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Simulation of international tests: a look from the language standards

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Abstract

The main objective of the following article is to compare the final results of the subjects of modular courses, and their relationship with the corresponding international tests at each level, in accordance with the Common European Framework that has been established in the academic pathway of the undergraduate program of English teaching. It is based on the initial result of the inter-semester course for the preparation of international tests; thus, it is possible to determine the proficiency in a foreign language of students in the undergraduate program of English teaching, Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Universidad La Gran Colombia, Bogotá campus. The results obtained through post and pre-tests show that there are some factors that influence the low command of that language, such as shortcomings in basic concepts, autonomy, motivation and time of dedication, as well as an increase in the students' dropout, being a free course taught by expert professionals. It is concluded that the inter-semester courses for the preparation of an international test are not enough to perform simulations of the aforementioned exams, but to generate clear goals that allow to properly conclude the academic path proposed within the curriculum.

Keywords: learning, teaching, evaluation, standardized tests, university course.

Introduction

In this article, it is necessary to highlight the role of communicative *competence*, because it has been relevant over time; but today it has generated greater impact as it is constituted in the possibility of transmitting, interpreting messages and achieving negotiation of the interpersonal meaning with specific contexts, which involves aspects such as: discourse, interaction, pragmatics and negotiation in communication, according to Hymes (1962 cited by Nielsen 2014).

With the above, learning-teaching and evaluation of a foreign language is seen, not only as a predictable potential process of the development of communicative competence, but also fundamental in the creation of meaning in which interactive negotiation between students is involved. In this way, Canale (1983) defines four components or subcategories of communicative competence. Organized as follows, linguistic competence, pragmatic, these two categorized as part of systematic language; on the other hand, strategic and sociolinguistic competence is part of the functional aspects of language (lexicon, phonetics, syntax, semantics and spelling).

On the other hand, the legal terms established in the Common European Framework of Reference for languages: learning, teaching, evaluation (Cadiz, 2002) include the general project of linguistic policy of the Council of Europe, hereinafter referred to as CEFR. Which has unified the specific guidelines for language learning, teaching and assessment within the global context:

This effort is sufficiently supported by projects that have significantly marked in the last decades, the lines of work of the professionals of language teaching, with the development of descriptive scales of linguistic levels for each competence. (Cadiz, cited by Nielsen 2014 p.294).

The CEFR, according to Cadiz (2002), is a legal entity that guides the processes of learning-teaching and evaluation of foreign languages in the global and national context, as it provides curricular guidelines adopted by both public and private universities within the framework of the improvement plans proposed by the Ministry of National Education (MEN, for its initials in Spanish) within the National Program of Bilingualism (2006) called PNB. This plan takes literally the CEFR (2002) and adapts it to establish a common goal through curricular standards in the Colombian educational context: "To obtain citizens capable of communicating in English, in such a way that they can insert the country in the processes of universal communication, in the global economy and in cultural openness, with internationally comparable standards" (PNB, 2006 cited in Nielsen 2015: 298).

Thus, the National Plan of Bilingualism currently, specifically called *Colombia Very Well*, (2015-2025) defines specific goals at the university level of education that go beyond the autonomy and that is to standardize the levels of language proficiency through PNB (2006) in particular, undergraduate programs in foreign and/or related ones, must guarantee to society that they have graduated communicatively competent graduates from what was proposed by the CEFR User C1. Often, this

can be demonstrated from standardized tests that allow a classification of the user of a foreign language. These tests do not take into account the risks and challenges that the users have had in the learning-teaching process of the second language, its main focus is to demonstrate within a society the mastery of language achieved, and that they really certify how competent are in that foreign language.

Review of the literature

The Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Languages Learning, teaching and assessment, called CEFR (Cadiz, 2002), has developed a considerable effort for the unification of guidelines for learning and teaching languages within the European and even Latin American context. This effort is sufficiently supported by projects that have significantly marked in the last decades the lines of work of professionals of language teaching, such as the development of descriptive scales of linguistic levels: “[described in] the Threshold Level, Platform Level and Advanced Level, or in reports and orientation works such as Transparency and coherence in the learning of languages in Europe, Objectives for the learning of languages, among others” (Cadiz, 2002).

The CEFR (2002) guides the learning-teaching processes of foreign languages in the global context, and it has been adopted for the Colombian context. From the use of the language, with the purpose of activating the communicative competence in order to consolidate the processes that entail the expression and establish in turn the necessary categories for the description of foreign languages according to the parameters described in the document according to the areas and situations that determine the context of the use of the language, all related especially with learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) and communication channels.

At present, the world demands that a foreign language be mastered, as it is retaken (Galindo, 2011) by the affirmation of Rodolfo Suárez, director of the Department of Foreign Languages of the *Universidad Nacional of Colombia*, who considers important and essential the ability of a student for oral production: “[knowing and improving another language that is not ours] is undoubtedly an added value that allows access to better opportunities for work or study” (p.7). Because the world demands that more than one language be mastered, it must be taken into account that within the requirements of several international and national institutions, at least one foreign language is required at intermediate and advanced levels. In this way, the handling of a foreign language in our times is

considered fundamental, since this in turn allows access to information and the circulation of knowledge as a necessary element to come to think about the production of global knowledge.

Communicative competence

In the case of foreign languages, competence is determined by the attempt to keep communication as authentic and coherent as possible. The term communicative competence initially was proposed by Hymes (1962). This author argues that communicative competence allows us to transmit, interpret messages and achieve negotiation of interpersonal meaning with specific contexts.

In addition, from the perspective of social constructivism, language is highlighted as a means of communication among individuals. Later, Hymes (1972) involves aspects such as: discourse, interaction, pragmatics and negotiation, among others, in communication. Even teachers and text editors consider that that language is used within the classroom as a significant place with authentic exchanges among the users of a target language.

From this, learning a foreign language begins to be seen, not only as a predictable potential process of development, but as the creation of meaning through interactive negotiation among learners. Canale (1983) initially defined four components or subcategories for performing the construction of communicative competence.

The first two subcategories reflect the use of systematic language among linguistic and pragmatic competence; the last two ones define the functional aspects of sociolinguistic and strategic competence communication. Linguistic competence refers to the formal elements of the language, which includes knowledge and skills on lexicon, phonetics, syntax, semantics and spelling. In addition, because of its basic nature, it allows its application to a variety of different situations. The pragmatic competence allows to make a practical use of the linguistic resources. This is divided into discursive competence, which is what allows sequences of sentences to produce extensive textual expressions; and functional competence, which is used to know the function of linguistic forms and how they are related in real communicative situations. The sociolinguistic competence, according to Hudson (1980), has to do with the knowledge of the social and cultural conditions that are part of the language to be learned. Among them are the norms of courtesy, the

relationships with respect to age, gender and social status, among others.

Savignon (1983, cited by Brown, 2000) defines communicative competence as something relative, but not absolute, and it depends on the collaboration of all participants who are part of it; in this case, from each and every one of the subjects who are communicating. This allows it to enrich itself, and for being addressed in different contexts, it is framed within ethical, aesthetic, social and cultural aspects. However, to frame the importance of communicative competence according to Hymes (1972), the main objective is to try to develop the capacity to use the acquired knowledge of a target language, in this case, of English as a foreign language, by propitiating its use inside and outside the classroom.

Relationship between learning and teaching foreign languages

According to the theoretical research of Vez (2001), in the eighties and nineties learning was simply evaluated, based on the achievements obtained according to the assimilation of knowledge, but nowadays it can be assured that a classroom is not only limited to this aspect but on the contrary, the students learn through instruments of socialization, power and communication (that are) essential in the information society in which we currently live: “today the languages are learned, and its uses are improved, because only that way can we become social communicators, capable of competing in a society of permanent change where the challenges are more demanding and functional” (Vez, 2001, p.316); this statement can assure that very few times had this situation been evidenced when languages were just simply taught.

This is how the “progressive consensus” of correlating the act of teaching and the act of learning a foreign language easily allows teachers and students to effectively delve into communicative competence (Nielsen, 2012). Through language, as a resource and instrument of communication, construction and negotiation of meanings both on a personal and social level, one can speak of a coherent and effective process of learning-teaching.

Going back to international organizations in education, learning and teaching a foreign language are social acts, which depend on relationships with others, the context, the environment, the world and oneself. Such learning and teaching are interesting, generating curiosity about life and the confidence necessary to initiate new social interactions in that foreign language.

Materials and methods

Initially, a concern arose on the part of a group of professors of the undergraduate program of English teaching, Faculty of Educational Sciences of the Universidad La Gran Colombia, Bogotá campus, morning and afternoon sessions, taking into account the results obtained in the modular courses; that is to say, the basic language courses that allow to consolidate the command of a foreign language of affiliated students, English in this case, due to the fact that the great majority do not reach the required minimums established in the curriculum, taking as reference the European Common Framework - CEFR.

For this reason, it is determined that the grades delivered during that semester will not be limited to a numerical computation to arrive at a simple final result, such as “pass/fail.” Because the teaching content used for learning a language other than the mother tongue in university students should be done constantly and go beyond a programmed institutional schedule. With all the above, a question arises: How can university scholars support the academic process of the students of the undergraduate program of English teaching?

To answer the aforementioned question, we started with a classification of the final results of the students in the grades of the modular courses computing the third cut, to then create inter-semester courses totally free for students who present difficulties and low results at the moment of taking simulations of international tests, established during the semester.

It is important to highlight that reinforcement courses in the inter-semester (course) were aimed at students who passed the academic year stipulated in the curriculum, called *Breakthrough, Pre-Intermediate-Intermediate-Upper and Advanced*, but who had failed the simulation proposed in each course.

To do this, a timetable was available for each course, starting on the fifth of June (Thursday); and ending on the 26th of the same month with a simulation of an international exam, at the following times: Mornings, 9:00/12: 00; and Evenings: 6: 00/9: 00. It is worth noting that they worked on Tuesdays and Thursdays, with an intensity of 6 hours a week. With this, each student received 24 hours of training (intended) to respond significantly to the demands of the next level stipulated in the academic path of the program to which the student would enroll the following semester; the (academic) hours were provided by the university accompanied by 10 teachers, in order to strengthen

the process in the students who will graduate of the undergraduate program of English teaching, and who at some point in their lives will present international tests that certify their proficiency level (in English).

Table 1. Distribution of teachers depending on the group and level established in the syllabus of the undergraduate program (of English).

Modular course	Morning teacher	Evening teacher
Breakthrough	Teacher 1	Teacher 6
Pre-Intermediate	Teacher 2	Teacher 7
Intermediate	Teacher 3	Teacher 8
Upper- Intermediate	Teacher 4	Teacher 9
Advanced	Teacher 5	Teacher 10

In turn, the inter-semester courses did not exceed a number of twenty (20) students, allowing teachers to generate specific strategies according to the needs of the students, since normally these modular courses are made up of approximately 28 to 37 students.

Results

The inter-semester courses for the presentation of simulations of international exams were held from June 5 to 26, with the objective of offering additional help to the students of the undergraduate program of English teaching, who passed the levels of English corresponding to their academic semesters (breakthrough, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced), but who did not obtain a satisfactory result in the simulation of the international English test, determined as a final exam in each modular course. It is necessary to emphasize that it was established that during the first academic semester, the students had to obtain a minimum score of 70% to consider the simulation as approved. However, there were many cases of students who passed the semester despite not getting a good result (equal or superior to 70%) in the simulation of the international exam.

The inter-semester courses were not formal courses, since they were not equivalent to any academic activity of the program, nor did they grant any academic grade or credit to the students. Therefore, they were invited by their teachers to attend voluntarily with the sole objective of improving their results in the simulations of international exams. Students who attended the entire course had the opportunity to complete the

corresponding process, and the results were shared and analyzed with the single aim of submitting a report to the faculty committee, which later in the research process contrasted the data obtained by the students in the inter-semester preparation courses with the results they had previously obtained during the academic semester.

It is necessary to clarify that these two simulations had the same format according to the international test, but they contained totally different questions, since the students were not asked to repeat the questions they had asked before.

The students were divided into different courses according to the level of language proficiency and the modular course they had taken during their academic semester, as follows:

Table 2. Curricular design of the subjects according to the CEFR. Source: Undergraduate program of English teaching-Faculty of Education Sciences

Group of students	Type of international test in which students were prepared	Level according to the CEFR
Breakthrough	KET	A2
Pre-Intermediate	PET	B1
Intermediate	PET	B1+
Upper- Intermediate	FCE	B2
Advanced	FCE	B2+

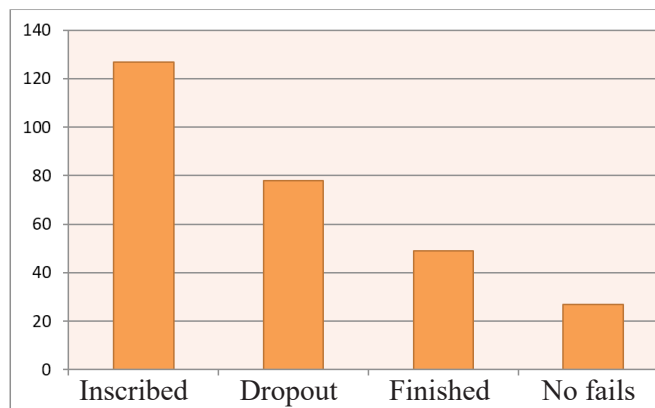
The following two tables show the general number of students who enrolled in the inter-semester course, and the relation to the changes that arose during the time that it was developed in accordance with the requirements stipulated for their registration.

Table 3. Relation of students' reactions to inter-semester courses

Inscribed	Drop out	Finished	No fails
127	78	49	27

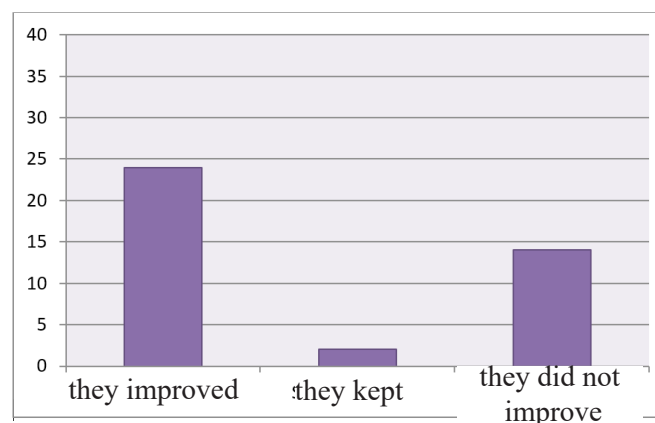
Figure 1 presents the evidence of the results obtained according by the students in the first simulation of an international exam that they presented at the end of the academic semester (pre). Figure 2 presents the results obtained by students in the second simulation of the international examination that they did it in the inter-semester course (post); taking as reference the level in which they were assigned.

Figure 1. Relation of students' reactions to inter-semester courses



Source: Undergraduate program of English teaching-Faculty of Education Sciences

Figure 2. Comparison of the pre-test and post-test results according to the level of language proficiency in which the students were.



Source: Bachelor Program in English- Faculty of Education Sciences

For a better accuracy of the results mentioned above, there are described in detail for each teacher the results obtained in the preparation process for the simulation of the international exams during the inter-semester courses. It is important to clarify that the numerical data are measured by percentages, that is, that being 100% equivalent of a satisfactory result, 50% is an average result and 20% a deficient result.

Exam: KET- Breakthrough

The results are presented from twenty-seven (27) enrolled students; of which twenty (20) defected from the process, and seven (7) students finished, but

only three (3) of them attended the complete course. Discriminated as follows: in the morning three students improved and one worsened, while one student improved but two worsened, represented graphically as follows:

	Student	Pre-test score	Post-test score
KET Morning session (Teacher 1)	A	43	51
	B	60	56
	C	43	48
	D	56	62
KET Morning session (Teacher 6)	E	56	54
	F	64	54
	G	58	64

Exam: PET- Pre-intermediate

The result in this level was established from the initial registration of eight (8) students, of which four (4) of them defected from the process; this indicates that half of the participants finished the process, but only two (2) of them are reported with a 100% attendance. According to the above, in the morning a student improved and one got worse; in contrast, during the evening session, the two registered students improved their results.

	Student	Pre-test score	Post-test score
PET Morning session (Teacher 2)	H	62	70
	I	62	52
PET Morning session (Teacher 7)	J	56	62
	K	26	58

Exam: PET- Intermediate

The result at this level indicates that eighteen (18) students enrolled, but eleven (11) of them dropped out of the process and seven (7) completed the course, but only two (2) of them completed the process by attending all the sessions programs. This also indicates that in the morning, two (2) students improved but three (3) worsened; whereas at evening, one (1) student improved and one (1) worsened.

	Student	Pre-test score	Post-test score
PET	L	58	40
Morning session (Teacher 3)	M	32	40
	N	56	47
	Ñ	33	25
	O	55	61
PET	P	65	58
Morning session (Teacher 8)	Q	65	70

Exam: FCE- Upper-Intermediate

The result at this level indicates that there were twenty-six (26) initially enrolled, but thirteen (13) students dropped out of the process; half of the remaining finished the course, but only 3 (three) of them completed their process by attending all the scheduled class sessions. If the data is analyzed per day, it can be determined that in the morning, five (5) students improved and one (1) worsened, but a new variable appears at this level because two (2) students kept their initial score. However at evening, four (4) students improved and one (1) got worse.

	Student	Pre-test score	Post-test score
FCE	R	64	60
Morning session (Teacher 4)	S	70	70
	T	46	50
	U	44	46
	V	46	66
	W	56	56
	X	54	60
	Y	58	66
FCE	Z	68	82
Morning session (Teacher 9)	AA	64	78
	AB	60	58
	AC	50	58
	AD	52	62

Exam: FCE- Advanced level

Morning session

The result was established from ten (10) enrolled students, of which only one (1) defected from the process; in addition, in comparison with the other levels, eight (8) of the students did the entire process and had no absences within the course. With the above,

it can be determined that in the morning hours all the students improved and none worsened; in contrast with the evening session, in which all the students worsened, according to the result.

	Student	Pre-test score	Post-test score
FCE	AE	56	73
Morning session (Teacher 5)	AF	46	74
	AG	53	73
	AH	66	88
	AI	60	72
FCE	AJ	40	54
Morning session (Teacher 10)	AK	30	54
	AL	40	40
	AM	54	54

Finally, it can be affirmed that there was an improvement on the part of the students who completed the process, but even so they do not fully comply with the level established for the academic semester in which they are enrolled. In turn, other factors influence, such as the importance of creating in students a self-regulation and discipline to achieve the learning of a foreign language, English in this case. Although the course was offered voluntarily and without generating any cost, it is evident that more than 70% of students dropped out of the process for giving priority to other activities, such as the mid-year holiday or simply occupying their time in work activities.

Discussion

The results obtained by the students did not show a significant improvement. Only twenty-four (24) of them improved their results, which is equivalent to 60%. Therefore, the percentage remains low to accept a hypothesis that shows to the educational community better results due to the offer of international exam preparation courses in an inter-semester period.

As well, there are different factors that can contribute to a large percentage of students (40%) not improving or worsening their results when taking international exams. For example, it must be taken into account that the students were prepared for a simulation of an international exam that they previously knew. However, the tests do not measure their knowledge as users of a language other than their mother tongue, but rather their level of proficiency in English. Therefore, work should be done to improve the level of English of students

through workshops or courses that focus on specific competence (listening, writing, reading, speaking, grammar) and that allow them to improve their mastery, in order for them to be competent professionals, without limiting simply to prepare students for the simulation of international tests.

Finally, the dropout in the courses was high; in fact only 30% of the students took the simulation of the scheduled international exam, and less than 20% attended without absences. This could be an indicator of lack of motivation, because it was voluntary.

This analysis was made from the perspective of future graduates in English teaching, which show that academic processes cannot be limited within a stipulated schedule, but must also focus on the needs of students, in this case to improve their level of language proficiency during the previous modular courses. The proper use of English in these future graduates is a requirement at present at the labor and social level, but at the same time it demonstrates the importance as trainers of trainers of generating teaching strategies conducive to achieve the proposed objectives according to the standards of the CEFR and therefore of the MEN.

Conclusions

In short, being competent in a foreign language, especially in English in Colombia, is a complex task because it implies different social, cultural and economic purposes, which not only involve the knowledge of grammatical rules within an oral or written speech, but also in specific contexts according to the roles of each participant, the relationships and the environment in which they are immersed.

The recommendations can be aimed at taking this work as a basis for possible new research projects that allow demonstrating the incidence of other variables in the use of simulations for international tests and their impact on learning-teaching-assessment, and the ways in which the pedagogical practice and the true presentation of the international tests together with the strategies that are generated by the agents involved could be promoted for education.

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