Students' Communicative Competence and Language Program Evaluation

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Abstract: There is no dilemma at present times that language learning means learning how to use the language and not learning to know about the language. Exactly for this purpose, in today's global world characterized by massification and mobility in the field of education, the Council of Europe - Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), as a universal instrument allowing individuals to have a record of the different elements of their language learning achievement, begins its treatment of language use through the context of communication.Language programs at different institutions organize their work in the way that learners use the general competencies they bring with them, but also develop them further. Nonetheless, successful completion of university language courses does not always mean that the student has mastered the language and can use it for communication. This mostly refers to the cases where the language courses are treated as part of the curricula while the other instruction is in the L1. The fact that students at such institutions are not required to take any standardized English proficiency test put the effectiveness of the complete language program under a question mark. In order to provide evidence that its quality language provisionresulted in improved communicative competencefor students, the Language Center (LC) of the South East European University (SEEU) in Tetovo, Macedonia, introduced final oral examination as a part of the course grading criteria. The aim of this paper is to determine whether the introduction of the oral examination as a part of the final achievement exam hashelped raise student's awareness of the need to improve their communication skills and thus attain better performance. Participants of the study are 114 students from eight sections, two per level, starting from beginner to upper intermediate, whose final scores will be followed in the last three exam sessions. In addition, individual students will be chosen and their progress followed during three academic terms in order to show the development of their communication skills. The results are expected to be used as an indicator for program evaluation by the University management and external evaluation.

Introduction

Language institutions, no matter whether they function independentlyor as parts of Universities, are faced with the necessity of evaluating their programs. This evaluation might be required by all stakeholders involved in their functioning,starting withthestudents themselves, the management and administration, the parents, andin the case of South East European University (SEEU), by potential employers. This last stakeholder group is especially important nowadays when relevant international bodies and national institutionsare issuing recommendationsfor strengthening the link between universities and the economy in order to create a skilled labor force that can respond to the needs of the employment market. (Conclusions of the Council of Europe from Nov. 2012 on education and training in Europe 2020, Strategy for Educational Development 2005 – 2015 by the Ministry of Education of RM).

As suggested by Lynch (1996), the program evaluation can take the form of student course evaluations, teacher questionnaires, achievement tests at the beginning and end of a period of instruction, or having an external expert prepare a report about the particular program. All the information gathered in this way is useful, but we believe that the most critical and valuable information about the strengths of a language program can be obtained from how well students use the language(s) being taught for communication or any other practical purpose, depending on the type of the program – e.g.if the program prepares students to pass a language proficiency test that will allow them to enter some other program or study.

In casessuch as ours, where the language program has multiple purposes – to prepare students to function successfully in non-English speaking communities that aspire to be internationally integrated; and to provide them with opportunities for mobility, research and career development abroad – the necessity of knowing the language for communication seems even more relevant.

The SEEU context

SEEU operates in three languages – English, Albanian and Macedonian – and language-skills development within a multi-lingual society is a central part of every SEEU student's academic career profile, both as required subjects and as optional elective courses. The University Language Center (LC) is an independent academic unit that provides obligatory and elective language courses for the faculties of Business and Economics, Law, Computer Sciences, Public Administration and Political Sciences, and Languages, Cultures and Communication. All these courses are integrated into the Faculties' curricula and students gain ECTS credits upon their completion. This means that the LC does not have its own students, especially since

there are no entry criteria for English; instead, students are tested at enrollment and placed at different levels. However, the University realizes the value of learning languages and its benefits for raising a student's profile and competitiveness and provides ongoing support, especially with regard to the English program, which contributes to the internationalization strategy as well as the employability of its graduates.

The English program is the broadest, since all students are required to take English courses in the first four semesters. They must complete four levels of General Englishand reach level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, developed by the Council of Europe for the purpose of measuring foreign language proficiency). After completing this requirement, students have the opportunity to enter a subject-oriented English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class. Those whose tests show that they have the required proficiency above level B1 (our level 4) can take Academic English in semester 1 and Advanced Academic English in semester 2 before starting ESP.

There are clearly defined and appropriately varied criteria according to which students can receive a passing grade from the language courses: attendance, participation, presentation or project, speaking and writing skills evaluation, quizzes, and thefinal exam; these are all grading components. For evaluatingspeaking and writings skills, the students are fully informed and have the opportunity to practice with the published rubrics, following the recommendations on the practice and application component of the SIOP Model. (Echevarria, Vogt and Short 2007). What is more, the final exams are cross-moderated in order to achieve greater objectivity.
This is the area where we face the issue of balancing achievement and proficiency and where program evaluation could bring evidence of the strengths and weaknesses of the LC with regard to students' ability to use the language for their career development as well as for future study.

Measuring students' progress and program effectiveness

Since the program in question aims to prepare students to use English for employment, mobility and further study and does not require taking any standardized proficiency test, and taking into consideration that all English final tests are achievement ones, it seems that there is no 'real' measure of how well students can use the language after graduation. We mustbear in mind that an achievement test measures what a person knows, how much they know, and compares them with a group that has the same knowledge, while a proficiency test measures what a person knows, but with an emphasis on how well they will be able to apply that knowledge in the future. (Test English Proficiency, 2011). It would be ideal for students to take

both these tests during their academic study, but it would mean burdening them with extra costs.

In order to provide information about student progress and program effectiveness in the existing circumstances, we applied two instruments: First, we created our own institutional proficiency test to be given to students at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Our aim was to see whether there would be difference in the score achieved at the end of the semester after 14 weeks of instruction and if so, how big the difference would be. This instrument has been applied for two years and it shows significant improvement of students' scores at the final exam after a certain period of instruction. What is more, one study conducted at SEEU demonstrated a correlation between achievement and proficiency, meaning that good scores on the achievement tests mean higher proficiency (Kareva, Deari &Ramadani, 2013).

The second instrument applied was the introduction of an oral examination as an obligatory course-grading requirement at the end of the semester. Its main aim was to raise awareness among students about the importance of the practical application of their knowledge so that they can pay more attention to developing their speaking and communication skills during English classes and to using every opportunity in and outside the classroom to practice English. It was also expected to provide teacherswith information onhow well students had learned the language for use in real-life, authentic situations.

Communicative Competence

What is the best way to learn if students are competent in the target language? How do we know that they can apply what they have learned in classroom and use it for communication and social interaction? In order to define the term communicative competence, Bagaric (2007) calls upon the work of Chomsky, who differentiates between "competence (the monolingual speaker-listener's knowledge of language) and performance (the actual use of language in real situations)" (p. 95).

The model of communicative language competence described in the CEFR (2001) is the closest to what we need in order to measure the language ability of our students, which will bringfurther relevant information about the complete program evaluation. In the CEF, communicative competence includes three basic components – language competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Language competence refers to knowledge of and ability to use language resources to form well-structured messages. Sociolinguistic competence refers to possession of knowledge and skills for appropriate language use in a social context while

pragmatic competence refers to sequencing of messages in accordance with intercultural and transactional schemata.

The oral examination that we introduced was based on the topics studied during the course and the vocabulary and structure used (language competence). The assessment rubric was based on the appropriateness of the answer in terms of language use, as well as the social and cultural context (sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence). For instance, if the topic was "Modern versus Traditional Education", one exam question would beto talk about the advantages and disadvantages of private universities. The answer would require all three competences and would mean that the student would be able to apply what she/he has learned to form her/his critical and informed opinion about the matter and actually discuss it with the examiner.

Research Methodology

In order to see if students' performance had improvedas a result of the introduction of the oral examination, we have compared the scores obtained from the rubrics for the oral-examination evaluation in the last three sequencing exam sessions (Appendix 1). A total of 114 students from eight sections were included in this study. Their level of English was different, starting from elementary to upper intermediate(A1 to B2 according to CEFR).

Since the oral examination counted as 10% of the final grade, there were a maximumof 10 points for the best answer distributed in the following way:three points for fluency, three points for accuracy, two points for appropriacy (meaning, content correctness of the answer) and two points for pronunciation.The points that students accumulated through the last three exam sessions were followed and compared with others to see if the introduction of the oral examination had led to a certain progress and improvement of their speaking skills.

Since the examination topics were related to practical application of the material presented during the lessons throughout the semesters, it was assumed that an increase in the number of points would mean increased communicative competence. For instance, if the lesson was about schools and education, examples of exam questions related to that topic would be to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of wearing uniforms at schools,a comparison between private and state schools, a comparison between modern and traditional education, the happiest/the most embarrassing memory from early school days, etc. A student's ability to talk about these topics would mean that he/she has acquired the key vocabulary and become able to use it in context when talking about realistic situations.

Data analysis

From the scores that students achieved on the oral examination as a part of the final examination, we were able to follow the progress in their speaking skills over the period of three academic semesters. This means that if a student started from level 1 (A1), his progress was followed until he reached level 4 (B2).In addition to every single student's progress, we were able to follow the average result in every exam session and also the general progress at different levels of English. The figure below shows the comparison between the scores achieved when passing level 2 (A2) and level 1(A1).

The results show that the progress in students' speaking skills demonstrated through the number of points accumulated on the oral examination when passing level 2 (A2, according to CEFR) was the lowest (Figure 1). The distribution of percentage in this figure means that out of the total number of 114 students, only 20, or 18% had increased their oral proficiency when passing level 2, compared to the points earned when passing level 1.Some22,81% of students achieved the same number of points, meaning their oral proficiency had remained the same. The biggest number of students (57,02%) actually demonstrated lower oral proficiency in level 2 compared to level 1.

Figure 1. Comparison of scores between oral exams in levels 1 and 2
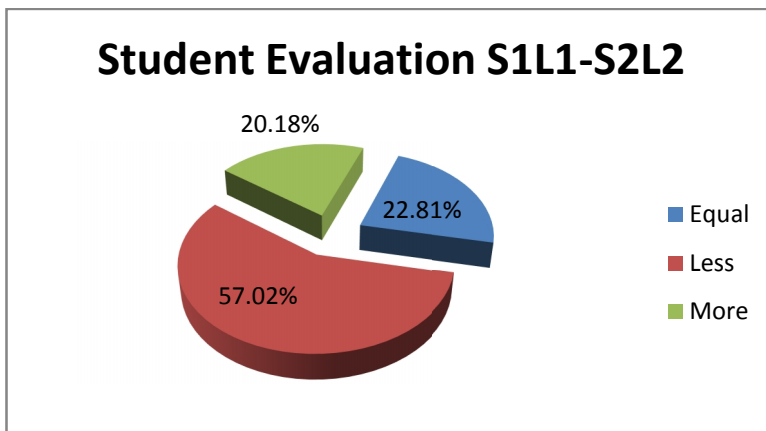
The next figure (Figure 2) shows the comparison and the progress with oral proficiency scores between levels 2 (A2) and 3(B1). It can be noticed that in the higher levels, the progress in oral proficiency had increasedcompared to the previous two levels.Some 50,88% of students achieved higher scores at the oral examination

compared with their achievement in level 2,35,96% remained at the same level of proficiency and only 13,16% performed worse than in the previous oral examination.

Figure 2. Comparison of scores between levels 2 and 3
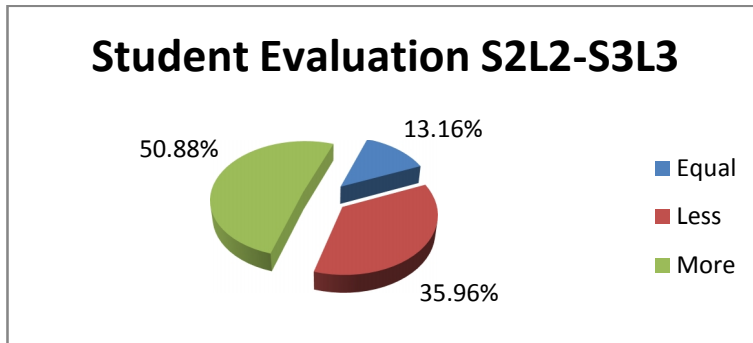
There were similar results in the next exam session when the results of the oral proficiency exam were compared between level 3 and level 4. Figure 3 shows this comparison.

Figure 3. Comparison of scores between levels 3 and 4
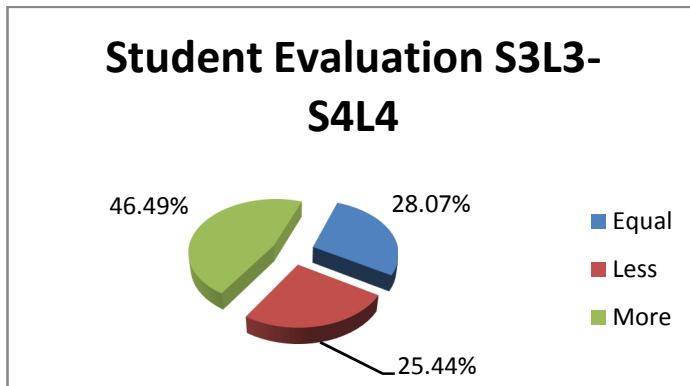
The biggest percentage of students (46,49%) improved their scores on the oral examination, 28,07% remained with the same skills and 25,44% had worse results when they passed from level 3 to 4.

Conclusions

Our assumption that the introduction of the oral examination will lead to better speaking skills and increased communicative competence is only partially confirmed. Students generally performedmore poorly when they took level 2 exams compared to their results in the oral exam for level 1. However, in the next two sessions, the general results were higher, both when passing from level 2 to 3 and from levels 3 to 4.

The lower result in level 2 exam weighted against those in level 1 can be explained with the fact that at the beginning level, the speaking tasks were very simple and all students performed well. By comparison, level 2 oral examinations were more complex and students therefore achieved worse results. When they got used to these oral examinations and probably practiced their speaking skills more both in and outside the classrooms, the results improved. Better results in higher levels are also an indicator of the program's effectiveness.

It is therefore strongly recommended that oral examinations be introduced in parallel with the final written tests in all University language programs in which language courses are part of Faculties' curricula. Students feel more motivated to practice and improve their speaking skills when they are formally evaluated on them. This should be done regardless of the fact that students' class participation is one of the grading components and they are expected to work on their speaking skills during every lesson. The difficulty in measuring every student's class participation and activity is another argument in favor of having an oral component in the final examination.

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Appendix 1 – Students' achievement per semester

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achievement by semester												
Student ID	Name	Surname	Faculty	Oral exam S1-level 1	Oral exam S2-Level 2	Oral exam S3-Level 3	Oral exam S4-Level 4	Average	S1L1-S2L2	S2L2-S3L3	S3L3-S4L4	
119467	Musli	Arifi	Law	7	8	7	10	8,00	More	Less	More	
119388	Fitore	Fazliji	Law	9	6	3	4	5,50	Less	Less	More	
119437	Erduan	Selmani	Law	6	6	4	5	5,25	Equal	Less	More	
119640	Ismail	Iseini	Law	8	7	5	3	5,75	Less	Less	Less	
119821	Xhihad	Nurishi	Law	6	7	5	8	6,50	More	Less	More	
119712	Inis	Ismaili	Law	2	6	4	6	4,50	More	Less	More	
119557	Mentor	Islami	Law	8	2	6	10	6,50	Less	More	More	
120007	Asim	Osmani	Law	7	4	5	5	5,25	Less	More	Equal	
120006	Fatmir	Pajaziti	Law	7	5,5	6	6	6,13	Less	More	Equal	
120120	Hidije	Bajrami	Law	10	6,5	10	/	8,83	Less	More	More	
119581	Alban	Alii	Law	9	9	9	8	8,75	Equal	Equal	Less	
119936	Lirim	Emshiu	Law	2	2	4	2	2,50	Equal	More	Less	
120004	Ziqufli	Rexhepi	Law	10	6	4	6	6,50	Less	Less	More	
119676	Mirterzan	Kamberi	Law	8	6	8	8	7,50	Less	More	Equal	
119786	Qazim	Rakipi	Law	2	3	6	4	3,75	More	More	Less	
119657	Berat	Ajdini	Law	2	6	4	9	5,25	More	Less	More	
119706	Kushtrim	Ljatifi	Law	3,5	8	4	3	4,63	More	Less	Less	
119438	Filip	Veljanoski	Law	6	8	5	/	6,33	More	Less	More	
119872	Piril	Uzun	Law	8	10	10	/	9,33	More	Equal	More	
119499	Ivana	Serafimoska	Law	6	7	5	/	6,00	More	Less	More	
119543	Gzim	Abdii	Law	5	5	7	/	5,67	Equal	More	More	
119545	Elfatije	Beshiri	Law	10	10	10	10	10,00	Equal	Equal	Equal	
119589	Lundrim	Rahmani	Law	7	5	8	10	7,50	Less	More	More	
119597	Luljeta	Rexhepi	Law	8	10	10	/	9,33	More	Equal	More	
119610	Armin	Imshi	Law	5	4	7	/	5,33	Less	More	More	
119924	Besnik	Abdiji	Law	5	3	8	9	6,25	Less	More	More	
119747	Semra	Emini	Business and Economics	9	10	9	9	9,25	More	Less	Equal	
119591	Lavdrime	Nuredini	Business and Economics	10	10	6	6	8,00	Equal	Less	Equal	
119628	Ardiane	Murseli	Business and Economics	10	7	5	5	6,75	Less	Less	Equal	
119877	Majlinda	Mustafi	Business and Economics	7	6	6	7	6,50	Less	Equal	More	
119882	Valmira	Xhemaili	Business and Economics	10	8	7	7	8,00	Less	Less	Equal	
119909	Hafize	Dalipi	Business and Economics	10	10	9	9	9,50	Equal	Less	Equal	
119910	Valbon	Arifi	Business and Economics	10	6	8	7	7,75	Less	More	Less	
119569	Arjeta	Abazi	Business and Economics	9	9	7	7	8,00	Equal	Less	Equal	
119615	Bujamin	Dauti	Business and Economics	10	7,5	4	4	6,38	Less	Less	Equal	
120103	Teuta	Idrizi	Business and Economics	6	6	10	10	8,00	Equal	More	Equal	
119390	Festim	Fazliji	Business and Economics	7	5	3	7	5,50	Less	Less	More	
119391	Argjend	Ibraimi	Business and Economics	6	4	4	6	5,00	Less	Equal	More	
119733	Alajdin	Zendeli	Business and Economics	7	4	8	9	7,00	Less	More	More	
120002	Valbona	Ilazi	Business and Economics	9	6	8	4	6,75	Less	More	Less	
119692	Albona	Ramani	Business and Economics	8	7	6	4	6,25	Less	Less	Less	
119965	Shenazije	Elezi	Business and Economics	8	8	8	6	7,50	Equal	Equal	Less	
119892	Bujar	Adili	Business and Economics	8	6	8	7	7,25	Less	More	Less	
119972	Lavdrim	Bexheti	Business and Economics	9	6	/	/	7,50	Less	More	Equal	
120024	Rami	Salihi	Business and Economics	4	3	3	8	4,50	Less	Equal	More	
119577	Ariana	Fetai	Business and Economics	8	9	8	7	8,00	More	Less	Less	
119465	Arlind	Daudi	Business and Economics	9	8	5	5	6,75	Less	Less	Equal	
119416	Arton	Bexheti	Business and Economics	7	1	/	/	1,00	Less	More	Equal	
120038	Arbresha	Zenku	Business and Economics	9	6	8	5	6,33	Less	More	Less	
119975	Shenur	Saqipi	Business and Economics	10	8	10	10	9,33	Less	More	Equal	
119739	Xheneta	Rufati	Business and Economics	9	8	9	9	8,75	Less	More	Equal	
119809	Ardenis	Aliu	Business and Economics	4	4	4	7	4,75	Equal	Equal	More	
119512	Mihajlo	Dukoski	Business and Economics	9	4	9	9	7,75	Less	More	Equal	
119978	Mirsad	Bekteshi	Business and Economics	7	8	6	7	7,00	More	Less	More	
119925	Kushtrim	Osmani	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	10	9	9	/	9,33	Less	Equal	More	
119932	Gafur	Sinani	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	10	10	7	/	9,00	Equal	Less	More	
119727	Gzim	Izairi	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	7	4	8	9	7,00	Less	More	More	
119830	Nuhi	Alili	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	8.5	8	4	5	5,67	Less	Less	More	
120040	Armend	Tairi	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	10	9	/	/	9,00	Less	More	Equal	
120003	Valdrin	Ilazi	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	9	4	6	4	5,75	Less	More	Less	
120067	Altrim	Shabani	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	8	3	7	4	5,50	Less	More	Less	
120108	Albiona	Elezi	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	10	10	10	7	9,25	Equal	Equal	Less	
120111	Noli	Bicurri	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	10	9	/	/	9,50	Less	More	Equal	
119973	Abdylgani	Agushi	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	10	8,5	9	9,5	9,25	Less	More	More	
120107	Hysnije	Jashari	Contemporary Sciences and Technologies	1	5	4	2	3,00	More	Less	Less	
120001	Valdeta	Ilazi	Languages, Cultures and Communication	6	6	5	4	5,25	Equal	Less	Less	
119954	Sedat	Nesimi	Public Administration and Political Sciences	10	10	10	8	9,50	Equal	Equal	Less	
119955	Vedat	Nesimi	Public Administration and Political Sciences	10	10	/	/	10,00	Equal	More	Equal	
119415	Albert	Jonuzi	Public Administration and Political Sciences	8	8	4	4	6,00	Equal	Less	Equal	
119833	Senad	Sulejmani	Public Administration and Political Sciences	10	8	4	4	6,50	Less	Less	Equal	
119804	Orhan	Shasivari	Public Administration and Political Sciences	8	8	6	5	6,75	Equal	Less	Less	
119903	Mirajet	Fazli	Public Administration and Political Sciences	9	7	6	4	6,50	Less	Less	Less	
119696	Muhamed	Ajrullau	Public Administration and Political Sciences	9	7	10	7	8,25	Less	More	Less	
120525	Lulzime	Jusufi	Public Administration and Political Sciences	10	8	9	5	8,00	Less	More	Less	
118710	Valbon	Azizi	Public Administration and Political Sciences	4	4	/	/	4,00	Equal	More	Equal	
118603	Florina	Imeri	Public Administration and Political Sciences	4	2	5	7	4,50	Less	More	More	
119948	Fisnik	Qamili	Public Administration and Political Sciences	10	9	6	6	7,75	Less	Less	Equal	
119935	Sabidin	Omeri	Public Administration and Political Sciences	3	2	6	/	3,67	Less	More	More	
119558	Bajram	Emini	Public Administration and Political Sciences	4	2	6	/	4,00	Less	More	More	
119732	Nadmir	Mehmedalija	Public Administration and Political Sciences	9	6	8	4	6,75	Less	More	Less	
120050	Azra	Zulfiqari	Public Administration and Political Sciences	9	4	5	6	6,00	Less	More	More	
119966	Lejla	Jonuzi	Public Administration and Political Sciences	10	8	7	10	8,75	Less	Less	More	
119907	Selvete	Limani	Public Administration and Political Sciences	10	10	8	8	9,00	Equal	Less	Equal	
119906	Shenure	Memeti	Public Administration and Political Sciences	5	4	8	8	6,25	Less	More	Equal	
119411	Besar	Nuhiu	Public Administration and Political Sciences	8	7	6	4	6,25	Less	Less	Less	
119632	Zamir	Saiti	Public Administration and Political Sciences	5	5	3	7	5,00	Equal	Less	More	
119418	Zilfi	Abdullai	Public Administration and Political Sciences	3	4	4	/	3,67	More	Equal	More	
118900	Sedat	Amedi	Public Administration and Political Sciences	8	4	6	7	6,25	Less	More	More	