




## English language skills assessment in higher education. A preliminary analysis.

### Evaluación de habilidades del idioma inglés en superior Educación. Un análisis preliminar.

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#### Resumen

El idioma inglés, es un requerimiento del 100 % de las instituciones de educación superior en el Ecuador tanto a nivel de pregrado como de posgrado. Las universidades incluyen la aprobación del idioma como requisito para la obtención del grado académico respectivo por medio de sus centros de idiomas en los cuales también se ofertan otros idiomas además del inglés. La presente investigación tuvo como principal objetivo identificar el nivel de inglés de los estudiantes universitarios de primer nivel que pertenecen a la carrera de Pedagogía de los idiomas nacionales y extranjeros de la Universidad Técnica de Ambato. Se trabajó con una población de 34 estudiantes bajo un enfoque cualitativo con un alcance descriptivo, se conoció que posterior a las evaluaciones de las habilidades de speaking, reading, listening y writing que la puntuación más alta fue de 9.6 sobre 10; por otro lado, la puntuación más baja fue de 1.8; esto mostró la dicotomía del conocimiento del idioma de estudio. Los resultados al evaluar los diferentes componentes del inglés muestran las debilidades de conocimiento con el que los estudiantes llegan a la universidad desde el nivel secundario por diversas razones y dependiendo del tipo de institución de la que provengan – particular o fiscal – y los principales aspectos que se pueden mejorar en las diferentes destrezas del idioma inglés.

**Palabras clave:** conocimiento, educación superior, estudiantes universitarios, inglés.

#### Abstract

The English language is a requirement of 100% of higher education institutions in Ecuador, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Universities include the approval of the language as a requirement to obtain the respective academic degree through their language centers in which languages other than English are also offered. The main objective of this research was to identify the level of English of first-level university students who belong to the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at the Technical University of Ambato. A population of 34 students under a qualitative approach with a descriptive scope was needed, it was known that after applying the assessment instruments to evaluate the speaking, reading, listening, and writing skills, the highest score was 9.6 out of 10. On the other hand, the lowest score was 1.8; this showed the knowledge dichotomy of the language under study. The results when evaluating the different components of English show the weaknesses in knowledge with which students arrive at the university from the secondary level for various reasons and depending on the type of institution from which they come - private or public- and the main aspects that can be improved in the different skills of the English language.

**Keywords:** knowledge, higher education, university students, English.

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of modern nations is achieved hand in hand with policies and initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life of its inhabitants through the implementation of different projects in education, health, and safety, among others. A pillar that solidly supports the improvement of the quality of life of the population is professional development, that is, the opportunities granted to the population for their academic and professional growth. The learning of the English language is gaining more and more strength in the world. English is the language of technology, commerce, and science, so citizens with better skills in other languages will opt for better jobs and salaries. This has been a trend in Latin America: Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Peru have implemented public policies aimed at promoting the teaching of English in their respective countries (Santana, 2016).

Many companies grow globally, the English language has become a means to share information, establish conversations and relationships with people around the world, allowing to create and close deals. There are more than 50 countries around the world where English is spoken, the job options in various parts of the world are greater than with any other language. It is easy to learn this language, the English alphabet is Latin, short and its grammar is simple, the verbs are easy to conjugate. The rigorous question is why if it is studied in primary and secondary education for many years, the result is that students arrive at the University with very little or no knowledge of the language.

In April 2016, the Higher Education Council, in the Code of the Higher Education Regulations, article 31, established that university students must reach a B2 level, upper intermediate, according to the Common European Framework to graduate. Additionally, it was instituted that proficiency in the language must be evaluated before the student enrolls in the last level of the degree. The efforts of the National Government have extended for several years and have tried to promote a new structure in the teaching of the English language; however, they have not had continuity or follow-up.

The teaching of English as a foreign language in universities around the world has focused on the development of the four main language skills, especially giving students the possibility to use the language in different contexts. This has been the main cornerstone, especially since the late 1970s and early 1980s with the rise of the communicative approach. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has characterized foreign language classes for the last 30 years. This is understood as a set of principles about the objectives of language teaching, how students learn a language, the types of activities that must be carried out in the classroom to

facilitate learning, and the roles of teachers and students in this process (Richards, 2006).

Those who obtain the best performance in higher education are graduates of private educational centers or who invest in private language courses, opening a range of employment opportunities for these young people. Next, we will delve into possible answers to the reasons for this discrepancy between English language studies and student performance in developing English proficiency for Ecuadorian students. Success in higher education lies not only in obtaining a university diploma but also in achieving an excellent job and quality of life.

When students enter Higher Education Institutions, they face great problems in terms of linguistic competence that they must achieve to graduate. The lack of continuity and motivation are one of the battles to fight to improve. English should be seen as a first-rate tool for both students and teachers. For the former, their mastery will guarantee better jobs and future remuneration. For the latter, the challenge encompasses better strategies for teaching with an audience in unequal conditions.

In the teaching-learning process of the English language, the fundamental pillars are the teacher and the student, the success of the process will depend on them, if one of them fails, the learning does not achieve the expected results. The role of the teacher today is not a protagonist but a guide in teaching, it requires highly trained teachers, who manages the appropriate methodology, designing appropriate strategies for the student group.

Other aspects to consider (Beltrán, 2017):

The planning of the procedures requires considering the level of prior knowledge of the students, their understanding and mastery of what has been learned.

Express oneself clearly and simply, reinforcing the explanations and corrections with the available media (drawings, blackboard, music, etc.).

Promote the use of phrases and idiomatic formulas in English in communication.

Promote the student's ability to infer meaning through logical context and associations.

The student represents the learning results, the degree of communicative competence that she has managed to achieve at the end of the course or process. They represent the most active role since they will be responsible for the level of development of language skills, a greater initiative corresponds within the classroom. The maturity of the students significantly influences their results, a student convinced that English is not just another subject but a way to access better jobs and salaries will put more effort into his results.

The selection of the appropriate material to be used in English classes becomes another key element to be considered by teachers and academic authorities, beyond a subject within a curriculum, it is recommended to promote the practice of the English language not only

within university classrooms but outside of them, in their daily lives (Castro, 2016). Cognitive factors include intelligence, aptitude, and the use of learning strategies. Studies support that students with above average intelligence learn a second language more easily in the formal context of a classroom. Also, successful trainees show a favorable aptitude and commitment to strive and work hard towards the goal.

The affective field includes some factors: empathy, self-esteem, extroversion, inhibition, imitation, anxiety among others, power or hinder the mastery of another language. Contrary to what is commonly thought, the age at which the study of a second language begins does not have a decisive influence on its learning, the advantage that learning a language at an early age give is due to a better pronunciation of accents, that is, of more naturally in relation to those who learn more adults. Another key factor is the use of the language in everyday life and reinforcing what has been learned through trips, books, music, culture, visits, groups that speak the language, etc.

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Ecuador has received various reforms based on education, including the compulsory study of English from initial level to high school (Ministry of Education, 2019). In continuity with this, higher education institutions have added the level of English based on their needs, which can vary between 4 to 6 continuous semesters, considering the official regulations found in the higher education regulations where it mentions that the Institutions must seek integration between cultures (Consejo de Educación Superior, 2017). Under these needs and analyzing the learning and knowledge of English in organizations, teacher improvement has been sought, for which reason, campaigns have been opened for a better pedagogical practice of this language (Ortega & Aucchualpa, 2018). The country has taken the study of the English language with importance and has added it to the educational curriculum because culture can be shared through language, thus making the possibility of international exchange real.

As already explained, English occupies an important place today in various scientific and technological fields, and learning this language is very useful. For this reason, Ecuador has implemented new changes in its educational policies to align with the needs of the globalized world. To carry out the language teaching process, the factors that affect language learning must be considered, as well as

different methods and cultural aspects that surround this language.

Therefore, identifying the level of mastering the English language with first-level university students is the primary goal of this research as a starting point for making decisions about the teaching strategies and content to help them out improve their knowledge.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In this investigation, a population of 34 users was needed. An evaluation was applied based on data collection. The Cambridge English: KEY (KET) A2 level exam was applied, which measures the four language skills in English: Reading Comprehension, Written Expression, Listening Comprehension and Oral Expression (Speaking) to know the level with which students enter the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages (PINE) career, the exam took 4 hours and evaluated the four skills.

In the Speaking skill, the evaluation was carried out with two English language teachers who worked with the students in pairs for 2 hours on topics such as Eating and Holidays. The interview modality was applied based on questions and the description of images. Reading and writing took one hour in which the students produced 2 writings of a minimum of 25 words in the first and a minimum of 35 words in the second. Listening was assessed in 1 hour with 25 multiple choice and completion questions. For the rating, each grade was divided into four based on the following parameters: poor, fair, very good, and outstanding.

The research was carried out from a qualitative approach which seeks to know in depth a phenomenon to be analyzed from a teaching perspective, this under a natural environment and context, such as the classroom of the students at the beginning of the PINE career that gave the exam to know the level of English they had (Hernández Sampieri & Mendoza Torres, 2018). In other words, this type of approach allows knowing a situation in depth and providing what the study subjects need, which in the case of this research is directed at the importance of studying the English language to transcend and innovate in society. Regarding the scope, the research was carried out descriptively, considering that it investigates the level or state of a variable on a specific sample or population, in which comparative descriptions can be made in groups or subgroups (Hernández Sampieri & Mendoza Torres, 2018).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the data collected (grades of the four skills) an analysis of the information was carried out based on speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Next, the results obtained are shown.

| Descriptors | Qualification ranges | Number of students |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Deficient   | 0-2,49               | 6                  |
| Regular     | 2,50 a 4,99          | 10                 |
| Very Good   | 5 a 7,49             | 7                  |
| Outstanding | 7,50 a 10            | 10                 |

**Table 1.** *Speaking Skill*

Regarding speaking skills, as can be seen in Table 1, most are regular (2.50 to 4.99) and outstanding (7.50 to 10) with 10 users respectively. In a very good performance (5 to 7.49) there are 7 users and finally, 6 deficient who have a performance between 0 to 2.49.

| Descriptors | Qualification ranges | Number of students |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Deficient   | 0 a 2,49             | 2                  |
| Regular     | 2,50 a 4,99          | 13                 |
| Very Good   | 5 a 7,49             | 7                  |
| Outstanding | 7,50 a 10            | 10                 |

**Table 2.** *Listening Skill*

Regarding the listening skill, it was known that the majority of those evaluated are in a regular qualification that has a score range of (2.50 to 4.99) with 13 students. Close to this, it is outstanding with 10 users with a score of 7.50 to 10. In contrast to this, 7 with a very good score and finally 2 with poor performance.

| Descriptors | Qualification ranges | Number of students |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Deficient   | 0-2,49               | 12                 |
| Regular     | 2,50 a 4,99          | 2                  |
| Very Good   | 5 a 7,49             | 4                  |
| Outstanding | 7,50 a 10            | 13                 |

**Table 3.** *Writing Skill*

Table 3 shows the performance in the writing skill in which it can be found many students at opposite poles of qualification, on the one hand 13 have outstanding performance, that is, they are in a qualification range of 7.50 to 10.

On the other hand, 12 are deficient users with grades between 0 and 2.49. There is a division of the total number of people based on their writing knowledge of this language, which may be related to grammar and vocabulary. Out of this, 4 are very good and 2 are fair.

| Descriptors | Qualification ranges | Number of students |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Deficient   | 0-2,49               | 1                  |
| Regular     | 2,50 a 4,99          | 10                 |
| Very Good   | 5 a 7,49             | 9                  |
| Outstanding | 7,50 a 10            | 11                 |

**Table 4.** *Reading Skill*

As it can be seen in table 4 which refers to the reading skill, it was known that 11 people had an outstanding grade that would be from 7.50 to 10, followed by this, 10 got a regular grade with a rating range between 2.50 to 4.99, 9 users with ratings between 5 to 7.49 were very good. In this evaluation area only one person had a poor performance that is in a score between 0 to 2.49.

| Descriptors | Qualification ranges | Number of students |
|-------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Deficient   | De 0,9 a 4           | 11                 |
| Regular     | De 4,3 a 6,8         | 11                 |
| Very Good   | De 7,6 a 7,9         | 2                  |
| Outstanding | De 8 a 9,6           | 8                  |

**Table 5.** *Analysis of the four skills*

Table 5 shows the general performance in the four language skills. It is possible to see that 11 people were deficient (0.9 to 4) and regular (4.3 to 6.8) performers respectively. 8 users got an outstanding grade (8 to 9.6) and 2 very good (7.6 to 7.9). In general, most people have low grades and a limited number of adequate grades. This is a relevant point to improve the teaching process and help in the shortcomings found in students.

## Discussion

In Ecuador, learning English is elementary, due to this, its acquisition is mandatory until the end of high school and after that, higher education institutions have decided to add it to their study credits. In addition, the importance of this language can be perceived not only at a national level, but internationally in different fields such as socioeconomics and even science.

In a study carried out in the United States that analyzed the impact of English on the social and cultural integration of Kyrgyz migrants. These people, due to economic difficulties in their country, decided to migrate to improve their economy. The 20 people who entered this research were between 37 and 56 years old. It was learned that of the participants only one person practiced their profession, on the other hand, 6 entered the labor market and 14 seek work in any trade in which the minimum level of English



is required. Under this investigation, it is known that the knowledge of English is an elementary part for the adaptation of new lives. Thus, being able to reach a process of self-realization that gives stability to their lives in the new country (Kazakbaeva, 2022). It can be noted that this study variable is of great importance even at the time of finding a job.

Regarding the academy and the discovery of information, it is known that English is a fundamental part since the new discoveries have been disseminated more frequently and updated in this language (Mascarenhas et al., 2018). Despite the attempts to manage in Spanish and under what is necessary English, it has not worked since people trust more in the information in the most used language in the world. Over time, platforms, books, magazines, etc., in Spanish have been adapting to the demands as an attempt to improve the reach or impact of the information (Lorenzo et al., 2018).

An improvement can be achieved through the incorporation of the English language as a fundamental component within the curriculum that must be transversal to each of the contents that are developed in the programs, understanding it as "a curricular strategy through which some axes or issues considered priority in the training of our students, can be present in all programs, projects, activities and study plans contemplated in the institutional project" (Velásquez, 2009, p. 36).

In this way, the knowledge is taught from knowing how to do and knowing how to be, thus managing to respond to the requirements of the English language at a national and international level in terms of quality, where more flexible and creative didactic models are also chosen which are oriented by a differential approach, which means that in order to teach English to a specific community, it is first necessary to evaluate its characteristics and make a prior diagnosis and then give a way to the development of teaching strategies and content or study plans.

## CONCLUSIONS

It was determined that it is necessary for universities to begin to evaluate the way in which they are applying the English language within the curriculum in undergraduate programs since studies reveal that the level that students are obtaining in English tests is very low, that is why it is required to make a modification in the way in which the knowledge in this subject is taught to increase the motivation of the students, achieving that they articulate the concepts of English with fundamental topics of their professionalization, so that they can generate more significant knowledge in the subjects.

In addition, it is concluded that it is crucial to improve the level of English in higher education to solve the problems

rooted in the early years of learning the language. On the other hand, it would be optimal to do more research on the acquisition of English and its development in all higher education institutions.

## AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Sara I, worked on the bibliographic research, Verónica Ch, helped with the analysis and interpretation of results, Cristina J, contributed with the abstract writing and translation and, Edgar's contribution was related to the final revision and the format of the article

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