Teachers' Research in Language Education

Voices from the Field

Edited by

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COMMON GROUND

The Learner

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Voices from the Field

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Voces de los Actores

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Contenido

CHAPTER 10

Language Assessment Perceptions through the Eyes of Undergraduate Accounting Students

Elba Méndez García, María Alejandra Archundia Pérez and Rosalba Leticia Olguín Díaz

INTRODUCTION

Language assessment has become a thriving industry in the education sector. The ubiquitous standardized language tests and certifications are proof of this. These language tests are used as a gateway (Bachman 61; Bachman and Purpura 458; Hughes 3; Shohamy 444) to either enter or exit educational programs or the job market. Therefore, diagnosing students' language proficiency has become a relevant issue regarding which diagnostic tools are available for this matter (Deygers, Van den Branden & Van Gorp 452; Read 218-219; Stiggins 11). This brings ramifications not only for those involved in designing language courses (Bhatia and Bremner 11) but also for those diagnosing and placing university graduates in such courses. The present study addresses the issue of standardized language tests that are used in entry into tertiary education processes, and what issues they raise for both test takers and test administrators.

Recent research in the field of language assessment in tertiary education focuses mainly on assessment of a second language, as reported by studies carried out in some European countries, Australia and in North America (Deygers, Van den Branden & Van Gorp 450; Read 218; Summers, Cox, McMurry & Dewey 273; Weigle 86). On the other hand, some of the research that analyzes foreign language assessment includes studies carried out in the Philippines, Hispanic, Asian and Latin-American regions (Bresnihan, & MacAuley 4; Gonzales & Aliponga 1; González, Trejo, & Roux 91; Zheng, & Cheng 2). Most of these studies acknowledge the use of language level descriptors such as those developed by the Council of Europe and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Council of Europe 5-7). These descriptors, namely the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and the ACTFL can-do statements, have had their users, their promoters and their critics.

In foreign language contexts as is the case of the present study, however, available research indicates that the use of language level descriptors such as the CEFR or ACTFL is welcome and even desirable, as it provides classroom teachers and institutions with common grounds on which to either base their own forms of assessment (González, Trejo & Roux 94; Pineda 182), or to guide their curriculum goals (Muñoz, Palacio & Escobar 155; Palacio, Gaviria, & Brown 74). In their study, Summers, Cox, McMurry and Dewey (283-284) provide evidence of the helpfulness of ACTFL language descriptors being helpful for both learners and curricula designers. Moreover, these descriptors were perceived as learner self-awareness promoters, which was in turn helpful to design the self-assessment statements they used for their study. From their analysis it can be said that those self-assessment statements help teachers to more clearly make their students' proficiency evident, to them and to students themselves. As well, learners can have full access to how they are being evaluated, what is expected from them and, eventually, they can also learn to self-assess their own performance, which could in turn lead to self-regulate their own learning.

Foreign language contexts also seem to refer to these language level descriptors as well as to other descriptors, for example, National Ministries of Education (De la Barra, Veloso & Maluenda 112), in order to describe and characterize their learners' proficiency, whether as separate skills or holistically (Amengual-Pizarro & García-Laborda 22; Bresnihan & MacAuley 7; De la Barra, Veloso & Maluenda 114; Griffith & Lim 2). There are studies concerned with EFL learners' views about language assessment in EFL Latin-American countries and Spanish speaking regions. Available literature in the area has addressed the design, use and monitoring of EFL assessment rubrics (Griffith, & Lim 4), EFL performance in specific kinds of assessment (De la Barra, Veloso, & Maluenda 118), learners' perceptions about the use of specific teaching techniques or approaches to develop EFL skills and general performance (Bresnihan, & MacAuley 8), or learners' perceptions about their EFL performance in specific kinds of assessment (Amengual-Pizarro & García-Laborda 30; De la Barra, Veloso, & Maluenda 119-120). To the best of our knowledge, however, there are no similar studies in an EFL Mexican context.

Studies that inquire about learners' views on language assessment techniques, procedures or specific international language tests commonly rely on the use of quantitative research instruments such as questionnaires or surveys to collect data for analysis (Bresnihan & MacAuley 4; Cheng, Andrews & Yu 226; De la Barra, Veloso & Maluenda 121). However, Amengual-Pizarro and García-Laborda (31) do elicit qualitative data from their participants by including two open-ended questions that aimed to describe the differences between computer-based and the face-to-face tests. In their study about difficulty perceptions of vocabulary tests in an EFL-EM (English medium) Turkish private university context, Oruç Ertürk and Mumford also approach data collection by using both quantitative and qualitative research instruments, namely a large-scale survey (419-420) and a 50-

minute focus group with ten students purposefully sampled from all faculties (420-421). These studies serve as a starting point for the research design of the present study. It feels relevant to ask EFL learners at a large public Mexican university about the EFL assessment practices that are used at entry, while they are doing their studies and when they finish their academic programs. It also feels relevant to inquire about their views using research methods that allow participants to express their views and opinions in their own words (Creswell and Plano 181; Silverman 308).

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Language certifications have been accentuated as a priority in professional education and training. The Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), a large public university in Central Mexico, is directing efforts towards having graduates and postgraduates equipped with the adequate language knowledge to succeed professionally. Since 2015, BUAP's academic programs require students from all its schools except the language department to ensure proficiency in EFL. In order to achieve this goal, four EFL courses are part of the curriculum. However, students who hold a valid standardized test that certifies their English language proficiency may be exempt of taking some or all of these language courses.

Alongside this internal language requirement, the university proposed a plan to channel efforts to impulse the university to international fields. The Institutional Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Institucional) is a document that attempts to outline what the university envisions for areas that range from teaching and research to student mobility and connections with the local and federal governments (BUAP 23-29). The PDI has many implications for the academic development, as it recognizes the achievements attained but it also formulates the future goals and challenges to be reached inside the university, for future improvement and internationalization. One of these categories considers, as a central role, the pertinence of teaching, assessing and certifying a foreign language, as a strategy to international mobility and professional development for both teachers and students.

In the above scenario, we feel it is crucial to investigate how these two actors, teachers and students, would deal with how teaching, assessing and certifying EFL can impact their academic lives. The present study focuses on students because they may not be as readily available to the researchers as teachers could be. In addition, students may be much more affected than teachers as these institutional planning would undoubtedly impact their future academic and working lives. Therefore, it is considered relevant to explore what EFL assessment practices undergraduate students at a large public Mexican university experience, as well as how they feel foreign EFL learning and assessment can impact their academic development and their future professional lives. In addition,

this study also aims at exploring what language skills these students consider relevant to assess their EFL proficiency. In doing so, this study was designed considering the benefits of approaching data collection and analysis from both qualitative and quantitative traditions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the light of the above discussion, the guiding research questions for this paper are as follows:

- How do BUAP undergraduate Accounting students perceive the EFL assessment practices that allow them entry into higher education?
- What language skills do BUAP undergraduate Accounting students perceive as relevant to assess their EFL proficiency?
- How do BUAP undergraduate Accounting students perceive the impact of EFL learning and assessment for their future professional development?

METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the above research aims, this study adopted a mixed-method approach within a case study paradigm. Creswell (226) and Creswell and Plano (112) conceive the mixed method as a posture where knowledge claims, based on a pragmatic posture, can be best represented by the gathering of both numerical data and text information. Such an approach can help construct firm and trustworthy data analysis and the further explanation of results. Therefore, this study attempted to explore participants' opinions and perceptions on their language learning and assessment inside their academic context through questionnaires and interviews (Dörnyei 25; Dörnyei and Taguchi 11) that could gather data that was both qualitative and quantitative in nature.

On the one hand, the identification of the language assessment practices is a cognitive-in-nature endeavor, which calls on a qualitative data collection and analysis (Silverman 180). Conversely, frequency, percentage and incidence of occurrence of the perceptions and opinions will be of a quantitative nature, which requires data collection and analysis that allows for statistical analysis (Rasinger 10). Overall, using a mixed method approach aimed at increasing the strengths of both paradigms by reducing their potential weaknesses (Paltridge and Phakiti 63), which we hoped would result in the benefit of our understanding of the phenomenon under study.

This was a case study that focused on the specificity of a group: BUAP undergraduate students' perceptions in respect to language learning and assessment practices within the university. According to Creswell (14) a case study is delimited by time and place, ruling out the idea of a generalization; and it

is generally chosen to analyze a unique site within its own boundaries. This paper took on a case study's detailed examination and pondering of the chosen site or group, considering its delimited space and observing the limits of a specific time period (Gerring 19; Merriam and Tisdell 39; Yin 4). The cross-sectional exploration of a particular entity or set of units generally required purposeful sampling, and the design of research instruments to gather quantitative and qualitative data.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING

Population consists of 1179 accounting school students in their second year of tertiary education at a public university in Central Mexico. These students were admitted for university after taking a College Board© admission exam that for the first time included a 50-item EFL component. This EFL component was a version of the College Board© ESLAT, English as a Second Language Achievement Test. These accounting school students are male and female, average age of 20, taking five-month courses in fall and spring terms. Lessons are an hour a day, four to five hours a week, anytime between 7:00 to 20:00. These five-month courses are four in total and prepare students to have A2 CEFL level. These four courses belong to Core Curriculum compulsory subjects; therefore, grades are averaged with all other subjects in their programs. Evaluation criteria for these EFL courses includes departmental achievement tests as well as student course performance. Every class consists of 30 to 50 students depending on classroom size. Convenience sampling for this cross-sectional case study consists of 56 students available from two classes of 35 students each. One of the EFL classes was taking an English III course whereas the other was in an English IV course. All 56 participants answered a questionnaire, and 15 of these participants participated in one of two focus groups as described below. Table 1 summarizes the participants' details.

Table 1: Participant Information (N=56)

Participant characteristic	Response	n	%
Age	19	19	34.5
	20	24	46.5
	21	6	10.9
	22	2	3.6
	23	1	1.8
	24	1	1.8
	25	1	1.8
	29	1	1.8
	39	1	1.8
Gender	Male	15	28.8
	Female	41	73.2
School	Accounting school	56	100

Source: Own Source

INSTRUMENTS AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Questionnaire

A printed questionnaire about the 50-item EFL admission exam component, English as a Second Language Achievement Test (ESLAT), was prepared and piloted with 60 students from the target population at the beginning of their second year in university. Final version of the questionnaire for another 70 students during their second year in university is in Spanish and consists of five sections. Section one asks participants to indicate the level of difficulty they give to the 50 item EFL admission exam ESLAT component in a four-point Likert scale. Section two asks participants to mark the two main reasons why they feel this component was as easy or difficult for them. This section offers participants with 15 possible reasons to mark. Section three lists 14 statements adapted from the A2-B1 CEFL statements for participants to self-evaluate in a zero to ten scale. Out of these 14 statements, six statements describe oral and/or written productive language (speaking and writing) skills; two statements paraphrase interaction and conversation skills. The five remaining statements describe linguistic (grammar, pronunciation), lexical (vocabulary) and receptive (reading and listening) skills. Section four is very important to this study. This section lists the same 14 statements and asks students to indicate whether they feel a language certification should evaluate these elements. Section five asks participants for contact details if they are willing to participate in a 25-minute interview to further share their views about the language assessment and the 50 item EFL admission exam component, English as a Second Language Achievement Test (ESLAT). Printed

questionnaires were distributed by one of the researchers in two classes of 35 students each. Only 56 students were present for questionnaire application. This process took place at the beginning of the course and lasted ten minutes.

Focus Groups

Focus group protocols were prepared instead of individual interview protocols in order to accommodate for the 19 participants interested in an interview. There were nine interested participants in English III class and ten in English IV class, but only eight and seven participants respectively showed up. Participants were then in two focus groups as shown in appendix B. Each focus group took place in the students' classroom towards the end of the school period, tables and chairs were arranged so that participants were distributed as illustrated. Each participant is shown with a number and a pseudonym for analysis and anonymity purposes. Each participant signed a consent letter a day before the focus group took place.

Focus group protocol was prepared in Spanish. It consists of a welcome and presentation section to tell participants how their interventions will be encouraged and balanced. The second section consists of five question prompts. The first question elicits participants' views about their experience being evaluated in their EFL performance at school. The second question focuses on EFL assessment at university and asks participants to describe how appropriate they feel it is. Question three asks participants to describe whether they knew there was an EFL component in their admission exam, and how prepared for it they consider they were. Questions four and five ask participants to comment on the answers they gave for section four of their questionnaires – whether they feel a language certification should assess the 14 listed elements. For this part of the focus group, answered questionnaires were given back to each participant and emphasis was placed on eliciting the reasons they had for marking any of the 14 statements as not necessary for language certification assessment. Finally, participants were asked for final comments and thanked for their participation.

RESULTS

Quantitative data consists of answers from 56 printed questionnaires. Answers from participants were processed in Excel. Resulting tables and graphs were analyzed and compared with answers from focus groups A and B. Qualitative data consists of full manual transcriptions from focus groups A and B. Cross-reference interpretative analysis was used for each focus group as it was first analyzed separately by two researchers, then each researchers' interpretative analysis was compared to the other researcher's interpretative analysis in order to improve coding and resulting categories. Researchers met to refine coding and rule out unclear categories. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis were discussed, and reflections shared and accorded. Final report is presented here.

Questionnaire

First section of the questionnaire asked participants to indicate how easy or difficult they think the 50-item EFL component in their admission exam the year before was. As it can be seen in table 2, 75.9% of the participants claim that this EFL test was difficult for them. Moreover, less than 20% of them indicate that it was easy for them while another 5.6% state that it was very difficult. Finally, none of the participants indicate that the test was very easy for them.

Table 2: Level of Difficulty of the 50-item EFL Component of Admission Exam (N=54)

Likert scale option	n	%
Very difficult for me	3	5.6
Difficult for me	41	75.9
Easy for me	10	18.5
Very easy for me	0	0

Source: Own Source

The following section inquires about possible reasons for such difficulty. This section asks participants to mark two out of the 15 reasons listed. However, a good number of participants marked more than two. Among the reasons that participants gave, the most chosen ones were those related to experiencing difficulties with English language learning. As it can be seen in table 3, the three most popular reasons were: "I have had English lessons, but I still find it difficult" (53.6%), "I only had English courses in junior high or high school" (46.4%), and "I hardly understand an English lesson – I feel it goes too fast" (33.9%), picked by 30, 26 and 19 respondents respectively. Finally, "I never know how to prepare for an English test" was chosen as a reason by 12 (21.4%) participants.

Table 3: Reasons for Level of Difficulty of the 50-item EFL Component of Admission Exam (N=56)

Reason	**n**	**%**
I have lived abroad.	0	0
I speak English as a child.	0	0
I have contact with people who speak other languages.	0	0
I have taken English courses in language schools.	4	7.1
I have had private English lessons.	6	10.7
I have attended bilingual schools or schools where English is taught from elementary levels.	2	3.6
I usually get good grades in English.	6	10.7
I study a lot for an English test.	4	7.1
I always have someone to help me understand my English lessons and study for English tests.	4	7.1
I have had English lessons, but I still find it difficult.	30	53.6
I only had English courses in junior high or high school.	26	46.4
I hardly understand an English lesson – I feel it goes too fast.	19	33.9
I never had English as a subject in school.	0	0
I always failed English as in school.	1	1.8
I never know how to prepare for an English test.	12	21.4

Source: Own Source

Section three of the questionnaire required participants to self-evaluate using a zero to ten scale for 14 can-do statements. There were five statements where participants self-evaluated the highest. The highest mark was eight, and as it can be seen from table 4 below, 26% (*n*=15) of the participants feel that they can answer grammar exercises correctly and use recently learned words and phrases when writing and speaking, 25% (*n*=14) feel they can pronounce words and complete phrases correctly. Finally, 19-21% (*n*=11,12) indicate that they can guess new vocabulary from context and express preferences and opinions orally and in writing.

Table 4: Highest Marks for can-do Statements

Statement 2	**Answer grammar exercises correctly. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	0	1	2	8	7	8	11	15	3	1
%	0	0	1.8	3.6	14.3	12.5	14.3	19.6	26.8	5.4	1.8

Statement 4	**Guess new vocabulary from context. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	1	0	2	2	3	11	12	12	11	2	0
%	1.8	0	3.6	3.6	5.4	19.6	21.4	21.4	19.6	3.6	0

Statement 6	**Use recently learned words and phrases when writing and speaking. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	1	0	4	3	6	6	14	15	5	2
%	0	1.8	0	7.1	5.4	10.7	10.7	25	26.8	8.9	3.6

Statement 12	**Pronounce words and complete phrases correctly. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	0	0	1	2	8	10	12	14	7	2
%	0	0	0	1.8	3.6	14.3	17.9	21.4	25	12.5	3.6

Statement 14	**Express my preferences and opinions orally and in writing. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	1	1	3	7	9	11	9	12	3	0
%	0	1.8	1.8	5.4	12.5	16.1	19.6	16.1	21.4	5.4	0

Source: Own Source

The second highest mark as shown in table 5 below was seven, and it was chosen by 30.4% (*n*=17) of participants to indicate that they can ask for information from someone who does not speak their language. A fourth (*n*=14) of participants feel they can explain in writing how a process occurs and read texts in English without stopping. Finally, 21-23% (*n*=12, 13) of participants consider they can write short texts in English and explain orally how a process occurs.

Table 5: Second Highest Marks for can-do Statements

Statement 1	**Read texts in English without stopping. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	0	0	1	2	12	9	14	11	6	1
%	0	0	0	1.8	3.6	21.8	16.4	25.5	20	10.7	1.8

Statement 5	**Write short texts in English (250 words maximum). (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	1	1	2	1	11	8	10	13	6	3	0
%	1.8	1.8	3.6	1.8	19.6	14.3	17.9	23.2	10.7	5.4	0

Statement 10	**Explain in writing how a process occurs. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	1	2	2	3	6	13	6	14	9	0	0
%	1.8	3.6	3.6	5.4	10.7	23.2	10.7	25	16.1	0	0

Statement 11	**Explain orally how a process occurs. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	2	2	1	5	8	9	9	12	8	0	0
%	3.6	3.6	1.8	8.9	14.3	16.1	16.1	21.4	14.3	0	0

Statement 13	**Ask for information from someone who does not speak my language. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	1	3	0	4	11	11	17	5	4	0
%	0	1.8	5.4	0	7.1	19.6	19.6	30.4	8.9	7.1	0

Source: Own Source

Participants gave themselves a barely passing mark, six, for statements eight and nine. As the statements in table 6 below show, 32.1% (*n*=18) of the participants feel that they are this good to describe one of their life experiences in writing. Less than a quarter of the participants (23%) (*n*=13) indicate the same for being able to describe one of their life experiences orally. A promising 21.4% (*n*=12) equally chose marks six and seven to self-evaluate their ability to understand conversations between English-speaking speakers. However, 21.4% (*n*=12) of the participants also chose marks five and six to describe how proficient they feel they are at keeping a conversation in English going, which corresponds to statement seven.

Table 6: Third Highest Marks for can-do Statements

Statement 3	**Understand conversations between English-speaking speakers.**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	1	0	2	2	3	11	12	12	11	2	0
%	1.8	0	3.6	3.6	5.4	19.6	21.4	21.4	19.6	3.6	0

Statement 7	**Keep a conversation in English going. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	2	2	4	5	4	12	12	10	2	3	0
%	3.6	3.6	7.1	8.9	7.1	21.4	21.4	17.9	3.6	5.4	0

Statement 8	**Describe one of my life experiences in writing. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	1	1	3	6	11	18	7	4	5	0
%	0	1.8	1.8	5.4	10.7	19.6	32.1	12.5	7.1	8.9	0

Statement 9	**Describe one of my life experiences orally. (N=56)**										
	0	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**
n	0	3	2	6	7	6	13	11	6	2	0
%	0	5.4	3.6	10.7	12.5	10.7	23.2	19.6	10.7	3.6	0

Source: Own Source

Section four of the questionnaire reveal whether participants feel that each of the 14 elements described in the above can-do statements should be assessed in a language certification. As it can be seen in table 7 below, a high percentage of participants indicate that elements two, three, seven and twelve should be assessed in a language certification. Being able to keep a conversation in English going and to answer grammar exercises correctly top the list with 89.3% (*n*=50) of the preferences each, while being able to understand conversations between English-speaking speakers and to pronounce words and complete phrases correctly follow in second (87.5%) and third place (83.9%) respectively.

About two thirds of the participants (76.8%) state that being able to read texts in English without stopping should also be included, and less than two thirds (71.5%) feel that describing one of their experiences orally should, too.

About the elements that participants feel that are not necessary for a language certification, describing one of their experiences in writing tops the list with 44.7% (*n*=25). Asking for information from someone who does not speak their language and explaining in writing how a process occurs follow with 41.1% (*n*=23) each. Except for using recently learned words and phrases when writing and speaking, more than 60% of the participants indicate that elements four, five, eleven and fourteen should be assessed in a language certification.

Table 7: Elements that Participants Think Should be Assessed in a Language Certification

	Elements that should be assessed in a language certification	Should be assessed		Not necessary	
	N = 56	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**
1	Read texts in English without stopping.	43	76.8	13	23.2
2	Answer grammar exercises correctly.	50	89.3	6	10.7
3	Understand conversations between English-speaking speakers.	49	87.5	7	12.5
4	Guess new vocabulary from context.	37	66.1	19	33.9
5	Write short texts in English (250 words maximum).	38	67.9	18	32.1
6	Use recently learned words and phrases when writing and speaking.	28	50	28	50
7	Keep a conversation in English going.	50	89.3	6	10.7
8	Describe one of my experiences in writing.	31	55.3	25	44.7
9	Describe one of my experiences orally.	40	71.5	16	28.5
10	Explain in writing how a process occurs.	33	58.9	23	41.1
11	Explain orally how a process occurs.	37	67.9	18	32.1
12	Pronounce words and complete phrases correctly.	47	83.9	9	16.1
13	Ask for information from someone who does not speak my language.	33	58.9	23	41.1
14	Express my preferences and opinions orally and in writing.	39	69.6	17	30.4

Source: Own Source

Focus Groups

After cross-reference interpretative analysis of the data obtained from both focus groups, four major areas seem to stand out that are worth presenting for the reader´s consideration. These four areas are (1) EFL learning as a vehicle for future opportunities, (2) gate keeping perceptions, (3) EFL examination issues, and (4) language assessment perceptions. These four topics are discussed and illustrated with participants' quotes below. Participants are all identified by pseudonyms.

(1) EFL learning as a vehicle for future opportunities

The first major category that stemmed out from the data analysis is the perception that interviewees have about EFL learning as a vehicle for future opportunities, which subdivided into job and academic opportunities. On the one hand, focus group participants considered that the knowledge of a second language is another skill that a good professional should have, as it will definitively increase their employability opportunities and consequently their prompt insertion into their future labor markets as the following excerpts from both focus groups illustrate:

> *"Well, yes, just like my classmates say, nowadays it is extremely important to be a good professional to speak English at least. If you want to speak another language it is even better because you are updating yourself."*
>
> *(Yuri, A)*

> *"I think that as we are learning it help us expand our horizons because just like my classmate said before it would help us obtain a better job abroad and have contact with customers…" (Alfred, B)*

On the other hand, having learned English also represented accessing present and future academic opportunities. According to interviewees' comments, having knowledge of English allowed them and other students to do well in the English component of the entry exam. In addition, it had an immediate impact on their studies as there was the possibility of being exempted from mandatory university English courses that are part of the students' general academic preparation at university. This situation indirectly helped those who were granted with the benefit to concentrate more on their area of specialization subjects or simply to cope better with the adaptation period into university life. This is supported by the following excerpts:

> *"…personally, it helped me concentrate on my other subjects because it was the first semesters and you have to adapt, it truly helped me focus on those difficult subjects." (Alexia, A)*

> *"In my case, just like my classmate said, it helps me to have passed one subject because it opens more space to focus on other subjects and at the same time you feel good because you know you passed it not because of luck or the odds I know that I have the knowledge in that area of English."*
>
> *(Daysi, A)*

Consequently, having certain linguistic capital turned into an academic gain. In the long term, however, it may as well turn into an academic loss since students would likely be disconnected from English while they are studying their major at university. Similarly, they may find it difficult to adapt to the higher levels of their English mandatory university courses as some of the interviewees expressed it:

> *"Well, even when they are mandatory, they are not enough because if you, let's say, have the opportunity to take an English course after those four levels you took, it's great, but if you don't have that chance you lose practice. Then, when you want to get the certification it is going to take you more time and effort." (Amaya, B)*

> *"I was lucky because I answered wanting to know how much I knew and when I was accepted I was told that the section had counted certain points. I was very lucky to have passed two levels. It was a good way to get rid of those two first levels. However, it was hard to adapt during the third level and see my progress, I realized I didn't know certain things*

> *but I did my best to adapt to what they were teaching in the third level." (Alfred, B)*

With this, the connection between the EFL teaching-learning and the EFL assessment is evident and shows its relevance. Not only was EFL assessment a useful tool to evidence proficiency of the language institutionally, but it also turned into an indicator of possible academic gains-and losses. If this fact is appreciated from a positive perspective, it rendered advantages to those who successfully passed the EFL component in the 2017 general admission exam. Therefore, it is crucially important to clearly inform those future university applicants of the benefits that will come along if successful results are obtained in the English general admission exam.

(2) Gate keeping perceptions

The second major salient category that emerged from the analysis was the concept of gate keeping. Participants considered that this language section was relevant to be included since it would put to the test the ability of future undergraduates to manage a language. The inclusion of this language section in the admission exam was perceived as a filter to first, identify who of those candidates have the required language knowledge; and second, to let those who do not have such level of the language to take action to obtain the necessary language level. However, they also mentioned that the EFL component should not be considered solely to determine their entrance or dismissal from university because the other sections of the exam are as equally important to evaluate their overall knowledge. The following verbatim quotations serve as illustration:

> *"It is ok they include English in the admission exam because the students to come should be prepared and they must be aware that they should know English even before entering university." (Moni, A)*

> *"[…] I think that it is a good idea to include English to let students and teachers know the level you have. It is a good indicator." (Janyce, B)*

Gatekeeping practices sub stemmed into (a) issues that had to do with the academic background and instruction of applicants, and (b) the quality assigned to higher education that includes English in their admission exam. We discuss these subdivisions below.

(a) Candidate preparation

Participants reported that foreign language ability is the result of their previous foreign language school instruction. They considered that receiving foreign language instruction at a public school would differ from those receiving the same

language instruction at a private institution. Participants' perception regarding English language instruction quality is that public institutions are not necessarily fulfilling the language needs students require to better manage the EFL component of the university admission exam. Participants appear to believe private schooling is better in this area, especially if you begin English language instruction since kindergarten; therefore, public schools in the country should include foreign language instruction since the very early years – kindergarten and elementary school – given that English language instruction starts until middle and high school in Mexico. This is illustrated in the following extracts:

> *"I feel they should evaluate English since elementary school and by the time you get to the university you would be fluent […]. In my case, I am struggling to understand it." (Moni, A)*

> *"[…] it is very important to receive English instruction since kindergarten because we would not only be bilinguals; I don't know… even trilinguals. Private schools are the ones that teach English and do exams in English"*
>
> *(Lucy, A)*

(b) Quality of education

It is worth mentioning that another aspect that surfaced in the analysis was the quality of the higher education in terms of including English in the admission exam. Participants perceived positively the inclusion of the EFL component (ESLAT) as a sign of quality and progress in the requirements to be accepted at the university. Passing the exam would imprint a sense of pride and prestige as the admission exam is organized and structured to measure quality of overall knowledge including that of a foreign language aspect. This is exemplified in the extracts below:

> *"It was a sign of progress to include English in the admission exam and this lets us know the type of institution we are attempting to enter and what we will face in the future. If English is a base in the admission exam then you know how important it will be during your career. We have to be prepared for everything." (Yuri, A)*

> *"Personally, I believe it is good they include this section because they are considering the quality and type of students who are applying to be accepted and we are supposed to have such language knowledge. Besides, the English section should be more difficult because we are talking about entering university; let's not settle for less, it is a higher level of education not like high school." (Lucy, A)*

(3) EFL examination issues

On the same string of thought, the preparation that future applicants can get might be directly connected with the clear understanding of the importance of passing the English exam with high results. Apart from being mentally prepared for the experience, future applicants may want to get a hold of the format that the exam will have, as in any preparation for admission examinations. With this understanding, future university applicants may be able to decide to prepare on different skills that will be assessed in the exam. Similarly, they may consider necessary to concentrate on the development of a specific language skill to increase the likelihood of succeeding.

Another important issue that arises from this clear understanding on the part of candidates is that there is an urgent need to design English preparation courses to apply for university entry. These preparation courses' ultimate aims should be familiarizing future applicants with the format of the EFL component of the admission exam, as well as helping them develop further proficiency in English. This need is illustrated below in participants from both focus group sessions' own words:

> *"I think that it would be a good option to include English in the prep courses and I also believe that the texts aren't that long and are probably the same length as in Spanish. It is just that we don't master the language much and it is hard to read and understand a long text. Then, I think that is the problem."*
>
> *(Alfred, B)*

> *"Maybe there should be not just the prep courses for aptitude and general knowledge but also many others and one of them can be in English because there are students who need it just like they need the other areas." (Lucy, A)*

Such preparation courses would help future applicants with two specific issues that participants seem to believe affected their performance in the EFL component of the admission exam. The first issue is time. As expressed by participants, they feel that they did not handle time so that they could successfully answer the exam, either they lost track of it or they simply did not use it for their best interest. Here are some of the comments related to this problem:

> *"…I remember that there was a section where you have to read texts and the section was timed, obviously, therefore I, honestly, could only do one of the texts and it was the shortest one. Then, I don't understand why they would put such lengthy texts if the section was timed." (Amaya, B)*

> *"…true, everyone was under pressure because of the exam, I don't know, around three hours and it was very exhausting having to read all the section with fifty questions in English. In my case, it was stressful that you reach a point where you try to answer or simply don't do it and in the end it happens to have a value for the bachelor. It would be important that they could distribute the section in a different way and not just to let it lay there separately." (Norah, B)*

The second issue was the fact that the EFL component was taken at the end of all the admission exam, which seems to have added a physical burden that exam takers had to sort out. This possibly augmented the likelihood of low performance in the EFL component. As stated by participants, sequencing the whole admission test differently, would be likely to result in better marks:

> *"Well, I believe that at the beginning of the exam they should not include the English section, they could do so after the aptitude and general knowledge sections. And after, for those who had already been admitted, they could do the English section independently." (Donald, B)*

A last, but extremely important point is the need of communicating institutionally what results will be used for since clarity of procedures will help test takers increase the likelihood of excelling at the exam. Both parties will clearly be benefited if they concretely knew what results will be used for as some of the participants brought it into consideration:

> *"… but if I had known before, I would have made the effort to pass that exam because I believe that motivates you to study. For example, if you tell the new candidates that they have to do their best for this language section even when they may tell you it doesn't count for your admission but they tell you to try hard because you will pass the first two language levels, I think they will definitely study." (Sherry, A)*

> *"As for our grades, I mean, they would say "certain given points will help you pass the first and second level and from there you only need to take the third or the fourth level". In my case, I didn't know that it would be considered for that." (Maggie, B)*

(4) Language assessment perceptions

Regarding the fourth category, it is observed that participants' perception towards language assessment is positive. Participants agree that English should be assessed and evaluated as it can be an accurate indicator to show them where they are standing and what elements they need to work on for the future. They also believe

that English is being assessed properly at university because they see that it relates to instruction. It can be observed that participants are aware of the different types of assessment their teachers apply. Also, they report that teaching is planned and sequenced as such so that they can see progress which, in turn, is reflected in their learning and the eventual passing of the subject. This is exemplified in the extracts below:

> *"Everything is connected…the online tests, the oral exam, the written exam… to learn it better. I believe that's the most important: to understand it" (Yuri, A)*

> *"[…] I like the way they evaluate nowadays because when I first got here I didn't know much and the way they teach you and evaluate you makes you learn and I have learnt many things which can help you pass the subject." (Sherry, A)*

Language assessment perceptions from participants further subdivide into (a) integrated language assessment perceptions and (b) one-trait language assessment perceptions. Participants are clear in terms of the different abilities they are being assessed during their language courses. It is inferred that they perceive language as a whole but that it can also be divided in different aspects or areas. They give special attention to the aspect of communication since, at the end, a language is precisely used for communicative purposes whether in writing or in speaking. The following verbatim quotations serve as illustration:

> *"When you have a conversation, you can display the way you speak, your pronunciation, the phrases and vocabulary you use so you somewhat validate all this in a conversation, you can realize everything. Likewise, when you write, you can clearly see whether it is correctly written or not."*
>
> *(Yuri, A)*

> *"[…] I think all aspects should be considered because they have to do with reading, understanding, communication, pronunciation and giving explanations. I believe it is necessary to evaluate all this to improve and have better language proficiency." (Janyce, B)*

Meanwhile participants perceive language should be assessed thoroughly as it is intended to be for communication, they also mentioned the relevance to evaluate language in its different components. This notion of the segmentation of skills is clearly seen in table 7 above and it is confirmed by analyzed data in both focus group where participants commented that it is more important to first know

the grammar of the language to visualize it and then to be able to write until they are finally prepared to speak. The participants agreed that before they can engage in a conversation it is advisable to know what to say and how to say it first. This is illustrated in the following extracts:

> *"In my case, I have a hard time understanding grammar and how to write so then it does not help me to speak it if I don't understand what I'm going to say. To me, it is more important to write, to use words in context before I can speak it." (Norah, B)*

> *"[...] I think that it is correct to evaluate how to request information so you can learn how to speak the language. It is easy for me to read English, but I find it hard to understand it when people are speaking, I don't know what they are talking about." (Maggie, B)*

DISCUSSION

The analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data reveals how language assessment practices take place at undergraduate levels inside the university. This, in turn, shed some light on how language learning and assessment are perceived by a representative sample of undergraduate accounting students. The five most relevant points are summarized below.

First, it can be inferred from the data that the inclusion of an EFL component (ESLAT) in the admission exam served two purposes: (1) to inform test administrators about the level of English that test takers brought with them when applying for university, and (2) to place those exam takers that passed it successfully in higher English courses once they were participating fully in the pursuit of their university academic formation. However, as expressed by participants in the present study, the EFL component results may have been affected by different circumstances while taking the exam. While some test takers may have given higher priority to the other components of the exam, others may have answered it randomly to just fulfill the requirement. This situation undoubtedly affects basic test fairness and accountability in that results cannot be entirely trusted (Hughes 29; Shohamy 446) if test takers are not all given the same instructions or if they are not homogenously briefed about what the consequences of test results will be. Authorities in charge of administering the test should see to it that exam purposes are understood fully and advertised broadly.

Secondly, the academic advantage of highly passing the EFL component (ESLAT) of the admission exam could also mean an academic loss for others. In other words, the placement of students into higher levels of English was considered both to render an academic advantage to the students as well as an academic loss for them because of the disconnection from English that those high achievers would have as a result of being exempted from taking some or all

English courses (Bachman & Purpura 459). In the light of these issues, it is highly recommended that the university context under study informs officially, clearly and widely about the EFL component (ESLAT). Certainty as to what the purposes of having it in the admission exam are is crucial for exam fairness and accountability. Moreover, consequences deriving from EFL component results would also have to be weighed in terms of what options can realistically be offered to high achievers who are exempt from taking one or all the compulsory basic courses. This way, these tests can still be considered gate openers for better opportunities (Bachman & Purpura 458; Cheng, Andrews & Yu 223) for both their immediate academic goals and their professional future (Deygers, Van den Branden & Van Gorp 453; Read 226).

Third, participants show a very positive attitude towards the EFL component. Not only do they perceive it as a way to measure the language knowledge of those candidates applying for their undergraduate studies, but they also agree with having a language test as a "door" to allow them to enter university because at this level the demands are higher and only those who have what it is required should be admitted (Bachman & Purpura 461; Deygers, Van den Branden & Van Gorp 466). We can positively conclude that participants welcome the EFL component as a tool that allows the university to identify the breadth and the quality of language knowledge its future graduates hold. The idea behind their conception is that only those worthy to pass are the ones to be recipients of instruction. This should be positively channeled via clear information as to what ESLAT results will be used for (Deygers, Van den Branden & Van Gorp 466; Fox, Haggerty, & Artemeva 51).

Fourth, it is relevant to observe that participants welcome the ESLAT as long as it does not interfere in their admission; perhaps this perception is rooted in the fact that they see their previous language instruction as weak (Fox, Haggerty & Artemeva 50). It can be inferred that their divide of public and private schooling can definitely be a factor to be considered since the academic background and English language instruction may greatly affect the English level candidates have at the moment of taking the EFL component in the admission test. However, participants persistently perceive a direct relation between the difficulty of the admission exam with the high standards university is posing for those attempting to be part of the community. This positive, aspirational perception that only the most apt would be accepted and that it will bring academic gains for them is fertile land for the language department at this university, as preparation, remedial and elementary level courses would be in great demand.

Finally, special attention would have to be given to the way potential students of such courses perceive language learning and language learning assessment. From our data analysis, we could conclude that integrated language assessment appears to be a common feature that participants agree with. This notion of evaluating a language as an integrated entity reflects that students are aware of how language functions in real life situations and that the assessment of such areas

would positively have an impact in their future language learning (Bhatia & Bremner 15; Bresnihan & MacAuley 8; De la Barra, Veloso & Maluenda 121-122). As much as they recognize language as a complete entity, however, they also understand that breaking language down in small parts can also be helpful for their learning and improvement. This means that participants prefer to use a scaffolding strategy, so language learning starts off with the smaller units of the language like pronunciation, vocabulary and phrases and then move upward to more complex elements such as listening and speaking (Oruç Ertürk, & Mumford 426-427; Stiggins 11-12; Wei & Zheng 878-879). As young adults, participants seem to be leaning towards a more structured approach which is learning grammar and vocabulary in first place to later use such components to practice speaking, like a puzzle where small pieces make up for the bigger picture.

LIMITATIONS

The present study is limited in its margin error of a bit above 10% as the originally planned 70 questionnaires were not answered on the day of application. In addition, there was no access to undergraduates from other disciplines so that we could have a much more representative sample. Although there were no incentives for participation, participants answering questionnaire and focus group protocol questions were students of one of the researchers at the moment of both qualitative and quantitative data collection. This may have resulted in participants expressing what their teacher would have liked to hear instead of what they believe. A further stage of the present research would have to include subsequent admission exam process documents so that clear and widely distributed information about the EFL component can be contrasted with participants' claims.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As teacher trainers, we see several pedagogical implications deriving from the five topics above. Here we discuss the three we feel are the most relevant. First, we have become aware that we may unintentionally be transmitting our pre-service student teachers an atomized view of language learning and teaching. They could, in turn, perceive and teach language in the same manner, which might result in them not being able to assess language from a more integrative, holistic perspective. Although we may already be assessing our student teachers both holistically and analytically (González, Trejo, & Roux 93; Plough, Briggs, & van Bonn 239), it would be necessary to make students teachers aware of the assessment practices we are applying on them. Exploring how teacher trainers' own teaching practice and assessment literacy echo in their student teachers' teaching and assessment practice (Griffith, & Lim 6-7; Looney 447) might be necessary to determine any course of action.

A second consideration to be made is the exhaustive revision of assessment and evaluation programs in the curriculum (Muñoz, Palacio, & Escobar 156). A proper redesign of the contents should aim to offer a more updated scope of the current practices in the field of assessment. This subject in the BA would have to guide student teachers to be able to determine the reasons why a language should be assessed in an integrative manner or by its separate components. Similarly, our student teachers should also be able to know how to articulate the purpose of any test before it is administered. Helping our BA in ELT students develop a sense of the construct, rigor and systematicity that should ideally prevail in any test (Palacio, Gaviria, & Brown 75-76) could also add to the competencies that might be expected from professionals in the ELT field (Giraldo 190-191; Pineda 182). These changes in the evaluation and assessment program could help future EFL teacher graduates to plan not just their teaching, but also their assessment strategies to make sure their own students can actually perceive the benefits of both.

Third, we feel that helping future EFL teachers become literate in assessment practices will surely help them assist their future students to become independent learners. Student teachers could, for instance, learn to diagnose a candidate's potential and his/her likelihood of achieving the marks he/she needs (González, Trejo, & Roux 92; Gonzales, & Aliponga 5; Pineda 190; Stiggins 11-12). At a later stage, our teacher students may also have to determine language learning or test taking strategies that such candidate would have to undergo (Muñoz, Palacio, & Escobar 153; Summers, Cox, McMurry, & Dewey 284). Indeed, we expect that a representative number of future EFL teachers graduating from our BA in ELT program will be inserted in public schools. Hence, the urgent need to train our student teachers in understanding the value of assessment and how it will likely inform and enrich their daily teaching practice. If future EFL teachers manage to help their students embrace the assessment practices as part of the leaning process, this would bode proficient EFL teachers and competent EFL students, which in turn could contribute to narrow the divide between public and private schooling.

CONCLUSION

The insights from this study do enlighten us about perceptions of university students regarding language learning and assessment. These perceptions are undoubtedly useful for the design of language courses that could be offered to these university students by the language department at our university, and they also triggered reflection on how suited for present and future language learning assessment scenarios our student teachers will be. In the light of these reflections, learning about how other BA in ELT programs in Mexico and Latin-America proceed about developing language teaching, learning and assessment awareness in their student teachers feels definitively relevant. Exploring what other ELT programs are doing regarding assessment could, for sure, shed light on what

practices can be implemented for more complete, stronger course programs and for the betterment of student teachers' training in the region. Further research may have to necessarily include the use of technology in assessment procedures, as well as how it contributes to exam fairness, exam administration and accountability, quality control and automated versus human scoring. Collaboration with colleagues from other ELT programs is, without a question, an appropriate alternative to address similar issues, and to redesign language programs as the means to improve our own teaching and assessment practices not only inside our classrooms but in the country, as well.

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Over the past decade, interest in language teacher education and professionalization programs has increased significantly mainly due to global educational reforms, which have been driven by internationalization, multilingualism, the rise of new literacy and the incorporation of technologies. This publication addresses work in various sociocultural, educational and institutional contexts carried out in Mexico and Latin America with various methodological designs and approaches from different theoretical perspectives. Therefore, in the context of current challenges, we seek to promote the exchange, discussions of experience and results of research and reflection that can influence the direction and implementation of language policies regarding teacher education and teacher professionalization for language teaching.

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