



Changes in students' attitudes and perceptions towards ESL testing: a case study from a group of adult learners

Cambios en las actitudes y percepciones de los estudiantes hacia las pruebas de ESL: un estudio de caso en estudiantes adultos

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Abstract: This paper has the intention of presenting, justifying, evaluating, and providing reflections about the work done by a group of teachers at UPSE-EP English Modules together with two experienced teachers in ESL teaching for high school sections, and with a teacher from an external university who provided an objective perspective towards the problem started. One specific higher education class was the subject of study. It was a group of students from a master's program. The intention of this work is to evidence changes in students' attitudes and perceptions towards ESL testing, and it will provide information related to the teacher's perceptions about the benefits and the impact of assessment during the preparation course.

Keywords: e-learning, students, perceptions, assessment, pedagogy of national and foreign languages.

Resumen: Este artículo tiene la intención de presentar, justificar, evaluar y reflexionar el trabajo realizado por un grupo de docentes de los Módulos de Inglés de UPSE-EP junto con dos docentes con experiencia en la enseñanza de ESL para secciones de bachillerato, y también con una docente de una universidad externa que brindó una perspectiva objetiva hacia el problema planteado. Una clase específica de educación superior fue objeto de estudio. Este curso fue un grupo de estudiantes de un programa de maestría. La intención de este trabajo es evidenciar cambios en las actitudes y percepciones de los estudiantes hacia las pruebas de ESL y brindar información relacionada con las percepciones de los docentes sobre los beneficios y el impacto de la evaluación durante el curso de preparación.

Palabras clave: aprendizaje en línea, estudiantes, percepciones, evaluación, pedagogía de los idiomas nacionales y extranjeros.

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CONTEXT

To start with, it is important to remark that this class has many particularities that is considered worth worthy of a study. The assessment was done to a group of fifteen adults, who are studying a master's degree. Most of them are from USPE master's program and others (a minimum number of students) are from other master's programs from Loja, Cuenca, and colleges (in Ecuador it could be considered as Institutos Superiores).

According to the Ecuadorian legislation, the Reglamento de Régimen Académico (2019) states that the level of a second language proficiency is decided by each education program. As it is requested by the master's program at UPSE, students must demonstrate that they have a B1 level in English as one of the requirements for graduating. These students are adults among 24-52 years old. Most of them have not seen the subject in more than twenty years. This course was the first of three: A1, A2, B1 levels. As students from the master's program, they have three options to validate the proficiency in English language.

First, they can show an international certification validated by a certified evaluation center and have an interview with the master's program director to prove the skills acquired in English language. They also have the chance to pay for a test that can certify the proficiency in the language, in total there would be three tests due to the three levels. And, as a third option, they can pay a preparation course and do the test at the end of this course to validate proficiency. It is important to clarify that the students have the option to take a test and complete the other levels with a course if they want it or need it.

This group of students were the ones who decided to take the A1 preparation course and take the test at the end. Typically, this course was supposed to be a preparation guide for the final test. There is a specific book and a workbook to practice according to the vocabulary, reading exercises, listening practices, speaking, and writing exercises; all of them related to the structure and types of questions they would find in a Cambridge KET test. However, the actual final test is an institutional test that each teacher prepares, and it must be pair-revised as well as having the approval of the coordinator before its implementation to validate and have reliability among pairs. The main characteristic of this test is that it must be as close as a KET test but only with contents that are covered for an A1.

Together with changes that the covid-19 pandemic brought, all students were forced to study via online. It became a real challenge for them. As it was mentioned before, some students have not practiced or even have not studied English since high school. And this generated a mix of anxieties, negative perceptions, feelings of low self-esteem, and insecurities related to failing the final test.

Also, the teacher noticed that even though students who could handle their laptops or cellphones easily, it took a while for them to get used to have classes through these devices. The use of resources such as interactive worksheets, short tests through online questionnaires, log in to break-out rooms in Zoom, playing games in Quizizz or having the chance to reinforce classes in this app was really challenging. Consequently, the teacher had to do extra tutoring classes to help students to log in to Google classroom, teach them how to use the platform, and show them how to log in to the apps, webpages, and other resources planned to work with during the module.

To sum up, this class had unique characteristics. It was the first module to be taught online fully, it had students who have little or no background in the language and in technological tools for education, and it was a class full of anxieties together with a pandemic happening at the same time. For all these reasons, two new forms of assessing during this course were considered. The first one was to take a diagnostic test with a similar format of the A1 Institutional Final Test, and the second one is that formal assessment was included as part of the final average grade.

METHODOLOGY

This case study was focused on qualitative data using methods such as formal and informal interviews, observations, formal and informal assessment records, as well as the analysis of primary and secondary sources. In this case, newspaper articles and official records from Universidad Estatal Península de Santa Elena were used.

Quantitative data was also collected with the intention of comparing the scores obtained from pre-test and the post-test. This study is qualitative descriptive with the intention of looking for variables that will serve as reference for future studies.

The participants of this study correspond to a population of 15 students who are studying a master's program at UPSE during the year 2019. Six of them were men and nine women. They shared similar characteristics such as limitation of Information Technology Tools for English Language Learning and they have not studied English since high school. All the students were adults around 24 - 52 years old.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section two claims and their warrants will refer to:

1. Taking a diagnostic and a final test to help students understand the format of the test and what they need to improve/prepare for the actual proficiency test.
2. The benefits of including assessment as part of the grading system.

Claim 1

Using a diagnostic and a final test as tools to help students to be aware of their academic situation and needs, as well to help them understand the sections, format, and design of the proficiency test.

Warrants

In this course it is not common to have a diagnostic test because it is a module that begins with the basic content (numbers, letters, etc.) so basically it was not necessary for teachers to look for background knowledge. However, as this module was different concerning to the particularities explained in the first section of this assessment use argument, it was decided to have a preliminary test.

According to Brown (1997) practicability and anxiety are two of the factors that can cause a negative or positive effects on tests. The application of a diagnostic test has negative and positive washback for students. On one side, there is the negative washback effect. The intention of a diagnostic test is to evaluate the background knowledge the student has, it also helps teachers as evidence of what could be the starting points to cover in the first lessons.

A diagnostic test tends to be taken without any previous notification, but it is known that listening the word “test” for students it represents a pressure, a negative posture towards doing it. Nobody feels happy or glad when they know they are going to be tested. For that reason, it is important to recognize that part of the student’s reliability may be affected due to the state of mind that represents being tested.

On the other hand, there is a positive effect from diagnostic tests. After taking the diagnostic tests, students may feel more confident because they would have a more precise idea about the grading system, the form in which instructions are given, the parts that the test will have, and the washback effect in this case will be positive because they know exactly what to do and what to expect on the final module test.

By the time the students took the final test, they were much more aware of the test format as well as the parts that they considered easier or more difficult for each one of them. They felt less pressure and they validated the test in relation to construct and content. They felt they had all resources to take the final test. There was a difference. It was easy to notice that even though the students felt nervous, they knew they were ready.

The intention to have a test as a diagnostic and as a final test was given because the teacher wanted students to detect their own particular weaknesses and, to be aware about the structure of a proficiency test. At the beginning of the class, students’ perceptions turned negative but with hope. They knew they had to work harder to pass the course but at the same time they felt they needed to do more research (and maybe extra practice) because it was the first time, they were facing a test of this type. All this anxiety and practicality, together with face validity (they considered the test as useful for future reference) served as a motivating starting point for the module.

And it was a motivation for them. See Tables 1 and 2 as reference for the results from the diagnostic and the last test.

Table 1. A1 Diagnostic tests results for a group of students who are at a master’s program

Validation	Range	Frequency	Percent	Median	Mode
Excellent	95-100	0	0%	76	85
Very Good	85-94	5	33%		
Good	75-84	3	20%		
Satisfactory	70-74	4	27%		
Fails	< 70	3	20%		
	Total	15	100%		

Note: The results shown in this table represent the grades students obtained without the speaking section, during the first week of the module. Students were not notified about this test. The grades on this table are only for research purposes.

The population considered on this table were all the fifteen students who were part of the A1 module. There’s a range already established by the university for scores. The frequency column shows the number of students who got a score on the diagnostic test, and it was classified according to the frequency. Only five students obtained a grade considered as “very good” representing the 33% of the population. None of the students got an excellent score.

On the lowest range, there were three students who failed the test because they did not reach the minimum of points required to pass the actual test. The median or the average among all scores is 76 which is inside the range of “good” scoring, however this result still evidenced that students really needed to focus on the contents and the format of the test to pass. The mode reflected that the score which was more repeated is 85/100 which at the same time it is the highest score on the diagnostic test.

Now, at the end of the course the results of the actual test were as it follows:

Table 2. A1 Final tests result for a group of students who are at a master's program (including assessment)

Valid	Range	Frequency	Percent	Median	Mode
Excellent	95-100	5	33%	93	93
Very Good	85-94	7	47%		
Good	75-84	3	20%		
Satisfactory	70-74	0	0%		
Fails	< 70	0	0%		
	Total	15	100%		

Note: The results shown in this table represent the grades students obtained in their final institutional proficiency test. The test has a similar KET format and contents were adapted only for A1 standards

Table 2 has similar characteristics compared to Table 1 considering calculation of population, range, frequency, percentages, and median/mode variables, however the results vary greatly. The 87% of students improved their results on the final test, meanwhile the 13% either maintained or got a lower grade. Concerning to authenticity, these two tests are more related to the practice we worked in classes and as part of their autonomous work. The tests were more authentic because they were adapted by the teacher up to the point of getting an institutional test. The test was considered to have content and face validity because they tested the contents the student should have for an A1 level, and they were considered as “fair” and “useful”.

It is evident that most of the students after preparation have improved their results and performance. Now, there are five students who reached the “Excellent” ranges. None of the students failed this time, and one of the reasons this could have been done is because they already know in advance what to expect on the final test in terms of formatting, instructions, parts, content, and rubrics.

Claim 2

Including formal and informal assessment as part of the grading system in English modules for master's programs is beneficial for UPSE stakeholders.

Warrants

Part of the success of the first claim is due to assessment students received. With the characteristics, needs, and the lack of ICTs management from this group of students, the teacher decided to include graded assessment activities as part of the program. It is important to emphasize that in this course any other activity than the final test was considered as a grade.

The general idea of this module was to provide extra support for students. Teachers were supposed to guide learning, explain any student's doubt, do the exercises on the workbook, and check them with the students with the intention of help them understand the format, the type of questions, the ways of completing the tests, etc. Teachers can use resources to motivate and develop students' skills with the practice, but it was required to insist that any of these activities were graded.

The teacher really needed to motivate students, and students already knew how the final test was going to be about. They were all worried but willing to practice similar exercises from the different sections. Even though the book has similar exercises, they felt they needed more. So, it was decided to establish class rules, modify the syllabus, and create a list of rubrics and a grading criterion for the course.

The intention in this change was to evaluate and keep record of students' progress as well as have grades to push students to take the activities more seriously. After doing these changes, they altogether began to work following the text order but extra activities from KET websites were included. Games and little projects were also applied, which were graded to have information to monitor progress. For speaking activities, they had the rubric in advance, and teacher explained the previous class each aspect that it was going to be graded.

Informal assessment was very important in this process as well. A record of students was kept, and they received personalized pronunciation corrections while they were working in break-out rooms as well as general observations after a session was over. Motivation and feedback were constant, and students received them gladly. Teacher even had students who got infected with COVID and they still attended to classes. All these signs helped the teacher to assess and plan accordingly.

What type of tasks were included?

In general, the activities were “test-like”. They received extra resources, and these resources were similar in the format on a typical KET test which was the basis of the institutional test format design. Some exercises from the course book were modified and adapted to their environment. Authentic materials were used. For example, the book stated a practice about a party planning. It was modified by “Organize the 40th birthday party for your teacher” considering pandemic restrictions and the zone the teacher was living. As a result, students used English language with their realities and presentations were filled with original ideas that really helped them to apply English in real life.

With this information, students took the activities more seriously, and they were aware that the practice, quizzes, exercises, and mini projects that they did were not only helping them to develop their English skills in the real world, but also to have the tools to be ready for the final test. The graphic below shows in blue the average of all activities considered as formal assessment, and the orange columns represent the actual grade of the final test itself.

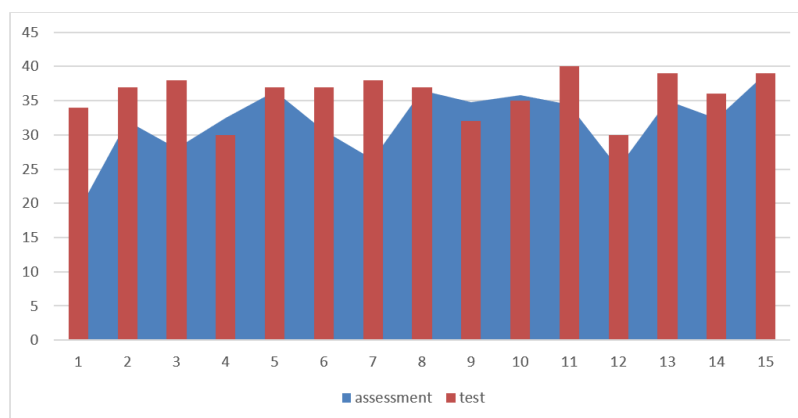


Figure 1. Grades obtained in assessment and final test for the A1 Module

Note. It is evident that summative assessment scores are similar with the final score of the test alone. In most cases, students maintained, and others surpassed the scores obtained from assessment and evaluation. There were only two students whose grades were below their average assessment records, however, they handled to pass the test.

This evidence reinforces the principles of assessment which its main idea is to help students, teachers, and the community involved in this process. Assessment helped the teacher to manage instruction. Assessment activities were important for students because it encourage them to keep on learning and preparing for the final test. The results of formative and summative assessments helped students to track their progress, it helped the teacher to have a back-up of their record for future analysis and proposals.

DISCUSSION

This study concluded in demonstrating the effectiveness of the implementation of formative and summative assessments in the English modules for students who are coursing their master's program at UPSE-EP, and the result in their attitudes and perceptions towards ESL testing. It is important to emphasize that students who may be part of this programs are students who are not in Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros, because in their case, it is expected they must demonstrate a higher level because of their professional area purposes.

It is understood that a limitation of this proposal may be that students are supposed to demonstrate full proficiency without any "help" or extra points away from the ones on the test. However, the situation of students at Santa Elena province states that is one of the poorest regions in Ecuador, and residents do not have the same facility to acquire a second language, except for pre-service teachers who really need it as part of their major.

Maybe, if these strategies and techniques of assessment would be considered in the modules, the motivation in students will increase, and they would work with a clear objective related passing the course from day one, instead of waiting to be tested only once at the end of the module.

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