

DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE BY INTEGRATING BUSINESS COMPETENCIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines what business competencies a learner of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) can develop while developing communicative competence in English. The analysis is focused on the business competencies undergraduate students at the Administration Faculty of Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo need to develop. The study aims to demonstrate that using a competence formation model enables learners to attain better levels of communicative competence. Moreover, it strengthens their business competencies through classroom practice of real-life communicative activities, without having to study them separately or at different times. Finally, by incorporating self-assessment practices and a learning portfolio as tools to enhance learning by asking students to reflect on their own motivations or needs, we expect to contribute to developing learning autonomy and self-evaluation strategies as an integral approach to both professional and personal formation.

JEL: I2, I23

KEYWORDS: Competences, Communicative Competence, Autonomy, Business Competencies

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, business professionals are required to be competent in a second language, whether they work abroad or not. Historically, the need to fluently communicate in English has become essential in business and for travel. Besides the communicative function of the language itself, English is essential to the deepening integration of global service-based economies. But even in non-English speaking countries, being communicative competent in English can be considered necessary (sometimes even a must) to get a well-paid job, regardless of the professional area one works in. This is particularly true as the outsourcing business grows, since most of the offshore contracts come from English speaking corporations and global enterprises create their own business process outsourcing centers in other countries to diminish costs.

Up to now, English is the language that facilitates transnational encounters and allows nations, institutions, and individuals in any part of the world, to communicate their world view and identities. This study attempts to provide a tool learners can use to make connections between positive learning outcomes and success experienced in a coursework on learning English, but also designed to specifically use the language to perform tasks required in the professional domain of business administration.

The article concludes with a discussion of the benefits of redirecting the main focus of English as a foreign language (EFL) courses within the curriculum of the Administration Faculty at undergraduate level at the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo where merely mastering the language is not the sole objective. These EFL courses ought to be not only business-content, but should also aim to develop business competencies as well as higher metacognitive strategies, such as learning autonomy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many authors have long reviewed and commented on what competences are and how they are categorized since McClelland first introduced the term in 1973 (Martínez & Carmona, 2009). Initially, the study of competences started in the Labor Psychology field, searching to better select and improve human resources in firms and companies. Over time, the concept has broadened and it has reached educational and environmental contexts. Tejada (1999), Pereda y Berrocal (2001), Lévy-Leboyer (2003) and Escobar (2005) cited by Martínez and Carmona (2009) categorize competences as: a) generic, the ones that can occur in any of the positions of an organization and can be easily transferred from one profession to another, which means they are common to different professions. They include knowledge, skills, attitudes and personality traits; and b) specific: the ones that occur to certain professions within the organization, or with particular performance levels. They are non-transferable.

Nowadays, the competence concept in education concerns with the capacity of students to analyze, reason and communicate effectively as they pose, solve and interpret problems in a variety of subject areas and it has been considered important due to its relevance to lifelong learning (British Council, 2012). Being able to do so in one's mother tongue is by itself one of the aims of public education policies, leaving behind the very basic objective of teaching literacy and numeracy and including today information technology as well as the learning of a foreign language. Thus, the role of education in school is seen as to provide the generic skills needed to acquire new knowledge and specialist skills in the future: learning how to learn.

In México such a foreign language is of course English. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was introduced as a mandatory subject into the middle-school curriculum for all public schools since 1993 (Ministry of Education -Secretaría de Educación Pública- Agreement 182) and last year's education reform made the teaching of EFL mandatory for basic education as well (Agreement 592, dated August 19, 2011), as a part of the implementation of a competency-based curriculum. Besides intending to raise the quality of education, this measure was implemented with the long term objective of facilitating international student and academic staff mobility. This seems to confirm that the learning of English appears to be losing its separate identity as a discipline and merging with general education (Graddol, 2006).

Since we are interested mainly, but not exclusively, in developing communicative competence in English, we will go with the work the Council of Europe has done regarding competences, and the classification they suggest towards the aim of forming participative, socially responsible individuals who develop a democratic citizenship. The Council of Europe (2001) defines some essential terms to facilitate the communication among users of a language and teaching professionals in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

Competences are then defined as the sum of knowledge, skills and characteristics or personal resources that allow a person to perform actions. General competences are those not specific to language, but which are called upon for actions of all kinds, including language activities, which include:

a) Declarative knowledge (*savoir*): it comprises knowledge of the world (which derives from experience, education or from information sources, etc.), sociocultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness.

b) Skills and know-how (*savoir-faire*): everything that has to do more with the ability to carry out procedures than on declarative knowledge. This skill may be facilitated by the acquisition of 'forgettable' knowledge and be accompanied by forms of existential competence (for example relaxed attitude or tension in carrying out a task). It comprises practical skills and know-how (social, living, leisure, and occupational skills) as well as intercultural skills and know-how.

c) 'Existencial' competence (*savoir-être*): it may be considered as the sum of the individual characteristics, personality traits and attitudes which concern, for example, self-image and one's view of others and willingness to engage with other people in social interaction. Attitudes and personality factors greatly affect not only the language users'/learners' roles in communicative acts but also their ability to learn. It consists of attitudes, motivations, values, beliefs, cognitive styles, and personality factors. This type of competence is not seen simply as resulting from immutable personality characteristics. It includes factors which are the product of various kinds of acculturation and may be modified.

d) Ability to learn (*savoir-apprendre*): it mobilizes existential competence, declarative knowledge and skills, and draws on various types of competence. Ability to learn may also be conceived as 'knowing how, or being disposed, to discover *otherness*' – whether the other is another language, another culture, other people or new areas of knowledge.

The Communicative Competence

The taxonomic nature of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) inevitably means trying to handle the great complexity of human language by breaking language competence down into separate components. This confronts us with psychological and pedagogical problems of some depth. Communication calls upon the whole human being. The competences separated and classified below interact in complex ways in the development of each unique human personality. Users and learners of a language draw upon a number of competences developed in the course of their previous experience in order to carry out the tasks and activities required to deal with the communicative situations in which they are involved. In return, participation in communicative events (including, of course, those events specifically designed to promote language learning) results in the further development of the learner's competences, for both immediate and long-term use. In that sense, all human competences contribute in one way or another to the language user's ability to communicate and may be regarded as aspects of communicative competence.

Communicative language competences are next defined as those which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means (Council of Europe, 2001). The language activity required to perform communicative acts always occurs in a context that imposes conditions and constraints of many different kinds (also called domains of language use: public, personal, educational and occupational).

Thus, for communicative intentions, users/learners of a language bring to bear their general capacities as detailed above together with a more specifically language-related communicative competence. Communicative competence in this narrower sense has the following components: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Each of these components is postulated as comprising, in particular, knowledge and skills and know-how.

a) *Linguistic competences* include lexical, phonological, syntactical knowledge and skills and other dimensions of language as a system, independently of the sociolinguistic value of its variations and the pragmatic functions of its realizations.

b) *Sociolinguistic competences* refer to the sociocultural conditions of language use. Through its sensitivity to social conventions (rules of politeness, norms governing relations between generations, sexes, classes and social groups, linguistic codification of certain fundamental rituals in the functioning of a community), the sociolinguistic component strictly affects all language communication between representatives of different cultures, even though participants may often be unaware of its influence.

c) *Pragmatic competences* are concerned with the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions, speech acts), drawing on scenarios or scripts of interactional exchanges. It also concerns the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence, the identification of text types and forms,

irony, and parody. For this component even more than the linguistic component, it is hardly necessary to stress the major impact of interactions and cultural environments in which such abilities are constructed.

The resulting outcome of the Council of Europe was a very comprehensive work that describes the competences necessary for communication, the related knowledge and skills and the situations and domains of communication where they occur. Communicative acts comprise language activity, which is divided into four kinds: reception, production, interaction and mediation. Reception entails understanding language produced by others, whether in speech or in writing, while production entails producing speech or writing. Interaction refers to spoken or written exchanges between two or more individuals, while mediation (often involving translation or interpretation) makes communication possible between individuals or groups who are unable to communicate directly. Clearly, interaction and mediation involve both reception and production. While learning EFL for general purposes, all language activities are stressed, but when focusing on developing business competences, interaction becomes an essential aim.

It is possible that competence formation is one of the most effective ways to prepare future professionals to successfully deal with constantly changing working conditions. In Mexico, the implementation of such educational model is already taking place, as mentioned above. Therefore, the goal for university students to achieve B2 level according to the CFR has been set. In order to do so, the authors propose the use of a Language Learning Portfolio to develop the communicative competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) of university students aiming to achieve B2 level, which at the same time incorporates opportunities for students to develop business competences. A learning portfolio is a flexible, evidence-based process that combines reflection and documentation. It engages students in ongoing, reflective, and collaborative analysis of learning. It also focuses on purposeful, selective outcomes for both improving and assessing learning (Zubizarreta, 2009). The use of portfolios has proven to be a useful tool to enhance learning by asking students to reflect on their own motivation or needs to learn and their learning strategies while promoting autonomous learning and self-evaluation strategies. By allowing both teachers and students to experience the benefits of using a Language Portfolio, the learning and metacognitive strategies developed can be expanded to the learning of business competences through the use of English and, thus, contributing to their learning of both professional and communicative competences.

The portfolio the authors propose is the “B2 Language Portfolio”, designed in 2011 to meet the needs of students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the Language Department at Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo (UMSNH) in the capital city campus, Morelia. It was based on the model launched in 2000 by the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and it conforms to the Principles and Guidelines defined by the Council of Europe that same year. It was designed as a tool to help students that reach the B2 level of proficiency in English, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Although there is a general template for learning portfolios (Zubizarreta, 2009) we decided to base ours on the model proposed by the Council of Europe (2006), since it was specifically designed to enhance the learning of any foreign/second language(s) by an international group of experts.

The Council of Europe developed the ELP in order to serve two complementary functions. The first is pedagogical: the ELP was designed to make the language learning process more transparent to learners and to foster the development of learner autonomy; that is why it assigns a central role to reflection and self-assessment. The second function is to provide concrete evidence of second/foreign language communicative proficiency and intercultural experience. In addition the ELP is intended to promote the development of plurilingualism, the ability to communicate in two or more languages besides one's first language (Little, et al., 2007).

The three obligatory components of the ELP are: a Language Passport, a Language Biography, and a Dossier. “The B2 Language Portfolio” adds a list of suggested activities in the Dossier section and a comprehensive list of websites for learning English. This was done in order to accompany the students

while they develop both communicative competence and learner autonomy (Calderón, 2011). To foster reflection and autonomy on the learning and development of business competencies, the Language Biography will be modified.

Business Competencies

Language is one of the foundations of human behavior: we use it continuously to perform communicative acts. Those acts may be external and social. In business settings, apart from holding conversations with colleagues, we are expected to hold formal meetings, make speeches or give lectures, write personal and official letters and of course extend knowledge in our domain of expertise. Communicative acts may also be internal and private. All forms of reading and some forms of listening are examples of this; so too are the many different ways in which we use language for purposes of thinking things through – for example, to plan the apology we have to make for absence from an important business meeting, or to prepare ourselves for a difficult interview by trying to anticipate the questions we shall be asked and working out what our answers should be. Productive activities have an important function in many academic and professional fields (oral presentations, written studies and reports) and particular social value is attached to them (judgments made of what has been submitted in writing or of fluency in speaking and delivering oral presentations).

While the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) focuses on language competences, it also mentions that *savoir-faire* comprises practical skills and know-how, particularly occupational skills. Occupational skills are also called competencies. Yet, a long series of arguments have taken place to differentiate and/or to compare them. Here, we rather use what seems to be a simple distinction. Eicker, S., Kochbeck, J. and Schuler, P. (2008) state that *competencies* refer to observable behavior and skills and that *competence* is the level of achievement on how a competency is performed. This is better explained by saying that qualifications can be measured and proved through references, certificates and credentials. In case of skills which are acquired in informal learning processes, this kind of proof is generally not possible. A distinction in rating scales with parameter values e.g. ranging from “weak” to “strong” are too broad and arbitrary for an exact indication. Thus, they are insufficient for a precise classification. Therefore, competencies are measured by means of a multi-level competence scale. In order to assess subjective characteristics objectively, a precise scale identifying various levels of competence and maturity is essential. The classification shows that an employee on a high level in any company hierarchy must comply with different requirements and must have different competencies than a member of a lower level in the company hierarchy.

Competencies are graded in levels, either on the basis of a numerical scale or of a verbal schema. In order to develop a classification scale, both approaches can be combined: in addition to a numerical value marking each level, a verbal description is given. The classification scale is based on an ordinal scale, i.e. the levels of competence are ranked. Negative competencies are not included, because existing competencies are always positive. If a certain level is reached, this implies that the person also meets the criteria of the lower levels.

Mora J., García-Aracil and Vila, L. (2006) analyzed how the different kinds of competencies requested on a variety of job descriptions for college graduates in Europe affect not only level of income, but also job satisfaction. For their study, they used the thirty-six competencies listed on the “Careers after Higher Education – A European Research Survey”, and concluded that, being everything else the same, positive attitudes toward work are better-paid than knowledge itself, and that in general, the more demanding a job is, the more satisfied the young graduate tends to be. Using factorial analysis they grouped occupational competencies into eight factors considered as the most valued by employers. Those factors are: 1) Participative, 2) Methodological, 3) Specialized, 4) Organizational, 5) Compliance, 6) Physical (manual skills and being physically apt to work), 7) Generic, and 8) Socio-emotional.

In their study, Mora et al. (2006) concluded that jobs which require a higher level on participative and methodological competencies are better paid. Business competences fall mainly within these categories, which provides empirical evidence to foster their development as an integral part of a curriculum. The communicative factor comprises such skills as planning, coordination, organization, negotiation, initiative, decision-making, persistence, personal involvement, leadership, and responsibility assumption. The methodological factor, on the other hand, is comprised of the knowledge of foreign languages, software knowledge, understanding of complex systems, economic reasoning, documenting ideas and information, problem-solving skills, and analytical competences. The socio-emotional factor is taken into consideration for this project since it includes such skills, attitudes and even values as teamwork, adaptability, honesty, loyalty, and tolerance to different viewpoints, all important to business competencies.

What Business Competencies Can Be Learned Simultaneously with a Foreign Language?

The authors consider that the following competencies can be developed throughout an English language course for students at the Business Administration Faculty at the Universidad Michoacana. Definitions are included only for explanatory purposes.

Ability to learn: The ability to observe and participate in new experiences and to incorporate new knowledge into existing knowledge, modifying the latter where necessary. This competence has been pointed out as a preferred personal attribute when hiring someone for a job or promoting him or her.

Achievement Drive: Possesses sustained energy and determination to set and meet challenging objectives. The ability to organize resources to achieve a standard of excellence in outcomes and monitor on-going performance.

Business Acumen: The understanding of key business drivers for performance and use of sound business practices. The ability to use sound commercial principles in all areas of responsibility.

Communication: The ability to effectively share ideas, thoughts, information and feelings with a diverse range of audiences to develop two-way understanding. It includes speaking, listening and written communication skills. The ability to influence others towards a desired way of thinking or course of action and to secure agreement to achieve common goals through effective negotiation.

Compliance: The practice of obeying a law, rule, or request or the ability to strictly following procedures, standards and regulations in order to avoid mistakes, problems or risks.

Continuous learning: Maintains a commitment to personal and professional development, keeping abreast of current professional knowledge and to acquire specialized knowledge.

Flexibility and adaptability: The individual is open and receptive to appropriate change. The ability to manage and shift priorities as required, and to incorporate new approaches in support of changing needs. Possesses confidence in challenging the status quo and providing input to change efforts and to make decisions accordingly.

Intercultural awareness: As a social agent, each individual forms relationships with a widening cluster of overlapping social groups, which together define identity. In an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favorable development of the learner's whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture.

Language learning abilities: They enable the learner to deal more effectively and independently with new language learning challenges, to see what options exist and to make better use of opportunities. Ability to

learn in an EFL learning setting has several components, such as language and communication awareness; general phonetic skills; study skills; and heuristic skills.

Leadership: The ability to lead, guide and motivate groups of people to deliver results, build teams and encourage risk taking, initiative and responsibility. The confidence to display leadership even when not acting in a formal leadership role.

Managing People: The ability to manage people to achieve maximum efficiency and productivity. The knowledge and understanding of management practices that enables the effective use of a performance framework to manage performance, clarify expectations, provide coaching and feedback, reward staff, lead by example and identify development needs.

Negotiation skills: The individual is able to lead the process of discussion between two or more disputants and seeks to find a solution to a common problem, one that meets both parts' needs and interests acceptably. Dealmaking is an integral aspect of nearly every executive's job, yet most have not had any formal training. Learning to be a skilled negotiator can help to make deals, solve problems, manage conflict, and preserve relationships.

Relationship Building: The ability to identify, build and maintain formal and informal networks and productive relationships with both internal and external stakeholders. It includes leveraging these contacts to influence positive outcomes for the organization.

Service Focus. A desire to help or meet the needs of others. The ability to respond to the changing needs of the client while maintaining a high standard of quality.

Strategic Thinking: The ability to think strategically about longer term goals, plans, needs and capabilities that address the needs of the area or unit and the organization. The provision of strategic direction to the area or unit in terms of analysis, advice and direction.

Teamwork and effective team building skills: The ability to work cooperatively across organizational boundaries to achieve shared goals. Possesses an understanding of team dynamics and provides tangible contributions to teams, fostering collaboration and an environment of mutual trust and respect that leads to a reliable commitment to teamwork.

Let us have a more detailed look at the language learning abilities, which are developed in the course of the experience of learning. Since they enable the learner to deal more effectively and independently with language learning challenges the learner should be aware that the same process can be applied to a business professional context. It is expected that any business professional can analyze, evaluate and make decisions in business settings in an independent, responsible and autonomous way. Therefore, building up this ability while learning EFL will result in a more efficient learning, since the metacognitive analysis of both learning outcomes is quite similar. Ability to learn in an EFL learning setting has several components, such as language and communication awareness; general phonetic skills; study skills; and heuristic skills. It is not difficult to see that these components are also essential for those professionals striving to make a career in international business.

The above components have a direct impact on improving a learner's chance to succeed in the business world, so we discuss them in a more detailed way:

1) **Language and communication awareness.** Sensitivity to language and language use, involving knowledge and understanding of the principles according to which languages are organized and used, enables new experience to be assimilated into an ordered framework and welcomed as an enrichment. The

associated new language may then be more readily learnt and used, rather than resisted as a threat to the learner's already established linguistic system, which is often believed to be normal and 'natural'.

2) General phonetic awareness and skills. Many learners, particularly mature students, and our university students can be considered so, will find their ability to pronounce new languages facilitated by: an ability to distinguish and produce unfamiliar sounds and prosodic patterns; an ability to perceive and concatenate unfamiliar sound sequences; an ability, as a listener, to resolve (i.e. divide into distinct and significant parts) a continuous stream of sound into a meaningful structured string of phonological elements; an understanding/mastery of the processes of sound perception and production applicable to new language learning. It is important to note that these general phonetic skills are distinct from the ability to pronounce a particular language.

3) Study skills. They include the ability to make effective use of the learning opportunities created by teaching situations, such as the following: to maintain attention to the presented information; to grasp the intention of the task set; to co-operate effectively in pair and group work; to make rapid and frequent active use of the language (or negotiation tactic) learned; ability to use available materials for independent learning; ability to organize and use materials for self-directed learning; ability to learn effectively (both linguistically and socioculturally) from direct observation of and participation in communication events by the cultivation of perceptual, analytical and heuristic skills; awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses as a learner (or negotiator); ability to identify one's own needs and goals; ability to organize one's own strategies and procedures to pursue these goals, in accordance with one's own characteristics and resources.

4) Heuristic skills. These include: a) the ability of the learner to come to terms with new experience (new language, new people, new ways of behaving, etc.) and to actively use other competences (e.g. by observing, grasping the significance of what is observed, analyzing, inferring, memorizing, etc.) in the specific learning situation; b) the ability of the learner (particularly in using target language reference sources) to find, understand and if necessary convey new information; and c) the ability to use new technologies (e.g. by searching for information in databases, hypertexts, etc.).

How Does Self-Evaluation Enhance Development of Competencies?

There has been some discussion about the fact that some people are more successful at some competences than at others, and that business people either possess them or they don't. Leadership skills, for example, are thought to be quite often natural. Though an individual can work to improve his ability to lead, he will likely never be as successful a leader as someone who simply is more charismatic. The idea of working with a language learning portfolio is that, no matter what the level of achievement of a certain competence the learner has, he or she can always improve it by following the steps of self-assessment provided by the theoretical model for self-evaluation provided by Rolheiser (1996). According to this model, teachers need to help students develop productive goals and action plans to move forward and to get involved in what she calls an "upward cycle of learning".

Rolheiser also states that the most difficult part of teaching students how to evaluate their work consists of designing ways to provide support for students as they use self-evaluative data to set new goals and levels of effort. Teachers need to be cautious here since, without their help, students may be uncertain whether they have attained their goals. Teachers can also help students connect particular levels of achievement to the learning strategies they adopted and the effort they expended. Finally, teachers can help students develop viable action plans in which feasible goals are operationalized as a set of specific action intentions.

Self-confidence and self-esteem are two aspects that can help business professionals overcome the rejections commonly associated with business deals. Research indicates that self-evaluation plays a key

role in fostering an upward cycle of learning (Rolheiser & Ross, 1998), so by working with tools such as the B2 Language Portfolio, both self-esteem and self-confidence are expected to be positively impacted. The theory that supports Rolheiser's model argues that when students evaluate their performance positively, self-evaluations encourage students to set higher goals and commit more personal resources or effort to them. The combination of goals and effort equals achievement. A student's achievement results in self-judgment, for example, when a student contemplates the question, "Were my goals met?" which leads to self-reaction, or a student responding to the judgment with the question, "How do I feel about that?". Goals, effort, achievement, self-judgment, and self-reaction all can combine to impact self-confidence in a positive way. Self-evaluation is really the combination of the self-judgment and self-reaction components of the model, and if we can teach students to do this better we can contribute to an upward cycle of better learning, whichever the subject matter is.

Nevertheless, a downward cycle could develop if there was a significant gap between students' goals and those of the classroom or if students perceive themselves to be unsuccessful performers. In the downward cycle low self-evaluations lead students to develop negative orientations toward learning, select personal goals that are unrealistic, adopt learning strategies which are ineffective, exert low effort, and make excuses for poor performance. Here, the teacher plays a very important role in assisting his or her students overcome these problems, and can take advantage of the situation to practice another key competence to business people, negotiation.

For this model to work appropriately, a negotiation between the teacher and the students has to take place in determining the evaluation criteria that will be used to judge their performance. Neither imposing school goals nor acquiescing to student preferences is likely to be as successful as creating a shared set that students perceive to be meaningful. This is based on workplace studies, which are known for indicating that involving employees in making decisions about their work increases satisfaction and goal commitment. It is easy to see then the close relationship between effective learning environments and business settings. In addition to increasing student commitment to instructional goals, negotiating intentions enables teachers to help students set goals that are specific, immediate, and moderately difficult, characteristics that contribute to greater effort. It also provides an opportunity to influence students' orientations toward learning, a long term guidance effort, that is particularly timely in cooperative learning contexts since students sometimes adopt orientations in group learning (such as letting someone else do all the work) that impede learning. Clearly, team building skills will also benefit from the use of self-evaluation. Even those learners who are very strong at certain skills can start practicing coaching others, as a part of a communicative activity with the primarily language objective to develop fluency but with the very engaging topic of actually helping a peer.

Hence, more than simply considering the language class a simple English for Specific Purposes class (ESP), acquiring the core vocabulary to perform the basic functions in the field, investing time to teach students how to perform an effective self-evaluation and therefore promote reflection on the students' own learning process of both language and the professional skills, will result in an individual better-equipped to outstand in his or her working field. The idea is to promote the development of complex capacities that enable students to think and act in various fields of activity, aiming to put knowledge in action, to use a sound knowledge base that can be put into practice and used to explain what is happening. Using the competency-based curriculum model, where exit profiles specify the classes of situations that learners must be able to handle competently by the end of their education, we propose these classes of situations are identified either on the basis of real-life or business-related situations.

METHODOLOGY

This paper proposes that university business/management students use a Portfolio similar to the B2 Language Portfolio, the Business Competences Portfolio (BCP). The BCP uses English as a means to

introduce both teachers and students to competence-based work. Thus, students have the chance to improve their linguistic proficiency in English while learning and developing business competencies, which at present are left aside in the formal curriculum. At the UMSNH's undergraduate program, it is currently left to the teacher to decide whether to include the development of business competencies in the course contents, assuming he or she knows how to do it or is interested in doing it. On the other hand, many of our students are still very dependent on their teachers. Using a learning portfolio fosters both learner autonomy and the use of self-assessment (Little, D. & Perclová, R., 2003, 2007; Zubizarreta, J., 2009; Chen, H. & Black, T., 2011; Dobrow, S., Smith, W. & Posner, M., 2011), which are also core objectives of this project. Successful students assume the responsibility of their own learning and are willing to expand it to other subjects of interest as a lifelong activity. Furthermore, Daniels (2010) reports that Human Resources managers find that, in general, being proficient in a foreign/second language adds professional and personal value to employees.

The Business Competences Portfolio (BCP) is to be piloted at the Universidad Michoacana (UMSNH)'s Faculty of Administration and Accounting, with two testing groups and two control groups. One control group and its correspondent testing group will be freshmen who are basic users of English (A1 level of the CEFR); and the other two groups will be students who are independent users of the language (B1+ level). The study will also aim to find if students who attend more advanced courses in the Business Administration Faculty (the ones who are also more likely to have a higher level of proficiency in English) have indeed learned more business tools than freshmen. The BCP is currently being developed by the authors and is intended to be piloted during the spring semester 2013.

RESULTS

Based on the literature review and on our own experience, the authors expect to find the following: a) if there is a correlation between the students' level of achievement in developing communicative competence and business competencies; b) what business competencies our students are best at and which ones need to be reinforced; c) the students' feelings and impact on motivation when they play a more active role directing their learning process; d) whether students' attitudes towards evaluation change; e) what aspects of the portfolio need to be improved or replaced; f) how much interest the tool raises among faculty teachers and students, and if it does not diminish once enthusiasm for novelty fades; g) set the basis for launching the definite version of an ePortfolio; and h) whether the students' intercultural competence improves, since Michoacan is home to the P'urepecha, one of the many native people striving to survive in Mexico, and if the BCP promotes awareness of a foreign culture while reinforcing our local identity.

Scope and Limitations

The authors foresee the following challenges that this research project will have to meet. To begin with, learners must have a clear understanding of the course objectives, and the teacher must be cautious not to raise unreal expectations, even if their level of competence improves, everyone will reach a different level of achievement. Moreover, they will probably need to devote more time and effort in order to fulfill the course tasks, so only the very motivated ones are expected to reach the course end. As in any class, dropouts are certain to occur, but to what extent is an unanswered question yet.

Moreover, we believe that learners might not be likely to develop some competencies which require expert knowledge, such as the Financial one, which can involve developing and presenting budgets that realistically reflect the needs of a department or division, initiating cost containment measures within one area of responsibility and monitoring budget variances as well as taking corrective action. We are aware that this can be the result of the authors' lack of formation on such particular areas, and that it could be a limitation that is not due to students' capacities. On the other hand, it will be interesting to find out if learners coaching competence can make it up for the teacher's lack of expertise in those fields.

For other competencies a real workplace atmosphere and organizational structure can be necessary, and if they are simply discussed in class with a rather theoretical approach, learners might feel disappointed and tempted to go back to “typical” classroom practices. This can be true for the Process Management competency, for example, which aims to determine the necessary processes to get things done, to break down work into process steps, to manage schedules and tasks to complete all assignments and to monitor processes, progress, and results. Obviously, the course does not attempt to develop Customer Focus competency, which would demand to practice dedicating to meeting the expectations of customers, taking personal responsibility for customer satisfaction and developing communication channels to fully understand customer expectations, among others.

CONCLUSIONS

Competence formation is possibly one of the most effective ways to prepare future professionals to successfully deal with constantly changing working conditions. Competence as an organizing principle of the curriculum is a way to bring real life back into the classroom (Jonnaert, P. et al, Prospects, UNESCO, 2007). It is thus a move away from the idea that curriculum is mainly implemented by having students reproduce theoretical knowledge and memorize facts (the conventional knowledge-based approach). In Mexico, the implementation of such educational model is already taking place. A competence-based approach implies that learners practice how to do business in English, recognizing that people need more than just phrase lists and useful language boxes to operate effectively in real-life business situations. Personal and professional competencies provide a framework to manage organizational culture, management as a core competency, leadership development, and drive organizational performance, which become the greatest determinants of employee performance, assuming the individual possesses the required threshold of technical competencies.

The implementation of a learning portfolio has two main implications, the first one is pedagogical: it is designed to make both the language and business competencies learning process more transparent to learners and to foster the development of learner autonomy; that is why it assigns a central role to reflection and self-assessment. This function reflects a commitment to develop learner autonomy as an essential part of education for democratic citizenship and a prerequisite for lifelong learning. The second function is to provide concrete evidence of second/foreign language communicative proficiency and intercultural experience.

Language learning abilities are developed in the course of the experience of learning. They enable the learner to deal more effectively and independently with new language learning challenges, to see what options exist and to make better use of opportunities. This is exactly what is expected any business professional can do when analyzing, evaluating and making decisions in business settings. Therefore, building up this ability while learning EFL will result in a more efficient learning, since the metacognitive analysis of both learning outcomes is quite similar. Ability to learn in an EFL learning setting has several components, such as language and communication awareness, general phonetic skills, study skills and heuristic skills. It is not difficult to see that these components are also essential for those professionals striving to make a career in international business. By providing university students with a Business Competencies Portfolio, the authors expect to help them not only develop communicative competence in English, but to help them build the key competencies they will need to set up a successful career. Furthermore, autonomy and competencies development might well be oriented at the individual’s self-realization, as a way for the realization of a vital project focused on the production goods and services that meet the needs of the community.

Finally, we agree with Graddol (2006) that it is time for a change in the teaching/learning paradigm, and that by using English for global communication (English as a Lingua Franca, ELF) we focus on pragmatic strategies required in intercultural communication, the second main objective of the Language Portfolio.

The target model of English, within this framework, is not a native speaker but a fluent bilingual speaker, who retains a national identity in terms of accent, and who also has the special skills required to negotiate understanding with another non-native speaker. Research is also beginning to show how bad some native speakers are at using English for international communication. He suggests that elements of an ELF syllabus could usefully be taught within a mother tongue curriculum. We look forward to integrating such intercultural awareness through English, as a complement to the curriculum in Spanish.

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