

The Mexican Scale of Languages: stakeholders' voices of its socio-political impact

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ABSTRACT

The National Certificate of Language Proficiency (CENNI) is a Mexican language scale developed by the Ministry of Education to validate citizens' language skills. This study aimed to analyze the socio-political impact of the CENNI in Mexico in regards to its uses, its impact on professional development, political decisions and language development in the country. Five CENNI stakeholders took part in the study, including language teachers and one national decision-maker from the federal administration of the CENNI. Semi-structured interviews conducted with participants suggested that stakeholders hold different views on the multiple uses of the CENNI and its nature. While teachers considered it a "test" or a "required process", the national stakeholder viewed it as a tool that could contribute to a candidate's language proficiency. The study provides possible implications for CENNI candidates, language assessment policy makers in the country and around the world.

Keywords: Language standards, stakeholders' perceptions, language assessment.

RESUMEN

El Certificado Nacional de Nivel de Idioma (CENNI) es una escala Mexicana de idioma desarrollada por la Secretaría de Educación para validar las habilidades lingüísticas de los ciudadanos. Este estudio buscó analizar el impacto sociopolítico del CENNI en México con respecto a su uso, desarrollo profesional de los usuarios, las decisiones políticas y el desarrollo del lenguaje en el país. Cinco usuarios de CENNI participaron en el estudio, incluidos profesores de idiomas y un responsable nacional de toma de decisiones en la administración federal del CENNI. Las entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas con los participantes sugirieron que las partes interesadas tienen diferentes puntos de vista sobre los múltiples usos del CENNI y su naturaleza. Si bien los docentes consideraron que era un "examen" o un "proceso requerido", el responsable en la administración federal lo consideraba una herramienta que pudiera proporcionar la competencia lingüística de los candidatos. El estudio proporciona posibles implicaciones para los candidatos del CENNI y los encargados de formular políticas de evaluación del lenguaje en el país y en todo el mundo.

Palabras Clave: Estandarización del Lenguaje, Percepciones de evaluación del lenguaje, evaluación de lenguas extranjeras.

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Introduction

Language standards around the globe have led to the development of language curriculums, language teaching methodologies, language teacher education curriculums, language policies, language assessment and testing methodologies among others. For instance, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), launched in 2011 (Council of Europe, 2019), seeks to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe”. It considers and promotes the plurilingual context in which Europe is immersed. On the other hand, the Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB), is a language descriptor that is considered a “a description of communicative competencies and performance tasks through which learners demonstrate the application of language knowledge (i.e., competence) and skill (i.e., ability)” (Center for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2019). The CLB includes 12 benchmark descriptors of language ability of English as a Second language and had the purpose of placing adult newcomers to Canada in language instructional programs of their proficiency (Peirce & Stewart, 1997). Due to the increasing demand of language proficiency tests around the world, the English language has played an important role to develop and validate new scales for language proficiency. Mexico followed the patterns of the CEFR and the CLB to establish its own language proficiency standards: The National Certificate for Language Proficiency (CENNI).

The effects that these standards may produce in its users and potential language assessment is varied. In other words, the effects that they may bring to learning and teaching (Hughes, 2003 as cited in Green, 2013) may include positive and/or negative effects that provoke distinct perceptions. Global efforts to explore language standard adaptation and the perceptions of those involved have been varied, including studies in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. However, research has yet to explore the CENNI, its use in Mexico and the views of its users. Understanding the perceptions of its candidates may contribute to its validation as a language proficiency descriptor. Therefore, this study had the purpose of exploring the perceptions of Mexican CENNI stakeholders with regard to the socio political impact it has had in its users. The following section reviews the relevant literature that has supported this study.

Literature review

The impact that language standards may cause in teaching or learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Hughes, 2003 as cited in Green, 2013) has been widely studied on a global scale in an attempt to understand its role in language testing and assessment. Studies worldwide have focused on the implementation of the CEFR at a classroom level and its impact, the establishment of level descriptors based on the CEFR to score language abilities, the perception of test takers in terms of the use of the language standards, and the adaptability of the language standard descriptors to specific contexts.

With respect to understanding the impact of the CEFR in Turkey, Celik (2013) analyzed teachers' implementation of the CEFR principles of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism in their public elementary foreign language classrooms. The researcher concluded that although teachers considered plurilingualism and pluriculturalism important factors in their lessons, strategies to encourage these skills were not being implemented due to their lack of familiarity with the Turkish National language program and to multiple contextual factors, therefore pointing out that more research needs to be conducted to understand the applications of language standards in the classroom and the views of teachers who use these standards on a daily basis.

In an additional effort to understand the application of the CEFR in Japan, Nagai & O'Dweyer (2011), analyzed the adaptation of the CEFR in three main areas: “1) the score interpretation of high stake proficiency tests, 2) attempts to create Japanese proficiency standards for foreign languages, and 3) various pedagogical uses of can do descriptors to improve foreign language education as well as to promote autonomous learning” (p.149). The authors emphasized the need to contextualize language standards to local contexts as pointed out by Celik (2013). However, they questioned the

validity of the global standards, such as the CEFR, since the more local the standard becomes, the less global it is and therefore moves away from its original purpose. It is within this inquiry of standard contextualization that perceptions of language standard impact need to be analyzed.

Stewart, Rehorick & Perry (2001) described the process of the development of a writing scoring rubric based on the CLB at an international college in Kyushu, Japan. Difficulty in the creation and adaptation process involved achieving consensus among the development team and the teachers involved in the assessment of writing, therefore pinpointing some of the challenges of adapting language standards to a specific context. In a more recent study, Doe, Douglas & Cheng (2019) analyzed the difficulties that new immigrants in Canada faced and the perceptions they had of these difficulties based on the CLB. They identified that participants had the most difficulties in speaking interactions in work places that required customer/client interactions in accordance to a CLB level 4 to 6. The researchers concluded that as with other language standards, each level of CLB does not capture candidates' true language ability in the sense that it was either above or below the true candidate skills, therefore suggesting that language standards such as the CLB, need to be constantly researched to understand its applicability and contextualization around the globe.

In a similar effort to understand users' perceptions, Manjarrés (2005) explored the perceptions of contextualization of the Colombian English Language Test (CELT), a test aligned with the official foreign language standards established by the Ministry of Education. Official test document analysis and student/teacher interviews revealed that attempts to align the CELT contents to the classroom contexts and language curriculums produced a teach-for-the test effect. Teachers and students perceived the test positively and its contents but any language skill that was not included in the test negatively. It was found that the test did not fulfill its theoretical purpose: to assess test takers' communication skills. Instead it focused on the linguistic features of language such as grammar and vocabulary structures, therefore, questioning its validity. In Mexico, Despaigne & Rossi (2011) analyzed perceptions of the implementation of the CEFR in the Language and Culture Department of a public university in Central Mexico, specifically the variables of learner autonomy and the development of learner autonomy. The authors conclude that the creation of a benchmark to assess languages in the country would need to include contextual factors that could allow their use. They argued that for Mexico to implement benchmark standards such as the National Certification of Language Proficiency (CENNI) or the CEFR, they need to be adaptable to the specific sociocultural context lived in the country, for instance, the inclusion of indigenous languages in the standards and their linguistic context. The Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP, Spanish acronym) on the foundations of the CEFR and the CLB, developed the CENNI.

The CENNI in Mexico

The first legal reference of the CENNI was documented in 2009 to suggest "in a reliable and objective way the level of proficiency of a language in a general form of use" (SEP, 2019a). It was designed to provide a nationally valid level of linguistic proficiency in Mexico of five languages (English, Italian, Portuguese, French, Spanish). It intended to fulfill three general purposes (SEP, 2019a) 1) *specific*: provide language proficiency used for specific professions or jobs, 2) *general*: language proficiency for education, migratory or other purposes that do not require a specific context and for 3) *academic purposes*: language proficiency for those interested in pursuing further academic degrees. Every year, the SEP provides from 5,000 to 14,000 certificates nationally. By mid 2016, approximately 69,000 certificates had been issued nationally (Rabago, 2017) since it began operation in 2009. However, the SEP has not made these statistics public.

The CENNI office has not developed an official language test that can provide proof of a candidate's language proficiency to obtain their certificate. Therefore, CENNI candidates file paperwork and provide a certificate of another international test taken by the candidate to validate their language proficiency in Mexico. Thus, the CENNI has added in its catalogue forty different international tests (TOEFL IBT, IELTS, PET, KET, DTES by Macmillan, ISE from Trinity College,

PTE, PPD by Pearson and APTIS by British Council) which can be accepted as a tool to obtain an official CENNI certificate (2019d).

Reasons amongst candidates to obtain the CENNI are varied and include but are not exclusive to education, migration and professional purposes (the most common among candidates). Since the creation of CENNI, governmental institutions have added the certifications and diplomas derived from CENNI as a compulsory requirement for new job candidates, professional growth and in some cases for job permanence. The largest group of candidates to apply for the CENNI so far, have been English teachers in the public elementary sector, where they are required to obtain a CENNI certificate as proof of their language proficiency level in spite of official information found in public documents of the SEP, stating that the CENNI is not obligatory for its users (SEP, 2019b, 2019c). Although the Ministry allows for a variety of certificates to be used as language proficiency proof to obtain the CENNI, it is the latter that is most widely required to be hired or continue in service as a language teacher in the public education system. In many states of the country such as Sinaloa, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosi, it is the governmental office of the SEP that pays for these tests and runs the paperwork for teachers to obtain the CENNI. In others such as Tamaulipas, the state offices of the SEP absorb the costs of the international test and require teachers to move on with the CENNI paper work independently.

In terms of language training for teachers, it is varied among the different states. In states such as Tamaulipas, language training to obtain the international certificate of choice is provided to most of the teachers in different modalities (online and/or on-site) depending on the financial resources available. According to the state government, in November of 2018 (Secretaria Educacion TAM, 2019) approximately 900 English teachers were provided with preparation for tests such as the Michigan English Test, Certificate of Advanced English and Certificate of Proficiency of English, which teachers then needed to file to obtain the CENNI. However, not all the teachers in service were provided with this training. In other states, such as San Luis Potosi, a four stage plan to train and certify teachers was implemented. In January of 2019, secondary school teachers completed their training and obtained their FCE certificate (Secretaría de Educación SLP, 2019). The exact number of trained teachers was not made available to the public.

As previously mentioned, the CENNI has been constantly promoted as an English teaching requirement in public sectors, rather than a tool to understand a candidate's language proficiency. On the other hand, efforts to explore its use in Mexico and to enlighten its socio-political impact have not been accounted for until the publication of this paper. This analysis is crucial since the CENNI is being approached as a tool that validates at a national level, language proficiency. But above all, it is being used to further validate language proficiency of teachers thus suggesting an important impact in language teaching and learning in Mexico. Understanding its uses would provide further validation and objectivity to this certification. Therefore this study sought out to analyze the social impact of the CENNI in two main sectors of Mexican society: candidates who have already obtained the CENNI certification and at a national stakeholder level. It intended to attain this purpose by answering the research question *What is the social, political and professional impact of the CENNI in the Mexican public?* The following sections depict the methodological procedures followed to obtain the necessary data to fulfill the main purpose.

Methodology

The study explored the CENNI's socio-political impact by analyzing participants' views of its usefulness for their professional and language development. It also explored participants' opinions with regard to the political contribution of the CENNI to the country's development of language standards. The study followed a qualitative methodological approach by interpreting participants' views of the CENNI from an interpretivist constructivist approach (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007; Creswell, 2015). Thematic analysis of six semi structured interview transcripts was conducted.

Participants and Research Context

Five EFL teachers in service at different educational levels in the state of Tamaulipas (Northeastern Mexico) and one national administrative stakeholder (NS) were contacted via email to take part in this investigation. Incentives (Amazon vouchers) were given to the participants for their cooperation in the study. Three of the teacher participants were females whose ages ranged from 24-33 years of age. One participant was a male aged 33 years. Teachers had experience teaching EFL at high school level and were working at this level at the time of the study. Participants' years of experience ranged from 1.5 to 9 years teaching the language. All of them had an English certification that proved at least a B1 level of English proficiency (FCE, Aptis or TOEFL) in addition to the Teaching Knowledge Test as a teaching certification. Teachers were recruited using a convenience sampling technique (Dörnyei, 2007) in which only those that had taken the CENNI and accepted to participate were considered. In the state of Tamaulipas to teach at the high school level, teachers are required by the State Government to be Mexican citizens, have an undergraduate degree in any field, and a CENNI certificate at Level 12 equivalent to a B2 level. They then go on to take a series of three exams that test their language, teaching and classroom planning abilities (SET, 2019). Those with higher scores are hired as English teachers.

The national stakeholder, a male, in his mid-40s was interviewed with the purpose of understanding the nature of the CENNI and its application in the country. This stakeholder had been working in the SEP for three years and was now working in the Department responsible for the CENNI and its distribution in the country. Part of his responsibilities included organizing the departments that conducted the paperwork for candidates to obtain the CENNI at a federal level. Pseudonyms were used to keep the anonymity of all participants and take care of the ethics of those involved.

Semi-structured interviews

Two sets of interview protocols were developed. Appendix A portrays CENNI holders' interview (IA) while Appendix B includes the protocol for the national administrative stakeholder (IB).

IA included 34 open questions and intended to obtain candidates' views of their academic background, their awareness of the nature of the CENNI, the uses the interviewees give to the CENNI, the perceived socio-political impact, and suggestions to improve the certification.

The IB protocol included 20 open questions that focused on the interviewee's background with the CENNI, information about the candidates of the CENNI and their views of the socio-political impact of the CENNI.

Both interviews were validated through a piloting stage (Dörnyei, 2007). One participant per interview was recruited and views on the interview protocol were shared. Two questions concerning the socio-political impact were added since the researchers believed not enough data was being obtained about this theme. Wording issues were solved to make the questions understandable for the interviewees in both protocols. Spanish was used to provide an environment of comfort and trust in which the interviewees could share their points of view without inhibitions (Pavlenko, 2007). The interviews were then transcribed to Spanish written text for further analysis. For the purposes of reporting results in this paper, participants' quotes included in this manuscript were translated to English.

Data Collection Procedures

Once interview protocols were validated, participants were contacted personally. A specific time and date for each teacher was scheduled through email, or social media platforms. Each interview was conducted face-to-face in the agreed time and place. The NS was interviewed by telephone since he resided in a different city. Via email, a schedule was agreed to conduct the interview.

Each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes, and with the permission of each participant, they were recorded on a digital recorder. Interviews were then transcribed for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Considering that thematic analysis has the main advantage of bringing forward themes or topics that are relevant to the interviewee (Pavlenko, 2007 as cited in Talmy, 2010), transcripts in Spanish were analyzed with the intention of “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). Firstly the transcription was read to start initial coding from which themes were identified. Then, codes were given within each theme. Codes and themes were reviewed to analyze their relationship among them. The deductive thematic analysis (Ibid, 2006) conducted for this study focused on four main areas while analyzing transcripts: 1) the participants’ knowledge about CENNI, 2) participants’ perceptions towards its political impact, 3) participants’ perceptions towards its social impact and 4) participants’ perceptions towards impact on professional growth. However, as the process was conducted subthemes emerged within these main themes. Once the main researcher finalized data analysis, the results were shared with the collaborating researchers for their analysis. This had the purpose of validating analysis and results obtained with other experts in the field (Dörnyei, 2007). These are further described in the following section. For the purposes of reporting results, participants’ quotes included in this paper were translated.

Results

Six main themes were identified in participants’ social, political and professional views of the CENNI: 1) participants’ perceptions of the CENNI, 2) Perceptions of the CENNI and its application, 3) Perceived usefulness of the CENNI, 4) Perceived impact of the CENNI on Language learning and teaching, 5) Perceived impact of CENNI on EFL teachers’ professional growth and 6) Perceived impact of CENNI on EFL teachers’ language development.

Teacher Participants’ Perceptions of the CENNI

The Nature of the CENNI

All the interviewed teachers considered the CENNI a requirement demanded by their local authorities that needed to be complied with to keep their jobs or to aspire to more teaching hours. Patricia explained the CENNI was a test that validated her level of English while the other four participants considered it a certification in which the interested person needed to follow a specific procedure. For instance, Marco had a specific notion of the concept of the CENNI: “CENNI is a certification ... it’s an equivalent. You take an English test and then you receive the equivalence of the certification compared with the results of the European Reference Framework.” Patricia considered the CENNI was a test that had the main purpose of measuring the teachers’ English level while Marco agreed with this notion. Maria pointed out “it works as a knowledge certification in any institution in Mexico”.

From these responses, it was concluded the main conceptualization of the CENNI was clear to most of the participants (four out of five). However, it is still worrying that one teacher considered it was a test that needed to be taken to prove her level of English to her institutional authorities. It is also crucial to note that all the participants considered the CENNI a “requirement” instead of a tool that can allow them to visualize their language proficiency. Thus, questioning the applicability and usefulness of the CENNI in Mexico.

Purpose of the CENNI

All the participants considered it had the main purpose of informing the SEP of their language proficiency, as stated by Maria: “it is a way for the SEP to know how many teachers really know English.” Beatriz added: “I think ... the objective is to comply with a requirement of the SEP ... it’s one more document to obtain and hand in”. Marco explained that although it was a document required by his institution, it is something that may help him understand his level of English. He also identified

its alignment to the CEFR by pointing out: “I understand the CENNI is explained based on the Common Framework ... am I right? ... so that means that it can tell me the level of language I have”. Finally, Maria agreed with her fellow teachers that it was only a requirement that needs to be fulfilled if you wish to get a promotion in your professional career. Although all the participants had the shallow notion of the purpose of the CENNI, it is important to point out that all of them considered the CENNI an obligatory requirement that needed to be complied with. Therefore, it may be concluded that for the CENNI to be successfully implemented in the country, its users need to have more information of its nature and purpose to make objective use of the certification.

Perceptions of CENNI and its Application

Perceptions were themed among two main groups: a) the positive perspectives, and b) the negative perceptions. Among these themes specific subthemes were coded.

Positive Perceptions: The CENNI as a Social Mobility tool

The NS, Mr. Pedro, believed the CENNI was a tool that facilitates candidates’ social and professional mobility in the country since it was the first legal norm that was implemented to validate language proficiency. It had the purpose of providing candidates with a national recognition of their level of languages and therefore facilitating their professional and educational position in society. This may be visualized in the following excerpt:

...based on the Common European Framework and Canadian framework, ... the first legal norm was the CENNI, as a frame of reference ... it is a tool of social mobility ... allows students to prove level and obtain a job inserting themselves in different social groups ... it’s the first effort from the Mexican government at having a national frame of reference. (NS)

He considered that its creation allowed the country to respond to the global demand of language standards through a frame of reference, which based its creation on the CEFR and the CLB. It provided CENNI candidates, according to Mr. Pedro, a certificate that made their proficiency valid in Mexico.

Positive Perceptions: The CENNI as an agent of homogenization

One of the main advantages of the CENNI, according to Mr. Pedro, is that it is a requirement in many institutions for professional and educational purposes. He explained that it “homogenizes within all categories the requirements...and it also facilitates meeting the rules of job requirements” (Mr. Pedro).

Participating teachers agreed to this view and added that since it is a requirement of the SEP, it was proof that teachers have a good level of English. This allowed them to obtain jobs and insert themselves in the Mexican workforce. Therefore, having the CENNI facilitated the entrance to the Mexican public education system as pointed out by Maria, “I had the idea that it was a certification that evaluates your English level so you can enter the education system (SEP) as ... English teachers”. Marco added: “it’s a requirement but the good thing is that it helps teachers have a good level of English...I don’t think quality English classes can be given if the teacher does not have good English”.

This data can suggest that although teachers had a misconception of the purpose of the CENNI by considering it only as a tool to meet work-related requirements, they considered this a positive aspect of the certification since it allowed them to move forward in their insertion in the Mexican workforce.

Negative perceptions and needs to attend: The need for an update

Mr. Pedro considered that the implementation of the CENNI has brought important developments to the country in terms of language use and proficiency. However, the standards established since 2009 have not been updated or revised, therefore considering this one of its main disadvantages. He continued by explaining that one of the main suggestions he would make is to update its legal norms. He suggested that the construction of the CENNI be updated by conceptualizing it so that it is understood abroad as explained, “I would say we need to improve its adaptation to the international

Canadian standards and the CEFR ... this may help us ... the CENNI should be an understandable document here and abroad”.

He suggests that the CENNI should be a Mexican language standardization based on international standards, that has use and validity in Mexico but also in foreign countries for academic and professional purposes. Although the development of the CENNI was an important effort to standardize language in the country, it is necessary to join efforts among academics and decision makers to conduct an analysis of its validity and use.

Negative Perceptions: The need to improve CENNI logistics

Three of the five teacher participants pointed out that the CENNI is a procedure that is too long and “tedious” (Patricia). For instance, Maria indicated that the certification is centralized in Mexico City, therefore people who live outside the city have difficulties with the time-consuming process. She stated: “you have to present the CENNI with anticipation because the procedure lasts a long time. I think that the office focuses more on Mexico city and in other places the procedure lasts too long ... even when they are the same institution”.

In this sense, participants suggested that to facilitate the procedure it would be necessary to have offices in different states of the country to assure that the process is followed in an objective and valid way. This was pointed out by Maria, who explained her view in the following way: “That they do not focus only on Mexico city. That every state has its own office, to conduct the procedure of the CENNI in the same place in order to avoid sending all the paperwork to Mexico”.

Despite the fact that the SEP has branch offices in different states of the country and CENNI paperwork is filed through these offices, it is the main offices in Mexico city that process all the CENNI applications. Perhaps, several branch offices or agents in important states of the country would help care for the process and watch over the uses of the CENNI. It would also allow the SEP have more direct contact with CENNI candidates, to understand their views of the certification validating its use in the country.

Negative Perceptions: The need to generate domesticated tests

The process to obtain the certification of the CENNI, requires candidates to have taken a previous test such as TOEFL, Aptis, MET among others. Then, with this test the SEP provides an official certificate that states the test is valid in the country. The participants considered that more needed to be done to objectively certify the level of candidates. It was suggested that the SEP create their own test, as pointed out by Maria and Raul: “it is necessary to create a test to validate CENNI. Not just a procedure where you have to look for someone else to present the test ... what's the point of validating something that is already valid globally.”

According to teachers, domestic tests would give more importance to the certification and therefore not only see it as a procedure that needs to be complied with. It would also allow the country to obtain identity in their language standards.

Negative Perceptions: The need to socialize the nature of the CENNI

According to Mr Pedro, the CENNI is a certification that legally validates a candidate's Italian, French, Portuguese, English and Spanish language proficiency. However, teachers expressed their lack of understanding of the CENNI and its usefulness in candidates' academic and professional life.

Marco expressed the lack of information that candidates had in regard to the CENNI. This may be evidenced by the different CENNI concepts that the participants described in the first section of this section (some believed it was a test while others a certificate to fulfill work-related requirements). Marco suggested that the CENNI and its nature needed to be socialized among the Mexican public. He added that a teacher-specific language certification was needed, thus considering the language certificates validated by the CENNI did not suit the specific foreign language teaching context. In this regard, Marco stated, “I think ... informing teachers (is needed)... how the procedure is and what the equivalent tests are, also the places where you can register and explain to teachers what kind of test we can present focused on education.”

This lack of information has caused candidates and the general public to mis conceptualize the CENNI and therefore its misuse may be involved. It may also lead to its social impact which is described in the following sections.

Perceived Usefulness of the CENNI

Patricia stated that the only requirement to obtain the certification was an ID and the recent results of a valid international test. Marco agreed in this sense by considering the CENNI a required process that opens doors to a full time position in the Mexican public education system.

It is our belief that one of the social impacts of this certification is the view that the process is creating in candidates. Instead of seeing the certification as a tool to improve their language development or to understand where they stand in their language proficiency, it is considered a “requirement” or a “process” that needs to be complied with. Maria considered the certification a means with which the SEP is obtaining funds. Therefore, seriously questioning the purpose of the CENNI. She stated: “another reason would be to obtain the payments that teachers pay to foreign institutions such as Oxford. I think that what the government is doing is finding a way to obtain funds for the SEP...” She considers the certificate a tool that, instead of benefiting the candidate, benefits the Mexican government while it impacts on the participants’ views of language assessment and language assessment policies in the country.

Finally, Raul considered the CENNI certification was useful to obtain a job as well as to understand the proficiency level of English teachers. However, it seemed this participant only considered this usefulness for EFL teachers and not for society in general. He stated, “I think the reason why it was created was to certify our level of English, but honestly I don’t know what else it’s useful for. I think it is just to become a teacher.” In other words, this participant’s view of the usefulness of the CENNI, has impacted his views of the social groups for which the certification was meant to benefit. For this teacher and the other four participants, CENNI is meant to certify English teachers’ language, thus narrowing the target stakeholders of the CENNI in the country. This could also be rooted in the misconception discussed previously.

Perceived Impact of CENNI on Language Learning and Teaching in the Country

Mr. Pedro (NS), considered that teachers and students were among the most benefited stakeholders of the CENNI. He added it allowed them to standardize their language level therefore improving their language ability in benefit of students’ language studies and teachers’ academic preparation. However, a very different view was perceived on behalf of teachers. All of the participating teachers believed that the CENNI certification did not benefit the development of language learning or teaching in the country. One participant, Patricia, considered that the only visible benefit of the CENNI was to assure that instructors who are actively teaching children in Mexico, know the language and have a specific level to teach it, thus agreeing with the NS on the standardizing teachers’ language level but disagreeing on the development of language learning.

The rest of the participants, Marco, Maria, Beatriz and Raul considered that since it is not a course, or a proficiency exam, it is not encouraging the improvement of language teaching or learning in Mexico. They believed that for language learning and teaching to be impacted by CENNI more needed to be done to socialize its use.

Perceived Impact on EFL Teachers’ Professional Growth in Mexico

Four of the five teachers considered the CENNI did not directly impact on their professional development as English teachers. Beatriz pointed out that although she considered it did not provide professional growth, it did give her the opportunity to obtain a job and be part of the public education system. She added that she felt she had an advantage over her colleagues since they were not able to obtain a teaching job because of the lack of the CENNI: “I have had an advantage over colleagues who do not have it, that is to say, at best they have the level of English, but they do not have the certificate ... that hinders their development.”

Marco agreed with this idea by stating that obtaining the certification gave him labor opportunities in the teaching area: “Yes, I consider the CENNI useful because it opens lots of doors proving that you know the language.”

Although participants felt that professionally, the CENNI did not benefit them, it did provide work opportunities that they did not access without the certification. Since the CENNI is a national certification part of a language policy promoted by the SEP, it allows candidates to access language related jobs. However, it does not allow them to access these jobs at an international level. This was also pointed out by the NS interviews. In this sense it was stated that the main advantages of the CENNI were that it allowed social mobility and labor insertion in the country since it was the most required language proficiency certification.

Perceived Impact on Teachers' Language Development

All the participating teachers, except two, believed the CENNI did not directly impact the improvement of their language development. They considered the certification helped them understand the level of English proficiency they had. For instance, Maria explained: “also you can notice how much you know about the language and if you really understand it”. Marco, explained that following the CENNI process allowed him to update his skills and remind himself of language functions he had not considered. In other words, taking the certification allowed him to review linguistic structures he had forgotten how to use in the English language. The rest of the teachers explained the certification did not help them improve their language development in any way.

It is interesting to point out how the teachers believed the CENNI allowed them to understand their language proficiency level according to the descriptors of the SEP. To obtain the CENNI, candidates need to take an additional test such as Aptis, TOEFL, FCE among others previous to obtaining CENNI. Depending on the score obtained in the test, the CENNI provides an equivalent score. Therefore, the teachers' language proficiency is not provided by the CENNI, but by the first international test the teachers decide to take. Therefore, it may seem safe to state that the CENNI does not provide candidates their language proficiency but instead only provides validation of other international tests in the country.

As a conclusion and in an intent to provide answers to the research question *What is the social, political and professional impact of the CENNI in the Mexican public?*, results suggested that at a social level a misconception of the certification has caused the candidates to consider it a teacher-bounded requirement that needs to be complied with, a certification used by and required to a specific social group: English teachers. At a political level, Mr. Pedro, the NS interviewed to obtain data, suggested that great benefit had been obtained from the CENNI since it represented the first political effort to standardize language pointing out that new efforts to continue its construction and its legal uses had not been updated since 2009. This suggests that language standardization in Mexico had brought upon important political changes in Federal regulations in the SEP.

At a professional level, participants informed the researcher they believed their professional growth had not been impacted since they did not acquire new knowledge that could improve their professional practice. However, they did consider that the CENNI had allowed them to insert themselves in the public education workforce as English teachers.

Discussion and conclusions

This study had the main purpose of understanding the social, political and professional impact of the CENNI on five CENNI candidates and one National CENNI public server. In some cases, their views corresponded and in some others, they did not. For instance at a social level, the five participating teachers and the NS considered that the CENNI allowed candidates to rapidly insert themselves in the workforce.

Disagreement concerning the nature of the CENNI was found. Teacher participants considered it a process to obtain a job, rather than a language standard that could encourage language

improvement. It was viewed as a language teacher requirement thus ignoring that the certification is for Mexicans regardless of their profession. While Mr. Pedro stated that the certification had the purpose of providing a legal referenced standard to language proficiency, the five participating teachers viewed it as a “test”, “exam” or a “requirement” to obtain a job. It is safe to point out that the CENNI has been misconceptualized and therefore its purpose is misunderstood by its users. This suggests that its validation needs to be further explored. Users suggested that the need to contextualize the CENNI by creating their own test may more accurately provide the language proficiency of users. These results may correspond to those indicated by Nagai & O’Dweyer (2011) where a call is made to analyze the contextualization of language standards such as the CEFR or in this case the CENNI. However, they warned that the more a language standard is contextualized, the more its global characteristic is lost jeopardizing its validity. In the case of the CENNI, validation through contextualization may allow the understanding of its nature and its use. It may also project the possibility of including indigenous languages in its framework as indicated by Despagne & Rossi (2012).

Social views also differed in terms of the impact of language learning and teaching. While teachers considered that having the CENNI did not benefit their learning or teaching of English, the NS considered it did since the certification allowed for teachers and students to understand their current level of the language. However, CENNI candidates were already aware of their language weaknesses and strengths since they had previously taken an external language certification to obtain the CENNI.

Although the CENNI was created with a purpose of serving as a tool that could provide evidence of a candidate’s language proficiency as outlined by Mr. Pedro, it seemed like its users did not view it as such. Teachers viewed it as a teacher-bounded requirement that is oriented towards this social group. Thus participants’ attitudes were found to be negative in relation to the CENNI and its impact. These results may contradict those found by Manjarrés (2005) where positive impact was encountered by teachers and students of the English Language Test. Manjarrés (2005) also accounted for a teaching-for-the-test effect in the EFL classrooms where teachers and students disregarded the study of skills that were not included in this national examination in Colombia.

In regard to the political effects, data suggested that Mr. Pedro’s views were more positive than those found by the CENNI users. Mr. Pedro considered the creation of the CENNI, as an important political milestone since it was the first effort to establish legal norms for language standardization in the country. Teacher participants considered it an unnecessary document that followed other purposes instead of those stipulated in the legal norms. This may also be an effect of the misconception of the CENNI and its uses, contributing to the existing gap of practice among policy makers and language standard users. This may come in line with the results obtained by Celik (2013) in which it was concluded that more research needs to be conducted to understand the applications of the Turkish National Language Standards at a classroom level. In this study, the misconception of the CENNI has led to its limited use among candidates aside from teachers therefore suggesting that more needs to be addressed to understand the CENNI’s nature and use.

Regarding professional development, a discrepancy among views and practice was found among interviewees. Teachers considered the CENNI did not encourage their professional growth since it was only a requirement they needed to comply with. However, some pointed out that the CENNI allowed them to obtain a job. This contradiction of views and facts may be caused by the lack of professional development infused jobs. In other words, although the CENNI certification allowed teachers to obtain jobs, the certificate did not allow them to grow professionally within their practice in those obtained jobs.

Limitations of the Study

At first hand, since the qualitative approach followed during the study does not allow generalizability of results, the conclusions presented in this study are limited to the views and experiences of six

CENNI users in the specific context under analysis. Future research could include more participants in the analysis to understand similar and different contexts in Mexico. The present project focused on the analysis of teacher candidates and one national stakeholder from the SEP. Therefore, results included the perspective of these two groups of stakeholders among a wide variety that may also be important users of the CENNI. Future research could seek the perspective of other stakeholders in the country and therefore comprehend the different uses they give to the CENNI. Finally, the study focused on the northeastern region of the country therefore narrowing the perspectives presented to this specific context. Only one person, Mr. Pedro was based in Mexico City (Central Mexico). To fully understand the scope and impact of the CENNI, central and southern Mexico could be explored to understand the differences of context and the implications of these to the CENNI.

Implications of the Study

Socialization among the Mexican public and assessment stakeholders of the nature of the CENNI, its uses and procedures would allow the valid and objective use of the certification among the diverse social groups in the country. It may also encourage its use for additional purposes that not only include language teacher workforce requirements. Finally, this socialization may include informative sessions and/or state visits that could inform stakeholders of the CENNI and its use in the country.

The importance of valid language standards in a country is quite vast. The impact that these may have on stakeholders is unknown until validation processes are followed. Since the CENNI is of recent implementation these validation processes are still pending. It may include practicality, usefulness, and experiences (among others) of stakeholders like those reviewed in the present study. Therefore, it is considered that the CENNI, Mexican stakeholders and above all the SEP as the developers of the CENNI, would benefit from research that approaches the validation of this certification. On a global scale, research exploring the validation of the CENNI may contribute to the understanding of language standardization and language policy in different contexts of Latin America.

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APPENDIX A: CENNI Candidate Interview Protocol

Información Personal

1. ¿Cuántos años tienes?
2. ¿A qué te dedicas?
3. ¿Con cuantos años de experiencia cuentas en esta actividad?

Conocimiento y Propósitos de CENNI

4. ¿Pudiera definir qué significa “CENNI”?
5. ¿Qué es CENNI y para qué sirve?
6. ¿Cómo obtuvo este conocimiento sobre el CENNI?
7. ¿Cómo funciona esta escala en comparación con otras como el CEFR?
8. ¿Cuáles son las bandas que contempla el CENNI?
9. ¿Cómo reporta CENNI las bandas obtenidas?

Requisitos, Revalidación y Usos

10. ¿Cuándo obtuvo la certificación CENNI?
11. ¿Cuáles son los requisitos para obtener el CENNI?
12. ¿Cuáles son los requisitos lingüísticos para obtener el CENNI?
13. ¿Cuál examen nacional o internacional tomó para obtener el CENNI?
14. ¿Cuánto pagó para este certificado internacional? ¿Su institución le brindó apoyo financiero?
15. ¿Qué es lo que puede hacer con un certificado CENNI?
16. ¿Hasta qué punto considera que CENNI le ha ayudado de manera profesional/laboral?
17. ¿Cuáles serían las ventajas y desventajas del CENNI?

Efectos percibidos por los participantes

18. ¿Considera que tener el CENNI le provee de ventajas en su vida profesional?
19. ¿Cuál considera que son las ventajas de aprendizaje del CENNI?

20. ¿Le ha ayudado en el aprendizaje o desarrollo del lenguaje meta?
21. ¿Tener el CENNI le ha ayudado a alcanzar sus metas profesionales? O sus objetivos de aprendizaje?
22. El CENNI ha representado dificultades para realizar sus metas profesionales?
23. ¿Ha representado desventajas para su vida académica?

Efectos Sociopolíticos de su uso en el País

24. ¿Considera que el CENNI ha ayudado al desarrollo de lenguas en el país? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
25. ¿Considera que el CENNI ha contribuido al desarrollo del aprendizaje de lenguas en el país? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
26. ¿Considera que el CENNI ha contribuido al desarrollo de la enseñanza de lenguas en el país? ¿Por qué si o por qué no?
27. ¿Cuál considera que es el impacto del CENNI en el país?
28. ¿Cuál considera que es el propósito y uso del CENNI en el país?
29. ¿Considera que este uso y este propósito se están cumpliendo?

Improvement suggestions according to stakeholders' views

30. ¿Qué sugerencias daría para mejorar el CENNI?
31. ¿Cómo considera que estas sugerencias pudieran mejorar el uso del CENNI en el país?
32. ¿Cambiarías algo del CENNI en cuanto a su administración?
33. ¿Cambiarías algo del CENNI en cuanto a su uso?
34. ¿Tiene algún otro comentario que dar?

APPENDIX B National Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Antecedentes del Entrevistado

1. Edad/Antecedente académico
2. ¿Cuál es su puesto y función en la secretaría?
3. ¿Cuánto tiempo tiene trabajando en esta área?

Información del CENNI

4. ¿Cuándo fue creado el CENNI?
5. ¿Con cuál objetivo se creó?
6. ¿Qué problemática atiende el CENNI?
7. ¿Cuáles considera que son las fortalezas del CENNI?
8. ¿Cuáles considera que son las áreas de oportunidad del CENNI?
9. ¿De qué manera se operacionaliza el CENNI? ¿Nivel nacional? ¿Nivel estatal?
10. ¿De qué manera considera que se puede mejorar la administración del CENNI?
11. ¿De qué manera considera que se puede mejorar el marco de referencia del CENNI?

Información de quienes toman el CENNI

12. ¿Aproximadamente cuántas personas han certificado su idioma con el CENNI?
13. ¿Con qué propósitos lo han hecho? ¿Laboral, estudio, etc?
14. ¿De qué parte del país utilizan más esta certificación?

Impacto Socio-político del CENNI

15. ¿Cuál considera que es el rol del CENNI en la profesionalización del docente de inglés?
16. ¿Cuál considera que es el rol del CENNI en estudiantes de inglés de los diversos niveles educativos en el país?
17. ¿Considera que el CENNI ha cambiado o ha contribuido a cambiar la política del lenguaje del país?
18. ¿Considera que el CENNI ha cambiado o ha contribuido a cambiar la política de enseñanza del inglés en el país?
19. ¿Considera que el CENNI ha cambiado o ha contribuido a cambiar la política de evaluación de profesores de inglés en el país?
20. ¿Tiene algún otro comentario?