

An exploration of Mexican students' motivation in EFL classroom assessment

David Ewing Ryan
Juan Carlos Ortega
Janeth Tello Carrillo

Universidad Veracruzana

Introduction

This study is an illustration of how one Mexican university is attempting to reach out and guide its new students towards the fulfillment of one specific requirement: providing proof of proficiency for beginner level English. It is also a study of how, in the process of so doing, it seeks to endow these students with the confidence and motivation they will need for coping with similar challenges, both during their time at university as well as when they begin new chapters in their lives following graduation.

The setting

English has become increasingly important in Mexico from World War II onward, and English classes are now part of Mexico's national curriculum at all educational levels. In 2000 the Universidad Veracruzana (UV), a large, public university in the southeastern state of Veracruz, made proof of proficiency in beginner level English a mandatory minimum exit requirement for students graduating from every discipline. The options for providing such proof are taking and passing the university's beginner-level language courses English One and Two, corresponding to CEFR¹ levels pre-A1 and A1 respectively, or by passing an English language proficiency test calibrated at CEFR level A1 or A2.

¹ *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, Council of Europe: 2001.

Unfortunately, since the UV's decision to require proof of proficiency was brought into effect, unforeseen obstacles have complicated the process for large numbers of students, chief among them being that undergraduates arrive with an insufficient or nonexistent estimation of their English proficiency. Added to new students' general sense of apprehension and uncertainty is not knowing which option to choose as a way of satisfying the university's English language requirement. Indeed, there have been many complaints, from students and teachers alike, that entrants with proficiency above the required level mistakenly pursue lower-level courses instead of waiving them via one of the proficiency tests mentioned above.

The Online English Diagnostic Test (OEDT)

Created in 2009 as a response to the problem, the OEDT was first administered in 2010. It was designed as a collaborative effort by a team of UV teachers, staff, and technicians from three separate departments. Its purpose is to provide newly admitted undergraduates with a general assessment of their level of English by means of a low-anxiety, free, convenient, and confidential assessment instrument available online day and night.

Test diagnosis

After students complete the test, one of four separate recommendations – in lieu of a traditional grade – is generated by the software. These include the following:

1. Take an English One class.
2. Take the English One proficiency test and upon passing, enroll in an English Two class.
3. Take both, the English One and the English Two proficiency tests and, upon passing, waive the requirement of taking the beginner level English classes.

4. Take a level A2 proficiency test and upon passing, waive the requirement of taking the beginner level English classes, and enroll instead in a B1 intermediate class, to eventually reach level B2 and become eligible for financial aid for participation in student international mobility programs.

In 2013, a survey component with 23 questions on preferred styles of learning was added to the OEDT, thereby making it possible for students to receive two separate kinds of recommendation. While the first, seen above, provides advice regarding the type of coursework or testing to pursue, the second provides information on the most appropriate mode of delivery for completing such coursework, be it traditional face-to-face, online, autonomous, or combining and personalizing elements of all three in blended learning.

Purpose of the study

In June 2015, a record number of new students (slightly less than 13,000 or 86% of the entire freshman class of August 2015) voluntarily took the OEDT. While this would obviously seem to confirm the test's popularity, what has not been known until now is what students - by far, the most important segment of the test's stakeholders - think of the test. One of the principle aims of the study, then, was to liberate the voices of students taking the OEDT as a way of evaluating its impact on participants.

It can also be maintained that the test's open and non-restrictive nature together with the questionnaire component helps to establish the test as an effective tool in involving students in their own learning. Given that motivation is one of the key variables involved in successful learning, a further aim was to investigate the supposed link that exists between students'

positive perceptions of the OEDT and their level of motivation once they began their studies in English One.

Motivation in language learning

Motivation can loosely be defined as “a cluster of factors that ‘energize behavior and give it direction’” (Hilgard, Atkinson, and Atkinson 1979, p. 281, as cited in Arnold and Brown, 1999, p.13). A long list of scholars in the fields of applied linguistics and educational psychology (e.g. Schunk, 1991; Weiner, 1992; Brown, 1994; Dornyei, 1994, to name but a few) consider motivation to be central to the successful acquisition of an L2.

Serious research into the impact of motivation on second language learning began in Canada in the 1950s, culminating with Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) groundbreaking instrumental/integrative model. This separated L2 motivation into two types of broad needs: those considered to emerge from practical stimuli such as the need to meet a university language requirement, and those considered to emerge from socio-cultural stimuli such as an emotional attraction towards, or even a desire to assimilate within, the target language culture (Arnold and Brown, 1999, p.13). The next major contribution to L2 motivation theory was Deci & Ryan’s (1985) intrinsic/extrinsic model based on animal behavior studies from the 1950s. The theory locates the intrinsic/extrinsic dichotomy at the core of the authors’ Self Determination Theory (SDT), as a way of distinguishing between the different types of goals that form the basis of human action (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.55).

In the mid-1990s, research conducted by Oxford and Shearin (1994) shed light on the role of self-efficacy as one of the most crucial contributors to learner motivation. This can be described as the degree to which learners feel a sense of “effectiveness” within themselves, as

well as the level of control they are able to exert over the outcomes of the learning process (Arnold and Brown, 1999, p.17). Subsequently, it is primarily the work of Dörnyei (2001, 2003, 2009, 2012) that has helped further advance L2 motivation theory. He documents the transition from a focus within the domain mainly on quantitative-driven studies to ones that focus more on qualitative approaches, while also refining his previous research into a new framework known as the “L2 Motivational Self System”, largely inspired from Gardner and Lambert’s integrative/instrumental model.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was used for the study. First, the OEDT was uploaded to a university website in June 2015 and students voluntarily took the test in a span of one month. Statistics were compiled based on the results and in June 2016, a small sample was identified from students who had used the test’s diagnosis to enroll in and successfully complete English One. An email was sent asking if they would consider participating in a semi-structured interview², and these were eventually carried out with five students during the summer of 2016.

Findings and Discussion:

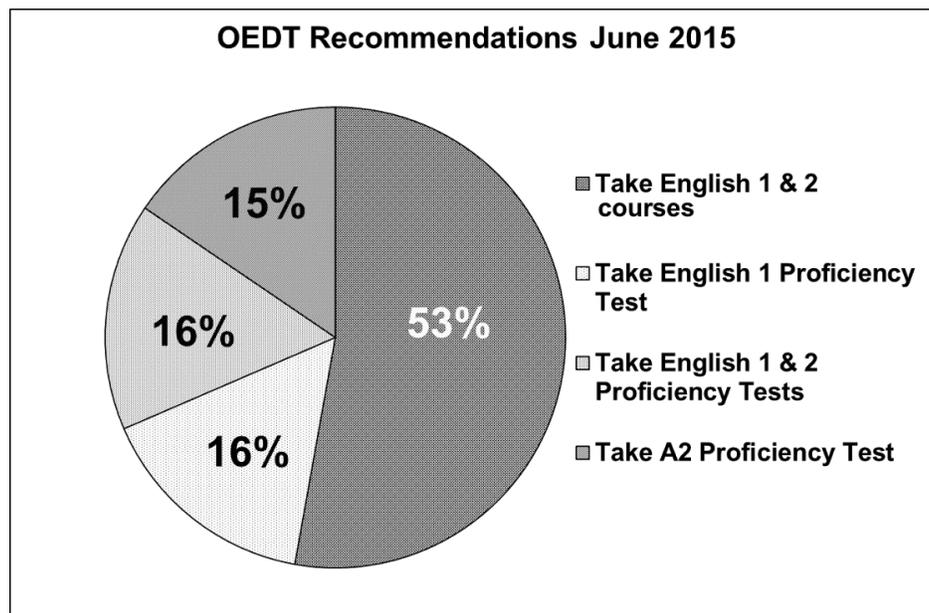
A) Quantitative Phase

The results of the June 2015 administration of the OEDT (Figure 1) show that over half of the candidature (6,845 students or 53%) received a recommendation to take the university’s two beginner level English classes. The poor level of performance of these students suggests

² A copy of the complete interview protocol is available upon request: dewing@uv.mx

that their level of English was below pre-A1 and therefore practically non-existent. The rest of the June 2015 candidature was divided almost equally among those who received recommendations two, three, and four of the OEDT (pp.2-3).

Figure 1: Results of June 2015 administration of the OEDT



B) Qualitative Phase

The semi-structured interviews yielded a rich set of data. As a result of triangulated analysis, three categories emerged that appeared to have overwhelming significance for students.

Category 1: the positive impact of the OEDT in stimulating motivation when students began their tuition in English

The five interviewees were almost unanimous in their shared perception of the OEDT as having increased their level of motivation when they began their first English class at university.

This was addressed in the interviews via Questions 6 and 7, both of which employed Likert-

type scales, and in a follow-up question probing interviewees' motivation for ticking Box C in Question 7. Ana³, for example, explained that she liked the fact that the OEDT showed her “which skills I was good at and which skills I still needed to work on so that I could work harder on those areas.” The four other students echoed this thought, with Andrés observing that thanks to the test's diagnosis, he had a clear idea of “where I needed to begin”.

Question 6. When you started English One, what was your approximate level of motivation regarding English learning? Please choose a number on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
0% motivation	25% motivation	50% motivation	75% motivation	100% motivation
	Andrés	Pedro	María	Vero Ana

Question 7. Which of the following explanations describe(s) where your level of motivation may have come from when you started your first English class? Please tick any of the boxes that apply. If none apply, then please leave the form blank.

“It's possible that the level of motivation I had when beginning English One came from ...”

A	B	C	D	E
some nice things I heard about the teacher	a sense of enthusiasm about taking a new class	the sense of confidence I had after taking the Online English Diagnostic Test	the fact that a friend was going to take the class with me	a sense of enthusiasm about beginning university
	Ana	Vero Andrés Ana Pedro	Vero María	Ana María

³ In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, their real names were changed to fictitious ones following data collection.

Category 2: the positive impact of the OEDT on levels of student motivation during classroom assessment

The majority of interviewees reported having medium to medium-high levels of motivation on formal (i.e. graded) classroom assessments, such as tests and quizzes. This theme was addressed in Question 10 and in a follow-up question that asked interviewees to consider where this sense of motivation might have come from. Vero felt that this was due to the positive experience she had when taking a prior test (the OEDT). This correlates with research carried out by Pekrun et al (2002, as cited in Gläser-Zikuda et al., 2013) showing how previous experiences can play a crucial role in, both, the amount of *control* students feel they have in any given educational situation, as well as the amount of *value* they assign to the situation.

Question 10. As you continued with your studies in English One, what was your level of motivation when taking classroom quizzes and tests that were formally graded? Please choose a number on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
0% motivation	25% motivation	50% motivation	75% motivation	100% motivation
	Pedro	Ana	Vero Andrés María	

Category 3: motivation to continue language study

It is heartening to note that during the course of the interviews, all five students spoke of their interest in continuing English at university as a way of eventually taking advantage of the UV's financial aid programs for study abroad. Students were fully aware of the university's requirement of having a minimum level of B2 in English in order to do this, but rather than being deterred they tended to see this as a goal in and of itself. According to Vero, "Yes, the idea of studying abroad sounds really exciting, but even if I'm unable to do so, I plan to continue

studying in order to gain more and more knowledge about the language.” Students’ responses here might be associated with Weiner’s (1994) theory of social motivation which sees learners’ needs being driven primarily from the socio-cultural environment in which they live. In a world with English as the lingua franca and a university environment with an ever-increasing focus on internationalization, UV students may well feel an intrinsic need to merge with these shifting trends. Arnold (2011, pp.18-19) describing Tajfeld’s (1978) theory of ‘transactional process’ asserts: “learners are not anchored in a fixed state but rather are conditioned by forces in the social context affecting them...The others we relate to in transactions in the target language may be those we coincide with in time and space as we participate in the language learning adventure taking place”.

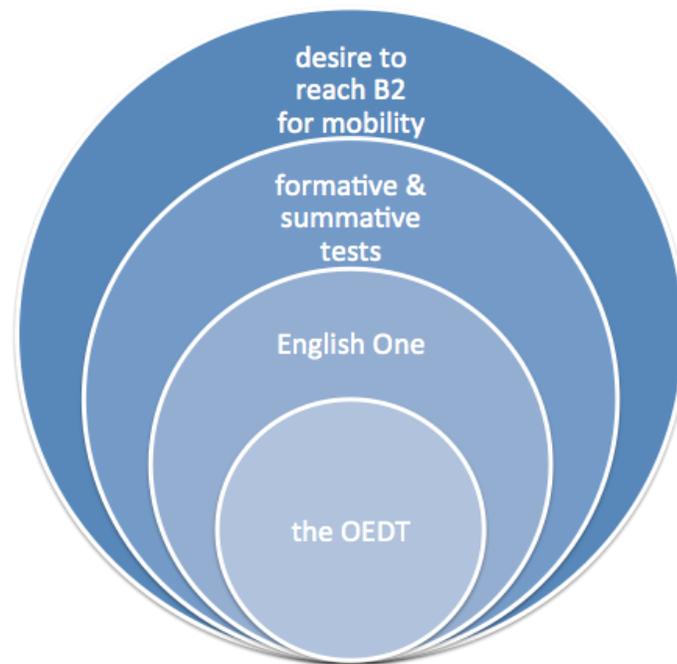
Conclusion: impact on language learning and testing

It seems fair to assume that when examining the learning arch that takes place in any kind of successful educational tuition, the logical place to begin would be by looking at the classes a student takes, the quality of these, along with sundry other variables such as the level of motivation exhibited by both teacher and student alike. An examination of the quality of the classroom exercises, quizzes and tests (i.e. formative assessment) throughout the life of the course might be included as further evidence of how well the student learned, and the investigation might end by looking at how the student performed on the final, summative assessment.

The view of impact as seen from the vantage point of this study, however, is somewhat different (Figure 2). Here, the point of inception for beginning a course of action came not from the initiation of classes themselves, but rather from an online test. The results of the

study suggest that the act of taking the test provided a positive stimulus to students' levels of motivation when initiating their first English class, thus improving their levels of learning, which in turn appears to have flowed back into their levels of motivation on both formative and summative assessments. From there, students appeared to be motivated to take their new-found appreciation of English outside the confines of the classroom, with a desire to conquer new boundaries as a result of study abroad in a foreign country.

Figure 2: apparent impact of the OEDT, adapted from Messick (1989) and McNamara (2001)



The relationship between learning and assessment, therefore, is not seen from a linear, step-by-step perspective, but rather from a cyclical, multi-faceted one, with a constant fluctuation of one informing the other. It calls to mind Messick's (1989) test validity matrix, and McNamara's (2001) reframing of this as a series of four interconnected rings, with societal impact located in the outermost sphere, impacted by and engulfing the previous three (p.336).

In a larger sense, students who participated in the study might be motivated by a desire to continue their tuition in English as a way of connecting with something beyond their day-to-day lives and the limits of their immediate surroundings. Indeed, seen in this sense, students' desires may very well be associated with the primeval human need of providing a sense of meaning and purpose to one's own life. As Arnold states at the end of her (1999) Preface, "perhaps the common ground upon which all rest – both in language learning and the greater whole of society – is a desire to contribute to the growth of human potential" (p.xiii).

Selected References

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