developers strive to include authentic reading passages within the TOEFL, arguing that the texts are extracted from authentic texts in which modification is avoided. She further argued that if a passage is extracted from a larger text, the extract would have little resemblance to the original source. Norton Pierce (1992) further notes how background knowledge plays a crucial factor in answering the TOEFL assessment correctly.

Dechant (1991) claimed that readers construct meaning from the text with aid from their background knowledge. Moreover, Freedle and Kostin (1993) developed an argument of the many variables that may influence reading item difficulty, specifically within a multiple-choice format. As Jennings et al. (1999) have further noticed, factors such as the test taker’s interest on the topic, prior knowledge on the content, the relevance of the topic, and the test taker’s opinions or perspectives on the topic may have a crucial effect on the performance of the test taker. Additionally, the patterns of lexis in terms of lexical cohesion and how they link one phrase of a sentence to another (Hoey, 1991, 201) also call for awareness from the test taker.

Recent emphasis has also been given to the relationship between critical thinking and reading comprehension. Early definitions of critical thinking refer to the ability to discipline thinking through information processing that is efficient (Paul, 1985). Pithers and Soden (2000) relate critical thinking to a number of abilities, including: uncovering assumptions underlying a problem, focusing the problem, inferencing, inductive and deductive reasoning, and judging the validity and reliability of assumptions and sources of information. Ku (2009) further adds that critical thinking entails a strong intention to recognize the importance of thinking along with an initiative to seek further judgment. In this sense, reading is not a linear process, but one in which readers continuously form hypothesis, test predictions, and use their knowledge of the world and language to construct meaning (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001). As can be observed, there exist an array of elements that ought to be taken into consideration by who is taking the TOEFL assessment.

The following section depicts the significance of this analysis, as well as the key findings.

4. Discussion

The purpose of analyzing the TOEFL ITP test within a CDA approach was done to better understand it as a curriculum artifact. From its early implementation, the TOEFL in all of its modalities has carried an array of implicit elements that test beyond the linguistic knowledge of the test taker. The same calls for the TOEFL ITP version, which has been the focus of analysis of this article. Whether the stakeholders are aware or not of the many elements tested within the TOEFL ITP, it becomes crucial to become more familiar with the different features that this assessment encompasses.

An initial concern is the academic content presented within the TOEFL ITP assessment. As is the case of many English instruction programs throughout Mexico, the syllabus types being adopted relate to a notional-functional syllabus, a structural syllabus, a skill-based syllabus, or a combination from all three. The notional-functional syllabus aims to present the different language sets pertaining to the usage of language along with the communicative purposes (White, 1988; Nunan, 1988). The structural syllabus targets the teaching of grammatical items or structures presented in a specific order (Ellis, 1993). The skill-based syllabus depicts the specific abilities that play an important role in using the language (Rahimpour, 2010). When combining both grammatical elements of the English language with a set of skills to use such aspects of the language, a notional-functional syllabus may develop. This also relates to how English courses or programs tend to adopt the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), or use it as a resource in measuring the proficiency and expected outcomes of the English learners. As such, this framework entails certain linguistic and structural notions that pertain to functioning of the language learner through an array of skills referred to as competencies to describe what the learner can do with the language. However, this may deviate from the communicative needs that the TOEFL attempts to measure, as it relies mainly on assessing the receptive skills (listening and reading) in addition to knowledge of written expression (focused mainly on grammatical structure).

A second concern leads to how the TOEFL ITP assessment aims to promote “standard” English through a prescriptive grammatical approach. As such is the case, any English varieties that deviate from the grammar presented in dictionaries and grammar books are considered wrong or incorrect. This reduces the scope of English usage for the test taker to recall correct grammatical sentences and utterances only. This contradicts an approach from an English instructor who may lean more towards a descriptive approach to teaching grammar (Greenbaum, 1996) that entails varieties and allows for students to experiment with the English language when aiming to convey meaning. It is worth considering how English instructors may further raise

awareness of the different ways in which sentences and the elements pertaining to a sentence may be arranged.

The listening section presents artificial language in the sense of omitting false starts, fillers, repetition, and interruptions among other elements that are used in actual every day conversation. The contextual cues are mainly limited in shorter conversations. An array of idiomatic sentences, along with vast pragmatic elements, are presented. This calls for English instructors to notice the importance of raising pragmatic awareness within their practices as it becomes a core component to be assessed within English proficiency tests (Brown, 2005) considered to be high stakes.

In terms of reading comprehension, there are a number of tasks to be carried out by the test taker when reading a passage. Topic familiarity and how the content is contextualized become central in terms of how the test taker will go about the reading comprehension task. Pragmatic knowledge may also become highly useful when aiming to understand the content of a passage. The development of critical thinking skills may also facilitate the comprehension of a passage.

In sum, the TOEFL ITP does not seem like the most suitable assessment to implement when aiming to assess the proficiency level or the development of English learners after a given course within undergraduate degrees in a Mexican EFL context. As the analysis suggests, there are many elements that are brought into the assessment of language proficiency, increasing the complexity of the assessment. This in turn questions the performance of the test taker according to the many implicit elements that are also assessed.

5. Conclusion

The focus of this article was to explore the TOEFL ITP assessment in terms of how it acts as a curriculum artifact within Mexican EFL contexts which establish such assessment as a crucial component of the exit criteria of undergraduate educational programs.

The theoretical framework was developed from the systematic curriculum (Null, 2011) and essentialism (Cohen, 1999; Shaw, 1995), the social efficiency curriculum ideology (Kridel, 2010; Schiro, 1978), and the work of John Franklin Bobbit (1918) and Werret Wallace Charters (1923, 1927, 1928). The works of Angel Diaz Barriga (2003) and Frida Diaz Barriga (2003) were also explored to locate curriculum work done in Mexico.

Concerning the methodology, A DHA (Wodak, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009) was used in exploring the pertinent discourse within the TOEFL ITP, to further understand its implementation as an artifact within the larger Mexican EFL curriculum.

The analysis of the TOEFL ITP helped reveal the many linguistic and metalinguistic skills and elements that may go beyond what is traditionally taught in line with a syllabus that results of the combination of elements from a notional-functional syllabus (see White, 1988; Nunan, 1988), a structural syllabus (see Ellis, 1993), and a skill-based syllabus (see Rahimpour, 2010). As the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) is commonly taken as the basis to align the desired outcomes of the course accordingly, the courses tend to focus on the linguistic aspects (or structures and notions) and leave little space for the uses of these linguistic aspects (or the skills or functions). As the list of linguistic elements to be taught is rather long, this limits the space for instruction pertaining to academic content.

6. Implications

Concerning possible implications that derive from this analysis, it becomes crucial to explore some concerns. As properly preparing students for the TOEFL assessment is considered highly important from both students and instructors, the instructor is faced with complying to adapting the pedagogical strategies to suit the needs that the TOEFL preparation entails. It becomes worthy to explore how instructors are going about with this practice. In addition, it is pertinent to note the degree of familiarity that the instructors have with the many linguistic and metalinguistic elements that are presented either implicitly or explicitly throughout the TOEFL. A crucial analysis pertains to how instructors better inform the students on aspects related to pragmatics, as well as the strategies that they use to further develop the learners' pragmatic awareness. A further inquiry that would be of great benefit would be to explore how more academic content is being implemented along EFL learning contexts.

It is important to mention that a possible implication could also be to eradicate the use of the TOEFL assessment as exit criteria due to the extensive knowledge required from the student that its application entails, and how it calls for many instructional changes from the instructor as well. In line with the flexible curriculum that may prevail within higher education in the Mexican educational system (Diaz Barriga, 1999), English instructors throughout Mexico and higher stakeholders may view alternative assessment types to suit the needs of the changes that arise from the labor world that the students may soon develop in. In this sense, alternative assessment types may help in providing a distinct perspective of the progress of a student through the English courses, and/or their readiness for English usage beyond the formal academic setting, though this may also entail a shift in perspectives in the practice of teaching EFL in a Mexican setting.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

References

- Ananda, R. (2016). Problems with section two ITP TOEFL test. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 3(1). 35-49. <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v3i1.3387>
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford University Press.
- Bobbitt, J. F. (1918). *The curriculum*. Macmillan.
- Brown, J. D. (2005). *Testing in language programs: A comprehensive guide to testing language assessment*. McGraw-Hill.
- Brown, J. D., & Hudson, T. (2002). *Criterion-referenced language testing*. Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press.
- Charters, W. W. (1923). *Curriculum construction*. Macmillan.

- Charters, W. W. (1927). *How to teach ideals*. Methodist Publishing House.
- Charters, W. W. (1928). *The teaching of ideals*. Macmillan.
- Cohen, L. (1999) *Philosophical perspectives in education*.
<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/ed416/PP3.html>.
- Cook, G. (1989). *Discourse*. Oxford University Press.
- Cook, G. (2003). *Applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
- Corsetti, C. R. (2010). Pragmatic competence in the listening paper of the certificate of proficiency in English. *BELT Journal*, 1(1), 14-25.
- Council of Europe (2001). *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, and assessment*. Language Policy Division.
- Crystal, D. (2008). *A dictionary of linguistic and phonetics*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Dechant, E. (1991). *Understanding and teaching reading: An interactive model*. Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Díaz Barriga, A. (1999). *La flexibilización profesional y su impacto en los planes de estudio*. Paper presented at the 5th Congreso Nacional de Investigación Educativa, Consejo Mexicano de Investigación Educativa, Aguascalientes.
- Díaz Barriga, A. (2003). Curriculum research: Evolution and outlook in Mexico. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *International handbook of curriculum research* (pp. 443-456). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Díaz Barriga, F. (2003). Main trends of curriculum research in Mexico. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.). *International handbook of curriculum research* (pp. 457-470). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Educational Testing Service (ETS). (2011). *TOEFL program history*. *TOEFL iBT Research Insight Series*. 6. http://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/toefl_ibt_insight_s1v6.pdf.
- Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2017). *TOEFL ITP Test Taker Handbook*. New Jersey.
- Ellis, R. (1993). The structural syllabus and Second Language Acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27(1), 91-113.
- Enright, M. K., Grabe, W., Koda, K. Mosenthal, P. B., Mulcahy-Ernt, P., & Schedl, M. A. (2000, March 01). *TOEFL 2000 Reading Framework: A Working Paper* (Report No. RM-00-04).
https://www.ets.org/research/policy_research_reports/publications/report/2000/iciv.
- Fraser, B. (1999). What are discourse markers? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 31, 931-952.
- Freedle, R., & Kostin, I. (1993). The prediction of TOEFL reading item difficulty: Implications for construct validity. *Language Testing*, 10, 133-170. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229301000203>.
- Garcia, P. (2004). Pragmatic comprehension of high and low level language learners. *TESL-EJ*, 8(2), 1-15.
- Greenbaum, S. (1996) *The Oxford English grammar*. Oxford University Press.
- Hoey, M. (1991). *Patterns of lexis in text*. Oxford University Press.
- Holmes, J. (2008). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Pearson Education Limited.
- Hung, T. T. N. (2003). How linguistics can contribute to the teaching of grammar. In J. E. James (Ed.), *Grammar in the language classroom* (pp. 41-61). SEAMEO Regional Language Center.
- Jennings, M., Fox, J., Graves, B., & Shohamy, E. (1999). The test-takers choice: an investigation of the effect of topic on language-test performance. *Language Testing*, 16(4), 426-456.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229901600402>.
- Jung, J. Y. (2001). Issues in acquisitional pragmatics. *TESOL & Applied Linguistics*, 2(3), 1-13.
- Kachru, B. B. (1982). *The other tongue. English across cultures*. University of Illinois Press.
- Kachru, B. B. (1985). Standards, codification, and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk, & H. Widdowson (Eds.). *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and the literature*. Cambridge University Press.

- Karbalaei, A., & Rahmanzade, M. K. (2015). An investigation into pragmatic knowledge in the reading section of TOLIMO, TOEFL, and IELTS examinations. *English Language Teaching*, 8(5), 208-221. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n5p208>
- Kridel, C. (Ed.). (2010). Social efficiency tradition. In *Encyclopedia of curriculum studies* (pp. 789-791). SAGE.
- Ku, Y. L. K. (2009). Assessing students' critical thinking performance: Urging for measurements using multi-response format. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 4, 70-76.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). The logic of politeness: Or minding your p's and q's. *Chicago Linguistic Society*, 9, 292-305.
- Lemke, J. L. (1995). *Textual politics*. Taylor & Francis.
- Null, W. (2011). *Curriculum: From theory to practice*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nissan, S., DeVincenzi, F., & Tang, K. L. (1996). An analysis of factors affecting the difficulty of dialogue items in TOEFL listening comprehension. *[Educational Testing Service] Research Reports*, 51(February), 1-42.
- Norton Pierce, B. (1992). Demystifying the TOEFL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26(4). 665-691. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3586868>.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *Syllabus design*. Oxford University Press.
- Odlin, T. (1994). *Perspectives on pedagogical grammar*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rahimpour, M. (2010). Current trends on syllabus design in foreign language instruction. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2, 1660-1664.
- Paul, R. W. (1985). Bloom's taxonomy and critical thinking intervention. *Educational Leadership*, 42(8), 36-39.
- Pithers, R. T., & Soden, R. (2000). Critical thinking in education: A review. *Educational Research*, 42, 237-249.
- Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987). *Cultural models in thought and language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ravitch, D. (1995). *National standards in American education: A citizen's guide*. Brookings Institution Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2013). Curriculum approaches in language teaching: Forward, central, and backward design. *RELC*, 44(1), 5-33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688212473293>
- Schiro, M. (1978). *Curriculum for better schools: The great ideological debate*. Financial Times/Prentice Hall.
- Shaw, L. (1995). *Humanistic and social aspects of teaching*. <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/LShaw/f95syll/philos/phbehav.html>.
- Sheorey, R., & Mokhtari, K. (2001). Differences in the metacognitive awareness of reading strategies among native and non-native readers. *System*, 29, 431-449.
- Tan, P. (1994). Key concepts in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 48(1), 100.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2008). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Blackwell.
- Wardhaugh, R., & Fuller, J.M. (2015). *An introduction to sociolinguistics (7th Ed.)*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- White, R. V. (1988). *The ELT Curriculum*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Wiggins G., & McTighe, J. (2006). *Understanding by design: A framework for effecting curricular development and assessment*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Wodak, R. (2004). The discourse historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 63-94). Sage.

- Wodak, R. (2008). Introduction: Discourse studies: Important concepts and terms. In R. Wodak & M. Krzyżanowski (Eds.), *Qualitative discourse analysis in the social sciences* (pp. 1-29). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Wodak, R., & Fairclough, N. (1997). Critical discourse analysis. In T. A. van Dijk (Ed.), *Discourse as social interaction* (pp. 258-284). Sage.
- Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2009). Critical discourse analysis: History, agenda, theory and methodology. In R. Wodak, & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods for critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed., pp. 1-33). Sage.
- Yule, G. (2000). *Pragmatics*. Oxford University Press.
- Yule, G., & Brown, G. (1989). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge University Press.

