

# OPPORTUNITIES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS WITH STUDENTS HAVING ACQUIRED AN INTERNATIONAL CERTIFICATE OF LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

Horea Ioana

*University of Oradea, Faculty of Economics, Universităţii 1, ihorea@uoradea.ro, 0259408799*

*Based on the direct and everyday work in class, this paper brings into debate a problem noticed with the new generations of students joining the English language classes of non-philological profile. Because certain signs of misunderstanding as for the scope of the acknowledgement provided by the internationally language certificates, and especially concerning its appliance within the university system, have been noticed with the freshmen of the latest years, a thorough investigation of the matter seemed appropriate. It revealed that careful consideration should be given to the needs of those who registered in, sat for and passed a recognised examination in English, taking into account the set of expectations some of them had mistakenly assumed.*

*Key words: acknowledged competence, expectations fulfilment, tests' further recognition*

## **Disputed usefulness and controversial benefits**

It seems that the younger generations are more and more inclined to sit for an internationally recognized examination in order to obtain a language certificate. It is not only the desire to learn and test own knowledge of the foreign language, but it increasingly develops into a kind of a fashion among the high-school students. There is nevertheless much right in their taking such an endeavour as the Romanian opening towards the global market implies appropriation of internationally applied rules and regulations in what knowledge assessment is concerned, as well. The certifications recognised world-wide, as those following the Standard European Framework, for instance, started to be adopted and promoted, as sure proofs of Romania's integration into the abovementioned context where such certifications are required.

Doubtlessly appreciated, useful and even necessary in future interactions with other countries, these certificates may not show their real value in everyday situations and activities within the home country. Seemingly remote and rather improbable benefits, occurring mainly in case of applying for scholarships abroad, for jobs or residence in a foreign country, prove ineffective and insufficient to the more and more demanding young generation that invests in something and expects full and immediate reward. Psychologically, this expectation translates into rather negative emotional responses from the students having passed one of the said examinations, in front of the realities of the educational system they are involved in.

Not really aware of the true nature of these certificates' scope of acknowledgement, some students have strong and sometimes revolted claims of permanent and total recognition of the certificate they had obtained during high school years. Hence, teachers are more and more often faced with the situation of students demanding their certificate's equivalence with highest grade in further examinations regardless of any curricula, attendance or any practical language training that belong to the higher education syllabus. Such situations are as unpleasant as they are frustrating, with the teacher having to explain a logical banality as that of the unlikeliness of meeting the said claim.

On the other hand, there is the category of students having passed an internationally recognised examination and, seeing no incoming opportunities of benefiting from their 'investment', in the near future, get disappointed and somewhat confused, wondering about the usefulness and purpose of their hard work and expenditure, an attitude not at all helping in their development and further approach or trust in the educational system. This may cause a real loss as long as it is only best quality students that are referred to here, given the fact that it is these who will undertake the sacrifices and hard work of the preparation for an examination of that nature.

## Investigative approach

A quick survey was applied to students that have sat for an examination for one of the internationally acknowledged certificates of linguistic competence and, besides statistic information as the type of test, when they sat for it, the method of preparation or the grade obtained, it also comprises questions relevant for collecting data and opinions on the anticipations they had had, the accomplishments they felt afterwards, any shortcomings they might have noticed or, possibly, letdowns they came across.

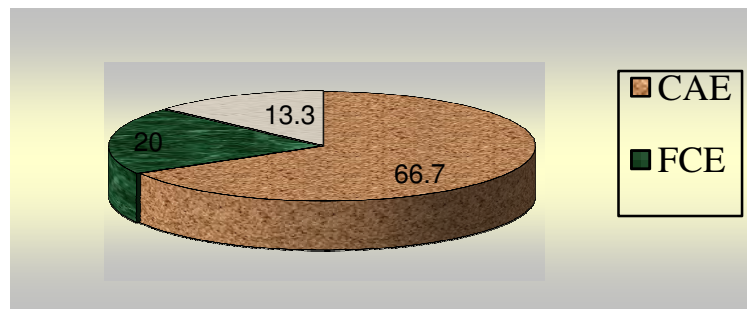
Applied to a sample group of 15 students having passed a test as discussed above, the assessment device followed, as shown below, in Table 1, the pattern of seven rapid answer queries of a statistical nature and three more questions, engaging more complex responses, that gave freedom of expression and opportunity to share thoughts and feeling concerning the subject.

1. Which of the internationally acknowledged English Examinations did you sit for? Test name: .....
2. Did you pass it? (tick) No..... / Yes.....
3. With what grade? Grade.....
4. When did you take it? Year .....
5. How old were you? Age.....
6. Where did it take place? Location .....
7. How did you prepare for it? (tick) Individually .....; Private tuition .....; Language centre .....; School .....
8. Why did you go for it? (mention your reasons and specify your expectations): ..... .....
9. What did you accomplish by taking/ passing it? (mention benefits) ..... .....
10. Are there any disappointments? (describe) ..... .....

*Table 1. Survey applied to a sample group of 15 students having taken, prior to coming to the university, an internationally acknowledged examination for an English language certificate*

## Interpretation of results

With a hundred percent positive answers at the second question, it is obvious that all participants interrogated passed the examination they sat for. As the answers at the first question make clear, the majority, 66,6%, sat for the Cambridge Advanced Examination, but there were also 20% with First Certificate Examination, and two students having sat for other tests (BULATS, respectively TOEFL) as seen in the diagram presented in Figure 1.

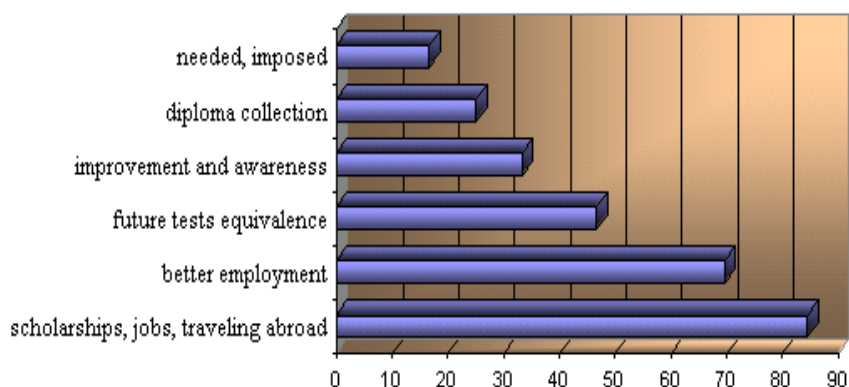


**Figure 1. Percentages of tests taken**

Rather low grades were obtained, as the answers to question three of the survey reveals, with 66,6% receiving a C and only 13,3 an A. Anyway, this type of scoring is itself controversial, researchers finding it insufficiently justified by the test developers. A “C” means 60% achievement of the total drills in the examination.

Most of the students took this examination at the age of 18, during their last year in high school and the venue for the CAE was with no exception the “Emanuil Gojdu” Highschool even though some of the students were attending other high schools (especially the Economic Highschool). In what the way of preparing for the examination was concerned, all but two underwent private tuition, half of them took some preparatory classes in their school two, and a sixth prepared individually.

As for the answers at the eighth question, we can see in the chart represented in Figure 2 that students know precisely that the certificate is particularly useful for getting a scholarship, a visa or permission to work abroad, but they would prefer a larger recognition within Romania and its educational system. Among the reasons for sitting for the exams, we can identify that most students thought it to be helpful in getting a good job later, some students mentioned it being necessary – imposed by the teachers or asked by the future employer –, others only wanted another diploma or ran for it out of an ambition, while others just wanted to find out their level of knowledge of the language and to improve it.



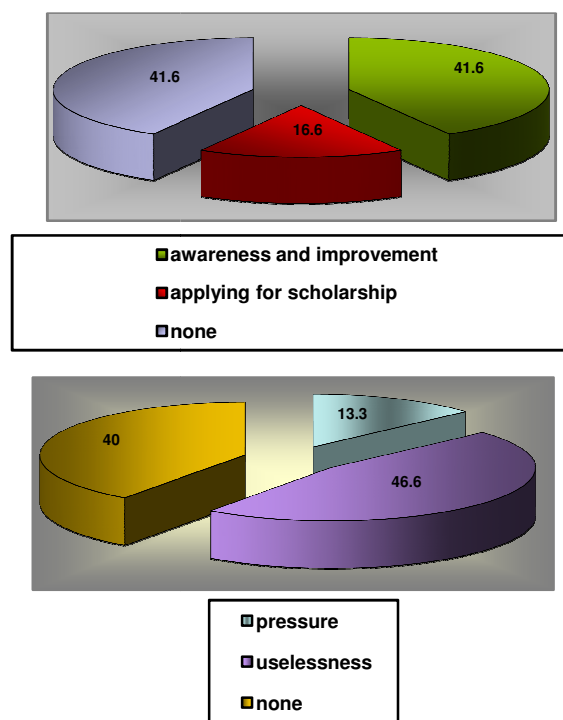
**Figure 2. Motivations for taking the examination**

The wish to acquire awareness and understanding of the skills and knowledge of English they possess seems indeed, on an international scale, to be preoccupying the students engaging in the endeavour of running for tests of the kind [1, 12-17]. Some of the students involved in the present survey specified that they liked preparing for it and that is an interesting point, as it is clearly known that whole classes in certain highschools are taught with a view towards the examination, so the English classes they take are truly preparatory for this particular goal, i.e. they are of a special character. The washback phenomenon, the effect of the tests on teaching and learning, is by now well-known and much discussed in the literature of speciality. “Where impact occurs in the form of teaching and learning directed towards a test, both intended positive or unintended and perhaps negative effects are generally referred to by the term

washback” [2, 114]. Interesting is, as the chart shows, that for more than a third this tended to become a purpose in itself, they taking the examination, along with the preparation for the testing, mostly for the sake of it, for getting aware of their abilities and thus knowing what to do to improve them.

Another point that seems to be of great importance is that if the majority of the students were aware that an international certificate of language competence would be useful in working, learning or travelling abroad – applying for a job, for a scholarship, or simply requiring a travel visa – , there were rather enough students relying on the fact that this certificate will be automatically equivalent with a high grade in any English exam that may follow or will bring them the ‘benefit’ of not having to sit for any other examination in English within the Romanian educational system. With almost fifty percent of answers denoting such opinions it is no wonder that a feeling of fulfilment is hard to achieve and, hence, the discontent and claims that rise. As other researchers stated, EFL tests are mainly and primarily not more than indicators of what the level is and how it should be improved: “the final grade can be useful for an overall indication of language ability; individual paper scores would add rich and useful information that could provide feedback to the instructional process” [3, 530].

The upshots of the tests, satisfactions or disappointments, felt since having passed the examination and obtained the certificate are assessed following the answers for the last two questions of the survey, and can be seen in Figure 3, broken down on benefits (a) and disappointments (b).



*a. Benefits*

*b. Disappointments*

*Figure 3. Outcomes*

While 40 % of the students declare there are no disappointments at all and they are completely satisfied with the examination and its outcome in terms of personal achievements, some, it is true that very few, 13.3%, sound off the pressure they have been put through during testing, considering it difficult to sit for, rather tiresome and quite stressful. It is just 16.6 % of the students that have so far benefited from their certificates when applying for a scholarship and 41.6 % perceive its usefulness in guiding them for future learning by making them aware of the level of knowledge they detained, while another 41.6 percent show the discontent of not seeing any benefits at all, as for now, at 1.5 or 2 years after the examination. This dissatisfaction, correlated with the uselessness they claim, in 46.6 %, when inquired about

disappointments, makes it clear that their anticipations were not really according to the real objectives of the test developers and the facts contradicted their expectations.

Thus, we can conclude that if this type of testing is a real asset and very effective for the development of language skills, one easy but important thing that needs to be done is informing candidates correctly, precisely and with no exaggerations, about the benefits they could await.

## References

1. Kathleen M. Bailey *Washback in Language Testing*, TOEFL Monograph series, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey, 1999
2. Anthony Green, Washback to the learner: Learner and teacher perspectives on IELTS preparation course expectations and outcomes, *Assessing Writing* 11 (2006), 113–134
3. Micheline Chalhoub-Deville, Carolyn E. Turner, What to look for in ESL admission tests: Cambridge certificate exams, IELTS, and TOEFL, *System* 28 (2000), 523-539