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Academic Achievement of Foreign Language Undergraduate Students during Pandemic Times

ABSTRACT

This research article aims to show the academic achievement in the form of marks of students of the third year's subject 'Teaching and Learning English' located in the Degree in Primary Education (Faculty of Education, University of Murcia, Spain). Our corpus of participants has five different groups (including the bilingual group) with a total number of n=1496 students with an average per academic year of n=374 students whose marks have been analysed comparing four different academic years. Taking into account the subject programme, the performance of the students during the normal year, during the lockdown, in the blended learning year (face-to-face and online) and in the return-to-normal year have been analysed. The results show that in both the lockdown and the blended learning year the performance is higher than in the other academic years, which leads us to question whether the pandemic really influenced the assessment and teaching conditions of the subject.

KEYWORDS

foreign languages; education; pandemic; academic achievement; communicative competence

1. Introduction

The 2030 agenda set by the UN presents seventeen Sustainable Development Goals that aim to make our lives better and, above all, to make our societies and, therefore, our cultures more sustainable. Language education is not explicitly included in these goals, but it is addressed by several of them. From our point of view, the transversality of language is a key factor in the progress of humanity and in people's daily lives. This abstract concept applies to languages and these, whether they are mother tongues, second or foreign languages, enable communication and, above all, shape our perception of reality.

The goals by which we consider that the acquisition and development of a foreign language is most clearly addressed are number four *Quality education*,

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since, logically, an integral approach to education seeks to provide individuals with essential knowledge and skills to interact with other societies and cultures. Objective ten, which refers to the reduction of inequalities, also contemplates the learning of languages, because this linguistic knowledge helps human beings to progress and improve their status within the social fabric. Moreover, this allows clear access to individual as well as collective well-being. Another objective would be linked to Goals sixteen and seventeen, *Peace, justice and strong institutions* and *Partnerships for the goals*.

These two goals refer to intercultural education and the coexistence of different cultures, respectively. To this end, knowledge of languages and their cultures is essential to understand certain beliefs, customs, ideas and stories related to countries and geographical areas. Given the significance attributed to (any) language learning, in these pages we focus on the academic achievement of trainee teachers in one of the specific subjects they have in their curriculum: the third year subject which focuses on the teaching and learning of the English language. We have analysed how the marks from different groups of participants have changed over the last four years (including the period of the pandemic). We must stress once again that they will become educators in the future and the success of the language teaching process to the new generation will depend on their language awareness in foreign language acquisitions and on their linguistic skills.

2. Difficulties in accessing English as a foreign language

Foreign language learning may be related to certain situations, but, from our point of view, the main reason must be the opening of the mind; through the knowledge of another language one gains access to other linguistic signs, to other codes, in short, to another structuring of the mind (Craig, 2018; Durán, 2008). The awareness of the existence of a vision of reality from a different, but at the same time convergent, prism must be the fundamental approach to the aforementioned learning (Barili & Byram, 2021; Byram, 1997). In the context of the Spanish education system, the background in which our study has been carried out, there has been an attempt over the last few decades to make approaches to English teaching and learning and bilingualism converge. This responds to an effort to get students to work both with their mother tongue and the English language. Nevertheless, there is still a tendency to consider English merely as a foreign language not a vehicular one in education.

One of the factors that hinder the successful acquisition of English as a foreign language in the Spanish context is the lack of motivation for learning English among the learners. Some of the contributing elements is the major dubbing industry that makes a significant contribution to the economy of this country. This is compounded by the fact that the grammatical approach that has been perpetuated

in the classroom prevents more time from being devoted to oral expression or to the understanding of culture which is a key fact that conditions the language (Afshar & Yousefi, 2019; Baleghizadeh & Saneie, 2013). Moreover, the reminiscence of people's experiences outside the country and the lack of interaction with native speakers mean that the language is learned in such a way that there is no clear reference and self-regulation of the evolution of the linguistic skills of individuals approaching the new language.

As we know, mastering a language requires a balanced level of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Conversation is added as a skill highly related to the first two. And it is highly relevant to take into account the cultural factors that surround these skills. As we know from Sapir-Whorf's contributions, linguistic relativity is one of the factors that governs the relationships established between language use and thinking. One of the most frequent errors that we see through contrastive grammar is the direct correspondence that learners of the foreign language make of the elements of the language, believing that there are mimetic parallels between the languages. The lack of a clear awareness of this makes access to the new language very difficult. In addition, in the absence of any awareness of the importance of the concept of communicative competence among educators and learners, the language is not transmitted in a complete way. Therefore, as we shall see below, the consolidation of such competence in curricula and syllabuses must be an aspiration that significantly improves learning issues.

3. Towards the consolidation of communicative competence as a goal of methodological designs in the English foreign language classroom

In the third decade of the 21st century, foreign language classroom dynamics should be articulated around the development of a communicative competence, mainly because of the presence of linguistic skills worked on at the same time and the relevance of the contextual updating it allows. Emerging technologies put abundant resources at the learners' disposal to develop their competence. Thus, access to series or films in original and subtitled versions, to documents in the foreign language found on the web, to applications that help to learn more about grammar or how to pronounce certain words become allies in the learning of that language and can complement the formal education already provided through the subjects in the curricula or syllabuses.

The trainee teacher who, in this case, is an essential element of our research, has to be immersed in the foreign language in order to internalise it and thus be able to enhance learners' pleasure in foreign language learning. This requires the mastering of the language. The third year subject *Teaching and learning English*, for example, cannot be understood as just another subject where the contents are assimilated and shown in a final test, since the assessment is based not only on

the evaluation of theoretical aspects, but also on the information related to all the linguistic skills. It is therefore urgent for teachers to be aware of the conditions necessary for a fruitful foreign language teaching and learning process (Le Roux, 2002; Leung, 2005; Papi & Khajavy, 2021; Pérez Cañado & Madrid, 2004; Shanahan & Beck, 2006; Soland & Sandilos, 2021). The surrounding learning conditions, the motivation and the purpose of learning are important dimensions when it comes to assessing academic performance in any related subject. Sometimes, if there is no motivation and the foreign language subject is dealt with as just another subject, there is a significant failure in the results obtained.

In this article we are interested in checking whether academic achievement is an objective fact that can be measured through the exam marks and the number of students who obtained the pass mark during the first exam session of the annual examination schedule. The comparative analysis we propose, taking as a reference four academic years that include the pandemic period, can also shed light on how certain socio-sanitary conditions affect the development of a subject. It may be possible that, in a situation of global alarm, the demands posed by the third year subject in question could not be met by suffering students and teachers. It can also be considered as an influential aspect the fact that assessment during the lockdown required technological means and these provide with opportunities for cheating (although this is not a generalised fact). Therefore, we will now analyse the academic performance of different students taking the aforementioned subject exam and check their evolution over the four academic years mentioned above.

4. Material and Methods

4.1. Aim of the research

The main objective of this study is to analyse the academic performance of third year students of the Degree in Primary Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Murcia, especially in the subject ‘Teaching and Learning English’. These students take this subject as learners of a foreign language. The intention is to compare their performance during four different academic years spanning the periods between pre-pandemic and post-pandemic. From our point of view, the teaching conditions will determine the possible difference between the marks obtained by these students.

4.2. Participants

Four different groups of students are monitores. The total number of participants in the study, including students from the bilingual group, is shown in table 1 below. The total would be 1496 and the average per academic year would be 374 students.

Table 1. Distribution of the student body according to academic years (including the bilingual group)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=337)	(n=353)	(n=392)	(n=414)

Table 2 shows the distribution of students, excluding the bilingual group. Thus, the total would be 1269 and the average per academic year would be 317 students.

Table 2. Distribution of the student body according to academic years (excluding the bilingual group)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=277)	(n=298)	(n=333)	(n=361)

4.3. Sources and data analysis plan

In order to find out the performance of these students by academic year, we accessed the grades obtained in the first exam session of the annual examination schedule, since other later exam sessions would focus on failing students. We try to highlight the percentage of those who pass the subject, as well as the average corresponding to the grades. This was done in a global way as well as separating the bilingual group. It is important to point out that throughout the year, language skills along with didactic issues are worked on in the subject. At the end of the course the evaluation measures these skills through different tests, including multiple choice exams, oral tests and written assignments.

5. Results

In this section we show the students' performance over the four academic years. We will differentiate between overall and per-group data. It is interesting to note that we provide both the percentage of students who pass the subject, as well as the arithmetic mean obtained. This will allow us to verify that those students who pass the subject also do so with a good grade, while the deficiencies are shown in the percentage of students who do not achieve an optimum performance. Only the first exam session is kept under scrutiny because it shows the students' performance after developing their language skills for a year. The rest of the exam sessions of the annual examination schedule are mainly oriented to correct the students' performance deficiencies.

Table 3. Percentage of students who pass the subject and the average marks they obtain

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=119/337 35%) $\bar{X} = 7.77$	(n=169/353 48%) $\bar{X} = 7.82$	(n=179/392 45%) $\bar{X} = 7.53$	(n=158/414 38%) $\bar{X} = 8.02$

The overall results show that, before the pandemic, one third of students passed the subject in the first exam session (June) (see Table 3). Although this is not a high percentage, the average grade obtained is high, standing at 7.77. On the other hand, we can see that during the pandemic the percentage of students who pass the subject averages around 48% – almost half of the students –, which is significantly higher than in the previous academic year. This percentage remains stable in the blended learning academic year – face-to-face and online learning – but drops to 38% in the post-pandemic period. However, the average number of students is higher in the last academic year.

Table 4. Percentage of students who pass the subject and the average marks they obtain (excluding the bilingual group)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=82/277 29%) $\bar{X} = 7.83$	(n=125/298 42%) $\bar{X} = 7.88$	(n=127/333 38%) $\bar{X} = 7.57$	(n=121/361 33%) $\bar{X} = 7.97$

The overall results, not including the bilingual group, maintain the trend observed in the general performance. That is to say, there are better percentages of academic performance during the pandemic and blended learning academic years. There is a downward oscillation in the percentages, but the average corresponding to the marks is maintained and sometimes higher than that of the overall data.

Table 5. Percentage of students who pass the subject and the average marks they obtain (bilingual group only)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=37/60 62%) $\bar{X} = 7.52$	(n=44/55 80%) $\bar{X} = 7.59$	(n=52/59 88%) $\bar{X} = 7.38$	(n=37/53 69%) $\bar{X} = 8.24$

The results for the bilingual group show a very high percentage of students passing the subject during the pandemic and the year in which blended learning took place. In the other two years, although the percentage is high, it is not as significant as in the two academic years in question. We should highlight the average obtained by students during the post-pandemic year, with an 8.24 being a high one. It should be noted that the linguistic requirements to be accepted in the bilingual group in the initial year of the degree are close to a B2 level since they receive more than 60% of their teaching in the foreign language. Therefore, this good performance is expected from them.

Table 6. Percentage of students who pass the subject and the average marks they obtain (group two only)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=20/88 23%) $\bar{X} = 7.41$	(n=36/92 39%) $\bar{X} = 7.55$	(n=38/101 37%) $\bar{X} = 7.49$	(n=47/109 43%) $\bar{X} = 7.68$

If we look at the specific data for group number two, the percentages for the pandemic and blended learning years far exceed those for the 2018/2019 academic year, rising by more than 15%. It is curious how in the 2021/2022 academic year the percentage has improved in comparison to the previous ones. The average mark of students who pass the subject in June remains constant over the four academic years.

Table 7. Percentage of students who pass the subject and the average marks they obtain (group three only)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=23/81 28%) $\bar{X} = 8.29$	(n=46/92 50%) $\bar{X} = 7.69$	(n=37/93 39%) $\bar{X} = 7.67$	(n=40/76 52%) $\bar{X} = 7.33$

Group three follows a similar pattern to that shown by group two, as in the pandemic year 50% of the students passed the subject. The previous year the percentage was particularly low: 28%. During the blended learning course, the percentage dropped to 39%. In 2021/2022 there was a significant improvement, rising to 52%. The average grades are consistently above 7.5, resulting in the paradox that the academic year with the lowest exam pass rates, has the highest average rate: 8.29.

Table 8. Percentage of students who pass the subject and the average marks they obtain (group five only)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=15/62 24%) $\bar{X} = 8.54$	(n=27/55 49%) $\bar{X} = 8.53$	(n=23/61 37%) $\bar{X} = 7.52$	(n=22/77 31%) $\bar{X} = 8.28$

Since group 4 consists of future French specialists, we move on to the next one. Group five repeats the pattern of the two previous years. The very low percentage in 2018/2019 rises in the year of the pandemic and then falls in 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. In this case, the average marks of the students who pass the exam are excellent, more than 8.2 in three out of the four academic years under scrutiny.

Table 9. Percentage of students who pass the subject and the average marks they obtain (group six only)

Normal (2018/2019)	Pandemic (2019/2020)	Blended learning (2020/2021)	Post-pandemic (2021/2022)
(n=24/46 52%) $\bar{X} = 7.1$	(n=16/59 27%) $\bar{X} = 7.75$	(n=29/78 37%) $\bar{X} = 7.62$	(n=12/105 11%) $\bar{X} = 8.61$

Finally, group six differs from the others. The percentage of students who passed the subject declined from 52% in 2018/2019 to 27% in the pandemic academic year. It slightly increased during the blended learning year before falling again in 2021/2022. However, in the latter year, the average score is 8.61. It is once again clear that the students who pass the subject are very competent in English.

6. Discussion

The data obtained show several very interesting situations, especially with regard to performance during the pandemic. It is clear from the percentages that all students perform better in the case of the academic years when both the lockdown and the mixed methodology (combination of face-to-face and online learning) were implemented. This fact may be due to several circumstances; first, the uncertainty resulting from the pandemic and the alteration in classroom dynamics (Hidalgo et al., 2021; Huei et al. 2021; Sutarni et al., 2021) it brought, replacing the face-to-face model with an online one, and with the assessment tests being similarly affected. In the case of blended learning, the reduction of face-to-face lessons together with the use of an online communication tool also distracted teachers and students to some extent, leading to special didactic circumstances.

It has been verified through performance that, once the usual teaching mode is re-established, the percentages are equal to the pre-pandemic ones. There is a stability of performance according to the evaluation parameters set in the teaching guide of the subject, focusing on the evaluation of all linguistic skills and considering the subject as a continuum. As we have seen, the bilingual group has been included among the statistics to be considered. This group follows the same pattern, although, as expected, due to the characteristics of the group, the results are much more positive in terms of obtaining the pass mark.

There are many factors to reflect on in this analysis. One of them is the pass marks in the first exam session include a fairly high average of impressive scores. This means that students who follow the subject regularly and acquire language awareness have no problem in showing their proficiency in the different language skills (Ardasheva et al., 2011; Bai & Wang, 2020; Rahardjo & Petiwi, 2020; Sercu, 2006), while the rest - who generally perceive the subject as one more based on learning by rote - tend to fail. This could also be influenced by the fact that the teachers are not the same in the different groups, but in this case, we should point out that all the students take the same test, so there are no differences in this

respect. There are, however, factors that cannot be influenced, as the configuration of the groups is established by the Secretariat and the students' linguistic skills is not a pertinent criterion. Therefore, randomly, there may be a group where bright students converge and vice versa; but, according to the statistics, the performance between groups is quite similar. Therefore, on the basis of this discussion, we proceed to the conclusions of the study in the following section.

7. Conclusions, future implications and limitations of the study

We conclude this study by stressing the importance of being aware of what it means to teach a foreign language. First of all, it cannot be considered as just another subject, since a language is not learnt at a specific moment but as part of the lifelong learning process. Therefore, the concept of communicative competence should guide the methodological designs applied in classrooms where English is taught. As far as teachers and students are concerned, they must be motivated, even if there are difficulties related to resources or to the grammatical tradition that has existed over the years (Fullan, 2018; Hargreaves, 1994).

As this study has shown, individual and collective circumstances also have to be born in mind and contexts greatly affect the processes of teaching and learning a foreign language. In our case, we have observed how the lockdown has led to different assessment conditions, raising students' performance in that particular period (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2022). On the other hand, it has been observed that those students who are able to follow the subject throughout the academic year obtain a relevant average grade, corroborating what has been indicated about the understanding of the subject as a continuum and not as a one-time action that is just another part of the curriculum or syllabus.

The main challenge arising from our contribution has to do with ensuring that performance can be uniform in all situations and issues and, above all, with transforming the conception of the foreign language in our reality. People should be made aware that foreign language learning will contribute to their social integration by allowing them to learn about other cultures and realities, as well as offering them the possibility of having a communication tool to be able to interact in other countries and with other people.

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