

The English level as a foreign language in 203 students (in the areas of economy, health, education and engineering) who form part of 9 undergraduate programmes, at Bío-Bío University in Chillán

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Abstract

This is a quantitative and descriptive research; its objective is to diagnose the English Level as a Foreign Language in 203 students (in the areas of economy, health, education and engineering) who form part of 9 undergraduate programmes, at Bío-Bío University in Chillán. A questionnaire was applied to all the students with the aim of obtaining personal information, type of school attended and the motivation to learn the English language (Brown 2002). An extract of the Cambridge ESOL examination Preliminary English Test (PET), which corresponds to Threshold B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)— an internationally recognized level of language ability, was applied to measure the students' language level.

The results obtained revealed that only 11% of the university students achieved level B1 of the Cambridge Examination. The students, who reached the corresponding level, had studied English for a longer period in their educational establishments, came from privately subsidized schools, and belonged to the health sciences, engineering and education.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, undergraduate programmes, type of school attended, motivation, Cambridge ESOL Examination PET

The importance and growth of English as a universal language and communication tool in oral and written form in all fields of knowledge, has created the need to learn and speak it by undergraduate university students in order to communicate effectively. Many universities in our country use the English language teaching as a medium of instruction for supplementary and full texts readings in different disciplines. Our students need a command of English for their future technological, social, scientific and commercial work development. In the globalized and

modern world in which we live, speaking English as a foreign language is extremely relevant, as established in the UBB Educational Model (2008) “it is a student-centered approach in which students assume their social reality and potential in which they project their personal and vocational training for achieving a comprehensive development, so they can fully participate in society, as professionals of excellence, in response to regional, national and international needs”.

Schunk (1997), Díaz and Hernández (2002) and Brown (2002) claim that the key to learn a second language is motivation. Krashen (1981) and (2003) and the concept is a very important factor, which is related to emotional and affective aspects of a foreign language.

According to Mata (1994) the learning concept entails ‘stages of intellectual grasping within the subject’s mind, a place in which engaging in receptive activities will permit to incorporate new ideas, facts and circumstances to cognitive structures and at the same time expand and highlight the facts, demonstrable and fortified, after accomplishing the activities resulting of the instruction strategies planned by the enabler and his particular approaches.

Considering the objectives aiming the English instruction, as a foreign language, coming from a communicative approach, it must follow certain requirements and rules based on the different teaching methodologies proposed by diverse authors.

In this regard, Brown (2002) describes the contrasting approaches and theories in the foreign language teaching, starting from behaviorism, cognitivism, communicative approach until eclectic approach. All these theories sustain the motivation importance as an affective-emotional factor in foreign/second language acquirement.

English learning as a foreign language is crucial for the fulfillment of our future professionals who finish their majors in public universities in our country.

Method

Participants

The research carried out a quantitative and descriptive analysis in which 9 undergraduate programmes participated at Bío-Bío University in Chillán (in the areas of economy, health, education and engineering) with a total of 203 students, 2013-2014 Academic Year.

Materials

To achieve this research, a questionnaire was given to all the students with the aim of obtaining personal information, type of school attended and the motivation for learning the English language (Brown 2002). An extract of the Cambridge ESOL Examination Preliminary English Test (PET), which corresponds to Threshold B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) — an internationally recognized level of language ability, was applied to measure the students’ language level.

The CEFR was put together by the Council of Europe (2001) as a way of standardising the levels of language exams in different countries. It is very widely used internationally and all important exams are mapped to the CEFR.

There are six levels in the CEFR: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 as shown in the following figure:

Table 1

COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK OF REFERENCE FOR LANGUAGES (CEFR)			CAMBRIDGE ESOL EXAMINATIONS
A1	Basic User	Breakthrough	SCHOOL STARTERS
A2		Waystage	Key English Test (KET)
B1	Independent User	Threshold	Preliminary English Test (PET)
B2		Vantage	First Certificate in English (FCE)
C1	Proficient User	Effective Operational Efficiency	Certificate in Advanced English (CAE)
C2		Mastery	Cambridge Proficiency in English (CPE)

Note. Adapted from Cambridge ESOL examinations 2015

Level B1 ((Threshold) is described as the ability to express oneself in a limited way in familiar situations and to deal in a general way with nonroutine information.

The Chilean Ministry of Education (MINEDUC 2014) determined to start learning English in Grade 5, with the goal of reaching Level B1 by graduation, which is still a pending task in our country.

Cambridge Preliminary English Test (PET) (2014) shows that the students can:

- Read simple textbooks and articles in English
- Write letters and emails on everyday subjects
- Take meeting notes
- Show awareness of opinions and mood in spoken and written English

This Esol Examination is made up of three papers developed to test your English skills, as explained in each paper below:

Table 2

Parts of Cambridge ESOL Examination Preliminary English Test (PET)

PAPER	CONTENT	MARKS (% OF TOTAL)	PURPOSE	EXTRACT	MARKS (% OF TOTAL)
Reading and Writing (1 hour 30 minutes)	Reading: 5 parts / 35 questions Writing: 3 parts / 7 questions	50%	Shows you can read and understand the main points from signs, newspapers and magazines, and can use vocabulary and structure correctly.	Reading: 5 questions. Writing: 5 questions.	75%
Listening (36 minutes, including 6 minutes' transfer time)	4 parts / 25 questions	25%	You have to be able to follow and understand a range of spoken materials including announcements and discussions about everyday life.	Listening: 7 questions.	25%
Speaking (10–12 minutes per pair of candidates)	4 parts	25%	Shows how good your spoken English is as you take part in conversation by asking/answering questions and talking, for example, about your likes and dislikes. Your Speaking test will be conducted face to face with one or two other candidates and two examiners. This makes your test more realistic and more reliable.	The speaking part was not applied to measure the participants English Level.	

Note. Adapted from Cambridge ESOL examinations 2015

Procedure

At an initial meeting, participants gave informed consent. Each consent form contained an assigned identification number and requested the participant's the English Language Level. The undergraduate university students were then given an instruction sheets. These written instructions, which were also read aloud, explained the importance of the Cambridge English PET Exam and that it is designed to assess how learners use English to communicate in real-life situations which is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) – the international standard for describing language ability. Next participants were informed that they would be notified by institutional e-mail about the date and time in which they should answer the questionnaire and make the Cambridge ESOL Examination Preliminary English Test (PET).

At their assigned date and time for each undergraduate programme, participants arrived at a classroom for testing. Each participant was given a written questionnaire (15 min) and testing instructions for the Cambridge ESOL Examination Preliminary English Test (PET) (1h 30 min), which were also read aloud. Participants proceeded to complete the questionnaire with personal information and made the Esol Examination Test in written form.

The ESOL Examination was applied with the following techniques: short and extended reading comprehension texts and fill-in the blanks listening comprehension. The types of questions used were: multiple choice, true or false and fill in the blanks which were answered in written form.

The research stages included the application and tabulation of the questionnaires from the students that formed part of 9 undergraduate programs. Subsequently an extract of the Cambridge ESOL Examination Preliminary English Test (PET), was applied in writing, listening and reading comprehension. Finally the Examination PET data was analysed, establishing conclusions based on the findings of the research. With the aim of improving English course descriptions, all the results obtained were socialized with the corresponding undergraduate university programme.

Results

The results revealed that only 11% of the university students achieved Level B1 (Threshold) of the Cambridge Examination Extract. The subjects, who reached the corresponding level, had studied English for a longer period in their educational establishments, came from privately subsidized schools, and belonged to the health sciences, engineering and education programmes.

The following results were generated in the Preliminary English Test:

PART 1 Reading and Writing: shows that students can read and understand the main points from signs, newspapers and magazines, and can use vocabulary and structure correctly. The best reading results were obtained by students from the BA (Barchelor of Arts) of Nursing (Enfermería) with an average of 2,6 points (56%) of 5, followed by BA Information Sciences (Ingeniería Civil en Informática) with an average result of 2,2 points (44%) and BA of Food Technology (Ingeniería en Alimentos) with an average result of 1,9 points (38%). The best results in writing were obtained by university students from BA of Information Sciences (Ingeniería Civil en Informática) with an average result of 0,9 points (18%), followed by BA of Food Technology (Ingeniería en Alimentos) with an average result of 0,8 points (16%), and last

by BA of Math Teaching Education (Pedagogía en Educación Matemáticas) with an average of 0,7 points (14%).

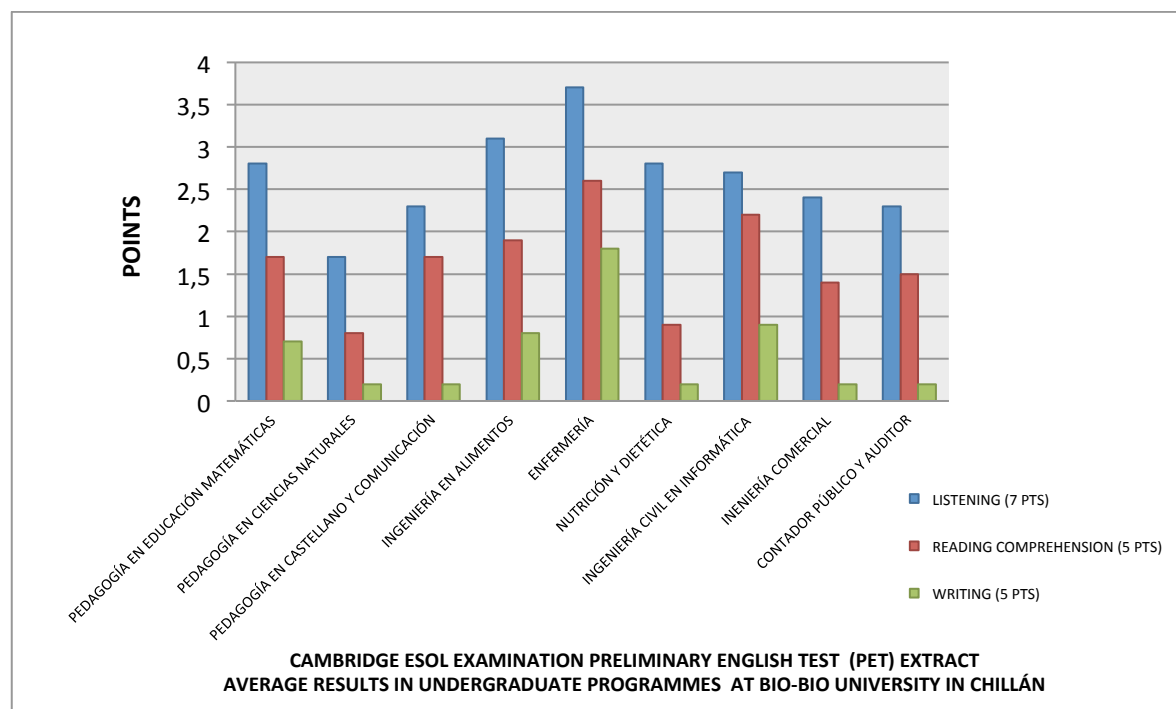
According to the results displayed only students who entered BA of Nursing academic year 2013 have the skills in reading and writing in English as a foreign language. University students who entered BA of Information Sciences, BA of Food Technology and BA of Math Teaching Education got lower results than Part 1 passing scores equivalent to 51%.

PART 2 Listening: show that students are able to follow and understand a range of spoken materials including announcements and discussions about everyday life. The best listening comprehension results were obtained by students from BA of Nursing with an average of 3,7 points (53%) of 7, followed by BA of Food Technology with an average of 3,1 points (44%) and by BA of Math Teaching Education with an average of 2,8 points (40%).

PART 3 Speaking: shows how sufficient the student's spoken English is as the participant takes part in conversation by asking/answering questions and talking. The speaking part was not applied to measure the participants English Level in this research.

The results exposed that students who entered into undergraduate programmes at Bío-Bío University did not achieve English-language proficiency and linguistic competence, which is a pending task in the teaching of English as a foreign language in Chile.

Figure 1. Average results in undergraduate programmes at Bío-Bío University in Chillán.



With the results made known, it was possible to determine students' main linguistic limitations, so as to improve future English course descriptions, develop new teaching-learning

strategies appropriate for each undergraduate programme, and for the students' linguistic management at our university.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to diagnose the English Level as a Foreign Language in students from undergraduate programmes, at Bío-Bío University in Chillán.

In conclusion, the data obtained in this research allowed us to conclude that students, who entered 9 undergraduate programmes at our university, did not achieve linguistic competence at Level B1 of the Cambridge Examination in listening, reading and writing.

Students who came from privately subsidized schools and which had studied English as a foreign language for more hours a week in their educational establishments, obtained better results from the ones who came from municipal schools, and belonged to health sciences, engineering and education.

In our globalized world today, English has developed into the worldwide language and English language education is crucial for cultural and economic development in our country.

The Chilean Ministry of Education, in connection to their development goals to reach a developed country status by 2020, have highlighted the need for Chilean citizens to become bilingual.

The Chilean government invests large amounts of money annually in English language learning with the hopes of making Chileans proficient in English and helping Chile reach developed country status.

It is important that undergraduate university students develop their abilities to communicate in English for practical tasks and situations and to gain a valuable qualification that is accepted worldwide, in order to improve their work, study and travel prospects.

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