

Are Mexican Students Ready for Graduate Schools in English Language Contexts? An Overview of a Mexican Public University

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The aim of this research is to identify university students' English language level as a foreign language. This is to discern if Mexican students in a public university are ready to enter into national and international graduate programs considered as high-quality programs. In order to know students' English level, it was asked to the institution the results of a domestic English test applied to all senior students who applied for this test as a requirement to obtain the Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in different fields of knowledge. Results have exposed the limited knowledge and usage that students have of English as a foreign language (EFL) becomes a constraint to enter into high-quality graduate programs, either national or international programs.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), graduate programs, high-quality programs

Introduction

Universidad Autónoma de Nayarit (UAN) is a public university. It is the biggest institution in the state for higher education and the current registers show that there are about 15,000 students enrolled in the different programs. Students come from low to medium social stratum and a high percentage of them come from rural communities from all over the state. This is important information to consider due to the limited options of private education out of the capital city—Tepic. There is also a high percentage come from public high schools (UAN, 2017).

UAN is divided into six academic main areas: Social Sciences and Humanities, Health Sciences, Economic Sciences, Biological Sciences, Engineering, and Arts. These areas serve the following academic programs:

1. Social Sciences and Humanities: Education, philosophy, politic sciences, psychology, linguistics, nursery, Korean studies, law school, and communication;
2. Health Sciences: Medicine school, odontology school, nursing school, biologist pharmaceutical chemist school, nutrition program, physical education program, and physical therapy program;
3. Economic Sciences: Tourism school, marketing, accountancy, economics, administration, and computer sciences;

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4. Biological Sciences: Biology program, agriculture program, veterinary school, and fishery engineering;
5. Engineering: Computer engineering, electronics engineer, mechanical engineering, chemical engineering, mathematics, and computer systems;
6. Arts: At this moment, only have a program in music and has been one of the most recently recognized as a separate area.

English Language as a Requirement

As a part of the enrollment requirements for any program, students do not need to present any proof of English as a foreign language (EFL), they only have to fully complete the enrollment process, which includes registration and entrance examination. This kind of process is very similar in many other public universities in Mexico. This process responds to the considerations provided by the Department of Education and Academic Affairs in Mexico (Secretaría de Educación Pública [SEP], 2006).

Education in Mexico has faced important changes in the last two decades but with no concrete results. This is to the fact that federal government has alternated among different political parties and this means that every six years people come with different ideas and different projects suddenly changing what is still running.

Regarding to foreign language learning, in 2006, the Department of Education proposed a long-term strategy in order to make bilingual schools (Spanish-English). For this purpose being included elementary, medium, and higher education, it was projected to obtain the first results in 2009 as a first step, and then, increased English language levels in a period of nine years.

In order to follow suggestions proposed in the project presented by SEP, UAN implemented an academic reform to provide English language instruction to all of the students enrolled in the different programs of the institution. At the same time, an exit English test was created to evaluate students' English language skills at as a requirement to graduate (UAN, 2003). Table 1 presents the goals to be reached according to the strategy proposed (SEP, 2006).

Table 1

English Language Levels Suggested by SEP

Education level	Ideal level of language competence 2013-2018	Suggested goal 2013-2018	Suggested goal 2010-2012	Suggested goal 2009
Doctorate/Ph.D.	C2 CEFR	C2 CEFR	C1 CEFR	B2 CEFR
Master degree	C2 CEFR	C2 CEFR	C1 CEFR	B2 CEFR
Bachelor of Arts (B.A.)	C2 CEFR	C1 CEFR	B2 CEFR	B2 CEFR
Technicians	C1 CEFR	B2 CEFR	B2 CEFR	A2 CEFR
High school	B2 CEFR	B2 CEFR	A2 CEFR	A1 CEFR
Junior high	B1 CEFR	A2 CEFR	A1 CEFR	False beginners
Elementary school (6th grade)	A2 CEFR	A1 CEFR	False beginners	Beggins
Elementary school (3rd grade)	A1 CEFR	False beginners	Beggins	Beggins
Pre-school	False beginners	Beggins	Beggins	Beggins

Note. CERF refers to common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, and assessment.

Methodology

Subjects

In order to have an overview of the current situation of the students' English language level, it was asked to the coordination of the exit English test—Examen de Acreditación de Inglés [EXACRI] and the results

obtained in this test by senior students in the period of 2007 to 2016. All of them correspond to the different academic programs and the different areas of UAN. Based on the information provided by this coordination, it was possible to make a diagnosis of the current situation of the students at UAN and determine students' English language level.

Instrument

EXACRI is a home-made test created with the same characteristics of Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-Based Test (TOEFL-IBT), but considering the context where it is applied. It contains 120 items divided into three different categories: (a) structure; (b) vocabulary; and (c) reading comprehension. This test is provided in a paper and pencil version. The scores for this test were rated according to the following categorization:

1. Scores are between 0 and 40 correct items correspond to no level assigned;
2. Scores are between 41 and 60 correct items correspond to Level 1 (equivalent to band A1 to the CEFR);
3. Scores are between 61 and 80 items correspond to Level 2 (equivalent to band A2 of the CEFR);
4. Scores are between 81 and 100 correct items correspond to Level 3 (equivalents to band B1 of the CEFR);
5. Scores are between 101 and 120 correct items correspond to Level 4 (equivalent to band B2 of the CEFR).

For this study, the results were classified according to the different areas and schools/programs. This diagnosis is based on the results obtained by senior students in the EXACRI for the period of June 2007 to December 2016.

Results

The obtained results are presented according to each area of knowledge considered in the focus institution. This analysis was considered as the total number of students presented in the register provided by the coordination in charge of the instrument.

Table 2

Results Obtained in EXACRI Between 2006 and 2016 in Social Sciences and Humanities Area

School or program	Scores					
	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120
Education Program	4	130	261	102	37	2
Politic Science Program	4	67	100	49	16	5
Communication Program	7	68	256	215	141	43
Law School	8	409	1,071	656	296	48
Cultural Development Program	0	1	0	6	0	0
Philosophy Program	1	20	58	29	9	10
Linguistics Program	0	0	3	10	4	8
Psychology Program	2	125	377	290	125	25
Korean Studies Program	0	0	2	1	1	0
Total	26	820	2,128	1,358	629	141
Percentages (%)	0.51	16.07	41.71	26.62	12.33	2.76

Social Sciences and Humanities

In this area, a total of 5,102 students have applied for the test. There is 0.51% (26) students has obtained a result between 0 and 20 points out of 120, which is the total score for this test, 16.01% (820) students

have obtained a result between 21 and 40 points, 41.71% (2,128) students obtained a score between 41 and 60 points, 26.62% (1,358) students obtained a score between 61 and 80 points, 12.32% (629) students obtained a result between 81 and 100, and only 2.76% (141) students obtained a result over 101 points (see Table 2).

Health Sciences

This area represents a total of 4,588 students. There is 0.54% (25) students obtained a score between 0 and 20 points out of 120, 8.83% (405) students attained a score between 21 and 40, 35.81% (1,643) students obtained a score between 41 and 60, 30.36% (1,393) students have gotten a score between 61 and 80, 18.74% (860) students got a score between 81 and 100, and only 5.71% (262) students obtained a result over 100 points (see Table 3).

Table 3

Results Obtained in EXACRI Between 2006 and 2016 in Health Sciences Area

School or program	Scores					
	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120
Odontology School	6	29	213	264	177	35
Medicine School	5	19	197	433	461	184
Nursing School	13	263	941	428	126	23
Nutrition Program	0	17	55	64	4	0
Physical Education Program	0	34	24	3	1	0
Biologist pharmaceutical chemist Program	1	43	212	201	90	20
Physical Therapy Program	0	0	1	0	1	0
Total	25	405	1643	1,393	860	262
Percentages (%)	0.54	8.83	35.81	30.36	18.74	5.71

Economic Sciences

In this area, 7,748 students have applied for the test. The results for this area were: 0.32% (25) students attained a score between 0 and 20 points out of 120, 18.24% (1,413) students obtained a score between 21 and 40 points, 42.66% (3,305) students obtained a score between 41 and 60 points, 26.06% (2,019) students got a score between 61 and 80 points, 10.35% (802) students have gotten a score between 81 and 100, and only 2.37% (184) students attained a score between 100 and 120 points (see Table 4).

Table 4

Results Obtained in EXACRI Between 2006 and 2016 in Economic Sciences Area

School or program	Scores					
	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120
Administration Program	12	631	1,178	537	191	30
Accountancy Program	4	495	1,134	634	190	40
Economy School	0	20	44	28	13	4
Computing Sciences Program	3	65	240	139	65	10
Marketing Program	3	144	363	259	102	37
Tourism School	3	58	346	422	241	63
Total	25	1,413	3,305	2,019	802	184
Percentages (%)	0.32	18.24	42.66	26.06	10.35	2.37

Biological Sciences

This is one of the smallest areas of UAN. During the same period of time, 1,283 students were tested in 2007 and 2016. In this area, 0.46% (6) students has gotten a result of 0 to 20 points out of 120, 23.15% (297) students obtained a result between 21 and 40 points, 48.71% (625) students obtained a score between 41 and 60 points, 19.64% (252) students obtained a score between 61 and 80 points, 6.16% (79) students obtained a score between 81 and 100 points, and only 1.87% (24) students got a score between 101 and 120 points (see Table 5).

Table 5

Results Obtained in EXACRI Between 2006 and 2016 in Biological Sciences Area

School or program	Scores					
	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120
Farming School	3	120	210	76	20	6
National Fishery School	0	39	81	31	6	2
Biology School	3	33	98	42	20	7
Veterinary School	0	105	236	103	33	9
Total	6	297	625	252	79	24
Percentages (%)	0.47	23.15	48.71	19.64	6.16	1.87

Engineering

In this area, 0.83% (9) students obtained a score between 0 and 20 points out of 120, 12.45% (135) students obtained a score between 21 and 40, 36.44% (395) students attained a score between 41 and 60 points, 29.52% (320) students got a score between 61 and 80, 16.70% (181) students got an average between 81 and 100 points, and finally, 4.06% (44) students obtained a score between 101 and 120 points (see Table 6).

Table 6

Results Obtained in EXACRI Between 2006 and 2016 in Engineering Area

School or program	Scores					
	0-20	21-40	41-60	61-80	81-100	101-120
Control And Computer Engineering Program	2	12	50	60	38	8
Electronic Engineering Program	2	15	66	59	48	15
Mechanic Engineering Program	3	46	82	49	18	5
Chemist Engineering Program	0	11	47	41	20	8
Mathematics Program	2	24	54	46	14	3
Computer Systems Program	0	27	96	65	43	5
Total	9	135	395	320	181	44
Percentages (%)	0.83	12.45	36.44	29.52	16.7	4.06

Arts

This area was created in 2008 and the musician program is the only one in this area. This program has a reduced number of students, which is reflected in the small number students in every class. According to the register, the first class to graduate from this program was in 2013 with only two students. Later, in 2014 with only three students graduated, and in 2015 with only one student. A total of six students have applied for the English exit test. The results show that 33.33% (2) students got a score between 61 and 80 points out of 120 and 66.66% (4) students attained a score over 101 points.

Discussion

As it was previously mentioned, due to the change of federal government and the alternation among different political parties, the project proposed in 2006 did not continue and English language learning was not a priority any more. Regarding UAN in 2012 changed the English language requirement as an option not as an obligation for the students to graduate.

Figure 1 presents the dynamism and changes caused by this new consideration. It is noticeable that the peaks with better obtained results are located before years 2012 and 2013. Therefore, taking this information into consideration, it is possible to determine that the lack of instruction and the obligation of EFL as a requirement decreased the levels of English previously achieved.

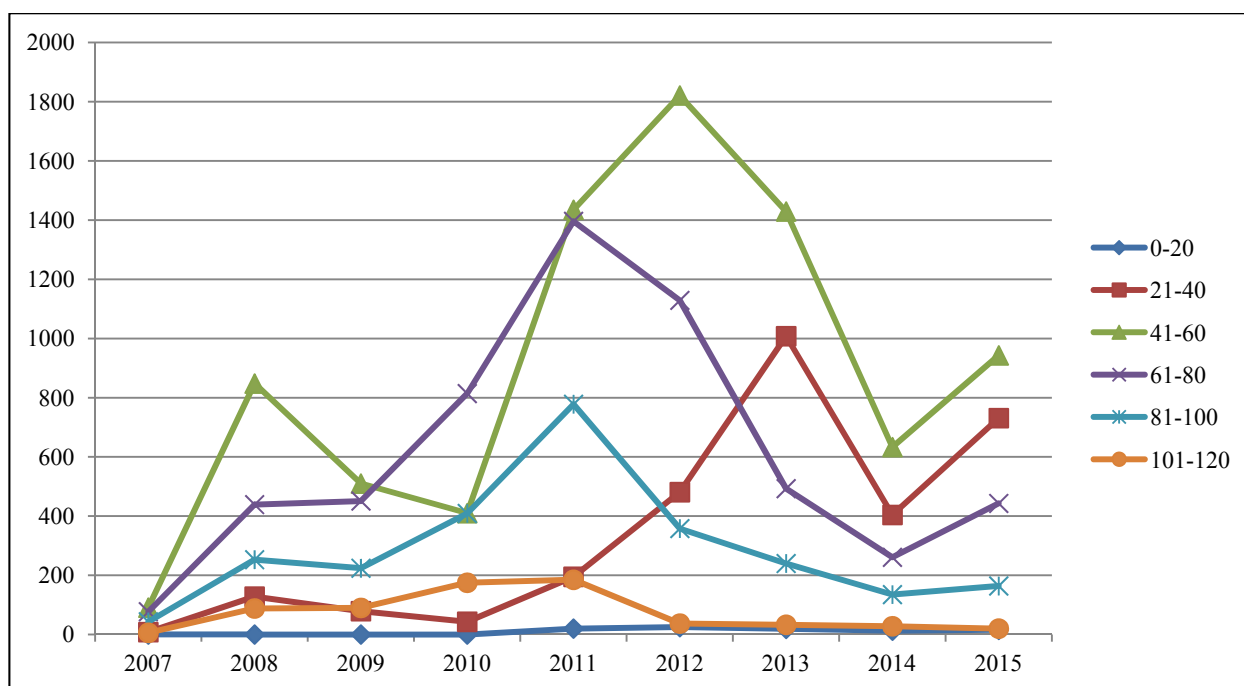


Figure 1. Dynamism and the changes caused by this new consideration.

The evaluation and register of national master and Ph.D. degrees with different modalities and areas named of quality according to their standards, are one of the goals of the National Strategic Plan of Development (PND, Plan Nacional de Desarrollo) 2013-2018, it is a plan of the current government and its purpose is to generate and develop innovation in the scientific and technological knowledge in order to solve problems of social contexts to provide economic and social progress to Mexico (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología [CONACYT], 2017). At the same time, graduate programs type CONACYT provide economic support to students to improve the quality and formation of the human resources encouraging to create new knowledge and publish it through papers and investigations either in journals, magazines, or books.

These 2,155 programs belong to and are certified by “the national program of high-quality programs (PNPC, Programa Nacional de Posgrado de Calidad) that responds to the needs of inclusion, mobility, flexibility, and internationalization of those education programs for of all kind of students who reach these standards. Every year, CONACYT calls for a new register and evaluation of available programs in the list of quality to maintain and to include new programs.

The project focuses on the English language competence on high-level education as a key tool to enroll in high-qualified graduate national and international programs of all areas of the knowledge, because these programs promote the cooperation of international topics for scientific and technological development and encourage the exchange, mobility of students, teachers, and research projects through dissertations of majors, such as Social Sciences and Humanities, Health Sciences, Engineering, Biological, Agriculture, and Arts.

Most of the programs mentioned require as prerequisite the certification of English language competence to attain a scholarship and enrollment in any of these programs.

At the end of the program, graduated students must demonstrate evidence of their improvement of the competence and got a certificate of English to interact in national and international academic English language contexts.

The requisite of English language competence is one of the main problems for students of the UAN to enroll in CONACYT graduate programs, the institution has minimized the importance of EFL despite global education, economics, and political demands to all people to be competitive and to gain skills, such as use of technology and English language competence and a third language to succeed in the academic and labor field.

Conclusions

EFL has become a key tool to implement a high-quality education system, especially when this tool is provided to higher education students. EFL facilitates not only access to technologies and information, but also it makes easier to understand other cultures and to interact with them and attend new demands in this globalized world.

Mexico is a very productive country, which has created strong bonds with many countries around the world through different commercial agreements. Some of the most important agreements are connected to North America, China, and Europe. In order to maintain and increase these bonds, it is important to professionalize students in the different areas of knowledge. Many universities in Mexico are in the pursuit of competitiveness locally and internationally, and this institution in particular has done some efforts to provide their students with tools to be competitive in the labor field. In the different possible scenarios, however, they are still on the process to accomplish their goals.

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